

STORIES FOR HUMANS: TEACHING NARRATIVES FROM A COMMUNITY  
COLLEGE IN THE COUNTRY

By

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## ABSTRACT

### STORIES FOR HUMANS: TEACHING NARRATIVES FROM A COMMUNITY COLLEGE IN THE COUNTRY

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Much educational research categorizes community college students as underprepared and in terms of retention and completion. This study uses narrative inquiry to offer a critical alternative to “human capital” analyses of community college students. Within a context of economic struggle and globalization, students cross borders of many kinds, and there are pressures for the US to become the “first in the world” to produce the most college graduates. However, subjectification can be included as a function of education (Biesta, 2010). The humanities play a critical role. Stories serve to humanize the lives of ten persons in community college classrooms. The dissertation concludes with the researcher becoming the learner through storytelling and teaching through stories.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1 A Girl Discovers Stories as Research.....	1
Chapter 2 Remembering Story: Turning from Teaching to Research.....	12
1. The First Turn: Relationships Matter.....	17
2. The Second Turn: Words Are Not Insignificant.....	20
3. The Third Turn: The Unique in the Matter.....	23
4. The Fourth Turn: I Know in More Ways than One.....	33
5. How I Engage in Narrative Inquiry.....	37
Chapter 3 There and Back Again: Border Crossing in Time and Place.....	43
1. Tech Readings: No “Blank Slate” on the Border.....	47
2. “Ain’t No Mountain High Enough:” Challenges in Literacy Construction on the Border.....	79
3. Writing Transitions: College Prep beyond the Border.....	109
4. Taking Every Opportunity on the Border: How to Get Off the Farm in the Country.....	132
5. There and Back Again: Hacking the Border When Coming Home.....	153
Chapter 4 First in the World: More than Economic Competitiveness.....	171
1. First: When You are On Your Own.....	174
2. First to Break the Barriers.....	192
3. Reaching Out to be First.....	201
4. Going Early and Working Hard to be First.....	211
5. First in the World When You Are On the Move and Not First.....	224
Chapter 5 Researching towards Writing--Storytelling towards Curriculum.....	241
1. Researching: What I Learned about My Research Process.....	243
2. Storytelling: What I Learned about Writing Stories using Narrative Inquiry.....	255
3. Teaching: What I Learned about My Teaching and Curriculum.....	270
Epilogue.....	296
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	297

## Chapter 1 A Girl Discovers Stories as Research

It seems very late in a life and in a doctoral program to remember my inclination for story collecting and retelling. I tell stories every day and have been listening to them--my parents have told me in an oft-repeated tale--since I dragged myself as an infant to the kitchen to hear them. I can still hear my mother and her sister shriek with delight after quietly sharing a story at my Babcia's house in the city, in a language I mostly could not understand. I also listened to the Holy Family Parish Guild swap stories. My sister reminds me that I would go out to the picnic table on our farm—my long blond hair streaming behind me—to present the chocolate cake and iced tea with strawberries I made for the ladies, and linger as long as they let me.

As I was about to move to the country as a young girl, I wrote detailed directions to our mailman so that he could deliver my “weekly readers.” I loved stories about heroes and girls, including pioneer women, and I still remember letters used as history from my brand new social science textbook and so considered studying political science, history, social work, and then journalism, before I landed upon the teaching of reading. For many, finding one's own way in the world sometimes takes time and experience. Since then I have told stories in classes, in presentations, and in articles. In spite of this affinity, the milieu of social methodology moved me from my recognition of the importance of stories for humans.

I suppose it is not a surprise that I became an English teacher though I came to it because of my interest in language learning and reading acquisition. I owe it to Marilyn Wilson, who was a professor *and* pregnant: she gave me the opportunity to explore my experience--dialects and discourse--which also helped me appreciate the literature of the students as I began teaching in the urban South. I was able to connect my past to my future.

When it came time for me to consider ways to research, like many English teachers, I was "unaware that narrative inquiry is a recognized form of research."<sup>1</sup> I did not know it was a research possibility or how to use it from the perspectives of the humanities, that is, how stories could be used as a kind of research thinking, not as a way to represent others but as a way of creating stories to present to others. They were circling around me: in Vivian Paley's *The Girl With the Brown Crayon: How Children Use Stories to Shape their Lives*, in Mary Catherine Bateson's *Composing a Life*, in Schneider and Laihua's *Giving Care, Writing Self: A "New Ethnography."* We read stories, but no one I knew was doing storied research. I thought that composing these stories was something that already famous researchers did, not a wobbly novice who has been

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<sup>1</sup> David Schaafsma et al, "Composing Storied Ground: Four Generations of Narrative Inquiry," *English Education* 39 no. 4 (Jul 2007): 282.

teaching for a long time and who uses stories for herself to connect, to understand, and to remember. I have had a re-cognition<sup>2</sup>.

It wasn't until my mentor, Lynn Fendler, helped me to cut my long research journey short, telling back all of the ways I had used stories and pressing upon me that my own voice could be used to express them, even though I was more interested in seeking how to engender student voices through my teaching. I remember fondly how my mother and aunt would press flowers in giant dictionaries and now wonder whether Lynn did this growing up. She could not comprehend how in the world I had let my literary life become overgrown by the nettles of enumeration, and she continued to pull me out. Although I had felt for a long time that the thinking from modernity was creating a kind of education that I did not abide in, I thought analysis, anger, and advocacy would pull me out. As I sought to help students develop their voices in their educational experience, I found my own but also listened to theirs in new ways. Story is, as it is for the Buddhist nun Jiko in the novel *A Tale for the Time Being*, my

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<sup>2</sup> Word play sustains this long journey of mine. My first college literature classes were taught by Evan Watkins. He teased me about the joy I found in my language play and about the way this country girl sighed as she looked out the window at the snow falling. I have felt this same sweet exasperation from Steve Weiland who treated me like a grownup in my first doctoral encounter but later teased me about my open enthusiasm. Watkins told me he wished he had the amount of facial expression I had as he assigned me to the role of the "Fool" in a classroom Shakespeare scene in a comedy. My memory is long. They were very patient with me. I am sure that he would be shocked to know that I teach college freshmen. I name them here along with other teachers from Michigan State University to honor their good work.

“superpower.” Her great-granddaughter Nao says of her, “She can pull a story out of anybody.”<sup>3</sup> Too much pressing and pulling for you? Probably yes.

I remember stories. In conversation—in reading or in other relations—I remember small stories that mean so much or even so little. As a middle school reading teacher, I needed to collect as many stories as I could to pass on in an instant. Now as a community college and high school composition teacher, I use stories as examples and to show how a story can be used to understand experience. As a literature and humanities teacher, I share stories to provide other perspectives from human experience. And I draw out their stories as well by sharing mine. Small stories<sup>4</sup> appear in thousands of individual conferences and at the other end of an email communication. Human beings like to tell their stories; I certainly like to hear them. I also practice the telling of stories—getting just the right detail or image to evoke a response, much like *moja matka i ciotka*.

In all, stories in the classroom provide me a way to be relational with students; they humanize us. They flip the classroom. Their stories are as important as my stories are and as important as the stories in the texts we share. My challenge was how to

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<sup>3</sup> Ruth Ozeki, *A Tale for a Time Being* (New York: Penguin Group, 2013), 244.

<sup>4</sup> Hayden Lorimer, “Telling Small Stories: Spaces of Knowledge and the Practice of Geography,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 28, no. 2 (2003): 197. He differentiates story and narrative by suggesting that story includes an assortment of various memories which might create narratives. This is an important distinction for me as well.



recognize this inclination for research, creating story forms through narrative thinking about setting, plot, characters, time, and metaphor.

The classroom is a space for narrative community but also for “narrative continuity,”<sup>5</sup> according to Paley, who like me, discovered this after three decades of teaching. We have a past and future, though we might be meeting in the present. The previous sentence once read “students, like teachers” instead of “we.” I am aware of the discontinuity this sentence creates, but revision through research has become a way for me to re-vision. Research writing pushes one to reconsider every word, and I am choosing here the more humanizing and inclusive “we.” I have finally discovered what research is for.

Narrative researchers Clandinin and Connelly share a story of a researcher who discovered “a boundary within herself” when she learns something about her “participant”: “Pam is much more than the expression of a formalist category. She is a person.” She is “an embodiment of lived stories” rather than “an exemplar of culture.”<sup>6</sup> This has been a tension for me as well: seeing the persons in the classroom community not as “students” and “teachers” but how they connect within the continuity of their

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<sup>5</sup> V. G. Paley, *The Girl with the Brown Crayon* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 74.

<sup>6</sup> D. Jean Clandinin, and F. Michael Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 45.

lives. With story there is a possibility “to shuttle *between*”<sup>7</sup> the various “scales” of inquiry: “here, the institutional and the intimate--and between previously disparate practices--here, the academic debate and the embodied experience.”<sup>8</sup> My stories include all of these scales. Boundaries are thinner in a relational teaching practice and so the ability to cross them with ease in storied research appeals to me.

Hearkening to one of Dewey’s criteria of experience, continuity is foundational in narrative inquiry in order to understand the “continuum--the imagined now, some imagined past, or some imagined future” with the complexity of personal and social experience.<sup>9</sup> My search for a way to present persons in education as embodied by time and place has been long and ragged, but my experience was like that of Clandinin and Connelly: “Continuity became for us a narrative construction that opened up the floodgate of ideas and possibilities.”<sup>10</sup> I know how they feel. As I waited in the hallway to see my advisor, I saw this postcard on a door: “No matter how far you’ve gone down a wrong road, you can always turn around.” The lovely Mary Catherine Bateson reflects: “Each person is calibrated by experience, almost like a measuring instrument

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<sup>7</sup>Emile Cameron, “New Geographies of Story and Storytelling,” *Progress in Human Geography* 36 no. 5, 577.

<sup>8</sup>Lorimer, “Telling Small Stories,” 200.

<sup>9</sup> Clandinin and Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*, 3.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid, 4.

for difference, so discomfort is informative and offers a starting point for new understanding.”<sup>11</sup>

When I travel around new country and see a side road, I wonder where it leads, hoping that it ends at a lake. I don’t mind getting lost if it means that I might find a new place. While I once thought that the continuum was for the “characters” in my study, I now see that it is just a beginning of future stimulating research for me. I have always liked hearing research stories from professors: non-representational views of modernity, the possibilities of digital publishing, the uses of social media for university athletes, the evocative poetic line break. Yes, I remember. Memories about our fellows is a way to re-member them and to make them human.

I said “maybe” about research for a long time. In early drafts I wrote, “I want to be a part of this work.” In my early years as a doctoral student, Paul Morsink challenged me in a hallway, asking me whether I was ever going to see myself as a part of the research work, and Mark Kissling sat me down, asking me why I was not finding a way to write my stories. I now say, “Yes, I am a part of this work.” I took their chiding to heart.

Narrative forms of humanities-based research have created new possibilities for me and the ways I want to understand experiences of those who attended a community college because as Schneider and Laihua urge: “You have to *care about* the worlds or

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<sup>11</sup> Mary Catherine Bateson, *Peripheral Visions* (New York: Harperbooks, 1994), 17.

possible worlds that your own work, your own *kind* of work, is making. You cannot be “clean”; you must be “in the action,” for, of course, you always already are. You cannot be on the “sidelines,” un-related. It is an all-too-familiar place for social scientists.”<sup>12</sup> I see now how I can care through research.

I care about those who are trying to find their way in the world through their attendance at a community college. I care about the possibilities that my work of composing stories with those I already have a relationship with might offer to myself and others. My hands are dirty. William Cronon argues that there is a “place for story” in academic work and that story “makes us *care*” and narrative is “our best and most compelling tool for searching out meaning in a conflicted and contradictory world.”<sup>13</sup>

I thought it was simply my quirky way of responding to all of my experiences. Thus, I hadn’t considered that writers I admired like Bateson, Terry Tempest Williams Ursula K. LeGuin, Sherman Alexie, had a way into research that I want to practice in order to contribute to the field of education, in particular about and for community college students, not as a category but as persons.

For a long time, I have been working on a nonfiction piece about my mother’s experience in a nursing home and a fiction piece about the relationship between a single

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<sup>12</sup> Joseph Schneider and Wang Laihua, *Giving Care, Writing Self: A “New” Ethnography* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000), 247.

<sup>13</sup>William Cronon, “A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative, *Journal of American History* 78 (1992), 1374.

mom who is a teacher and a single mom who is a student, weaving omniscient story form for the teacher and in classroom journal writing for the student. But I have discovered that research writing can be just as generative and invigorating. For storytellers and story researchers, like Barbara Czarniawska, there is little “difference between fiction and nonfiction” and but the researcher is less like a novelist and more like a literary critic because she has less freedom and has to pay attention more to “reality,”<sup>14</sup> to real and imagined experiences forwards and backwards for persons.

Hannah Arendt did not write fiction but “believed that stories and not the methods of social, political, or historical science capture the contingency of human events; and like all great storytellers she realized that the meaning of the story can never entirely be extracted from it.”<sup>15</sup> In an introduction of a collection of correspondence from 1949-1975 between Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy, her biographer continues: “In the *act* of thinking...Arendt, in particular, shuttles back and forth across a gap that ordinarily separates the experience of everyday life from the contemplation of it. The essence of this kind of thinking is its power to bring the world into sharper focus, and not just our experience of the world, but the world itself, to strip it of

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<sup>14</sup> Barbara Czarniawska, *Narrating the Organization: Dramas of Institutional Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 203.

<sup>15</sup>Jeremy Kohn. “The World of Hannah Arendt.” *The Hannah Arendt Papers at the Library of Congress*. <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/arendthtml/essay4.html> last modified June 15, 2001.

superstition, sentiment, and the drapery of theory.<sup>16</sup> Thinking about stories, the creation of them, can help to “strip” away assumptions, whether they be from myths we carry or have created. Every culture that we know of has had stories at their center, at their heart. I have seen the transformative power of stories, and this story reflects my efforts to be an educational researcher through story. It helps me to argue less and tell stories more.

Educational research is often used to make policy decisions, often in aggregate, demographic and politically partisan ways with similar political and rhetorical rancor that occurs in environmental work. Naturalist writer Terry Tempest Williams responds: “How are we to find our way toward conversation? For me, the answer has always been through story. Story bypasses rhetoric and pierces the heart. Story offers a wash of images and emotion that returns us to our highest and deepest selves, where we remember what it means to be human, living in place with our neighbors.”<sup>17</sup> Stories humanize us to others. This is especially important in a field that is sated with rancor through reform.

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<sup>16</sup> Carol Brightman, *Between Friends: The Correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy 1949-1975* (NY: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1995), xv. I am a letter writer. I love this old fashioned genre and am grateful for the year of letter writing that I shared with a young man in jail. Their huge volume of letters was my companion during the revision process. They discuss the organization of their family lives while writing multiple pieces and teaching and their responses to public criticism. They share stories with each other about their lovers, spouses, travels, and illnesses along with their writing journeys. I was inspired to see how writers integrate their personal and work lives with their writing life.

<sup>17</sup> Terry Tempest Williams, *Red: Passion and Patience in the Desert* (Pantheon Books, 2002), 3.

We each have our own response. I believe that education includes a subjectification function, as Gert Biesta suggests: space for one's unique, irreplaceable response in addition to the representative responses of the socialization and qualification functions of education.<sup>18</sup> Biesta's idea is based in part on Arendt's idea of how our beginnings are taken up by others and the potential of how "everyone's beginnings can come into presence."<sup>19</sup> Stories can be a way that education can engender individual responses.

By the end of writing her story in *A Tale for the Time Being*, sixteen-year-old Nao realizes that everyone has a superpower or two, not just her old grandma, and that one of hers is writing to her particular reader, the middle-aged woman who finds Nao's journal on the shores of British Columbia. I too have particular readers. And I think that all students have superpowers, and we can learn our superpowers together, in time. As "time beings" we can turn our attention towards story, towards teaching narratives and the inquiry to create them, in the way I say to novice writers what my mother would say to us to get us to do something difficult: just for fun. I thought that I was cutting my research journey short, but it was just another beginning.

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<sup>18</sup>Gert Biesta, *Good Education in an Age of Measurement: Ethics, Politics, Democracy* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2010), 86.

<sup>19</sup>Philip Winter, "Coming Into the World, Uniqueness, and the Beautiful Risk of Education: An Interview with Gert Biesta," *Studies in the Philosophy of Education* 30, (2011), 538.

## Chapter 2 Remembering Story: Turning from Teaching to Research

*Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off—then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can. This is my substitute for pistol and ball.*

Ishmael in *Moby Dick*<sup>20</sup>

In stories, metaphors are pivotal. To describe the turn towards narrative inquiry, there are many metaphors used by narrative researchers. Though I have thought about the turn towards narrative inquiry as a journey on a rugged, dirt road, I love water. I go to rivers, lakes, and islands every chance I get. Maybe it is because every day in the hot Michigan summers, my mother would take us to the beach in the afternoon after we got all of our work done on our farm. Some novels, like *Moby Dick*, *Ahab's Wife: Or, the Stargazer*, and *The Old Man and the Sea*, I have read only near water.

Various speeds of water flow with impediments, switchbacks, flash floods are among the possible outcomes along the way and are used as metaphors for the turns taken towards narrative inquiry described by Pinnegar and Daynes. They consider Foucault's discussions of the image of water as a part of "negotiations of power" in a

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<sup>20</sup>Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (Bantam Books, 1981), 17.



way I like which is related to humans and research: “Concern with humans, experience, recognizing the power in understanding the particular, and broader conceptions of knowing coalesce in flashes of insight, and old ways of researching and strategies for research seem inadequate to the task of humans and human interaction.”<sup>21</sup>

When on a body of water, the lights in the darkness help us along. My research story embodies the four turns, as they are framed by Pinnegar and Daynes in the *Handbook of Narrative Inquiry: Mapping a Methodology* edited by D. Jean Clandinin, and the turns all have relational ways of thinking. I’ve been on a winding road that finally reaches a body of water. I like the imagery that Rudolf Steiner uses--the past and the future are like “two streams of soul” that meet, even fear of the future can affect the present.<sup>22</sup> Since college is a place of preparing for the future but also the past must be considered, this image helps to not imagine persons in the college setting as only present, stripped away of time.

I have been a community college instructor for over twenty-five years. Like the national trend, our community college students were placing into many pre-college level courses and were not successfully completing their college courses. I started my research focusing on critical thinking and information literacy as a possible way to buoy

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<sup>21</sup>Stephanie Pinnegar and J. Gary Daynes, “Locating Narrative Inquiry Historically: Thematics in the Turn to Narrative,” Ed. D. Jean Clandinin, *Handbook of Narrative Inquiry: Mapping a Methodology*, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2007), 8.

<sup>22</sup>Rudolf Steiner, *Metamorphosis of the Soul*, Trans C. Davy and C. von Arnim. Quoted in *Parabola*, 34 no. 4 Winter 2009, 70-71.

students who might have limited access to computers and college. I have used the image of learning to “swim” in college, not with “floaties” creating dependence, but with lessons and experiences. Of course, even some of the most advantaged students have difficulty locating and evaluating sources, but I decided that this was a concrete way to bolster community college students’ engagement and skill for a greater chance of success.

Since I had already been teaching literature online for a decade and since college composition in particular had taken such a turn towards technology, I wondered whether technology integration could transform some of the limitations with traditional pedagogy to help create an equal plane of relations for students and teachers--although at the time I imagined it as a student-centered pedagogy. I began a series of courses and projects on technology integration, including analyzing wiki use by doctoral students and professors, interviewing and observing community college students on their computer lab use, and completing an annotated bibliography about new literacies. The shift to story causes “former meanders [to be] abandoned and new streambeds [to be] cut.”<sup>23</sup> I wanted to help students, but now I want to tell their stories.

Turning to narrative inquiry can help us to find the boundaries within ourselves. Although it might have been more expeditious to have discovered this earlier in a life or earlier in a doctoral program, I certainly wouldn’t know it as deeply and experientially

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<sup>23</sup>Clandinin and Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*, 8.

if I had. Clandinin and Connelly discourage a comparative analysis of how narrative inquiry differs with other methodologies. However, they suggest that “it is more productive to begin with explorations of the phenomena of experience.”<sup>24</sup>

Understanding the starts and stops with other research methodologies has helped me to provide further explanation of why this methodology works, answering their question: “What *does* narrative inquiry help us learn about our phenomenon that other theories or methods do not?”<sup>25</sup> Stories help me be a better teacher.

After considering educational technology as a research inquiry, I began to question the idea of “underprepared” as a construct as problematic to use as a starting point, as a generalizing category. I was onto something but didn’t know that the most important discovery for me would be considering each and every human being as unique, to consider stories in which they are “irreplaceable,”<sup>26</sup> rather than generalizable. Thus, an important understanding that I have come to from my seeking and exploring is that there isn’t *a* community college population, *a* community college problem.

I am interested in the role of relationship in teaching and learning with the possibility that relation might be framed in non-hierarchical ways, so I am also interested in how narrative inquiry can facilitate researchers and participants in this

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<sup>24</sup>Clandinin and Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*, 128.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid, 123.

<sup>26</sup>Biesta, *Good Education in an Age of Measurement: Ethics, Politics, Democracy*, 86.

kind of relational way. All of the aspects of my research journey have led me to change direction towards another “way of thinking or being toward another” and the ways “the academy opened up in a way that made space for narrative inquiry.”<sup>27</sup> For me, it suits my concern for ethical treatment of all the storytellers within the research and has provided a space for me to do a version of educational research that suits me and my love of stories,

As a teacher, I tend to focus on anecdotal experiences and stories in a field that sometimes scoffs at them, and have even been teased about it by colleagues. As a literature teacher, I am more interested in words than numbers, and I have seen how stories can make an impact on education due to the “limits of validity within a quantitative paradigm.”<sup>28</sup> As a politically-aware teacher, I tend to advocate for change in circumstances of injustice and inequality, which is also a problematic stance for novices in educational research, and so I hope to shift from terms like “initiative, control, and urgent problem solving...to new terms such as stories to live by, negotiation, improvisation, imagination, and possibility.”<sup>29</sup> As a post-colonial

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<sup>27</sup>Pinnegar and Daynes, 3.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid, 25.

<sup>29</sup>Clandinin, D. Jean and Connelly, F. Michael, “Personal Experience Methods,” N.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Collecting and interpreting qualitative materials: Dealing with empirical material and interpretations* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998), 162.

humanities teacher, I believe there are multiple valid ways of knowing. All four of these turns in narrative inquiry include the relational in research.

### 1. The First Turn: Relationships Matter

The first turn towards narrative inquiry in Pinnegar and Daynes' framework is a different understanding of the relationship between what has been traditionally called the "researcher" and the "participant." I am interested in the kind of research that allows for and even makes visible the relationship between the persons who are communicating in a study. I am interested in the ways they learn from each other.

In addition to my experiences of concern for participants as a teacher and then as a graduate student, I have also been a participant myself, which alerted me due to the lack of relationship with the researcher: as a young girl who was observed playing by a graduate student, creating a sense of self-consciousness because I then began to wonder what others were thinking of me; by a doctoral candidate interviewing me about my experience in an online class and badgering me to say negative things about a classmate; and by a researcher on my international experiences before and after a study abroad trip, asking me questions that were irrelevant to my experience as an adult learner. Sometimes being a "participant" can teach us ways we would like to turn away from the problems with this position.

In research assignments during my doctoral classes, I tried to fulfill projects with people I had relationships with or I included my own experiences of the research as a part of the study. I was also a part of a creation of a website called “Hushme,” prompted by Yong Zhao, in order to collect stories about how schools have “hurt” people. Our hope was that we could expose and understand problems that exist, but also to notice whether a website might create a global conversation about the experience of school through stories. The website did not gain popularity, or even traction, although these stories are shared in social networking sites frequently. I think relationship or a clear audience—even if it isn’t bodily present—is necessary for storytelling.

Relationship building is at the heart of my teaching and learning, but I got the early impression that I had to reconsider this in researching. In one research course, I wrote an essay called “Too Much Information: The Dilemma of an Ethical (and Open) Researcher.” It seems like such a naive title now! But I reflected then that as a teacher I was more committed to students: “I am concerned as Kirsch suggests that with the “greater intimacy and increased collaboration” that there is more potential for “exploitation of participants...It is in moments of decision like these that researchers discover that their commitment to participants can be at odds with their commitment to

the research community.”<sup>30</sup> I was afraid I was too much of a teacher to be a researcher.

I now see that I can be committed to both by creating stories for humans.

“For narrative inquirers both the stories and the humans are continuously visible in the study.”<sup>31</sup> Neither is generalized or abstracted. At that time of earlier projects, however, I had not become familiar with the first turn towards narrative research and the possibilities of relationships. For this reason and also because I needed a research project fairly quickly in my studies, I decided to interview teachers about their practice—particularly with ways they were exemplary in working with first semester college students or dual enrolled students who were bridging high school and college. However, attempting to represent any of these groups through a few individuals did not seem worthwhile, especially if I did not have a relationship with them. Without being able to articulate it, I was uncertain whether traditional social science research would allow for the level of relationality or unique presentations that I was interested in. I needed more reading of Biesta and Ranciere and more discussion with Lynn Fendler and our Critical Studies reading group. Stories can surely be savored by one’s self, but there is also great joy and insight when shared with others. Although we rarely talked about narrative inquiry, thinking about relational pedagogy and ethical

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<sup>30</sup>Gesa E. Kirsch, *Ethical Dilemmas in Feminist Research* (Albany: SUNY, 1999), 52.

<sup>31</sup> Pinnegar and Daynes, “Locating Narrative Inquiry Historically,” 7.

treatment of persons helped me to reimagine research and the way that I could access narrative inquiry from a humanities perspective.

## 2. The Second Turn: Words Are Not Insignificant

The second turn towards narrative inquiry in Pinnegar and Daynes' framework also has a relational element: a focus on relationships among words rather than relationships between numbers. They state: "The turn towards numbers to words as data is not a general rejection of numbers but a recognition that in translating experience to numeric codes researchers lose the nuances of experience and relationship in a particular setting that are of interest to those examining human experience."<sup>32</sup>

Even some English teachers have shifted to a focus on numbers due to the pressure to have empirical evidence. For example, Rebecca Moore Howard, who has written insightful articles problematizing plagiarism in composition since the 1990's, has recently moved to coding in quantitative ways, even concluding that dissertations without it "would be very dreary."<sup>33</sup> As I consider that 93.72 percent of students in 174 research papers from 16 higher education institutions use sentences from the first page

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<sup>32</sup>Pinnegar and Daynes, "Locating Narrative Inquiry Historically," 15.

<sup>33</sup> Rebecca Howard, "Why This Humanist Codes," *Research in the Teaching of English*, 49, no. 1 (August 2014): 80.



or two 69.49 percent of the time<sup>34</sup>, my clever husband and humanities scholar Barry Alford responds, “It shows that they can count and divide by one hundred!”

Good stories, vivid and evocative stories for humans, requires relationships, at least among words. Narrative inquiry can lead to stories because it attends to context, to relationships of words, which includes “ways of holding meaning together in more complex, relational, and therefore more nuanced ways than flowcharts and number tables.”<sup>35</sup> Also, relationships are created through the narrative structures of “character, place, scene, plot, tension, end point, narrator, context, and tone” and “these matters become increasingly complex as an inquirer pursues this relentless rereading” of the field texts.<sup>36</sup> So while some research might seek to distill data into clear and perhaps even “bite sized” conclusions for policy makers, often about demographic categories obtained in numeric ways, narrative inquiry can turn towards the complex and dynamic in stories in relational ways.

The idea of the turn from relationships between numbers to relationships among words is intriguing to me, even though I have used plenty of numbers in teaching and in teacher research. The General Education department at the college

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<sup>34</sup>S.Jamieson and R. M. Howard, “Sentence-mining: Uncovering the Amount of Reading and Reading Comprehension in College Writers’ Researched Writing. in R. McClure and J.P. Purdy (Eds.), *The New Digital Scholar: Exploring and Enriching the Research and Writing Practices of Nextgen Students* (109-131). Medford, NJ: *American Society for Information Science and Technology*, 127.

<sup>35</sup> Pinnegar and Daynes, 20.

<sup>36</sup> Clandinin and Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*. 131.

where I have worked for decades now has been collecting numerical aggregate data on pass/fail rates, withdrawal rates, course-to-course success rates, and campus differences among our assessment processes; we present them at meetings, consider changes in our teaching and learning, and been accredited because of them and the “learning outcomes” attached to them. So much of persistence and retention data is numerical, and though relational in numbers, the numbers do not create unique occurrences: “Each occurrence is independent of any other, each occurrence is interchangeable, and each occurrence is equal to every other occurrence.”<sup>37</sup> Because we know the students behind the numbers and they are local, in our classrooms and individual conferences, we can also look for trends overall. If necessary, we can count them and divide by a hundred! But because they are our students, we also know their stories, and that they are, as Lynn Fendler says, not interchangeable.

In my view, relationships of numbers alone is not enough; categorizing levels of numbers does little in understanding storied persons. “As researchers become less content with labeling the level of kindness and the degree of hope, they may become more interested in understanding the stories of kindness and hopefulness.”<sup>38</sup> The levels and degrees noted through statistics obfuscates experiences. I reminded our community college Retention Committee recently that we sometimes only have

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<sup>37</sup> Pinnegar and Daynes, 18.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 19.

anecdotal stories, barely any numerical data is accessible to faculty anyway, but more importantly, we have few longer, reflective stories. Perspectives from the humanities need to weigh in *more* in these conversations, not less. The stories here, which I promise are coming soon, will contribute, I hope.

### 3. The Third Turn: The Unique in the Matter

The third turn towards narrative inquiry in Pinnegar and Daynes' framework is a shift from a focus on general categories to the local and particular. Although I was working with individuals initially in my research journey, I was still hoping for some generalizable answers to problems. After a push towards reform in Michigan schools in the late 1990's due to an increase in "remediation" in community colleges in areas like math and writing, my college joined forces with the local districts and the local university to problem solve, creating some collaborative professional development opportunities and eventually a National Writing Project site. As a result of our college's concern, as a part of my work as a faculty member, I became the high school liaison, organizing "dinner and dialogue" events to facilitate communication between the high school and community college faculty. Another goal was curriculum alignment at a local level. A very weak research report was done about the local literacy and local colleges' and universities' response to it. It was completed by an outside consultant who did not know us or even like us. I wanted to do better. I wanted to learn how to

do research and contribute to the solution of “the problem” of “underprepared” students. I hoped to find answers, the truth, and solutions.

I hadn’t yet taken the third turn; I was focused on research as generalizing. Did I not already know that every student has his or her own story? I did, but I have learned, that my understanding of their stories as a teacher are quite superficial and that narrative inquiry offers me possibilities of greater depth. Breadth might not be wholly possible, or in my case, desirable.

In my effort to find answers, I went down many of the byways that other teachers might. So much of our education, our cultural influences, and continued professional development due to reform focuses on how to help groups of students by thinking of them as members of a group or category; even the idea of differentiated instruction is often based on understanding categories of students. The specific and particular rather than the generalizable comes with reflecting and working with individual student stories. I began to appreciate Biesta’s perspective on research: “It is important to see that knowledge acquired in previous situations—or knowledge acquired by others in other inquiry or research situations—does not enter the process of reflective problem solving in the form of a rule or prescription...all that research can give us is an understanding of possibilities—of what worked, not what will work.”<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Gert Biesta, “Good education: What it is and why we need it,” The Stirling Institute of Education, Inaugural Lecture, University of Stirling, March 4, 2009. 42.

Perhaps policy makers have not done much teaching. It is clear to a teacher that what “works” in one class often does not in the next because of the persons, the time, or some undeterminable aspect of the space. We can share what worked in previous situations, which may provide insight or inspiration to figure out what may work in our own situation.

Before I took this third turn, I considered many educational perspectives to understand students from their cultural background: feminist criticism and other formalist-structuralist literary criticism, culturally-relevant pedagogy, critical pedagogy, generational characteristics, generational poverty and cultural capital. I used them to create and understand patterns, and I admired them all enthusiastically. Due to the connection made between socio-economics, gender, school performance and persistence, it was easy to focus on these categories of causal analysis.

Paulo Freire, who became the godfather in our department’s curriculum, critiquing the teacher as a “narrating subject,” was attractive to us because of the possibility of more student-teacher dialogue.<sup>40</sup> Several in our department knew Ira Shor, who even wrote the afterward to the edited book “The Politics of Writing in the Two-Year College” by Barry Alford and Keith Kroll. (Ironically, the editors claim that community college faculty do not write and research enough.) While as a faculty we did have students write narratives of their own individual experience with the

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<sup>40</sup>Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum. 1970), 57.

“narrating subject” in the classroom, based on Bartholomae and Petrosky’s prompts in our text *Ways of Reading*, though they were local and particular, they were not relational. They put their own experience over others’. And though students read the narratives of Mike Rose’s own educational experience and those of other “underprepared” students and students would consider their own stories of college challenges, we did make generalizations about students. Thus, for me, the introduction to Biesta and Rancière and the perspective of equality from the outset in education, has created new pedagogical and research possibilities. Rancière posits, “Each superior inferior is also an equal who recounts and is in turn told by another, the story of what he has seen.”<sup>41</sup>

While I had been eager to find answers or “best practices” to make college learning better for students, I came to understand that generalizing research is limited because we are unique persons--local, specific and particular. Social science research expects a certain amount of applicability of their research upon local classrooms. Biesta used Dewey’s perspective on the uniqueness of particular teaching performances. Biesta explained that for Dewey, it is “not about following tried and true recipes...on unique problems” and that “we cannot and should not expect that situations will stay the same over time.”<sup>42</sup> Classroom situations are each unique partly because the persons

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<sup>41</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, Trans. Kristin Ross (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), 108.

<sup>42</sup> Gert Biesta, “Good Education: What it is and Why We Need it,” 41.

in the classroom are unique. Thus, generalizations are difficult to make. Relational positioning lays the groundwork for considering each person as particular; the local and specific is the domain of narrative inquiry.

As students come into college and transition from ways of thinking and reading that are familiar to them towards other kinds of thinking and reading, my eventual primary doctoral research goal was to investigate how teachers can help students with this process in a way that engenders subjectification, their own unique voice. Instead of interviewing teachers myself, I decided to study exemplary researchers, expecting to find insights. My study of the research of James Paul Gee and Stanton Wortham resulted in seeing the ways in which their structuralist frameworks might have presupposed the result of their research. Due to my own background in education, in particular my experience in literacy, linguistics and critical pedagogy, I did not immediately understand the ways in which they were reifying inequality due to their demographic approach. However, because I was faced with their extended work and with their repeated disclaimers of the demographic categorizations, I was able to see a pattern.

Instead of subjectification through stories in education and literacy, which is what I was looking for in their research, Gee and Wortham created identification from categories. Although much of educational research results in and from generalizations,

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I concluded that these categorizations were not considering stories of each young person as a legitimate research inquiry. While I read and analyzed the linguistic analysis of Mindy and Leona in Gee's research text<sup>43</sup> and the transcripts and categorical analysis of Tia, William, and others in Wortham's,<sup>44</sup> I noted that Gee's and Wortham's analysis were de-contextualized, their stories not included. I wondered about the relationship between the observers and the observed. To follow my commitments to teaching and research, I hoped to find an approach that allows me to include people in a way that is mutual and equal, complex yet specific. "The researcher learns that people are never only (nor even a close approximation to) any particular set of isolated theoretical notions, categories, or terms. They are people in all their complexity. They are people living storied lives on storied landscapes."<sup>45</sup>

In literature, we often hear unique voices and if we are careful, we can avoid overgeneralizing through the multiple characters. For example, it is difficult to overgeneralize what an "Indian" is while listening to the varied voices of Arnold, Victor, Thomas, and Suzy Song in the movie *Smoke Signals* based on Sherman Alexie's stories. Likewise, stereotypes of what a "Mormon" is contrasts with the fully embodied

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<sup>43</sup> James Paul Gee, *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in Discourses*, Third edition (London: Routledge, 2008).

<sup>44</sup> Stanton Wortham, *Learning Identity: The Joint Emergence of Social Identification and Academic Learning*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>45</sup> Clandinin and Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*, 145.



descriptions of Terry Tempest Williams. Using this kind of literary approach to the local and particular teaches us to avoid broad generalizations with extended exposure to many stories, but without ignoring the personal life experiences that are associated with demographic identifications. Every character is unique; every story is different. Although Pinnegar and Daynes focus mostly on how the social sciences have moved to the particular and local, I think I can contribute through a literary perspective.

As a literature teacher, I am interested in the turn taken in the 19th century towards stories about ordinary people, including the regional “local color” of particular peoples and “ordinary” language in realism. In narrative research, this choice is done for many reasons: “Narrative accounts are normally written in everyday, vernacular language, and this enables virtually any reader to read narrative inquiry and gain some understanding of why particular stories are being told. This use by narrative inquirers is a deliberate ideological move, an attempt to make research more inclusive.”<sup>46</sup> Thus, the third turn towards narrative inquiry also reflects this value I have for ordinary language and individuals, and out of my literary understanding of unique characters.

I am also interested in ways to discover how to make connections to others. This discovery requires conversations about specifics. Although there are universals—family, rituals, food, death--the local and specific is what makes us less strangers to one

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<sup>46</sup> Schaafsma et al, 302.

another. Kwame Anthony Appiah, a post-colonial philosopher we read in my General Education humanities course, describes this idea within a context of globalization:

My ability to connect with people in a Chinese village, or your ability to figure out what is going on in Kumasi or Kuala Lumpur or Kalamazoo, doesn't depend just on what all human beings share... The cosmopolitan curiosity about other people does not have to begin by seeking in each encounter those traits that all humans share. In some encounters, what we start with is some small thing we two singular people share...the points of entry to cross-cultural conversations are things that are shared by those who are in the conversation. They do not need to be universal; all they need to be is what these particular people have in common.<sup>47</sup>

I think this occurs among all unique persons. We discuss globalization in my classes and in my stories because it is the backdrop of their lives. Within this context, I am interested in the particulars and seek to find "points of entry" with "strangers" while working as a teacher, which also gives me an approach as a researcher.

Clandinin and Connelly call this a "negotiation of entry" and that it "highlights the way narrative inquiry occurs within relationships among researchers and

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<sup>47</sup>Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co.), 97.

practitioners, constructed as a caring community. When both researchers and practitioners tell stories of the research relationship, they have the possibility of being stories of empowerment."<sup>48</sup> Thus, the empowerment I was looking for in research on college readiness in relation to technology and literacy can be revealed in specific stories through narrative inquiry.

The inquiry is "narratively code[d]" with a focus on the particular, rather than coded from a formalist categorical way or reductionist thematic way. "For example, names of the characters that appear in field texts, places where actions and events occurred, story lines that interweave and interconnect, gaps or silences that become apparent, tensions that emerge, and continuities and discontinuities that appear are all possible codes."<sup>49</sup> It is clear that much of this language comes from literary understandings, but also Dewey's examination of experiences as creating growth or continuity.

When the local is foregrounded, so is time. I know that sometimes a person, a student, says something that is a temporary notion. They are trying it out. I have seen this in myself, and as I began to learn about research, I did not want to note something that a person had said in one moment without the benefit of a relationship. The idea of "relationship" might be challenged and I recognize the full range of relationships,

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<sup>48</sup> F. Michael Connelly and D. Jean Clandinin, "Stories of Experience and Narrative Inquiry," *Educational Researcher*, 19 no. 5, (Jun-Jul 1990), 4.

<sup>49</sup> Clandinin and Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*, 131.

knowing that former student/teacher relationships might be a limited kind of relationship, but conversations between them develop the relationship further.

In some kinds of research the “person and phenomenon that were being researched could be bounded...atemporal and static.”<sup>50</sup> Clandinin and Connelly argue that temporality is a “central feature” of narrative inquiry and that narrative inquirers “think of [an event] not as a thing happening at that moment but as an expression of something happening over time. Any event, or thing, has a past, a present as it appears to us, and an implied future.”<sup>51</sup> Narrative inquiry turns away from generalizable, static claims partly because of the understanding of human beings as shifting and fluid. Understanding the temporality of persons can help us to see their stories as a way of knowing, a way of relating. As the old saying goes—which one of my tennis partners, who is originally from India, reminded me—Heraclitus of Ephesus says something like: you can never step into the same river twice, for new waters are always flowing.

#### 4. The Fourth Turn: I Know in More Ways than One

The fourth turn towards narrative inquiry in Pinnegar and Daynes’ framework includes an acceptance of a range of epistemology or evidence. In the relational quality of the fourth turn, narrative inquirers use various kinds of knowing and valuing. “They

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<sup>50</sup>Ibid, 9-10.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid,29

accept and value the way in which narrative inquiry allows wondering, tentativeness, and alternative views to exist as part of the research account.”<sup>52</sup> For example, in my storytelling I include my own felt sense of what a good story is and whether it will be generative to others. Narrative inquiry does not rely “on the assumptions of reliability, objectivity, and generalizability, it also doesn’t rely on the assumption of validity.”<sup>53</sup> In my work as a humanities teacher, I have used an interdisciplinary approach and like narrative inquirers, a post-positivist perspective.

I have experience with multiple ways of knowing in my teaching which I leverage in my research. In addition, although narrative inquiry might not be considered a “mixed method”<sup>54</sup> approach, it does use multiple field texts, which might be varied in perspective. In the humanities, different ways of knowing and feeling are accessed. “As narrative researchers engage in this work, they begin to hold different field texts in relation to other field texts.”<sup>55</sup> Even the field texts are in “relation” to others, rather than separated.

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<sup>52</sup> Pinnegar and Daynes, “Locating Narrative Inquiry Historically,” 25.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 29-30.

<sup>54</sup> I’m grateful for the doctoral study story that Loyola University Chicago professor, Amy Shuffelton shared at the Educational Theory Summer Institute 2014: Humane Education: Recovering the Humanistic Dimensions of Teaching, Learning and Research. In a research course which recruited her, she assumed that narrative and qualitative methods were “mixed,” but that was not the case. She dropped the course.

<sup>55</sup> Pinnegar and Daynes, “Locating Narrative Inquiry Historically: Thematics in the Turn to Narrative,” 131.

Multiple perspectives is an important general education goal in the liberal arts. Although it would seem that with the various disciplines that a student might be exposed to in one semester, that multiplicity would be obvious. But even in writing, students often want to write an argument that they see is one-sided. Students tell me that the new standardized writing tests cause them to be taught in a way and to write in a way that is one sided, argumentative, and simple. In addition to the current testing influences, at a community college their other instructors in their discipline areas often foster a particular kind of thinking, which may conflict with the multiple perspectives of the humanities. When students in my General Education humanities and composition courses are inclined to think of issues in a dualistic pro/con way, I encourage them to think of more perspectives. By using stories to show complexity, it is difficult for students to categorize in a dualistic way.

A non-dualistic perspective has implications for research. Although Pinnegar and Daynes split narrative inquiry from other kinds of inquiry, I do think that Hendry makes an important point: instead of splitting research methodology into a binary, we could consider that all research is narrative.

Resituating all inquiry as narrative, as opposed to characterizing narrative as one particular form of inquiry, provides a critical space for rethinking research beyond current dualism and bifurcations. The current typology of research in which science (positivist) and narrative (interpretivist) are understood as two

incommensurate modes of inquiry...create boundaries that limit the capacity for dialogue. These barriers impede the very possibility of interactions between multiple and diverse epistemologies that are the heart of generating questions critical to inquiry.<sup>56</sup>

I am interested in how all research is narrative but also how to do it from a humanities perspective of contingency.

In my struggles with academic research social science methodology, the four turns--towards relationship, towards words and away from numbers, towards particular and local and away from general, and towards multiple ways of knowing and away from narrow kinds of evidence--resolve many of my misadventures and what I see as the ethical challenges of other kinds of research. Thus, due to the relational, word-oriented, local, and interdisciplinary nature of narrative inquiry, I turn towards my strengths in research and writing and turn away from the problems I see in social science research and make relational connections to the humanities and creating of unique stories. In their earliest document, Clandinin and Connelly make this statement about narrative inquiry:

The educational importance of this line of work is that it brings theoretical ideas about the nature of human life as lived to bear on educational experience as

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<sup>56</sup>Petra Munro Hendry, "Narrative as Inquiry," *The Journal of Educational Research* 103 (2010): 72.

lived. We have not set out to contribute to the long tradition of narrative in the humanities, nor to bridge the gap between the humanities and the social sciences in educational studies, desirable as that clearly is.<sup>57</sup>

I hope that my work will contribute to extending the connection between these two educational disciplines as I study the “lived experiences” of those at a community college in the country, but who also have many other experiences at other colleges and in the cosmos. “What distinguishes narrative inquirers is their understanding that understanding the complexity of the individual, local, and particular provides a surer basis for our relationships and interactions with other humans.”<sup>58</sup> However, I must say that I am grateful for the work of my colleagues in the social studies: how I loved the stories about Bruce Springsteen from Mark Kissling, about Patti Lather from Avner Segall, and about the adjustment of local churches to Vatican II from priest and anthropologist Jeffrey Donner. My intention is to connect to the social sciences, not to dismiss them, seeing the possibilities of story across boundaries.

In addition to telling stories frequently, I also have been writing stories in multiple perspective story forms and have been inspired by them. I share literary stories and allusions, which weave into ordinary everyday stories, as is clear in my

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<sup>57</sup> Connelly and Clandinin, “Stories of Experience and Narrative Inquiry,” 3.

<sup>58</sup> Pinnegar and Daynes, 30.



collection of stories here. In *The Wave in the Mind*, Ursula LeGuin says in a talk to those interested in “local literacy”: “I can imagine living without my thumbs, but not without my imagination...The reason literacy is important is that literature *is* the operating instructions. The best manual we have. The most useful guide to the country we’re visiting, life.”<sup>59</sup> Much of my experience is with literature as a way of knowing and literary allusions abound. Perhaps, like LeGuin’s characters in her science fiction novel, *Always Coming Home*, despite the long trek, I too was coming home to the possibility of the creative work of story, even in research.

## 5. How I Engage in Narrative Inquiry

*There is so little to remember of anyone - an anecdote, a conversation at a table. But every memory is turned over and over again, every word, however chance, written in the heart in the hope that memory will fulfill itself, and become flesh, and that the wanderers will find a way home, and the perished, whose lack we always feel, will step through the door finally and stroke our hair with dreaming habitual fondness not having meant to keep us waiting long.*

Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping*<sup>60</sup>

Like other teachers, every semester persons I have not met enter my classroom. (This once read: “I get a new batch of students” and then “I get a new group of

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<sup>59</sup> Ursula K. LeGuin, *The Wave in the Mind: Talks and Essays on the Writer, the Reader, and the Imagination* (Boston: Shambhala, 2004), 210.

<sup>60</sup> Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping* (New York: Picador, 1980), 194-195.

students in my courses,” but this depiction changed after research and revision.) As an English teacher, I hear about their experiences and hear their voices quite a bit. They write many short introductory papers about themselves, about their readings, which leads them to engage with some challenges in reading and writing. They also consider what their assumptions are about themselves, about their own reading and writing, and about college--whether they are new to college or returning.

At about midterm, I meet with individuals to discuss the challenges they have faced or aspects of college that surprised them. Many of the same issues come up--the difficulty of critical reading rather than summarizing; the challenges of communication, collaboration, or participation with people--both students and teachers--who are not from one's hometown; and lots of regular problems like procrastination or computer helplessness. We work together to problematize for deeper understandings. But always there is something unique about their experience, their story--how they are a racecar driver or rodeo rider; how their skin condition or large family affects them as a student; how their mother's illness pushed them to do volunteer work, how their experience in an abusive home causes them to want to be a law enforcement officer. I have used these conversations for many years to help them to create unique essays about their experiences in unique forms for other student and teacher readers. I now want to share them in researched stories.

To collect stories, I emailed students in all of my courses from the Winter 2013 semester, inviting them to talk further with me about their college challenges, leading to their own unique stories. All of the students from that semester were sophomores--in either a General Education humanities course, a literature course, or an expository writing and research course. I chose sophomores because it means that they have made it through over a full year of college, and I was able to learn about their stories of persistence in college as a starting point.

Out of the one hundred persons who were in my courses, I had hoped to have between five to ten who would agree to participate, so that this would leave some room for attrition but offer what I was looking for: energetic and compelling stories. Happily, 21 of them responded to my email; I was able to talk at least briefly with fifteen of them. Many of them were completing clinicals in other towns and were quite busy, so I was not able to set meeting times with them. The ten stories that I include explicitly in this dissertation have ideas from the other five weaved in. All of the students knew me and seemed eager to participate.

I usually had two conversations with each of them, audiotaping one of the conversations. Although I had a list of potential questions, sometimes just asking them how their semester was going was enough to begin our conversation. My goal was to let them tell their story in the least invasive way possible, so that readers of the stories could imagine them and the community college context.

Narrative inquiries begin with a research puzzle, but the puzzle can shift through the restorying. I explore the stories of community college students, creating one individual story for each with echoes and connections between them because there are unique yet similar aspects among any group of students. I chose potent and poignant aspects of their stories, their writings if available and interesting, and my own observations and reflections. A significant shift over time was how much I was learning from them through the relational stance. This shift, along with many other shifts in my learning as a researcher, storyteller, and teacher are discussed in the final chapter.

There is a kind of “wakefulness” in narrative inquiry, and it is this wakefulness that provides for an “ongoing reflection.”<sup>61</sup> Clandinin and Connelly explain that a “good narrative... [includes an] *explanatory, invitational quality*, as having *authenticity*, as having *adequacy* and *plausibility*.”<sup>62</sup> I hope I have created stories that resonate with readers, but also I hope that narrative inquiry continues to be a generative form of research for this idealistic, enthusiastic teacher, even after all of these years, to be less didactic, less self-righteous because in narrative inquiry “it is impossible...to present a kind of perfect, idealized, inquiring, moralizing self.”<sup>63</sup> Thus, my own vulnerability as a teacher, as a learner, is a part of the story. I know that through my enthusiasm and care

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<sup>61</sup>Clandinin and Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*, 184.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid, 185.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid, 62

for my students and years of experience that the potential for my research is to depict either them or me as self-righteous. With community college students that seems like an impossibility, however, because they often have bold and fearless responses to authority and certainly to overly moralizing individuals. They are complex humans with unique responses.

During difficult times in 1968 during the Vietnam War and civil unrest, Hannah Arendt wrote a letter to Mary McCarthy: “I have a feeling of futility in everything I do. Compared to what is at stake everything looks frivolous. I know this feeling disappears once I let myself fall into that gap between past and future which is the proper temporal *locus* of thought. Which I can’t do while I am teaching and have to be all *there*.”<sup>64</sup> Arendt expresses the complexity of considering time: we are in the present when we write, yet in narrative inquiry time can be reconsidered. And it is so great for me to see this very famous scholar feeling the pulls of cultural forces with concerns for the future but also the absolute force of teaching to be in the present. It helps me to see what a difficult thing I have been doing. But I can pull some of my strengths as a teacher into my research work.

As I reflect on these concluding remarks before my stories begin, I think about both a dreadful Retention Committee meeting I attended that tried to create a “gap analysis” of “causes” of retention problems, but I also think about the young man in my

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<sup>64</sup>Brightman, 213.

developmental course who when I was trying to explain how to use a quotation in a separate sentence without lots of his commentary in the same sentence, he looked up at me through brown, shaggy hair and said, "Sometimes I don't know half of what you are talking about." Another adorable person often sits next to me in the library to work on her papers, ever since I was tough on her when she told me that she would miss class to see her brother as he was returning from Afghanistan after being shot and I told her that she could see him when he got home. Recently, she said that my feedback about civic literacy was gobbledygook. They keep us humble. And yes, I am full of stories. I still expect to continue to learn from them just as narrative inquiry does not end when the final text is complete. I hope to continue to use it as a way of thinking and researching for the rest of my work life. Clandinin and Connelly say that narrative inquiry is "a form of living, a way of life."<sup>65</sup> It is clearly my way of life. Teaching is such an enduring challenge; researching retelling stories requires agility, imagination, and hope. I have found it to be hard work, but I have learned more than I could have imagined.

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<sup>65</sup>Clandinin and Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*, 78.

### Chapter 3 There and Back Again: Border Crossing in Time and Place

As soon as we met at one of our satellite campuses--once an office building owned by a natural gas and oil company and now holds couches and computers in the lobby and opens up to three floors with small trees and large hanging plants on the side of each level with a giant skylight above--Kirk Chamberland was immediately talking. He continued while sitting and then occasionally standing to pull up his socks or to take his watch off and then put it back on again. Rarely looking at me with his aquamarine-eyes, he looked into the distance. I was so excited that he was willing to meet me, willing to be the first to start my adventure of learning from former students.

As we walked up to an old conference room with a large oval table without a center to begin my first conversation, he said that his college experience was like the *Hobbit*-- there and back again. To connect with him and his allusion, I quickly replied that on the first day of a semester I often feel like I should bow dramatically and deep, like one of the dwarves at Bilbo Baggin's rounded, wooden door, and say, "Lucia Elden, at your service." In their case, the dwarves then began a rambunctious dinner party before dragging the resistant Bilbo on an adventure, though he does finally make the decision himself to go after reading the complicated contract.

In the end Bilbo writes his story with the subtitle of the novel as the title of his memoir--*There and Back Again*, which is the story for many community college students, as Kirk implies. Rarely does a student who attends a community college have only one

stay: they might have been there during high school, during summers, if they are not successful at a university or in addition to university classes, after they return from military service. They might be trying again after not completing the first time, retraining due to offshoring of jobs, or coming to reimagine their lives. Many students have crossed borders many times: between the city and the country to find an education or work, between countries, between civilian life and military life, between parenting and schooling, between high school and college, between community college and university. The community college is a borderland of time and space: a place where there is gain, often coming after loss, a place where the past, present and future converge.

In late 2008 the United States went into a recession but even before then, outsourcing affected work in the Midwest, forcing folks to get new credentials or to attend community colleges before transferring. Thus, the economy affects attendance, and the vast majority of community college students receive financial assistance and struggle with living expenses. However, my inquiry here does not examine humans as “exemplars of a form--of an idea, a theory, a social category,” rather, they are “looked at as embodiments of lived stories.”<sup>66</sup> I present their stories within my own exemplary pedagogy, that is, an example of a relational pedagogy where I am affected by them,

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<sup>66</sup> Clandinin and Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*, 43.



where we are affected by each other. It has been a joyous occasion to do a retelling, a re-presentation of their stories.

The five stories about the following persons, each in their own section of this chapter, are about those who are the first in their family to attend college and yet all attended another college before attending a community college in the country. As a result, they have crossed borders several times: from other schools in cities, from the city to the country, from the university to the military to the community college. In addition, we have on campus on the border of an Indian reservation and another on the border of Amish country.

Kirk Chamberland, a former aviation mechanic who graduated from a for-profit trade school in the city before becoming a computer networking student in the country, and Michell Latosz, a former singer from Detroit who lived in California for many years and started college there before coming back to the Midwest to care for her mother and start over.

Kenneth Wing, an average high school student and good athlete, who attended a mid-size state university ended up onto academic probation and due to the recession joined the military to serve abroad. Because of hard work and good luck, April Wood, an average high school student who persisted at two different community colleges, had a clearer path, and like Ken is now a university student getting very high grades.

Like many, Lillian Warren went to a university for two years, changing her direction many times, before running out of money, missing her family home, and returning there to attend a community college. Indeed, crisscrossing borders, there and back again, creates the twists and turns of a tale in time and in place.

When making the case to the dwarves for Bilbo's participation in the adventure, Gandalf claims, which I think is also true for these students: "There is a lot more in him than you guess, and a deal more than he has any idea of himself," and yet, there is much more for them all "to find out beyond the borders of the Shire."<sup>67</sup> I have stories here of my own as well, a mom and teacher of many a year, a returning student myself who seeks to be a *doctus poeta*,<sup>68</sup> who had hoped to find a way to help struggling, border crossing students before and during college and career readiness reform movements. As it turns out, it was probably me who was most like Bilbo, the "fifty year old or so" who had been worrying about doilies and his mother's dishes.<sup>69</sup> I found my way back through stories. Once I started, I looked forward to hearing another story and another. I knew that I would learn more and be amazed, over and again.

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<sup>67</sup>J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit or There and Back Again*, (New York: Ballentine Books, 1996),19 and then the film *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*. Dir. Peter Jackson. Writers Fran Walsh and Phillippe Boyers. New Line Cinema. 2012.

<sup>68</sup> Scholar-poet, especially one who uses her knowing and her skill for good effect, Arthur Leslie Wheeler, *Catullus and the Traditions of Ancient Poetry* in Alberto Manguel, *A History of Reading*, (New York: Penguin Books,1996), 295.

<sup>69</sup> Amazingly, this is Gandalf's age description of Bilbo in the novel and then the rest is from the 2012 film. In the film he also says that every good story has "embellishments." It reminds me of the film *Smoke Signals* where Thomas wants a story from Suzy Song and she asks, "Do you want the truth or lies?" He smiles, broadly: "I want both."

# 1. Tech Readings: No “Blank Slate” on the Border

*Interesting...I may be willing to sit down and tell my story, but I fear it may be too long...I've had a rather...Unique...Life and career in my short time, and, while it would make for an interesting case study, I don't know if it would be your typical college experience and may throw your paper's message askew.*      Kirk Chamberland, with his own use of ellipses

I first met Kirk Chamberland in my humanities night class. I did not know then that he lived on the edge of several school districts. As is often the case, I did not know him at all for a few weeks in the semester but did discover that he had attended the same high school as my sons; he was in the marching band with one son and was a computer information services major like my other son. He had no trouble talking with me after class or during class, our blue eyes meeting squarely when he was near a computer. There was something about him that was intriguing: not just the reddish-blond waves, freckles, and a cup in his hand into which he spit sunflower shells but also the contrast of how he stood when he was near a computer—straight and confident—in contrast to how he sat in the chintzy, worn chair desks—hunched over. I soon realized after talking with him after the class that I knew very little of him back then.

I had not taught an evening class on the northern campus in the countryside, twenty-five miles from home, in a long time. I gave them up when it became too

disruptive for my family, and I had enough status in the department not to do so. In the past, most instructors taught one night class, on one of the campuses. It was an acknowledgement that most of the persons who attend classes were returning and working jobs. Today most of them are between 18-26. The last semester I taught at night was on Mondays in the 1990s from 6:30-9:30, before which I would make a giant pot of spaghetti and meatballs that my sons and their teenage male babysitter would then consume. We still have his green, brown and gold weavings and grey photography on our walls. They remind me of the watercolor paintings, skirts, and festivals created by the kids' playgroup and our mothers' group called "Creative Parenting."

It was a tough way to begin the week for us and probably for the "nontraditional students"<sup>70</sup> who had families of their own. I was too frazzled to ask them about how they were coping, maybe too prideful to admit that it was a strain. Looking back, we could have supported one another with our stories, instead of keeping a traditional teacher-student distance. One year I almost decided to teach part-time instead of full-time, despite the huge economic strain it would cause, because after dropping my sons off at their uncle's in the country, always in a hurry, I got a speeding ticket while cutting through the back road with the football field. I felt fragile and frustrated by the whole

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<sup>70</sup> I am thinking very carefully about my use of the word "student" and hope to use the descriptor "person," as I do in the above paragraph when possible, but I use "student" intentionally in some cases to indicate a role.

deal. I know that the students have these stories as well. Don't be angry, said the very young cop from the small town, which the Amish buggies and small brick shops in a row caused one of my many former sister-in-laws to think she was in the 19th century.

Kirk is from an even smaller town, with farms that border the highway towards the college in the country with billboards along the way reminding passersby to eat fruit and vegetables and stop by the fast food pit stop or local boat shop. He appears like he could be a local right-out-of-high-school college student, but he is not. A lot can happen in a short time. One of the mistakes I often make is assuming that most everyone is from this rural area. Like me, they got there somehow--through relationships of chance--but I make assumptions every time I enter the classroom.

I taught the evening class this time around, many years later, because there wasn't an experienced adjunct instructor to do so, and I was already teaching two other sections of this General Education humanities course called "Modernity and Culture," thus giving me the rare opportunity to have only three class preparations rather than four. The class introduces the humanities to those who plan to graduate with an associate's degree. Discussions on ethics in a changing world and the visual culture of globalization occur in order to help them to problematize modernity through stories within the context of their work in our local rural community. I had no idea that Kirk had already had plenty of experience with the effects of globalization on one's career path. He could have taught me so much then. Instead, I learn through his stories now.

On the first day I always tell this sophomore-level class that while their nursing, welding, and radiography teachers are trying to initiate them into the ways of thinking and speaking in their field, my role as a General Education teacher is to broaden their perspective with other stories. I use my hands while I describe a narrowing and then pull my arms wide like a giant bird to describe the action, the shape of an imaginary parabola. Although the course was created to draw on their experiences, I found myself at the front of the room. Now I realize that the wide reach could also represent each student's experience: each of them having a wide and varied experience across time while they are funneled narrowly in their current seat, as if they were clear and ready as blank slates.

The college seems like it is in a constant state of remodeling. This classroom had once been a nursing classroom. It still has sinks and old-fashioned wooden cupboards. Although I've walked by to see rows of psychology and history students listening to a lecture in the room, I had used the room many times before; it held good feelings for me from the past of large circles with rowdy student conversations. A makeshift classroom with light switches and electrical outlets in odd places, the linoleum floor has a long cord on it taped to the floor which extends from the back of the room to the computer cart at the front of the room. It is not an imaginary cord like the one in Carolyn Forché's poem "The Colonel" set in El Salvador: "The moon swung bare on its black cord over

the house.”<sup>71</sup> It is also not a spinal cord, umbilical cord, or the automotive company in Indiana from the 1930s with that name. One word with so many distinctive meanings in various disciplines. It is amazing that we can communicate at all, especially with my pile of literary allusions always at the ready. I discovered that Kirk had his own pile of allusions, collected from video games, Internet exploits, and science fiction novels.

Kirk Chamberland often came up to the front to help with computer snafus, which were nearly every day occurrences since everyone made several presentations. A little cocky, he seemed to like this role: looking at the cart through his glasses and wavy bangs with his hands on his hips and sunflower seeds behind his lip. Classroom technology can provide a place that gives students an equal footing, and in fact, they can be the teachers in the class. For others, however, it can make them feel unsteady. On the first day of a composition class, I had two persons suggest boldly other ways for me to present a document and then another person almost break down in tears with fear and anger.

In Kirk’s class, those studying computer information systems chose to sit in the back of the room where it was not well lit. Kirk was one of them, along with a 20-something who was the “IT guy” at a local high school, an Iraq veteran with a wife and kids—though he only talked about it with me in small group time but claimed he

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<sup>71</sup> Carolyn Forché, *The Country between Us*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1981). This poem ends with: “As for the rights of anyone, tell your people they can go fuck themselves. He swept the ears to the floor with his arm and held the last of his wine in the air. Something for your poetry, no? Some of the ears on the floor caught this scrap of his voice. Some of the ears on the floor were pressed to the ground.”

remembered nothing—and a computer-assisted draftsman with a big smile and mop of hair who knew my sons in high school. I actually know much more about these young men now from the conversations I have had with them on breaks during the three hour class, during group work, and even after the semester, but for now these descriptors suit my purpose of describing them in this setting with Kirk.<sup>72</sup> I felt that they were resistant to the class, partly due to their positioning in the room and intimacy with each other. There were also others who did not make themselves known to us, but I felt I had to win over this self-created group in the back if I was going to succeed in facilitating discussion in this class.

I eventually learned that they all hung out in the student lounge, which none of the others knew about, playing video games before class. One day I organized a stunt where I asked them to stay in the lounge, and I was going to pitch a fit to the class about them being late and then we would all go down and get them. It was the first time that I had been in the student lounge where couches, screens, and weight equipment dominated, junk food wrappers strewn here and there.

I teased them often, and they seemed to enjoy the class eventually, perhaps because they could work together and choose issues for projects related to their interest—their careers and video games. They liked figuring out where superstitions come from—the layers of cultural stories behind “knock on wood” or black cats crossing one’s path—

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<sup>72</sup> Like the others, Kirk is a pseudonym and details about others are for context.



-making a game out of it with their devices on the ready to look up histories before anyone else. We were all intrigued by the layers of culture underneath religious stories.

Kirk, dressed in jeans and a black t-shirt with a random saying on it, often had a two liter bottle of Mountain Dew, which he said he needed because of his long hours of work. Many seemed bedraggled. Moms sat on the right, older persons in the front, young ones like Ashlynn Owen trailing off to the left, Michell Latosz in the middle of all of them. An automotive and heating-air conditioning worker always came in a little late. Kirk was always there.

Teaching in a course based on discussion--in order to develop collaborative communication--is like being the host at a dinner party. I have attended several dinner parties at our neighbor's house while visiting our summer cottage in a tiny village by a big lake. The guests are usually retired academics, and the conversation ranges from national and local politics, current cultural events, and old stories. I've also met a former ambassador to New Zealand who has long, curly gray hair and wears nautical striped shirts, and a New York City lawyer who flies back and forth to work.

Inevitably, the conversation turns towards Michael Moore, the documentarian who has a house nearby in this land of ice caves on the lake in the winter and rip tides drowning the unsuspecting in the summer. He has been seen at the local cemetery on Memorial Day and is known for attempting to attend a community college but because he

couldn't find a parking spot on the first day, decided not to attend. I am not sure whether this is truth or legend.

With all of the variability, the host has many decisions and responsibilities: seating arrangements to maximize the conversation, food preparation so that the temperature of the courses are just right and comes at the right time, consideration of who is in the conversation and who needs to be drawn out and whether the side bar conversations of twos and threes are working and when to draw everyone back to a central conversation. The goal is for folks to get to know one another and enjoy a meaningful and memorable dialogue. It is unlike the house parties I have hosted where I have intense conversations one-on-one with almost everyone. A dinner party does not privilege intimacy; smooth and easy group conversation is the goal for the hostess and the guests who are aware and help with this outcome. It is a controlled environment—nothing too tense or controversial. The host makes sure of it—both at the dinner party and in the classroom.

Being a part of a discussion is not easy, especially for the uninitiated. Some are unfamiliar with roles that are played and the possible detours in the conversation. Kirk acknowledges this ambivalence: “While many times our class discussion rambled into territory that filled me with annoyance, overall, I enjoyed the many diverse viewpoints and philosophies shared between us all, and, on occasion, we should take time out of our busy lives to stop and think about our worldly culture and what affects we are

having on those that we share it with.” I get a kick out of the submerged emotion and turn towards what “we” should do. I know about this turn.

When the discussion moves from views of a particular text, it gets more complicated. Kirk began to stand out with interesting comments about the reading, but it did seem like he was doing the reading on the spot, not reading beforehand. He was quick enough to figure out this strategy. Recently, in another humanities class, because we were all amazed how many allusions to television shows in a novel--scientists were assumed to be like the ones in *The Big Bang Theory*, the accent of a brown-skinned stranger was like the crab in *Finding Nemo*--a student shared a quote. When I asked her a follow-up question about the other characters in the context, she couldn't explain, admitting that she hadn't read it but was just trying to find a response to my question about how the rural character used the allusions to understand her encounters in the world. I felt judgmental of her at the time, teacherly and corrective, but now I see how I set her up. I am learning.

This is a danger in facilitating discussion: despite its appearance as democratic, they might still engender a “one right answer” story. The same class was having difficulty figuring out when the character was thinking, whether the narrator was commenting, or whether it was happening in the moment. They became angry at the text, and of course, at me. Instead of learning through experience, they expected me to clear it up for them, and I obliged. In my view it was a fairly linear and

straightforward--Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior* about a family in the country confronted by the effects of climate change--but the students found the omniscient point of view confusing to negotiate during the short amount of time they had to devote to it. Kirk never admitted a text was difficult.

The text for Kirk's class, Kwame Anthony Appiah's *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics for Strangers*, is not a typical textbook either, and Appiah often makes points, which appear to be his main argument, and then shows how they are problematic. He might begin with a story about his Ghanaian family before moving to a stream of historical and literary allusions and then references to popular culture. He creates a description of a globalized group with cosmopolitan tendencies and then in the end say it is actually Al Qaeda. Some readers are used to "closed" texts, rather than interpretative "open" texts, yet even in the humanities, writers create sequences for a particular effect though the response is unique.

Even in the sciences, students learn different parts of the stories from the same material. And what happens if they read more than is assigned? Will they do poorly on the test because it is less clear? These are the discussions I have about reading. In my experience students are so used to straightforward simplistic textbooks that texts which move on different planes of time and space rather than in a linear progression give them trouble. Their stories, the texts of their lives, can give us trouble because they have more complexity than I can fathom.

Before he entered the college doors, Kirk Chamberland began his hands-on classes in an old plane hangar in the trade school program to become an aviation mechanic. He also worked a series of jobs: driving and unload shipping containers for a variety of delivery companies and warehouses. It was exhausting for him and very structured: in school for eight hours, working for eight hours, sleeping, eating and video game playing for eight hours. The certification was taking longer than it had promised because of the amount of work he was doing and so he quit and lined up all of his many tests and exams needed to complete. He says sarcastically that it was a “circus of hoops.” He has a funny way of describing things. He lists the many jobs and complications due to the economy in rapid fire. I feel as I often do when listening to these stories--sitting in my seat, overwhelmed.

In addition to the challenges with the schedule, he had roommate troubles and “altercations with classmates” --of which I can only imagine--so that he had to redo some of his school projects. I think it might have helped him to be in a group of guys who respected his computer skill for the group work in our class though he hints at troubles with others even there. He might be a bit of a “know it all.” I feel for him.

While in the trade school, he had a falling out with some friends and roommates, including roommates who had addictions and didn’t pay rent, which is not unusual for a college student to encounter. He pointed out that he “got a friendship that way” when he discovered that a guy he worked with was also at his school. Moving from the

country to the city seemed to make finding friends a challenge for Kirk, but his relationship problems occurred at work as well.

The stock market crash affected one of his part time jobs, and he lost it due to the GM bankruptcy; it also affected him in his job search after he graduated. He did not want to move away from the Midwest, however, but that is where the placement office from the school was offering. Living in the big cities two to three hours away had been difficult enough. He moved home. He was able to procure a job at a small aviation strip. It was isolated and only lasted three months. The blue collar, “rough and tough greasy” guys, and the “hunting types, the fishing types” began to pick on him. I see now that even though Kirk grew up in the country and would seemingly be able to negotiate these relationships, his smart and nerdy style—of which he is proud and happy about—might give others pause. He explained that they began to “push my buttons.” He had to work with a crew in 10-hour shifts, inspecting rivets. While manning a large machine, he actually did push the wrong button—up instead of down—and damaged the side of a building. He was fired. He pauses after telling me this part of the story, waiting for me to take it all in.

Kirk moved to a larger airport in which he was supposed to read aircraft manuals in between jobs. He would sit in a corner and read a sci-fi novel instead. His concentration “slipped.” Again, he was let go from the job. He moved back home and stayed in his basement alone, depressed because of his being a “lazy and inattentive

person.” The challenges Kirk experiences in relationships and with details have caused him great stress. I was shocked by the steady stream of story that Kirk shared without much inflection in his voice, seemingly happy to be sharing all of his experience yet without affect. I felt such empathy about his being tossed and turned in a world that requires certain communication skills. I was learning about 21st century skills and the effects of globalization.

After sulking and playing video games in the basement, his mother told him that he had to either get a job or go to school. It was the last day in August to sign up for classes. He decided to try out his other interest at a community college: computers. Unlike his experience in the trade school, at the community college he discovered that there are moms and kids right out of high school from “all walks of life.” This is sometimes a challenge for some at a community college. I sometimes hear someone giggle that there was “like a 40 year old” in their class. But for others, they learn how to learn from older or younger classmates.

Kirk noticed that the learning was at a more relaxed pace: “You have a lot more freedom; there is also the possibility that you will forget about all these projects and end up on the last day--oh crap you have all this work to do.” Perhaps the intense structure at aviation school had helped him. At the college he is his “own boss.” He can choose to be lazy, go out drinking, he says, but then have a mound of work to do in the end.

Each person decides whether and how much reading he or she will do for class. Because of the technical reading in his former career, including finding references to specific directions for machine operations, he says that those books would make the reading that he has done in college look “very small” and easy. He didn’t like the “random texts” in the book for his composition class; the excerpts and design didn’t make sense to him. Despite the fact that he was directed towards a technical career, his personal and job-related reading are significant in his life.

His first college classes--a general computer course and speech—both required a PowerPoint presentation. He says that he hates them “with a passion”:

Just all the pomp and circumstance, just to say hey, we want you to buy this product or we want your company to partner with our company to make a business. But it’s all the pomp and circumstance that all these business people go through just to say, hey, I want a partnership. And other things like I gotta now do extreme detail of this pomp and circumstance and now in 20 slides. Please. I have more things to do with my time.

The irony is grand. “Pomp and circumstance” is the song that is sung at graduations but was written as a war march, coming from the Shakespearean tragedy *Othello*, whose war hero is not successful in domestic relationships. It suggests the pageantry of war in the first word and the devastation of battle in the second. Kirk probably played the



song many times in marching band and at graduations. He means something different in his connection to PowerPoints--frivolous pageantry that will be graded or used for some financial gain.

The first project for the humanities class is a group project, the first of several, where they explore their field and the effects of globalization in it, telling stories from people in the field. His group's was not very polished, but Kirk did a lot of talking in the presentation on the globalization of their field. They presented a PowerPoint. I don't think I told the story of a technology<sup>73</sup> for that particular class, and I regret it because that story might have helped. It is a challenge to remember that this class here was not part of previous dialogues.<sup>74</sup> While I urge them to connect their learning from outside of the class and in other classes, this teaches me how difficult it is to remember.

I sat with the computer group in their preparations and helped them move out of the philosophy of their computer course instruction: KISS--keep it simple, stupid. I have also recently heard this saying used by a state trooper at a committee meeting. In their classes, the computer instructor tells them a story about when he worked for the Pentagon creating a document that his supervisor did not understand and so he rejected it as computer jargon and told him about this philosophy of communicating. Kirk

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<sup>73</sup> I learned this kind of storytelling at a National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Institute in 1994: "Cultural Tools: Realities and Representations of Technology in American Society."

<sup>74</sup> Is the opposite of a blank slate a full slate? "In computer science, tabula rasa refers to the development of autonomous agents with a mechanism to reason and plan toward their goal, but no 'built-in' knowledge-base of their environment. Thus they are truly a blank slate." Wikipedia, "Tabula Rasa." [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tabula\\_rasa](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tabula_rasa), Last modified Nov. 24, 2014. On the other hand, humans are not "truly" blank slates, but it is intriguing to think about this computer science perspective.

reports that the instructor uses stories from his experience other times as well to share the values of this discipline about time and behavior. I would love to know how faculty use stories as a part of their official or unofficial curriculum. In a conversation with a nursing faculty member, she told me that she uses stories to gross students out to get their attention, to “scare” them with medical anomalies. I told Kirk’s group that I actually did hope they would complicate the issues, looking at them from many perspectives, not just two in a pro/con view. They seemed amazed at the circular concept map that we created in contrast to the two-sided chart that they had as their start.

Kirk often posted links to the online course learning space for the class. He did this before anyone else, posting videos for the class with explanations and reviews. Early on, he posted a video of the butterfly effect in a video game form and then videos on globalization by John Green who does the “crash course” series. Green speaks in a humorous, witty, fast clip with lots of sidebar tangents, and in his video “Is College Worth It?”<sup>75</sup> he has a picture of a “baby Genghis Khan” and a Ninja Turtle behind him, and sometimes answers questions from “me from the past.” He uses numbers and stories to make the argument, but he also says that college makes us a “more informed observer[s] of the universe.”

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<sup>75</sup> John Green, “Is College Worth It?” [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t\\_N7MAr98CI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t_N7MAr98CI). 21 August 2012.

Kirk actually reminds me of the much-loved John Green, an Internet and Facebook superstar, and now he has novels and a movie, *The Fault in our Stars*. Glasses, quick-witted, interdisciplinary, smart in a quirky, nerdy way. A few weeks after the group project, Kirk posted this comment along with three videos about North Korea:

Recently, during my usual romp through the Internet, I came upon a documentary that delved into the heart of North Korea. These brave men managed to tour a country that is closed off to the rest of the world, and dared to bring video recording equipment, which is forbidden by that government. It gives a much different look at a land that has nearly no contact with the rest of the world, and what happens when a people have a complete lack of globalization in their lives. While a touch long, and some parts are a bit disturbing, it is an interesting look at a world very different from our own.

I could argue that the opportunity to find this on the Internet helped Kirk become more informed, a better observer, but his enthusiastic “my usual romp” suggests that he often accesses the Internet’s gems. Perhaps the sharing with others, communicating critically and with context is the opportunity that the course affords him. Here Kirk takes a particular view of globalization: isolation is a dangerous thing and looking at other worlds is interesting though I didn’t know at the time how his life had been dramatically affected by globalization.

As a part of the film search group, Kirk also volunteered to get everyone copies of a postmodern movie that shifts in time and place, even though he pirated copies from Russia. He took this job very seriously. Of course, he knew not to tell me about it: he sent a note to his classmates to bring a flash drive to a location and kept it away from me. He spoke in code.

I often use the commercials from the Super Bowl or the inaugural speech as texts for analysis in the winter semester; this time the film became one of the writing options for the midterm essay. Although Kirk provided one of the options, he chose not to write about any of them. I prodded him a bit before letting it go. I did not pay attention to the volumes he was writing for the class, uncoun ted in the gradebook.

At the time, I was curious about Kirk because he attended the same school system as my sons; he was between them in age and, like my youngest, was in the same marching band. But he had not heard of either of them, which either shows that my kids were not that well known or he didn't always pay attention to others. Since my youngest was one of only four who was in the middle of the band on a stage playing electric guitars and my other son was playing football in between marching band performances—I think it might be the latter. I wondered how it was that they were graduating from universities and starting careers and how he got stuck in the community college labyrinth before I knew that he had only been there a short time.

In school Kirk played the trumpet but because of the needs of the different bands he was in he switched to euphonium for marching band and then trombone for jazz band. For him this is similar to his participation in a discussion group or even his role in the economy, as it is true for many community college students: what they might be good at or enjoy is only one part of the decision of what to do with their life.

Of course, there are small decisions he made along the way. In our class Kirk did not turn in a midterm essay. Even when I asked him about it a week or two late, he didn't take the opportunity to do it. I am not sure if he thought maybe he couldn't do just what he wanted to do with it and had perfectionist tendencies or whether he was really busy as he said. Others in the class worked full-time and were doing just fine: one woman was having her fourth child over spring break, another man came in business clothes each class and another came with a mechanics uniform with his name embroidered on a badge over the pocket of his shirt. Many women with children who were Licensed Practical Nurses were forced to come back to college to finish their Registered Nurses because of their now outdated degree. Two of the women had children with serious health problems who frequently found themselves in a downstate university research hospital.

Kirk never missed class, he always participated, he always contributed to the work of his groups, yet he didn't turn in a paper. He said that there are "too many other things to worry about in this world than a little bit of late work," but at other times he

blamed Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder. He didn't seem hyperactive to me at all at the time, so it was unclear what that meant for him. One of my sons struggled through school with his abundant energy. His teachers would let him walk around, take his shoes off, debate vigorously, take naps. There were times when we wished he was on two football teams. He participated intensely or was sleeping. He also loved listening to complex stories, reciting the last line I had read the day before. I always thought he would have been a good bard or warrior during Homer's time: "Sing to me of the man, Muse, the man of twists and turns driven time and again off course."<sup>76</sup> I didn't know that Kirk was full of stories too, but he did not seem "hyper" to me. Even with my personal experience, I was puzzled.

Teachers hear about ADHD a lot, but in college where the responsibility for one's uniqueness resides with the student, partly due to the lack of oversight or exposure to the student, teachers are often uncertain what their role is. It is as common as their label of "procrastination" or "lack of motivation." It appears to me a way of externalizing and limiting their own freedom by giving them a label.<sup>77</sup> I recognize, however, that a "flaw" like not turning in papers or being persistently late can possibly limit opportunities for success; it can become a "tragic" flaw for a drama that it is not a

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<sup>76</sup> The first line: Homer, *The Odyssey*. Translated by Robert Fagles, (New York: Penguin, 1996), 77.

<sup>77</sup> I love this June 14, 2014 article from the *New Yorker* that gives the history of literary writers and their "writer's block." It even includes Ian Hacking's idea that once a category is created, people tend to sort themselves into it. [http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2004/06/14/040614fa\\_fact?currentPage=all](http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2004/06/14/040614fa_fact?currentPage=all). This idea in relation to many educational labels was discussed at our Michigan State University CITE Critical Studies group in the spring of 2014. But I do not have writer's block!

tragedy with a magnanimous hero. My son's foibles were seen as a part of the comedy of the educational setting. I am not sure they were for Kirk.

In class I had assumed that he had been going to the community college since high school, picking away course by course, but that wasn't true. Kirk had been a student at a local high school tech center. I have visited classrooms full of students of welding, certified nursing aides, culinary arts, and I understand that these students might not be academically engaged, might not want to go to school, might drop out if they weren't able to do some "hands on" practical training that they could see as connected to some job later on. As a General Education instructor, I am very skeptical about tech centers in high schools. I'm afraid that students will miss opportunities to take academic levels of writing, reading, math, science because they think they will not need these for their future jobs. However, even if they are not "college bound," which is often considered to mean "university" bound, they are often bound for the community college and will be taking them as well. In addition, their future jobs might not be what they think. Not taking these courses puts them at risk of not succeeding in college, wherever they find themselves. I am stunned by the amount I use the word "taking" in the previous sentences. Just taking?

One advantage of being in the "college prep" track at a high school, whether it is named a track or a "pathway," is that it gives a student a chance at a broad preparation, even a broad perspective. Even if they are not exceptionally "prepared" due to the

weakness of the high school curriculum,<sup>78</sup> it does not narrow their perspective so quickly. Regardless of being in the tech center system, Kirk's experience is not that narrow because of his outside reading.

I see stories from the prism of my own experience, my family's experience. (So how is it that I don't recognize the role they play for other persons? Do I think they are blank slates while I am not?) Both of my own sons might have studied in tech centers if I would have allowed it. My eldest had been cooking in a restaurant since he was a boy and had a penchant for selling, yet taking culinary or business courses in high school would have narrowed his possibilities so early. Instead, he is a happy computer networker for a large corporation, and like Kirk, reads science fiction and plays video games still. My youngest could have taken drafting, especially since as an electrical engineer that is the kind of work he learned on the job. His final career choice might have actually come from orchestra and jazz band, with his love of electric guitars, the cello and stand-up bass, and then building stereo speakers. Both of them wanted to take a weightlifting class, as many do. I was watching. I was not going to allow it. Calculus, physics, poetry.<sup>79</sup> If an advisor would have gotten a hold of them in a quick

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<sup>78</sup> I am indebted to Jeff Bale, now at Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto for his honesty in sharing his lack of understanding of these interchanges. I hadn't realized that this was not common knowledge. My brief but potent exchange with him while revising my comps paper might have triggered the realization that my insider position blinded me and that it was a perspective I could elucidate for others. I hope I do, and I am grateful for his modeling of "not knowing" that helps to put persons in educational settings in more equal places.

<sup>79</sup> I like the part of John Green's video "Is College Worth It?" where he says, "Whether you are studying electrical engineering or poetry, college is not finally about maximizing income..."



minute and asked them what they liked to do, they might have been satisfied to settle on focusing on their interests, rather than gaining new ones. Some of these interests lead to what John Green calls for-profit and “misleading vocational programs,” which cost a lot and lead nowhere but to high debt. The conversation about high debt for graduates seems to be mostly for university graduates, but that is someone else’s story to tell.

As a high school student, I attended a college night and because I liked an interdisciplinary college at the biggest state university. I went there though I knew nothing about any other colleges and applied to only this one. At his high school tech center, a recruiter handed Kirk an application for a for-profit trade school—the “for-profit” he points out often. His older siblings were all mechanics of some kind, so he followed suit, probably disregarding that his siblings are over fifteen years older than he is and are probably quite different. Kirk’s father was a gunner mechanic in Vietnam before becoming a small farmer, and his grandfather was a B52 bomber and officer in WWII. Kirk too tried to enter the military, but his asthma kept him out. Though we are not far away from where the military recruiters were documented talking to kids without plans or money in Michael Moore’s *Bowling for Columbine* and I know my son was recruited in school, but Kirk does not seem to fit the bill.

Kirk is not one who finds it easy to accomplish tasks that he doesn’t see as valuable or when he has other things to do. In addition to the essay for the humanities

course, he admits that he did not do a final revision for his composition portfolio review, saying that he didn't write a conclusion because he could only conclude with his experience which he didn't think was an appropriate conclusion. Connecting his experience to his school essays seems to be a challenge, yet he did spend time connecting his skills to the class. There is something about an essay. There is something about writing an essay that is disinviting to a person's full life.

When he received a second chance from the department with a free tutorial to revise it the next semester, he did not follow through: "I was supposed to go write the paper, go check with him, see if it's ok. Yeah, didn't get that in, just didn't get that in cause hey, ya know I'm addicted, well enthusiastic with World of Warcraft and also doing a new video production job at the horse races." Although he does not feel that having late assignments is earth shattering, he talks about the "mountain of work" he has for his current classes. During the semester in my class, he took all of his sophomore Gen Ed classes in the same semester, which he considered to be a mistake. Because of this scheduling problem, he did not complete all of them. Kirk struggles with the patience to pin all of the details down necessary for "student success."

Learning outside the course also doesn't count for much in school. I recall this feeling as a student: wanting to read unassigned parts of assigned readings or go on tangents of my own learning. If one reads more than is assigned, then won't they learn different things, have a different experience? So for those who believe that students all

learn the same thing, they don't want them to read more than is assigned? How do we integrate a person's life into their learning?

This final post to the class demonstrates some of Kirk's sharing to the class and shows how seriously he takes his role of finding and offering websites to the class that are related to the course. I have removed the 15 hyperlinks, his paragraphing, and much of his text:

This is the last week of the semester, so I leave you all with a few nuggets of knowledge that I go look at often to keep me both informed and entertained.

First, a link made by a group of individuals in the gaming and art industry that take a deeper look at games, how they are made, what they mean, and how we can improve them. Want a more informed view on the medium and what views they bring to the table? Here's a good start. This official website, which has articles and podcasts that are good reads if you feel like it. Next, a rather eccentric magazine-style website that brings discussion for movies, comics, games, and nerdy geek culture in general in the form of videos and articles...They also assume that a majority of their audience are adults, so take proper precautions. Nothing too nasty, just, PG-13 on this one...Lots of good info and news there, a bit more trustworthy than your Facebook news feed, I can tell you that straight out. .. Many hours could be wasted there, just reading up on things...a humongous content sharing site that you can vote on different posts, so

tread lightly...they just don't advertise like most companies do. Go give 'em a try.

Know how comments on the internet can happen in real time, like we did in the video blogging? This site is one of the prime examples for that. I've got most of them up there, let me know if y'all want more. Peace.

Kirk sounds like a "teacher" here, the teacher of the course, even a teacher who recognizes that "individuals in the gaming and art industry." He recognizes that they might not be a category. I learn from him. He has an encouraging tone, "go give 'em a try," and connects it to the class, "like we did in the video blogging." These are General Education skills: seeking information and critically examining it. He writes in a rhetorically sensitive way. He even has an edit of the post, adding seven more websites with the note "enjoy some goodies I cherry picked for you good folks." Kirk, like my sons, often sends me videos and articles, explaining video gaming culture. Though Kirk might not have all of the "study skills" and management necessary to be an excellent student, ironically, he has many of them to be an excellent teacher.

I think that might be the case for many persons seeking degrees: keeping up with the details and deadlines of school is not something they are interested in. Teachers, on the other hand, can be late on grading or can postpone deadlines. The contributions made by the teacher--leading discussions, considering multiple perspectives and whether they are present--might be done quite well by "students" and

they might do them even better. Thus, some students might not be very good at “student work” but might be better at “teacher work.”

In his sharing and group work, like in his band days, Kirk is a “team player,” yet he is still struggling in college. He believes that life inside and outside the classroom is a challenge:

I did get the impression that my view was not always received well, that I may have been despised by a few of my peers. All I attempted to do was bring a realistic view to the discussion, for it is not good to have one’s head in the clouds when the road ahead is full of obstacles...In my career group, I believe I was one of the lynchpin members that made sure all materials came together in one form, one of the coordinators that helped to get ideas rolling, to ensure that we at least attempt to keep on track.

I reflect now about an aspect of education in college that surprises students: the amount of encounters with other students, that the quality of their learning sometimes depends on who is in their class or who is in their project.

A student who might not have certain resources and ends up at a community college cannot afford to have “flaws” that do not coincide with college. They just have less margin for error. I am uncertain if, when and how Kirk will graduate from the

community college and what it will afford him. As smart, interesting, and talented as he is, I just cannot predict. One night I checked in on email and as soon as I logged in, Kirk swooped into the Google chat and started a conversation. As we chatted he sent videos in rapid fire—Sir Ken Robinson talks that he learned about in his comp class, speakers on ADHD, and a trailer of the movie *Limitless*— to show me what he knows and how he feels. I asked him how his job interview went to be an IT intern at the college. He retorted that no one will hire him because they want “experience.”

Later, he sent me a video called “Humans Need Not Apply,” which compares the effect of technology and the economy on horses to humans. Kirk explains to me that his experience comes from “watching and reading about others’ experiences” like in television and movies where he tries “to find the message and purpose of the parable and apply that as a leaf in my book.” It makes me think of the line from an interview with Donna J. Haraway that has puzzled me for many years. Thyrza Nichols Goodeve asks her about the moments that the cyborg concept crystallized for her. “Well, one is certainly my sense of the intricacy, interest, and pleasure--as well as the intensity--of how I imagined how like a leaf I am.” She talks about the pleasure in confused boundaries and the interdisciplinarity of knowledge practices to understand this

possibility.<sup>80</sup> I now want to know what Kirk thinks about this. He may have some answers for me.

Kirk talks about his friends who are staying with him, who he is playing video games with, his \$2000 computer system, his parents needing his tech help and their nagging at him about getting a job. All of the stereotypes of kids going back to live with their parents may be humorous, as depicted in Yong Zhao's blog post called "College Ready vs. Out-of-Basement Ready: Shifting the Educational Paradigm," but listening to Kirk "blows up" my previous ideas about these assumptions and humans' "learning styles."

As I explained a little about my project in the beginning of our conversation, Kirk Chamberland responded immediately that it sounded like the science fiction novel by Patrick Rothfuss, *The Name of the Wind* a biography of a person received over three days. He brings up this allusion seamlessly in our dialogue. He suggested that we would need that long as well. I discover that the novel is about mentors and a hero who is a legend. After I said I had one more question, he searched desperately on his device about what he had read on Reddit that helped him to explain his ADHD, describing it as "a soft rain of post-it notes."

Kirk walked me to my car, still talking, explaining how a friend was renovating his house and so he was staying with him and then remembering that he wanted to tell

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<sup>80</sup> Donna Haraway, *How Like a Leaf: An Interview with Thyrza Nichols Goodeve*, (New York: Routledge, 1998), 132.

me about his dad who watches Fox news which is one perspective and one that might be relevant for business people but that he is interested in other perspectives as well, including ethical positions. It is like he is trying to be sure to include in all of his thoughts into our conversation.

In Kirk's final reflections from the class, he writes:

As for the cosmopolitanism, I have had a small philosophy growing in the back of my mind for a few years now, spawned from a particular passage of a sci-fi military-based novel I read some time ago:

[Major] Silva walked out into the rain and felt it pelt his face. He turned to look at the ranks of black, brown, and white faces. All he saw were Marines (*Halo: The Flood* 109)

To me, this kind of thinking resonates with Appiah's cosmopolitanism. We are all "Citizens of the Cosmos," and we should treat each other first as human beings, that no matter a person's race, creed, gender or origin of birth, they shall be treated as equal members of this human society.

For a person who uses technology a lot in his life, Kirk talks a lot about humans, perhaps as a science fiction buff can do. Here we can see how his thinking over time



has developed from his reading and then is connected to current reading of the course.

It is not until I reflect through research that I begin to learn as much from him.

Kirk had not figured out a way to leverage his experience or connect his experience to the course discussion, unlike another person in the class who shared his family story in a group presentation of three generations' relationships between the economy and automotive industry. I may have encouraged him to share this story as I sat with his group while they prepared. Perhaps Kirk had not processed it, did not want to share, or did not find a way to share in such a big once-a-week class. Perhaps I had not engaged him personally like I did the other person to find out and facilitate his own border story of being between jobs. What is the role of stories in learning? The teacher's question is much like the researcher's question: How do I respect their privacy and at the same time discover and honor their humanity?

Kirk's self-proclaimed inattention and the challenges he faces in relationships continued to create difficulty for him in the workplace. It is possible that neither of these is addressed in a trade school setting where general education does not have a place. Of course, this is my own bias. Hopefully he has taken the "right road to the right pass," as the hobbit and his companions did because for them, "[t]here were many paths that led up into those mountains, and many passes over them. But most of the paths were cheats and deceptions and led nowhere or to bad ends; and most of the

passes were infested by evil things and dreadful dangers.”<sup>81</sup> I am glad that our college is providing him a co-op situation where he thinks he will need to recall all of his web design skills, but that he can also develop his social skills. Kirk continues to apply for jobs for his co-op; he continues to reach out to me now.

What Kirk really wants to be is an inventor. He has ideas about satellites and of new protocols. He knows that he doesn’t have the credentials yet--saying that he would need a couple of PhD’s to create what he wants to and have enough credibility to do it--but it is clear that he has the imagination. Due to the firings and *faux pas*, he seems to expect trouble and sees other students as having “rose colored glasses” because he thinks they have not been through hard times. He claims that he “hopes for the best but plans for the worst.”

Kirk Chamberland is a person who grew up on the border of a college town in the countryside, dare I say in the Shire, where the only elementary school has been recently shut down due to the decrease in farms and families, its Catholic Church and school closed, the only grocery store burned down. In the first half of the twentieth century, the village was a part of an oil boom; now it has a few hundred residents. The oil wells can still be smelled on the highway that passes the town, the same highway that has new windmills in the open fields. Kirk was there and back again after a visit to the big city. He started in the North Country, began a post-secondary training in

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<sup>81</sup>Tolkien, 55.

metropolitan Detroit, and ended back home to continue his education. Too much did I consider him a “blank slate,” as a local college student. I know better now.

2. “Ain’t No Mountain High Enough.”<sup>82</sup> Challenges in Literacy Construction on the Border

*I would be happy to help. Not sure what I can contribute...Dorky form letters are necessary for the box that academia needs to be in, so understandable. Thanks for thinkin’ of me.*

Michell Latosz

I sat at the end of the brand new lobby of our new campus building with Michell. Our chairs had cushions with modern geometrical designs and a movable study table, which crashed, getting in our way as we tried to move closer to each other as we talked. We laughed together, her black small curls bouncing and laugh lines just starting to show through her almond complexion. She bursts with laughter again when she dreams up what her name might be in a story. We had chatted in two other hallways between our class together and this meeting: in the long hallway adjacent to our former classroom on the campus in the country, which was the same as Kirk’s, and the old, used building in the college town where Kirk and I met.

These floors, however, are shiny, and there was a full length window next to us where we could watch the next phase of construction. A front loader was moving dirt.

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<sup>82</sup> Nickolas Ashford and Valerie Simpson, “Ain’t No Mountain High Enough.” (Tamla Motown, 1966).

I know this term from the children's book *Tough Trucks*, which I used to read to my sons and now read to other young children.

After talking for a couple of hours, we saw Kirk who was with us in our class the year before with a trim new haircut. I waved him over. Since he had delivered pizzas over the year to the hotel where Michell worked as a front desk receptionist, they remembered each other. He told us later that he no longer worked at the pizza place because when he couldn't pronounce a customer's last name and she corrected him, he said under his breath, "It doesn't matter." The customer complained to the boss, and he was fired. He meant that it didn't matter whether he could pronounce it, but she must have felt like he thought that she didn't matter. He joined us in one of the newfangled coach-desk combos and began to talk about the technology we were using and the abundant technology he had in his hands. Later after hearing about Michell's dream of helping those with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in a non-profit business, Kirk closed his eyes and described in great detail a video game that puts a player in a PTSD experience.

Kirk showed us the list of courses for transfer on a beat-up piece of paper he was holding. It looked like every piece of paper that my sons turned in to their teacher. I cynically cherish a big fat folder full of rumpled worksheets which represents my son's learning in a couple of math and science classes. It reminds me of a dual enrolled student telling me that at her high school the teacher lets them know when it is ok to

dump their papers from the semester into the recycling bin. I had not understood what it meant when students asked me whether they should keep or throw away something.

Michell had taken a math and English class before at a community college in California. She didn't realize how much work it was going to be, and though she made good grades, she did not return. She was 31, twenty years previously. She grew up in Detroit, the youngest in the family, going to several schools including one that closed, another boarding school two hours away because her mother thought it would be good for her and then after a year where she "called home every day" due to homesickness, she finished elementary school at a big Catholic city school. She dropped out<sup>83</sup> of high school for a summer because she "felt like she knew everything" and then completed her degree at a different high school. She wasn't good at school--too active and distracted by her own account. She seems so smart to me, so independent, experienced and well-rounded. It is difficult for me to see her as a homesick girl or drop-out of any kind.

Like her mother, she loved to sing, singing in the choir at school and in church. She was going to be Diana Ross, she decided. I have not heard her sing but have heard her melodious laugh. The gap between her teeth when she smiles so big and the way

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<sup>83</sup> Within seconds of writing "dropped out," I receive an email from the local regional district assistant superintendent with a challenge to this label: that the stories of those who did not graduate suggest that not graduating was choice they often had to make due to personal circumstances. Again, I learn another label that does not reflect the broader experience and story of humans. "Don't Call Them Dropouts: Understanding the Experiences of Young People Who Leave High School Before Graduation." A Report from America's Promise Alliance and its Center for Promise at Tufts University, <http://gradnation.org/report/dont-call-them-dropouts> May 20, 2014.

she giggles at herself and others creates a light playfulness that might still be there from “Baby Love” days, yet her sparkling eyes have a knowing depth that goes beyond the sentiment of the Detroit star’s pop song.

After high school though, Michell got married to a disc jockey and moved to California where she lived for thirty years, but not before divorcing there and marrying again. She sang in bands but received little financial reward. She was part of the music “scene” with the requisite drugs and sex. After living in the present in a day-to-day lifestyle, not concerning herself with the future, she found herself attending a non-denominational church, singing and taking a sequence of courses for several years. The music and the religious education have contributed to the literacy education of this bright, complex woman, offering experiences and allusions to connect to the next phases of her education. I knew none of it before our conversation. I am shocked by her story but also by the fact of my ignorance.

Before she could begin a new life away from the ravages of the music industry, which were plenty, she had to undergo another challenge she says. It reminds me of the ways Steven Johnson talks about the video game *The Legend of Zelda* or the way that Lloyd Alexander stories like *The Iron Ring* that I would read to my children, would have a series of problems to solve in increasing progression. The character has a mission and collects people (or animals who personify people) and problems along the way. These small problems are tasks or puzzles that need to be solved before the main mission can

be completed. Although these layers might develop “intelligence” and sometimes even “metacognition” or just new levels for more points, these “tangents” certainly are what make up a person’s story.<sup>84</sup>

Michell uses the word “challenges” with cutting humor. She laughs at herself with a wide-open mouth, saying that she collects challenges as if she does not like life to be too easy. She knows that she is giving me a shock. She says that some of the “challenges” she faced over the years were due to the men in her life--first a white husband, then a black husband, and then a Jewish boyfriend,<sup>85</sup> the last while she began to go to a Christian church. Each relationship posed new challenges and perspectives along the way.

But the next challenge set up unmitigated problems for her future. In the late 1990’s she went to France with a friend. Over the next few years while attending the church, she began to change her life--paying old bills, forgiving trespasses, and being forgiven. The day before her oral exams in her coursework, she went to the Superior Court to pay her last bill. “I went to clean up my business.” She put her backpack on

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<sup>84</sup> Steven Johnson, *Everything Bad Is Good for You: How Popular Culture is making Us Smarter*, (New York: Riverhead Books, 2005). His idea that the more complex structures of pop culture today is creating more intelligence challenges the notion that students to read traditional canonical literature that is deemed a “complex text.”

<sup>85</sup> These are her descriptions, but like all of the husbands, wives, girlfriends and boyfriends in these stories, they are nameless in a literary sense, not of being an “everyman” or so unimportant that they are an archetype rather than a fully developed human, but as a helper for the protagonist of the story. They would each have their own unique story. It is similar to the stories teachers encounter daily; we often hear about these characters in their lives and rarely meet them but our loyalty is with the one we learn from.

the conveyer belt for inspection. The police officer kept moving the bag back and forth under the camera. She couldn't imagine what they were looking for until she remembered that her pen knife souvenir from her old trip a decade before was in the bag. Ironically, it had a "camouflage" print. Though she had no record--which they also blamed her for because of the length of time it took to find her identification in their records--she was handcuffed and put in jail. She wept.

Like me, Michell has moles and sunspots. She is my age, Barack Obama's age. Unlike me, no cop has challenged me that the one under my eye is a teardrop tattoo suggesting that I am in a gang. Michell was let out of jail that day, but not after swearing mightily at guards and inmates. She has a new souvenir: a federal gun and weapons trafficking charge. Despite the fact that the police officer could not get the knife through a piece of paper in a demonstration of how dangerous it was, she was still charged. So many trivial charges have tripped up so many for so long. Yes, it is sometimes hard to believe the stories, but they are a kind of learning. Certainly hers is a pardonable offense.

When I tell this story to friends, they go into problem-solving mode: couldn't she have found someone to represent her to explain the situation? Couldn't she still hire a lawyer to clear her name? It is a problem solving that comes out of having finances and security. It is the same response that people have to the story about my son's friend who was trapped into providing pornography to an undercover police



officer, spending time in prison and then on probation sending a work-related email which landed him back in jail for another year. They don't want it to be a kind of a story that suggests all was lost--like in the against-all-odds plots as my former professor Evan Watkins describes that students themselves feel: "My undergraduates usually seem aware enough that a great many of the cultural texts and visuals around them turn on a basic against-all-odds plot." Despite them pointing this out, they still identify with the character fighting the odds: "It is the fact of being positioned against the odds that brings the necessary individuation and special uniqueness of 'the one.'"<sup>86</sup> The character sometimes has to move on, empty handed, with their experience to keep them company.

After a couple of moves across the country due to a boyfriend and an ex-husband, Michell ended up moving to the locale of a community college in the country to help her mother who had a heart attack. My own mother moved to me when she had health problems and since I had a new relationship, and she was able to finance her stay in a care facility, yet there are still so many medical needs to watch out for, advocate for. The persons in my classes always seem to have extras to care for--parents, grandparents, cousins, and siblings--which takes so much of their time. Michell ended up also taking her mother's 90-year-old boyfriend to the Veteran's Affairs and learning a lot about the plight of former soldiers. Despite her help, he glared at her because he

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<sup>86</sup> Evan Watkins, *Class Degrees: Smart Work, Managed Choice, and the Transformation of Higher Education* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 6-7.

said she was “black.” Michell laughs. “I would ask him, what can I do for you? Can I rub your feet?”

Although she considered studying to be a nurse, she cannot because the weapons charge prevents her from getting a license. Similar to not knowing during the semester how the economy and globalization had affected Kirk--even though they were central to the course theme--I did not know these stories about Michell. She did not talk about her past in any classroom anecdotes about the global nature of our lives, although there were anecdotes about a student’s sister who lives in New Zealand, another student’s Arabic boyfriend and their trip to London, and my son’s friend whose story became not just about breaking the law, due to sharing and reproducing pornography but also a story about new technology and multiple literacies. But I do recall her clap vigorously with a big smile, squealing “Babcia!” when I told the class a story about how my Polish grandmother was finally able to recognize that persons of German descent were not just “Germans,” not all the same based on this demographic bit. I did not understand Michell’s response at the time, her familiarity and excitement when hearing the colloquialism. At the time it just seemed like a response to a funny word.

In the final essay, she reflects on a video interview of Sherman Alexie called “Living outside Cultural Borders” and what she shared with the class when I was not in the room in preparation for their collaborative oral class exam. She also comments on her group’s presentation on undocumented immigrants:

Change is messy and uncomfortable, but change still comes. I shared with the class about Alexie being on the fence of Indian and White America, that he liked being able to jump back and forth and confuse anyone who thought he was their race. I could relate with that because I am also biracial and I am mistaken for Mexican, Puerto Rican, Indian, and Hawaiian along with white as he has been mistaken for other races. It is comforting to be able to relate to anyone just by asking them what you do not understand about them. People are more than willing to share their cultures. I understand when Alexie jumps in and out of his culture. Me being German, Black French, (I think the French is thrown in from past stigma) and raised Polish. I was fortunate to be in this position. It gave me understanding of the immigrant humiliation not being accepted for yourself and judged by a falsehood.

Michell relates to Alexie's border crossing, but like him, sees that there are some benefits. When Bill Moyers asks Alexie what he believes, Alexie replies with his deadpan smirk, "I believe in stories." Michell has more belief in God, but like my feeling about Heart Song, an Anishnabe whose story I share later, I wonder about this faith. After my conversation with Heart Song could be similar to Michell's which I asked myself in my journal: How does a person who has been so affected by people believe that God is leading the way?

For those who live on the border, what others bring up can be challenging.

Michell was glad that students who barely would talk to each other had to take Speech 101. She thought it was a good class for the first semester—just not for her since she already had experience speaking to hundreds, maybe thousands in the church. She felt that they also needed more experience communicating with others. I like how she has views about the curriculum and is concerned about it. Michell described this scene from another class: “You could tell the tension of people not wanting to speak. I mean, because they didn’t want to offend. I’m like whatever you gotta say, say, I’ve heard everything. Ya know I don’t listen to what you say, I listen to what you feel about what you’re saying.” Michell already understands that humans just have so many words to express their complex set of feelings and that we also communicate from this other modality. She says she also knows there are bad feelings towards her when she sees “that face.” She laughs.

Michell does push back in discussions in her classes. She describes an experience in another class:

I love to see the faces of the people that come from the back woods to come to this college and see that, they have no idea, they have no idea that people are different. And we had a couple guys in class and who said ‘oh things can’t change’ and I’m like get used to it, honey, it always changes, it’s already

changing. If you don't open up, you're not gonna be happy, ya know, you gotta make room, you gotta make room for differences.

Michell has experienced the changing world, a life on the border. In addition, she and her siblings were picked on by both white and black kids walking to school, which she didn't understand until, as she said, "I looked in the mirror when I was seven." I got the sense from Kirk that he was picked on without these skin color complications. But her story surprises me because recently while telling a story to my son about our summer when he was seven in Cleveland where we lived in a dorm so that I could study in a National Endowment for the Humanities seminar, the boys attended a city day care center. He didn't recall that he was one of the only white kids. He said, "I just remember kids that I liked to play with. I don't remember their skin color at all." But then I remember the poem "Incident" by Countee Cullen, which reminds me of the eight year old boy who remembers being called a pejorative name on a trip: "Of all the things that happened there/that's all that I remember." Learning as it turns out has something to do with our appearance.

Michell doesn't recall reading written texts as a child, but clearly she was reading the world. After Paulo Freire describes the house where he grew up in Brazil<sup>87</sup> where

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<sup>87</sup> I am reading how Asao B. Inoue uses Freire's quote to explain his own first love of a novel in the seventh grade but also in his argument about using stories and haiku poetry about WWII Japanese internment camps in his article "Teaching with Feeling: A Subjective Pedagogy," *Community College Humanities Review*, 20:2 (Fall 1999): 136-157. I find this old journal as I clean out my old office and begin

he did his first readings: "Reading the world always precedes reading the word, and reading the word implies continually reading the world...this movement from the word to the world is always present; even the spoken word flows from our reading of the world."<sup>88</sup> As the youngest of five children in a middle class neighborhood with large and small families, this was no house like the one in "The House on Mango Street," where a nun goes by in Sandra Cisneros' novel and asks the young girl where she lives and after pointing, the nun says, "You live *there*?" The girl reflects, "The way she said it made me feel like nothing. *There*. I lived *there*."<sup>89</sup>

Michell recalls a happy childhood with vacations, days on the beach, and a special cake made by her father for birthdays. She smiles blissfully with the recollection. Her father worked at the famous Sanders Confectionery in Highland Park, which has an interesting history itself related to globalization: Henry Ford was a young mechanic fixing the new technology and competition in the 1970s and 80s caused the

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packing to move to the new building. It is crazy to me that I then read a review of a new book he has out with Mya Poe called *Race and Assessment* which "address[es] how writing assessment reflect and create race and racial formations" in Chris Gallagher, "All Writing Assessment is Local," *College Composition and Communication*, 65 no 3 (Feb. 2014), 493. I feel fortunate to happen to come upon the early piece of writing to give me context and connection.

<sup>88</sup> Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo, *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World* (South Hadley: Bergin and Garvey Publishers, 1987), 35.

<sup>89</sup> Sandra Cisneros, "The House on Mango Street," *Literature: Reading and Writing the Human Experience*, Tenth Edition, Ed. Richard Abcarian, Marvin Klotz, Samuel Cohen. (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2013), 142.

company to flounder.<sup>90</sup> Michell's mom was a seamstress, making bridal gowns. It is all so fascinating to me. But she also recalls that the first trauma of her life, involving sexual assault, came in that neighborhood at a very early age, which affected her school attendance.

Though she doesn't recall any children's stories, she does excitedly remember the movie *An Imitation of Life*, a 1959 movie that I had never heard of before. I discover that Diana Ross and the Supremes sang a 1969 song "I'm Livin' in Shame" based on the film before the Supremes broke up in 1970. The song focuses on her initial shame she has of her hard working but unglamorous mother and then her shame in coming to appreciate her too late. She says she could relate to the light skinned biracial girl in the film. The young woman is played by a Mexican-Czech Jewish actress. The character meets an actress and her daughter and spends more time with them and moves towards their culture, rejecting her mother over time. Michell is grateful to her sisters who have stood by her and challenged others' bigotry.

Michell has clearly read since her early days. She talks about Toni Morrison and how much she loves her writing because "you feel her in there." When I ask her to explain, she pauses and thoughtfully and slowly considers: "It is when you can recognize the person in it." Her insight is breathtaking, about feeling characters and

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<sup>90</sup> Wikipedia, "Sanders Confectionery," [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sanders\\_Confectionery](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sanders_Confectionery), last modified May 23, 2014.

persons in stories. As I struggle to write stories instead of writing didactic discussions, I learn from her perception.

After Maya Angelou died, Michell reflected that she thought she would meet her before she died.<sup>91</sup> I have not asked her whether she likes having the same name as the popular First Lady, Michelle Obama, whose college story of going to Princeton University because her brother did is a well-known one, but Michell has a confidence that she too should have met the poet. She feels that like these writers, she also has a story to tell, advice to share. Many “like minded” speakers came to the church, Agape International in California, and she was exposed to many spiritual and cultural icons. I am heartened that she has found inspiration and humanity in literature, but for her it isn’t really “literature” but human stories.

In class I had a sense that she had a strong literary background, even though she never shared any of it. I struggle with not sharing my wide reading. I regret once telling my cousin who had just left the priesthood and wanted to become a poetry teacher that I had read a Charles Dickens novel in the eighth grade that he had mentioned. It’s embarrassing. This, by the way, is not a Charles Dickens’ novel. It is more like *Comedy of Errors* that my friend’s high school class is performing at the local

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<sup>91</sup> When I asked her whether she had a chance to see the eulogy, she replied: “I did not get a chance to even see the coverage on it. I will be watching it after I take a quiz in Economics tonight...I did not get a chance to go into the Grand Valley State University site. I am stressed and overwhelmed with classes already, I can’t think straight, not trusting my decision process at this time, not feeling very confident.”



Catholic school.<sup>92</sup> While she talks through her struggles, I admire Michell's countenance: she has no need to flaunt it<sup>93</sup>, yet she is as beautiful as Beyoncé and has accumulated multiple literacies beyond and back as she has made her way across borders.

Michell's international church, Agape, would be called a "sponsor of literacy" by Deborah Brandt.<sup>94</sup> I had not considered including churches as an example of globalization despite the fact that Appiah talks about it in our class text so much in interesting ways. For me, schools have been a sponsor of literacy, even as a teacher. For Michell, studying at the church became a bridge to college. Organized religion led her to organized education. But it was a surprise and she says, laughingly:

I'm in an organized religion, what the hell is the matter with me? And I'm like, oh my gosh, I'm like, I cannot believe this! One thing I wanted to study: I wanted to get into the bible and I wanted to study my spiritual side. And I'm like, oh, I'm going to classes! And oh, I'm studying! I'm going to be a spiritual

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<sup>92</sup> This Shakespearean comedy is about twin brothers, separated at birth, but I feel that Michell is like a sister to me. In addition, we both have sisters who have meant a lot to both of us. The image of sisters and brothers is so powerful. When my mother's ashes were buried, the deacon called my mother "our sister Myra," and at that moment she was not my mother, but my equal, my sister, and I felt healed.

<sup>93</sup> A reference to "Check on It" written by Beyonce Knowles, Kasseem Dean, Sean Garrett, Angela Beyince, Stayve Thomas. Prod. Swizz Beatz. (Sony Music Studios. Columbia. 2005).

<sup>94</sup> Deborah Brandt, "Sponsors of Literacy," *College Composition and Communication* 49, (May 1998), 166. "Sponsors, as I have come to think of them, are any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy--and gain advantage by it in some way.

person when I'm done. Because I'm looking for the end game...if I do all this I will be something in the end.

Michell explains that she sort of fell into attendance. She found herself getting ready on Sundays. Her college attendance was much more deliberate, and it is interesting that the concern for "attendance" in schooling comes from this moral use of church attendance, including "mandatory" attendance among the Puritans. (I now grimace at the idea that I have used "mandatory" attendance policies unthinkingly on syllabi. They might fit the "clear expectations" mantra of current effective teaching pedagogy, but they do not embody an understanding of persons and their subjectification and freedom, not to mention their very complex lives.) Once again, I learn about my misfit teaching practices due to the context of storied research.

This first venture into an organized system of learning for Michell was initially about becoming a spiritual person but led to wanting to become "something in the end." Thus, she also has become more focused on her own literacy and leadership.

Before this point, her learning came from the challenges she encountered, and she realized that she was making it hard for herself, that she had made choices that were not fitting with who she really was.

They gave me insight into what I wanted...I was going against my own grain, ya know, at every move, it was like ok, I'm doing this, but I should be doing

something else because I'm not comfortable here. So everything was a struggle, everything was a challenge. I had no compass for myself... I was doing what everyone else told me I should be doing...It was a spiral downward and it was just like a losing battle...I had no focus, I had no direction. I thought that living life was my teacher. Day-to-day going, these are my lessons for the day, at the end of the day going, woah! I didn't need to learn that!

Life was her teacher, as she saw it, then and now. After moving with her mother and starting college, she recalls, "When we were introduced to Freire in First Year comp, I thought oh yeah, I get that but I learned it in life, not in a book." She pauses. "But it was eye opening." She realized her experience: "I am not a book learner. I'm a nomadic learner." "Nomadic learning...that's how I feel, I feel like I'm a nomad in a bohemian kind of atmosphere where everything is coming from all over place to come and do something. It's gonna materialize and create into its own." She explains that she came up with this description in her English class. I am very tempted to talk about her with several of her good postcolonial teachers that she had, but I do not.

Michell knows that she has a way with words. She has been asked by people if they could write down a thing she says, and she knows she should write a book about her experience. "I think I have an intelligence that most people don't, I mean, ya know, in a different way. I never thought of myself as smart because I can't think things

through, I don't have like point A-B-C-D...I just don't put it all together." After listening to "The Danger of a Single Story" by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, she said that Adichie "affected me at every turn. I felt that it was a mirror of America." We agreed how beautiful Adichie tells her story. Michell points out that she too has been told that she is "well spoken," and she laughs at the assumptions behind that false compliment.

Though funny and bright, she feels like she has a "boulder on her shoulder." I was surprised when she mentioned "pain body,"<sup>95</sup> which is an image that Eckhart Tolle uses. He is one of the many spiritual teachers and self-help books she read. Although in class we analyzed commercials from the Super Bowl and the State of the Union speech, analyzing self-help books as a text would be intriguing too.

Some pain comes from past misdeeds, but mostly she thinks she feels pain because she is still "trying to be the good girl." It reminds me of the Mexican saying *dar a algo un tiron fuerte*, to keep tugging at the sleeve of the Virgin Mary, trying to work hard enough to be seen as acceptable.<sup>96</sup> I feel this as well. It is amazing to hear someone articulate it so honestly, and it presses me to consider my own "good girl" efforts. She has been angry, defensive, burdened; she has high expectations for herself, but she blames herself, not society's constructs. She did "anything I could do to try to remove

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<sup>95</sup> Eckhart Tolle, *A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life's Purpose* (New York: Dutton, 2005), 129.

<sup>96</sup> Clarissa Pinkola Estes, *Women Who Run with the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype*, (New York: Ballantine, 1992), 280. I have been reading Estes and studying fairy tales for 20 years, but I just recently discover that she started her work as a *cantadora* with mothers, prisoners, and soldiers with PTSD. I have not yet read her *Untie the Strong Woman: Blessed Mother's Immaculate Love for the Wild Soul*.

it. I don't know who I'm trying to please. My past comes to get me. Every time I try to clean my business, and get on stable ground, the rug is pulled from under me." It is probably not a surprise that the main supplication in Polish is "*Matka Boska!*" Mother of God, Black Madonna of Czestochowa.

I've told this story many times: a very large nurse who has had nine children comes into my hospital room while I'm recovering from the delivery and tells me that my first born son has a bad temper. He wouldn't take the pacifier, and she was spitting mad. She is the one who told me to be sure to only nurse him every three hours. She either saw that I was a softy or that the child would be in charge. Both have been true, but I did manage to nurse every three hours and almost on the dot, a wailing, angry creature would appear. My father-in-law had a very well-known temper—firing servers who didn't live up to his standards, yelling at them and throwing things in front of customers—and my father too, it seemed to me, had an infrequent but irrational and frightening temper, probably due to the stresses of the economy and our rowdy behavior. So I thought this experienced nurse somehow knew the truth. As it turns out, she was wrong.

But it was disheartening to hear Michell tell the family story about her birth, to consider how the story makes her feel like it set her feelings for life. As I look at the pictures in electronic portfolios from my composition class, it is odd but good to think of them outside of class. Michell's mother wasn't sure who the father was, but her

mother won't talk about it. There was much anticipation to see the baby. I'm assuming when the brown-skinned, black curly-haired, black-eyed baby came there was some dismay. The part of the story that Michell knows is that she didn't wail. She shed one giant tear. One tear. And though she says she started with sadness, like with my son's supposed anger, sadness doesn't seem to be the main note of her life. Although it has been a struggle at times, especially now that she is trying at college, it doesn't seem that sadness is what her life has been, despite the family story. When I heard Jamie Foxx interviewed for the part in *Ray*, the Ray Charles movie, he was encouraged by someone to play all the notes on the piano, like in life, not just a few. Michell does this. She has range.

As a teen, Michell secretly went to a counselor to discuss her angst over her "missing half," in which she got in trouble mightily from her mother. She experienced that her father, loving her unconditionally, despite the fact that he was not her biological father. She didn't appreciate his acceptance until after he died in his eighties. Michell is named after her father, a kind of gender-neutral name, which is also how she sees herself.

Now that she is in college, grades are a symbol to herself that she is good, meeting her expectations. She feels that her coming to terms with herself was necessary before she could go forward: "It's all about my identity. Who am I, where am I, where am I going. And that's why I'm in college. It's up to me to figure this out.

Ohhhhhh ok, now I get it.” She is determined to make the most of her experience for her future. She has retaken the math class from her first semester where she received a “C.” She laughs at some of the instructors she has had--one in particular who was an adjunct faculty without the right degree who gave them a lot of work with no explanation.

She has been angry at advisors at the college. She was assigned to one in particular because of her “learning disability.” I see no learning disability. Then she was assigned another who dealt with returning students. They were both fine, she says, but when she went to a couple of male advisors to ask about a particular information path towards a university transfer, they seemed frightened by her anger. She still feels they aren’t listening to her. She is afraid that she intimidated them. I see the fire in her eyes, but I have a hard time imagining what they saw. She wonders whether she should have gone to a better school, though she admits that she has learned a lot at the community college and that it has been a good experience, though she thought it would entail more experiences like involvement in clubs.

Like in her first experience with college, she did not realize how much work college is. While her good friend who she met in her First Year comp class can pay less attention to teachers and read the text and take the test, she realizes that she cannot do that. Managing job and school plus unexpected “crisis” situations is part of the difficult transition to community college life. In her first semester in college she hit a deer on the

way to class and decided that she couldn't take any more night classes. It was a stressful experience. She laughs at herself: "I kept leaving my purse at school and would have to go back to retrieve it and each time someone had it and told me how someone had stolen theirs." She feels lucky despite her challenges. Perhaps she hummed this refrain from the Diana Ross song to get her through: "No wind, no rain can stop me, babe, if you are my goal."<sup>97</sup>

Michell has high hopes for her college education. "That's what I hope I get from my college experience: that it's focused and all my life I just want something that I would die for, that I'm so into it that people could take my life if I couldn't do it anymore." She says the closest she has come to finding that passion is working with veterans to get them psychological help before they come out of service or working with others who are dealing with trauma. In addition to considering becoming a nurse, she considered working in hospice: "I call myself the bleeding heart because I have all these feelings and nowhere, nowhere to arrange them. And I don't know if I could handle that, ya know I thought about going into hospice, doing hospice work, I think I would be a wreck...but then maybe it could be therapeutic, ya know?" She wants to be able to provide for herself, but she also needs her education to help her with a higher calling.

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<sup>97</sup>Ashford, Nickolas and Valerie Simpson. "Ain't No Mountain High Enough. (Tamla Motown, 1966).



I wonder how she is making those connections, how a person uses the bits and pieces of lectures, readings, and discussions to make a beautiful and useful patchwork. Though she does not say she makes many connections between her classes and her life, she points out to me that when I had told her that she probably would start to notice connections due to our conversation, she says that that indeed happened. She saw a segment on television about the reports on mismanagement in the Veteran's Affairs. A small comment was that people with PTSD were often on the defensive, responded defensively to others. It helped her to understand her own defensiveness though I have not seen it myself. Here she weaves the class theme and activities into her life experiences:

I provided [a website to the class] on what globalization is, whether globalization can be controlled, how it affects women, oppression, and diversity and whether it causes poverty. These are all questions that are being answered the more we relate to the world as it is now. I was able to get to a couple of the extra credit venues...finding that Secretary of State Gen. Colin Powell was just another citizen, no secret service caravans, no Air Force One, now just a speaker telling how patriotic waving the flag is, nothing more.

“The Way We Worked” exhibit from the Smithsonian at the library<sup>98</sup> was interesting. I remembered the feeling of the trains that I used to ride (hop) on in Detroit, and the workers that would chase me off them, riding to Polliwog Paradise to catch frogs. The car factories that were right down the street, watching the new cars come out of the Chrysler factory warehouse onto the waiting semi -trucks shipping them to the showroom floor. I remembered my mother working in the clothing industry, when I saw the pictures of the separation of blacks and whites through a glass window, and never knew if she has experienced that segregation.

I like her discovery that Powell is an ordinary person and how she connects the exhibit to the stories of her life. Michell told me that during the 1967 riots her mother would keep them inside while they looked out of the window. I can see her mischievous face peeking through the white curtains that her mother sewed.

I like the changes in Michell’s register from her playful dialogue with me to her descriptive, serious writing style. She is just as comfortable in joking, making fun of herself and others, in an informal discourse as she is sitting up straight and formalizing her language, especially in papers for class. She does not downgrade the first but

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<sup>98</sup> Sponsored by the Michigan Humanities Council.

exudes a kind of knowing with the sass and slang. She knows just what she is doing to create an effect with her language and feeling.

It is very insightful to have multiple modalities from a person. It shows so much of her literate self. I am grateful that I have had a few modalities to communicate with Michell to better appreciate her story. I have her rich reflective essays and her poignant verbal entreaties. Her rants and her reflective pauses are lush with insight for me.

As an Agape practitioner, Michell would have been a sensitive leader, a thoughtful teacher. People can use their experience in so many ways; they are not limited to one path. It reminds me of a state trooper friend who is organizing a community tennis tournament with me: he has the melodious talk of a minister as he persuades folks to participate. Moving, particularly due to relationship changes, pulled her away from Agape and required her to set herself a new life plan. One teacher she admires glowingly is a social science teacher, not because of her skin color matches her own, but because she lectures--all the time. Michell laughs about it, saying that if she was a teacher that is how she would be: "No, I don't care what you have to say about this. You just go ahead and listen." I think she is wondering about all of those divergent discussions in class and thinks maybe students just need to listen and learn something else.

Like Kirk, Michell frequently shared on the online course discussion forum, but she chose her classroom contributions carefully. She could have contributed much

more. In her final words about the humanities class, she writes about her experience and her classmates' and her own self-doubt about providing feedback to others:

I got to see compassion rise, to a world that is shrinking in size caused by globalization, as the class moves forward questioning everything they are experiencing...I responded [to discussion forums] as if I was being asked the question, when possible, with the answer. I found that rhetorical questions needed an answer (from me). I fell short in that I felt it necessary to express myself and find answers not allowing others to state their opinions and find their own answers. I felt intrusive.

Very much like I feel as a guest at a dinner party, Michell feels a responsibility for her role to the other guests. She realizes that her comments might influence others and that they should find their own answers instead of forcing them upon them. I learn a lot from her. *Abrazos!*

She was unhappy with some of her classmates' responses in our class too. She continues to reflect on her classmates' responses:

I did share another book of Appiah's *Ethics of Identity* which I was relating to the chapter on moral disagreements...from the news about the homeless man that returned an expensive ring, and the Good Samaritan that found \$1,200 and returned it to its owner but was surprised with an accusation of "it better all be

there.” This also related to the chapter “Kindness to Strangers”...As if a humane reaction is a cosmopolitan, not a democrat or republican responsibility. The photojournalist Carter and his provocative photo of the starving child about to die while a vulture is waiting to devour the corpse brought attention to the starvation problem in southern Sudan. Food would not have helped this child however compassion for the dying...he could have held the child so he wasn’t alone, which Carter later regretted. These are split decisions that must be utilized to find who you are and how you live among the global community.

Like Kirk, she thoughtfully responds like a “teacher,” reflecting how she wishes that she might have allowed her classmates to struggle with the questions themselves and then trying to give them multiple perspectives. I have felt this also as a teacher, not wanting to overly influence students in their process but wanting to share new ideas.

We all have gifts to give. At a career fair recently, I overheard an unusual conversation. As I introduced a young woman who was in my dual enrolled classes and have used her writing examples in an article and interviewed her for a video to the same state trooper that I know, he asked her what her God-given gift was when she said that she had accumulated many credits but was not sure what she wanted to do. I did not expect to hear this question at a college career fair, but it might be more helpful than something else. On the other hand, another young woman is writing about

finding one's life purpose but also writes how overwhelmed she feels with her classmates' religious beliefs when she was not raised that way. The role of college is complex in a person's "uniqueness as irreplaceability."<sup>99</sup>

Due to the trauma Michell experienced and her newly activated concern for veterans, she decided that she wanted to help people reintegrate. She began taking business courses in hopes to start a non-profit group with counselors. As an instructor I tried several times to talk her out of going into business. I should have understood but had forgotten about my own decision to procure a business minor as an undergraduate for fear of the marketplace. Michell was taking an anthropology class, an ethical philosophy class, and was an outstanding writer and participant in humanities classes. I shared with her a website about doing business in ethical ways. Perhaps I thought that a business degree was too instrumental, but she has insisted that this is what she needs to have for respect in the workplace. She deals with shame and guilt for having to now "catch up" and figure out a way to both support herself and honor her past. Her final paragraph in the class connect them:

I enjoyed the way I went about this search in my life. (Now in the past, not so much). Reading things that interested my thirst for knowing the consciousness of Being. I shared with the class that total immersion into a culture through church, volunteering for as many different things and organizations, until I found what

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<sup>99</sup> Biesta, *Good Education in an Age of Measurement: Ethics, Politics, Democracy*, 86.

resonates with what my heart values. You can agree or not, I don't judge you for not agreeing, I don't try to change your mind, I'm passionate about truth and being in integrity with myself. Not saying I have been perfect or I have not made major missteps on the journey of my existence, I have and I own them, but I just let my actions be the example of knowing more of my heart and speak from that space.

Michell knows so much through her vast experience and rigorous reflection. What can a community college offer her? So little of who they are seems to be touched by schooling.

I asked Michell whether she had told an advisor what it was she wanted to do, what her life plan was. She had not. I am also afraid that her schooling might not allow for the visionary perspective she has. She is trying to take courses that will add up to a credential so she gets respect, but she has an interdisciplinary vision. Will she be able to connect her past experience and learnings to her present and her future? Also, will she be able to know herself enough to persist? Like me, I had an instrumental goal in my doctoral program of helping students without considering my own deep experience. Though I am interested in cultural variety and am not interested in borders of demographic categories, I admire Gloria Anzaldúa who wrote *The Borderlands*: "In graduate school, while working on a Ph.D., I had to 'argue' with one advisor after

another, semester after semester, before I was able to make Chicano literature a focus.”<sup>100</sup> I admire her persistence in a space where what she wants to focus on does not appear to be valid.

Thus, for returning college students like Michell and Kirk, who have a vast amount of experience, they may need more exploration--even if it is meandering on many small missions within a larger one. Perhaps more stories will illicit more stories. And it is not literacy that they are lacking, but credentialing. While Kirk had “hoops” that he needed to go through, Michell seems to have test after test. Every time I talk with her or she emails me she is under great stress about a test. Instead of lovely ideas and theories to add to her experience, ways to imagine or reimagine along with new knowledge, she is taking collections of tests. She will then have a collection of grades.

Michell says, “I’m in a catch 22 because I have no education to get a better job, to get better pay. And I need the education, but it’s gonna take me 6 more years.” She knows from her economics class that being in college is an “opportunity cost.” In some follow up communication, I shared a 19th month leadership-business bachelor’s degree for working adults that I read about in an alumni magazine for my son. She’s looking into it, hoping to tell her own stories someday and help others with theirs.

Like Marianne Elliott, who was a United Nations peacekeeper in Afghanistan, I am recognizing that listening to stories is often more important than trying to help.

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<sup>100</sup> Gloria Anzaldua, *Borderland/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (United States: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 2952.



Elliott says that along with post-traumatic “stress,” there is also potential for post-traumatic growth. Either way, sitting and trying to perceive deeply, listening to stories is better than deciding on a diagnosis of a disorder. Michell teaches me in her final essay: “I shared about subjects as they were, but feel that I could have focused more on solutions, without standing on my soap box. (We are all in this together, what’s the problem?) Realizing I can be over the top at times, I shared in class my feelings and theories without fear of judgment.” Perhaps through class discussion--despite the tests and grades of school--we can both fear less about being the good girl and more about sharing ourselves.

Michell has been living on many borders—of race, of religion, of regional changes. She hopes to go back to Detroit to complete her undergraduate and graduate degrees. I hope someday Michell will write her own there and back again memoir that reflects the refrain: “Ain’t no mountain high enough, ain’t no valley low enough, ain’t no river wide enough, to keep me from you.” It will be my turn to squeal with delight. But I hope that I will hear her own beautiful refrain as well. And I hope I will read that her dreams have come true.

### 3. Writing Transitions: College Prep beyond the Border

*yea i can do that just let me know when you would like to sit down.*

Kenneth Wing, CPL US Army

The first day of class is a big deal, for everyone. Some even suggest that if adults feel disrespected in the first few hours, they might choose not to come back. I do a different introductory activity every semester, mostly because nothing works perfectly, and I have new ideas or forget the old ones. Very little can be replicated from class to class anyway. I didn't expect the response I received from my simple request for each of the new fall First Year composition students to share something unique, something that they think might not be true for anyone else in the room. I was especially surprised by the response from a young man: he and his brother were once on a billboard as heroes. Ken's brown eyes, with his long eyelashes that he joked about, looked out at the class. We were smitten. He pretty much ran the class for the rest of the semester or at least his corner of it.

Quick decisions need to be made on the first day about what to share, how much to share. It is a rhetorical move. This young man so openly revealed his military experience throughout the class as if he was putting down a stake: he grew up in the most cultured town in the area, he had nearly flunked out of his first time in college, and it was not going to happen again.

I had two First Year Composition courses back to back—from 10:00-11:20 and then 11:30-1:00 on Mondays and Wednesdays. The classroom was just around the corner from my office which I shared with two colleagues, hundreds of books, two computers,

three desks, and a round table where we held individual conferences. The length of the room has a window facing the street, but it usually had the blinds drawn because of the sun. We rarely looked out the window unless we heard sirens. Accidents were common because of the difficulty to turn in and out of the college's driveway; there are often back-ups.

One day I watched a person go across the busy road in his electric wheelchair. I felt much like the narrator in Adrienne Rich's poem "Frame," where she watches helplessly as a college student comes into a building in Boston in 1979 to get out of the cold while she waits for a bus when a police officer is called and handcuffs her for trespassing. After a series of phrases using parallel structure that start with "in silence," the final lines conclude: "What I am telling you/is told by a white woman who they will say/was never there. I say I am there."<sup>101</sup>

It is sometimes a helpless feeling to watch the heroic attempts of individuals trying to get to school, finding a way. In a chapter of *Lives on the Boundary: A Moving Account of the Struggles and Achievements of America's Educationally Underprepared* we read as a class, Mike Rose recounts some stories of students who cross the border from their home town to UCLA--like a young mom who has to catch several buses to get the college. Just getting there is a complex undertaking for many at the community college.

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<sup>101</sup>Adrienne Rich, "Frame," *Later Poems Selected and New: 1971-2012* (New York: W. W. Norton 2013), 105.

Though it is assumed that getting through the bureaucracy of signing up at an open enrollment college and figuring out the transitions of schedules and finances is the easy part, I always acknowledge this herculean effort on the first day. I like to think of it as part of the learning, however, learning to negotiate a bureaucracy. I say, “You made it through the labyrinth of signing up and getting here; now let’s still be together here in December. I will be with you through the ups and downs.” I sometimes feel like I have no idea what I’m talking about. I went on and on about transitions from high school. Most of them in that particular class had already been at another post-secondary institution, including Ken.

Although I want us to have a chance to connect, I also hope we will learn something on the very first day of class, something that connects to our lives and literacy. I always explain Aristotle’s rhetorical appeals, often using emails from former students trying to persuade me to “add” my course when it is full. The one that is the worst--all lower case without any courtesy remarks, structure or detail--is from a neighborhood friend of my sons who I had in the class twice. As a class, we talk about how we often write more casually when we know who we are addressing.

I also share the concepts of genres and discourse communities so they can become aware of previous kinds of writing that they are familiar with in contrast to what they might encounter in this class of “academic” writing. And in the end, I give them a chance to analyze the rhetorical choices I have made that day--smiling at them,

laughing at myself, telling a funny story, wearing a teacherly but approachable outfit, sharing that I've been teaching 25 years and that 19 out of 23 students passed the course assessment last semester and the four who didn't failed to show up. It is a performance for all of us.

The second introductory activity was for them to each share a discourse community of which they are a part. There are always such interesting language communities--firefighters, snowboarders, skateboarders, bus drivers--that I feel so lucky to have a chance to learn from them. I usually share my tennis discourse community because the U.S. Open is on in August, but this semester I probably shared about my befuddling entrance into the wrestling discourse community since there was a mom of a wrestler who was on my son's team. I like to share this story because I am a part of the learning, and it gets the students to laugh at me when I talk about singlets and chicken wings and how it is ok to have violent cheers in wrestling but the same behavior will get a fan removed from a tennis match.

Unlike for Kirk and Michell, who did not share their personal story during our humanities class, this activity in our comp class gave Ken an opportunity to share on the very first day where he had been. He was starting his first semester back from Afghanistan. He described the army as a place that has particular values, language, and behaviors. Throughout the two semesters that I had him in class, Ken always showed up.

In the class we discuss the transition to college and the literacies needed for college. Because many students were there for a second go round, we heard long stories in class about a woman in her thirties who had the opportunity to go to a prestigious art school as a young woman but turned it down to work. I had her the previous semester in a developmental course, and she shared a follow-up story with me about her young son's video game: my suggestion to his too much play on the video game machine was to take a bat to it; since their dad played with them, she couldn't do that, but there was a wire loose and she kept quiet about it. I have had a fantasy of putting a television on the driveway and smashing it into pieces. A video game might not have enough bulk for me.

There were five other moms in their thirties and forties, struggling with kids and career attempts. There were also a few young quiet women, including Heart Song who came in late almost every class. This class, however, became dominated by the "boys" in the class, although the women participated strongly too. The guys began teasing each other if they were absent or late. Jeff<sup>102</sup> impishly asked if it would be ok if he missed class for the first day that the video game *Call of Duty* was out. When one young man played on his phone the whole time and never turned in anything, Ken scoffed with disapproval. He made it a point to say that he was not going to make the same mistake of not paying close attention. They talked about local university football and

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<sup>102</sup> I also had a conversation with Jeff for this project, but I chose not to include him as a story all to himself. He also shows up in Tim's and Amanda's story later.

one of the young men had a job of unloading trucks of booze into a liquor store. The logistics were fascinating to all of us and apparently there is a lot to learn about expediting alcoholic beverages.

Luckily, this class was right before noon, not too early in the day. The other males who had experience on academic probation sat close together yet close to the door. One day when I stood close to Jeff's desk, he called me out: "I know what you're doing. I've had plenty of teachers stand close to me to keep me on task." We all laughed with pleasure. Students stayed after to chat; the mom with the young gamer suggested to one of the guys that he problematize first impressions since he told a story about how his mother had suggested he play football and it helped him with any stigma of his fading skin due to vitiligo.

Ken often talked to me after class at the front of the room. I used to hold class to the very last second, thinking that we needed every bit of instructional time we could get, but I have learned that getting to class a little late and letting it out early provides this important time for relationships just as I spend the beginning of online chats with "small talk" that is not really small.

Though he became a leader, in his writing he followed the example of one of the nontraditional students--the wrestling mom--who always posted her excellent papers on the online Discussion Forum early. She wrote incredible papers about her bus route and all the literacy needed to follow the manual and a story about how she was going to

start college right out of high school, but her father said they couldn't afford it. Ken admitted unashamedly to the class that he would read her papers and follow her lead.

To help students get used to me and the idea of office hours, I hold individual conferences early on. There I have learned the most about community college students. We often just start by talking about their day, which leads me to my questions about their challenges in the transition to college. For the hundreds of students I have had in the tutorial after the class if they do not successfully "show competency" for our college assessment, it feels like triage, where I am trying to quickly assess what areas of their essay could give them the most confidence to continue to revise. I am fortunate to hear so many stories.

Although they had already completed the course, as Mike Rose says, their previous "curriculum wasn't doing a lot to address their weaknesses or nurture their strengths." I felt that I agreed with him: "They needed practice writing academic essays; they needed opportunities to talk about their writing--and their reading; they needed people who could quickly determine what necessary background knowledge they lacked and supply it in comprehensible ways."<sup>103</sup> I struggle with whether this is deficit thinking, even though Rose himself speaks out against it. But my students love Mike Rose; they love his blog; they love the stories I tell about seeing him at a conference and offering his chair to an elderly woman and how he told me that he was

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<sup>103</sup> Mike Rose, *Lives on the Boundary: A Moving Account of the Struggles and Achievements of America's Educationally Underprepared* (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), 187.



amazed that students in the country had similar problems to those in Los Angeles. They feel the affect in his stories, about himself and about others. Ken did not write about being a student, but he was always resolutely respectful to me, always treating me like an equal.

What I remember about my meeting with Ken did not happen in the office and did not hold any moments of angst about his skill set. I remember talking in the hallway as I led him out of my office, asking him about his career plans. He said wistfully, as he turned to go, that he was probably going to Libya, and that he missed combat. This was the only indication to me that perhaps he was struggling with a different kind of transition. When I met him after that year and his first year at a university, he was deeply enmeshed in his studies and another kind of future.

Teachers make a lot of lesson plans, and I make mine in response to encounters with students and their own texts, but like for painters what happens in between the images also matters. Barbara Helen Berger explains how an exhibit on a field trip in 1966 helped her have a better understanding of painting and her life when she focused on the negative space between the Virgin Mary and the baby's finger in a painting by Piero della Francesca. She felt the mystery of the space of the work of this painter who was known as a mathematician and was buried on the very day in 1492 that Columbus landed in North America. Serendipity creates marvelous moments. At the time, I

wrote a sort-of poem called the “In-Between” inspired by them about all the in-between human moments in a classroom.

Perhaps the classroom needs more negative space. While trying to find the technical term for removing paint when there is too much of it--as I often find the need in my writing due to the way I layer on more details over time--I find out that turpentine is used. Writers need turpentine and an old rag! I find out that some do not consider an oil painting dry for sixty to eighty years. But I also learn that oil painting was first done in western Afghanistan between the fifth and tenth centuries, and I think of Ken sitting on his mountain in that same area, looking down from his post at the empty spaces.

Entries into relationships are funny. Profanity sometimes helps, or laughter. Usually both. In my other comp class, two young men problematized profanity, Tom Shalter and another student who worked as a butcher at a local meat market and would occasionally draw pictures on the board before I got in class with funny notes to me. But for Ken, it isn't clear to me whether it was the profanity that helped a middle-aged woman to gain his respect or my public interrogation of the websites offering anti-gun control quotes he provided. I was patient and carefully showed them that they were not direct quotes at all, though I was not as patient when a young woman wrote in a paper that it was her god-given Constitutional right to own a gun. Last semester a young woman who I met in the parking lot at the university library on a field trip there

to help them use the research references told me that she was a Marine who served in Afghanistan, but only after I shouted, “Shit!” when she pointed out that I was putting coins in the wrong meter. Profanity or teacher *faux pas* puts everyone’s guard down so we can be together.

While I wondered about the surprises in their past that they told me after the class, unlike Kirk and Michell, Ken’s openness might be less complicated than I think. Ken explains that he shares his status with the instructor and class because he “could get a call anytime because of his NCO status and have to leave class.” I don’t know what the discourse specific jargon stands for, and I don’t ask. But he is always there and seems to have little embarrassment about asking and answering questions. He always has projects started and completed before most of the other students. He worries a little about being a “brown noser,” as many students seem to, but not that much: he laughs off the teases from the other guys. I am sure that if I asked every teacher of his in college that would be their impression, but apparently this was not always the case.

In high school, Ken did his homework for one class during another class. Since in class we read stories from Mike Rose, Ken says, probably for my benefit: “Let’s be real here: the high school doesn’t exactly prepare you for the work that needs to be... I mean in high school, I literally never did homework, I would finish homework in other classes and then in college it ain’t that way.”

He did not expect to go to college. “I didn’t know what I wanted to be when I grew up, I was one of those kids, I don’t know, I didn’t grasp the concept of what college did for people.” Ken explains that the only encounter he had with the counseling department was to fill out a form: “They brought us into a room, and we filled out some sheets. Because I like being outside, it said that I could be a garbage man or something like that. It didn’t make sense.” We laugh together about this image.

Most of the athletes in my high school experience went to college, so I try to imagine what happened. Did he have low test scores? Low interest? He says that he didn’t look towards the future, only the day-to-day. Perhaps his interest in sports boxed him into a corner in the view of educators at the school. He loved football and baseball. His “first love” of baseball did not give him success in high school—getting cut from the team in both his junior and senior years because the guy whose dad owned a dirt and gravel company had to be on the team so that the fields could get taken care of, according to the “straight answer” that Ken asked the coach to give him.

Football, however, became a family affair with twenty family members coming to every game; he played safety, a defensive position. Safeties are often the quarterbacks of the defense; they have to be able to read the offense and either move forward to tackle the oncoming runner or support the cornerbacks in tackling receivers. They have to be bigger than cornerbacks but not as fast. I find out this part of the discourse community from my husband. I enjoy thinking about Ken watching the feed,

making a quick decision to go forward or backwards, and making contact. He connected playing football with family, so that when he was offered a position in Nebraska with “a room” waiting for him, he turned it down because it was too far away from them. He couldn’t imagine playing football without his family there. He said that the decision was overwhelming because of the speech: papers coming at him, a class schedule already created, a weird experience.

His mother made him apply to colleges, and when he got accepted at a mid-size state university, a friend’s dad said that if he majored in construction management there a couple of hours away, he would give him a job after college; Ken took that offer. In high school when he took the career survey, he emphasized wanting to “work outside” and so he said, jokingly I think, that it said he should be a garbage collector. Since he attended a high school in a town with a middle- to upper-middle class reputation, the same one that Heart Song attended as it turns out, it is surprising that he was not pushed squarely into imagining a future in college. Perhaps in middle to latter decades of the 20th century, but in the 21st? With all of the talk about college today? How did his high school miss him? I can see Ken keeping his head down in class, waiting for the end of the day when at practice he could lift it up.

He began college in 2007 and quickly began to party every night with roommates and friends. He tried out for the baseball team and was accepted but the team was dissolved due to a scandal. He played on a club team. By the end of his first semester,

he was put on academic probation. He “just stopped” partying and began to do better, proving to himself that he could. But when the stock market fell in the fall of 2008, his loan was at risk and he did not want to burden his parents, so he decided to join the military like his brother who was in active duty since 2001. When he called his brother, which he does for any decision he makes, like Jeff who also has an older brother, his brother said, “You aren’t going to like it.” He didn’t think he would like the rules, the structure. Ken’s response was that he didn’t have to like it; he just had to make it through.

Though parents play a role in valuing formal education, I think that siblings play an even bigger role. Kirk assumed that he would become a mechanic, like his far older siblings; both Jeff and Ken followed in the footsteps of their older brothers; Heart Song ended up missing class or being late for class due to the family need to care for her younger siblings. I think that what older siblings do or the burden of younger siblings might be an underappreciated factor of college attendance.

Why would a person who doesn’t want to leave his family to play football decide to leave his family to go to the military? Because of death and divorce some of the family dissolved, but he feels that the “sacrifice” of going to the military was in the end helping his family because he wouldn’t be a financial burden. He was able to pay off the loan from the first college and then get an education on the GI bill after he returned

from Afghanistan. He is very proud of this financial decision though he also recognizes that it helped him to learn to follow timelines and meet deadlines to prepare for college.

Ken had already made a couple of transitions before he got to my class: a transition from a high school football star to a party guy at a university and then to the military. All of the conversation about “college transition” was probably unhelpful. There were so many students on borders--between parenting and schooling, between work life and academics. Ken had his goals already laid out before he got there: a 3.0 to prove that he could be a good student. He ended up on the Dean’s list. What he learned in the military, about being “task-oriented,” was transferred to college.

Though failing in college can be done all by one’s self, there is a surprising amount of teamwork required in college, which students are often unprepared for. Even more than sports in some ways the military helped to prepare him for needing to be a part of a group. This is the beginning of his first paper in my class, a multi-genre essay, just a couple of months after returning:

I was 21 with the world in front of me as I sat down in a c131 (military aircraft personnel carrier) next to the guys I would spend the next 12 months with.

Newly married two months prior I was already having to accept that my comrades would be the walls that hold me up. As the plane ascended into the air all I could think about was all the terrible things that could happen or that I have

seen on the television. The unknowing leaves your mind and then your survival skill kick in.....

As we landed in Afghanistan's second largest forward operation base (FOB) the thoughts of what could happen had left my body as I looked around to find what looked like a military city without the skyscrapers and tall buildings. We gathered our things only to move to a helicopter which would lead us to our final destination. As we arrived we were greeted by other soldiers who had left before us.

We had arrived in October and we all knew the fighting season was pretty much over till the spring and summer months. We didn't let our guard down as we waited for the months to past to see what the Taliban's next move would be. For us it came two days after I had returned from R and R (rest and retreat, 14 days of uncharged leave). We were moving one truck to another base when the Taliban struck with their infamous IED. We lucked out; they had missed so we continued on our way after going through military protocol.

As the middle of summer rolled around we were sent in to another AO ( area of operation) to oversee a valley as other troops walked through. This five day mission would be one I will never forget. As soldiers walked, I over saw their



every move waiting for the Taliban to make a move. Half way through the valley the soldiers began what started a four day fiesta. Bullets flew all day as my platoon watched over our brothers in arms to protecting them as if they were our own kid.

I include this lengthy portion of his first essay because of another young man, a Marine who has two sets of twins and is in my literature class. He was so happy to find a poem in our class from a soldier's perspective and asks me for more. Stories of experience become stories for the future.

There are a lot of "moves" and "moving" in his piece. I often use Graff and Birkenstein's description of academic moves, which I try to connect with moves made in sports. After hearing these stories, I realize now the moves they make include much more physical distance.

Ken does feel like he has a different understanding about participation, from his first time college experience and his military experience. Ken explains that if there are issues with peers not pulling their weight in group projects, he is "not shy" about letting the professor know and lets them address the problem. This is a reflection of his training and his understanding of how hierarchy works in handling conflicts. However, often professors want students themselves to learn through the experience.

Ken acknowledges, “Most of these kids don’t have a military background, and they are all about procrastinating...and it annoys me.”

Besides small group discussions, there was no required group project for the class. Jeff and a couple of his class buddies did, however, make a video for the class on procrastination for the “remix” assignment, transforming their “academic” paper topic for a different audience. The first big project of the course was to write two reviews: one for an “informal” audience and one for a “formal” or academic audience. Luckily, in our text there was the article “Globalizing Terror”<sup>104</sup> about war and the media. Ken was able to engage with the article. When I asked students to reply to one another by engaging a similarity or difference between their article and their own, this is what Ken wrote on the Discussion Forum: “While Schank believes that people change their stories to make them more interesting, Beer would say that terrorism takes over the media because it’s the most interesting story. They both make good points in the fact that people just want to hear the best story.”<sup>105</sup> I often collect the best line or two of student writing for a class collection, and this was one of them for our entree into synthesis writing. I also write an essay each semester along with the others,

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<sup>104</sup> Frances Beer and G.R. Boynton, “Globalizing Terror,” *Composing Knowledge: Readings for College Writers*. Ed. R. Norgaard. (Boston, MA: Bedford’s/St. Martin’s, 2007), 774-782.

<sup>105</sup> I am proud of this “transitional” activity that I do which uses templates from Graff and Birkenstein’s *They Say/I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing*, 2007. Other examples of my students’ writing are documented in Mary Juzwik, Carlin Borsheim-Black, Samantha Caughlin, and Anne Heintz. *Inspiring Dialogue: Talking to Learn in the English Classroom*. (New York: Teacher’s Columbia Press, 2013). My goal is to use relational transitions between the article they review and a classmate’s. The authors make the academic discourse community moves visible. Likewise, when a sergeant in the army made the values and behaviors transparent for Ken, he was grateful.

problematizing a puzzling aspect of the college experience. I probably should have been writing stories instead.

With the opportunity to write a portfolio piece and electronic portfolio, he spent much of his time working on an explanation of and outreach for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. He created a well-designed website. Although Ken never shared that he had PTSD, he did talk about his bad back and knees, and the 50-mile hike up mountains he had to take with 100 pounds on his back. I get a sense of what is like from Cheryl Strayed's memoir *Wild*: "They were, I now realized, layered and complex, inexplicable and analogous to nothing. Each time I reached the place that I thought was the top of the mountain or the series of mountains glommed together, I was wrong."<sup>106</sup> Stories help me to imagine.

I was not surprised to find that Ken had signed up for my next composition course--a research course with its central task of writing a long research paper using the conventions and characteristics of their chosen major, their future discourse community. Ken knew on the first day what he wanted to research, clearly making the choice because it connected with his interests and his learning. Since he wanted to be a football coach, he wanted to research the effects of concussions. He also talked about how soldiers are monitored for concussions. It was not surprising that he immediately

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<sup>106</sup>Cheryl Strayed, *Wild* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2012), 63.

found something he was connected to for a research topic, but it was interesting that it was more focused on his career goals and less connected to his past or his personal experience at least.

I had to help him with the formatting for an article in the sciences, with ways to categorize information, but he continued to seek help through to the end--sending me many drafts, sitting with me for conversations after class or during office hours. After he went to the Writing Center for more help with making endnotes, he shared what he learned with others in the class. Like with his work on PTSD for the first comp class, he spent considerable time studying the many definitions of concussions, which he noted created complexity and confusion for all those involved including family, coaches, and health professionals.

One of the challenges in teaching the course is that although the writers are learning the documentation, the values, and research writing style of the various disciplines they might find themselves in their future, some of their hopes are murky and they have to pick a style that might be close. Ken could have been in the education and sociology group who were examining APA studies, or he could have been in the business group because he was interested in the management aspect of coaching, or he could have been in the science group because of the physical responses to and on research of concussions. He was patient with the ambiguity and understood that this was just one possibility.

In the first week of this semester, I saw Ken in the hallway and asked if he wanted to share his experience in Afghanistan with my humanities class. He came that afternoon. Through our questions, I learned so much more. With a strong semester under his belt, he seemed even more confident and presented in the same classroom as he was in for first year comp, but this time he was sitting in front of the room with many more strangers. He spoke calmly and clearly about his time watching out on a mountain in the countryside, learning languages from the locals and seeing women with full body coverings talk to their superiors and then get around the next building to take them off and giggle away. He shared how he transitioned to this new life. He described the food and an Afghan man he befriended on the mountain as they shared duty, learning each other's languages. Previously, most of what I knew about Afghanistan was from the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini.

I was awestruck by Ken's performance and perspectives. He was bold and brave, answering the students' questions off the cuff. He was not hesitant and though it was the class' job to make the connections to the humanities class, he seemed to intuit possibilities for them. I was so glad I asked him. My only disappointment was that the only former classmate from the comp class did not show up that day. Ken sat in front of the classroom, in the same classroom we had composition together. It was my turn to sit on the side yet once again he led the way.

I invite guest speakers as much as I can in order to expose students to many perspectives. I remember guest speakers who came to my class when I was an undergraduate, like Louise Rosenblatt, the reader-response theorist. Because of the domination of “getting through” the content, very few of my colleagues are willing to take class time for other voices than their own. I believe they become an important “text” for the class and privilege stories rather than information. Sometimes I invite speakers and sometimes students do. Recently, when the film planning group in my humanities class wanted to watch “30 Days as a Muslim” because of Appiah’s stories about his own childhood, I invited a couple of international students that I had spoken to as they stood by the railing on the third floor with the plants and light coming in. They told their own stories in relation to the documentary. Even in informational presentations, stories are at the center.

Now Ken works with younger guys. Even though he is only 25 himself, he is the veteran who is working with 18-19 year olds but also has older recruits, including a 40-year-old who has a master’s degree. Every weekend they do National Guard duty, they have a list that they need to go through to check the vehicles, even if they are not used since the last time they checked through—oil, fluids, tires. Every week guys ask why they need to do it. He says that he tells them that he will know they are really initiated when they stop asking. He has moved on from wanting to be a football coach and

instead wants to work on the legal aspects of college sports. He has moved from being initiated to initiating others into the practices of a culture.

Now at a university, he has even more group projects. He thinks people tend to lean and push things toward him when choosing people as leaders in group projects because of his military background and they can see that by his army backpack he carries. But he tries to push it back a bit so it remains a group effort: "I'll try when I do lead stuff, I'll be like, should we do this? Not, hey we are gonna do this, this and this, ya know. I'm saying, should we do this, what do you think about that? I ask questions." His motivation to do things that way is so he doesn't become too much of a negative leader: "I feel like if I went into military mode I would lose more respect from people and like people would think I'm an asshole, I just don't want that negative connotation towards me."

He feels that he was lucky to have had a superior who was his age who told him not to ask questions, to be skeptical, but not to ask. He is grateful that he had someone who told him how things worked in the military. He seems to have figured out ways to negotiate the codes of the community college and the university as well. He figured out that he should follow the lead of the woman in class who was his mom's age. He admits that he always asks his older brother and his wife. He wants both of them to be proud of him. Due to exams and projects and a weekend of service, Ken was very tired when we spoke, me poking and prodding him with my questions. He did not

complain. He took them like they were his duty to me, to those who had mentored him along the way including fellow students, to do his best to answer them. I am grateful for the ways in which he volunteered to help others in the class and out, in my class and in others'. I am grateful for this service too.

Finally, I asked Ken why it is that he asks questions in class most days. He realized in our conversation that it is because he can. If he crosses the line, he figures he will be told, so in the meantime, he will keep asking. His leadership has been obvious from the beginning, but the transition from sports and a university to the military and a community college classroom and then back again to the university--regardless of the borders along the way--is some kind of heroic.

#### 4. Taking Every Opportunity on the Border: How to Get Off the Farm in the Country

*My year is going great! I transferred this semester and am absolutely loving it. I am at the university now, but I would still be willing to talk to you about my college experience.*

*Tuesday/Thurs I am available anytime after 11 a.m if that would work for you!*

April Wood

I didn't know when she was in my class that April Wood was a farm girl, like me. At a funeral, when I told my dad's cousin's wife, Maureen Buda, who would invite me to dinner occasionally when I went off to college away from the country, that I was



now starting graduate school in a doctoral program, she laughed and said, “You were always trying to get off the farm.”

Like Ken, April was an attractive athlete who did not see herself preparing for college while she was in high school; she had an adult outside of the family who encouraged her to go to college; she figured out a way to pay for college; and she learned how to be a hardworking, organized student, partly from the non-traditional students in her community college classrooms.

Ken and April were in the same research writing class and despite their similarities, they didn’t have much to do with one another because she sat in the front with the other young women and the young men sat in the back--especially the rowdy bunch from my previous semester. They did have some conversation together about their process and in peer review. Conversation and peer review are central in composition classes, the learning while teaching. My view is that responding to writing helps the reader herself in her own writing. Hopefully, it did for them as much as it does for me!

For April luck and opportunity came along the way but she also has what is now call “grit,” but she is so sweet and pretty that it might not be recognized right away. There are so many physical and emotional struggles in college as well, and like the old game of “Life,” a person might “pick up” a card that sets them ahead or behind and

ahead again. And like all students, April had both of these options along the way, but by taking every opportunity that came her way, she becomes lucky.

I have nothing against those who choose to continue to work on farms, by the way. I have many students who work on farms, especially family-owned farms like a student I have this semester with 500 head of cattle. Yet we still have had class criticism of pick-up truck advertisements, particularly during the Super Bowl with Paul Harvey's voice and a message of godly farming. But I also understand April's desire to do something that she can do besides what seems to be the only option in her community. In high school she didn't think she could do other things—perhaps not thinking of herself then as “smart,” but through her experiences, she now thinks she can and knows she is.

Malcolm Gladwell's book *Outliers: The Story of Success* tells stories about being smart--how some who are very smart become successful but some do not if they have social skills that work against them. But he also talks about how luck plays a role in success--Bill Gates being lucky enough to have PTA mothers in his school who bought a couple of computers in the 1960's; hockey players who were born in the early part of the year; and the Beatles who got a gig that forced them to play music for ten hours at a time. Gladwell points out that what seems like “natural” giftedness is actually “accumulative advantage.”<sup>107</sup> Of course, persistence and hard work plays a role in all

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<sup>107</sup>Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers: The Story of Success* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2008), 30.

three of these stories as well, but those dispositions are understood in the community college narrative. But luck? Not so much. Is a student's "luck" discussed in retention meetings and policy think tanks? Being lucky enough to have others who help is a boon for success, and learning how to access them is even better.

I hadn't taught the particular course April signed up for in a long time and heard instructors say how terrible the students are because so many of them are university students taking this course to get the "C" to transfer--and not attending, not able to identify credible sources from the library databases, plagiarizing, and eventually dropping out. So I created lots of small sequenced assignments with strict deadlines, but as it turned out, I didn't need them for this class, not having any of these disruptions. The only challenge was when a young man appeared in the class for the first time in the third week of the semester, telling me afterwards that he couldn't come beforehand because of severe anxiety but could come now that he made it across the threshold of the classroom door. I had already used the institutional drop policy and because of the sequence I had set up I felt that I couldn't let him make assignments up or it would not be fair to the rest. For Jeff, who added a few days late, he talked to me about the missing points for the rest of the semester, worrying that they were going to be the thing that sent him back to academic probation. I don't think I really understood the fear for students who have been through a previous failure. In a paper in our First Year composition class called "The Point of No Return," Jeff concludes:

No one likes to be behind, it is a gut wrenching feeling that everyone has felt.

When this feeling leads to hopelessness—that the deficit of the work that needs to get done will never get done—and dropping seems like the only option, it's not. To be an efficient student the surroundings that college students are in can be set up to help them in every way or be destructive in their own way if they do not use their time appropriately and get the work done.

Professors can help by becoming not so much a professor but more of a guide that set the class up by connecting old material with new and letting the students take over the material and discuss it as a class. This will help the motivation of the student because it will help them understand the material and feel more confident during tests. In turn this will motivate the student to try harder because of the gratifying feeling of success. Now and always, the problem of student's procrastinations is that it tends to lead to students doing so poorly that they fail or drop. Students can overcome the complex problem of procrastinating by changing their surroundings, their mindset, and the teacher can help.

I think Jeff's expressions of his feelings are quite profound, and I am grateful that I have reread them. Unfortunately, I did not pay attention to them while he was in my class. Instead, I pay attention to them now in the research process.

In this second class the students plowed through my sequence of tasks trustingly, despite the fact that the writing in First Year composition is quite different than in this research class, which focuses on the writing in their discipline. I shared lots of stories and drafts of my own challenges with this process, especially since I didn't have any available samples from former students, which I use too much anyway. Although I have heard so much that this course is overwhelming, like after the portfolio in the first class, they feel like they have really accomplished something.

One of the set-up activities was an optional trip to the university library since our community college library does not have physical research space. Since our college in the country holds classes on Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday, I offered that day to meet them and share the current periodicals with them. Only a handful of students attended. April was one of them. She and I spent time looking at journals and articles together, talking about her hybrid goals that the college's majors did not quite package. She wanted to work with children who didn't get much exercise, creating a space like a workout gym that was fun for them to help cure the obesity problem. The dreams and life plans of humans often do not fit into the packaged pathways that are created for them before they get there, sometimes from a previous century.

At the time I did not know that she was a runner and but also had grown up outdoors and wanted kids to experience it as well. She has long blond wavy hair and skin that glows from her natural beauty and happiness. It never occurred to me that

she had spent her own childhood on a farm. I thought she had this entrepreneurial idea out of pure ambition. She was having a difficult time articulating her plan. I know this feeling of inexperience. Understanding where she came from might have helped me. Her clean good looks got in the way. Every time I enter the classroom for my developmental course in the campus in the country, I smell cow manure. No one says anything about it. My classrooms are often smelly places.

April went to a small high school with only 35 who graduated. Although she went to a community college in the suburbs between two urban areas, I assumed she was from there. Instead, she drove 35 minutes a day from the countryside. All of her old friends do hard manual labor work--and she too worked on a farm, taking care of eight dogs for a large farm down the road, which helped her throughout college because she could make some money while staying focused on her studies. A lucky break she thinks--a part time job that she can get whenever she needs cash to supplement the financial aid that she is on. Her parents were very busy, had little time for them, were always working, and they did not have a vacation, particularly after 2007 or so when the economy hit their family hard. She continued to show pigs, however, for twelve years and even bought her car from the proceeds. This car has been with her going back and forth to both of the community colleges. She kind of misses the commute.

During high school, she hit it off with the valedictorian's mother, a physical therapist, who kept asking her about her plans and pushed her though she hadn't considered going to college and didn't prepare herself in any way. "You doubt yourself so much, but I would trust you over others," including those who graduated high in her class, she said.

Out of the three community colleges that were within driving range, she picked one that was the furthest because she had heard better things about it because it wasn't in the city, one of the most dangerous in the country. She wanted to "branch out" and be closer to the city of the university she thought she might transfer to. In this way, she could get used to the area before she then had to get used to the university. "I did everything myself because no one in my family really knew anything about college. I went to orientation even though no one goes to it at community college," she laughs, "but I was there."

Once she began at the community college, she began "to take advantage of the resources for math when I needed help because I knew that I would struggle" and though she found them helpful, the thirty five miles was too long because she felt she needed help every day. So she contacted her friend's mom. "We weren't really, really close but I knew that she helped people at her house after school in some kind of extra program, and they all did awesome on the ACT." She went to her mentor's house every night for help in math. "All I did in my first semester of college was study. I

wanted to prove to myself. But I found out that I enjoyed it and loved it!" She discovered that her teachers were very different than she had experienced in high school. She only took three classes in the first semester to give herself the best chance to succeed. Her nutrition teacher was a doctor, and she was inspired by her English teacher, especially because they read *Unbroken: A World War II Story of Survival, Resilience, and Redemption* by Laura Hillenbrand. She remembers the soldier's name, tells me about it and that it is going to become a movie. She recommends it to me. She uses the word "resilience" when she describes him. She also uses the word "engaged" frequently. I like how she turns it around, using it about her teachers: "They were very passionate...I realized how much I enjoyed learning when the teacher is engaged."

At her community college, there were mostly nontraditional students in her classes, which is difficult for me to fathom since I have cousins who live in this suburb that has a well-to-do reputation and a NBA basketball stadium. In addition to her persistence due to a fear of failing math, she also learned that from her classmates. "There was an array of all ages, which was really interesting to me because I expected them all to be my age." There was a single mother who brought her child to class every day who graduated as a radiographer. She was in her late twenties, had three kids, and the welfare check she was on did not cover childcare. Her professor allowed the child in the classroom as long as he was quiet. April respects her resilience, her desire to improve her life, even though it was very hard. But she also helped April with her



math and with organizational skills. Like a math student in Gladwell's book, she had enough of a work ethic, maybe because she is a farm girl but she attributes it to the role models she had in her classes.

There was also a man who she thought was around sixty to sixty-five but then she realized he was probably in his fifties. He had lost his job, "probably working jobs that were below his potential," and had no choice but to go back to school. April thought he was brilliant. Because they were all in an interpersonal communication class, they would talk for three hours every week. "To have all of those ages in one class gives you perspective on life and the different stages that people go through. They taught us things, and we taught them things."

Many of them were coming back to retrain after being laid off in the late 2000's. She went back for a summer of classes at the suburban college and then finished at our college in the country in the fall where she had economics with a mom in her 40's who she thought was the best student she had ever been with. She had been a "top performer" at the hospital but had not completed her degree. When under threat of losing her job because of it, she came back. She was "the most studious person I had ever met. She was on top of everything, always asked and answered questions."

Despite the age difference, she was one of her best friends in the class because they both cared about the work. Her friend did the best in the class. April saw how difficult it was for all of them and their resolve as well and decided that she did not want to wait

to get an education so she might have less struggle in life later. April learned so much from all of them: “They are not afraid to stand out, they want to get their money’s worth.” She recognized that times were so different than they were before and a degree shows “that you are capable of learning, of being coached.” When telling these stories, she often says that she was “touched” by these people.

April says that unlike students her age, she does not take education for granted. She appreciates it and knows that it makes a difference. She learned from so many perspectives that she says that her current university students do not seem to have. She is shocked that they listen to headphones during class. She is horrified that they do not want to organize group projects and are so difficult to get ahold of even though they live close by and do not have a commute. Because she gets papers done early, her business law professor who is also a judge was shocked. “But I thought it was so cool because I had never been to court so I decided that I was going to do it today! It was a different way of learning; everything in the court was connected to what we had learned in class.” Some of the students had not turned in their papers a week before the end of the semester. She bursts into laughter about how odd her classmates think she is because she asks and answers questions. Most of them she says have blank stares.

In our class there weren’t any nontraditional students except for a veteran who was a business student though he had owned businesses himself. His brother was also in the class, and it is the second time in a year that I have had two brothers in the same

class. I admire their support for each other; it is hard to imagine my sons taking a class together. April stayed clear of the hubbub of the male students in the back. Instead, she spent time with two young women--one who wrote about women in business because she was a hair stylist and the other researched whether drug education programs in middle school worked, which she got the idea from an interview she did of a social worker. They were not always in class, as April was, and she always had her drafts done and was eager for feedback from me or others. After this class she went back to the suburban college again for the summer and took two humanities courses, one was an intro to film.

Now that she is at a university, she has found other mentors. She emphasizes that she is a first generation college student. She might have learned that phrase recently because it helped her to frame her experience. She wants to be more self-aware, she wants to have fewer doubts about decisions she makes, and she wants to be pushed out of her comfort zone. She has found a new mentor who she says is amazing and laughs if she wants easy answers. April knows how to find a mentor—first the valedictorian's mom, then classmates, and now a staff person who came to speak to her class about learning to use strengths. She goes to talk with him every week. She hopes to learn more about herself; she wants to be more confident about her decision making. It seems like she knows so much already, but she does not stop trying to learn.

She had two friends who went straight to the university. One did not do well and transferred to our community college, which is how April found out about it. She also has a roommate who she admires. Although she is not as committed to her schoolwork as April is, she is very passionate about writing for the online college newspaper *Her Campus*. “I was in shock that she hated it but didn’t go home and now she loves it. She inspired me to get out of my comfort zone.” I decided to give it a “full chance.” April also has had a boyfriend at another university who is supportive about her dreams. “We inspired each other to reach our goals.” But now he respects their decision to break up because of the challenges of distance. “At my age, I can’t just make all my decision based on another person. It is worth but it is hard...will be hard...we’ll find each other down the road if it is meant to be.”

In Ken Bain’s book *What the Best College Students Do*, he tells many stories, including a story about how Kalamazoo Valley Community College helped writer. Another story is about a rural first generation student who took a class with a professor who pushed her to figure out the unique ways that she learns. She is now a very famous designer, partly because of the luck of taking his class because of the promise she made that she would take one class each semester for herself. Though it did fulfill a fine arts requirement, she says that it changed her life. Bain says that William Faulkner “wrote all of *As I Lay Dying* while perched on the back of a wheelbarrow” and though [t]he goal is not to do what Faulkner did, but to understand yourself: to explore who

you are, how your mind works, and what keeps it from working.”<sup>108</sup> The exemplary student’s discovery in Bain’s book sounds like April’s desire to learn about her own learning and the ways in which her new mentor helps her with this goal. He gave her a “strengthsfinder” exercise and she hopes to “use my strengths to help me be the best I can be. I want to learn about my talents, my passions, what I really like learning.”

April also recognizes that she got lucky in choosing her major. She found one of the colleges much more helpful than the other and so used the helpful one for advising. The other had not told her how to set up a plan to transfer her courses to a university, formerly called the MACRO agreement. Recently, I heard a story about a student who went to the Meijer Shopping Center to try to purchase a MACRO when she heard she needed one. Maybe it is just an urban legend.

Besides advisors, April went to see a career counselor. She knew she wanted to do something related to fitness—she loved running, she liked running in 5 and 10K’s and liked the events. She decided to become an “event planner,” though she did not have that language in my class. Then, she explained that she wanted to own a fitness center for kids or with the mission of getting kids moving. When she went to the counselor, he knew the parks and recreation director at the neighboring university who said that there was going to be a new and still unannounced major that focused on commercial

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<sup>108</sup>Kenneth Bain, *What the Best College Students Do* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 2012, 37.

event planning within the parks and rec major. They were golf buddies. She laughed, knowing that the choice of her major was due to a lucky random relationship.

She was still uncertain about the major, but she said that once she let go of concerns about making money and just pursuing this interest that it was better. She recognized that this might not be a field known for its financial rewards. Someone talked her through that, she says.

April is so glad that she went to a community college because there “so many stories opened her up.” She reflects that at a university there are fewer stories, but she was exposed to so many at both of the community colleges. But the transition was not easy. She hated the move to the second community college 150 miles north. She was homesick, her roommate hadn’t made many friends and she wasn’t easily making friends. Her roommate was her best friend since third grade and the plan was that she was going to the university nearby eventually. The move caused her to be “weirded out.” But it helped that her roommate had hated it at first and stuck it out and now loves it. April was sad and moped around for a couple of months. She knew that it would all eventually be ok, and so she just decided to “embrace it.” In her speech class she decided to give her informational speech to the class on her struggle. It was supposed to be “what is important to you and what you want to share with the class,” and she spoke about the importance of change. She said that she hoped if she talked about it, she would believe it.

Although April did join and participate in the Phi Theta Kappa organization at the second community college, volunteering at the haunted house trail, she decided to get involved right away and more frequently in clubs and groups involved in her major. She attended a career fair and said she wasn't sure whether she was "supposed" to attend but she went anyway. She laughs at herself freely. I think she meant that because she wasn't graduated that maybe she wasn't supposed to attend, but she landed an internship and so will be heading off to the east coast for the summer for training and then going from event to event setting up tents and talking about the brand.

April talks a lot about comfort zone, about confidence, about trying new things. She said that she had two presentations she had to give. One of them was about a visit to a company. Because her boyfriend was from Louisville, she made some contacts and spent the day at a company that does tours and events and met with the leaders of the company who told her about their entrepreneurship. Now that April has taken advantage of some of the opportunities, she now has the confidence to make new ones. She ended up taking her discomfort straight on and gave a speech to her class about why it is important for a person to move outside of their comfort zone. It was a turning point for her in "owning" the anxiety and taking charge of it.

April understands that a person in college needs to care enough to take the opportunities. “Young people don’t realize how lucky they are to get the opportunity,” she says.

I never asked questions in high school because I didn’t care, but being surrounded by people not my age who asked questions made me wonder why people my age were not so I just started to ask. None of them my age. They kept their mouth shut. I didn’t want to be like them. I want to understand it before I leave like they do. College has taught me more than just information and my education. It has helped me learn who I am. It has opened my mind up, to new ideas, it has transformed me.

April freely makes connections between her classes and her learning because she is interested in her learning. She says, “My speech class helped me to talk to others, to find common ground but it also taught me how to listen. I never really engaged with others or knew how to communicate in a healthy and good way. To engage and think before you talk is what I have taken with me.”

April’s mom is anxious about her being far from home, both in college but also in her upcoming internship. I am glad that this has not limited her decisions as I have seen happen to many of our local students because their parents do not want them to go to a university even an hour or two away. April knows that she supports her “deep



down” but that this new life that she is creating for herself is very different in several ways. “People didn’t really communicate well in my family,” she says about the connection between her speech class and her learning.

I wasn’t given that many opportunities. My parents were so busy, all the time.

So I want to take every opportunity. My goals are not just about maintaining my GPA so that I can stay in school on scholarship but what I’m learning, absorbing, and applying to my own life. Professors have given me opportunities that helped me learn, like I didn’t know where that section of the library was and when we went for your class, it helped me this semester because I needed to find current journals so that opportunity helped me.

April notes opportunities through her care to take advantage of them. She doesn’t take them for granted. She fluidly connects her learning in school to herself, to her life.

During her internship, April emails me with excitement about her time in Lake Placid, New York. I was reading the book she recommended to me, *Unbroken*, and I begin to see some of what she sees in it. Because of the emphasis on resilience, I thought the only reason for the title was to suggest that the soldier was not broken by all that he had undergone, but the word appears only once, as far as I can see, and it comes in a long sentence after complete calm in the middle of the journey as he and a comrade float at the equator, swapping and re-swapping every story and piece of memory they

had. “Unbroken” comes as a surprise, a different meaning than is suggested in the title, in the journey. He finds total stillness and finds it magical, spiritual, and finds that he can think differently than he has ever done in the unbroken space.

April is also a surprise. I had misunderstood her. I thought she easily moved from high school to college and that all of the obvious student success skills she had were come by naturally and easily. I did not think she was going to have an interesting story. She was always very ahead of the others in her research and writing of the class. I thought her transition was smooth and didn’t realize how much she did to make it smoother. She went to career services, figured out that the university was shifting their major so she could be parks and rec and event management; she went to career fair and applied for internships. She didn’t get the one she wanted at first, but she got another. She drove for the interview through a snowstorm.

She seemed naturally persistent, like a student who has always been a good student. Although she did have some luck along the way, she persisted to meet others and to put herself in a position to be lucky. Her grade point average was so high that she has a full ride at the university. Our Gen Ed goals are focused on learning outcomes and not grades, and Ken Bain too says that grades tell us very little but that if a person “concentrates on deep learning”<sup>109</sup> that they can make high grades. For April the grades have been important financially. Perhaps it was raising pigs and showing

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<sup>109</sup>Ken Bain, 37.

them that gave her the foundation to persist and put herself out there. I thought there would not be the typical backstory of the challenges that most community college students face. April made it past the challenges by taking advantage of the opportunities.

As we walked to our cars, she told me about the Miley Cyrus concert she was going to that night with friends, and we talked about a four-way stop near us where we both happened to get tickets for going through the stop sign, though neither of us thought we did. We laughed about living in a town where there are five police departments--city, county, state, university, and tribal. We both responded in our own personal style to the ticket: I didn't argue right away with the intimidating young cop but wrote a long and what I thought was a rhetorically-sensitive letter to the court with the help of my students. Unfortunately, what I didn't know about this discourse community is that they most want an admission of fault.

April didn't argue either, but she talked with her business law professor-judge about what to do, and he suggested she go in person. He was shocked when he assigned a visit to the court early in the semester in which a paper was due in a month's time. She made the visit the next day and turned in the paper a month early. "Who turns in a paper a month early?" he asked. He shouldn't have been shocked, but with this ticket, once again she took advantage of the opportunity to get some advice, to find some support, and to develop a mentor experience. So many students feel very alone in

their journey through college--especially in their beginnings, but April discovered that there are so many who could support her. While Jeff says in his essay that teachers can help, he had trouble when he transferred to this same university, not finding any mentors even yet. If April has not had as much trouble as so many community college students do, it is because she asks teachers to help and takes advantage of any openings they give her.

In the documentary *Ancient Futures: Lessons from Ladakh*, which we watch in our humanities classes, which is about the move from rural farming to urban living, a man says that within a context of globalization it feels that people from some groups “cannot be made friendly.”<sup>110</sup> April did not take our Gen Ed humanities course—taking film courses at another school instead—so we cannot take much “credit” in our assessment for her as a sponsor of literacy.<sup>111</sup> But I think even the chance to talk with a former professor again was not an opportunity that April was going to pass up. She seems to have no difficulty in making others friendly.

As we got closer to our cars, after leaving the bagel and coffee shop with music in the background so that on audiotapes of our conversation I hear cheerful songs like the Pharrell Williams’ soundtrack “Happy,” she laughed at her old car that had taken her

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<sup>110</sup> *Ancient Futures: Learning from Ladakh*. Motion Picture. J. Page. (United States: International Society for Ecology and Culture, 1993).

<sup>111</sup> Deborah Brandt says, [Sponsors of literacy] “lend their resources or credibility to the sponsored but also stand to gain benefits from their success, whether by direct repayment or, indirectly, by credit of association.” “Sponsors of Literacy,” 167.

so far, paid for by her 4-H winnings. She lives in a huge apartment complex between local college bars, just before my subdivision, on the border between the town and the countryside. She knows how she will get to where she wants to, across the border and away from the farm. Yet just beyond both of our places—as different as they are—is a big red barn in the bright spring afternoon. In the summers I can hear the clank of the rake as it shapes the fallen hay into neat rows. I can still smell the dust in my father's sweat and see the clover in my mother's smile.

#### 5. There and Back Again: Hacking the Border When Coming Home

*It was absolutely meant to be that your cool little robot thing didn't record. Now you have to rely on the feeling you got from the conversation, which in my opinion is much more important.*

Lillian Warner

A beautiful young woman sits in front of me across the plastic-wood plank. She has large brown eyes with black liner extending in a curve towards her high cheekbones. Creamy eye shadow glistens. Her black glossy hair is folded to the side with large curls that she occasionally lifts, sets down, and pats. She wears a necklace that has large baubles of gold, black, cream, which rests on her black-cream pantsuit. She points out that I have traveled across the countryside to see her with my limited

time. Her eyes gaze at me, and I feel like I am her prey. She doesn't flinch. She is sure of herself and of her place in the world. She smiles broadly and puts me at ease.

Early in my afternoon humanities class the year before, we were discussing Michael Walzer's *Thick and Thin: Moral Argument of Home and Abroad*, which is discussed in Kwame Appiah's ideas on cosmopolitanism in relation to rudeness. Cultures seem to have the "thick" concept of rudeness with "thin" specific notions what it constitutes. We talked about the challenge of a new technology like the cell phone. What is rude? They were especially interested in the idea that a "conversation" was happening across the globe and that the conclusion was being negotiated. In the beginning, it was unseemly to hear someone talking on their phone in the next toilet stall in the airport, and there was a lot of confusion about cell phone use in classes. At one time, I argued with faculty about cell phone policy mandates, saying that an engaging classroom with a lot of direct eye contact would limit cell phone business and not limit their freedom. Now, I struggle with students not just listening to me, but their classmates in a discussion. And now, when I take small children to play at a park I wonder whether it is irresponsible not to take a phone in case there is an emergency. I decide not to. I've seen volleyball practices, however, where parents are lined up in the bleachers looking at their phones. It has been settled.

I asked the class what were some other rude behaviors that they had witnessed or experienced. Immediately, Lillian raised her hand. She proceeded to tell us a story

with vivid description in an unexpected way, as if she was challenging what was considered rude to speak of in the classroom. She worked at a gas station, and someone kept leaving feces in the toilet, in the sink, on the walls. No, it was not a child, she said. The workers frequently drew straws for who would clean it up. It was such an extreme example of rudeness that we laughed about it for the rest of the semester. I shared John Green's "Is College worth It?" because one of the reasons to go to college, he says, included his never again having to play "rock, paper, scissors" to decide who would have to clean the vomit in the urinal.

Lillian was open to talk about many other things to the class, including her participation in the Wicca religion. She talked about it comfortably and to point out that people often misunderstand this religion instead of being curious about it which cosmopolitanism required. She explained that when she heard about the details of the religion she felt like she was learning a language that she didn't know she had. She recalls that another student talked a lot about her Judaism, even sharing a film with the class about a doctor who was in the Nazi camps but could not practice in the US. Perhaps because of the personal connections, students in the class did not discuss religion, even though there was significant fascination in posting videos of cultures who do animal sacrifices and in Appiah's stories about witches in some tribes and a missionary's explanation of boiling water as evil spirits so those not understanding science might eliminate germs causing diarrhea. Many students are nurses, and this

part of storytelling, and they liked these stories of cultural differences including those about blood transfusions.

Lillian lives in a county where Amish families populate the landscape so there seems to be no need for curiosity about them by the locals. A quick census account of the county points out that there are almost no firms owned by Asians, Blacks, Hispanics, American Indian or Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islanders. Another search results in a half a dozen companies run by Amish families, clearly mucking up the purpose of the demographic accounts. It makes me laugh. In all of my humanities classes, the Amish are most often brought up as an example. Partly because it surrounds this college in the country, but also, I think, because it complicates their understanding of technology.

Kwame Appiah mentions the Amish when discussing the limited possibility of having a “closed” culture within globalization, but students bring in many stories about them: how the Amish bought a student’s in-laws’ house so that they would own land connected to one another and stripped the siding; how they actually do use cell phones, energy, or other kinds of technology; how they get to not pay some taxes but use the roads, leaving horse feces on them. Like many community college students, the Amish are border-crossers. When Lillian and I meet for the first time to share stories, an elderly Amish woman--who might actually be my age--and a girl come into the McDonald’s. They each order a hamburger.



I am surprised how negative and sometimes even angry the locals are, and we problematize their observations. I often ask if they know any Amish personally. It is tempting to use academic materials, like Kevin Kelly's, but since they have their own experiences--some of them just a few and others with many--the students often make the same generalizations about their use of technology. The ideas that they are not a "monolithic group," their technology use is "uneven,"<sup>112</sup> their choices are driven by religion rather than reason and change over time are unevenly understood by students in such close proximity to the Amish. The idea that they are "hackers" might give them more respect, appropriating and reconfiguring technology, cultural artifacts, and even hospitals for their own purposes.

The Amish also contrast with Appiah's definition of cosmopolitanism. The Amish might care for their own, but not necessarily for others outside of their "tribe," and they might or might not have a curiosity about other cultures. They share in the universal values of family, religion, food but might not speak out about behavior that they see as problematic. Slow moving horse-drawn buggies are a common feature of the towns and backroads. Although I shared a poem I wrote with the class when I witnessed a buggy-car accident that semester, I see that another response poem I wrote at the time poses an Amish man in unnecessary opposition to myself:

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<sup>112</sup> Kevin Kelly, *What Technology Wants* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2011). But I think this is quite a useful website: *The Technium*. "Amish Hackers," <http://kk.org/thetechnium/2009/02/amish-hackers-a/> last modified Feb. 10, 2009.

Poetic Times

For nikki giovanni

Elated, I drive  
up the highway  
to my class, smiling,  
because my students— who I don't own,  
so why do I use the personal possessive?—  
see, that poetry is not just a puzzle  
to solve,  
but an experience, a view— when  
I then see an Amish farmer, plowing  
with six rugged tan horses, three in a row,  
he with a hat and focused ahead,  
with the golden, red leaves spanning the horizon,  
and his spotty dog, marching beside,  
and here I am  
with my cell phone focused abroad,  
speeding along a one-way highway.  
I get to the school,  
and a student who teaches me says

to the class in his online post: “Stop and Listen,  
and you may be able to understand  
how to free  
yourself  
as well.”

This is the only poem I have left among these stories. I had three others, but have forced myself to cut them. Three things have helped because I do not have the turpentine necessary to remove layers: remembering that my mother had no trouble at all throwing things away regardless of their value; remembering the dream I had recently of holding a baby too bloated to live; and remembering my students and hearing them say to me—this is my story!

At the time I wrote the poem, I was happy to experience an online discussion with students about the poetry we were reading together. Driving on the highway in contrast to the plodding horse and plow seemed such a contrast, but also the image of the countryside was so lovely. So when I got back on my computer at the school and I read this student’s response to James Baldwin’s “Sonny’s Blues,” I was stunned by his insight, thinking about freedom and technology.

I hope that these “lived” stories, rather than stories “representing” particular categories, even those of ‘first generation students’ or ‘nontraditional’ or even ‘community college students’ will not “flatten” but fortify the human experience and

the language and the “emphases on ‘shared humanity’ the *flattening effect*,” which become “erasures of difference that occur when narrating stories of the ‘other.’”<sup>113</sup>

Some stories, like Lillian’s, cannot be flattened. In a class problematizing globalization, the word “flat” is a common metaphor, even on the border that the community college is.

“Flat Stanley” is a character in a children’s book. He is usually a flat and folded up cut-out so that he can be mailed easily, in “snail” mail. When I’ve been asked to take pictures of him “around the world” for an “at risk first grader” who had colored him in bright colors, I decided to take pictures of Stanley at a university library, a bookstore, at a sculpture. Now I see my assumptions that this young person might be inspired by Stanley to go to college. Perhaps I have “flattened” the boy.

I am constantly challenged to rethink my own binaries. Lillian’s story certainly helps me to do that. She glows and sparkles with spirit. She holds so many seeming contradictions in her short life. Like many community college students, she started at a university. I didn’t know that at the time of our class and assumed that this was only the case for students on our campus in the “college town.” Though from a family that struggles with financial resources, her commitment to volunteering challenges stereotypes. I don’t think people often understand how much others, regardless of their

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<sup>113</sup> Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes, “Flattening Effects: Multicultural Imperative and Narrative Coherence,” *College Composition and Communication* 65 no. 3 (Feb. 2014), 433.

income, help their fellow human beings. I knew that from the amount of times I had heard students helping other students in low-rent housing complexes, but many assume that volunteering in other ways was a luxury that wealthier students had. I didn't know how much she has considered her obligations to others, despite the fact that this was a central conversation of the course. In her buoyant, optimistic way, Lillian broadened my perspective with her story.

Her parents divorced when she was young and she, her mother, and a sibling moved in with another single mother. They all lived together in a one bedroom apartment. Thus, the other mom was there when her own mother worked; the siblings too took care of each other. When her mother remarried, she gained step-siblings and then more step-siblings came along. But they never had any money. Her mother believed that even if you don't have anything you still share. Lillian gave her mother a hard time once, telling her that the man asking for money was only going to buy alcohol with it. Her mother said if he needed her \$3 for that to get by then that was fine with her.

Along with participating in choir and theatre, Lillian spent much of her high school years volunteering for causes related to women and children like child abuse, homelessness. She was a part of the "Key Club" organized by the local Kiwanis. Her current workplace and career path is partly interesting to her because of this commitment.

By the time she came to my class, Lilly was in early childhood education, but she started at a university right out of high school to become a medical administrator. She thinks she chose this field because of the show “House.” It was a glamorous and interesting world. She wanted enough money to survive so that someday she could give her children a certain kind of lifestyle. She herself didn’t have the whole “kid thing,” she says, meaning an experience of just being a kid, and she says the one thing that she is very grateful for is that she does not yet have any children like so many of people in their early twenties that she knows.

She went to college because everyone in her generation must in order to do anything, she says. All of her girlfriends went to college—they were a tight knit group of “good Christian girls.” She is still friends with them, and she is very proud that her best friend will be graduating from the university soon. She had a friend who was wealthy in high school. Her mother would take them traveling—Chicago, Las Vegas. Her own mother was upset that she could not pay her anything, but the mother said she wanted to hang out with teenage girls because she wouldn’t be doing it for long.

She got enough financial aid and scholarships to go to the university 45 miles away. Away is what she wanted the most. In her first semester she was a receptionist at an “Urgent Care” medical office and also doing coding and hiring in order to get experience for her future career. I remember carrying my son into that very office when he fell on a ski hill, hurting his knee. He worried that his hockey season was over. In

the beautiful starlit night as we skied together, I had just thought to myself—see, you can do this, you can teach him stuff, we can have a good life together without a dad—and then, just then, he fell in pain. I was with two doctor's wives from our "Creative Parenting" group, and they called ahead to their doctor friend. We got special treatment. For Lillian, it wasn't the way she had imagined it from what she saw on TV. She had a patient come at her with a knife telling her to give her Vicodin; she had to call the police and three cops held her away from Lilly. She hated the work and was grateful she tried it at the very beginning of her college career.

She received very little advising at the university. She was given a list of courses to take and she took them. The only one she really remembers is the abnormal psych class because it helped her to think about some of her family members. She continued in general studies using the two years she had left on her financial aid. She especially liked the long list of options of which she had to pick three classes. "Why wouldn't I take abnormal psychology, anthropology and religion?" She liked the "social undercurrent" of these classes and her interest in history led her to reading about Wicca, and also a local woman who she finally had a conversation with when she returned back home.

When she got to the university, she was "instantly homesick." She felt, "No one knows me." About her hometown she says, "You go into the grocery store, and they know my grandma wants cigarettes and they have them already on the counter; they

know that I'm going to get a root beer; they even ask me how I did on a big test." She didn't like that over familiarity as a teen. She wanted out of the small town so bad, her mother encouraged her, and she took all of the college prep classes and was "ready." She reflects on reading *The Great Gatsby* and found it to be "poignant," unlike the recent movie that she feels glamorizes greed.

But not being part of all the family gatherings that occur was upsetting. She has 40-50 relatives who all live close. She does not recall missing class because of any family members, despite the professional development on generational poverty that suggests that she might. She did miss classes when her grandfather was dying. He was central to the family unit though rarely talked. Lilly plans on getting another tattoo in his honor with other aspects representing other relatives.

She experiences a lot of fun, practical jokes, and love in her family. There is straight talk yet tolerance. If one of the uncles says something about a cousin bringing someone to a family get together that is different than they are, others step in. Lilly was a Christian because she was taken to church, she says, but she began to read—about World War II and about the witch trials. A sister lives out east and she smiles that she and her mother want to go to Salem.

Lillian was involved in many clubs and activities, including volunteer work when she was at the university. Likewise, at the community college she jumped right into the theatre program, having loved it in high school, along with choir. I was a little annoyed



that she and another student, a former dual enrolled student of mine who I later found out was on the “wall of fame” at his school for theatre, had to miss a couple of weeks of my class. I wonder now whether I should have been that annoyed. Although universities might be used to having students out of class for sports and activities, I don’t think community college faculty are crazy about it. Perhaps it is because they are also often missing for the various family and work obligations. Clubs are often used as a retention connection to the college, but for students on the border, they can connect or create more problems for them.

Unlike at the university, when she got to the community college, there was a lot of advising that she considered “hand holding.” She decided that maybe she wanted to be a nurse, but she did not want to deal with feces or blood, and “did not want to touch their insides.” So she decided to go into early childhood instead. She liked kids from her volunteer work. While the credits from a community college to a university transfer well, she says, the opposite is not true, so she needed to start over with many prerequisites. She thinks it might have been better to start at a community college, but she was desperate to get out of the small town that both of her parents grew up in. She laughs that she discovered that she is not Superwoman. I think she means that it is harder to “take over the world,” which was her description for one of her goals for going than she thought it was when she innocently went off the university.

She took one more semester of classes after the one she had with me. Despite being close to her family now, she was struggling with the work hours, the field experience hours, and classes. When she applied for other jobs, she sent in her resume to the local bank which had an opening. She became a teller. She found it mundane, but it quickly led her to a promotion. She is now a financial specialist. Lillian proudly states, "I am an advocate for people's financial well-being." She gets to help others with ways to save for retirement, to help them save so they can send their kids to college. Although the bank has "packages," they do not push her to sell the products. It is like another big family, she says, they have lots of care for local folks, but even when she went downstate for a training she found those from other branches were just as friendly. In addition to the job giving her a way to contribute, they will pay for her future education, and they have many volunteer projects to help children. She smiles, recalling the movie that she loves: *It's a Wonderful Life*, a movie that I have not liked so much but see how the humanitarian financial ways of old--nostalgic or not--have been erased through the predatory banking before and after the recession. She sees how important this local bank is to individuals and her community. Lillian has found a way to "hack" the corporate system into one that she can live with.

I too changed my major many times during college, deciding that I couldn't compete with my urban classmates to become a lawyer and the interdisciplinary program I was in wouldn't allow me to teach if I decided to. I considered history and

the social sciences. When I discovered that learning about how one learns to read was a thing you could study, I was excited, but I minored in business, even though I was terrible in those classes, so I could be “marketable.” I admire the way Lillian has stayed true to her desire to help others no matter what her career is. Although I know that we have a service learning component in our Gen Ed program and that Michell benefitted from the experience as a way to connect to the local community, Lilly’s focus is remarkable to me.

There is a lot of concern with students actually graduating from college. She assures me that she will one day. She has had no significant mentors or classes, but she retains her optimism, her joy in life. Both of the times I met her she enthusiastically eats something, unlike any of the other students I meet.

Lillian calls herself a “hippy dippy,” because she is open to others and their ways of life, which is why she says she liked reading about cosmopolitanism, though she resists reading things that are assigned usually. My husband often calls me a “strange attractor,” a term from the subdiscipline of math, of chaos theory, where once a person becomes aware of something they become aware of other things connected to it.<sup>114</sup> Lilly

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<sup>114</sup> During the time of writing this, I read the novel *The Interestings* by Meg Wolitzer about summer camp and what happens in the lives of those who were at the camp. Within the span of one chapter about a dinner party when the characters are right out of college, we find out that the hostess dies much later at 43 and that one guest had a mental breakdown and before all that we know that two of them become happily married. This explains to me how contemporary fiction commonly uses time in what I read in the Annie Dillard (a book that my sister picked out of hundreds of books at a used bookstore and said I should probably read it. I agreed and took it and out of the hundreds of books I have at home 200 miles north). Dillard quotes Alaine Robbe-Grillet who I had never heard of, but I had picked up a *Vanity Fair*

feels to me like she too might be a strange attractor, but I wonder whether when one lives in such a small town, there is enough “strange” to become aware of, whether the theory assumes and requires a multiverse because all seems familiar in the country.

As she and I talk, her boyfriend calls, and she reminds him that she is talking with me. Later, I hear her telling a villager why she is there; the woman tells Lilly to be careful. She seems to have no secrets though. She is, as they say, an open book. She seems so purely herself, perhaps the way that Gandalf saw Bilbo and why he wanted him on their important adventure. Now months later in a different season, with the beginnings of crimson and rust, I would love to talk to her some more.

At the McDonald’s where we sit together in the season of spring, each of the tables have coffee cups with plastic brightly colored flowers in each. As I sit down to join her, she laughs at the kitschy floral design. Later, we met in a beautiful outdoor-indoor vegetable market that has an ice cream stand attached. As we wait to get ice cream, she seems to know everyone--cousins, somehow related, a fifth teacher. After we are done talking, I pick up some zucchini plants since I hadn’t gotten seeds in the ground soon enough because of the cool spring. I looked at some trees I was interested in—a Japanese laceleaf maple for a spot at the corner of my house where a big tree was knocked down by a wind. I think about the journey of this tree over the globe and through breeding. I think about a walk I took in the woods where a one inch start of a

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this week on the side of the road in someone’s garbage and read an article about this writer who was famous but I had never heard of before. Strange attractors.

tree I saw growing out of a trunk and a larger sapling was coming out of another while other little start up trees were bravely starting on their own in the earth.

I overhear a middle-aged customer ask a young man who was stocking shelves and tables where he was going to college and how his first year of college went. I then go behind a woman at the register to discover a young man from one of my developmental classes in the past year. He has on a striped tank top like the ones my brother wore in the 80's. In his comp class, I happened to be the reader for his portfolio paper. He says "thank you" to the woman and smiles, and then smiles again when he turns and sees me. I remember that he had played hockey in this community and then on the college's team. I remember the coach telling me how supportive his parents were. I ask him how things went this past semester, and he says that he made it through his English class. I say that surely he more than just made it through, since he had been a dutiful student and revised his writing with persistence. He replies that he did "ok," considering he wasn't good in English classes. I said that was not my experience of him in class. He said quizzically that it was probably a thing he had heard from his English teachers in high school. Since I am lucky enough to know the local teachers through my work as a high school liaison, I can't imagine any of them saying this to him. He says he wasn't sure yet what he was going to major in, maybe he would go to a trade school, maybe he would be an electrician like his brother. I told him about my son's study as an electrical engineer and tried to explain the kind of work he did.

As he rings up my zucchini plants, he says only, "So there's jobs there?" My heart sinks. Yes, I say, there are jobs.

## Chapter 4 First in the World: More than Economic Competitiveness

Within a short time, I twice came in contact with the phrase “First in the World.” A grant was announced to “spur innovation in higher education aimed at helping more students gain access and complete a college degree.”<sup>115</sup> The goal is to be the “first in the world” to have a record amount of college graduates. The word “testing” appears many times in the press release, not testing of students this time but testing in empirical measurements of approaches of gaining more college graduates. I was contacted by my college’s admissions office to brainstorm a possible innovation. Trying not to let this project take over my own writing, I communicated extensively with the project lead—sending resources and ideas—but choose to miss the initial meeting. After viewing the pre-application webinar, it was decided that our small college in the country did not have the project Department of Education is looking for. I was relieved because I was already disappointed that the project was moving so sharply and so quickly towards even more student service support rather than more instructional understanding.

The second encounter with the phrase “First in the World” was in a search about Richard Alfred, a community college expert that I wanted to read about from the University of Michigan. It led me to J. Noah Brown’s book with that title; its 2012 publication indicates that the Obama administration is using the title for the grant from

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<sup>115</sup> U.S. Department of Education Announces \$75 Million First in the World Competition,” U.S. Department of Education, <http://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/us-department-education-announces-75-million-first-world-competition>.

the book. Brown works with trustees and his book is focused on their role in addition with college presidents. Since I had recently been a part of a presidential search, it seemed to me that local imperatives dominated the search rather than global economic competitiveness that the concept proscribes. Indeed, Brown's primary focus is the role that the community college plays in the economic progress: "focusing on the proven potential of community colleges to assist in transforming our economy and restoring America to a position of unquestioned economic and democratic pre-eminence in the world." The statement is ominous in the way it uses persons for national dominance. However, community college students are difficult to "track," and Brown explains that their "discontinuous" education with a "stop in/stop out" pattern and "swirling," jumping among many colleges, makes it difficult to document their persistence.<sup>116</sup> I am uneasy about the focus on tracking rather than on the human stories, but he does admit that "life" gets in the way for many of them.

For me, the following five persons are first, first in their world to enter this new land, rather than graduates to increase the numbers for world superiority. Those presented in this chapter are not only first generation like those in the previous chapter, but have only attended our community college in the country rather than stopping or "swirling." They have been in continuous motion towards an associate's degree at our

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<sup>116</sup> J. Noah Brown, *First in the World: Community College and America's Future* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2012), 9.



college. Does that make their stories less complex? Does it make their challenges easier to solve? Are they even on the radar?

Tom Shalter, a young snowboarding instructor who lived in many states, ended up at the community college only after getting kicked out of his father's house. He made it through and is on his way to a university. Taylor Gronowski was also raised by her father, but moved "up north" from the city to her grandmother's house to study and to receive an associate's degree as a physical therapy assistant. Both are very clear about their career choice and very determined to get there.

Reann Bringley, a computer networking student who is in her forties and has had a half a dozen jobs, is still raising a teenage son who is in the college's welding high school program and is helping her older son with his own children and his college classes. Also a very hard worker, Ashlynn Owen started college as a sophomore in a middle college dual enrollment program, started working at fast food restaurants early, and has completed an associate's degree and is heading to a university to study psychiatry. While Reann knows that she has come a long way, Ashlynn knows that her road ahead is very long.

Heart Song, a student who has traveled back and forth between the US and Ontario dozens of times, going to school on tribal reservations, several small schools and a large elite school, before going to community college, is hoping to become a nurse. She has been turned down and has no alternative plans but to try again.

Despite their push towards being a part of the “first in the world” to graduate, these students have had significant losses that has shifted their college story. Although I experienced economic hardship as a kid, living through a couple of recessions, my bricklayer dad unemployed for two years during my college years and my mom given a terminal health diagnosis, and I hear other stories every day, these unique stories are still eye-opening for me. Thus, I think through this “first” image from my own perspective and theirs. Although it is a poem about romantic love, I think of the “first” in e.e. cummings’ poem: “Since feeling is first/who pays any attention/to the syntax of things.” The final line is “for life’s not a paragraph/and death i think is no parenthesis.”<sup>117</sup> These stories embody humans who live in time and space, are temporal beings with a past and present as well as, I hope, a vibrant future. These are stories about humans, for humans.

#### 1. First: When You are On Your Own

*I'd rather die on my feet than live on my knees.*

Tom Shalter

It is always interesting to see a former student a year later, years later. With their new confidence, their bodies seem altered. I especially noticed this when talking with former students who had just gone through nursing clinicals, like Christie, and physical

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<sup>117</sup> E.E. Cummings, “Since Feeling is First,” *E. E. Cummings: Complete Poems 1914-1962*, Ed. George J. Firmage, (New York: Liveright, 1991), 291.

therapy clinicals, like Taylor Gronowski. What I noticed about Tom is that his blue eyes seemed different, and he was more talkative and maybe even friendlier since I was not “his teacher” any longer. But perhaps he was just more confident. Though he was still tall and willowy with his usual jeans and a t-shirt, he still had the quiet intensity that I remembered. As we caught up and I explained that I was interested in back stories of college and before, he said slyly that what happened to him in high school affected his attendance in college.

I didn’t understand. I didn’t recall any stories from the two semesters that he was in my class about his high school experience. Instead of asking about it right away, we started talking about critical feedback because he had some that he was struggling with at the time in his sophomore-level research class, and he saw that Heart Song was also working on a big paper next to me in the old conference room where Kirk Chamberland and I first met. As she packed up her multiple books and bags, I told him that he always seemed open to feedback in class. He remarked thoughtfully: “I’m down with feedback. I like multiple perspectives. I like taking other peoples’ perspectives, and I like seeing things from that angle because to think that your perspective is the only perspective that’s right is really narrow-minded and not true.” I was surprised to hear the forcefulness in his voice and to see Tom use the language of our General Education program—multiple perspectives—about getting writing feedback. Later, he adds more

about others' perspectives: "You don't know what other people are going through. You don't know who they are." His focus on persons is interesting to me, a lesson for me.

But then we begin to talk about the challenge that a teacher has since he has recently taken an education course. He responds to my worry that as a teacher it is hard to know how much to know about students. He immediately starts to say that "if a teacher knows too much," but then he switches gears: "You are just a teacher, you can't like hurt yourself, striving to connect with kids. It is problematic when you are trying to be personal when they are trying to make it impersonal with all the standardized tests." I learn about this perspective: that connecting and being personal might hurt. I am intrigued with how he knows this.

Tom was struggling with his current teacher who did not think he had researched his paper on learning styles enough. He is in the same expository and research writing course that Ken and April had taken. He is challenged at every turn, he says. He understands that there are those who do not agree that there is such a thing as learning styles, and he has considered many perspectives on the topic; he also feels he has found every article that he can. I am curious about his negative experience with a writing teacher; I never saw him upset at being challenged. In my classes he always had a rough draft and was open to suggestions, never overly needy.

In our talk about critical feedback, Tom also explains a situation in another class in which he had to turn in an assignment late because he didn't understand the

description of the assignment. While he was explaining to the teacher all his stressors, including working 30+ hours per week, not getting assistance from his family, having a lot “on his plate” and lack of sleep, she gave him what he feels like to be discouraging advice: “Her first suggestion was ‘have you thought about maybe dropping the class?’ I was like you don’t even want to talk to me? You don’t even want to see where I’m coming from? You just want to ask me to drop the class? I just thought that was really a bum deal. That kind of hurt.”

I have done this before out of concern. Instead of understanding that those who share their challenges are reaching out, I thought that having them drop if they are overburdened was good problem-solving instead of just listening to their perspective. I didn’t realize that they might take it as the opposite: that I don’t care about them and their efforts at an education, even though it seems that they are skimming to learn, just trying to get the credential. This had never been my feeling about Tom though. He seemed to really want to learn. He was quietly engaged, giving contributions. Why would a teacher not want Tom in class? I cannot imagine it. I cannot imagine being anything but grateful for having such an interesting, imaginative, committed participant in class.

Tom always sat by the window. He would come in with his baggy jeans dragging down, and he participated deliberately and resolutely. I recall him telling the class in a discussion about attendance and persistence that he was afraid of missing class.

Although I try to move students around so they can find “new perspectives” through various small group activities, I can only imagine him sitting by the big window with the beige plastic blinds with the blue sky and dark green images of pine trees behind him. I am sure that not a day went by that he didn’t show up and speak up.

It was wonderful to see him again in my comp class because he had been in the developmental English class the semester before where we researched online piracy as a class. As a result of the research a returning student led the class in creating a Facebook page to share materials and warn students about downloading materials. He sat with and partnered with a neighborhood teen that I knew only because I had interviewed him for two projects—one on his reading and one on his experience with information literacy. He was playing basketball in his driveway one day when I asked to interview him for a project. He immediately said “yes,” and I probably assumed that Tom was much like him--a tall, lean, blondish snowboarder from a traditional family. Although he told me early on that he had lost his mother as a boy, it was the only sign that he had a past already at seventeen. I think he brought it up to explain how he ended up in our part of the country, perhaps trying to distance himself from the nearby small town.

Tom was born in an eastern state, moved to the south and then west with his mother. She died when he was eight, and he had to decide whether to go into foster care or go to live with his dad in the Midwest. I am not certain how much of it was his decision, but he makes it sound like it was his own. As I think about Tom, I remember

that I was eight when my parents decided to move from the suburbs hundreds of miles to a farm but first having to stay with a grandmother for six weeks while I finished the year. I missed my mom so much. I can't imagine what it was like for him. At eight my oldest son was dealing with living with his mother away from his father, and at eight my youngest son was dealing with a new step-father. Part of life for children is the push and pull as dependents. Recently, a high school teacher told me that they often get about seventy-five new students that they do not expect due to all of these transitions.

Many people fuss that divorce today has caused many new problems; I always retort that children have always been living with loss. In my own family, my grandmother had a step-father; my mother lost her father traumatically at seven and later had a stepfather. My other grandfather was adopted out of a hospital and then abandoned at twelve when his mother died and his father remarried. I wonder how much of a role losing parents plays in the many community college stories. Tom is buoyant, however. He says that it all worked out for the better.

It might be harder to find others to connect to, but the need to do so might be greater. In the movie *The Way, Way Back*, fourteen year old Duncan sits in the back of the station wagon on the way to the ocean cottage with his mother's new boyfriend who verbally abuses him. He finds a mentor in a water park manager who tells him that he needs to "find his own way." As Duncan makes a courageous stance--his posture

getting straighter over time--the song "Souls Will not be Fooled" plays in the background.

I don't know if there were stories that helped him to feel less alone. Did he read *Hatchet* by Gary Paulson or *The BFG* by Roald Dahl? He says he read the standard fare of kid fantasy. Anne of Green Gables, the spunky girl who lost her parents and accidentally landed at a farm, helped Heart Song. My childhood was full of stories about struggling children: *Harriet the Spy*, Laura Ingalls Wilder, Anne Frank,<sup>118</sup> *Jane Eyre*.<sup>119</sup> Lately, I've read many novels about foster care, but all of them about girls.

Though I now know children who are having safe and meaningful lives in foster care, I felt badly for Tom, but he did not tell me about his experience with any note of pathos. I have many persons in class who worry about everything they do and want reassurance and apologize mightily, and are as my mother would say, "a pain in the neck," but Tom was straight and steady, confident enough to get through all of my demands about one kind of paper genre and another. He tended to miss small things that didn't quite get him a "straight A." At the time I thought he was young and the details were not important, but he also might have been maintaining his freedom or just

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<sup>118</sup> As I think about confidences in sharing stories, I am touched today by a Facebook post from doctoral classmate Mark Helmsing: "I hope I will be able to confide everything to you, as I have never been able to confide in anyone, and I hope you will be a great source of comfort and support." Page 1, Anne Frank, June 12, 1942.

<sup>119</sup> I am amazed at Pamela Graff's idea that in the 1960's teenagers read adult novels and wanted to be adults. This has implications for college students. She problematizes young adolescent fiction from her perch in northern Michigan: <http://booksinnorthport.blogspot.com/2014/12/were-there-young-adult-novels> last modified December 17, 2014.



struggling with the amount of responsibilities in his life. It is difficult not to, but it is not fair to judge.

I love stories of persistence, even the ones that are hoped for in policy documents. These are the food for immigrant children: sacrifice, struggle, success. So when a student doesn't have this mantra, I don't always understand and throw up my hands, scapegoating the young. I like stories I know about a young woman who accidentally got pregnant, raised the boy alone, went on welfare assistance, then advocated about its value as a program to politicians, and finally completed her bachelor's to become a local teacher of Spanish. I like stories like another whose boyfriend said that he knew college students who were not as smart as she was and even though she was living out of her car when they met, with his prodding, she walked into the college's front office and asked how she could go to college and is now the sociology department chair at one of the largest community colleges in the state. I know these are rare, but I do not always understand how a person keeps trying to be the first in their family to go to college without the imagination that it is not rare.

I love the stories of persistence that Malcolm Gladwell tells in *David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits, and the Art of Battling Giants*. He tells stories about successful people who overcame dyslexia and lost parents. He retells the story of a psychologist in the early 1960s who investigated "creatives" and discovered that of the 573 "eminent people," 25 percent of them had lost a parent by the age of ten, 34.5 percent lost a parent

by the age of fifteen, and 45 percent by the age of twenty. Gladwell contrasts it with wartime trauma: “Losing a parent is not like having a house bombed or being set upon by a crazed mob. It’s worse. It’s not over in one terrible moment, and the injuries do not heal as quickly as a bruise or wound. But what happens to children whose worst fear is realized—and then they discover they are still standing?”<sup>120</sup>

Gladwell argues that society needs people who have experienced some kind of trauma. He says that they become stronger and more persistent and change society in creative ways. Though I had relatives who lost parents and saw them grieve for a lifetime, it is not until I learn of the stories of those coming into adulthood that I question the “suffer” part of the sacrifice, struggle, and success narrative. I also recognize that these stories have created a sentimentality about struggle, to be seen as the first to succeed in one’s family, any more than a heroic teacher who saves them.

I am not sure where Tom fits in with Gladwell’s narrative. Tom did fit in just fine when he moved to the new school in the new northern town. Luckily, he had met his father the summer before his mother died, so he felt ok about moving with him. Of course, when Tom had originally told me this part of this story during class, I imagined that he and his father had been together since his birth and that they were going through the loss together. I assumed it, and Tom let me assume it. I think he told me, or the class, in the first place to explain why he moved to the area, that he wasn’t really

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<sup>120</sup>Malcolm Gladwell, *David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits, and the Art of Battling Giants*, (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2013), 153.

from the area. In addition to his mother, an older brother died. I know none of the details, and I don't ask.

He feels lucky to have had a teacher twice—once in the fourth grade and again in the sixth grade. He recalls, “She was good about talking to me; she gave me a push a couple of times...write what you want to write about, you have a good point so try to make it.” He says that “on the other hand,” he has had teachers that didn't make personal connections, but he says that he kind of understands it, again blaming the amount of students and standardized testing. Tom shows his flexibility in understanding various perspectives with his reflections on teachers. He says that he cannot “pinpoint” a time where he began to think like this, but he now tries to treat people like he would like to be treated.

Tom fell in love with snowboarding in middle school. He started instructing at the small hillside ski resort near the college. He had a chance to go out west snowboarding with a friend's family in high school. His only goal was to snowboard and teach snowboarding out west. He told the story to the class in his first paper, which included getting very sick and the dad taking care of him enough so he could return home. Another snowboarder in the class appreciated the story and replied on the class site.

I remember a kid who said that he wanted to go out west to teach snowboarding and so didn't need to go to college, but it was not Tom. I visited his school around that time. As our college's high school liaison, I offered my help to the speech teacher who

was teaching college courses to dual enrolled high school students at Tom's school. I decided that rhetorical appeals would be a good way to bridge a speech class and their future English classes. The kids were rowdy and social, but they got involved in the analysis of the "Handy Guide to Freshman Comp" that I designed to pass out to high school students to prepare for college writing. Since I had a teenager of my own, I asked them to think of a situation that they have found themselves where they were trying to persuade someone—to borrow or buy a car, to go out on a date. They wrote using the appeals and a few of them shared. Tom did not take these courses. He was not in vocational courses but not in college prep courses. He says stayed "under the radar."

In many high schools if a student is not in the courses that allow them to be offered the other courses they are not offered to be in the courses, in a circular and cyclical way. I recall my son telling me that they were playing "hangman" in his government class and that he would have liked to be in the "honors" government class. I found out from a daughter of a friend of mine, that the teacher went into her honors American studies class—a course my engineering type son was not directed towards—and personally invited into the honors government course in the next trimester. A personal visit and invitation! When I wrote a letter to the social studies teacher that I knew, he angrily responded—even though I knew him to be a nice young man as my sons' football

coach—that all students were indeed welcome. Welcome. If persons could just feel welcome in school, that would be amazing. I want to do that.

Tom is happy about the difference between his high school experience and college. He recalls,

I don't think I'm really dumb, I just didn't want to go to college because I didn't like the idea of school because I hated high school but I didn't know how different it was. I didn't realize how you could take classes that you were actually interested in and you could learn stuff, like really learn stuff in college. In high school it's just not like that.

When I got out of high school I was like wow, now I can just be me, ya know? I don't really have to worry about past stuff that people know about you, and you don't have to worry about that anymore. It's all you. It was really freeing for sure because I got to be around people my age and I got to be in school again but it's just a fresh slate.

I like the idea that college allows for a person to be themselves, to be free. With all that I heard from Kirk and Michell—and all the credits and tests—I was not sure about that.

At the same time that Tom was in the local high school, I was getting to know all of the area high school English teachers, going to their professional development

sessions, organizing dinner and dialogue events between them, our faculty, and the local university. Part of the goal was to develop relationships and clear communication, but also there was a hope for the community college that there would be some curriculum alignment so that when local students were less likely to place into developmental courses and would be more likely to meet competency in the portfolio assessment.

Tom was also trying to improve the teaching and learning at his school. He recalls that his English teacher came ten to fifteen minutes late for class and regularly “dropped them off” at the library. Of course, I do not know the reason for this, and I don’t want to push Tom about the other possibilities. This is his story. But I could see that the teacher might have been trying to help them develop some self-direction or independence. He and a buddy—a young man who moved recently from a big city—went to the assistant principal with their complaints. Nothing happened. So they decided to go to the principal. Again, nothing happened.

The young men did not think this was fair and wanted to take a stand, but they wanted to do it in a “professional” way. They typed up a list of complaints that “all students would support as true,” and they signed it. They wanted to do it “the right way.” They did not want to “distribute” it as well as write it, so they gave it to another student, and he put “a big stack” in the bathrooms. Soon after, the boys were suspended and lost their “walking” privileges at graduation. They insisted, however,

that since they were no longer students that they could still watch their friends graduate. There were many more police officers than usual at graduation. When he refused to leave, they said that Tom was trespassing, handcuffed him, and he was taken to jail. He waved his friend away from the back of the car, so that he wouldn't get in trouble. He reflects,

I was just trying to stand up for what I believe in and like I was doing it as professionally as I could, like if you were to look at it and see where I was coming from maybe you'd understand. That might be why I'm so adamant about looking at other people's perspectives too because I've had my perspective not actually looked at sometimes and it kind of sucks to be silenced like that. That's when I moved out of my parent's house.

Tom's dad was very angry, and they had a falling out "for a minute." Tom moved into the basement of a friend. The judge threw the case out of court. Luckily, there is no "paper trail." As I nervously looked online, I only found a newspaper notice for him on the honor roll in the fifth grade in the third marking period. A week after the event, his much, much older step-brother told him to move in with him. By the end of the summer, he said that Tom needed either to find an additional job to help with rent or go to college. He decided school sounded better than getting another job. His brother did not go to college and urged him to go so he would be able to do what he

wants in life. But he also had met a secondary education university student at his job and felt that he could do that too.

When he thought about it this friend becoming a teacher, he decided,

That really seemed like something that I would want to do, you know, have an impact like that, and especially because I loved to teach snowboarding, that's where I really made the connections. I just love teaching people stuff and talking about experiences. I just thought that it would be really cool, because that's just what I've always been passionate about.

In high school no counselor ever talked with him about his future, and college was not something he thought about "for a minute." He signed up for courses at the community college and walked into my developmental English class. I recall thinking that he was such a thoughtful writer and participant that he could have been in the First Year composition course straight away. I also remember him working on math homework in the computer lab after class with a couple of classmates, helping one and getting advice from another about an upcoming test, and complaining mightily.

He was bolder in the second semester. I wish he had been in the class with Ken and Jeff, but this class included many very good students right out of high school and Chinese international students, one who wrote a paper making fun of American students' low math abilities and another about his passion for shoe collecting.



Although he did give some critical feedback about the rhetorical choices of the math essay, Tom mostly stayed to himself, despite the compliments about his snowboarding discourse community multi-genre essay he received from another snowboarder in the class who had a sponsor. In an exchange they had with one another, Tom asked the student how he got a sponsor.

He worked very hard on a complex paper for his portfolio on profanity. I learned later that it was a response to a teacher who he felt was critical of what she thought was unprofessional use of a minor profanity. He explains,

In conversation with a classmate, the teacher addressed me like I was a child, saying “Umm, language, that’s not how you conduct yourself...apology?” She asked, “How long have you been in college?” And I was like, I’m actually just finishing my associate’s this semester, and I’m going to be transferring, and she was like, well you should learn how to conduct yourself in front of instructors better because that’s not how you conduct yourself, and I was like, ma’am I was on the honors list last semester, you could talk to any of my instructors and they could tell you...you don’t need to tell me I need to learn to conduct myself, I was just expressing myself.

The struggles Tom has with teachers does not jive with my experience with Tom. I recognize that if a student does not seem to be having difficult in my class that doesn’t

mean he isn't having difficulty in other classes, needing support there. Last semester when asking a former student how things were going for him, he said things were very bad because a classmate was accusing him of sexual harassment. He thought he was teasing and trying to fit in. I don't know the details, but I did go with him to an administrator just so they would have another perspective.

Tom figures out in his writing process that even profanity can be understood from many perspectives. This is the thesis of his essay: "The inspection of what defines profane language, the examination of the role of discourse community over individuals' morals, and the analysis of the role of media in the United States as it pertains to peoples' perception of "dirty language" can help us to understand the complexity of profanity." He uses academic research in psychology and in science, considers how the Bible understands profanity, and then discusses how in various discourse communities like the military, profanity has its purposes. He weaves in his reading, his analysis, and an interview with a classmate to showcase his synthesis thinking:

I had a brief sit-down with my classmate, a veteran of the US Navy. He explained that swear words were used "excessively" and "fuck" was thrown in "every other word," which was unsurprising after many viewings of military films and documentaries [but] what really caught my attention was that he specifically mentioned that they were "never being derogatory." He continues on to explain that no one was offended and that they were used commonly just as

descriptive terms: “hand me that fucking wrench” or “this is running like shit.”

In addition to this, he comments that higher ranking officials would swear solemnly around lower ranking individuals, yet when in the company of their higher ranking peers, they would be fine with using profanity. The military’s profanity policy is very interesting—there isn’t much of one. An expert in military law with 33 years of experience briefly elaborated on the military’s profanity policy...

Tom is especially concerned about the lack of clarity for children and analyzes a couple of popular cartoons. His transitions are weak, before moving into legal cases and a discussion about censorship. Though the paper is very ambitious, he takes risks and is engaged in the project. He is proud that I have shown it to future comp students.

Despite the experience with the high school English teacher, Tom wants to be an English teacher. He says that he “came up with that” when he started college. When I say to Tom that he will “slide over” to the university now, he said that it will more likely be go bumping over there. He is a kid that expects to be roughed up some. Of his experiences in high school and college, he says, ““I learned that there is injustice in the world, and I mean ‘pride cometh before the fall,’ but I mean to be honest. I’d rather die on my feet than live on my knees, to be honest, and like if I see something that’s not

cool with me, I feel like I have a reasonable reason to think that. I say something and that does get me in trouble.”

But he is also a young man that has had to work hard, but he is tough. I noticed that he had a scar near his eye and recalled that near the end of the semester he had a very bad black eye. I sheepishly ask him about it now, not very crazy about the stories that accompanied the fat lips or black eyes my brother or sons received in college. He told me that he is participating in fights for fun, mixed martial arts style. I realized then that maybe the change in his eyes was not from college after all. I am hoping that he will be a part of the “first in the world” to graduate, but he has a long road on his own.

## 2. First to Break the Barriers

*When she said “hi” to me in the hall, it broke the barrier for me.*

Taylor Gronowski

I assumed that Taylor was from the local area partly because she was quiet like many of the persons who come from the area around our college in the country. It does not get easier for me not to use the phrase “our students as I write these stories. But they are so much more than students, as they stories show.

Taylor said she lived in one of the local towns that support the college through a millage, and I couldn’t imagine anyone living there that didn’t grow up there. I was excited to talk with a student who was in our local schools and made her way through

to a program. But instead, like most of those who attend our community college, I discovered that Taylor grew up in a busy part of a suburban city. She went to a huge high school, lived with her brother and her dad, her primary parent, and played sports and mostly “hung out” while in high school. She looks a little like April Wood, blondish, pretty, wise eyes for one so young. I don’t mean to make the descriptions as if they are from a fictional land in the north. Perhaps from the perspective of middle age, all young women are beautiful, even though they don’t always know it.

Taylor had decided that after high school she would move with her grandmother 200 miles north in a small town. In the eighth grade, she had an anatomy class and the teacher was very enthusiastic about the subject. At the same time, her dad went in for physical therapy due to a work injury and told Taylor since she liked helping people that being a physical therapy assistant would be something she might like to do. She did not do much in way of preparation for it in high school but did like biology. Her father was a draftsman in the automobile industry and was unemployed for two years and so the children qualified for a program called TIP, Tuition Incentive Program. It is for community college assistance, unless a four year school offers an associate’s degree. This program gives her freedom to study but also holds her accountable to get good grades. But in order to get into the program she wanted, she also needed to get good grades.

It took me a long time to remember Taylor's name. She sat in a quiet part of the class with other female students, and the louder students dominated, from an older Vietnam vet who was involved in the Phi Theta Kappa honors program and encouraged everyone to participate in the anti-domestic violence program to some rowdy male students. Students often let other students who want to share their stories, or who are clear that they have stories, take much of the airtime. I was very surprised when Taylor wanted to talk with me a year after the class.

Luckily, Taylor had a First Year composition instructor who did learn her name quickly. It was in her first semester, and as she walked down the hall, the instructor said, "Hi, Taylor." She said it "broke the barrier" for her. This makes me laugh because I have been recently thinking it was funny when faculty say that "learning their names" is their number one "retention" strategy. Is that the best we can do to welcome them, I wonder? As it turns out, it is quite a bit.

The instructor who said "hi" also sat with her as a Writing Center instructor as she worked through an essay for my humanities class. I happened to come in to the area attached to the library and joined them in a discussion about the assignment and her ideas. She seemed at ease in this setting but never volunteered to speak up in class. She did work on many group projects, and she said that she liked them and that they offered new ideas that others shared. She did, however, leave the speaking to others in the group.

Group work helps students who might not naturally want to come forward to speak. At an honors breakfast, a barrel jumping horse competitor and radiography student told me that because she was in a small group with other quiet students she knew that she would have to do it. She told the vice president that she was surprised that the stories in our humanities course related to ethics were so relevant to her studies in the medical area. She described herself as someone who doesn't read much but that the group interaction and presentation pushed her and she was glad because she needed to deeply understand it to present it. Another student who was an excellent student in composition was forced to be the leader in the humanities course and she reflected that having a "bad" group actually taught her more because she had to develop leadership skills that she didn't know she could.

For Taylor, another barrier was broken by her biology professor, one of my quiet colleagues who has never called me and only texts me. I have several colleagues who are grateful for this way of communicating. Taylor told me about the "goofy stories" that helped her remember the material. She recalled a story about the one and only softball game the professor played in--an amazing catch that she made that she knew she would never be able to repeat so she never played again. It made Taylor laugh, recalling the story. This professor asked her to be a Supplemental Instruction instructor for biology because no one got an A in the class, and she got an A-. She was terrified, "intimidated." The only instructional work she had ever done was at a bible camp,

which she like very much but it was with children. When they asked her to be a leader for the counselors, she turned them down for two years. She said, "They saw leadership in me." But she was too nervous. The biology instructor talked her into it, and she couldn't believe that students who were her age or older would be coming to her and thinking of her as a student instructor. But she was able to translate the professor's ideas into worksheets or materials "on their level" and would answer questions in emails. She found the sciences her "comfort classes."

Taylor discovered that she likes stories. In the camp she worked at in the summers, each child shared their faith story. Because her mom was an alcoholic, she would share this part of her own story. Later, she explained that she liked the case studies in physical therapy courses that they had to analyze because they were basically stories: "Miss Margie has...what should you do first?" They have to analyze the story scenarios before making a plan. I am intrigued by this insight she has about her discipline. I have had students tell me that the critical reading in my literature course helps them with other reading, like in chemistry, for example, but I had not considered that other disciplines use stories as a part of the curriculum.

I know that Kirk Chamberland talked about stories that his computer information systems instructor used stories for humor and connection and to make points that represent values of the field; I know that nursing faculty use stories to give students some stories, modeling how they are a kind of knowledge to draw from for their own



nursing practice; but I hadn't known that in some disciplines stories are central to learning about diagnosis. I think it might even be interesting to discuss on the first day of a class that discusses discourse communities or in a class like our Gen Ed humanities, the role that stories play in different fields. At lunch I've often heard our welding instructor share stories from the "field" and his harsh telling of them to young students to suggest the danger and need to study well. I am sure that stories are central to "grease" the social connections in automotive, heating-air, as well as the many kinds of medical students we teach.

Despite the help Taylor had had in "breaking barriers," she had had enough of being the "quiet girl." That is a lot of past perfect! When I met her for a second conversation, she shared a reflective story for me about how she decided to change her role in breaking barriers.

Taylor thought a lot about our initial conversation, especially the fact that I asked her about not talking in class. We met the second time at a McDonalds just after a fundraiser for her program. She was still talking with program-mates when I got there. She introduced me to a classmate, saying that she was now in the Gen Ed humanities course. It seemed like she was lingering, intentionally talking with her in front of me. She told me later that she encouraged her boyfriend through the course as well. When we sat down, she immediately addressed the issue of barriers before I said a word. She recalled that the word "barriers" was used in her comp class.

Often in discussing adult learning, our instructors use Patricia Cross' idea of barriers--the potential of institutional, situation or dispositional barriers. She realized in our first conversation that she did have barriers, but she decided that didn't want to have them in her clinical. She decided after the first day of the clinical that she did not want to be the "quiet girl" anymore. She wanted to be "open." On the first day, the head physical therapist had "set up the barrier between them right away" by telling her that she knew nothing and should not attempt anything alone. The PT and the assistant had lunch with her and conversation was very awkward. She realized that others were nervous and that she could play a role.

She realized that the PTA was also afraid. But she decided how to be more open. She found out something that her co-workers liked, scrapbooking, for example. She would ask them a question about this interest and learn a little more about it and then ask more questions. She learned that this was a good strategy for getting patients comfortable as well. She learned from the PTA that people loved talking about the weather. She also learned that the elderly patients used the therapy as a social time and wanted to share and hear stories. Many of them came from downstate, and so she would share where she was from and they would all have stories about the city. At first she said it was awkward not knowing people but day-by-day she learned something new about the people she was working with during clinicals that helped eased into getting to know them. "It's not being afraid to start a conversation."

By the third week or so she was carrying a full load of patients and feeling like she was a part of the team. She liked being able to connect her book knowledge, about muscles for example, with the actions that patients were asked to do. In the end she shadowed the PT the most because she was encouraging and she challenged her. "I told her I wanted a challenge, I told her, I said, I want you to ask me questions, I want you to critique anything that you can, I'm here to learn." She continued, "I said don't be afraid to challenge me, I'm all ears, when you ask me questions and make me use my mind, I am all for that. You know, to take what I learned in the books and apply it to a situation I am in." Along the way, she had regular critiques: "That was when the walls started coming down I guess, you could say, when I really started being open about what I want out of this experience, my goals, what they want from me, like where they expect me to go."

After that conversation she felt the PT really challenged her and helped her learn: "I just decided you know what I want to make the best impression I can on these people. I want to have them as references. I want them to know that like I am a good person and this is exactly what I'm supposed to do and I have those people skills...I walked in there and tried to be myself as much as I could and tried to break down the barriers as much as I could." Taylor began to think about the ways in which she could be active in this instead of waiting for others to do it for her.

In the end, she gained so much: “They all said they would be happy for me to have them as references. They said whenever you need anything whether it be your struggling in a subject or anything, ya know, like they have become mentors to me that I can turn to ya know if I’m having difficulty with something or if I am applying for a job.”

I asked her how things will be different in the coming year as she goes back to classes. She discusses the struggles she had with labs in previous classes, but due to her clinical hands on work: “I think I’m going to be way more comfortable, way more confident, ya know working with an actual patient, knowing what to feel for, knowing how they are going to react.”

She is happy to have made such growth. The part of her life that she doesn’t have control over that bothers her the most is the life of her mother. Her mom is homeless in Florida right now, sleeping on a picnic table. Alcohol is like water for her, comments Taylor, and she knows that she cannot help her. Plus, her mother loves life the way it is and does not want help. “My biggest disappointment is for so long I was so angry with her and I hated her, I didn’t want to talk to her and she tried to communicate with me and I never answered and I told her never call me again, saying that I do not want communication with you.”

She continues, “I think my biggest disappointment is that now that I have forgiven her and I love her unconditionally, I can’t help her.” We talk about *The Glass*

*Castle* that I had shared with her; it is a memoir of growing up with alcoholics, the mother ending up homeless in the end. She was excited to order the book from her local library after I mentioned it. I know that this is a book that universities have used as a common text across campus in order to learn about other perspectives and to connect with others. For many, especially at community colleges, this is a part of their perspective.

Taylor is grateful for her good relationships with her father, her grandmother, and her fiancé. She is more easily flowing into relationships with classmates and co-workers. She sees that she can control some of the relationship barriers that might affect her learning and her success. I feel that with this new possibility for her she will continue to expand through her openness.

I did not mean for our conversation to be a trigger for transformation. I did not expect comments that I made about my experience of Taylor would cause her to reflect and want to make changes so quickly. This is the potential for one-on-one research, for the sharing of classroom experiences. I didn't expect that our encounter would be about her process in breaking barriers as she becomes the first in her world to graduate from college.

### 3. Reaching Out to be First

*If I arrive at a point where I feel like I need to get clarification, or even to give clarification in order to understand another person's point of view on a value or belief that maybe I may help to aid myself in becoming more Cosmopolitan.*

Reann Bringley

Classrooms are spaces that do not exactly engender authenticity. Instead, we play roles—of parts of ourselves or the ways in which we think we should be. It is a performance. We make assumptions about each other. These are Reann Bringley's reflections about me as a teacher in class:

We were in a circle and we were discussing a story about a former student who was a police officer. My instructor had said she was taking her son to a wrestling practice and was very tired and when I heard my instructor talk about wrestling I asked her if she was the typical wrestling mother (like myself and I say that because I get very excitable at wrestling meets). I was shocked to hear her say "yes." I never would have imagined this instructor being a loud person screaming or carrying on (like myself) because I have always seen her inside of the classroom where she has kept her composure and has displayed to me a kind and caring persona, and I actually said, "I would love to see you at a wrestling meet!"

Again though I had not taken the time to get to really know my instructor as well as I had thought throughout this semester, and it made me realize that we all live separate lives but yet can still be so connected in similar ways and that last day really put things into perspective for me because here I sat thinking how much more can I learn from the people I surround myself with on a daily basis.

Reann herself was formal in class, always dressing up in what would be called professional attire and addressing me and the class in a formal persona. It was clear that she was very serious about her education, and I did not see her as a crazy wrestling mom either.

As a young person, Reann graduated from high school with high honors and went to Oklahoma. Now as a returning student, she wishes that she would have gone directly to college instead or at least gone to college while she was a mom with two sons instead of waiting until they began to attend college. But then Reann was “on a mission” to find her mother who left her when she was four years old. She did find her, it was a disappointment, and she met the man she would marry. She expected to start college, but because she didn’t understand the geography of the state and despite the fact that she had received scholarships, she did not understand that the college was two hours away. She had a baby boy and then moved back to the Midwest after she had another son. Now one son is in high school and the other is a young dad and in college

himself. "I am here now not because I think I wasted my life--because my children are not a waste of my life--but I'm here because I wasted an opportunity. I thought that by having children I couldn't go to college but wish I had so they could have had a better life."

Reann has a fierceness about her. She is petite and has a smoker's voice; she has a big smile and twinkle in her eyes that says that she is not afraid of anything. "Country Strong" could have been written about her: "hard to break/Like the ground I grew up on. /You may fool me and I may fall/but I won't stay down long."<sup>121</sup> Like many, like Tom and Taylor, they persist because they are persistent already.

Reann has an amazing resume, and it is clear that her boldness is part of the reason why. She has been in automotive sales, managed a bar and a hotel, managed a trucking company, done payroll for a medical facility, worked in health care in medical records as a chart analyzer and in patient care. Once again, I realize that during the semester I did not know any of this vast experience of a person in the class about globalization. With all of this experience, it is clear that she is organized, and as she says, is "controlling." She came to college to be in the health information technology program, but within a year, the program was cut. She could have transferred to another school that offered it but couldn't afford it. An advisor suggested work in computers since she said that she had done so much with them. She is majoring in computer

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<sup>121</sup> Tony Martin, Jennifer Hawson, Mark Nesler. "Country Strong." Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC.



networking. Like in many of her jobs, there are only one to two female students in her classes.

Reann does wish that she would have gone to advisors earlier. Because she was stubbornly figuring it out herself online, she made some mistakes by not taking CIS courses along with her Gen Ed courses because she did not take the courses in the right order. She is “scared” about not taking summer courses that she will forget what she has learned. She put herself “backwards,” she says, because of her independence. It was a “poor decision.” She recognizes that in order to make it through to graduation she has to ask for help but doesn’t want to. She is used to taking charge and not relying on others.

Almost the minute she received the first group project of the class, she took action. She volunteered to be the first presenter. “When we finished our project I felt a sense of accomplishment when hearing other classmates say “Wow, you guys set the bar high that was an incredible presentation”. She was happy about this because she sets the bar high for herself.

It isn’t that it is easy, however, and that she has no fear. Although her final reflection for the class says that she was “intrigued” by the description and set up of the class, she says that “my stomach dropped and I started to feel panic.” She wrote many pages in the reflection about her group participation, documenting her involvement, but did not say any other kinds of angst she had about the experiences. This might be

because it was a class paper and she felt she needed it to be a “positive” assessment of the experience. After time or after the class, she had a different story about the experience in the group work. I had given Reann grief in her earlier globalization presentation because she and her partner had done a simplistic. Her partner was not “very responsive.”

When we met, I was startled that she began immediately talking to me about the big course project and her feelings about working in the group as if she had done some rethinking of it. It is always interesting what students remember or don’t remember. She explained that she continued to think about things on the news, wondering what I thought about them, wondering what she could do locally about the problems that were happening in the world, wanting to “reach out.”

Reann said that she had watched everyone’s participation throughout the semester and then “initiated” participation with group members who she wanted to work with for the final project. She wanted a strong group with members who participated regularly on the online discussion forum and that is who she “reached out to.” The “phenomenal things we could accomplish” was her mindset, she recalls. The collaborations in previous projects went well and she thought that maybe other members were getting nervous about graduating. She did not like the disparity in the work load. She talked with them and there was some “attitude” and the group was not as “tight knit” as it might have seemed. She smiles and laughs. I had forgotten about it:

that she had come to me about problems in the group and that group members had come to me that she was bossy, which she would fully admit. Because the points were so high and she didn't like the way they managed their time. She recalls that while her group was focused on the changing ethnicity of the princesses in Disney movies that the assignment was to analyze the impact of globalization on Disney. I think her insistence in understanding the goal might have caused some tension in the group. Reann speaks very directly, cares very much about performing well.

One of the characteristics of a community college is that there are many generations taking classes together. Sometimes they wear on each other. I have seen older students who are an inspiration to the younger ones, but also who become a topic of "the older generation can't do technology" assumptions. I have had older students approach me with anger about the behavior of younger students, some of which I don't even notice. They all have stories, but sometimes they make us uncomfortable. On the first day of class, an older guy shared that he used his rhetorical skills with a police officer when he walked home from the bar, arguing with him that it was better than driving. The ten dual enrolled students that were in class tittered.

Reann reflects: "I'm not going to lie, I get a kick out of some of them but some remind me of my own children. I want to choke them." She goes on, "I want to be their mom sometimes; it is difficult sometimes. Some of them are focused and others could care less and don't take it seriously." For Reann, who seems like she might have been a

party girl at one time, now she is serious. "Some are focused and some are taking their education seriously. They think they're going to fly by. The distractions are very off-setting especially for someone like myself that is controlling, even for myself. I want to reach the standards that I have for my children." She says this very strongly with her big round brown eyes in her very thin face looking straight at me. She concludes, "I have made the honors program but I haven't been able to pay the fee. I am holding my sons to that too." I am sure she is.

"Don't make my mom mad because she is feisty," tells her son to his friends. One of the challenges as a parent has been keeping other kids away from her kids who have problems. The drinking age of 21 is a challenge to keep for young people in rural areas and they can easily get in trouble with the law. Reann's best friend had a son who had been using alcohol and drugs, was suspended from school, and then ended up in jail due to violent behavior.

After leaving him in jail for a few weeks in hopes that it would have a positive effect, the friend asked Reann and her husband to take him since he was still inappropriate with her because he was angry that he had to do chores. He had always "respected" them and so her friend "reached out" to them. This young man ended up attending our humanities class. He had to stay with her at all times, and she asked if it would be ok for him to sit in. He slept most of the time, but when she gave him a book

to read--not the course text she laughs--but one that gave him other perspectives, she thinks it helped him to see that others have "bigger problems that he does."

In addition to the challenge of young students, Reann has had to face many young faculty members, some of them who also get "distracted" by the students which "made it tough to learn." I think it is interesting that young faculty at a community college are not often told or helped in any way to work with students who are far older than they are. Some adjunct faculty are quite intimidated by them. When I explain that I consider what students, she said that I "managed to make it the focus" it was "not drawn in or not focused." One in particular struggled with her writing, not understanding what she was saying. He said "make this your own writing." She took this direction literally. She couldn't figure out what the instructor's problem was because she said she made it her own by speaking. When she critiqued the class, he took her in and asked for a meeting, not personal in her paper. She explained "your own" conflict. Language and structure--not I or you in my stories but he didn't like her mechanics, and she was emphasizing something and it was a choice and he didn't understand what she was saying. But he was genuine. He was grading her "off his lectures" and she admits that maybe she misinterpreted his directions. I think he might have misinterpreted the role her voice plays in her stories.

She says, "I still keep in communication with my instructors. I loved my math instructor, from my first semester, and I've emailed him questions I have for my son's

homework.” She admires him, adores him, and yet does not consider him a mentor.

She adds, “[The Gen Ed courses] have transformed me, not that I didn’t know there were things going on in the world. I treat people different now. I have to have a guard up at work but I still see them differently.”

After the semester Reann emailed me in the summer session. She shared that her business communication text assumed that everyone was the same conventions for “proper etiquette” across the world. She explained to her class that this was not the case, that there were many kinds of customs which might be considered “rude” in another culture. She said, “I now see people as not only individuals but as someone I can learn from.” She says that seeing other perspectives has helped her in her relationships with the girlfriends of her sons. She says that the boys have had their own communication problems as “children of divorce.”

A couple of weeks later she sent me a chat request to tell me about a billboard that is across from her job. It had a Disney princess in a car seat, explaining the importance of having approved car seats. She was intrigued by the use of the princess and talked about globalization. The final time that I saw Reann she had worked late and was on her way back to work after a class. She had a pink ball cap on and an oversized sweatshirt with an automotive advertisement on it. She had jeans with many holes in them and tennis shoes on. These were her first worries about the class: “When I first entered this humanities course I was to say the least, a little uncomfortable. I had heard

of other people talking of humanities courses, but had never experienced one myself. I did not know if I was going to be speaking, writing, or whether it was just another note-taking class, only to be tested on later. My fears soon faded..." It is difficult for me to imagine Reann as fearful of anything.

Students like Reann offer so much to their classmates as they work towards integrating their lives with their new education. Her fierce determination pushes her and is a model for others. I am hoping that she gets as much from them. I am sure that she will keep reaching out to others and to her future.

#### 4. Going Early and Working Hard to be First

*"So now you can see another side of me."* Ashlynn Owen

She had been working since 5 a.m., and it was late afternoon. Her brownish hair was in a ponytail with only a few strands askew, but her glasses seemed banged up and smudged. She had a grey and pink striped t-shirt with grey bra straps showing of a jog bra. She has a round face with bluish-grey eyes behind her wire glasses. I think that she is just beautiful. Not in a friendly sweet way like young girls who wave at me or stop to talk with such cheer and openness, but in an "I'm folding my arms and holding myself in and keeping you away from me because I'm so damn independent," kind of way. Although it might seem like she might be the protagonist for a female role in an

animated fairy tale, this is not the case. She is not just black or white. She does not transform within a 90 minute plot sequence.

Ashlynn does not smile easily. Her mouth twists in a very interesting, quirky way that she might not be aware of. It is one part rebellion against the world, and one part hard work to try to get somewhere. Despite it all, I come to love her.

I certainly did not love her while she was in my class. But she says wistfully that she wanted to show me another side than she showed in class. As she walked away when we met, those were her parting words. Ashlynn is not one to say a formal goodbye face to face. Instead, she walks away, checking her phone that is dying, as she moves on. Her twin brother is wondering what she is doing, waiting for her to take a trip to the university town he will be moving back to across the state. "I'm busy," she says forcefully to him as he pushes her to be done with me. He's mean, she tells me.

She knew she had been quiet and reticent in class. I had no idea why. I had my hands full with Kirk and the other computer information systems students, some very nervous returning students, and some moms that were competent but seemed hardened. Ash was an outlier. She sat alone, came in and out of the class at will, said very insightful things to the class all of a sudden, out of the blue. She seemed to be kind of looking out at me with one eye, though now that I am sitting in a neutral space--not a classroom--she looks at me straight on without any hesitation. In class, she had an "I dare you to talk to me and I dare you to leave me alone" pose, all at the same time.



I did try to talk with her in small group time. She seemed smart and insightful when I reached out to her, but I could not sustain the relationship. As I reread this line, I see that she probably knew that I was making it more about me. She was right. I hear the song again, "Souls will not be fooled."

I wondered as she replied to my introductory email--why in the world does she want to talk to me now? She says she was doing a lot of "smoking and drinking" that semester. She thought it would help her deal with stress, but she discovered that it caused more. She explained, "I got over it. I don't want to do the same thing." She doesn't exactly say what that means. I didn't know that is what caused her to miss some class. She didn't look like a partier "type" to me. This isn't a university town or a college with drinking as its reputation. This is a rural area where there is little to do but work, or not work.

Hard work. She used those words many times. She had been working at Burger King since she was a junior in high school. Although her grandparents gave her a car, for which she is grateful, it caused her to have many expenses including taking care of all of her other needs, despite the Pell Grant funds and TIPS financial aid she receives because her father is unemployed. She is a good worker, efficient and reliable, and so she moved up to be an assistant manager. The economic politics, however, were crushing. She couldn't work at the same store as her brother, so she was convinced to drive an hour to help manage another store, getting a dollar raise. She realizes after

four years of working at different stores that she is replaceable, that she needs them more than they need her and they know it too. "They know you need the job, but they don't need you." She also worked at a Boy Scout camp one summer every day. She wanted to quit the Burger King because it was "a bad job and they were making me mad," but they talked her into working on weekends.

Despite the fact that we were "studying" globalization in our humanities class together, she had no idea (and no apparent interest) in whether Burger King was a global company. "I don't know. Are Burger King's global?" she says with her smirk. But she does understand that one of the goals of the class was to learn to appreciate others. "Working at a fast food has taught me how to talk to people, I've talked to so many kinds of people." Ash says strongly, "I feel that everyone should work in fast food because you learn how to talk to people, you understand." She explains that then perhaps people would be more patient and less angry with "a little mistake." She has been called names many times, and seen customers throw hot coffee or food at workers. "They are trying, they are not purposely messing up your stuff. And often, the customers ordered it wrong."

I was a dishwasher in a restaurant a long time ago, my first job; I learned a lot. I don't tell Ashlynn my story. Why would a student want to know anything about the teacher's past? But I reconsider when a very angry student attacked me after I talked to her about coming late, leaving early, missing class altogether, and sleeping in class. She

spit out that she had a minimum wage job and continued with dripping resentment, that it was something I wouldn't know anything about. Do we tell our story so that they know that we are with them? Or if we do will our story become too dominate? It reminds me of the poem at the end of *Smoke Signals*. Thomas asks whether we can forgive our fathers for loving us not enough or even too much.

The National Restaurant Association has a video of stories about this "Industry of Opportunity."<sup>122</sup> A person can start as a dishwasher or sorting silverware and after hard work can become the owner or manager of a corporation. I have so many students who are working these jobs for little reward.

The economy has improved greatly since Ashlynn started. I happen to have a sister who was a manager at a fast-paced, high performing Burger King. She received more bonuses and salary than the twenty or so other store managers, so when new ownership took over all the stores, she was let go. Ash has been in a work environment where there were no bonuses. "When I started they were losing money and now they are giving bonuses which they say hasn't happened in years."

Despite the "cut throat" environment, she still believes that employees should work hard. "The managers are the leaders, you have to be responsible and make sure that everyone is trying and not just there to be paid." And even managers have to motivate themselves. She struggles with new employees. "I remember the things that I

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<sup>122</sup> National Restaurant Association. <http://www.restaurant.org/News-Research/Research/RPI>.

liked that managers did to train me, but I easily get frustrated with new people, when they don't motivate themselves. I'm a self-motivator. What gets me upset is when I see people standing around and not doing anything. With new people, you have to teach them how to do things, they aren't used to doing things, they don't know, they want someone there to tell them what to do and exactly how to do it. I learned." When she was starting out, she didn't know what to do because she didn't want to talk to others: "When I started, I knew I had to work hard, but I was shy and I didn't talk to people and I didn't look for things to do."

Now she says, "I want to be the best. I've always been competitive." She thinks she gets it because of having a brother. "I think that I'm one of the best managers," she laughs. "Getting all of your stuff done, correctly, in a timely manner, with good speed of service and good guest comments. "Yes, look at that timer!" She said that others were amazed how fast she was... "Move out of my way," she says to them. And they do.

As a student, I didn't see much of this—not the hard work, not the team work, not the competitive spirit to be the best. It is a profound paradox to me that often students who say they have all sorts of problems—procrastination, hyperactivity, boredom—do not have it in their life out of school. Ash had a domineering group mate, and she was not in charge so she let others do the work even though she complained about others doing this in group work. When I ask whether this happens at work, she says, "This is

true but do you want to know who works the hardest...me, because it is a chain of command...I have to make sure things go well. If they don't show enough effort...we coach them...correct their mistakes...if they make the mistake over and over that would result in a write up...because they don't care...They get lots of chances." In class, she did seem angry most of the time. I didn't know about what. Perhaps I should have asked. She says, "If you would have gotten to know me maybe we would have talked more but I'm a lot different now than I was in that class." I think of all the changes that she has made since high school just through her experience at work and imagine what she must have been like as a high school kid.

She had options—do CTE (Career and Technical Education) or go to the Middle College. Her younger sister chose CTE and is in the culinary program. Ironically, the subheading for the CTE program is "learning that works for Michigan." She was talked into Middle College by her dad to study to be a physician's assistant because she could make a lot of money someday. The Middle College was focused on fields in the health sciences, so she had to pick something in that area. But she realized after a few semesters that she did not like science.

She also did not like high school. Ashlynn attended the high school in the area that is considered to be the most economically disadvantaged in the area. It is so lean from years and years of cuts, before other schools had to make cuts, that it is almost barren. In fact, it does not have walls in the classrooms, but that is not because of its

financial disparity but because of some long ago pedagogical popularity of “open” classrooms. She did have friends and was an officer in the art club, but the classes did not of much use to her. She was even in the National Honors Society but was dismissed because she could not do all of the volunteer hours necessary. She has been working at the Burger King for forty hours a week since. She would have played soccer if they had it at the small school. Instead, she spent most of her high school years at the college.

The faculty at the college are up in arms about students taking college courses in the early part of high school now that the legislature has changed. I find out that Ashlynn started taking courses as a sophomore. There is so much irony in it. First, during the time that she was taking classes at the college while she was in high school I was connecting with teachers at her high school. I taught an online literature class in which three of them took. The class was challenging the images of “generational poverty” that we had all learned about through the popular professional development program through literature. I wanted to use literature as a way of thinking about stories that were not stereotypes or at least challenging a single view. We talked about Jeannette Walls’ *The Glass Castle*, Khaled Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner*, Sherman Alexie’s *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, and others. I visited classrooms and hosted dinners. Although I was working with another school district in dual enrollment as a way to prepare students for college in ways that their high schools were not able to, this school took on a lot of our curriculum without this strong arm

intervention. For example, despite the fact that the standardized testing did not test comparison and contrast writing, they taught this genre to prepare them for our college. This is a district that had a policy that a student had to take all of the courses at their school before they could take a dual enrollment course, so I assumed that very few students did. I was not aware at the time that this did not mean that sophomores and juniors were taking the bus over to take college courses. Although I am heavily involved in dual enrollment for many years, it is amazing to me how much I don't know about the high school-college programs that are going on outside of the instructional division.

Recently, I had a developmental English class with a Middle College student. After the semester, the president of the college sent around a thank you letter that he wrote, thanking her for a full scholarship that he received. He was a dutiful student. Ashlynn says that advisors prod them quite a bit, asking them about assignments that they already know they have. I can't imagine that this young man had to be prodded much. He sat in a class across from ten other students from another high school that were sent by their high school counselor for me to get them ready for college. In his letter he said that because his dad had died that year that this scholarship allowed him to go to college. I also found out after the semester that one of the ten had lost both parents recently. Though it is my job, I feel silly that I carried on about academic articles and marched them through so many writing assignments when there was this fresh loss in the class for these very young people.

Ash firmly says that taking college courses was much better than taking high school courses. She took a developmental English class, computers, and speech. She was with five other students from her high school so she was not alone in the college situation. She did not feel like she stuck out. There were many young people and the older students didn't seem to mind them too much. She did the minimal requirements for high school. If she would have stayed there, she would have had to take courses like Physical Education courses as electives because there was nothing else to take. It was either take classes at the college or take PE courses.

She did not find the college courses to be difficult. The English classes took the most time. She remembers little from her early English classes, but says the sophomore research course was the most difficult of all of her courses. She even had to drop it the first time. The first time she was going into pharmacy and so was going to research prescription drug problems, but she dropped the course. I know the instructor and it seems like she would have been so very good with her. I am disappointed that she dropped. She took it again online with a blustery colleague but who knows how he is online. She was able to make it through the class with a B, she says; she was marked down for formatting problems, she says. She was very excited to share what she learned—that divorce affects everyone badly and that except in cases of very serious import, it should be avoided. She said it like she was happy to discover it, especially for dads. She shrugged her shoulders about the idea that she was one of many.



Her brother also was in the middle college program but went to a university right out of high school. Her best friend also went there, so she had a chance to visit them. “I like how the university was but I knew that it was smarter for me to be here. He has student loans to pay back and I don’t have any yet.” She is proud of her own financial stability: “I was going to go to the community college to save money, which didn’t happen, but I eventually did because I don’t have loans.”

Ashlyn looks straight at me because she wants me to catch this point that is important to her: “I wish I could have gone to a university right out of high school but I didn’t have the money. I did get accepted. I wish I was raised in a family that did not have money to send me to college. I get full Pell and that I get TIPS. It is not a good thing that my parents aren’t making money, but I have to pay for other things.” She has had some time to think about it. She tells me this in our second conversation to be sure that I make this point clear.

But she did get something out of the middle college experience. First, she had an advisor as a regular student who wanted her to go into medical assistant. She did not want to. He was not listening. So she decided to do her own schedule. She went to her middle college advisor and she would encourage her and get her to finish and then to another one that she had met, even though she was no longer in the middle college system.

When she brought up the advisors, she brightened—she really likes the two women, knew that one of them had a husband die, even though she was quite young, but was now remarried. I had met this advisor and thought she was new and disrespectful of me as a faculty member. I feel badly now that I was so rough on her. I was planning on speaking at a group and she emailed me and was organizing it in a way that did not make sense at all if one knew who the students were—already my students, not future students. I was impatient. But Ashlynn, who does not appear to me to be that sensitive or that personal, knew all of these details about this colleague of mine that I don't see as a colleague because of the split between student services and faculty. It is embarrassing. It is one more thing that I didn't expect to learn from these stories.

Ashlynn said that the advisor now has a wonderful life and travels so much. She too wants to travel someday. She wants to go to Europe. She really wants to go to Italy and has an uncle who lives in Germany. She has only been to Seattle where her mother moved to remarry before her mental illness got the best of her and she had to return, where she lives with her parents. Ash did get to visit there for a summer. She met a friend who also played soccer. For a long time, she didn't see her mother, but recently was trying to help her.

Ash is excited that she is done with her associate's degree. At graduation, I saw that her name was listed and that she was in Phi Theta Kappa, though she didn't

mention it to me. As she waited for me, she said she was on Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat. She says that it is a way for her to stay in touch, to be entertained, and she is “addicted” to Clash of Clans. “You have to have a social life...a little bit of joy,” she laughs cynically.

Despite starting in the sciences, she ended up loving her psychology classes. She is interested in the human brain: “what you can control what you do, what you can become.” It reminds me of a friend who is a successful hair stylist who puts “you have a choice who you are” signs of all kinds on her Facebook page. She hates excuses. She hates when people blame others. Ashlynn Owen is straight-forward and “owns” her mistakes. She has seen the effect of drugs—with her mom, a sister who was diagnosed with ADHD, another sister with special needs, and friends—and even though she wants to become a psychiatrist, she understands that she would be dealing with prescriptions. She feels that they push them on people and has seen their impact. “I’ve witnessed it,” she says. It does “not cure them;” it is a “dulling of the person.” I remember when I was a young college teacher, I was worried about having classes of “dull” students, especially concerned about older students coming back who might be “dull,” preferring the younger, brasher ones. It was a crazy way to think. I also recall people telling me of the possibilities of a “dulling” drug effect for my energetic son. It has all become more complicated for me now. Ash hopes for “not the same life,” and I hope for her more than a little joy.

## 5. First in the World When You Are On the Move and Not First

*I was grieving the loss of her.*

Heart Song

With her face of resolve, a magnificent sculpture could be made of Heart Song.

Although I have heard her giggle sweetly and have seen her smile mischievously, the sculpture would have her arms crossing, long black hair flowing, her mouth and jaw firm, her eyes serious and straight ahead. Although I often did not see her at the very beginning of class in the three courses she attended that I taught because she was so often late, from the beginning I found her to be a person who learns intently and intensely.

Heart Song began her schooling on an island, between the United States and Canada. She has a big brother and a couple of younger brothers and very young sister. Heart Song was an early reader and later began to walk down to a little bookstore and check out books at the school library. Her favorite story is *Anne of Green Gables*, about an orphan girl in Canada who was finally adopted to a couple who had requested a boy.<sup>123</sup> It is a story about how hard work and a cheerful attitude helps a person survive and thrive in adverse conditions. She has read the whole series, twelve times she says, and refers back to it occasionally. She says that Anne's creativity and imagination

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<sup>123</sup> It is a little strange to see a Facebook post today from Kristin McIlhagga about the novel: <http://www.playbuzz.com/allie12/which-anne-of-green-gables-character-are-you> June 22, 2014.

helped her do better in school and she did more than people thought she could. I had never read the stories but have since then. I see how the girl could inspire her.

Due to family connections, Heart Song moved to several small rural towns in the Midwest of the US, “bouncing around” due to housing challenges. In between all of these locales, her family returned to Canada to be with her grandmother during summers. Heart Song was very close to her grandmother who taught her Ojibwa. Her mother—the youngest of 12 children—is fluent in Ojibwa and is a language teacher now for preschool children, which is how they ended up staying at the current Anishnabe tribe after visiting an uncle. I was startled by this revelation. I have taken students to the Ziibiwing Center, an award-winning museum for the local tribe, many times and have heard about language reclamation efforts but didn’t know they were happening so close to me. Her grandmother was able to keep her language because while “they would come by boat for the children” to take them to a boarding school, she says, “our natives had a fighting spirit and children were able to stay.” She heard the language frequently from her grandmother and still knows some Ojibwa.

Again, due to housing, Heart attended what many consider to be one of the best high schools in the area. This school has more Advanced Placement opportunities than any others within fifty miles and has strong parental support, sports and arts programs. I have a good friend who is a director of special education, which does remarkable

work in preparing their students for college. It is the city of the headquarters of global corporations.

It is difficult then to imagine the transition from three months of high school in a farming community that is known to be quite proudly rugged to this affluent community. The town still has a grain elevator. It hosts a maple syrup festival in the spring. But a young man I know was recently “jumped” at a party by others from this community, and like three other young men I know across the state in rural and urban areas, was beaten badly. But I also know a couple of lovely children from the tribe who attend the school who had a faculty member as their foster mother. They are being treated well at the school. Heart Song has been through many changes in location for surprising reasons and with sometimes surprising outcomes.

After her junior year in high school, her grandmother became ill and Heart Song’s mother wanted her to get braces, so they returned to Canada. “I wasn’t exactly happy about that move.” She looks away behind her glasses, smiles gently. They stayed for three months on the reservation, staying with relatives and going to the small tribal school: “I was among my own people but it felt very disconcerting because I had been in schools where Native Americans were a minority...I stayed close to my cousins. I knew most of the other teenagers, but they spent most of their time partying.” I learn that Heart Song might have been the most comfortable at the “upscale” school though

she might not have appeared to be like anyone. A subgroup is not necessarily a comfort.

The family moved again, two hours away when her mother found housing, and she attended a public Canadian school. "Because of the differences in curriculum in Canada" than what she completed, and it took her an extra year to graduate. In her community service, she was an efficient helper in the school office. She has had trouble with jobs later but seems quite proud of her work at the school.

She reflects on her experience of the time in a paper for a literature class about the Mary Oliver poem, "The Journey":

I started a new school, where I was going to class, completing the remaining course and hours of community service that were required by the province.

During my last semester of school, my mother found out that my grandmother, on my dad's side, did some terrible stuff to hurt me and my family, and she was doing this to deliberately hurt us. At the time I loved my grandmother very much and would spend many summers helping take care of her because she was very sick. So this hurt that committed against my family was enough to send me into a long state of depression. I was grieving the loss of her. In my one month absence, I was almost kicked out my high school because it was a privilege to go to this school, over a school that was closer to where I lived. My Native American advocate worker in the school was kind enough to make a continued

plea with the principal to keep me in attendance to the school. These incidents are enough to remind me of this line from the poem, “And the road full of fallen Branches and stones. But little by little.”<sup>124</sup> I was dropped from an Accelerated class, that semester but finished my other courses. I was finally able to graduate from high school after that incident.

I learn again how much is going on at home and how disconnected school can be from it all. I was amazed that she posted this paper to the class. It was so personal, yet she offered it as a sample to future classes.

The family returned to the US, and she began college. It is her mother who told her she should be a nurse, but she also sees herself as a caregiver. Since she was a preemie, born three months early on her older brother’s two year birthday, she wants to eventually be a neonatal nurse. It is like she wants to help babies like herself. She doesn’t even have a birthday of her own.

Heart Song has been in college for a couple of years now, and though she has short and long term goals, she is still struggling. She reflects on her feelings about college in a humanities paper:

Even the act of going to college is a big step to better myself and learn my place in the world. I am the first of my mother’s children to go to college. In college I feel as

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<sup>124</sup> Mary Oliver, “The Journey,” *Dream Works* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986), 38.



though I am a part of a larger community, in some way like high school is in, itself, a community.

Some beliefs that go along with these thoughts would have to be that there seems to be a negative stereotype against Anishnabe (Indians) going on to higher education, especially in this town. To me, I don't see many of my people in college. This belief affects my attitude towards schooling, mainly it brings feelings of discouragement. In *Flight Behavior*, the main character Dellarobia has feelings of intense passiveness toward how her life has turned out, when she observes, "The sheep in the field below, the Turnbow family land, the white frame house she had not slept outside for a single night in ten plus years of marriage: that is pretty much it...From here it all looked fixed and strange, even her house, probably due to the angle. She only looked out those windows, never into them." <sup>125</sup>

The character Dellarobia is a young mother in the western Kentucky who is discovering that there is more going on up her mountain. A person might not imagine how Heart Song could relate to characters who might seem so different than she is. She makes no assumptions of division. Even about her classmates at the new rural high school, she says, "We know that we are Anishnabe but not to know each other well enough to be friends." This is a profound insight for me to remember: a person who might identify

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<sup>125</sup>Barbara Kingsolver, *Flight Behavior* (New York: Harper, 2012), 3.

with some cultural group does not mean that they might be friends with individuals within it.

Unlike her math background which was strong, one of the good consequences of all of the various schools she attended, she recalls that she “did poorly” in high school English classes and the preparation for college was “hit or miss.” But her developmental college English instructor was “kind and helpful,” giving her feedback that she was able to use to learn and she kept getting better over the course of her classes although she did have to repeat her First Year composition class, which I did not know when she retook it with me. Many students have to repeat this course despite the fact that we created the developmental class as college course not a remedial course. “I didn’t start integrating my life with my writing until college because in high school you have to stick with their topics...but when I got here, I realized I could do that... what can apply to my life? What can I use from my experience?” She even connected her readings even when they “didn’t really mesh together but I could make them.”

I found Heart Song to be interested in weaving complex aspects of writing, and she took on interesting projects. She writes about the effect of small class size and how that helped her in her chemistry class, she writes about Amy Tan’s bilingualism (but not her own experience with it), and also a final paper entitled “Media, War and Death: Relation to Student Learning,” in which she interviews a faculty member who lived

during the Vietnam era and also discusses several articles in the course text. In one section, after defining “discourse community,” she says,

The media’s ability to affect students depends on whether the student watches the news. If they do and they are interested in only watching specific outlets...such as Fox News or CNN, then these media outlets have the possibility to impact or influence the way students view the events that are displayed on the news. This can affect, on some level, student’s mindset.

Later, Heart introduces frames of references, from Jack Mezirow’s transformative learning research, and considers this theory in her analysis and synthesis. She reflects later, “In those papers, I wanted to see what I could do, I wanted to see if I could make the ideas work, if I could make them connect and make sense. I thought everyone was doing this sort of thing, but when I looked at some of theirs and I said ‘wait, wait, what?’ They are only doing one line of thought? And I was pulling three threads of thought together?” I am amazed how much students compare themselves to other classmates, not always for the best.

Later in another class, her group decides they want to study the effects of globalization on the automobile industry. One member voluntarily goes to the Henry Ford Museum for the project. Heart Song interviews a colleague who is a road novel

scholar. She sits comfortably in his office with a notebook on her lap, asking questions, taking notes.

Heart Song's writing was so engaging that I didn't mind her limited speaking out in class. In the next course, she spoke up occasionally, but I tried not to put pressure on her since I knew her and knew few of the thirty others in the class. She cheerfully explains, "When something interesting sparks my interest, I speak up!"

Despite her strong reading and writing—she giggles that she still has one of my books—Heart Song has struggled in college. Heart Song has been rejected by the nursing program twice. She believes it is because she has no work experience in the field. But she also admits that her grades have not been stellar because of the "patches" of absences she has had due to taking care of her siblings. "I feel like this comes every semester where there are patches that I don't come and have to pick up my brothers, sit with my sister who was sick." She recalls that it was a difficult way to finish high school and start college. She is angry at her father for leaving them. Not only did her mother have to become "the father by taking care of them financially," but then Heart Song had to take her place and be the mother, taking care of the house and kids, getting her license to drive kids around and hopefully doing a good job. She is tired and worn out, she says, and is happy to be in her own apartment with a friend for the past three months.

The most difficult semester was when she had to combine many hours of work and school. She says,

This was the most trying semester I have ever taken. I got denied entry into the Nursing program, and had chosen to focus on courses that would go towards a different degree. I have the belief that if I am focused closely on these courses I will be successful. I had not anticipated on how many hours I would be working that semester, 40 hours a week for a month and an half, then a short 36 hour week before continuing another 40 hour week, one month and a half cycle.

Not unlike many of our students, some who work night shifts or full time, her job at the casino was physically demanding and her grades were slipping. She had too many tardies though, and they let her go. "Poor decision on my part" to be taking three English classes, working too much, and taking care of her family. She had to drop one of them. In the next semester she takes two psychology classes, which she also found to be very stressful. She is trying to find classes that will transfer and so takes them in clusters while she waits to be accepted in the nursing program.

She feels quite alone. Heart Song explains, "I've always had to encourage myself to do the best that I can because I didn't get it from my family." Though her parents are not contributing financially to her classes, which is very common among community college students, they are not happy with her grades and the extra classes

she is taking for transfer. “They have paid more attention to my grades than my interests.” In her mind, her parents want her to be independent, so she is on financial aid, but they are disappointed about the choice of classes like psychology classes which she is struggling in.

It is hard for me to imagine Heart Song having difficulty with writing in a class, but this is part of the challenge for her in the psychology course:

I don’t understand what [the instructor] wants in the writing portion of the class. We are analyzing a disorder and picking treatments, and I am not getting it, and the feedback doesn’t make sense to me. I haven’t talked openly with her yet though she did email me about my lack of participation in the class forum. She gives us the rubric and the chapters and chunks of questions but no matter how much I try to make it make sense it doesn’t come out as coherent as it needs to be...I didn’t know about headers and subheaders in APA...will try that to separate my thoughts...the material is daunting...several disorders under each disorders.

I am unclear whether it is the vocabulary, the way of thinking, the amount of memorizing, or something else. She loves her anatomy and physiology and other science courses. It is possible that the way of thinking she used successfully in English classes--the kinds of analysis and synthesis with voice and variety--was not transferring

to her psychology classes. I understand this problem. I've been there, yet I feel powerless to help. I give some measly hints about documentation and structure. I listen.

Of the many pieces she has written, Heart Song says her favorite is a literary criticism essay about Sherman Alexie's prose poem "War Dances." It is about a son whose alcoholic father is in the hospital and is cold. The son tries to get a nurse's attention to get more blankets and then goes around looking for an Indian who might have a Pendleton blanket. He doesn't find the nurses to be very receptive of the urgency of warmth or of the cultural meaning. "As I draped it over my father and tucked it around his body, I felt the first sting of fire. I'd read the hospital literature about this moment. There would come a time when roles would reverse and the adult child would become the caretaker of the ill parent. The circle of life. Such poetic bullshit."<sup>126</sup>

The Nobel Prize winning author, Alice Munro, like Heart Song, is from Ontario. In her short story "The Moons of Jupiter," a daughter is in the hospital with her father who needs heart surgery. He is worried about medical insurance that he did not ask for a semi-private room, and there are many passive conversations between the two of them as she reflects on her own weak relationships with her grown daughters. The aloof feelings are evident as she watches the heart monitor:

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<sup>126</sup> Sherman Alexie. "War Dances." *War Dances*, Grove/Atlantic Inc. 2009.

The writing was accompanied by a nervous electronic beeping. The behavior of his heart was on display. I tried to ignore it. It seemed to me that paying such close attention—in fact, dramatizing what ought to be a most secret activity—was asking for trouble. Anything exposed that way was apt to flare up and go crazy.<sup>127</sup>

She talks with a nurse who comforts her in the women's bathroom that it is her father's choice what he should do. They talk about the planets as he remembers the moons of Jupiter, but has trouble remembering what goes before "seas" in a line of a poem called "Columbus." It is "shoreless," and he remembers as she walks back into the room.

I ask my mind a question. The answer's there, but I can't see all the connections my mind's making to get it. Like a computer. Nothing out of the way. You know, in my situation the thing is, if there's anything you can't explain right away, there's a great temptation to—well, to make a mystery out of it. There's a great temptation to believe in—You know."

"The soul?" I said, speaking lightly, feeling an appalling rush of love and recognition."<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>127</sup>Alice Munro, *Moons of Jupiter*, (New York: Penguin, 1982), 217-218.

<sup>128</sup>*Ibid*, 225-226.



It is amazing and strange to contrast these two hospital scenes. Not only the different experiences of hospitals and nurses, but also the deep relationality that occurs in the first in contrast to the kind of “exercise” of a relationship. In Alexie’s the nurse is described as “black” and too busy to help; in Munro, the nurse gives her “inside” information, even though the “inside” information provided to the daughter is from a machine or seen as appalling. I wonder what image, what story, Heart Song has for herself of what a nurse is.

Anne of Green Gables had faith in herself but refused to say the formulaic prayers that adults told her to do because of the difficulties in her life. Heart Song, however, has faith:

Doing everything I can in a spiritual sense when things don’t look the greatest and then keep helping people helped me through some of the darkest parts of living in Canada...I had to realize when things got bad with my dad....I needed God or I would be lost. I had to take that thought and pull it for comfort...deal with my own emotions but also help my siblings and my mother...

I would clean to help her...I would try to be comforting to my four year old sister...she took it hard...and I would take time for myself...so I would read books, go to the library, walk around and do other things than think on it...I

found myself walking to the bookstore...three or four miles from my house...once a week or so.

Heart Song has not had that much time for herself. This is not unusual among community college students. Every week a student tells me that she has to pick up her brother, or her dad or grandma is having surgery. They miss class. They miss instructions, directions, discussions. They miss readings and relationships. It is ironic though for me to say that she has little time for herself, as I race from making a color-coordinated gift basket for a woman at work who lost her mother to texting with a former student who cared for my own mother at her nursing home but has recently had a baby. There is a lot of caring to be done in the world.

Time has other complications for Heart Song. There are inside jokes made in *Smoke Signals*, the film based on Sherman Alexie's novel *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, about "Indian time." Heart Song says that her constant lateness is a "personality thing." She has "too many thoughts, too many distractions during the day." Lateness doesn't bother her in her family and even with the routine of the semester schedule, she is still late. She thinks that she could change if she "really put it on my calendar." I explain that I have learned which meetings a person could be late for. She says, "I have not figured that out yet."

I am hoping that she figures out a way to be a nurse, but she will need to find mentors. When I first met her to talk, she said she had none and insisted, “We should meet again.” Although she moved so much and has had struggles getting places, I don’t think it is going to stop any time soon. She no longer has a car. She was going to ride her bike to meet me but got a ride across town from a roommate but was over an hour late. I gave her a ride home. Her biggest challenge right now is that she needs to get some volunteer experience caring for people—in a nursing home or hospital. She was late in signing up to volunteer at the hospital for the year, but of course, she has probably put more time in caring for others than many other applicants. But it doesn’t count. She says she did not save enough money for the nurse’s aide training and is going to a hearing to try to get her job back at the casino. In order for her to be a part of the nation to be the first in the world to graduate, somehow she is going to have to put herself first.

When Heart Song introduced herself in one of my classes, she said that she was interested in Japanese culture and manga. I was surprised because I hadn’t known that the semester before, and on a whim now, I take a peek at her Facebook page and her profile is a collage of a dozen colorful characters from graphic novels or anime. I had shared with her Ruth Ozeki’s *The Tale of the Time Being*. We still have not had a chance to talk about it, and she has mentioned a couple of other books she wants me to read and talk about. That will be something for the future, I hope.

When I would linger and not go off to work on some writing I had, my mother would urge me saying that I was the only one who could do it. I hope that Heart Song and every seeking person at community colleges across the country will do what it is that only they can do, their own contribution, their own unique response.

I wake up early to reflect, revise and write. An enthusiastic email from a young woman is waiting for me and I reply in a different time and space to her question about several literary pieces for a project. "As you consider the characters and experience what they say, you will learn about your theme. They are multifaceted. Learn from your characters." As I write this to her with hopes that I sound enthusiastic in return, I see again that this is what I have been doing as well. This is what the humanities offers us. We have stories.

## Chapter 5 Researching towards Writing—Storytelling towards Curriculum

My house was built by a carpenter who lived in it for two years while he completed it, and then he sold it to us, quicker than he wanted. We made an offer on it before the basement was finished so that it would be affordable for us. As soon as I saw the view of the fields and woods in the back, which led to a river, I hoped to live there. On a hike on a trail, I asked my sons to turn around and told them that the far off house would soon be ours. A few years later the carpenter came by and asked if he could go down in the basement and in the back because he had forgotten how he had done something that he hoped to repeat in building another house. This is how I know that I need to record my researching, reflecting, and writing process for future projects. Even now I have craftsmen in my house, remodeling. The drywaller comes in to put a layer in and sand it down; he comes back a couple days later for another layer. Trim and crown molding is measured, cut, and drilled. I too add layers and sand down rough edges. I will point to the story text in relation to what I have learned as a teacher, as a researcher, as a human.

What can we learn from stories about community college students? This was the question on my research consent form--the research question or the possible research puzzle, as it is described in narrative inquiry. But it should have been posed in the singular: what can *I* learn? Despite the fact that Lynn Fendler continued to revise my

headings in my proposal with phrases like “what I learned,” I kept wanting to make overgeneralizations even though I did agree theoretically with Dewey and Biesta that research could not be duplicated in teaching. I am not sure what “we” have learned, but “I” have learned a lot.

I now understand that doctoral dissertation work provides a kind of deep learning that one can use for her own transformation and for future research. I recognize that this is an occasion for my own significant learning. This chapter explores this learning. In a Literacy Colloquium at Michigan State University, former graduate student and now professor at SUNY Buffalo, Mary McVee shared her research trajectory. She said that she had not fully understood at the time of her doctoral study that it would establish the kind of research she would do. I am grateful to know this now. It is part of the “continuum” for a researcher.

I almost let the stories get away from me. I was in deep, creating story forms. I almost forgot about the first part of the sentence--what can I learn. It is what can happen to a teacher--the stories become so foregrounded, so overwhelming. I can see how the research can pull us up and out, for a while.

I had not realized that it was through “I” that I would be able to make a contribution. Clandinin and Connelly state: “We need to be prepared to write ‘I’ as we make the transition from field texts to research texts. As we write ‘I,’ we need to convey a sense of social significance. We need to make sure that when we say ‘I,’ we know that

'I' is connecting with 'they.'"<sup>129</sup> Previously, I had avoided "I," not considering that it could create contributions, which was my purpose for beginning doctoral study. This is a big step in moving away from previous understandings of "objective" research, but it also came from my understanding of writing. In the writer's rhetorical triangle of writer, content, and reader, I had minimized the role of the writer. I had placed too much emphasis on the content and the audience. By inviting myself back into the engagement rather than reporting for others, I not only created social significance but was also facilitating my own subjectification, my own unique response to the experiences of researching, storytelling and teaching.

### 1. Researching: What I Learned about My Research Process

I entered my doctoral program as a teacher wanting to learn how to research in order to help others: students and their teachers. I had struggled to see myself as a researcher, voicing my angst about this new role on a blog called "Theories to Practices" and in doctoral classes. People looked at me quizzically. While I felt dislocated, they seemed to be taking it in stride. One classmate said that he didn't want to teach too much because he didn't want to be seen by others as a practitioner; teaching was seen as a ghetto to be avoided. So I struggled with this depiction of teaching, but I have finally

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<sup>129</sup> Clandinin and Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*, 122-123.

learned, that for me, research is actually a powerful way to learn. I have learned so much about teaching from researching, and I am grateful for it.

After a long wait, I was so excited when my Institutional Review Board approval came, my first experience. On that day--March 28th--I started a new journal called "Flight Behavior," partly due to the novel and partly because my sister Eve says that I am like a predatory bird: I fly calmly in the sky above everything and then when I see an exciting, vulnerable bit, I swoop down and attack it with veracity and don't let go until it is dead and in shreds. Unfortunately, I do this a lot at my job. But I now have a research life, and I am sure administrators are very glad about it. Although I would like to see myself as a crane with its deep mythological heritage or a heron--both of which have what biogeographers call "cosmopolitan distribution"<sup>130</sup>--I recognize that they actually sit quite a bit in a small shallow water instead, looking for easy prey.

On March 28th looking for inspiration, I looked up important acts that happened on that day: Pope Francis washing the feet of women for the first time ever the year before; in 1907, the year my grandfather James Elden Dora was born and taken to a hospital orphanage, Lucia Santos later saw the Blessed Mary at Fatima on this date. Also, it is the Tibetan Serf's Emancipation Day. You can see that I was very excited! I was looking for good omens for what would surely be a transformative journey.

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<sup>130</sup> Wikipedia. "Crane." Accessed 18 Oct. 2014 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crane\\_%28bird%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crane_%28bird%29).



I also immediately sent out the emails to all of my former students who were in the pool from the semester and quickly received my first email acceptance from “Kirk.” I had seen him a few times since the semester, including a time at a local restaurant with his friends who honestly seemed as odd as he seemed. It is very judgmental of me to call him “odd,” but I was sure that it was going to allow me to present an intriguing story. They were sitting together at a long table, all of different shapes and sizes but not very animated with each other. It already seemed like a scene out of *The Hobbit*.

The next day I began writing about my memories of Kirk as a student and detailing the context of our classroom and the campus. Although I didn’t know which other students would accept my invitation and which would have energetic and compelling stories, I was sure that Kirk did. The certainty was surely not the case for all of the respondents. Every subsequent reply was a surprise, and I excitedly made appointments to find out.

As I waited, a lunch I had with an old friend proved to be thought provoking. She kept saying that the rich will save our society with what they can provide for culture in art and other endowments. I began to say “you mean poor” when she would say rich. It startled her. She teaches “rich kids” and I teach “poor” ones, but I know that they are not poor in many senses and rich in others. It is easy to slip into categorical thinking. I am exceedingly disturbed by the phrase “poor reader.” A song at the church which celebrated my mother’s life and death buoyed my spirit as I was

about to embark on my research adventure: “We come to share our story. We come to break the bread. We come to know our rising from the dead.”<sup>131</sup>

As I met each person, before and after my classes of the semester and between college accreditation meetings of the Higher Learning Commission, I sometimes would start with just a simple question, trying to find out where they were then with their education, major. I shared some of my memories of them from the class. We laughed. I was concerned about how they were doing currently, and I shared stories about my current semester. This created a relational context, but it also gave me a chance to sharpen my own memories.

As I mentioned in Chapter One, narrative inquiry begins with a research puzzle. This can be quite broad and general to begin with and is renegotiated over time. While other kinds of research that begins with a research problem or question might lead to possible solutions, “narrative inquiry carries more of a sense of a search, a ‘re-search,’ a searching again. [It] carries more of a sense of continual reformulation of an inquiry than it does a sense of problem definition and solution.”<sup>132</sup> In addition, this is difficult to create at the “beginning of an inquiry or in the research proposal, and “not about an easily answered question” because of the amount of reading and rereading and also because a “phenomenon” is difficult to define and creates a feeling of “shifting

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<sup>131</sup> David Haas, “Song of the Body of Christ,” *Creating God* 2006.

<sup>132</sup> Clandinin and Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*, 124.

ground.”<sup>133</sup> Because my “puzzle” was quite broad, thanks to Lynn Fendler, my main obligation was to see what I could learn. This, of course, moved around a lot.

While the puzzle shifts throughout the inquiry, the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space requires the researcher “to ask questions pointing each way” and which concludes in “a research text that addresses both personal and social issues by looking inward and outward, and addresses temporal issues by looking not only to the event but to its past and to its future.”<sup>134</sup> Because their lives are embedded within an economic and social context and they are deeply aware of their place within it as a participating member of a community college, this aspect of narrative inquiry was not difficult to be faithful to. In fact, I learned a lot about their response to the economy like the jobs they have had to have—especially for Ken, Tom, Ashlynn, and Reann—and governmental aid programs that I had not heard of before. Thus, the economy and globalization became a backdrop of the stories. Because higher education is essentially a place for preparation for the future, inquiry about where they were going, plus where they had been and are now were all significant. And even my own reverie about where they might be in the future was also important. While I was not as certain for Kirk and Heart Song, for example, I was more certain for Ken and April due to the trajectory they were on and the dispositions and support they had.

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<sup>133</sup>Clandinin and Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*, 125-126.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid, 50.

Clandinin and Connelly suggest many methods for collecting field texts in narrative inquiry: participant observation, unstructured interviews, storytelling, journals, autobiographical and biographical writing, letter writing, and others. In the sample in my dissertation proposal I used letters, which can provide a common place where people try to make meaning of their experiences, and my own memories. But in this study, students and I used unstructured conversations, much like the ones I use in my individual conferences about student papers, with transcripts from audio-tapes that provide an “ongoing narrative record,”<sup>135</sup> but I also recorded my own experiences of the conversation. I like the word “ongoing” because it suggests a dynamic process, not a static one. Narrative inquiry starts during the collection of field texts with narrative thinking, not afterwards. Clandinin and Connelly consider carefully: “This is not to say that stories cannot be composed from non-narrative field texts, but for us, such research texts composed after the fact of the inquiry are not narrative inquiry texts.”<sup>136</sup>

In addition, I used papers and posts that they wrote during the class when they were available and email exchanges--with their permission. These provided me with some idea about their experience and thoughts during the class they were in—thus something about the past—but it also deepens the way I can tell their story because I

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<sup>135</sup> Connelly and Clandinin, “Stories of Experience,” 5.

<sup>136</sup> Clandinin and Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*, 165.

can let them tell critical parts of their story themselves. But more about that later in the storytelling analysis.

I would sometimes start the audiotape at some point when I felt like it was going to be generative conversation. It actually became a funny aspect of the process and revealed of their personality: Kirk was all about the technology and analyzed and evaluated the pieces of it; others completely ignored it; Lillian—who has a beautiful, colorful name in real life so it is difficult for me not to use it—laughed musically because our initial conversation was not recorded; and Ken just went straight to work. When it seemed they were tired or had run out of time, we would stop, and I would tell them that perhaps we would have a second time to talk. I would almost immediately begin writing my memories of the conversation, using my clipped set of notes to remember what they said and what I thought and felt about it. I made my note taking very evident, letting them see what I was writing down. Sometimes I would ask them to repeat a lovely line, so they would know that I appreciated it.

I preferred my own memories and reveries of the conversations rather than listening to the audiotapes. I avoided listening to them for a long time, not wanting to hear how dumb I sound. The thought of listening to them pained me. The memory of our conversation was so imprinted in my body that it felt like a jolt to listen to it out of the context. But eventually I could do it, and I got used to it and feeling that I didn't sound too bad.

During the course of my conversations, I discovered that many of the students who I thought were locals were in fact not originally from the area. It was stunning. It seemed that about 90 percent of my sophomore level students were actually from down state or out of district. I wasn't sure whether that meant that a lot of locals do not make it this far or whether locals prefer not to go to the local community college. Since I am on the Retention Committee at my college, I submitted a research request to the college to see whether this was true for the general population. What was true for my five classes was also true for our student body as a whole. This is already being considered in recruiting and retention work. The conventional wisdom might be that narrative or qualitative research comes after aggregate research in order to flesh out more knowing. In this case, narrative research led to a new understanding of trends. It provided a question that no one had considered.

I did continue to set up conversations, pursuing a couple of the respondents in particular because they had attended local schools. Their stories were unique and intriguing, but I don't think necessarily particularly so because they grew up a few miles from the college rather than a hundred. While it is true that some community college students come from families who have been in the area for generations, because there is so much moving and migration, that is not necessarily the case. In the end, did I choose research participants due to their locale? Did I choose conversations due to

some kind of gender or racial categorization? No, I chose them due to the intrigue of their story.

Sometimes this was clear to me, like with Kirk, but for a couple I use them as “B role” or supporting cast because their basic stories were similar or interesting once they were in contrast to another story. There were several surprises about the interest, which I discuss in the stories in themselves. I did not expect April’s story to have much depth. In our initial classroom encounters and conversation, she seemed to be such a “good” student, always ahead, always prepared. When I was just about to conclude the conversation and wish her well, on a whim I told her that she had had such a smooth time of it and thanked her for her time. April is very nice, but she was a little bit perturbed with me. She vehemently told me that that was not the case, and then began to tell me about her mediocre high school experience and the way had to sit with a grown up and work on math every single day during her first semester. She also learned from other students. Her story came to life because I basically told her she didn’t have one.

I had gotten along with April very well during our semester together, so it didn’t surprise me that she wanted to participate. This was also the case for several others. However, I was most surprised by those who wanted to participate who barely spoke to me during class. This suggests to me that the idea of “relational” does not just mean

“friendly.” As I discuss, I did not have much of a relationship with Taylor and Ashlynn. As it turns out, not having a relationship initially can be a part of the story.

In addition, to the possibilities of the research for my own continued learning about research and the possibilities of narrative research for institutional purposes, narrative research holds possibilities for the other participants. Ashlynn, Ken and Tom all said that they were figuring out what they thought about an experience through my question and their discussion. It might be true for others: that the experience of the conversation with me might have given them a chance to reflect about their experiences before and during college. Although I suppose a list of questions on a survey could have that effect, but because they were able to pursue a thought and use their own language to express themselves to someone who cared that it might have been more transformative for them. I am happy that the research was valuable in any of these ways.

Also, in the process of conducting this research, there were opportunities for mentoring or at least encouragement. The participants would ask questions about their papers, about their classes, and about their future. So they asked questions too and they seemed to value the research exchange. In addition, my early conversations affected my later conversations with others as we began to talk about their community college and educational experiences. Did one conversation affect others? Yes, for sure. As narrative inquiry recognizes, there is a continuum for me and them. I am a different



person from day to day, so naturally and sometimes consciously my conversations influenced the others.

A few times I only had one conversation. It depended on whether they could meet again, how much time we spent on our first conversation, and whether either of us wanted to. Heart Song insisted that we meet again. In a couple of cases, the students led the second conversation by knowing exactly what they wanted to talk about. The most astonishing was Taylor's. Because she had talked so little to me during our class I asked her about her participation in her classes. When we met again it was after her clinicals and she immediately began to tell me how she had made the decision after our conversation and at the beginning of her clinical that she was not going to be the "shy girl" any more, that it was limiting her experience. It was not just a relational move, but a research move. My pressing her for her insights so that I could understand as a researcher and as a teacher what the experience of a quieter student is in class caused her to rethink the ways she wanted to experience her clinical experience.

I know that some researchers "collect data" before they begin to write, but luckily for me narrative inquiry does not require this kind of separation. Soon after I started writing narratives about our conversations, I was eager to begin to write them in story form. I liked the challenge that Clandinin and Connelly offered about risky, creative forms. Also, I was worried that I would forget things. I wrote in a journal

every day of the process and right after each conversation. This was a disadvantage in that I had a lot of writing for each student to form into stories.

Luckily, in my very first meeting, Kirk gave me an image—that of Bilbo and there and back again on the border—that I could use as a metaphor and feather into the first chapter of stories. The metaphor got too heavy handed and so I removed much of it, but it gave me a starting point of how to organize the stories. The first group of stories were all students who had been to college before my encounters with them at their current college, and the second group started and stayed there in hopes to be the first to graduate. Since part of the research is in the writing, I had to write, but I ended up writing much more than necessary because I did not know where the story would lead. Each story insinuated a form, but I know that the form also “formed” the research.

It is not whether I write a “good narrative” but whether it was a “good narrative inquiry.”<sup>137</sup> Despite this encouragement, I want to write good narratives, good stories, and one of my goals was to find forms that were interesting to me because I found few originally when I began to study them. This is more difficult than I thought it would be. When I tell a story aloud, I have an immediate response, so I know whether it is evocative. This is not so easy in writing. Clandinin & Connelly and Lynn Fendler both suggested to examine the kinds of reading I like to do in order to create research texts:

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<sup>137</sup>Clandinin and Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*, 185.

“Such an inquiry opens up a range of possibilities and frequently suggests innovative and compelling forms that might otherwise not be available.”<sup>138</sup> Risk taking is encouraged in both the research process and in the writing of research texts. I like that quite a bit; however, not all risks that inspire me, inspire readers. I learned a lot as a storyteller. Collecting stories and retelling them is a kind of research that is compelling for me, but the challenge is to make them compelling for others.

Before I move on to explore the storytelling aspect of my learning, my biggest concern as a researcher was that I treated the persons well, both in the process of conversations and in the writing of our story. I do not mean accurately. There are some details that are not included or changed, partly out of my error of understanding, partly to protect their privacy, and partly for the sake of creating a good story for readers. I wanted the experience to be a good one for them, that they were getting as much out of it as I did. Since many have continued to keep in touch with me and share their lives, I believe that I was able to treat them like human beings.

## 2. Storytelling: What I Learned about Writing Stories using Narrative Inquiry

If I could have dreamed that I could start a dissertation with a poem, I would have been even happier as I made my way through to this point in time. Could I be so

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<sup>138</sup>Clandinin and Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*, 137.

brave? Could I be so brave to use a poem even outside of class, outside my stories, even in an academic text?

As it turns out, I removed the poem. It was a beautiful poem by Nobel Laureate from St. Lucia, Derek Walcott, about images, a heron, and a girl. I realized that it was inspiring me, setting a peaceful quality for myself, but then when I began to write a footnote explaining why I was using it, I knew that it was not there for my readers. I deleted it. It was not the last thing that I had to delete something I loved. Recognizing that I was not writing case studies but stories with spaces for silence was an important realization. Not including absolutely everything was difficult, even though it does not look like it since it is so long!

Long ago in my first year as a full time faculty member, I read Lillian Bridwell-Bowles' essay "Freedom, Form, and Function: Varieties of Academic Discourse." I carried a copy around with me. Over a decade later, in my first official essay in my doctoral program, I started it with a quote from the nineteenth century literary critic Margaret Fuller, connecting my literary background to my new exploration of public school education in the United States of America. In 1846 she hoped for "that riper time national ideas shall take birth, ideas craving to be clothed in a thousand fresh and original forms. Without such ideas all attempts to construct a national literature must end in abortions like the monster of Frankenstein, things with forms, and the instincts

of forms, but soulless, and therefore revolting.”<sup>139</sup> Connecting the literature that I knew and loved to Horace Mann, David Labaree and John Rury made me very happy although it was too big of a stretch--connecting new forms of education to new forms of literature--and too big of a risk for the course. For the biggest project of the semester, I analyzed the changes in a literature textbook called *Three Narrative Poems* that had occurred from 1898 to 1924, during big changes in public education. I am still thinking about “fresh and original forms” in education and in writing. I think my student stories are unique forms.

Besides the ability to traverse scale of scope, to turn towards the relational, to tie inquiry process even in the writing--this ability to translate new tellings into new forms is another reason I am drawn to narrative inquiry. Although I have seen very few examples of articles expressing new forms, Clandinin and Connelly provide inspirational freedom: “Narrative inquiry writers, without over-specifying and limiting themselves, need to imagine a shape for the final dissertation text...The writing itself makes a difference to the actual form of the final text...The search for form, even the floundering in confusion before even realizing that one is reaching for form, is part of

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<sup>139</sup> Margaret Fuller. “American literature: its position in the present time, and prospects for the future.” *Papers on Literature and Art*. (New York: Wiley & Putnam, 1846).

what narrative inquirers do.”<sup>140</sup> It has been important then for me to document the processes that I took to reach my form in my stories, in particular.

After five weeks of conversations with students, I then spent five weeks building the foundation and “framing in” the stories. I spent the next five months doing the detail and design work. As I thought about the story, connective pieces came because of the “blurred knowing”<sup>141</sup> that allowed for new images and insights.

Each story took shape depending on the setting of the classroom or campus and sometimes the meeting place where I met them for our research conversation. For example, in Kirk’s story, juxtaposing the old fashioned classroom with wooden cupboards and linoleum with the computer cart provided an interesting clash of time, which was a theme of his story. His story starts the “there and back again” theme of the community college that Kirk provided with his use of it from *The Hobbit*. So in his case the setting was developed further after this metaphor appeared in our conversation.

In Michell’s story, the setting was described due to the follow-up connection to Kirk’s story and then much later the metaphor of the mountain-border was a part of her story in the form of a song. Likewise, this metaphor followed in Ken’s and Amanda’s stories with Ken’s army experience on a mountain and Amanda’s country farm

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<sup>140</sup>Clandinin and Connelly. *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*, 153.

<sup>141</sup> Pinnegar and Daynes, 25.

experience brings the reader back home which leads to Lilian's story, in which she does come home to the country.

The names were mostly chosen by me with their approval because most of them did not care about it, but if there was a request, I honored it. Their trust in this allowed me to choose names that fit the character in the story and were sometimes plays off of their real name or metaphors of some kind. Just as an example, Tom's "last name" is "Shalter" to reflect both his will in the "shall" and also to reflect his need for some "shelter." I think Reann Bringley sounds like a country star's name and the person who is embodied in this story "brings it." I am grateful for their trust in this because it allowed me to be more creative.

There is only one name that is actually a "real name" because I expect that President Obama will read these stories and as he learns about the lives of community college students, he will use his power to pardon her. As the Dixie Chicks sing in a deep tenor voice, "I hope. We can all live more fearlessly."<sup>142</sup>

These stories are meant to be emotionally evocative. I include mentions of songs in hopes the reader will pick up the tune as they read. At times, the person mentions a song like Kirk's pomp and circumstance which provides multiple meanings along with sound. In other times, there was music that reflected the mood like in April's "Happy" which was unbelievably playing in the background when we met. Likewise, each story

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<sup>142</sup> Dixie Chicks, "I Hope," *Taking the Long Way*, Columbia Nashville, Producer Rick Rubin. Writers Martie Maguire, Natalie Maines, Emily Robison, Kevin Moore, 2005.

has a different tone; sometimes reflecting the person in the story's mood or temperament and sometimes my own feeling about them. I actually imagine reader's possible response for each story--O! Shock! for Michell's and a nostalgic inward gasp at the end of April's. Sometimes I can see a reader shaking his head. My favorite actress is Juliette Binoche. I fell in love with her in *Three Colors: Blue*, and I like the idea of having a different color for each story as Krzysztof Kieslowski does. In a recent interview Binoche talks about playing a war photographer, an artist-teacher with rheumatoid arthritis, and an actress in the same year: "I think intense emotions are meaningful because it makes people rehearse for their own lives...I think intense emotions are meaningful for us as human beings....in [antiquity] they knew that stories were a way of helping you to live."<sup>143</sup> We can learn from characters. Of course, I also like the story in the movie *Chocolat* with its folk tale French Catholic setting with the female protagonist who travels trying to change the world until she finally finds a home.

Metaphor and imagery came from both the persons themselves and their context. I use the idea of "border" in my first chapter of stories partly because narrative inquiry is considered to be a border methodology, bordering on long time traditional methodologies. Thus, imagery related to borders, like mountains and rivers, are included. In a Taoist story which Diane Walkstein retells about a farmer who does not

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<sup>143</sup> Krzysztof Kieslowski, *Three Colors: Blue*, MK Productions, 1993.



worry about the future, she says that she had been hearing it for many years and found a version with the farmer who lives near the border:

To be near the border is to be close to the liminal. The farmer, perhaps from the loss of his wife, perhaps from his natural tendencies, has a different view from the others in his village. His view of the present and the future is that they are impermanent, unknowable, and filled with possibility.<sup>144</sup>

I feel that community college students and teachers offer us this view. As it turns out, there were many “in between” places of learning, which I hope will add to the consideration of a non-representational feeling. Hallways are important in-between places in the stories. There were a couple in my story—messages that I received in hallways from classmates and from something on a door, and both Michell and Ken were in hallways when I had significant conversations with them during our class together. This suggests liminality as well, a threshold of transformation.

Setting is important in story and plays a very important role in narrative inquiry. The stories are placed somewhere specific. The setting is not a part of some anthropological aspect of their culture but in story the location is a part of experience. In my stories I have a lot of locations. First of all, we are in the Midwest of the United States and I am writing about the country, about the rural parts of America. But also

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<sup>144</sup> Diane Walkstein, “Who Knows What the Future Brings”? *Parabola* (Winter 2009), 21.

many of the stories start in the city, where they were born or where they worked. I too have moved from the city to the country and back again. Then there are several campuses and classrooms. In the middle of the writing the college added another campus and so we have old and new buildings. I move from the old to the new, as the humanities do. The location is more important in some stories than for others because of the way they were situated in the classroom or in the conversation. I am intrigued by the saying “the power of the site,” which I have heard Dee Yager say in relation to her work as a principal and of the dual enrolled students that we work with together to help them transition to college. There is so much focus on the buildings—building new ones, remodeling old ones. I am intrigued by the Open University system where my friend Nga says that in Vietnam the teachers go to the students’ cities. Place and travel is a significant part of the commuter community college experience.

In the second chapter I problematize the current economic imagery of “first in the world,” when the students should be first for themselves. This layering is an important feature of the writing: the description of the setting was written first, then our conversation led to the metaphor, and then back to the description of the setting. A reiterative process. Tiny descriptive details often came to me on runs by the big lake after a day of writing.

Each story had either a novel or other text that they read as a part of the story--as a text they shared with me--or included their own writing. In addition, my own

reading during the time is included, partly to break the plane of time. I wanted there to be plenty of literary allusions; some had more--like Kirk and Heart Song--than others. My goal to include them was to show that literature and stories about these persons were equal in the space, but they sometimes became distracting to the human stories so they needed to be removed. This deleting was difficult for my literary self. The stories about these persons became more dominant as the stories continued. There were fewer and fewer literary allusions until Heart Song where they came back around to them because she mentioned them so much.

In addition to literary allusions, there are allusions to popular culture of all kinds, websites, and even children's stories. This is to suggest that there are many ways of knowing and that not only are classic literary allusions valuable.

Each story allowed for an aspect of the community college experience or research. Because I teach both first year composition and sophomore composition and then literature and humanities, I had different shadings of experiences with their stories. Ken and Tom were in the comp class, Ken was in both levels of comp while April just the second, Heart Song was in all of them, and the rest of the stories are set in the humanities course. The comp courses focus on persistence conversations and transitions like the ones we make in discourse communities. The humanities course is required for persons entering vocations and so work and globalization was foregrounded but so was advising for careers. In the background is all the everyday

functions of the college--accreditation, clubs, meetings, interviews. These were all intentionally placed to show the climate and context of a community college. No fire or tornado drills or lockdowns occurred. Though there was plenty of snow and ice, there were no "snow days."

All of the courses had an online component so that we could go back together and see what they wrote. Heart Song was grateful for copies of her papers, which she no longer had. Decisions whether to use parts of papers was made for aesthetic reasons but also for them to say in their own words in a reflective tone. I think their papers add another modality and dimension of communication and description. But like for Michell, they offer a place to reflect on her experience of the course.

Each story includes my story as "a nested set of stories."<sup>145</sup> This included memories of other students, teachers, and also with the permission of my sons, their part in my part of the stories. I tried to weave in threads of our lives in with each story. I do this partly because of the relational nature of the stories and the methodology but also for ethical reasons. As they have made their story available and themselves vulnerable, I do the same, to show the relational element of the stories.

As I include their writings, I also include a piece of my own poetry, partly to make some point, partly to be vulnerable myself like the students, and partly to show

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<sup>145</sup>Clandinin and Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*, 144.

that use of myself as a writer in contrast to published poets. They also signal that this is a humanities reading of story with a focus on human expression.

In some cases like Michell's and Reann's, I use my story to show contrast or comparison. Sometimes it is to say that I understand. In others, my experience as a mom or as a teacher more closely provides a descriptive contrast or comparison. In some cases, like with Kirk, I am puzzling out his experience by considering my sons who are similar in age. I think teachers do this quite a bit, for better or worse. I hope my comparisons are ethical enough, but I may not be perfect on that account. I recognize my risk-taking and as my friends know, I sometimes go too far for a good story. As my dad still says when we play family pinochle (and I remind my perfectionist partners in tennis), we're learning here.

I discovered a method that is important to my writing. While I often would start out writing about the setting--the classroom space or an early encounter with the student--I would usually hint at, or foreshadow, a central event in the beginning, but then create more context on a research theme--persistence, the economy and globalization, demographics--before telling their actual story. I would then "sketch out" the story and then come back time and again, "coloring" in the lines, "shading" in the scenes. I discovered through revision, thanks to Lynn's perspicuity, that I needed more description, more biography earlier so that readers could hang on to the vision of the person. I worried about objectifying them, afraid that readers would categorize

them with the descriptions. My hope is that readers can see the characters enough to imagine more.

Clandinin and Connelly explain that the “dimensions or directions or avenues to be pursued in narrative inquiry” are a three-dimensional space of backward and forward; inward and outward; and located in place.<sup>146</sup> All of these directions are apparent in my text: many stories are situated in a college classroom; they include an examination of what happened during the time and looks to what the possibilities are for the future for the student, and includes my internal thoughts and feelings and comments from the students at the time of our conversation. I moved from my “field text” of scribbled notes to a “research text” which is a kind of retelling or interpretation in this three-dimensional space. In some cases, I describe the classroom or the seat where the person sat in the classroom; in other cases, I describe the setting of the conversation we had. The decision was made based on which offered the most poignant space for the story.

Time is another dimension as is the “plane” or point of view taken with the reader. Is the reader close? Far away? Is there are a multi-dimensionality? Can we write in 3D? 4D? Although I barely have an understanding of non-representational thinking, it has informed my writing to think about the in-between spaces in the stories and between readers and writers.

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<sup>146</sup> Clandinin and Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*, 54.

There are several features of the research text, partly because of the narrative inquiry process but also because of my “signature”<sup>147</sup> and the signature of the other participants as well. What is not said or the silences are also significant. As a whole, there are multiple voices to consider: “As researchers, we too struggle to speak our research texts in our multiple voices. Our silences, both those we choose and those of which we are unaware, are also considerations of voice in our research texts.”<sup>148</sup> Because of my long experience in writing, I know my own way of writing or participating. Some of the characteristics of the research text also include that some of the text is not linear or chronological; repeated motifs, images, or threads; the shape will “have a chance to push the boundaries, yet not stretch them beyond audience belief”<sup>149</sup> and detailed descriptions will appear, including points of time. There is also an element of foreshadowing, for example, when I mention that Ken was a hero, or that Michell’s chair and my chair “crashed.”

For the analysis and the research text, Clandinin and Connelly cite the challenges of plot, time, structure, and the multiple “I’s” in the reconstructing or “restorying” of the narrative.<sup>150</sup> Using analysis, particularly rhetorical and literary analysis as well as

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<sup>147</sup>Ibid, 148.

<sup>148</sup>Ibid, 147.

<sup>149</sup>Ibid, 168.

<sup>150</sup> Clandinin and Connelly, “Stories of Experience and Narrative Inquiry,” 11.

the understanding that narrative inquirers “value story *as* a form of analysis”<sup>151</sup> rather than analyzing itself.

I have had great fun in playing with words, sentences, and paragraphing, which I have discovered is a kind of dramatic line break in prose. I especially use this with several two words sentences in Michell’s story like “she wept,” which reflects a religious imagery and story, namely of the women surrounding the Jesus story.

I like words and word play and include multiple definitions of words at times, just for fun, but also to make a point about language. During this reflecting and revisioning process, I attended the Teaching English in the Two Year College conference in Grand Rapids, Michigan during their ArtPrize festivities. Long time poet and teacher Jack Ridl did some poetry reading and explication. He said that the only thing that poets have over those who write in prose is they get to play with the line. Having students study line breaks often disrupts them enough to see, feel, hear, which as country writer Bonnie Jo Campbell said later in the day are really the main sense because you can’t have readers smelling that much. She is a funny girl, and her novels about teenage girls who are, as my mother would say, roughnecks are marvelously brutal. When I asked her which was her favorite--*Once Upon a River* or *Q Road*--she said with a big smile on her round face: “You want me to choose between my children?” I

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<sup>151</sup> Schaafsma et al, 302.



love that she wore jeans and a black t-shirt to speak to English teachers, her arms taut from carrying buckets of water and the elderberry wine which she makes.

I mention these professional development opportunities like conferences and guest speakers in my text to show how much can be learned from them with some “wakeful” consideration. These are in stories in addition to mentors of my own to show the role they play and in hopes that those in the stories will also consider their role. Wakefulness is important for this kind of storyteller to be ready for the serendipity of new connections that occur when one is thinking and imagining.

I am interested in the idea of liminality in stories,<sup>152</sup> which etymologically suggests a threshold and implies being in the middle, on the verge, in an ambiguous state, in transition, and going against tradition. There is a spiritual dimension, perhaps archetypal, or a journey, which both images of the border crossing and seeking and the transitions they hold. Yet there are no morals or didacticism, no fighting or preaching or missionary work--though it certainly sneaks in the text of the stories, which I have had to beat out, or rather, delete out. Because of my shifting puzzle, focusing on my learning from the stories, I had to delete aspects about my own story because I realized that it was not my story that created an equal plane but my learning from them.

Writing essays is not like writing stories, and I have more experience with the former than the latter. I have learned that storytelling is harder.

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<sup>152</sup> Pat Sikes and Ken Gale, “Narrative Approaches to Education Research,” <http://www.edu.plymouth.ac.uk/resined/narrative/narrativehome.htm>, 2006

In narrative inquiry there is a sharing of the narrative with the persons in the story, since it is a collaboration. They see that narrative inquiry is a collaborative process. In fact, the “participant” is the first audience. However, the persons in these stories were not eager to read the text before I was done; they were mostly encouraging me as a fellow student. I would receive emails occasionally with hopes that I was continuing with the project. They were proud of me, and it seemed like they were more interested in the hope that their story would be heard by others. I’m proud that I applied to a doctoral program with a paper using student stories and voices, and finally here in the end, I am still sharing their voices. I have not been stripped bare. I thought I went full circle, but perhaps I have come to be unhinged.<sup>153</sup>

### 3. What I Learned about My Teaching and Curriculum

I never dreamed that writing about teaching and curriculum would be in the end the most difficult part of this project. It is not that I couldn’t talk all day (and do!) about teaching. I recall my very smart counselor, Sandy Hermann tell me that I am better one-on-one than I am communicating in a group, which I didn’t understand for a long time. She also begged me to write down the stories I told her every week, even if it was in bits, but I was a young mom and teacher. In addition, my mentor and colleague

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<sup>153</sup> An allusion to Lynn Fendler’s “Unhinging Modernity: Historiographical periodization as effective history. *Systems of Reason and the Politics of Schooling: Alternative Studies on School Reforms and Sciences of Education in the Thinking of Thomas S. Popkewitz*, Ed. B.M. Franklin and M. Pereyra (New York: Routledge, 2014), 226-249.

Jim Vander Mey chided me about my insistent storytelling and my overly open reflective emails, but he also spent years sending me volumes of essays or collections of letter, hoping that I would find an outlet for my own voice. I mostly just kept mothering and teaching, and I started writing essays instead.

As I conference with students, I actually feel brilliant in the way that I listen and remember aspects of their participation in the semester and the way I can help to draw out their unique stance on something they could write. However, listening to myself perform in the stories, within the context of the stories, like hearing my voice from the audio-tapes, is difficult due to the mismatch at times between my higher values and my actual practice. I actually did not need video transcripts to analyze and narratively reflect on what I did. I just needed time to reflect in a “wakeful” research inquiry to deeply consider my teaching practice. Perhaps along with a “hidden” curriculum,<sup>154</sup> there is also an “embedded” curriculum that is inextricably connected to who the teacher is.

Teaching cannot be separated from curriculum.

Writing this one sentence paragraph reminds me how much I like the drama of a one sentence paragraph. It reminds me to go back to my stories and be sure to include a one sentence paragraph or two. It is harder to do in a story than I thought. But I like

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<sup>154</sup> Anyon, Jean, "Social Class and the Hidden Curriculum of Work," *Journal of Education* 162 (Winter 1980). Reprinted in Gary Colombo, Robert Cullen, and Bonnie Lisle, eds. *Rereading America*. Boston: Bedford Books, 1995, 45-60, was probably most influential in thinking about rich and poor schools

the irony of my one sentence paragraph-- about something that cannot be separated as I separate it. Re-vision comes after, and during, re-search. And though I would like to continue to re-vision the stories all day long, it is time to move to re-visioning teaching. While Clandinin and Connelly say that a vigorous rereading of field texts is necessary, for me, it has been a vigorous and constant rereading of the research texts that has been the most potent. Perhaps this is one difference between the social sciences and the humanities.

I was taken by the way Clandinin and Connelly depict Dewey's idea about the interconnection between teacher and curriculum. Dewey's notion of experience makes it possible to imagine the teacher not so much as a maker of curriculum but as part of it and to imagine a place for context, culture (Dewey's notion of interaction) and temporality (both past and future contained in Dewey's notion of "continuity"). In this view ends and means, curriculum and instruction, are so intertwined that designing curriculum for teachers to implement for instructional purposes appears unreal.<sup>155</sup>

The teacher is a part of the curriculum, not just a "maker" of it and that preset objectives and particular outcomes and then measuring student behavior with the idea that the teacher is responsible for the change is conceptually flawed from a narrative

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<sup>155</sup> Clandinin and Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*, 28.

perspective. It is a modern notion that curriculum can be perfected, made clean, coherent, and uniform. Clandinin and Connelly continue:

According to narrative construction, the teacher is not merely a filtering variable or a factor to be considered as either an impediment or a catalyst for the achievement of objectives. Rather, the teacher is part of the curriculum and therefore part of the establishment of the goals in the first place and part of the ensuing achievement.<sup>156</sup>

This is a radical construction. It recognizes that the teacher cannot be extricated from the curriculum and the curriculum-creating process. And she is only a “part” of the achievement of learning, which reflects Cohen’s idea that teachers are dependent on students. He also says that there are “mental and emotional difficulties of learning.”<sup>157</sup> This jettisons much of current conversation about portable curriculum and teachers wholly responsible for growth. This current mantra in accountability circles suggests that the teacher has “muchly much-much more”<sup>158</sup> power than other persons in the classroom. I teach, but their learning is their own. If I don’t see this, then I see that my part is more important.

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<sup>156</sup> Clandinin and Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*, 28-29.

<sup>157</sup>David K. Cohen, “Teaching Practice: Plus Que Ca Change...” *Contributing to Educational Change: Perspectives on Research and Practice*. Ed Phillip W. Jackson. Berkeley, CA: McCutchan Pub. Co., 1988),

<sup>158</sup> Dr. Seuss, *Did I Ever Tell you How Lucky You Are?* New York: Random House, 1973, 4.

A small teacherly tangent: I have two composition classes that are “well behaved.” We might say that they “know how to behave in a college classroom,” or they know the college classroom protocols. I ask for volunteers to lead discussion about articles or a guest speaker. Everyone joins in smoothly. They seriously peer review or analyze texts while I’m in other small groups. They text each other if someone is not there; they include them in projects. I also have two developmental composition courses. There is a daily barrage of random comments while others are talking in the attempted discussion about their own concerns about their paper, the weather, their experience on the farm or in the factory, their reasons for being late, leaving early, or missing class, their troubles with a computer or a relationship. A common comment is “I’m not going to lie, I didn’t get that done.” They have forced me to slow down and listen to their stories. I cajole and create new concrete experiences. I get frustrated and worry that I’m not “learning them enough,” but I don’t get any more credit for the first scenario as the second. They are getting the credits.

In many ways, the second group disrupts the socialized aspects of the classroom—that the activities of the classroom are removed from their experience, and their temporal nature. The first group already knows how to do this. Their life rarely bleeds into the classroom. At a professional development workshop with forty middle and high school teachers, I heard teachers explain that they try as much as possible to use student interests in projects. But I see now that this is still an instrumental view of the

activity of the classroom, even if they are stories. If teachers have a narrative understanding of the persons--that they are storied persons--even in the classrooms, they know that they have experiences and that they are temporal beings. All the persons live within a narrative arc; they have a past along with a present. Their imagined future is a part of the conversation, particularly for college students who are often in college for their future.

Clandinin and Connelly see a “narrative notion of curriculum.”<sup>159</sup> And why not? Why not use explicit use of stories from guest speakers, from field trips, about work experiences? Perhaps if we integrated more aspects of learning--inside and outside the classroom--we could see learning in more expansive ways, but I have done this and discover that this is not what is most important. It is not what happens in the classroom necessarily, but an ontological stance, who they are as human beings.

Although storytelling is an accepted pedagogical possibility in many fields, like in nursing where they can be a “trigger” to “stimulate critical thinking and deeper nursing issues” and create “lifelong effective learners.”<sup>160</sup> I have heard many faculty say that there isn’t time for student stories and connections in the curriculum. But it is not just about telling stories but understanding the humans within a context of experience and as temporal beings, understanding them narratively. I am not the only actor in the

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<sup>159</sup> Clandinin and Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*, 29.

<sup>160</sup> Michele R. Davidson, “A Phenomenological Evaluation: Using Storytelling as a Primary Teaching Method,” *Nurse Education in Practice*, (Sept. 2004): 184-185.

drama and neither are they. Another aspect of the humanities that can inform teaching is that monologues are not the only genre in a drama. You have to be really good to hold the stage all by yourself and embody all of the literary elements necessary for a good performance. Few actors can do it.

I have learned several important things about teaching, about my teaching, through this research: how the terms “student” and “teacher” are problematic; how little I knew about the persons in my class though I thought I knew so much; how challenging it is to know how much experience a student has and how or whether to use the classroom as a space for integrating one’s experience. In Chapter 2 it seems that I am mostly interested in how students connect their past, their outside life to their college learning--how they are border crossers--and how teachers can help in that effort. In Chapter 3 it seems that I am interested in how students struggle with teachers and with themselves with so many barriers in order to be first in their life. I will discuss these three significant reflections. In all of these aspects of teaching, the realization that persons in classrooms are temporal beings with full lives and ways to teach that honors this reality/framing in a modern context that tends to de-member (correct this) them is an enduring challenge.

I had a vague notion that the terms “students” and “teachers” were problematic. For years, I have used Freire’s idea of student-teachers and teacher-students as a solution. Although I had been reading and thinking a lot about labels and categories, I



had not deeply understood the ways I was creating categories through language. Of course, that is what language does. I explore this some in Michell's story, letting her own words speak for themselves but also some of the pieces she reads. But as I reflected in revision--wakefulness in both collecting field texts and then writing and revising--I recognized that in the beginning of my story, before I even get to Kirk, that I said teacher and student so many times that I was faced with my own labeling. I thought that I had to use those terms. I don't have to. As a result, I try to use the word "persons" as I refer to those in classes--in both the stories and in my teaching. The terms obfuscate the uniqueness, their humanness. They suggest submission or power. I think they are unnecessary in most circumstances, except when that is exactly when the writer is suggesting this point.

As I reread Tom and Taylor's stories, again learning so much from rereading the stories, I see that they were really not treated as adults. Even though part of adult learning theory includes equality between teacher and student, they are obviously not considered equals. I hated to read how Tom was treated by others in both high school and in college. Because he talked so much about his teachers, I could see the problems with teachers, even myself in the way that I conceive others as not unique and atemporal humans.

I considered the idea of calling us all "storytellers." So if the "teacher" is the only storyteller, then that is not fair. To be honest there is only so much time in a class or at a

dinner table for stories. Not everyone wants to tell them. And some of stories might be problematic for others in a politically correct space of public education.

I realized in Kirk's story--in contrast to some of the others--that he was not that great of a student. A successful student is usually understood as one who does what he is told, follows the instructions carefully, expects to make errors and to learn from them. What is a teacher then? A person who gives instructions, gives others feedback on errors, and does not necessarily learn from them. What Kirk did was decide for himself what he would do and not do. He was already autonomous. But in the rubric of what a successful student is he might not be successful. The rubric for a student is not one for a person. What does a person have to give up in order to be a student? What does a person have to give up in order to be a teacher?

In addition to these labels, restorying has helped me to learn more deeply how limited categorical information is about a student. Clearly these persons are unique, not because of some abstract demographic category. They have their own subjectivity. I can help to support it, but it is not mine. Michell herself also challenges the notions of demographic categories. I let her do the talking on this from her perspective. There are spiritual undertones in her story, and the idea of "everyone is unique in the hand of God" has spiritual play. Unique stories replaces demographics.

I also marveled at Michell's reflections about her own participation, her own feelings of trampling the views of others. I think this is an under-considered aspect of

education. I have known that students are always monitoring their participation because they are socialized to be considered a “brown noser,” or too loud and disruptive, or too quiet and not caring. They are worried about not being “good.” Well behaved. After years of this, students come into college classrooms socialized in particular ways. I have actually had amazing experiences with those who are homeschooled and dropouts, although I consider the ramifications of this categorical term in the story, and I recognized that these persons too are all unique and cannot be categorized. This week I received an email from a high school student about how he wished there was more frequent participation on the online forum from all of the class and that his classmates were asking his advice about ways to reply and whether he should wait to post so that others would first. It isn’t just teachers who are questioning the level of their participation. How can there be less concern, less fear, more subjectivity in classroom discourse?

As I write this chapter, I am sitting in a classroom in our new building. Unlike the old building where I met Kirk and taught Ken, April, Tom, and Heart Song, the chairs do not have gum and lead dust under each of them, and everything moves as if it is a kind of “smart” or flexible space. The blinds are fabric and beautiful, the natural light generous, the brick with an interesting design matches the painted walls. The newly planted ornamental grasses blow gently in the wind. I sit in the seat of the quietest student in my classroom. She has been writing a beautiful essay about her

experience this semester. As all of my students are, she is a complete surprise after I met her to talk one on one--four siblings, moved from a wealthy town to a rural town, lived with her grandmother and then alone with her dad--and besides all of that, just a very interesting person. But I know now that I barely know anything.

I thought I knew so much about the persons in my classes, but because I thought of them as students, I think that limited my recognition. My first significant research to teaching insight was how little I knew the persons of whom I was having a conversation. It was jaw dropping. And humbling.

Because of my close contact with students throughout their writing processes, I assumed that I knew a lot about them. I thought that I probably knew more in my composition classes than in the larger humanities classes. I still knew very little. I recall realizing this a few years ago when students created "writer's statements," similar to an artist's statement that is shown at an art exhibit. A student who struggled with the regime of writing for our department's assessment created one that included a beautiful photograph of her and her dog and said she was a photographer, did fundraising and awareness against dog fighting, and hoped to be a nurse. All of those basic things I was not aware of and I felt like a very bad teacher for not knowing them in order to encourage her to use all of the visual and rhetorical skills she used in her outside of school life into her school work. I vowed to do better. After talking with these students, it is clear that I have not done much better.

I do not know why I think this is so important. Why do I think that it is important for a teacher to deeply know students? I have learned that it is more important for me to listen carefully instead. Why would signing up for a class obligate one into a close personal relationship? Can the relationship be relational without it being overly intimate? Who has the expectation to be known deeply as a unique person--all persons in the classroom? Probably not.

It isn't exactly that I expect that everyone will become friends. The arrogance that I had was that I knew them. Recognizing how little I know allows me to see them as more complex, more unique. It is a paradox. I don't need to do anything different; the recognition of this will help me to see them differently than I have, be with them differently than I have.

As I discussed in the "storytelling" portion of this chapter, connecting previous knowledge to a new doctoral program was challenging. There were times when it seemed that previous knowledge was called for and other times where being a "blank slate" was preferred. I have had experiences to reflect upon but this research project allowed me to think about this from another standpoint—the teacher's.

A tension that the teacher experiences is that she often assumes that students know what she knows and uses allusions as such, but also she also sometimes treats them as if they know very little. This must be very jarring for a student. As I discuss in

their stories, Kirk and Michell knew more than I did about the class inquiry of globalization.

I have also learned about my teaching from revising the stories. As I framed out their stories and over time included details of setting, plot, conflict and other literary aspects, a part of these are aspects of my own teaching that gives context for the story. But after many revisions, baring down closer and closer but also looking from a distance of time and place, other realizations appear. I can be a judgmental teacher, harsh, impatient, unclear. As I looked for some final bibliographic information, I found this scrawled on a back page of the Brightman collection of letters between McCarthy and Arendt: "The problem is that because I've been teaching almost as long as I can remember—siblings, students, colleagues—I tend to be a bossy, competitive, know-it-all, pedantic, self-righteous. As much as I want to learn from others, I want to teach them even more. Story helps me to focus more on description and less on judgment." It feels like I wrote that a long time ago.

The story about Kirk reveals that I am a fairly controlling discussion group leader, facilitator. My analogy of a classroom discussion as being a dinner party shows that I want neat and orderly discussion that is probably superficial and not very complex. Although I do have classes that become very chaotic and messy, I do tend to eventually reign in the class so that others can be heard. Thus, I do it out of democratic participation, but probably move towards silencing or disciplining messy discourse.

Although I have a high tolerance for politically incorrect comments, I do have to monitor--or police--some language that is extremely offensive. I justify my dinner party leadership style by considering that everyone gets a shot at participating, that we are modeling practice for other citizenship encounters, that we are trying to reach for multiple perspectives, and that there is a measure of contingency because I do not have an already established idea of what the conversation will be or lead to. I am not looking for a particular answer.

In the story I was using the example about reading and responding in a humanities class to contrast with Kirk, so I did not think that much about it at the time. I did not want to over-romanticize student's preparation any more than I wanted to romanticize my own, but I could later see that my expectations for others were greater than for myself. I thought that because I believe that texts are open that I was ok but actually I think the truth is that there are a few openings but still they are acceptable openings and unacceptable openings, thus closings. Research writing gives a person, at least this particular person, the opportunity to consider carefully, if not in the first or second or third revision, then in the twentieth. Sometimes I reflect on my teaching in "real time," that is at the time of the writing, like I do in Michell's story when I reconsider my "mandatory" attendance policy language, but usually in complex scenes, I only come to realizations after much debriefing in the revision process.

For so long, I was obsessed with the stories, but as I began to move back and forth between the stories and my own researcherly perspective--through a different lens--I could see my own participation differently, not just theirs from a teacherly perspective. As Lynn would say, and Gert Biesta said it to me also, this is actually helpful.

Despite my realizations about some of my facilitation--the facilitation of education--I do feel there are other spaces in the classroom environment that is not controlled or colonized by me. In Ken's story I discuss what I call the in-between, the unplanned aspects of the classroom, but it is clear in Kirk's story that he feels some freedom to post on the online discussion forum. I am not sure whether he felt this in small group activity where I am not hovering. And I do hover. Where I know that some of my colleagues leave the room for long stretches and allow the students to post on the discussion forum without their supervision, I am not that kind of teacher. I feel like I can contribute.

I even wonder in the end of his story whether I "hovered" enough with Kirk because I might have been able to help him make more connections. More interventions for more connections. Clearly, I want to be in charge of their experience. Depending on what one's lens is this might be awesome or awful. As I am reflecting on this scene, I recall a conversation I had yesterday with a second grade teacher who said she had to stay after school with the other second grade teachers in order to



synchronize their PowerPoint slides because there were several sets of twins spread among the classes and they didn't want to confuse them with disparate language. At least I never use PowerPoint slides but am one of those progressive teachers who maintain power without them.

I make a lot of suggestions: in small groups, with individuals, in the large group. I do it partly because of time. I want to speed up the time they have with the struggle of figuring it out on their own. Sometimes students--like the one who refused to accept my suggestion about writing about video games or Kirk who totally decides what he will and will not do--are resistant enough not to be overly influenced by my own labels. I just hate to watch when students do not think for themselves because I have made a suggestion or given a sample, which they ask for. In the way that some of them refuse to submit to my suggestions, I need to refuse to give suggestions.

There are economic imperatives for getting community college students "on board" and graduated. Most of them are using taxpayer money for financial aid and they are needed to contribute productively to the economy. But many of them also hold a lot of resistance in not letting the institution change them too much. In that, I am intrigued by their desire to hold on to their humanity. Perhaps because schools have been less successful in colonizing their behavior, maybe even their souls if we see how much school brainwashes us, then perhaps these folks are even more human. In

Michell's story, I problematize the "up from your bootstraps" message in the community college curriculum but also in the humanities.

Are the humanities a part of students' qualification, socialization or subjectification? I think all three. So while I suggest that the vocational aspects of their degree increase their qualification and the socialization necessary for their field, I suggest that a humanities course such as mine also contributes to important features of those fields, particularly democratic discussion and examining multiple perspectives. The subjectification--or the development of their own perspective--might also be developed in the humanities course that is not just more content knowledge but more of a development of their own unique voice. The course is designed so that students and groups of students contribute greatly to the content choices. That is not enough to support subjectivity. Thus, they might be learning the "voice" of their field, but the humanities can contribute to the development of their own voice. Kirk expresses himself in long, reflective exchanges to the class on the forum and in papers. The opportunity for them to write a final "what I have contributed to the class" reveals this voice in both Kirk's and Michell's stories. I begin Michell's story with some heavy discussion of the career focus--the emphasis on qualification--for the college's staff overall.

This kind of narrative research process also provides the participants themselves with opportunity to rethink their participation. Sometimes questions do this or it

provides an opportunity for them to think aloud. This happened many times in this study. Ken considered why he liked asking so many questions in class. Tom is still thinking about how he “drops” some of the small details of tasks of a class. Taylor tried out being outgoing in her clinicals after our conversation about her quietness. This happened for Michell in a final paper of the class. Thus, some assignments can provide a space for their own reflection, and but then the research a teacher might do is an additional space.

In Michell’s story, I remembered again that teaching itself is a learning experience, that we learn as we teach. So as I suggest in Kirk’s and Michell’s stories, they had an opportunity to teach and so they did. They are both rhetorically sensitive--considering what pieces and how to introduce what they put on the course website and considering their role in discussions and trying not to overly influence the other persons. Michell says poignantly: “I fell short in that I felt it necessary to express myself and find answers not allowing others to state their opinions and find their own answers. I felt intrusive.” Letting others be, not arrogantly trying to change their minds, allowing them to find their own views through their attentiveness. At the same time, I think that overly apologizing for one’s views--even the abundant sharing of them--is a kind of fear of not being good enough. Yesterday a student in a new class talked with me after class. I asked every person to share whether they thought the dramatic “Shift Happens” video was persuasive to them or not and why. She thanked

me for calling on her. She said that she had so much she wanted to share but because of her anxiety issues which she had been to a psychologist about that she was nervous to talk in class unless she is called upon.

I feel like a cheerleader for Kirk and Michell and Heart Song in particular, encouraging them through their struggles to find a place in the world, in the economy, to tap into their abundant possibilities. I think my main role as a teacher is to encourage. To help create courage in others. To strengthen their will so that their will can be done. But I also listen to their stories and in the end of Michell's story, I learn that listening to stories is a way not to colonize, not to "get into a missionary position" but forcing advice upon them. I didn't quite manage the balance between encourage and listening with Michell. I tried to take her dream, her idea and show her that what a wonderful vision it was and I listened to how she wanted to implement it and gave her other options to consider. I'm ok with that.

After Kirk's and Michell's stories, I tend to be less didactic. There is a clear shift after their stories, but it is clearer yet in the second chapter where the stories are absolutely at the center. I am keeping this as an intentional writing choice to show after Michell's how I learned as a storyteller and as a teacher that I needed to listen, listen to the stories for humans.

I have to encourage students a lot. I just have to show them that they already know stuff. This is especially true of students who end up in developmental courses.

They have been told and shown that they are not good at stuff. So I start many class periods before they begin to read and think to show them that they indeed can. I ask them, "Did anyone watch the University of Michigan and Notre Dame football game last weekend?" A few say they did. I ask, "What happened?" They explain the missed field goals and lots of running yards but lack of scoring. I ask about the Detroit Lions game. I get similar game summaries from others. "Yes, you know how to summarize." When they begin to say that fans were disappointed and that the coach should be fired, I explain that is their response, different than a summary. They already know stuff and how to do stuff. They don't always know that they do it already.

In teaching composition it was the individual conferences where I had the chance to develop the most relational pedagogy with a combination of the three functions of education that Biesta describes. They can express their own unique voice, their story, which I use as a starting point for writing projects. As they share and develop their own perspectives, I can help with skills necessary to communicate clearly to others, thus socialization. They develop skills necessary for qualification or credentialing.

Thus, when I meet with students--or any teacher meets with students--to discuss aspects of their writing that they might not be clear on, this is not necessarily a "deficit" thinking on the teacher's part, but a concern for their growth in qualification. I remember the great classical teacher Louise Cowan saying to me at the Dallas Institute

of Humanities and Culture<sup>161</sup>: “Lucia, you are intelligent, but you need to just stop this habit of writing run-on sentences.” There is a difference between intelligence and skills. I think right now that a teacher can assume equality of intelligence, as Rancière discusses, and yet also give some instruction--whether those are considered to be deficits or a surfeit. Tom and Heart Song were interested in talking about whether they were smart, both saying that they had never heard that they were, which I thought was so sad.

I give examples with Ken about the kinds of “help” I provide with his article formatting and research. Although we spent significant amount of time in class collecting articles in their discourse community and examining their features, it seems that I still did a lot of “teaching.” I have a colleague who teaches the course with very little instruction. Students research and write a 15 page paper on their own. I also hear students say that their history teacher does no teaching; they read the book on their own. I have always felt that was irresponsible. I prefer my approach. For example, in my developmental class, the students chose a research topic and the articles. I had not read them ahead. They were indeed texts “in common,” as Rancière might suggest. We all share our insights and questions. Even in my literature class, I often do not reread the text in order for the rest of the class to share what they think. But I think in some

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<sup>161</sup> Louise Cowan was this elegant teacher that worked so hard to say things so carefully that I remember so much of what she said. She said, for example, that we can tell a comedy or tragedy from the first bite. By the end of two summers of study of literature with her and other scholars and 45 other local high school teachers, I was able to make a joke in public, teasing her. It was a big step for me. It is also important to me that I mention these humanities organizations throughout this humanities project.

classes where certification is required as a result--qualification in particular--then more teaching needs to occur. Could a person teach him/herself? Yes. But the teacher can provide another kind of text. In other words, the history teacher's language is just as much a text as the classroom "text" itself. The students still have to teach themselves. In addition, other classmates who talk and teach also provide a text for others and often teach themselves through this process.

Their papers, their stories become texts for the class as well. I also share my writing as a teacher. I share editing that I receive and sometimes do the assignments myself. I am sure that I have written an essay each semester, sometimes synthesizing our classroom discussion, sometimes problematizing a classroom topic. I try to do this to show that I am still learning. I put my paper in the pile for peer review. Now with some looking back on this technique, I am not sure it has made that much difference, and maybe a negative difference. They do like seeing that we all get criticism as writers, but only a couple of the papers I've written received significant response. One in particular was enthusiastically received because I used several students as examples in the essay. If only a couple received responses, those were probably pretty good odds for anything that we write.

Like Ken, April asked for a lot of "help," but neither of them did it in an annoying or helpless kind of way. They approached their questions with their own knowledge. Perhaps they needed relational reassurance, connection, but they were

clearly always in charge of their own learning. I suppose that is true of everyone, but it was very evident with them because of their attentiveness to their own work and because they were always ahead of where the class was--at least in actual production of their work.

I had very little influence on Lillian. Her story is just as interesting to me, but I can read it without examining my teaching very much because I can just focus on her. Oh joy! I have no record and she has no record of the work she produced in the class. All I have is her story, and I quite like it that way. This teaches me that when I do a lot of teaching my teaching clogs up the story.

A central theme of this chapter is how or whether students connect their lives to the curriculum of the course. As adults, I would think they would. From my understanding of adult learning theory and self-directed learning, I would think they would. Of course this doesn't mean that they would share their connections with the class or whether they were intellectually aware of the connections. They might be "felt" connections that are very personal. I make a big deal about this early on. It was just so shocking how much the students knew about the theme--globalization, discourse communities--of the humanities and composition courses that did not reveal themselves. On the other hand, when they did, like Ken, then I was intrigued what the difference was.



I try to model to students ways they can connect their stories (like the story in my poem on my drive to work) to their lives, to their classes. I try to validate these stories as legitimate aspects of the class curriculum.

As I have shown in some of the stories, like for Kirk and for Taylor, stories that teachers use are a part of the curriculum. In the composition course, students are usually exploring their own learning problems now that they are considered adult learners. We read stories and analysis of college learning, from scholars in composition studies like Mike Rose and bell hooks. We consider dispositions and frames of reference that might hinder their own growth. They typically compose essays using anecdotes of their own and integrate stories and analysis of others. But this is not the most important aspect of my relational, narrative pedagogy: whether they tell stories or not, my understanding of them as temporal beings who have a past and a future, who have prior experiences, to not teach them as if they are the same. In addition, I expect that for many of their essays, they will have a unique form with unique content. Thus, through conversations with them, a generative dialogic process ensues for creative forms of expression and relationship.

Many articles using narrative inquiry are actually about narrative inquiry, in a way promoting narrative inquiry. They suggest that narrative inquiry could be used in professional development, in nursing homes, among pre-service teachers, for medical students. Thus, I am suggesting that narrative inquiry among students about students

could provide learning for both students and teachers. The teacher might be sharing narrative inquiry methods but the student will be the “expert” of the one she is researching in relation to herself. But again, these activities are less important than the recognition of the persons as embodied, unique, learned, vast. Walt Whitman is not the only one who contains multitudes.

Restorying is a possible way of “reading” the stories of students, even as a possible curriculum. Narrative inquiry has roots in the humanities, from Aristotle and Augustine:

Our own work then becomes one of learning to tell and live a new mutually constructed account of inquiry in teaching and learning. What emerges from this mutual relationship are new stories of teachers and learners as curriculum makers, stories that hold new possibilities for both researchers and teachers and for those who read their stories.<sup>162</sup>

Stories of the persons in classrooms like the ones here can be a kind of curriculum for themselves in particular. Only maybe for others.

Most of all, I realize that noting small rinky-dink notes about teaching as I went through this process was to make it too clean and trivial. What happened by the end was bigger, global shifts for me. I’m sure that some of my students might say that I was quite a fine instructor and maybe a few of my colleagues. I am not saying I wasn’t. I’m

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<sup>162</sup> Connelly and Clandinin, “Stories of Experience and Narrative Inquiry,” 12.

saying that research has given me the opportunity to quest after a different view of what was already there.

Many aspects of researching, storytelling, and teaching are clearer to me. “Storytelling then, in and of itself, or recounting...emerges as one of the concrete acts or practices that verify equality...The very act of storytelling, an act that presumes in its interlocutor an equality of intelligence rather than an inequality of knowledge, posits equality.”<sup>163</sup> I realize that although each unique, all of these stories, including my own, have a mother in them, even if it is in her absence. Mothers who push college, who have problems of their own, who are not there at all—they all seem to affect these persons in deep ways. My own mother was a teacher in her country and then eventually attended a community college in the country, struggling to get there because she could barely walk. I am sure she watched with pleasure when as I child I played school when I got home from school. Now researching, storytelling, and teaching is what I learn.

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<sup>163</sup> Kristin Ross, translator and introduction, in Rancière. Jacques. *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*. Trans. Kristin Ross. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991, 3.

## Epilogue

As I sit looking out at the Potomac River, I remember once spending a week in Minneapolis for a Phi Theta Kappa symposium. I had spent most of the week talking, partying, singing in the “freedom” choir, playing basketball and tennis, along with leading discussion groups. On the last day, I had some time alone and shopped, looking for a new dress for an upcoming family wedding in my small town in the country. I found the coolest neighborhood. I was so disappointed that I hadn’t discovered it earlier. After checking out slowly—each little antique place, coffee shop, funky burrow—I got to the end of the road. I looked left and realized that I was not very far away from where I had started and that it all just looked different because I came from the other direction. Next time I start a story project, I’ll have a map.

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