LOOKING BEYOND THE WHITEBOARD: INVESTIGATING FIRST YEAR TEACHING AND THE BEGINNING TEACHER THROUGH TRANSDISCIPLINARY INQUIRY

by

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Abstract

The beginning teacher's story is one that is rarely told. Amidst the theory-versus-practice dilemmas and judgement by self and others, a beginning teacher can easily lose his or her sense of self. The beginning teacher often naïvely believes that expert colleagues' teaching styles and techniques can and should be imitated. However, employing others' techniques and teaching as someone else does not always produce satisfactory results, and often, these sometimes desperate measures can also make the novice practitioner disillusioned about his or her identity, as well as the reasons for choosing this profession. This thesis explores the possibilities of how a reflection guided by the principles of transdisciplinary inquiry can help the beginning teacher understand the complexities of teaching and the teacher identity. Transdisciplinary inquiry acts as a set of lenses that transcend existing ways of investigation. In essence, transdisciplinary inquiry encompasses elements of self-reflexivity, plurality, and complexity, which enable a more insightful approach to reflection in real life settings. In this thesis, I reflected on my first year of teaching by analyzing and examining six anecdotes written in the form of narratives. Borrowing from Schön's (1983, 1987) model of reflective practice, I approached the narratives by first identifying a trigger, followed by framing, then reframing the questions or key ideas, before eventually determining the most suitable future action. Knowledge of one's identity through reflection is essential in this profession, for it is not merely teaching techniques that create a good teacher, but an awareness of oneself. I argue that good teaching emerges from one's identity because our personalities, values, and experiences influence how we teach and

why we teach. This thesis is an attempt to trace and document that process for my own practice as a beginning teacher.

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Acknowledgements

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I owe a special thank-you to my mom and dad for their financial and moral support. Finally, I would like to make a tribute to my sister, Cindy, and my boyfriend, Greg, for their encouragement throughout this process.

"Who is the self that teaches?" is the question at the heart of my own vocation. I believe it is the most fundamental question we can ask about teaching and those who teach – for the sake of learning and those who learn.

(Palmer, 2007, p. 8)

Chapter 1: Introduction

I never wanted to be a teacher, and yet, here I am, writing about the identity of a beginning teacher.

With this said, I never thought much about what teachers do and what it means to be a teacher, and despite a thirteen week practicum and a year of being a teacher on call, I still feel as if I don't fully know the "teacher" in me. To me, our society is so driven by the idea of economy and work that I cannot help but feel as if my job is my identity. It seems like Linda Mei – teacher, is the same as Linda Mei – individual. I seem to be defined and judged by my profession, which is not too much of a concern for the time being because I consider teaching to be my life. In this case, it might be pretentious of me to attempt to separate my teaching identity and my individual identity. The reality is that our sense of self is tied to the work that we do (Palmer, 2007). We essentially "teach who we are" (Palmer, 2007, p. 1). To add another dimension to this inquiry, I am only at the beginning of this profession and hence, my identity is still in constant flux and continuously evolving.

Being a teacher is interesting in that everyone who has been educated before knows what I do, but few actually really know what I do. No one ever asks me to elaborate on

what I do during those obligatory small-talk conversations about what one does for a living. A conservation consultant, a program executive director, or any job with a wicked title can get questions that ask them to explain what they do, but no one ever asks me. People *already* know what I do. They've had teachers before. It's such a stereotyped profession. Movies are notorious for portraying the common perceptions of teachers. I think of Mr. Simonet in *Pay it Forward*[1], Professor Keating in *Dead Poets Society*[2], or M. Mathieu in *Les Choristes*[3] when we think of the greats, and Ms. Halsey from *Bad Teacher*[4], Coach Carr from *Mean Girls*[5], or Mr. Bates from *Freaky Friday*[6] when we think of the worst.

Obviously, movies tend to exaggerate the role of the teacher; nevertheless, despite the embellishments, there really are extraordinarily good and astonishingly bad teachers. The good teachers motivate me to love the subject as much as he or she, while the bad teachers remind me of why I was not too fond of a specific course. There are also really cool teachers too. For example, my high school AP Calculus teacher was one of them. Now that brings up yet another dimension regarding the teacher. What is a cool teacher anyway?

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[1] McLaglen, M., Treisman, J., Reuther, S., Abrams, P., Levy, R. L., Carson, P. (Producers), & Leder, M. (Director). (2000). *Pay it forward* [motion picture]. United States: Warner Bros., Bel Air Entertainment, Tapestry Films, & Pathe!.
[2] Haft, S., Witt, P. J., Thomas, T. (Producers), & Weir, P. (Director). (1989). *Dead poets society* [motion picture]. United States: Touchstone Pictures.
[3] Cohn, A., Perrin, J., Jugnot, G. (Producers), & Barratier, C. (Director). (2004). *Les choristes* [motion picture]. France: Miramax Films.
[4] Miller, J., Householter, D. (Producers), & Kasdan, J. (Director). (2011). *Bad teacher* [motion picture]. United States: Columbia Pictures.
[5] Michaels, L., Shimkin, T., Rosner, L., Messick, J. (Producers), & Waters, M. (2004). *Mean girls* [motion picture]. United States and Canada: Paramount Pictures.
[6] Gunn, A., Iscovich, M., Sanderlin, A. M. (Producers), & Waters, M. (2003). *Freaky Friday* [motion picture]. United States: Walt Disney Pictures.

My transitioning sense of the beginning teacher's identity is a little beyond the simple division of good or bad teacher. Subject area(s) and/or grade(s) taught also contribute to a sense of teaching identity supposedly, at least, based on the questions that follow after one reveals that her profession is "teacher" during those obligatory small-talk conversations. Davis et al (2008) assert that "teaching and becoming a teacher should be mindful acts. Who we are, what we know, and what we are able to do are enabled and constrained by the possibilities of interpretation that are presented" (p. 188).

So then what does it mean to be an English teacher? A high school English teacher? An elementary P.E. teacher? What if I am both a high school English and Science teacher? Maybe I have two identities.

And even more important right now is what is a beginning teacher's identity? Can I be a really good teacher who inspires her students without fully knowing my own identity as a teacher? Pragmatically, I can teach in a way that suits me and I believe is more inspirational to the students because I have a sense of "self." Parker (2007) writes about "my sense of this 'I' who teaches – without which I have no sense of the 'Thou' who learns" (p. 10). But knowing my identity is more than an exercise in teaching expertise. The more familiar I become with the "I" inside, the more insight I will have into not just my teaching, but the way I attend to the world and those with whom I interact.

I adopt a more relaxed, conversational tone in this thesis to portray a more genuine sense of the narrative and to provide authenticity and currency to the inquiry.

1.1 Background

I cannot begin to thoroughly explore the beginning teacher's identity without briefly discussing my understanding of the purpose of education, and my philosophy of education. I realize, however, that my ideas are very much the result of the lessons that I have learned from my teachers and my students. I have been influenced by their teachings, and by the experiences that they have offered me. Despite the different ideas and experiences that I have, compared with other educators and their stories, there are nuances that are universal.

1.1.1 Purpose of Education – My Interpretation

One of the main objectives of education in the school system is to develop students to become productive citizens in the world. Education's value is accentuated by the widely accepted belief that education "is vital to the success of our working lives, to our children's futures and to long-term national development" (Robinson, 2001, p. 6). This economy-driven idea is also echoed in the British Columbia Ministry of Education Service Plan for 2011 – 2012 in that even the government dictates that "the final indicator of how well school served any student can be measured through his or her enduring grasp of the literacy skills that help determine an individual's quality of life, including meaningful employment and a satisfactory income" (BC Ministry of Education, 2011). Given this social expectation, my responsibilities as a teacher becomes both exciting and important, but at the same time, daunting and challenging.

This task is made even more improbable by the disconcerting realization that in its current state, many systems and structures of education are unable to keep up to what Daniel Pink (2005) refers to as the "conceptual age." Pink (2005) concludes that based on the current trend of culture, economy and technology, our society has shifted away from knowledge workers to creators and empathizers. Karl Fisch's astute summary that we "are currently preparing students for jobs that don't yet exist, using technologies that haven't been invented yet, in order to solve problems we don't even know are problems yet," is a pressing message that is being communicated virally through the "Did you know?" video on YouTube, and other print and online sources.

In recent years, there has been a significant emphasis on the necessity of change in the educational system (Robinson, 2001). This push for change is a result of an evolving workforce and technological advances. The argument that schools are not preparing students to function effectively in their future career and in society sounds more valid each year. Robinson (2001) asserts that we are "caught up in a social and economic revolution," one that is comparable to the remarkable changes that occurred during the times of the Industrial Revolution; however, the education system is unprepared or reluctant to adapt to this imperative (p. 4). As an institution characterized by traditions and boundaries, academia is comfortable with the familiar and wary with the new or the novel.

School is essentially a place for learning, and despite its role in helping individuals recognize their potential, it is also a place of exclusion. Those who have the type of intelligence that is recognized by academia are embraced and given opportunities to succeed. Others who are not as "successful" academically are often shunned by the system

and left to their own devices. Even within the institution, there are further curiosities. Certain disciplines, for example the sciences and mathematics, are perceived to be more prestigious than the arts, and are, therefore, prioritized above creative concepts and perspectives (Robinson, 2001). Unfortunately, the real world does not function in isolated blocks of disciplines where scientists must think like scientists, and musicians must think like musicians.

Our current education system, with its obsession on raising standards, emphasizes compartmentalized disciplinary content knowledge and prescribed learning outcomes; hence, many students challenge the relevance and value of what they learn (Boyer, 1998). Like my students, I also challenge the relevance and significance of what I teach sometimes. In other words, many students struggle to make connections between the information they acquire in schools and the practical life experiences that they need to function in a complex society where the nature of knowledge evolves continuously and the application of knowledge tools, such as technology, advances exponentially. Integrated inquiry rather than segregated disciplinary knowledge should govern learning: "[the] aim of education should be . . . how to think, than what to think – rather to improve our minds, so as to enable us to think for ourselves, than to load the memory with thoughts of other men" (Dewey, 1964, p. 106). In *Ecological Literacy*, Orr (1992) asserts that the issues we face today "cannot be solved by the same kind of education that helped create the problems" (p. 83). We should frame education in terms of expanding the space of the possible.

Enter the concept of transdisciplinarity[7]. The 1998 UNESCO Symposium on Transdisciplinarity argues that transdisciplinary inquiry has the potential to investigate the *how* and *what* of learning – an endeavour that is increasingly significant in a society where many of the complex issues we face require integration across disciplines, and creative perspectives that transcend the disciplines. In other words, transdisciplinary inquiry enables us to better understand the process of learning and of meaning-making so that we can better appreciate knowledge and varying epistemological perspectives.

Recognizing different perspectives and applying integrated ideas allows for evaluation and creation, two of the higher level thinking domains on Bloom's Taxonomy. In the world we live in now and will encounter in the future, simple recall and straightforward application are no longer sufficient to succeed. Teachers, too, need to evolve, since the "pace of change has us snarled in complexities, confusions, and conflicts that will diminish us, or do us in, if we do not enlarge our capacity to teach and to learn" (Palmer, 2007, p. 3).

1.1.2 Philosophy of Education

Perhaps "philosophy" is too loaded a word to use in this context, but it's a word that embodies important ideas. In this case, my "philosophy" of education encompasses three central questions:

1. What do *I* think is the purpose of education?

2. What do I think is important for the students to learn in my class?

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[7] For more information on transdisciplinarity, consult Basarab Nicolescu's (2002) *Manifesto of transdisciplinarity.*

3. What is my role as a teacher of these students?

Each of these questions provides the basis for further exploration.

Theme 1: My purpose of education

Throughout the years, multiple classification schemes have explained different types of curricula. Schiro (2008) categorizes curriculum ideologies into scholar academic, social efficiency, learner centered, and social reconstructionist. The type of curriculum that is emphasized by the mainstream institutions and school districts sheds some light on academia's perspective on the purpose of education. As discussed previously, education reform and government plans frequently focus on students' eventual contributions to the economy. Although all four of Schiro's curriculum ideologies are and should be essential to the concept of education, based on the public system in which I am employed and have been schooled, I would argue that I teach in a primarily scholar academic environment.

The scholar academic ideology identifies the nature of knowledge as didactic statements where knowledge provides the ability to understand. The source of knowledge comes from "objective reality as interpreted by the academic disciplines," and derives its authority from the academic disciplines (Schiro, 2008, p. 178). This curriculum ideology most closely identifies with the economically-driven mentality of educators – within this hierarchy of experts and knowledge, students are taught to participate in this process to work their way to the top. Despite the fact that this ideology preserves the integrity of intellectual rigour and objectivity with its root in disciplinary knowledge, this ideology is

unfortunately often simplified into a cookie-cutter and mass-production interpretation of education—often referred to as "traditional education."

The teacher's role in a scholar academic ideology is to act as a "mediator between the curriculum and the student" (Schiro, 2008, p. 46). The hierarchical organization of a discipline in this situation moves from the dissemination of knowledge to the search for knowledge, from students to teachers to scholars. The school is sometimes seen as "the instrument for transferring a certain maximum quantity of knowledge to the growing generation" (Einstein, 1982, p. 60). The majority of class time is involved with this activity. As a student, I have been taught by teachers who have been taught by scholars. As a teacher now, I transmit the knowledge I have acquired from scholars to my students. I do so because the scholars are the perceived experts whose words and knowledge are taken as truth. The government issues standardized examinations to my students to evaluate whether my disciples have acquired the necessary abilities and understandings to be advanced to the next level before being approved to navigate productively in society. Unfortunately, both the economic and intellectual models of education are "outmoded and . . . completely inadequate," as I will demonstrate below (Robinson, 2001, p. 23).

While I too support the idea that education should prepare young people for the world and the interactions they encounter, I am less enthused about the economic agenda. I speak from a North American perspective when I discuss this social outcome we call the economy. The economy involves money, and in order for it to persist and flourish, we must ensure that our future generations are able to make and spend money. From this

perspective, the message is clear: the more money you make, the more successful you are. And, the more highly paid your job, the more successful you are deemed to be.

During the first year of my teaching, I had a discussion in my class about marks and the purpose of education. Virtually every single one of my students desires to do well in school and acknowledges the importance of school because of future employment prospects:

"I want to be able to have a good job in the future."

Never mind what a "good job" actually means. These students are only thirteen or fourteen! And they're already thinking about a "good job in the future." What else can we adults expect, seeing that one of the first questions they were asked as children after they entered kindergarten is "what would you like to be when you grow up?"

I fell into the same trap. At the age of four, I said that I wanted to be a doctor. At that time in my life, I was aware of four professions – teacher, firefighter, police woman, and doctor. As I grew older, I sensed the admiration and positive responses I received from adults whenever I revealed my goals, and I truly believed that I would succeed in life when I became a doctor.

From a survey of their future aspirations, in two classes of thirty, I would argue that at least fifty percent of them want to be doctors when they grow up. A review of UBC's 2006 admission statistics reveal that only 12.7% of people are accepted into university, which equates to about three students in a class of thirty. Factoring in the fact that medical

school applicants generally have a high GPA, I would be surprised if even one of them gets admitted and graduates from medical school.

So clearly, this economically driven idea behind education appears incompatible with the current school system. Under the mandates of the social efficiency curriculum theory, the concern is not for the child as a person, but for the child's capability for fulfilling social needs (Schiro, 2008).

I do not deny the impact of the economy, but perhaps education should also focus on more than hierarchical disciplinary knowledge and developing skills necessary to secure a "good job," and more on the value of knowing and connecting with others. We really should expand our view in that schools are not merely places where we prepare students for future living in the world; students are living now, in the present. In this sense, for me, the purpose of education is to develop more than just employable students, but to expand an awareness of the world, foster a love of learning, encourage creativity, develop critical thinking, and provide opportunities for students to interact with one another.

Theme 2: What is important to teach in class

Given that my personal philosophy of education is slightly modified from the commonly accepted view, in my first year of teaching after I had satisfied my sponsor teachers or followed another teacher's lesson plans as a teacher on call, I attempted to "undo" the students' schooling by challenging their beliefs about what they perceive as truth and the authoritative relation between teacher and student. Schooling is a part of living, and thus, the goal is to open new perceptions and therefore, possibilities.

I still refer to the British Columbia Ministry of Education's Prescribed Learning Outcomes to provide a framework to convey information, but a significant portion of class time is used for discussion and less teacher-directed activities. I basically have to "un-school" my students. By the end of my first year of teaching in-class, discussions turned out to be one of the most effective approaches in representing what I think the purpose of education is.

Awareness: Too often, people are at the mercy of others. Social influence manifests itself through conformity and obedience. Solomon Asch's[8] classic visual line experiment provides a "dramatic demonstration of humans' propensity to conform" (Weiten et al, 2010, p. 725). If such a simple line test can influence people's responses, students in a school can easily yield to real or imagined social pressures, and they do. When observing my class, I am always intrigued by how many of them conform to the current trend in fashion and in electronic devices and accessories. Beyond a superficial conformity related to material possessions, they may also be inclined to participate in certain activities that augment their "cool" factor and credibility, or be encouraged to harbour an opinion about a certain class / teacher that is similar to everyone else's. For example, basketball is considered the most elite sports activity at my school. The student body's belief in the popular status of basketball exemplifies a form of conformity. The excitement that permeates the gyms and hallways during the basketball season is astonishing; the athletes always dress formally on game days, and as a coach, I felt the pressure to conform and dress formally too.

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[8] Asch demonstrated conformity in group settings by using vision tests where participants are asked to indicate which of three different sized lines correspond with a control line. Asch found that an overwhelming number of participants chose an incorrect answer when others in the group (researchers in disguise) responded incorrectly.

In an academic institution, the impact of obedience is undeniable. The balance of power in teacher-student relations is tipped to one side because of inequality; teachers are in a position of authority, and, therefore, regardless of how liberal or inspirational the teacher is, the traditions and assumptions of academia are firmly in place. For the most part, students' age and lack of knowledge in comparison to their teachers can also easily make schools notorious for the misuse of authority, or at the very least, for the enforcement of compliance. In other words, "education is a fearful enterprise" (Palmer, 2007, p. 36). In an ideal learning environment, the teachers honour the students' voices, but for the most part, students look to the teacher for the correct answer (as if the correct answer is the only one worth knowing) and the "right" decisions. What I write on the board must be important. What I say must be right. The mark they get is what I give (instead of what they earned). Within a fear-based system, as a teacher, I control what they learn, their marks, their future, and in a sense, them. This power imbalance exists everywhere though – between politicians and citizens, doctors and patients, CEOs and employees, men and women, the rich and the poor, adults and children.

Keeping that in mind, I aimed to subvert the structure and the existing expectations in hopes that the students will leave my class being slightly better equipped to challenge ideas and the status quo. Freire (1970) argues that education provides people with opportunities, empowering the oppressed and the less privileged so that they may take their place in society through awareness. Indeed, awareness is one of the first steps to taking control of one's own life. Education, as a process that enables people to notice what they haven't noticed, is an "ongoing expansion of one's perceptual world" (Davis et al, 2008,

p. 35). I was oblivious to Wordles[9] for a very long time before someone pointed it out to me. Now I see them everywhere, and recognize their appeal as both a marketing tool and a visual form of art. Perhaps my advocacy for an increased awareness of the world around us stems from my identity as a woman in a very gendered society and patriarchal culture, or as a young person in a workforce dominated by middle aged experts. These motivations intrigue me, and I will further explore this later.

If my students can at least recognize that they have a choice in what they wear and do, as well as appreciate that they can challenge the teacher's answers, I will have accomplished my goal. I am not naïve or arrogant enough to think that I am to be solely credited for their enlightenment – but I do hope that my words and teachings make a difference. Any student of mine will acknowledge that I seem more delighted when challenged than by the correct response. To challenge the expert, the authority, means that the student is aware, and this awareness allows one to control his or her own life. Educating then, really means to "guide students on an inner journey toward more truthful ways of seeing and being in the world," instilling a powerful sense of agency (Palmer, 2007, p. 6).

Love of Learning: Fostering a love for learning plays a key role in many of the choices I make in the classroom, as well as the teaching strategies and activities I use. From the many conversations I have had with my colleagues, the majority of us were very successful as students. We have to be successful in the academic context in order to obtain an undergraduate degree and then demonstrate an ability to philosophize about the

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[9] Wordle is an online tool used to generate word clouds using text to emphasize certain key ideas. The more frequently a word appears in a block of text, the bigger the image in the word cloud created.

theoretical and pedagogical underpinnings of education. Many of us are actually nerdy enough to relish the idea of conveying the truths of our disciplines. We actually love our subjects, and embrace the fact that we are the representatives of our subjects. Our disciplines chose us, shedding light on our identity. So of course I respond in a flabbergasted manner when the students I teach reject this very pleasurable process called learning and my subjects.

"I hate English" is like the proverbial stab to the heart, and "I think Science is stupid" is like the clichéd knockout punch to the face. Those poor students are just miserable. In secondary school in British Columbia, especially prior to grade ten, the students really lack the autonomy to choose the course of study that best suits their abilities and interests. Some students will work hard regardless of their interest level because the objective of achieving good grades takes precedence. Others, however, are miserable! They sit in class, texting with their friends or their parents, playing games on their phones, talking to their friends, or, my favourite, sleeping.

This presents two different issues: in the former situation, I find students' obsession with good grades to be quite reminiscent of my own experiences in school, and in the latter case, I am challenged as to how to best engage them.

How much learning is really happening if marks are the main motivation? What happens when marks are no longer attached? Does apathy ensue? Does learning stop?

And is it even possible to motivate students who would rather nap than work within the academic content?

Creativity: The great scientist Albert Einstein once said that "Imagination is more important than knowledge." The idea of encouraging creativity in education could fill tomes for two major reasons: one, it is undermined in academia, and two, it is necessary for the sustainability and evolution of society. Rather than fill said tomes in a thesis that is focused on the beginning teacher's identity, the topic of creativity will only briefly be alluded to here.

Creativity and culture cannot be separated; "[thinking] and feeling are not simply about seeing the world as it is, but of having ideas about it, of interpreting experience to give it meaning" (Robinson, 2001, p. 11). Creativity is what allows for change, such as the great revolutions that have occurred in human history. For all that creativity enables, it is something that cannot be readily measured and standardized, or be represented by empirical evidence and truths. Therefore, the public education system tends to emphasize the paradigms of scientific understanding rather than the possibilities of creative processes (Robinson, 2001). With its current perspective on the value of disciplines, I believe that education is fundamentally denying students from being and from living.

Practically, creativity has always been difficult to evaluate, since it has much to do with individual perception and the appropriate medium. Accordingly, since numerical designations imposed upon creative works and ideas tend not to provide an accurate gauge of a student's competency, there is some fear of its place in academia. I do want to be a fair teacher, but how can I remain unbiased while evaluating the most evocative poems and visually tantalizing images? In a way, the five paragraph essay is disproportionately easier

to mark than the creative narrative, and the unit test less onerous to assess than the exploratory model.

Interestingly enough, it always comes down to marks in a system of schooling rather than an educative agenda. Even I'm restrained by the idea of letter grades. The creative projects are never worth as much as the essays and tests.

But can creativity be taught? I used to think that it cannot be, until Ken Robinson's (2001) inspirational book *Out of Our Minds*. I have yet to fully figure out how to teach and assess creativity, but I work with his belief.

Critical Thinking: Critical thinking is one of those educational catchphrases that never seem out dated. I often hear: "What I learned in high school was all pretty useless and not really all that applicable to my life, but what I did learn from all the things I was taught was how to think critically."

So what does thinking critically mean, anyway?

An elaborate definition of critical thinking describes it as the "intellectually disciplined process of actively and skilfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and / or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action" (Scriven and Paul, 1987). In short, critical thinking is the process where we use our minds to make sense of information and possibly do something with that information. The result of cultivating a culture of critical thinking is that we enable students to formulate questions and problems in a clear and precise manner, consider alternative systems of thought,

communicate effectively with others to solve complex problems, and to gather and interpret information for effective use (www.criticalthinking.org, 2009). Just the thought of enabling this vital shift in the way young people approach the world is enough to make one fully cognisant of the impact of one's profession.

Connecting with Others: Davis et al (2008) emphasize that humans are "not self-contained, insulated, or isolated beings, but are situated in grander social, cultural, and ecological systems"; from the moment we are born, our lives are interlaced with the lives of others (p. 7). There is no "I" without "you," and "Otherness, taken seriously, always invites transformation, calling us not only to new facts and theories and values but also to new ways of living our lives" (Palmer, 2007, p. 39). The other challenges us, and builds our capacity to grow.

Observations and conversations reveal much about the intricacies and workings of the school environment, and my humble inference is that teacher-student interaction is one of the most rewarding aspects of the profession, that staff collegiality promotes a positive work environment, and that friends make school a fun place. All three insights revolve around the central concept of connection.

Remarkably enough, this idea of connection is rarely the subject of academic deliberation or learning outcome requirements. The understanding that knowing is a community event, that it "is a human way to seek relationship and in the process . . . have encounters and exchanges that will inevitably alter us," does not seem to be readily accepted in schools (Palmer, 2007, p. 55). The Western culture has a "tendency to regard the individual as the basic unit of knowing and sociality, out of which all knowledge and

culture arise" (Davis et al, 2008, p. 11). Schools are designed to recognize individual achievement in isolation. I find this rather ironic for two reasons – one, that nearly all professions and social situations entail interaction, and two, with the proliferation of social media and communication technology, we are more connected than ever before.

We are always communicating with others through verbal utterances and bodily gestures. The CEO can never share his or her vision with employees without communication. The media cannot broadcast the latest human interest stories and conflicts without communication. The customer cannot express his or her needs without communication. As long as humans have existed together, so has some form of communication.

Facebook, Twitter, text messaging and cell phones are among some of the most powerful communication technologies today. Within seconds, the world learned about Osama Bin Laden's death, the luge training run tragedy during Vancouver 2010, the Japanese earthquake, Alex Burrow's game 7 overtime goal against the Black Hawks, and what someone is doing in the classroom at 10:47 am. We have really only just begun to explore the possibilities.

Being able to interact with others is a social skill and aptitude that we assume students to have. The majority of educators know that group work is essential to success, and that more minds produce better results. The problem is that many of us don't know how to teach consideration of the other, nor do we even think to teach it in the first place! So much stress is placed on getting through the curriculum, especially for provincial examinable courses; sometimes, there is no time to deviate from the lesson and develop

cooperative learning and social skills. But more than just effective group work is at play here; there is tolerance, respect, and understanding of diversity and of others. Simply put, the connections and relations in our lives give or sap life.

While these areas of focus are valuable to me, I also realize that I can only do so much as a teacher. From what I have discussed, I expect to be able to teach students to think, to do, and to be, which at the best of times, is a lofty goal. But is that really something within my capabilities? And is it really something that should be required or expected of me? I have a difficult enough time waiting patiently during rush hour! At the end of my first year of teaching in a classroom, I'm 24 years of age. I'm still trying to grow up and figure out my life, and now, I've got to add "inspire" and "enlighten" the youth of tomorrow too. It's definitely an understatement when I say that teaching is neither an easy profession, nor a vocation for everyone.

Theme 3: My role as a teacher

Teachers are professionals. That designation means that we have a social responsibility because people look to professionals for the solutions to problems (Schön, 1983). The impetus is that through these experts, we can strive for social progress. That is a serious responsibility, one that perhaps not all teachers, and especially beginning teachers, are ready to fulfill. Unlike other professionals however, we are situated at the intersection of the public and the personal, since we cannot be purely detached like lawyers in the public sphere, nor can we be overly focused on the individual like psychiatrists dealing with the personal domain (Figure 1). While we need to support the individual needs of students, we also need to attend to the world in which they live in. Such

an intersection occurs in this profession because teaching, and more importantly, good

teaching, connects the self, the subjects, and the students (Figure 2). Although rarely

explicitly stated, teachers are expected to "serve as models for others . . . positioned as

beacons of normality . . . to be exemplars or cultural representatives of collective ideas"

(Davis et al, 2008, p. 38). These notions further complicate the profession of teaching,

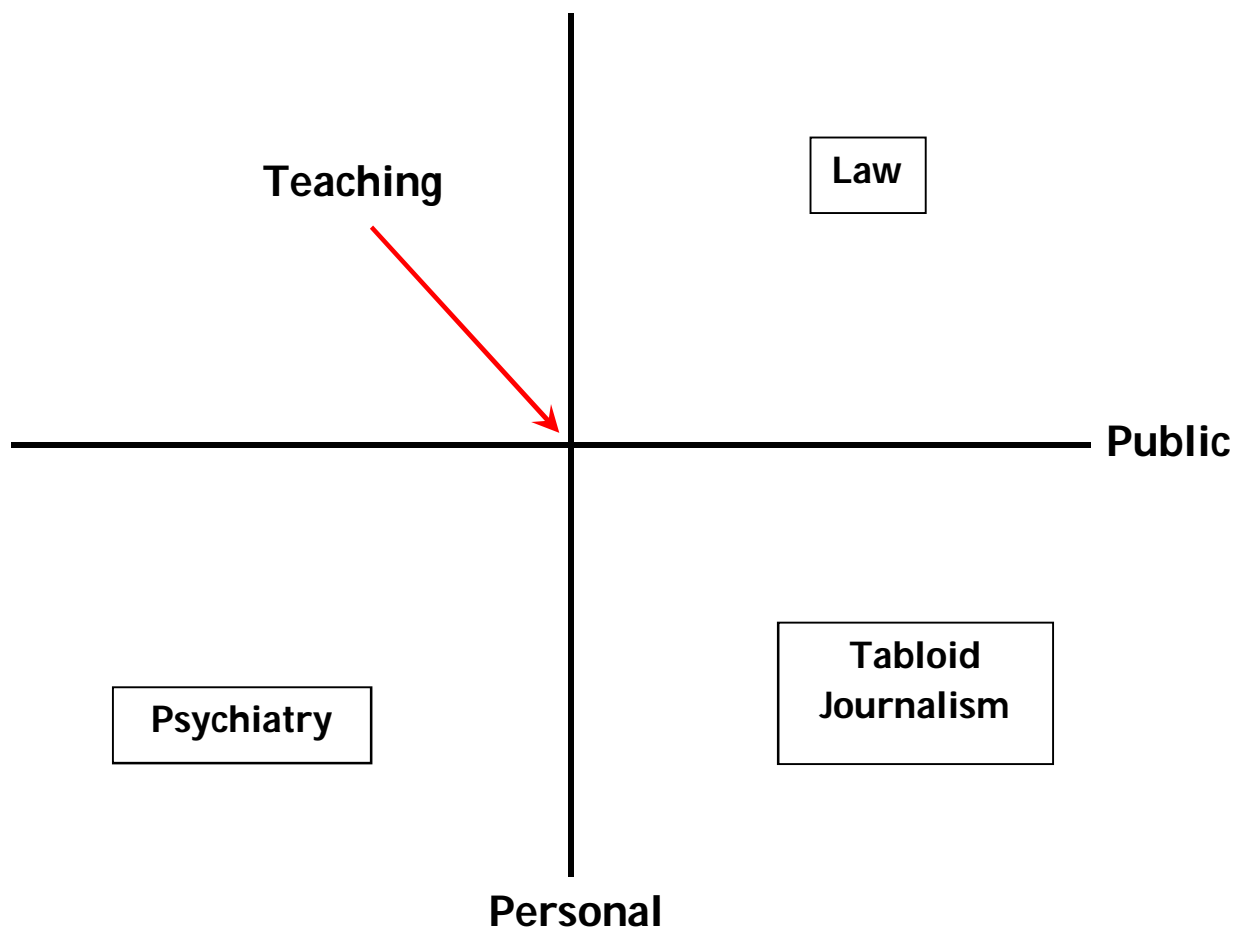leading to many challenges, especially for new teachers.

Figure 1: Teaching is at the intersection of the public and personal domains (adapted from Palmer, 2007)

The assumption that certification equates to a fully qualified individual who is now capable of teaching often leaves beginning teachers feeling overwhelmed and lacking guidance (Bullough, 1989). This assumption is understandably unnerving because I am a professional (an inexperienced one, but still one nevertheless), and professionals have the autonomy to make judgements and are deemed experts. With this expertise and autonomy comes the privilege of defining standards of evaluation. What if I make a mistake?

The link between learning how to teach in theory and actually knowing how to teach from experience is often quite ambiguous. Beginning teachers often lack the refined nuances that expert teachers inherently possess. Our actions and decisions are usually more reactive than proactive, as we have yet to tune in to students' behavioural pattern, or respond sensitively to their needs and the teaching contexts in which we work. Bullough (1989) refers to the work of Veenman (1984) regarding some of the problems beginning teachers face. He mentions the following:

1. Classroom discipline

2. Motivating students

3. Dealing with individual differences among students

4. Assessing students' work

5. Relationships with parents

6. Organization of class work

7. Insufficient materials and supplies

8. Dealing with problems of individual students

Most of these problems will be addressed in more depth throughout the thesis using anecdotal renderings of experience so that I am able to reflect on my journey as a beginning teacher and improve. In many situations though, my challenge is not knowing what I need to do, or what questions I need to ask. My problem is that sometimes I am not even sure where to begin to seek for help.

When I don't even know what to do or where to begin, the ideals I hope to accomplish in my classroom, my values and beliefs that constitute my identity cannot easily materialize.
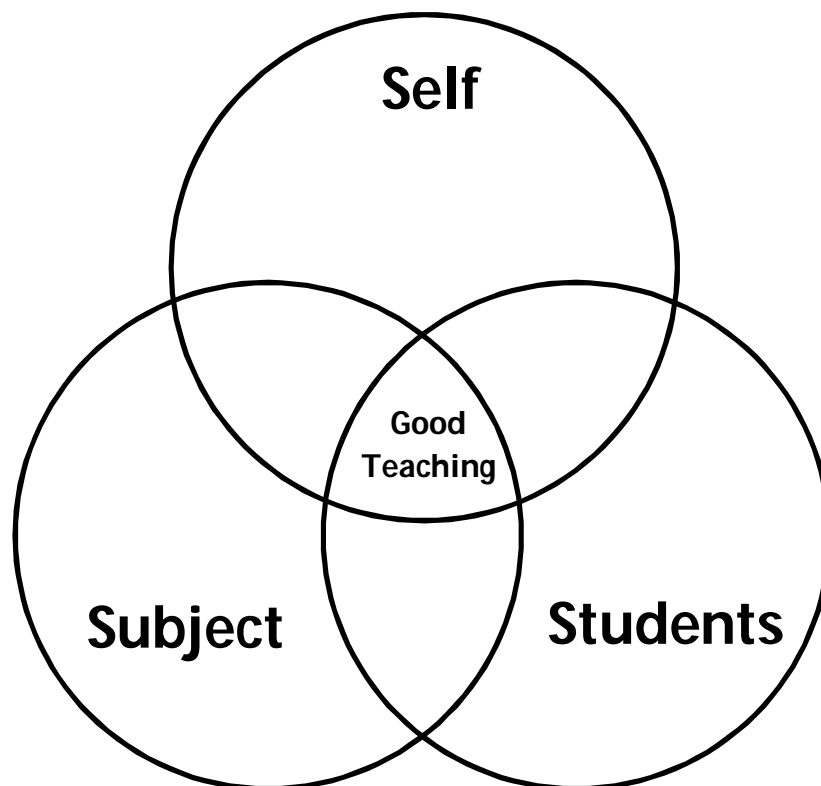

Figure 2: The domains of good teaching (adapted from Palmer, 2007)

1.2 Analytic Frame for Research Question

Donald Schön's work with professional inquiry has prompted us to think about how professionals continue to develop and remain accountable. He has identified ideas like reflection-in-action in which professionals respond to complexity by thinking ahead, analyzing, experiencing, and critically responding. This type of inquiry allows practitioners to connect with their feelings, emotions, and prior knowledge to the situation. "Reflective practice" is, in essence, the capacity to reflect on action so as to engage in a process of continuous learning, which is one of the defining characteristics of professional practice (Schön, 1983). Raelin (2002) further defines reflective practice:

> *Reflective practice . . . is the practice of periodically stepping back to ponder the meaning of what has recently transpired to ourselves and to others in our immediate environment. It illuminates what the self and others have experienced, providing a basis for future action. In particular, it privileges the process of inquiry, leading to an understanding of experiences that may have been overlooked in practice.*

(p. 66)

Reflective practice is especially important in professions such as teaching, since one cannot really be taught how to teach students. Teachers can be given tips and strategies; we can even emulate teachers we admire, but ultimately, one's teaching comes from knowing oneself. Many professors or teacher-candidates agree that some of the most valuable practical knowledge about being a teacher arose in the practicum.

Someone from my education cohort phrased it succinctly: "What's with all this theoretical bullshit?"

Indeed, a good majority of teacher-candidates find the coursework component at universities and colleges tedious. That, or they expect to be given a "how to" manual about teaching from the teaching experts (who unfortunately, are not always experts). The practicum was like a trial by fire. Some of us sink immediately and drop out of the program. Practical experience is a powerful wake up call.

Others continued and learned from the experience. Usually this development occurred without too much reflection, and throughout the practicum and our future teaching opportunities, many of us learned what worked well for us, and what didn't. However, a number of us typically don't have the time to critically contemplate our practice, which can possibly hinder our growth as professionals, or prevent insight into our identities as teachers. On a realistic level, classrooms are dynamic, meaning that we need to stop treating our profession as something static and recognize its fluid nature. After all, it is "through the development of knowledge and understanding of the practice setting and the ability to recognize and respond to such knowledge that the reflective practitioner becomes truly responsive to the needs, issues, and concerns that are so important in shaping practice" (Loughran, 2002, p. 9).

This thesis is an avenue for me to be reflective on my experiences after my first year of teaching. This is a learning opportunity as much as it is a restorative activity. Donald Schön's (1983, 1987) reflective practice model provides me with a suitable analytic frame.

Schön's (1983, 1987) model of reflective practice analyzes a situation through four stages (Figure 3):

1. Trigger

2. Frame

3. Reframe

4. Plan for future action

The trigger is the event that initiates the inquiry (and allows more ideas to be built on top of others), so for instance, we notice that one student does nothing in class. The practitioner is intrigued, surprised, curious, and uncertain about this aspect of the practice setting in other words. The trigger is often times confronting and provocative. The frame allows the practitioner to take a step back and analyze the situation, framing that aspect based on the particulars of the setting. This step allows the practitioner to attend to the setting and details. In this case, the aspects are framed in terms of lack of motivation or interest. As the practitioner progresses from the frame to the reframe stage, she draws on prior experiences and knowledge to identify some of the key issues. Hence, once sufficient details are gathered, how does one make sense of the experience? Possible conclusions could be that the student had behavioural or learning disabilities, felt bored, lacked motivation, felt stressed, or was confused with the information. A future action in this case would be to determine if the student had an Individual Education Plan (IEP), as well as for the teacher to consider employing an alternative instructional strategy to engage the student and help with his or her comprehension.

By being reflective, the teacher is an inquirer who is continuously striving to inform her practice and promote student learning. Ultimately, a goal of any inquiry is to achieve more insight about oneself such that one's performance is enhanced as a result; in teaching, a profession that is so entwined with relationships and feedback, this idea is that much

more important. As Bullough (1989) states, the "beginning teacher either succeeds in establishing a renewed sense of identity and self-worth, or is crushed and becomes disenchanted with teaching" (p. 17). We start our teaching careers full of hope and ideals, vowing to be open to possibilities and create change. The same youthful optimism that brings us into the classroom is extinguished by the demands of the classroom itself, and we are left questioning what education is for, and if it's possible to change a social institution so steeped in unspoken expectations and established routines. Perhaps I shouldn't be surprised by the staggering statistic, which outlines that up to 50% of beginning teachers quit the profession within five years (BCTF, 2005).

But rather than focus on such a disheartening reality of why teachers leave the profession, I would like to, instead, use this thesis to emphasize the idealistic views of why a teacher would stay. Luck has a hand in this situation, but I would like to argue that reflection through inquiry has an even more significant role in motivating teachers to continue.

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                    ┌─────────────────┐
                    │    Practice     │
                    └────────┬────────┘
                             ▼
┌──────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│ **Trigger:** The intriguing, confusing,        │
│ controversial, interesting event that initiates│
│ the exploration                                 │
└──────────────────────┬─────────────────────────┘
                       ▼
┌──────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│ **Frame:** The frame from which the            │
│ practitioner examines a particular aspect of   │
│ the situation                                   │
└──────────────────────┬─────────────────────────┘
                       ▼
┌──────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│ **Reframe:** Drawing from prior knowledge and  │
│ experience to investigate the issues of the    │
│ setting                                         │
└──────────────────────┬─────────────────────────┘
                       ▼
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│ **Future Action:** Using the knowledge and     │
│ insight derived from the inquiry to plan for   │
│ changes to improve the current condition       │
└──────────────────────┬─────────────────────────┘
                       ▼
            ┌─────────────────────┐
            │     **Practice**    │
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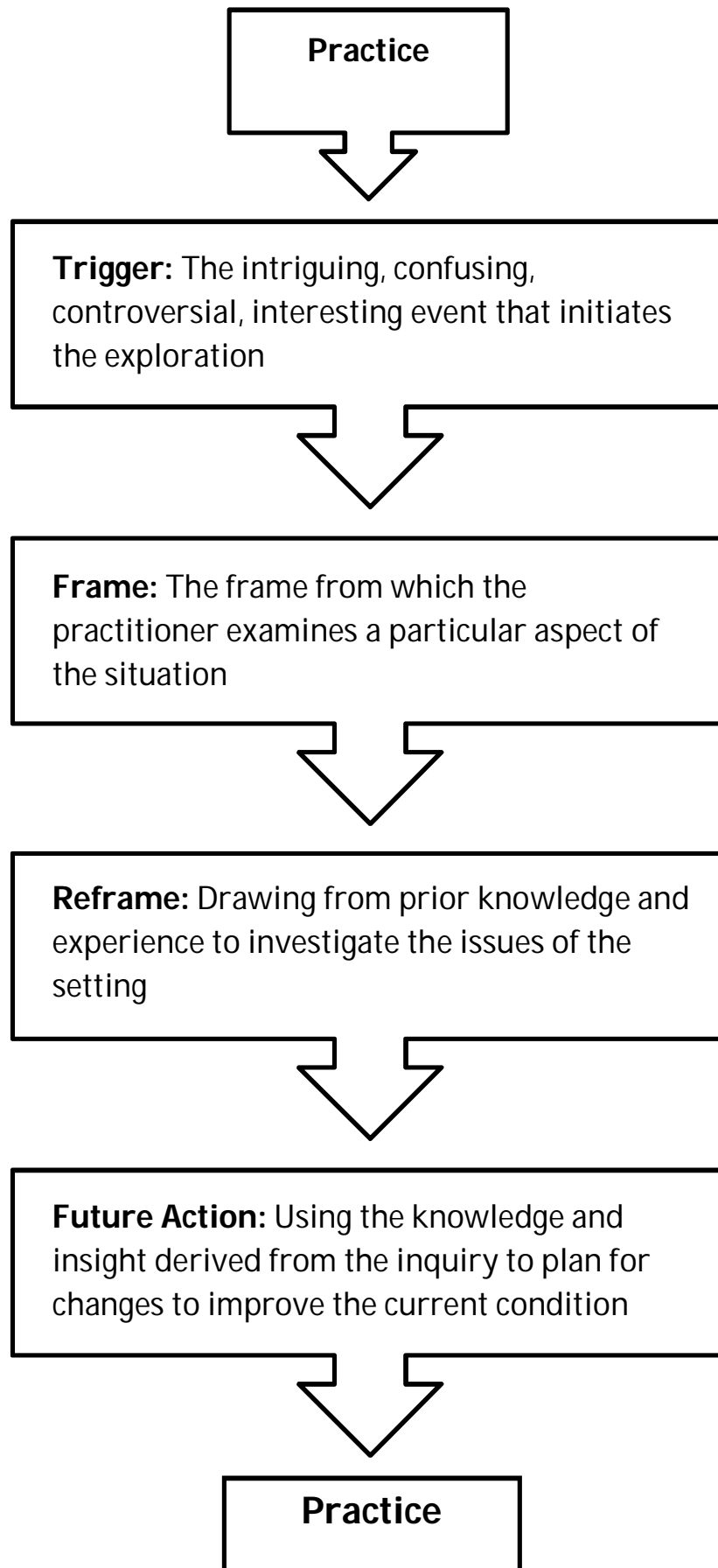
Figure 3: Schön's (1983, 1987) model of reflective practice

1.3 Method and Research Question

Initially, I was drawn to the idea of transdisciplinarity due to my background in two disciplines that are typically perceived as being at the opposite ends of a spectrum. My preliminary research on the topic inspired a greater understanding about not only its definition, but its possibilities as a lens. In other words, transdisciplinary inquiry can be seen as a lens to consider issues and ideas that allow for novel ways of understanding. Continuing with the lens analogy, Figure 4 is my rendering of the difference between viewing from disciplinary to transdisciplinary perspectives. After reviewing literature on "transdisciplinarity" and "inquiry," I have developed a working definition of "transdisciplinary inquiry" as the process of investigating, examining and researching knowledge by going beyond the disciplines to integrate multiple perspectives that reflect the complexity of the human condition. The beginning teacher's identity is one such complex human condition.

I refer to Montuori (2005, 2008) to further develop the idea of transdisciplinary inquiry and its application in exploring questions that are beyond conventional inquiry methods:

1. Transdisciplinarity is "inquiry-driven" rather than "discipline-driven." As such, transdisciplinary inquiry is guided by the inquirer's research agenda, and by the questions that emerge "through a dialogue between the inquirer's experience and passion, the subject of inquiry, and the bodies of knowledge available" (Montuori, 2005, p. 154). This does not reject disciplinary knowledge; on the contrary,

transdisciplinary inquiry engages disciplinary knowledge and adds to it, "pertinent knowledge from a plurality of other disciplines, through the development of a plurality of perspectives on the same topic, and through a constant interaction with the inquirer's context and his or her own lived experience, values, and beliefs" (Montuori, 2005, p. 154). Such pertinent knowledge is developed for the purposes of action in the world.

2. Traditional approaches to inquiry have "been reductive and disjunctive, with ever increasing separation and differentiation, but with little or no effort to connect and contextualize" (Montouri, 2005, p. 154). Transdisciplinarity should be a *meta-paradigmatic* approach. This process questions the inquirer's own paradigmatic assumptions, and offers an "opportunity to question and explore one's own assumptions," for it is "in the exchange with different perspectives that our own perspectives become most clearly elucidated and articulate" (Montouri, 2005, p. 155). By accepting the possibility of multiple ways of knowing and the co-existence of various perspectives, we can develop creative integrations and novel concepts.

3. Transdisciplinary inquiry enables new ways of thinking, what Morin (2005) calls "complex thought." As a self-reflective process, transdisciplinary inquiry encourages a kind of "creative thinking that contextualizes and connects, distinguishes rather than separates" (Montuori, 2005, p. 155). The importance of the observer and the nature of thinking is recognized, shifting the focus from observed systems to observing systems (Montouri, 2005).

4. In contrast to disciplinary and interdisciplinary inquiry, transdisciplinary inquiry emphasizes passion, creativity, context and connection. The inquirer's "subjectivity

is an inextricable part of the inquiry's context and indeed not just deeply connected

to, but constitutive of the inquirer's construction and interpretation of the context"

(Montouri, 2005, p. 156). In essence, transdisciplinary inquiry integrates the

inquirer in the process of inquiry. The inquirer's motivations and assumptions are

made transparent throughout the process of knowledge construction. Montouri

(2005) asserts that every inquiry "becomes an opportunity for self-inquiry . . . [and]

self-inquiry becomes a necessary part of the research process" that leads to self-

contextualization, further self-inquiry, and self-creation (p. 156). Fundamentally, in

order to understand the world we must understand ourselves, and in order to

understand ourselves, we must understand the world (Montouri, 2008).

Disciplinary	Multidisciplinary
Viewing through one lens	*Acknowledging the existence of other lenses, but viewing separately*
Interdisciplinary	Transdisciplinary
Overlapping lenses to examine, but still within the parameters set by the two lenses	*Many sets of lenses nested within each other to view as one*

Figure 4: A comparison of disciplinary, multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and
transdisciplinary viewing perspectives

Examination of the narrative anecdotes from my first year of teaching requires that I access the self-reflexivity, plurality, and complexity elements of transdisciplinary inquiry; my inquiry is driven by my passion and creativity for teaching, as well as the context in which I am situated and the connections I establish during my experiences. With the gained insight from this analysis, I hope to undergo a transformation in my teaching and my identity as a teacher. As Clarke (1995) writes, "knowledge is personally constructed, socially mediated, and inherently situated" (p. 243). As is transcribed by the idea of transdisciplinarity, knowledge and meaning making is very much a social process that is determined in part by context. Many of the anecdotes that follow are moments from my teaching that reflect a problem or a success that occurred during a lesson or within the school context, as well as the future action that follows. To phrase it like a Zen Buddhist, I wish to find clarity during moments of confusion, to find wholeness during moments of doubt, and to find insight during moments of curiosity.

Earlier on, I described my conception of education, its purpose, and the role of its practitioners; in my anecdotes, I will revisit these ideas to reflect on what I have learned about teaching and about being a teacher, about how my teaching has defined me, and how I have defined my teaching. In essence, becoming a (good) teacher is not so much knowing how to teach, but rather, knowing who I am so that I know how to teach. The more familiar we are on the inside, the more surefooted our teaching and living becomes, since "the most practical thing we can achieve in any kind of work is insight into what is happening inside us as we do it" (Palmer, 2007, p. 6). This thesis is my attempt to inquire about, and eventually honour "the self who teaches." As a teacher, the quality of my "selfhood [can]

form – or deform – the way I relate to my students, my subject, my colleagues, my world" (Palmer, 2007, p. 4).

Since the beginning of the school year, I have attempted to chronicle some of the most inspirational and desperate events that have occurred within the school context. I would write these entries the day of the incident so as to remain as accurate and detailed as possible. What I find particularly important are the small nuances that make up the heart of a story.

Although I did not write my reflections according to a set schedule, I do have conversations with colleagues, friends and families about my day at school every single day. As well, the alterations I make in lesson plans and delivery methods between the first time I teach a topic and the second time are another form of reflection, although they tend to lack the depth of a thorough analysis. Both the conversations and adjustments also play an integral role in my development and understanding of my identity as a teacher. Many of the conversation points and instructional modifications influence the commentary I make in my written reflections.

My reasoning for this method of data collection is tied to my belief about identity inquiry as an organic process. Connelly and Clandinin (1988) recognize that "narrative is the study of how humans make meaning of experience by endlessly telling and retelling stories about themselves that both refigure the past and create purpose in the future" (p. 24). I seek truth in my writing; narrative is essential to how and what and why I know. An investigation at this level of complexity and intellectual challenge cannot be reduced to a strict linear process that follows a set structure. Additionally, our identity is always

changing, being shaped by our experiences and discoveries. Leggo (2008) clarifies the malleability of identity, stating that "[t]oo often we fail to understand the complex ways in which we compose and recompose our sense of identity . . . Otherwise, we can get stuck in a rigid and singular position of identity, and fail to pursue creative possibilities for potential new identities" (Leggo, 2008, npa). As Grumet (1988) explains, "[t]he 'I' of autobiographical consciousness . . . is an index to a subjectivity that is always open to new possibilities of expression and realization" and the "location of a stream of possibilities" (p. 66).

Borrowing from Schön's (1983, 1987) model of reflective practice, I will explore the following research question:

How can transdisciplinary inquiry enable the reflection and understanding of the complexities of first year teaching and of a beginning teacher's identity?

Chapter 2: Voice

November 10th, 2010

Probably the best teacher I ever had in high school was my peer leadership teacher in grade 10. That's saying a lot because I've had many excellent teachers in high school. What makes Mr. Saini the best is the fact that he gave us a voice. His sensitivity, passion, and respect helped all of us form a synergistic relationship that went beyond popularity or language. While the popular cool girls and the eccentric bookworms never "hung out" outside of class time, in that class, there was mutual respect and understanding.

Ever since I became a teacher, I've tried to measure my teaching against his. I'm not overly concerned about being the best subject teacher, or the funniest teacher, or the coolest teacher… That's all subjective, relying on students' perspectives and my personality. But rather, I'd like to be a sensitive teacher, one who tries to connect with and understand my students. I'd like to be like Mr. Saini, and create a comfortable classroom atmosphere where boundaries can be pushed and risks can be taken because people trust each other. Most importantly, I'd like to give my students a space for their voices to be heard.

Mr. Saini had something called "Facilitation Fridays," student-led facilitations that allowed us to discuss all sorts of issues, from driving age to the war in the Middle East. Our discussions were always passionate, but still remained thoughtful and respectful. We were only in grade 10. I think there was only one time when things got a little heated, when abortion came up, but it was still within the realms of acceptable behaviour. And although I don't really remember the points we raised or the issues we debated, I still remember how

much I enjoyed Facilitation Fridays and how amazing those experiences were. Mr. Saini always told us how impressed he was with our depth and clarity. According to him, we were so much better than his senior peer leadership class.

I reflect on that as a teacher now, and realize that the experience was so great because the students' voices were heard. My voice was heard and respected. Mr. Saini allowed our voices to be heard. I figured I could provide that opportunity through a similar facilitation activity.

This brings me to a facilitated debate on stem cells. As controversial as it is in the real world amidst policy makers and researchers, it turned out to be a lot more provocative than I ever imagined. Whenever the students lead, things are never predictable, which is normally fine by me because it keeps my job interesting, and my self-diagnosed almost ADD brain stimulated. As I expected, religion versus science came up in the argument.

Excellent, I thought. This should engage more people, or at the very least, encourage more passionate discussion. I'm not very religious myself, and so I've always been fascinated by how much courage people must possess to have such faith in the divine.

As I was scribbling down comments for Richard, the presenter, Keith said:

"Well, I think religious people are stupid."

And I lost my voice. I didn't know how to act or respond. But in trying to be sensitive in this delicate situation, I hesitated too long.

I was caught in a mental war, with so many sides to consider.

1. I'd already imposed on the presenter more than once due to the technical knowledge required for this topic, and I felt bad about continuously resuming control.

2. I was certain that the comment wasn't meant to be offensive, and a harsh reprimand could be hurtful. Keith doesn't always think things through before speaking up, but he's not a malicious guy.

3. I was aware of the students who were religious, and a part of me felt that they needed justice.

Then, I was saved by Marc who found his voice; he solemnly commented, "You know, you just offended many people in the room."

I can't remember his words anymore after that, but his addressing the issue was the best thing that could have happened. I still believe that some of the best teaching occurs when students' voices are heard.

But maybe there were students who expected me to say something. I don't know. I didn't say anything. Perhaps I should have, since years of schooling have trained them to view the teacher as the voice of reason and authority. Maybe they needed me to say something to settle things down or whatever. I don't like that much, always imposing my voice, but students do like having adults they can trust. But maybe in my honouring their voices, I challenged that trust. I don't know.

2.1 Trigger

In this case, three major issues came up in "Voice" to trigger reflection.

There was a breach of respectful person-to-person interaction when a student made a derogatory comment about fellow classmates' religion. Many of us have been socialized since childhood about tolerance and acceptance. We are apt to recognize the difference between supportive comments and offensive remarks, and for the most part, understand the idea of appropriateness when applied to various situations. Calling a group of individuals "stupid" can really hurt.

The student's insult affected a rather large group of people in the classroom because a surprising number of my students are religious. But Michelle was most affected because she is deeply religious and unafraid to express her belief. Having coached her in basketball as well, I know her to be quite emotionally vulnerable as well. In response to that comment, her entire demeanour changed, from a hopeful stance to one of dejection and hurt.

The third issue that resulted from the incident lies with my action, or lack thereof. Instead of saying or doing anything, I just sat there and hoped the problem would dissipate in time. Of course it didn't because the students seemed really shocked, and Michelle wouldn't look up from her desk after that.

In this situation, I questioned my role as a teacher / authority figure in trying to provide a space for voice, as well as the dynamics of interaction that exist within a class.

2.2 Frame

The incident in "Voice" is framed in terms of the expectations of teachers in our social settings. I feel that I'm expected to do too much, from the small everyday responsibilities to the greater privilege / burden of inspiring the young. I am not complaining about the expectations, but I am a little wary about how much self-worth I can maintain if I feel like I'm constantly unable to achieve my responsibilities. A lot is at stake here – my reputation with the students, my teaching and management abilities, and my unwarranted fear of "rocking the boat" too much with some of what / how I teach in class, for example. For this, I think we often succumb to the subtle pressures to conform.

I think my transitioning identity, as well as my lack of complete understanding of my role at the beginning of my profession, make it difficult for me to fully grasp when I should step in and interfere, and when I should sit back and watch the events unfold as the students steer the discourse. Experienced teachers seem to have a solid grasp of classroom management and behavioural expectations; nothing fazes them. They are remarkably astute and intuitive for the most part, calling out problematic conduct at the right moments without interrupting the flow of the lesson. Whereas experienced teachers appear to be able to anticipate challenges that might arise, I always find myself at a reactive position instead of the proactive one that my mentors tell me to be in.

What troubles me also is my inconsistency with my responses to management issues. Am I biased or just inexperienced? Change is good in some instances, but definitely not in the context of management. The students wouldn't really know what to expect, and can argue against the fairness of my treatment of students.

To go on a tangent from the main topic as I explain the previous point more, I'd like to describe my "late" policy. During my practicum, I basically emulated my sponsor teacher's late policy – a deduction of 10% a day for late assignments (including weekends). After a week, a student is unable to get a mark higher than 50% out of fairness to those who were punctual. This sounds great in principle, but I didn't quite figure out what to do with the students who demonstrated such poor understanding or effort for their late assignment. Would the students even bother handing the assignment in if he or she knows that the work produced was low mark? With the late penalty, would the mark he or she receives even make it worthwhile? In all likelihood, the students who will hand in assignments past the due date are typically the ones who struggle with the material in the first place.

And then I began to read more about the idea of assessment for learning and actually assessment in general. I started to question my late policy practice. Can I really justify deducting marks for work habits? Should the mark really only reflect a student's ability and performance on the assignment? I would never subtract marks for a test that was written at a later date, so why would I do that for assignments? This practice just didn't really sit comfortably with my philosophy of education. I then attempted to eliminate late penalties. At the start of my first year of teaching, I allowed students to hand assignments in late without deducting marks, but they had to obtain my permission first about not meeting the due date that I had set. My reasoning was that they need to take ownership of their responsibilities, and that since we are all busy people with different abilities, it is only fair for me to be considerate of these extraneous circumstances.

Unfortunately, this policy backfired, as the students who are always punctual are still punctual, and the ones who will hand work in late still do so (and without requesting an extension too). Halfway into the school year, I imposed a change in my late policy – any unexcused late assignment will automatically drop the work habits mark from a G to an N. I will also not provide any written feedback that takes me painstakingly long hours. Rather, the student will just receive a letter grade or percentage. And once again, not much has changed, except that I issued many more "Needs Improvement" work habits marks.

My own lack of consistent documentation of late assignments meant that some students slip through the cracks, and I forget to treat them like late assignments. It was almost easier on my part, especially when my marking started to pile up. To the students then, I would appear to show favouritism to some, but not others.

To bring us back to the main discussion point, I failed to reprimand a breach in respectful behaviour despite outlining it in my classroom expectations at the beginning of the year. Although I know that Keith did not say that sentence out of malice, it was still inappropriate. I have admonished lesser issues in class prior to this, so some of the students were probably troubled that I let it go. I know that Michelle definitely was troubled as she would reveal to me later in a private conversation how hurt she was. The issue here is that I did not address the situation when perhaps I should have.

2.3 Reframe

We often think back to our favourite teachers and why we liked them so much. Mentors have such a powerful influence on us because they have a "capacity to awaken a truth

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within us, a truth we can reclaim years later by recalling their impact on our lives" (Palmer, 2007, p. 22). But as much as I would like to be Mr. Saini, I cannot. I am quite intrigued by the fact that whenever I try to measure myself to him, the descriptors are always less comparable. It is as if I'm disproportionately harder on myself, and as if I have formed an ideal perception of the Mr. Saini from my memories.

From experience, despite the occasional student or situation, students tend to look to me for answers because they have been socialized all their academic careers to do so. Whether students are asking me to use the bathroom, asking me how to do something, or seeking my approval for a correct answer, I possess remarkable authority. As I shall bring up in a later narrative, the one time I showed up in class feeling distraught, all the students were clearly agitated.

As I think back to what made discussions so engaging in Mr. Saini's class, I'm reminded that beyond my classmates' enthusiastic attitudes about debates and our depth of thought, the often dismissed classroom atmosphere provided a setting in which we could be comfortable and expressive. Sure, Mr. Saini had a microwave in his room and didn't mind if we ate in there. And sure, he had couches and didn't mind if we propped our feet up on chairs to lounge. But more importantly, it was his sensitivity and love for us that made us love ourselves and our class.

Experienced educators will argue that unless a student is comfortable and ready to learn, he or she will not. My principal has a chart that indicates all the levels of Maslow's hierarchy in her office. Maslow's hierarchy of needs delineates this idea clearly; until our most fundamental needs are met, we really cannot develop a sense of belonging, esteem, or

self-actualization. The best teachers recognize these needs. Generally, most students in decent neighbourhoods have both physiological and safety needs met, but love / belonging is not necessarily a given. Mr. Saini's nurturing and guidance made most of us feel as if we belonged, and for that, I think we were able to achieve, respect others, and honour ourselves. He really did create a space in which we could find voice. According to Palmer (2007), the teacher actually plays a vital role in this situation, for the "the voice of the individual and the voice of the group – depends heavily on the teacher's ability to facilitate rather than dictate the discussion" (p. 83). Palmer elaborates, asserting that the "teacher must invite and affirm each individual's voice . . . It means helping each person find the best meaning in what he or she is saying by paying close attention, asking clarifying questions, and offering illustrations if the student gets lost in abstraction" (p. 83). Fundamentally, the group does not have a voice until the teacher gives it one. As I reflect on my Peer Leadership class now, I wonder why we didn't stay as cohesive once we left his classroom.

2.4 Future Action

This experience has taught me that despite not wanting to always overpower the students' voices, I still need to speak up when appropriate. While I encourage heated debates, I cannot condone unsocial behaviour as an adult, a teacher, and a human being.

I realize how many things arise unexpectedly in a classroom. My lack of anticipation or experience proved to be a roadblock in how I managed this situation in class. Immediately after school, I found Michelle and had an emotional conversation with her where she revealed many personal reasons as to why religion is so important to her and

how distressing such an attack on her belief was. I was impressed to discover that she knew that Keith didn't mean it spitefully. Yet, she cannot help but still feel hurt. The next day, I had a conversation with the class about the incident, and I read "Voice" to them before apologizing for my mistake.

Since this experience, I have established more parameters about in-class debates. For instance, when I identify a topic to be of contentious controversial nature, I always stress the types of comments that they can make in retaliation. Freedom of speech and student voice is one thing; an emotionally and socially unsafe environment is another. I am also more diligent about cutting conversations short when I feel that the comments and ideas will inevitably lead to another fiasco like the one in "Voice."

For next year, I may even modify the assignment so that religion versus science cannot be a facilitation topic. Although a socially important conversation, this subject can still be exclusive to many members of the class, and can be an "easy way out" for students who are too uninspired to think of a more novel topic. Nevertheless, I will still encourage themes like abortion and stem cell research that rely on religious perspectives. I also plan to formally teach the debating process and breakdown the parts of an effective argument and rebuttal. This year, I assumed that students knew how to do that, but in truth, very few actually did.

Chapter 3: Cardboard People

March 14th, 2011

Is my class really that boring?!? Am I really that dull?!?

From my experiences substitute teaching for all those English / ESL teachers, I've realized how difficult English as a Second Language can be to teach. Few ESL classes ever go smoothly without a hitch, as I often spend half of the time repeating "Please speak English," and the other half talking to myself because no one seems to care.

The reality is that the prevalence of new immigrants in my school district makes ESL classes in high demand, but there are not enough qualified ESL teachers in the district. In addition to this situation, many less than qualified teachers are given ESL teaching blocks to fill their teaching load. To top this all off, many schools don't have the capacity to open classes in a way that best suits the cognitive and linguistic abilities of individuals in different grades. For example, I have students from grade 8 to grade 12 in one ESL 3 class. I would never teach grade 12's the same way I teach grade 8's in a regular class, so how can I possibly succeed in this already challenging context? And ESL 3 does not mean ESL level 3 for speaking, reading, listening, and writing! ESL 3 could mean level 2 speaking, level 3 reading, level 2 listening, and level 3 writing! In other words, I could have a decent writer and reader who doesn't even know what I'm saying or how to communicate with me! Level 3 also does not mean "all the same level of English proficiency" – it means high level 3, low level 3, and everyone else level 3.

Unfortunately, this leads to many issues. The problems of an ESL class for me (the beginning teacher who is barely ESL trained) seem to go on forever:

Note: The list is incomplete, overly-generalized, and insensitive (not delivered in politically correct language). Some items are slightly embellished. Additionally, I would like to note that there are some incredibly bright and determined students in ESL, too.

1. They don't understand what you're saying the majority of the time.

2. You don't understand what they're saying the majority of the time.

3. If they're Chinese, they speak Mandarin or Cantonese with their friends. If they're Filipino, they speak Tagalog with their friends. Etc.

4. They rarely do their homework, or they rarely do it well / based on your instructions.

5. You can never assign anything written to take home because they will plagiarize, or get their tutors to write it for them.

6. The likelihood of cheating that occurs during tests is higher in comparison to other classes.

7. They lack motivation to work hard because they see ESL as a class they can't wait to get out of, or as a big joke. Sometimes even both.

8. They don't know how to work in groups.

9. Their assignments and projects really lack effort and pride.

10. And the list goes on...

To me, their apathy is a criticism of my teaching. Clearly, they think I'm not worth listening to, my ideas and teachings are useless, and my class is dreary. It seems like the indifference

towards what my teaching is about is a direct attack on me as a person. So it's not just my content and ideas that are unbearable, but me as well.

I'm hurt as much as I'm disappointed and a little angry too. I don't want to always make the situation about ME, ME, ME, but I can't help but do so because I put my identity and integrity at stake in everything I do in the classroom.

I'm trying my best. Is it really that hard for them to even attempt something?

They really are cardboard people, always sitting there, waiting for their life to happen. Waiting for the day they can finally see the light and get out of ESL.

What they don't realize is that regular classes are so much harder. That even though regular classes are what count for graduation and post-secondary admission, they are much too linguistically-challenged for the typical uninterested ESL student. Half the battle in the junior Sciences is understanding the words in the textbook! And forget trying to understand social studies and writing a research essay! If they can't even pass ESL (aka, Easy Slow Lessons), how can they even fathom passing Biology 11???

Yesterday was the fourth time I gave the angry lecture about not doing homework. I purposely asked them to write down their thoughts and ideas regarding the discussion questions so that they could actually carry on a discussion in class. Of course, Ling did the work better than most students, the usual suspects did the bare minimum, and two-thirds "forgot" or were "too busy."

I was surprised by my anger. I nearly threw the book at them. I nearly did. I held back because Mrs. Williams nearly made us pee in our pants in grade 6 when she almost

launched her stool at us in band class when the trumpet players messed up yet again. So instead, I slammed the text down on my table. Extra hard for good measure.

My voice was surprisingly soft and even, although inside, I was shaking with an intense rage that scared me. I was so livid that I actually threatened to not teach. I stormed over to my desk and sat down furiously with invisible steam erupting from my ears. On top of the fact that I'm raging beyond belief, I also have no backup plans for teaching. Teachers are always told to have a backup plan, but I honestly ran out of time to plan a backup plan because my main lesson plan wasn't conceived until 11:00 pm the night before.

I just couldn't do it though, and seeing their downcast forms, I silently asked them to work on the questions for the first fifteen minutes before we started discussing.

Could the right thing to do actually be to carry out my threat? I wonder. But I really hope it'll never have to come to that.

3.1 Trigger

Since my practicum, all the experienced teachers tell me that when I land a job, it'll probably be full of courses that I'm not qualified for and that no one wants. My sponsor teacher called it "the dog's breakfast." At that time, I didn't stress too much because considering how impossibly difficult it would be to land a job in the next few years, I would have been satisfied with teaching anything.

Despite being in that exact situation one year later, I still feel content enough to have a job when members of my cohort weren't even getting hired at all or were still teaching on call. This concern contributes to two of the five main reasons in which beginning teachers leave the profession – difficult working conditions, and alienation and lack of support (BCTF, 2005).

Indeed, working conditions can be understandably challenging and trying when one is required to be passionate and knowledgeable about something that one doesn't really care or know about. On the surface, the trigger for this narrative is students not doing homework when asked. Nevertheless, the issue goes a lot deeper, concerning what it takes to teach well, and my pride as a teacher.

3.2 Frame

I already know that the students' reactions and energy motivate me to teach better every single class. This is beneficial in that I'm able to really raise the dynamism and vitality of my class. However, this reliance on students' feedback and interaction can easily discourage me from teaching with the same fun drive that I can be known for. The more I

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become demoralized by their apathy, the more I revert to the classic "chalk and talk" way of teaching. I can't get disheartened or discouraged if I didn't even try in the first place, right? I'm sick and tired of being hurt and rejected by the students.

Teaching "is a daily exercise in vulnerability," since we teach the things that we care about, and what we care about defines our sense of self (Palmer, 2007). My self and my self-worth are defined by the success I have in the classroom. Even though I don't particularly care about teaching English as a Second Language and really dull Canadian social studies, I clearly still care because their indifference evokes strong emotions in me. I don't concern myself too much about this subject area because it's not one I really explored, as the interest wasn't there. And even if students didn't respond to my fascination with the nervous system action potential, I'm still passionate about it. But to take a subject area I find uninspired and ask me to be passionate is truly problematic.

This shouldn't be treated as a case of whining. Perhaps really great teachers are able to do something differently. Maybe I just lack the experience to figure out how to teach in a situation I'm not very comfortable in. And the apathy isn't an everyday occurrence, but it is much more prevalent in this ESL class than any of my other regular classes. Based on this observation, the questions I should ask myself are:

A) is this just an unfortunate case of uninspired students (the so called "bad class")?

or

B) am I just not able to perform at my optimum ability when I'm not teaching my subject areas?

My gut tells me that the situation is a combination of the two, which complicates matters because the issues in question A are for the most part, beyond my control. We can't all be Erin Gruwell (*Freedom Writers*[10]) and LouAnne Johnson (*Dangerous Minds*[11]). As a very successful student in secondary school (since grade 9, I was the top academic student of my grade and the class valedictorian in grade 12), I find it quite challenging to empathize and understand what mediocre and learning disabled students go through in secondary school. At times, I'm even incredulous that they can't understand something I perceive as being unbearably easy and straightforward.

I'm frustrated, then, that I'm unable to really understand how unnatural learning can be, and how much of a struggle the process can be. My advisors and mentors have always directed me to outline the instructional steps very clearly, which I think I do, until I realize that I still take too many assumptions for granted. The lack of comprehension on the students' part reflects several aspects – the most obvious reason is linguistic, but beyond this, a difference in cultural experiences and the clarity of instructions can also be contributing factors.

I'm also frustrated at the hierarchy within the school, too, the one where experienced teachers get all the best courses which are "easy" because they actually care about that subject and are experts in that area. AP Biology 12 is "easy" relative to ESL 1 Social Studies in my opinion. I wouldn't need to superficially energize myself for an AP Biology 12 class because all the passion is genuine. I would have to though for an ESL 1

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[10] DeVito, D., Shamberg, M., Sher, S. (Producers), & LaGravenese, R. (Director). (2007). *Freedom writers* [motion picture]. United States: Paramount Pictures.
[11] Simpson, D., Bruckheimer, J. (Producers), & Smith, J. N. (Director). (1995). *Dangerous minds* [motion picture]. United States: Hollywood Pictures.

class because I lack the same level of interest, expertise, and enthusiasm. In addition to disciplinary knowledge, the types of students in these two classes differ in their motivational level, their academic ability, their social skills, and their work ethic. The advanced placement class have a more homogenous composition, whereas the language class have students of diverse capabilities and backgrounds.

3.3 Reframe

There is no doubt that teachers who enjoy the profession feel a sense of empowerment after a successful class. Yet, there is also no denying that naturally academic students provide us with a skewed sense of success, as although the class seemed successful, only a portion of the class participated in the process. The greats always say that it's succeeding with the difficult students that prove a teachers' ability, since the "smart ones" do not really need us in the first place. My most trying classes are my most educationally valuable classes, since through those difficult students, I'm forced to evaluate the effectiveness of my teaching.

As an educator, my default setting is to teach. Questions turn into discussions, and offhanded remarks turn into philosophical conversations. I find myself always teaching, whether I'm in the classroom, sitting on a bench with a student, or walking about with friends. I think the profession made me, and I made the profession. The teacher and the self are one entity, which on the best days is empowering, but on the worst days is demoralizing.

What the difficult classes and students taught me was that I'm still a novice at the craft of teaching. Despite whatever natural talents I may have as a teacher, I stumble through unexpected moments without the same poise and control of the experts. My teaching still needs refining, lacking the natural flow of my experienced colleagues. Whereas I need to look down and consult manuals, or roll my eyes in exasperation from the rough transitions, the experts, like seasoned performers, easily take their place at the front of the classroom without a whisper of doubt.

My experience as an immigrant makes me sympathetic to ESL students' struggles. I'm also aware of how it feels to be silenced because the language and the cultural understandings are not quite developed yet. While I know what it means to be an immigrant and the "other," I sometimes feel as if this empathy is superficial because I was so young when I immigrated. The days of limited communication were few and only in the first couple of years, since children often learn languages with ease and pick up fluency quickly. So as I reassure them that it's possible to integrate into the culture, improve on linguistic skills, and increase oral fluency, my encouragement falls flat in my mind because I'm really promising what seems impossible to them.

3.4 Future Action

If patience were a virtue as they say, then I wouldn't be very virtuous at all. I'm anxious to experience success in the classroom. Of course, the concept of success is subjective – for me, I will have succeeded when the six purposes of education that I have discussed have been met.

As previously discussed, most experts have fewer classroom management challenges, not because they don't exist, but because they have the experience to prevent or quickly manage the problems. I find myself being very reactive rather than proactive with management. The rules and expectations I set out at the beginning of the year seem subjective to students because I do not always follow through. I discussed these ideas earlier in "Voice." As of now, I have identified two factors that lead to inconsistency with follow-up: one, lack of time to attend to unpredictable little details, and two, concern about interrupting the flow of a lesson.

One specific example would be homework completion. Throughout the past year, I refused to give credit for homework, since I believe that students should be mature enough to engage in practice and review activities themselves. I always tell the students that athletes don't have a game every single time they play. Rather, they spend most of their time practicing to hone their skills so that they can be successful during the few games they do play. The same idea applies to performers and musicians, for example. Applied in educational contexts, students shouldn't expect to be evaluated for the "practices," but for the "games." Theoretically, intrinsic motivation and mastery of learning sound promising, an idealistic vision of education. In practice, however, motivation is hardly ever intrinsic because in order to feel inspired, one must first have interest and passion, but students are often forced into a system that doesn't work for them, or a class that bores them.

Short of being brilliant and making my classes so much fun that intrinsic learning occurs naturally, one change I could make for future years is to provide some extrinsic motivation for completing homework without compromising my own beliefs. While I do

not wish to threaten the students with marks, I might also need to offer some incentives as they are often accustomed to. Many young people unfortunately cannot consider long term consequences yet, being used to the instant gratification of a fast-paced and immediate response lifestyle. Perhaps some credit can be given for completion or maybe a small quiz at the end of each week for accountability. Administration of these new implementations could become more of a stressful burden, and thus, I need to devise ways to make things more efficient. Having the luxury of a peer tutor may help with the former change, while marking quizzes in class could free my time after school hours for the more demanding responsibilities of teaching. This is one form of being more proactive rather than reactive, since hopefully, more students would have incentive to do homework, and I wouldn't have to reprimand them every single time homework is assigned.

This action may provide some relief from the incessant nagging on my part, but it only solves the problem on the surface. To come to terms with myself, I need to discover a way to face the insecurity and frustrations. Recently, I found some comfort in Palmer's (2007) *The Courage to Teach*. Being accustomed to the eloquence and fluency of speech in regular classes, the silence and broken language of an ESL class is unsettling. In a regular class, silence in the classroom is difficult enough to handle, treated often as a symptom of confused or apathetic students. The front of the classroom can become an unbearably uncomfortable space, because "in silence my sense of competence and worth is at stake: I am the one who must set right what has gone wrong – by speaking" (Palmer, 2007, p. 85). And thus, I always speak after the prolonged silence in an ESL class, if not providing the answer, then reprimanding them for not doing anything. Unsettling as it is, I am so much more dependent on them and their "good" behaviour than they are on me. According to

Palmer (2007), behind "their fearful silence, our students want to find their voices, speak their voices, have their voices heard. A good teacher is one who can listen to those voices even before they are spoken – so that someday they can speak with truth and confidence" (p. 47). It's a powerful realization that I wasn't teaching my class like a good teacher, but reacting to silence to regain control for myself instead of for their space to learn.

Further reflection reveals that I could have perhaps provided them more time to think and respond. I fear now that I have stifled many potential opportunities for dialogue because of my ego and insecurity. By breaking the silence, I am creating more silence. I'm well aware of techniques like Think-Pair-Share, small group – large group, and writing down ideas before speaking. I tried to employ them with little success, hence the anxiety. I have heard from experienced ESL educators that I should assume nothing and to be extra clear with my instructions and expectations, even teaching the most basic of skills because of the diverse upbringing that language learners have.

I think that what is missing though, is a classroom atmosphere that enables dialogue. Unlike my regular classes where I continuously dedicate time and effort to establish an environment of trust and comfort, I capitulated to the lack of immediate feedback of success in my ESL class. In a sense, I kind of abandoned them and gave up on them, since I was scared and questioned my teaching. I blamed them for my inadequacies, but perhaps teens don't know any better. From our conversations, they really want to follow the same curriculum as everyone else; the ESL class becomes an obstacle that prevents them from graduating on time. They have no choice but to take ESL, while their friends can take electives. Some of them don't want to be in my class any more than I want

to teach it, but as a professional with an ethical responsibility, my first goal should be to create a learning atmosphere rather than dive into a textbook that has little meaning to them. Teaching the course for the first time amidst a collection of other more "interesting" preps, I resorted frequently to their textbook, but through that, I was not able to express the great passion for my subject that students in my other classes know me for. I became a teacher whose class they probably dreaded.

I agree with Palmer's (2007) assessment that "great teachers . . . 'bring to life' things that the students had never heard of, offering them an encounter with otherness that brings the students to life as well" because this allows the subject to be at the centre of learning, not the teacher nor the students (p. 122). (See Figure 5). I let the stress of an unfamiliar curriculum, lack of interest in a personally non-engaging subject area, and fear of an unresponsive silence direct my teaching. Instead, I can reconcile my wounded pride with a profound truth that "the self is not a scrap of turf to be defended but a capacity to be enlarged" (Palmer, 2007, p. 39). Indeed, I should be more conscientious about not treating all problems as a personal attack on my teaching, and focus instead, on building capacity and creating space.
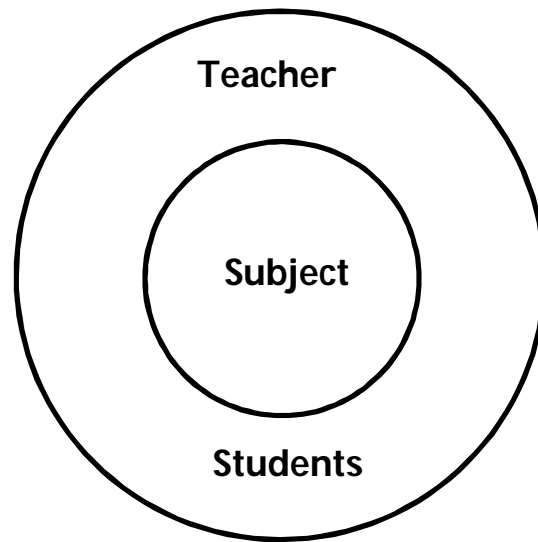
Figure 5: The subject as the focal point of learning

Eventually though, I'm hopeful that the system of seniority benefits me and I can teach my subjects so that I can put the subjects themselves at the centre of the classroom and not my ego or my students' attitudes.

Chapter 4: The Poet

March 2011

Karah Ahmed is a poet.

Technically, if a poet is someone who writes poems, then everyone in my class would be one. But Karah's a real poet. I haven't quite figured out what that means yet, but I am very aware that her poems are not like ours. Her poems, despite all the teenage angst and drama, are maturely crafted and linguistically sophisticated, which caught me off guard at first because Karah is not a strong writer in general.

But sadly, we're not talking about her poems right now, but about a boy.

A boy that's really not good enough for her.

"Thanks for meeting with me afterschool. I just really needed to talk, and I can't exactly talk to Chan about this," Karah confesses.

Uh oh. Must be "girl issues" – there were an awful lot of those during the basketball season, although Karah wasn't involved with those multiple hour discussion sessions. Teenage girls do really have a lot of drama it seems. Grade 9 girls are the worst for drama, they tell me.

I wonder if we'd have been this close had it not been for basketball. Way back in October, I asked Frank Chan if he needed any help with grade 9 girls basketball because I thought that it would be interesting for me to get to know some of my students outside of my classroom

walls. I already had some experience with that this year when I exchanged teaching roles with the teacher on call who was in for the grade 9 science teacher. And similarly to my practicum experience, the students who were quiet in Humanities were quite different in a science class.

Originally, I thought of Karah as a bit of a punk, colouring everything graffiti style on her handouts and showing up to class wearing vibrant "skater" clothes, complete with a cap and all.

"So anyway, there's this guy I like," she starts. "He's in grade 8, and he skateboards. He's like, really cool." And then she goes on to describe the skater dude's personality and awesomeness.

What I took away from Karah's introduction: He is an asshole who is not good enough for her. A playboy who likes to play girls, and somehow has cred because a lot of girls want to be with him, Karah being one of them.

What I wanted to say to Karah: He is an asshole who is not good enough for you. He is a playboy who likes to play girls, and somehow has cred because a lot of girls want to be with him, but you don't have to be one of them.

What I said to Karah: "Well, it's your choice to make. I think you're probably smart enough to make your own decisions. Perhaps you might regret some of the choices you'll make, but I hope you don't have to experience that. Personally, I'm not sure if I'm supportive of this interest, since he doesn't exactly sound like the kind of guy who'll reciprocate your feelings in the way you hope he will. If you're hoping to hear my opinion (she nods at this point in

time), then this is what I think." I hate having to respond like a teacher sometimes. I'd much rather share the "asshole" comment.

She sighs. Long, thoughtfully, deeply. Then, she tells me that she trusts me.

"I trust you a lot, you know. You're like my older sister."

I'm touched. How do you respond to a statement like that?

"I'm glad we're able to develop a close relationship. Now I'm really glad I helped coach basketball."

"Yeah, I know. And you're also a really good teacher. At first, we were all like, 'Ms. Mei's really soft.' Like, we can't really hear you. But when we got to know you, we really love you. I really like listening to you talk in class. And we're so quiet now so that we can hear you."

"I noticed that. And I'm really thankful because I really can't speak too loudly. My voice is soft."

"You're really different than other teachers. I kind of didn't expect it."

You may as well be talking about yourself, Karah. You're not who I expected.

We talk about her poems next, and her family. She gives me a poem that she wrote for me when she leaves.

"Thanks for inspiring me to write more poetry," she says.

Although we no longer had conversations that went for as long as this one in the subsequent months, we still talked like teacher / coach / sister (?) periodically. Somehow, it could be the expressive poet within her or the "complicated" family situation, but of all my students, Karah is the one I worry most about. I don't worry about her ever turning out "bad"; nevertheless, I do hope that she can be spared some angst and drama.

She's a beautiful girl with extraordinary talents yet, I question her choices sometimes. While I tend to call all my students "my kids," the ones on the basketball team are "my girls." I'm starting to believe the people who tell me that grade 9 girls have the most drama. Karah's got the most drama out of them all.

It's not my place or right to judge her friends and her activities, since I'll be eating into the stereotypes of rebellious teenagers (although in some cases, these stereotypes are warranted, I think). This worrying is so reminiscent of how parents worry. My parents worry about me all the time. They always tell me to drive slower, to drive more carefully. They always nag me about calling home when I'm traveling so that they know that I've arrived safely at my destination. Parents worry, and now I worry. Is being a teacher being a parent? Some parents would argue against that, claiming that we have no right to raise their child. Sometimes though, we kind of are, especially when the parents are not around much to be parents to their kids. Who am I to know what's best for their child anyway? I'm only 24. I can't even really take care of me yet!

4.1 Trigger

The case of Karah, as with many other students, raises a potentially controversial question: is it my responsibility / right to be a student's parent?

Research indicates that fostering relations at school support students' learning (Bernstein-Yamashiro, 2004). As educators, we are with students during their most crucial developmental stages. Some of us spend even more time with them than their parents. And yet, we are not their parents. We are legally responsible for their wellbeing and education when they are in our classrooms, but the responsibility is not clearly defined and rather ambiguous. By well-being, I interpret that to be their social, emotional, and physical safety and comfort.

However, the needs listed above can easily cross over into the jurisdiction of parenthood. Through teaching about a dystopian future as a theme in literature, I am imparting social values that I feel contribute to the wellbeing of society. Am I really impartial and qualified enough to judge what is good or what is bad in this world? Perhaps for my own child, yes, but for someone else's kid? I'm not so sure. Through reprimanding a student for not saying "thank-you," I'm promoting a vital skill of courtesy, which should really be the parents' job.

While teaching the most basic rules of social interaction, I sometimes cannot help but feel that I'm evaluating the parents' upbringing. What kind of parent texts back and forth with his or her child during class time? During instruction hours! What are these parents thinking anyway? Is it because they do it too? Fiddling on their Blackberries and iPhones during business meetings? Since when has it become acceptable to distribute your

attention while others are speaking, presenting, or teaching? But once again, I'm stepping on that very controversial boundary of parenting versus teaching, as well as an even more contentious line of judging parenting quality.

I'm worried that maybe I might forget my "place" as an educator and become a parent. If parents expect and appreciate my teaching their child in more ways than just academic content, then I wouldn't feel so anxious. Nevertheless, many parents are defensive of their child, and of their childrearing abilities.

4.2 Frame

According to the elders in my life, the teacher in Asian cultures is highly revered. The teacher imparts knowledge and opens up a child's path to a better future through education. When my nephew visited from Taiwan, his mother reprimanded him for playfully hitting my boyfriend, who is also a teacher. She didn't say, "Stop hitting him, he's your elder," but rather, "Stop hitting him, he's a teacher." When I went to China on a humanitarian trip, and to Japan for a cultural exchange, I was introduced as "The Teacher." Out of all my peers and friends, I was at the centre of attention and respect during our trip. Even in Japanese anime, you often see the teachers apologizing to authorities on behalf of their students, as they feel as if they didn't fulfill their duties to properly educate the children morally.

I'm notorious for wasting time at school. I spend the majority of my prep block socializing with students, office staff, and other teachers. After school hours, instead of marking in my classroom, I'm wandering around the hallway striking up a conversation,

supervising some extracurricular activity, or else in the gym watching a sports game. When I helped coach juvenile girls' basketball for example, I was at the school for upwards of twelve hours a day.

Suffice to say, I spend a lot of time with students. I trust some of them with use of my classroom and even my car keys! Extracurricular activities allow me as the teacher to see the students succeed in non-academic contexts and for them to see me care about them outside the walls of my classroom. Just like that, we are both more human to each other. Instead of an "A" student, or a "C-" student, they become a talented athlete, a considerate leader, or a compassionate volunteer. Instead of a teacher in the classroom, I've become a coach, a mentor, a friend, a sibling, and a parent in some cases.

In addition to time, I find that my subject matter also helped develop the strong bonds I have with some of the students. Although I arguably enjoy teaching sciences more than other subjects, I know that I cannot really live as a teacher if I don't teach English. Teaching English invites writing opportunities. When given the option to write, many students surprisingly open up and reveal their most intricate inner voices. As an English teacher, I read a lot of personal writing, which sometimes means a lot of pain and sorrow. Regardless of the mood of the writing, I have gotten to know the students in my English classes on a more personal level than any of my other classes.

The amount that they disclose about themselves surprised me initially. As I deliberated more though, I realized that I really shouldn't be astonished, for I truly believe that people revel in and require connection. Nonetheless, without trust, people won't likely reach out. Their trust in me could be an acknowledgement of the effort on my part to

create a safe space and to take the initial risk. I never asked them to do anything I wouldn't do. Even though some students disliked the freewrites that I required them to do in English (who wants more work, right?), I think they benefited from the relation-building in my class because through freewrites, we can mutually share the thoughts on our minds, and the emotions in our hearts. Through my own freewrites that I often share with the class, they see me as vulnerable – as human. They see that I trust them enough to divulge my inner world and my selfhood, and many (not all) returned that sentiment.

Indeed, I feel genuinely moved by their responsiveness; however, I sometimes wonder if I'm emotionally and mentally prepared enough to deal with some of the things that can come up (and did).

4.3 Reframe

"You want to be friendly, and not their friend."

"You're not their parent."

I heard both warnings during my teacher education. I fear that I broke both "rules" within my first year of teaching.

Both words of advice were given to beginning teachers for our protection, especially the young teachers. I am merely ten years older than my youngest students and barely five years older than my oldest students when I first started to teach. Outside of school, I have friends who are my students' age, and they have my cell number and have added me on Facebook. I know I'm metaphorically "playing with fire," as many of them are also friends

with my students. I live and teach in the same community I grew up in. My connections are widely spread out.

I have yet to find the balance between being friendly and being a friend. Often, I'm envious of experienced teachers who have established themselves at the school. Their reputation precedes them; they are popular, and they are loved, even by students who have never met or been taught by them before. To me, it appears as if the students share a closer bond with those teachers than what I perceive in my mind to be a traditional teacher-student relation. They really do seem like friends or sometimes parents; the students do favours for those teachers and hang out in those teachers' classrooms. The interactions are always professional though, as the teachers are still viewed and respected as teachers, while the students are very aware of their status as well.

From teaching on call in the school district for a year, I have been to every single secondary school, and I have frequented those schools enough to acquire a relatively comprehensive sense of the student body and school atmosphere. Compared to other schools, my current school is rather unique in that as a whole, the students are uncharacteristically attached to the school and to their teachers. I believe that there are several reasons for this. My conclusions are not based on the formal procedures of empirical research whatsoever, but on informal observation and experience. I don't regard the following reasons as generalizations, but as educated hypotheses.

For one, my current school has a much younger group of staff relative to other schools in the district. Naturally, the young understand the young, and the recent cohorts that graduated from teacher education have been encouraged to collaborate and to utilize

technology. My school experiences are not too different from theirs. The curriculum I studied, and the textbooks I used are virtually identical to theirs. Secondly, this school has a period in the regular time table called "advisory" where the same group of students are with each other and the same teacher for all five years in school. Advisory occurs every day, and its curriculum is a combination of uninterrupted sustained silent reading, and community and social development. In addition, the students are "nested" for their first two years in high school, meaning that they share classes with their advisory group. They also have fewer teachers, as the same teacher instructs courses like math and science, and English and social studies (Humanities), with the purpose of strengthening the bond with their teachers. Finally, this school has an uncharacteristically high number of extracurricular activities, from athletics to leadership, from arts to multiculturalism. These are some of the factors that I feel contribute to the students' remarkable affection for the school.

Within one year, I have managed to achieve a relatively decent reputation at the school, but not without some costs. I'm emotionally and physically drained all the time once I leave the school environment, and I wonder how sustainable this enthusiasm can be. I also wonder if given the same type of teacher-student engagement as my colleagues, my age creates an assumption of friendship on the students' part. Recapitulating, although the staff members are young, even they are old enough to be recognized as a teacher despite the close relationship they have with students. I'm younger than some of my students' siblings! Fortunately, I think that the students respect me enough to still acknowledge and treat me as their teacher, even if some of them occasionally say that I'm like their sister.

Conceivably, my gender also contributes to this teacher-as-parent tension. While I'll be at the front lines denouncing the negative stereotypes of the passive nurturer, biologically and socially, we are frequently expected to give birth and to accept sensitivity. As a matter of fact, attending to the feminine qualities keeps people whole and fosters connection. Like many women in professions, I don't consider myself a nurturer at all, but I do believe that I'm caring, which is the case for most in the teaching profession. I suppose that since men and women have been conditioned to show care differently, my expressions of concern can be perceived as more nurturing than my male counterparts. Furthermore, male teachers tend to be a lot more cautious about conveying care because of the stigma of being male, both in the sense of authority over the passive, and the stoic resolve of masculinity. Whereas I'm running around high-fiving everyone or gently patting a student's arm to comfort him / her, my boyfriend is cautious about contact, telling me that he has never once patted a student on the back or given someone a hug.

Should I step back though? The imminent danger of misunderstanding and of angry parents who think I'm overstepping my boundaries seem like practical incentives to try to become less of a friend and parent, and more of a friendly teacher. But in doing so, am I denying my personality and an important part of what I value in teaching?

4.4 Future Action

The future action for this setting is rather difficult to figure out, since although I'm concerned about how to properly fulfill the parenting responsibilities that I impose on

myself, and how to properly deal with potential problems that may arise, I'm also not apprehensive enough to cease what I have been doing for the past year.

Although I sometimes share a few words of wisdom and offer my advice, I always emphasize the authority of and final approval from the parents. As long as all relationships are respectful and open, I doubt confrontations will arise.

Regarding issues that I lack the capacity to handle, I can always consult experts for the most appropriate course of action.

Then perhaps, the real issue is not one that requires a future action, but a pragmatic one. In order to establish and maintain these relationships, I need to devote a significant amount of time, time which might become more constrained when I have to eventually prioritize familial obligations. On the last day of school, my mentor teacher even warned me about burning out.

Short of diminishing my extracurricular involvement, and minimizing my effort in lesson preparation and marking, I really can't conceive of another way to manage my well-being. Taking on too much is irresponsible – output may lack the same high level of quality, and the body may not be able to sustain the demands. Maybe like smoking, I need to gradually wean myself; one less commitment each year until what remains is manageable, or cease accepting new responsibilities. Or maybe not. This is a question, an issue that will remain with me for some time yet!

Chapter 5: Lost Generation

April 2011

Karen was the one who brought my attention to the reverse poem "Lost Generation." She's a cool kid that one – just popped her head into my class randomly and asked me to check out a really cool poem on YouTube.

I almost taught her; I had her for a day, before admin took that English 11 class away from me after an English 11 class was collapsed because I lacked seniority.

Somehow, I must have made an impression because she still treats me like her teacher.

Of course, being the new teacher that I am, I welcome anything that ends up before me. Especially anything to do with good poetry because this unit intimidates me. For the most part, I enjoyed poetry as a student once I understood what the poem's about, but I don't delude myself into thinking that all students will be like that. I genuinely do enjoy the beauty of linguistics (once someone identifies the writing for me), and the very human themes that transcend time. Somehow, I always have this fear though, that the non-English oriented students will hate poetry, and that I won't be able to inspire a love of poetry and English because I'm not interesting or knowledgeable enough.

The selections I chose for class therefore, reflect my fears. I focused on song lyrics and contemporary poems. Poems that were "interesting" to the average teen, and poems that I can actually understand.

Chaucer and Milton are definitely out. Atwood can be intimidating because she's so bloody brilliant. So instead, it was Christina Aguilera, Bon Jovi, Simple Plan, inspired poet laureates, and student poets from anthologies.

And just when I was smacking my head against the whiteboard about what poem to use to discuss the concept of theme, Karen appeared before me, illuminated by a radiant beacon of light. My saviour.

And now, I'm playing "Lost Generation" on YouTube.

The students appear to be all engaged, staring intently at the screen in front of them.

Lost Generation[12]

Jonathan Reed

I'm a part of Lost Generation

and I refuse to believe that

I can change the world

I realize this may be a shock but

"Happiness comes from within"

is a lie, and

"Money will make me happy"

---

[12] The poet, Jonathan Reed, has given permission for the use of "Lost Generation" in this thesis. Refer to Appendix A for more details.

So in thirty years I'll tell my children

They are not the most important thing in my life

My employer will know that

I have my priority straight because

Work

Is more important than

Family

I tell you this

Once upon a time

Families stay together

But this will not be true in my era

This is a quick fix society

Experts tell me

Thirty years from now I will be celebrating the 10th anniversary of my divorce

I do not concede that

I will live in a country of my own making

In the future

Environmental destruction will be the norm

No longer can it be said that

My peers and I care about this earth

It will be evident that

My generation is apathetic and lethargic

It is foolish to presume that

There is hope

And all of this will come true unless we reverse it.

REVERSE

There is hope

It is foolish to presume that

My generation is apathetic and lethargic

It will be evident that

My peers and I care about this earth

No longer can it be said that

Environmental destruction will be the norm

In the future

I will live in a country of my own making

I do not concede that

Thirty years from now I will be celebrating the 10th anniversary of my divorce

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Families stay together

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Family

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Work

I have my priority straight because

My employer will know that

They are not the most important thing in my life

So in thirty years I'll tell my children

"Money will make me happy"

is a lie, and

"Happiness comes from within"

I realize this may be a shock but

I can change the world

and I refuse to believe that

I'm a part of Lost Generation

(To check out the poem, visit
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=42E2fAWM6rA&feature=player_embedded)

I pause the poem halfway through before the poem's narrator reverses the lines. I'm not

about to spoil the poem by getting ahead of myself.

"So, what do you think of the ideas that the poet wrote about? Do you agree? Do you think that you guys are a lost generation?"

Absolute silence. My old Faculty Advisor called times like this "crickets." "You could hear crickets chirp," he used to say.

They all look quite depressed.

"So perhaps that question is a little overwhelming to answer right now. Why don't we take a step back and think about what kinds of things the poet brought up to indicate that you guys, myself included, belong to this 'lost generation?'"

"I'm going to play the poem one more time, but think about the big question, as well as what the poet said to suggest that our generation is 'lost.'"

Once again, I pause the video halfway through.

"Thoughts?"

They tell me the things that they read from the scrolling text of the poem, from divorce to disasters.

My dark room does little to lighten the intensely sombre atmosphere.

"Alright, good responses and commentary to what you read from the poem. I'd like to play the poem one more time, okay?"

They don't look too receptive to the idea. Wow, I really killed someone's dog here, didn't I? Or else they're just bored at having to check out a poem for the third time in a row.

I press play for the last time. And this time, I don't stop the video.

The moment the poem reverses, an amazed cry erupted from the class. Then, their wonder turns into delight, and the downcast eyes soon light up at the positive message that was previously negative.

The video ends. Their demeanours have completely changed in the span of a few minutes.

"Now, what do you think?"

The reverse poem may have surprised them, but the discussion that ensues surprises me. See, third block is never as engaged or as insightful with discussions as second block. I've learned that difference after a month or so. While second block excels at dialogue and debate, third block is much more comfortable taking notes efficiently (partly because I have cleaned up how I write the notes the second time around, and partly because this is a seriously academic class with many studious and quiet Chinese girls).

Today, third block dominated the thoughtfulness and maturity of ideas. Today, third block and I went on an unexpected journey.

Now this poem really engaged the students. I'm pleased to have ended on such a powerful piece of writing, and since I'm not entirely confident anything else can surpass this, I'm glad that I'll be moving on to the short stories unit next day.

5.1 Trigger

Earlier, I discussed the frustrations of student indifference; just as probable as trying lessons are to occur, so too, are the inspirational classes. When these precious moments happen, teaching becomes even more "worth it."

As a teacher, students' success brings me great joy. For one, I won't deny that their accomplishments bolster my ego about the quality of my teaching. Even more important though, is the fact that when students understand and are engaged, they are experiencing the thing I love most about learning. We are funny that way – we find pleasure in the activities or topics we love, and if we can share our love with others and encourage them to enjoy what we enjoy, then we're even more delighted.

I have always loved learning, but my students do not always share my enthusiasm.

I'm surprised that a lesson like "Lost Generation" could spark so much interest, since just two days ago, I had no idea what I was even going to teach, and to further emphasize my shock about the success of the lesson, I didn't even feel comfortable teaching poetry. I wonder then, what is it about this particular lesson that engaged students and enabled meaningful learning? Essentially, the question that is on the minds of all educators is how to really engage students.

5.2 Frame

The answer to how to really engage students is simple – find their interest. The difficult part is aligning their interests to the prescribed learning outcomes, figuring out how to

manage diverse interests in a large class, and honouring the teacher's teaching self. While the solution is theoretically easy, the action is practically near impossible.

The one common factor amongst athletic and artistic students, achievers and slackers, is their interest in their selfhood and their lives. All children who have been socialized care about their lives and their future. Through their schooling and interaction with peers and teachers, they continue to learn more about the world and themselves. The more they learn, the more pieces of the puzzle are filled in, and the more they continue to seek. This understanding prompts my use of cooperative learning in class, and my observance of the constructivism theory. Cooperative learning continues their synergistic search for meaning while promoting social and academic development, while constructivism reminds me that the students, not the teacher, have to do the sense-making to learn.

The concept of cooperative learning is not new. Its social and academic benefits have been extensively studied, and its incorporation has been widely encouraged. Greater student achievement, social benefits, and a changing business structure have been cited as some of the main benefits of cooperative learning (Dahley, 1994). There is something to be said about learning with and from peers. With the exception of a few cases, students tend to tune in when their peers speak. With good reason though – their peers articulate ideas at the same level, and with the same cultural references. In addition, I find that students generally tend to want to help their friends and classmates out, finding the courage to elaborate on ideas, explain a concept, or challenge a claim. At the end of my first year of

teaching, I can argue that all my favourite lessons were the ones with student discussion and genuine collaboration.

Good teachers act more as the "guide on the side" instead of the "sage on the stage." Teachers need to embrace "an entirely fresh perspective, one that moves beyond a compilation of information and skills to be methodically delivered to students" (Moss, Osborn, & Kaufman, 2003, p. 2). This new outlook is defined "by shifting the emphasis away from teaching and toward learning" (Moss et al., 2003, p. 2). Teachers lift and frame dialogue as it occurs, shaping the chaos and creativity into an interconnection of meaning. We can turn simple question and answer sessions into a complex community of conversation. Palmer (2007) explains,

> *The richness of the community of truth lies in the fact that its process is nonlinear. Its tracks lead in diverse directions, sometimes circling back on themselves, sometimes jumping far ahead. In the midst of this creative chaos, the teacher must know when and how to draw a straight line by connecting comments that have been made, revealing a trajectory of inquiry that can both confirm what we know and take us somewhere new.*
>
> (p. 138)

We don't know everything, and shouldn't pretend to for the sake of our egos. Students do not come into our classrooms as blank slates without any prior knowledge or experiences. This perspective reflects the constructivist theory, that learning and meaning-making are the result of integrating and understanding new information using prior knowledge and experience.

Theorists like John Dewey, Maria Montessori, and Jean Piaget have developed constructivism in their writing and practice. For them, learning is an ongoing process that is influenced by new experiences. In other words, the learner continues to update his or her sense of the world, "constantly construing and reconstruing in an effort to maintain a coherent system of interpretation" (Davis et al, 2008, p. 100). This idea explains how diverse individual interpretations of similar experiences can be. Davis et al (2008) conclude that the purpose of education in constructivist terms is "not to guide learners toward completion, but to provide them with experiences that challenge and enlarge their understandings" (p. 101).

While constructivism is only one of many theories on learning and processing new information, as educators, we cannot ignore the individual as a learner, nor the environment in which they are learning in. As I attend to a common interest as a social group, I also need to remember that the interpretations are theirs to make sense of. I can't do it for them.

5.3 Reframe

Both cooperative learning and constructivism have an essential role in my classroom. While equally important in both an arts and a science class, I find that I can better attend to them in the English lessons.

I am a discussion-driven educator because I'm comfortable facilitating conversations and sharing the ownership of learning. I've discovered that over the

previous months of teaching that I seem to teach best in a discussion-based environment, and that my best lessons include dialogue.

In the lesson based on the poem "Lost Generation," I was able to explore the elements of poetry, but also evaluate the bigger picture, which is the future of human civilization. For me, literature is a way to perpetuate and disseminate the ideas and issues of human beings, of people and their natures, experiences, emotions, and identities. There is really no purpose behind literature if we cannot associate it with people. Although beautiful writing and language alone can be a moving experience, there is something lacking and disengaging when the human aspect is absent.

I don't believe that people don't care about humanity or humanness. There is always something that intrigues us, and ignites our curiosity to find out more. Although I never took a history class in university, I'm constantly reading articles and books about the events of the past. That's my personal interest. I'm not required to, assessed, or rewarded for my own private research, but doing so is a delightful experience. My challenge as a teacher is to find out what inspires my students' questions and the interests, whether it's a science topic or a work of literature. Once I successfully do so, the concept or the text becomes enjoyable and worthwhile of their efforts and potential future research.

On paper, this idea sounds obvious – engage the students, and they will be engaged in your class. In reality, any teacher will agree that engaging all thirty bodies is quite the pedagogical challenge. The larger our classes, the more difficult it is for us to find a way to appeal and attend to all. I would argue that it is not impossible, but certain elements need to be in place for such a stimulating phenomenon to occur. The content is a key component

– conjugating subject-verb agreement just cannot be as interesting as mutants and mutations to the greatest number of students. Context is equally significant, since the universal theme of the quest for one's identity can be disseminated in a monotonous lecture, or it can be explored in a role play.

I can attribute some of the success of the "Lost Generation" lesson to the content and the context. From a content perspective, the poem described the emerging trends of the young generation, most of which sound quite negative based on social standards. The poem also provides the students with a sense of hope for the future. "Lost Generation" used a unique medium to convey the content as well. The reversible poem in video format was different and unexpected, which helped pique their interest in both the poem and the poem's themes. A teacher's knowledge and comfort with multiple modes of presentation and different forms of media is indeed helpful to keep things dynamic.

In terms of context, the ideas in the poem present a tension and anxiety about the future that so frequently motivate students to perform in school and participate in the community. Although teenagers often get a bad reputation for being ignorant, selfish, and destructive, this generation truly believes that they can make a difference and change the world. I think the messages in the poem shocked them, made them realize that their perceived ideal future is very different than the one society attributes to them. I think that they were quite relieved when the poem ended on a hopeful note. This poem mattered to them. They're at the right age too. If they were younger, they may not care about marriage and divorce, and if they were too old, they may have settled into their lives already. Context is essential.

5.4 Future Action

I am not about to delude myself into believing that every single lesson could be as inspiring as this one, but I do know that being mindful of content and context is a good place to start.

Questions and research, especially on a topic that interests students, satisfy both content and context demands. While a lecture can attend to both, interactive and cooperative learning based on inquiry has been argued to be more effective and impactful in the long run. Wilhelm (2007) describes an approach in which the teacher constructs lessons and units based on essential questions that guide and drive inquiry.

The curriculum acts as a starting point for the development of a lesson or unit plan, but the inquiry is only limited by my imagination. The challenge for me is to develop an inquiry that is engaging and meaningful enough to not only appeal to students, but to fulfill their educational needs. Inquiry strives to instil an aptitude for learning in students by nurturing their intrinsic thirst for knowledge and sense of curiosity. In "The Educated Person," Ernest L. Boyer (1998) asserts that "'Why?' is the question that leads students to connections" (p. 287). In order to make inquiry purposeful and engage students, educators need to consider more than curricular and isolated disciplinary questions.

At the start of each science lesson, I tend to think of a few questions that foreshadows the upcoming lesson topic and information. For example, I might ask students questions like these in a lesson on mitosis:

As a living thing grows bigger, is its growth caused by an increase in the number of cells, or the size of cells?

Does an elephant have bigger cells or more cells than a mouse?

Why does your cut heal after a while?

Should we create babies by design?

Etc.

In addition to foreshadowing the lesson, I try to associate the ideas to life if possible.
Sometimes, what we learn in school is abstract and not tangible – for example, algebraic
functions learned in a math class. Never again would I have to refer to that skill or
knowledge, but functions are still important to learn about because through the process of
solving the math problems, I gained reasoning skills and logical sequencing abilities. In the
past, I rarely mentioned the value of such skills at the beginning of each lesson. I allude to
these abstract skills and knowledge from time to time, but never in conjunction with the
lesson.

I always emphasize how meaningful metacognition is, but thinking about thinking is
often not an inherent skill unless students are made aware of it. The beauty of inquiry is its
emphasis on the process as well as, if not more than, the product. If I know that I'm hoping
to hone students' critical thinking abilities using for example, Edward de Bono's six hats[13]
strategy for an ethical dilemma, I could tell the students at some point during the lesson
that this is my objective for the day. My feedback about their responses gives them an
indication of how their thinking is going, but it's not really obvious what they're trying to
develop. Providing students with a reason for what they are doing and learning could help

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[13] Each of the six hats represents an approach to problem solving. Black hat = cautious approach; blue hat = controlled approach; red hat = feelings approach; yellow hat = positive approach; green hat = creative approach; white hat = factual approach.

engage a few more reluctant students, and at the very least, ward off complaints about the usefulness of an activity or problem. If only my math teachers had said something, I wouldn't have questioned the applicability of any math skill asides from addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division (and logarithms, but that's only because there's no other way to efficiently calculate such large numbers in biology).

Returning to the topic of essential questions at the beginning of each lesson, I found that despite the fact that these questions were useful in focusing the learning, building anticipation, and engaging the students, the inquiry was only really helpful for the academic students who cared about school, and the people who participated. The few students who are unmotivated, and who I'm trying to reach, are often distracted, waiting for someone else to do the thinking or the next text message to arrive.

What I forgot to do (and probably didn't have the time and energy to implement) during my first year of teaching was incorporate writing into the equation. During my practicum, I had the students respond to the questions at the beginning of each lesson in their journal. I evaluated their science journals for completion and quality of investigation rather than the correctness of answers.

Learning from that experience, I plan to once again, introduce the science journals with a few modifications. In addition to the essential questions at the beginning of each lesson, I would also like to invite students to reflect on one thing that interested or confused them at the end of the class. Practically, I doubt that I will be able to manage that much marking and recording if I were to check every single entry. Instead, I plan to thoroughly read a few entries halfway through a unit so that I can determine students'

competence with the subject at hand. At the end of a reporting term, I will ask the students to self-evaluate their science journals for completion and thoughtfulness, providing them with examples of what a well-done journal looks like.

Ultimately, the aim of the essential questions prior to the lesson or unit is to promote more engagement and ownership of learning and research. One final note to questioning is the relationship between teacher and student. Inquiry does indeed engage, but it can also wound if the topic is associated with a painful experience or memory. Thus, before I ask a question, more so, but not exclusive to, an English class, I need to ask myself this question: "Can this student handle the question?" (Palmer, 2007, p. 84).

Chapter 6: Teenage Punks

"Teenage Punks" is a narrative that is based on an upsetting experience that occurred

during my advisory (homeroom) block right before lunch on April 28th, 2011. The focus of

this piece is not the incident, but the students' response to my distress that followed. The

cliff notes version is that someone got injured in my advisory, which left me feeling

uncharacteristically anguished and miserable. The narrative below was something I shared

with my class the next day.

April 28th, 2011

Whenever I reveal to others that I'm a teacher by profession, people often ask me, "What

grades do you teach?"

The moment I say "secondary school," their facial expression changes to that of disdain.

"Oh. High school kids. Aren't teenagers very difficult and rebellious?"

I get that they're trying to sustain a conversation, but I don't know if they're aware of how

angry that comment makes me.

Popular media and literature have defined teens, and hence, our perception of adolescents.

I know who they're referring to, but honestly, not all my students have piercings

everywhere and not all of them confront adults with contempt.

While I don't deny that cliques and image are significant issues in the life of a teen, I won't be the first to call adults out on how much more we emphasize inclusion and exclusion, as well as drawing upon our reputation and appearance to feel confident about ourselves, and happy with our lives. If we're no better, we have no right to criticize.

Probably the biggest stereotype about teens is that they're selfish. To an extent, I can see where this assumption comes from – teens often think about themselves first, which is actually not that strange because human nature dictates such behaviour for our survival.

But biology aside, I find it really hard to be convinced of this stereotype because the teens I work with have compassion. Compassion emphasizes the other, and a genuine sensitivity and empathy to people's plight. How can someone be selfish if they care about others?

I recognize that when the teacher walks into the room feeling overwhelmed and shaken up, the class is inevitably affected. As a teacher, the most difficult thing for me to deal with is my students' physical, emotional, and psychological pains. When the pain does happen, I'm left questioning if I could have done more or done things differently.

Yesterday, amidst my distress and anguish, my students, teens, reached out and made me feel as best as I could be at that moment. After a few deep breaths and a word of encouragement from my principal, I braced myself for what would probably be a very difficult class to teach because of the emotional turmoil within. And I was so touched and impressed by how every single one of my students were sitting in their assigned seats in class, on time, and waiting attentively and quietly under Mike's (another fellow student) good-natured supervision. The looks of concern, the genuine words of encouragement, and the kind hugs of support all helped reinforce my faith in the compassion of adolescents.

And afterwards, during my prep, Yaminah and Fajr saw me wandering around the school aimlessly looking pale and traumatized. They invited me to crash their PE class to play badminton with them to cheer me up. It's remarkable how observant and sensitive they were.

Later on, Fajr, Yaminah and I had a conversation about how someone at the mall accused them and their friends for not caring about an elderly woman who fell behind them. I was livid when I heard this. How dare this person accuse my students of being insensitive teens! Teens have compassion, and they can definitely make a difference in the world. Just yesterday, they made a difference in mine.

6.1 Trigger

The main issue in "Teenage Punks" isn't melancholic, but optimistic, which I feel is often overlooked in a criticism-heavy environment of the school and the society at large.

The trigger in this situation arises from a sense of intrigue and impressiveness. I don't speak of teaching or lessons, but of the idea of living with self and others. Despite everything most of us think we know about adolescents, this generation is not as convincingly "bad" as the stereotypes have led us to believe. I'm curious about whether the typical stereotypes of drugs, alcohol, gang violence, sexual abuse, bullying, and suicide for example, actually hold merit. I believe that the Millennials who I teach are much more aware about the self and others than we give them credit for.

6.2 Frame

Although funny when viewed in a candid way, the stereotype that an adolescent views himself or herself as the centre of the universe is rather vicious and unfair (Figure 6). The teenage years are strange indeed, being this confusing transition period in which one is neither a child nor an adult. In comparison to children and adults, I feel that teenagers are often neglected.
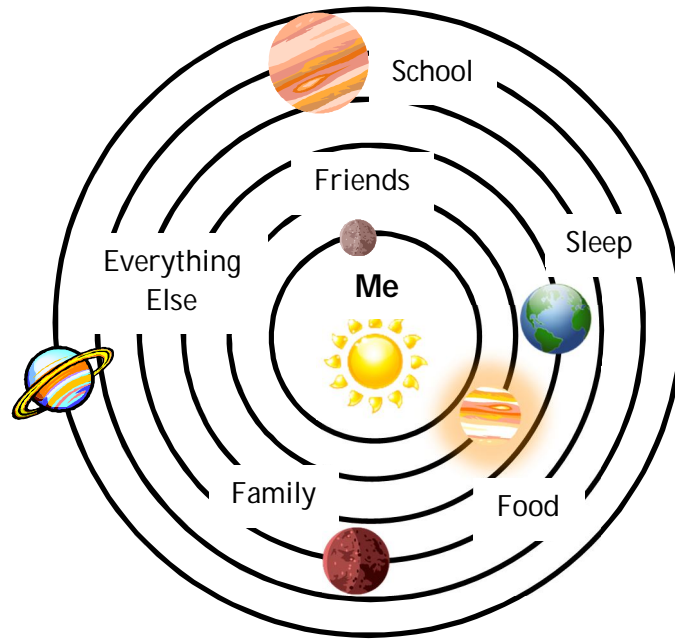
Figure 6: The ~~helio~~*ego*centric view of a teen's life

These years of discovery are some of the most important years in a person's life; school is an environment for them to not only figure out who they are, but realize how to live with others. Negative stereotypes of young adults may contribute to prejudiced treatment from adults and self-fulfilling prophecies to live up to those stereotypes (Wake Forest University, 2009). Yaminah and Fajr's anecdote about the accusations at the mall really angered me. The two girls have such generous hearts.

With everything that is charged against them, I'm impressed that teens continue to try to do well by us adults. Perhaps it's in this generation's nature to reach out and connect. Studies by Bibby et al (2009) indicate that more teens than before cite the way they were brought up, and their mother as being powerful sources of influence in their lives (Table 1). His surveys across Canada also reveal that trust, honesty, humour and concern for others are among the top four valued interpersonal characteristics (Table 2).

My assumption that the class will probably be rowdy as a result of my late return after lunch turned out to be completely false. Instead, they were impressively caring and generous in their concern. Now, correct me if I'm wrong, but those values seem pretty virtuous to me. Another positive change is their increased concern for family and community.

Table 1: Perceived Sources of Influence (from Bibby et al, 2009)

Perceived Sources of Influence *(% seeing as influencing their lives "a great deal" or "quite a bit")*	2008	1984
The way you were brought up	93	85
Your own willpower	89	82
Your mother	89	80
Your friends	86	73
Your father	82	73
The characteristics you were born with	75	60
Your teacher(s)	46	41

Inspiring as these facts and stats may be, social perceptions of adolescents have remain stagnant and disinterested. I think more people are increasingly aware of the negative influences of social media, cell phone usage, and video games on teen behaviour and health than of how fewer young adults participate in destructive and rebellious behaviour. At this time, I feel obliged to situate my position in making these statements. I must confess that I too, am a member of the Millennial generation. Perhaps my

interpretation of Bibby et al's (2009) results is biased, but as an educator, I do genuinely

follow the idea of "bias for best."

Table 2: Perceived Sources of Influence (from Bibby et al, 2009)

Valued Interpersonal Characteristics (% viewing as "Very Important")	% Nationally
Trust	84
Honesty	81
Humour	75
Concern for others	64
Politeness	64
Forgiveness	60
Working hard	54
Intelligence	52
Creativity	50
Patience	44

After framing the inquiry in terms of subverting teen stereotypes and uncovering

the values of the adolescents of this generation, I now find myself thinking about the

teaching strategies that can be applied to suit the needs of the Millennials.

Wilson and Gerber (2008) mention seven distinguishing traits of the Millennial

generation: special, sheltered, confident, team-oriented, achieving, pressured, and

conventional. Obviously, any research generalizes and has holes, but I think that their

work provides a practical way to begin my inquiry. Family time is now a main priority, as these teens have been brought up by parents who cared for them greatly. While the media and social networking expose these adolescents to the affairs of the world, the majority of them are well-protected and still quite naïve about the ways of society. Generally content and optimistic, the young adults who I teach are quite positive about their future prospects and their lives, which explain their confidence. With the increased prevalence of group work and peer feedback in the class, the Millennials are accustomed to instinctively work in teams. With respect to achievement, they have big aspirations, especially regarding their careers. They are however, much more extrinsically motivated than other generations (Strauss and Howe, 2000). With such enormous expectations set upon them by both themselves and the workaholic world in which they find themselves, my students face an extraordinary amount of pressure. According to Noveck and Tompson (2007), school is the greatest source of stress for 13 to 17-year-olds, whereas for older members of this generation (18 – 24), including myself, the stress is in jobs and financial matters. It's incredibly promising that as a result of this generation's awareness of the fragility of families, its members are much more conventional, and thus, receptive to establishing loving relationships and accepting their parents' values.

Research recommends that when dealing with the Millennial generation, teachers should create clear structures and expectations while offering choice, participation, and student-led initiatives.

6.3 Reframe

Reflecting on the suggested practices, I feel more confident about the effectiveness of some of my actions, since as a beginning teacher, I'm never quite sure if something I do is good or not. The worry and anxiety is always present until someone affirms a practice. Personally, I always hand out a syllabus in September to provide an outline of the year, thus giving them some guidelines as to what to expect throughout the year. This fulfills their dependence on established observances, for their sheltered nature and conventional ways mean that the more reassurances I can deliver, the better.

Two terms into the school year, I asked the students to write an evaluation of my teaching and the class. Many commented on how they appreciated class discussions and fun assessment choices. I think that through these two approaches, I was able to honour that they are indeed, a very special group of individuals with immense potential for creativity, insight, and sensitivity. I was especially touched when Anil, one of the most influential students in my class, thanked me for helping him enjoy English and realize that he was actually good at it. I know him well enough to discern that provocative discussions that frequently sway from the curriculum and expository writing with a focus on meaningful societal issues work best for him because he has an understanding of philosophy and psychology that surpasses even people my age.

I'm most impressed by Wilson and Gerber's (2008) statement about "teaching less." In my heart, I make a conscientious effort to attend to process and "space," not just product and "stuff," but a quick comparison with what other colleagues are doing immediately makes me hesitate. There's always a lingering fear that if I don't properly cover every

single point in the curriculum, my students are going to struggle next year, and their new teachers will think of me as a failure. However, I'm starting to see more successful teachers observe this idea, and the more literature I read on the necessity of this approach, the more I can settle into a style that aligns with my identity.

6.4 Future Action

Although I am sometimes frustrated that not more people can appreciate the teens of this generation the way I do, I also realize that alone, I can only convince so many people. We're always told that actions speak louder than words. So rather than persuade people to accept another view with my words, I can support the young in their endeavours to improve the world. This way, those who normally reject the unfamiliar or the unknown can see firsthand, the influence this generation has on our world.

Sponsorship of worthwhile extracurricular activities for youth is a privilege that I have easy access to. Before I started teaching, and especially after I began, I have supported various clubs, events, and youth organizations. My future action in this case is to continue learning how to be a more effective mentor for the young. My objective about mentorship is to determine when to relinquish responsibilities, and when to step in and provide a guiding hand.

Locally and globally, adolescents' actions and inspired leadership will be what changes the public perception; nonetheless, I still need to equip them with the skills and awareness to counter the stereotypes and criticism. In my own class, I can teach teens about stereotypes and the role of the media in perpetuating prejudiced views. I hope that

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class discussions can invite peer support and further the dialogue and inquiry about the

role of the young in today's society.

Chapter 7: 9%

June 20th, 2011 – End of the school year

My classroom is uncharacteristically empty and quiet. Even after an entire year of teaching, I can't help but feel excited at the prospect of having my own room. I realize that the students really brought this room to life because there's just this void now. Blaring loud Lady Gaga music does little to recreate the vibrant atmosphere that existed just a few days ago. The only plus side is that I can finally focus on mark entry.

I feel like an accountant. 75. 1802. 127. Somehow, I have a feeling that these kids will pretty much all get the same comments from their other teachers.

I love this comment. "__ has been recommended to summer school to make up for the incomplete mark. Have a good summer!" How ironic!

75. 75. 75. 79. 346. 52. 51.

I'm bored already.

52. 52. 47. 198. 191.

Mike wanted me to write "Mike is a beast!" on his report card. At first I planned to include the comment, but on second thought, I deleted it. Depending on which admin checks over my comments, I'm not sure he or she will be as amused by it as I am.

Jonathan Huynh – 47%. Close enough. I manually change his mark to 50%. I had my doubts about this guy.

Jonathan Huynh must have sensed that this was the opportune time to drop by, since moments later, he's sitting in front of me on my stool.

He gets right down to business like he usually does. He doesn't dawdle with small talk, but he always hesitates before he speaks. "Did I pass?" He asks.

"Hold on, let me turn off the music. You did, actually. After I bumped you up. You were close enough at 47%, and based on the effort you've put in this last term, I just don't feel like you've earned yourself a failing mark. Honestly, as I've said before, you're really smart and you've got great potential."

He nods slightly.

"I just kind of regret that I can't be giving you a solid B mark because you're at least that. But considering you were at 9% for the term 2 report card, you made a seemingly impossible task possible, and that's really impressive."

"Thank-you for passing me," Jonathan says.

"You're welcome," I reply, "but you don't really have to thank me because you're the one who earned the pass. You did all the work."

"Yeah, but you cut me a lot of breaks. Like you let me hand stuff in late, and you gave me a lot of chances."

You bet I "cut you a lot of breaks." Although I don't know how he knows these things. Quite an astute one.

"Despite that though, you really did come a long way. You know, back during Christmas time when you e-mailed me about wanting to change your attitude, I was so excited. But then you started to skip all my classes, and that was not cool at all. It's a good thing you approached me at the beginning of third term after that talk with the counsellor."

He smiles sheepishly. "Yeah. That." He kind of shrugs it off.

"But it all worked out. You were terrific in third term. I especially appreciate how you started to contribute to our class discussions. Have you ever noticed that when you speak, people really listen because you always speak with insight and clarity?"

"It's because I listen to what people say."

If only a small proportion of people do that, Jonathan. Life would be so much simpler.

I smile and shake my head lightly. "You know, Jonathan, I've probably said this to you a million times now, but you really do have potential. I kind of wish I'd had the chance to have you in my class more often, you know?"

Wow. The classroom is really really silent. Awkward! Both of us wait for the other to speak up. Where's Lady Gaga and her music to cut through the silence?

I found my voice first.

"But I've got to say, Jonathan, you probably taught me the most this year out of all my students."

He looks surprised. "Me? How?"

"I don't know how to say it exactly, but it's kind of this whole process, you know? I mean, for one, I'll be a lot more attentive about the comments and humour I use in class. See, I'm more used to teaching senior grades from my practicum experience and from teaching on call. I'm naturally pretty sarcastic as well, so a comment about someone smoking is supposed to be taken humorously rather than as a judgement or insult."

"I didn't want people to know."

Okay, Jonathan, they can smell it in your breath even if I didn't make a passing remark about it. Regardless.

"With you, I also realized how important it is to give people a second chance. I could have believed in you all I wanted to, but you really made something happen."

"Thank-you for that. I'm going to make a commitment to do better next year. Grade nine's not that important. It's not like anybody cares. But I'll work harder next year because that's when it counts."

This kid knows the system too well.

"You've got street smarts, I'll give you that, Jonathan. While many of your classmates are smart on paper, they're not cut out to succeed out there. You on the other hand, you know how the system works, and you know how to work it." I laugh.

"It's been a pleasure, Jonathan."

"Thank-you so much, Ms. Mei."

"It's the least I can do. And I mean every word that I say. But Jonathan, you and I both know that I'm not oblivious to your 'activities.' You've made a commitment to school next year. You can make the right choices too about your life."

I don't expect him to respond to that, so I keep going. "Keep me in the loop about how you're doing next year, okay?"

"You bet. Thanks again, Ms. Mei."

He walks out the class, and I'm alone again. Lady Gaga comes back on.

Thanks, Jonathan.

7.1 Trigger

I thought that the only students who know the system are academic students – the ones who know how to cater to the teacher's expectations and write tests. But Jonathan made me realize that there are students on the other end of the spectrum who also know the system.

For students like Jonathan, the system is one that can be easily exploited to cater to *his* needs. School isn't the priority or concern, no problem! Educators mostly want to keep students in school, not out. We'll make exceptions for him. We'll help him out. We'll make sure he's on the right path. He knows it's in our nature and profession to do so.

This situation also brought the teacher's authority and power to the surface. I could literally answer the question:

To pass, or not to pass?

By passing a student, I could potentially encourage him to change for the better. By failing a student, I could reinforce her disdain for school or a particular class. Conversely, the opposite could happen as well. The student who is passed out of pity could easily learn that the system is a joke, while the student who is failed due to incompletion could recognize the need for an attitude change. As the teacher, it's possible that the decision I choose could make or break a student. My choice needs to be so carefully deliberated; when it's the right one, I would have done my job, and yet, I am apprehensive of being the straw that breaks the camel's back. How do I know which choice is the right one?

The triggers for this situation are probably some of the most difficult and controversial ones to explore, since they have to do with the authority of the teacher in assigning grades that pass or fail a student.

7.2 Frame

I once had an interesting conversation with someone who is labelled by society as "gay," but as it turns out, labels like straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, etc., present absolutes that are not realistic at all. He told me that things are always categorized by polar opposites. You're either straight, or you're homosexual. You either identify as a man, or as a woman. He argued that there's a lot more to sexuality and gender than a simplified division. Rather, according to him (and many others who I've spoken to since), we all exist along this continuum. I might be born a woman and identify as a woman, but I'm a more "masculine" woman than someone else. Thinking about my male colleagues, I would dispute that many of them are probably more "feminine" than their male counterparts in other professions, since there's no denying the significance of the heart in this line of work.

Although seemingly an unrelated topic, I discuss the idea of polarity because that is exactly the conflict I face. With respect to evaluation, I have two options – pass or fail. We are always caught up in divergent choices. Yes or no. Right or wrong. Good or evil. Because true living cannot be so cleanly severed into two opposites, a tension exists.

This tension causes me great stress because my judgements as a teacher place me in a very frightful position of power and authority that can be easily misused and manipulated. I am fearful that someday, when I get tired and disillusioned, I might take

advantage of this power that I possess and inflict a heartless decision on a student. Furthermore, this tension frustrates me because I am uncertain if I attended to the very heavily scrutinized idea of fairness. To a lesser extent, pressure from administration can also be overwhelming sometimes.

The characteristics of power and authority help me in reconciling the tension I feel slightly. Palmer (2007) differentiates between the two, stating that power works from the outside in, whereas authority works from the inside out. (See Figure 7). I gain power from students' obedience and external influences of reward and punishment, but true authority comes from within. When students willingly choose to respect me and listen to me, my authority as a teacher is established on a basis on mutual consent and understanding. Based on this discussion, I could view my choice of pass / fail as an issue of power, or as a responsibility of authority. If I view my choice as a responsibility of authority, the conflict is no longer as difficult.

Palmer (2007) asserts that "we must teach our hearts a new way to understand the tension we feel when we are torn between the poles" so that we can accept our humanness and reconcile our fragmented spirit (p. 87). Like Jonathan, the pass or the fail impacts me greatly, even if the decision was made as a respected authority and not a feared power figure.
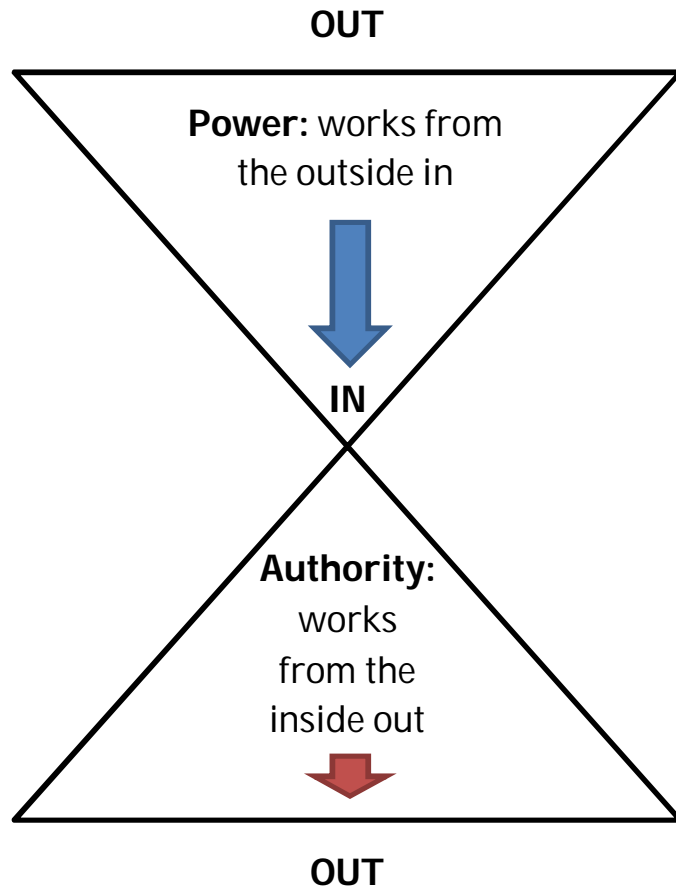
OUT

Power: works from
the outside in

IN

Authority:
works
from the
inside out

OUT

Figure 7: The relationship between power and authority (Palmer, 2007)

7.3 Reframe

Most systems in a democratic society offer chances for redemption. Criminal law, for

example, allows early release, probation, community service, and bail. Driving records that

include offences like speeding and running a red light get erased after three years in British

Columbia. Education is no different.

I could become an inflexible teacher and play by the same rules for everyone. An

impartial system will not fault me for choosing this way. If a student doesn't hand in work,

for example, I have nothing to base my evaluation on. The students made a choice, albeit a bad one, but it was still their choice. I didn't fail them – they failed themselves.

Life would be much easier if I were like that. But I'm not.

During the grade level promotional meetings at the end of the year, I heard many arguments for passing or failing a student from my colleagues. In the group are counsellors, administrators, teachers of other subjects, and learning resource specialists.

Table 3 is a compilation of the frequently used comments given for passing or failing a student.

Table 3: Pass / Fail Comments

Reasons to Pass	Reasons to Fail
- Students who are weak cognitively or skill-wise may need the emotional and social support of their friends who will be moving up a grade - Students in younger grades will feel discouraged - Students in grade eight are not used to the severity of passing and failing system that is present in the secondary school - Is the teacher failing the student because of lack of evidence of understanding, or because of the student's actual lack of understanding?	- Students who are weak will struggle with the curriculum in the higher grade if they cannot meet the prescribed learning outcome of their current grade - Students may not have the right attitude, skills, or knowledge to advance to the next grade - Despite make-up assignments, students have failed to produce the evidence required to demonstrate their meeting the prescribed learning outcome - Teachers have professional autonomy and enough expertise to

Table 3: Pass / Fail Comments (continued)

• For language learners, is the failure a result of linguistic challenges, or content understanding? • Students who are about to graduate are unable to do so unless they pass this one course	make judgements and set evaluation standards

With so many insightful reasons as to why one would pass or fail a student, this decision can often feel whimsical and subject to intuition and feelings. In some ways, this contradicts the objective ranking system of the traditional marks scheme that so many of us are familiar with. We are expected to provide exact percentages to measure and indicate a student's progress and abilities. Yet, for students who seem to have learning difficulties that are not always identified, we, the evaluators, are contradictorily sympathetic.

I do not object to being sensitive to students' needs and considering the greater scope of students' developmental issues. I sometimes feel that we're hypocrites though, saying and valuing one thing, but doing something else. Although at the forefront of debate and academic research, assessment, as important as it is, is not a topic that I will go into more depth at this time, beyond the questions posed by Bullough (1989, p. 63):

1. Should effort be most rewarded, or achievement?

2. Will grades be norm- or criterion-referenced?

3. Are attitudes important?

4. Should attention be given to the effects an assessment will have on student motivation and self-esteem?

Given the complex and interpretive nature of these questions, I must first discover more about my identity so that I can answer them in a way that honours my values and my personality. In addition to deliberating on Bullough's questions, I feel that it is necessary to focus on the internal conflicts that I face whenever I have to make pass / fail decisions.

Assigning grades is inevitably linked with my perceived professional authority. Students come into my classes knowing the drill – I assign, they do, I evaluate, they pass or fail. I am a disciple of the academic system too. Even now, despite appreciating knowledge for the sake of learning and awareness, I still stress over marks. I cannot afford a failing grade because my chances for further studies or opportunities will be severed unless exceptions are made for me. The stakes just keep getting higher and higher the more education we receive.

Having said this, I truly empathize with students' plight regarding marks. How do I reconcile a tyrant and a pushover? If I am rigid and unwilling to bend depending on the circumstances, I worry if I helped contribute to the child's sense of failure. If I buy into every single sob story, will I lose all credibility and professional integrity?

Perhaps those questions are too broad and all-encompassing when in reality, these decisions never subscribe to a set of generalizations. I passed Jonathan because I know that he is incredibly intelligent and can easily understand the content and master the language arts skills required by the grade 9 curriculum. He may not have all the evidence that I required of his peers, but I have seen enough of his work to know that he "gets it." He

worked really hard to complete the major missing assignments when the certainty of incompletion dawned on him. Much to my delight as well, he also started contributing significantly to class discussions. I think a part of me is impressed by his astute insightfulness. What fourteen-year-old knows how to work the system like Jonathan? Maybe I felt guilty that academia failed him. Like a personal penance for the exclusive nature of schools that is beyond my control, I felt as if I had to make it up to Jonathan somehow. What really solidified my decision, though, was his peers' recognition of his abilities and intelligence. More than one student mentioned how smart Jonathan was. If he can garner their acknowledgement, he's clearly a very capable young man.

Taking Jonathan's situation into consideration, I argue that I rewarded his effort and change in attitude. I never even considered norm-referencing out of ease of administration and observance of objectivity. Criterion-referenced assessment also allows students to understand the guidelines and expectations on which they are assessed. The main factor that influenced my consideration of Jonathan's status is Bullough's question about the effect of the assessment on the student's motivation and self-esteem. I will return to Jonathan after a few paragraphs, but this is the perfect opportunity for a brief interlude on my view of assessment.

To uphold objective academic standards and to perpetuate the integrity of the disciplines, I tend to value achievement in my assessments, and in older grades more so than in younger grades. An "A" essay and a "C" essay just cannot compare, and its writers should not receive a mark that isn't consistent with the necessary competency required at specific levels. As harsh as this reason may be, I don't believe we should shelter students

from the unfairness of the genetic and future nurturing lottery. Some people are born with an affinity for writing essays, while others excel athletically. Students from affluent families typically enjoy positive role models and can afford extra learning support. Like life and the reproduction of our species, competition is a reality. However, I do not object to rewarding marks for effort as well in certain situations. If I asked for a project to be neatly illustrated and coloured, and a student hands in a masterpiece that took hours to construct, I have been known to be quite generous with bonus marks. Eventually, I slowly worked in an effort / wow factor mark in the criteria to prevent unnecessary mark inflation.

A good attitude is rarely recognized for marks or for praise, but a bad attitude always stands out. Attitude is such a vital component to how we interact with the world and its people. Very rarely, are we explicitly taught about attitude and what it means to have a good one. Our knowledge about attitude occurs from our life experiences and interpersonal conversations, but almost never in formal academic settings. While having a good attitude is imperative to one's success, like the arguments I provided for effort and assessment, I am unwilling to consider a student's attitude on an assignment. I tried to offer minor credit for attitude in my classes this first year, but as of now, I'm still undecided as to whether or not I should continue with this practice.

Finally, my last concern is more to do with my wariness about being in a position of authority, since whenever there is a power imbalance, the tension of power and oppression arises, and I will be disappointed in myself if I ever oppress anyone in a learning setting. Despite all the good reasons for passing Jonathan, I still made the judgement based on intuition and feelings. And beyond the bias in my decision, I realize that I am judge,

prosecutor, and jury in the classroom. I confess that I am reluctant to accept this responsibility, but similar to how Jonathan has no choice but to work within this system of education, I too have no choice but to embrace the expectations and roles of the authority figure.

While I revealed a lot about this tension, ironically, I also discovered that despite all the power of judgement I have as a teacher, I am powerless to abdicate this responsibility. Even if I were to view the power in terms of authority, I'm not sure if I can differentiate between the two yet in practice. What I can accept is my need to be humane and conscientious by putting the student first when I pass my judgement. What I can't forget is to be human so that I don't internalize any mistake on my part and expect to always make the right judgement.

7.4 Future Action

Since we were young, we've always argued about the concept of fairness. My sister had a bigger scoop of ice cream – that's not fair. Mom and dad favour her – that's not fair. She was born "smarter" – that's not fair. I could list a holy scroll of inequalities in life, from the shallow small things to the impactful big issues. It is this very idea that makes our every decision and evaluation as teachers difficult.

To be fair to the students who work hard and produce quality work, I shouldn't make any exceptions. It can be difficult to justify passing one student and failing another using anecdotal evidence when both are borderline. Conversely, it is also unfair to treat a dyslexic child or language learner the same way as an average student. Students have

hypocrisy radars on all the time; they'll remember favouritism and unfairness, which affects learning attitude and classroom atmosphere. However, they are not deaf to reason – if a teacher can justify why someone is assessed or treated differently, they're usually accepting of it. The more I think about this, the more I realize that this ethical need to be fair may be more in my own head than the reality of the collective classroom.

I've learned something important about evaluation from Jonathan. I've learned that the less arbitrary I can make this judgement seem, the fairer and easier my job is. Authority figure or not, this decision occurs always amidst conflict. To be a good teacher, my heart must guide the vital decisions, but if I can appear to consider fairness for all, I can diminish resentment and complaints.

Establishing expectations at the beginning of the year sets an objective evaluation tool, and allows me enough evidence to make informed decisions. For example, I can state in the syllabus that unless the student participates meaningfully in class dialogue, completes all assignments according to the set due date, and attends all classes on time and with the exception of excused absences, I reserve the right to fail him or her if the mark is already below 50%. With exceptional students, the expectation is flexible.

This may seem self-explanatory to most, but when arguments and pleading arise, I can always refer to an agreement in writing. I anticipate the main reason for a mark below 50% for an average student is failure to hand in assignments or write in-class tests / essays. In part, this is also a strategy to be more proactive about the situation. Rather than wait until the last term, I can use this to remind students to start making changes earlier

on. Hopefully, Jonathan benefited positively from this experience, and hopefully, I won't

have to face another Jonathan for a few years.

Chapter 8: Discussion

When I initially chronicled the interesting events that occurred during my time at school, I never had the intention of inquiring further than the candid commentary I had already inserted within the narratives. I wrote for the purpose of finding relief or inspiration from my experiences, for like many writers out there, words are my channelling medium. Once I revisited my experiences using Schön's (2003, 2007) reflective practice approach, I astounded myself with the amount of theory, philosophy, thoughts, and emotions that I was able to unearth. Reflective practice provided the foundation on which I applied transdiscipinary inquiry.

I chose six anecdotes that I felt were defining moments of the first year of my teaching career. Each story taught me valuable lessons that not only develop my identity as a teacher, but also as a whole person in a world that easily fragments our sense of self if we remain unaware.

"Voice" allowed me to voice my constant desire to be as good as the great teachers who have taught me and inspired me. The narrative also served as a vehicle for healing from a moment of self-doubt and insecurity. "Voice" was one of my favourite pieces to write, for in doing so, I was able to reconnect with my memory of the teacher who really initiated the values of relations and living within the school for me. Prior to meeting Mr. Saini, the school was a building full of learning content that teachers disseminate.

The ideas I addressed in **"Cardboard People"** was probably what made me most ashamed about my first year of teaching. Although the ranting was easily unleashed, the

audacity to commit my frustration to words was not initially. Even after what I have learned from the reflection, I can't help but think about whether it's right of me to think this way. Professionally, I feel as if I should be ethical and mature enough to overcome my personal issues and interests for the sake of the students. Personally, struggles and unmet success are always demoralizing.

"The Poet" was an interesting narrative to write because I would've never thought that Karah would capture my attention the way she did. Prior to this anecdote, all of the experiences I've reflected on emphasized provocative situations that deal with the students as a more collective entity. In "The Poet," I instead, focused on one student who has touched my life because I've touched hers. In writing "The Poet," I have come to the paradoxical realization that I am finally starting to know and don't know what it means to be a teacher.

Despite the ominous title, **"Lost Generation"** was a sketch about one of the most optimistic and successful lessons I've taught. Although always a well-behaved and relatively academic class, third block didn't really have the same unrestrained creativity and insight of second block. Since "Lost Generation," I've been able to witness more growth and risk-taking on the part of my quieter class. I even invited my administrator to visit that class during our discussions on various short stories. Writing "Lost Generation" was a break from the heavy and emotionally charged pieces that seem to attract my consideration and reflection. I felt more empowered as a result, and comforted by the fact that I can do things right too.

"Teenage Punks" is again another hopeful piece that expresses my impression of and gratitude for the teens who I have the privilege of calling my students. The inspiration for this narrative actually came as a result of my utter astonishment with my students' maturity and sensitivity when I was no longer the confident teacher with authority, but the confused lost soul in need of comforting. I wrote the story to thank them for their generosity and heart, but a conversation with Yaminah and Fajr helped give "Teenage Punks" more direction for inquiry. "Teenage Punks" evolved from an emotional watershed to a social commentary on the plight of adolescents as they seek approval and understanding from the world.

"**9%**" relived my conversation with one of my most exasperating students during my first year of teaching. The vexation that I attribute to Jonathan isn't really about his behaviour, but about his apparent lack of motivation or interest despite his cleverness. Of all the students who I've taught and issued a failing grade, Jonathan's pass / fail status was the one I was most invested in. If Jonathan had failed, I would have been devastated because he truly is a child who I believed in so much. Since the beginning of the school year, I knew he had potential. There was a solemnness about Jonathan, a grown-up mannerism and a sensitive demeanour, that made him stand out for me. It didn't take me long before I discovered his gang-related activities and unhealthy habit of smoking, and if it were anyone else, I would've been concerned, but with Jonathan, I was more than concerned, I was immensely disappointed.

Although unplanned, some of the important concepts of my narratives touch on the implicit skills of awareness, love of learning, creativity, critical thinking, and connecting

with others that I feel are important to teach. The situation of typecasting adolescents and the lethargic attitude towards the Millennial generation I described in "Teenage Punks" lends itself to fulfilling my goal of teaching awareness, for stereotyping and ageism are socially constructed and situated. "Voice" is also a story about awareness, although its ideas are less content-driven and more philosophical, since both the students and I are forced to question the interactions within a classroom and what they represent. On the surface, "Voice" can also be a story about when we fail to properly connect with others and how to learn from that experience as a result. Similarly, "The Poet" is a narrative about connecting with others, although in Karah's case, she learned to connect with a trusted adult figure who is her teacher. "Lost Generation" describes an experience in which my students employed critical thinking skills and creativity, and discovered success as well as new insight, while "Cardboard People" depicts the opposite scenario in which my students don't have a love of learning, informing me that I can't possibly teach unless space is provided.

Each story also offers a peek into my identity as a teacher. With each story, a piece of my selfhood is joined to the whole, creating a more complete picture, much like the pieces of a puzzle. Through my inquiry and the discussion that follows, I determine what I bring to the classroom. I am more aware of how I greet disappointment and failure, as well as the qualities I possess to successfully work through hard times.

8.1 What I Bring to the Classroom

Based on my recent glimpse into my nature and teaching style, I am beginning to see myself as Linda, not as the textbook or as my mentors. I am surprisingly sensitive for someone who has been disciplined for so many years in the sciences to be objective and methodical. Recently, more scholars of the sciences are embracing their disciplines à la Barbara McClintock, but this embodying approach is still on the fringe of the sciences. My first graduate studies professor, Carl Leggo, spoke of "teaching with love." I didn't realize this very modest truth until he stated it so simply. Suddenly, everything made sense. Before this perspective-altering statement, I never really understood why some classes or lessons were so unbelievably alive while others just fade away.

Leggo's "teaching with love," and Palmer's "teaching from the heart" all express the necessity to connect with ourselves, our students, and our subjects, as well as to act in ways that pay tribute to the human heart and spirit. I think the idea of teaching with love can manifest itself in multiple ways, transcending teaching styles or personalities. When we immediately visualize the teacher who teaches from the heart, we think of the passionate maternal or paternal figure who teaches in a dynamic way and provides space for dialogue. But even the teacher with a traditional mindset who lectures can teach with love. His methods may be out-dated, but they are not a true indicator of his heart. He, too, can love his subject and his students, teaching with great passion to inspire. If we teach to our natures, we are teaching with the heart in mind. If one's sense of self is unsuitable for teaching, then perhaps teaching is not the right profession to be in. It is not possible to teach from the heart if we do not teach as ourselves.

I have always been restless but eager to learn. My restlessness is not so much manifested in kinaesthetic movements, but by my wandering, inattentive mind. My impatience, combined with my mediocre knowledge of the subjects and relative inexperience in teaching, force me to be different from my mentors. I can't teach like them even if I tried. Mr. Saini was gifted with intuitive sensitivity and verbal eloquence. I, on the other hand, am born with emotional recklessness and heated utterances. While I have been told that I have a natural talent for providing feedback and sincere listening, I am not able to engage at the same spiritual intensity, nor articulate with the same spoken poetry that Mr. Saini is known for.

During my days as a teacher on call, a student and personal friend of mine told me that her friends said that I was "trying to teach like Edison." The students comment was both flattering and wounding. My sister, a former student of Ms. Edison's, always raved enthusiastically about how great of an English teacher Ms. Edison was. To be compared to her meant that the students held me at a similar level as one of the greats. However, I was also only "like" Ms. Edison, and "trying." With her expansive knowledge of English literature and writing, as well her sound pedagogical approaches from years of teaching, I can never measure up to, or compare with Edison. While I can't speak for the students, I feel as if I'm trying to be someone else and falling short of it.

In both cases, I borrowed the idea of student-led facilitations from Mr. Saini, and much of the effective teaching strategies and resources from Ms. Edison. Had my students been taught by Mr. Saini, they may have very well said that I was "trying to teach like Saini."

Teaching ideas are meant to be shared though, and once I began to find success in my classroom, I was able to release their influence from my mind.

Because I'm not as knowledgeable as Ms. Edison, I encourage the students to provide more information instead of pretending that I know everything. Because it's in my nature to provide positive and constructive feedback, plus listen with my ears, eyes, heart and an undivided attention (as derived from the Chinese character "listen" Figure 8), I am able to redirect the tangent threads of dialogue into more cohesive trajectories of thought. Albeit my partial knowledge, I do bring a passion for my subjects into the classroom. Despite my less-refined and poetic speech, I do bring an intuitive ability with oral language to encourage and educate. I know myself, and I know class discussions work for my nature. The small management complications and uncomfortable silences that disrupt a space for learning can easily be rectified once I am conscientious of these issues, and committed to improve.
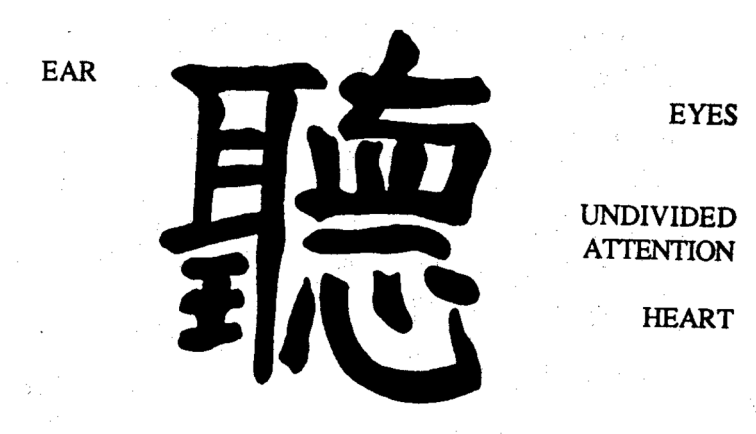
EAR 聽 EYES

UNDIVIDED
ATTENTION

HEART

Figure 8: The Chinese character for "listen" describes all the necessary elements of active listening

8.2 Dealing with Disappointments and Failures

From my narratives and the ensuing reflection, I can summarize how I deal with disappointments and failures with one powerful realization. Similar to what I bring to the classroom, I must remember my heart and my identity when I greet the unsuccessful and sometimes hurtful moments. Being a more competitive and passionate person, my immediate response to failure is anger and frustration, both at myself, the students, and the system. I am as quick to blame myself for inadequacy as I am to blame the students for their laziness and apathy. And when I become slightly more rational, I start to blame the school system and how lack of resources and support for beginning teachers leave me in such exasperating settings in the first place.

I genuinely believe that the act of writing and reflecting saves my soul. As quick as I am to become frustrated, I am also equally swift at calming down, given the opportunity to think things through. Once I figure out the source of my consternation through writing and conversations with my colleagues (and sometimes students), I am quick to open up space for dialogue, once again to nurture a respectful and heartful learning environment. With renewed determination, I seek to fix my errors and improve for the better. That is part of my identity, too, my instinctive intrapersonal intelligence, and my willingness to change to improve.

The renewed determination stage usually marks the end of an episode of disappointment, although there is one class that proves to be a failure I couldn't handle, and as I alluded to earlier in "Cardboard People," the only way to overcome this is to release my fear and surrender my ego for the sake of the students. Being relatively popular

and well-liked by my students, I found that class, its issues, and that setting the most unsettling experience of my first year teaching. We all know that failure helps us grow, and that without disappointments, we would never know pleasure. I just wonder how many of us actually live by that philosophy.

8.3 Transdisciplinary Inquiry as a Reflective Practice

Transdisciplinary inquiry allowed for the depths reached in the reflective writing that followed each narrative. I didn't view my experiences with critical eyes that nitpicked everything that was wrong. Nor did I approach my stories linearly because our identities are not arranged so neatly. What I did was approach the inquiry from a position of passion and creativity, taking note of the context and connections that surround the inquiry.

What I appreciate most about transdisciplinary inquiry is its viewing lens that transcends the situations themselves. Rather than limiting myself to the perspectives of a single inquiry method and an objective approach, I am able to account for the plurality of knowledge using transdisciplinary inquiry. The subjective nature of this form of inquiry enables a genuine study and constitutive construction of self-identity, as well as more meaningful and novel interpretations. The reflections described in each of the four stages of reflective practice – trigger, frame, reframe, and future action – all observe the essentials of inquiring in a transdisciplinary manner. The self-reflexive component is self-explanatory; plurality and complexity require more explanation.

Each reflection keeps in mind the existence of others in day-to-day living, as well as the varying ways in which we come to understand the world and make meaning of our

experiences. Although frequently introspective with a pronounced focus on the subjective "I," all the thoughts, actions and feelings that I write about following the narratives are influenced by the undeniable presence of others, and the diverse forms of knowledge.

Like the reflection that transdisciplinary inquiry enables, it also facilitates an understanding about identity that transcends the simple classification that are generally created by disciplines. At the end of my thesis, I know more about myself, but I still cannot satisfyingly categorize myself as a specific type of teacher, or as someone who does X due to Y because of the teaching contexts in which I am situated. I don't think I need to though, since transdisciplinary inquiry respects the openness and possibility of answers, as well as the complexity of life.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

Both the genuineness and limitation of this thesis lies in the fact that it is based on narrative. The voice of narrative is evocative and personal, leading to its authority on the experience of the I, and also to its subjectivity in the face of conclusive findings.

What is advantageous about this research is its relative accessibility by any beginning teacher wishing to embark on an identity quest. By referencing Schön's (1983, 1987) reflective practice approach and observing the elements of transdisciplinary inquiry, a questioning teacher can define his or her identity more insightfully so that the teaching can come from a sense of self and not from imitation and textbook techniques.

This thesis proved to honour the voice of the teacher within, reaffirming my faith that "the human heart . . . is the source of good teaching" (Palmer, 2007, p. 4). Out of an urgent need to become wonderful like our mentors and our experienced colleagues, beginning teachers can easily succumb to the temptation of imitating others and using techniques that work for them. Teaching is not about replication, but about creating something new through connections (Davis et al, 2008). If we do not find ourselves in time, these external expectations and our compromised identity may distort our integrity and love of the profession. Techniques can also be empowering rather than crippling if approached correctly. Palmer (2007) articulates that "as we learn more about who we are, we can learn the techniques that reveal rather than conceal the personhood form which good teaching comes" (p. 25). Davis et al (2008) elaborate that

Teaching, then, is never simply a personal or an interpersonal act. It touches the subpersonal through the planetary. Teaching is a deliberate participation in what is ... teaching isn't something that is done. Teaching is lived as one encounters self and other, individual and collective, past and future, actual and possible.

(p. 226)

When we start teaching, we do so with the best intentions. We believe that we'll be able to inspire our students the way we were inspired. We believe that we'll be able to make a real difference. More often than not, our optimism and aspirations crash to a very discouraging reality. Over time, many of us move past this awakening call, and begin to feel quite positive about our progress as we slowly find success and improve. Despite the good, there is no denying the fear that still lingers in our minds as we continue to question our abilities and identity. And for all our good intentions and efforts, the impending danger of burnout always exists. Is it realistic to expect teachers to always consider the most pedagogically sound approach, and to teach with great enthusiasm every single day for every single class? Is it realistic to expect this year after year? Is it realistic to expect this from beginning teachers? Eventually, we come to the realization that there are limits as to what a person can accomplish, and that even our best efforts and intuitiveness cannot deny the wisdom of time.

Reflection helps us realize our limits and our potential, our weaknesses and our strengths. Once we know ourselves better, we are able to teach more consistently from our identity and integrity, supporting the unforgettable painful moments, and reinforcing the inspiring joyful ones. Ultimately, the goal to teaching is more than just day-to-day survival in the classroom; our sense of self-worth and desire to be a contributing member of our

profession cannot be undermined by the more immediate demands. If we're in the right profession though, we intuitively know it, for a vocation that is not mine violates self and others.

At the end of this lengthy reflection, I did partially discover first year teaching, my teaching identity and my sense of self. Although it may seem that I have provided answers to many of my questions, the fragments that I have unearthed lead to new inquiries and uncharted trajectories of thought. But reflection is never a process that terminates because our stories never finish. Our stories will always need revisiting and revision because our investigations lead to "disclosure, exposure, and closure, followed by further opportunities for disclosure, exposure, and closure (Leggo, 2008, npa). Like the whiteboard that is never blank in a dynamic learning environment, reflection is a process that continues and creates because we are always in process.

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