LIVING AND RELIVING THE TENSION IN ONE TEACHER'S LIFE

by

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Whenever I’m in the classroom interacting with students, teaching and learning, I’m content. I’m also energised by planning, beginning with curriculum mapping, all the way through to the formatting of project guidelines/invitations. And yet, when I think about teaching as my career, I have a physical reaction, similar to the one I had in grade six when I lied to my parents so that I could go to a mixed party. I don’t feel noxious, but my stomach does tighten.

There are reasons for this that I wanted to explore, so I decided to write to learn more about why I might feel the way I do. This in itself proved daunting given my insecurities and doubts about any knowledge I may have as a result of eight years teaching. I rail against the data-driven dialogue that is accorded so much value these days, and yearn for more stories, but am unsatisfied by my own.

One of the themes that emerged during the writing of this paper was the importance of process. I’ve worked to make my classroom more process-oriented over the past two years. I place more emphasis on formative assessment and look for ways to move the focus away from the seemingly magnetic pull of tests, final projects and ultimately, report cards. I begin the process here of recognising that the tensions I feel with regard to evaluation (I worry that my having to assign grades negates any gains that may come from narrative feedback) and time (there’s not enough to teach the way I know I could with fewer demands) will never be resolved. I need to change in order to be more at peace with teaching. I also need to continue to search for ways out and through and around and in between the concerns I have because without some real work I believe that public education in British Columbia is going to become less vibrant and viable. I began looking for answers, but now realise that they’re much more valuable if they spawn more questions.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ................................................................................................................. ii

Table of Contents ............................................................................................... iii

Acknowledgements ............................................................................................... iv

Struggling to Write the Struggle ................................................................. 1

Teaching as Art? .............................................................................................. 3

Evaluating Evaluation ......................................................................................... 10

  Standardised Tests ......................................................................................... 13
  Classroom Evaluation ...................................................................................... 51

Further Frustrations ......................................................................................... 58

  Time .................................................................................................................. 58
  System ............................................................................................................. 61
  Boredom .......................................................................................................... 64
  Well-being ....................................................................................................... 71
  Control ............................................................................................................ 74
  Teacher Attrition ............................................................................................ 81

Why I Teach ....................................................................................................... 85

  Magic in the Classroom ................................................................................... 85
  Creative Planning ............................................................................................. 87
  Inspiration from Literature and Language ................................................... 88
  Constant Challenge ......................................................................................... 89

Do I Stay or Do I Go ......................................................................................... 104

  Understanding Teaching as a Process ......................................................... 110

Works Cited ....................................................................................................... 115
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STRUGGLING TO WRITE THE STRUGGLE

I feel muddled, confused, uneasy, unsure

The Dough in the Oven

I had four too-ripe bananas on my counter the other day and decided that I needed to make banana bread. I'm a fairly confident cook, but my banana bread never turns out. I thought it might be because I usually throw my browning bananas in the freezer and don't drain them well when I take them out months later to make the bread, so this time I used them directly from the counter. Surely this loaf will cook right through. Surely I won't have to eat around the gooey dough in the centre which, let's face it, wrecks the whole experience of eating a piece of loaf. Who wants to waste calories on something so unsatisfying, so unappetising? So imagine my distress when the oven buzzer buzzed, and I couldn't find a toothpick or equivalent to test the loaf? I had to look for other signs. The loaf was coming off the sides of the pan, the edges were dark and crisp, the top had split and healed, like wounds across a knee. I didn't want it to burn or dry out, after all. So I removed it, hopeful because of my change in technique. I even let it sit the suggested ten minutes before taking it out of the pan (I never usually let things sit). It flipped onto the plate easily and perfectly, and I anticipated having beaten my banana bread curse, when my knife, that started by slicing through firm loaf, met something wet. Only in Ben and Jerry's cookie dough ice cream do you want to find uncooked dough, and ever since I've been pregnant and concerned about eating raw eggs, I don't even find that flavour enticing anymore. What was wrong with me?

I've been teaching in British Columbia for eight years now, and for about six and a half of those years, I've contemplated leaving while working long hours to improve my practice. There are a myriad of reasons for this turmoil, yet I have difficulty articulating any. When I sit down to think about my situation, I end up feeling lost and frustrated, and I give up, just as I have with banana bread. But the questions that surround my teaching refuse to be ignored. I can successfully look the other way for two weeks or so, but then they'll be back, spurred on by an education headline on the 6 o'clock news, or by the third Sunday in a row I've spent marking essays while the pictures from my family's trip to the Atlantic provinces two years ago lie waiting to be put into the album. It's almost as if I have this relationship with teaching that requires, if not the full-blown leather couch and psychiatrist treatment, then at least the therapy writing offers. As E. M. Forrester once wrote, "How do I know what I think until I see what I say?" And although I'm not sure about much when it comes to my teaching these days, I know
that I need to address some of my concerns because they're monopolising parts of my brain that could be put to better use.

I wonder so much about why I worry that I worry that I wonder too much.

I wish I didn’t struggle so much with writing meaningfully about teaching both in and of itself, as well as how it shapes, complements and compromises my identity. I feel like Eliza Doolittle, only instead of marbles in my mouth, I’m fumbling with a too-fat pen. I think I know things about teaching, but how do I know I know, especially when much of my classroom know-how and knowledge is just a part of me? Barrie Barrell writes that “classroom teachers often state that what they are really trying to accomplish with their classes is much more than that which is outlined in a lesson plan, inquiries, or curriculum guide. Indeed, many teachers will become frustrated with their inability to express, in clear, cogent terms, exactly what they hope their students will be able to see and achieve” (7). And I’m frustrated, too, with the difficulties I have in expressing exactly why I wrestle so much with this profession.

I consider myself a teacher; I only play at being a writer, and no matter how many times I hear people say “as long as you write, you’re a writer”, it’s still hard to believe. What could I possibly say that would matter? It’s important for me to at least attempt to work through these conflicting feelings I have about teaching, though, and immersing myself in literature that addresses some of my questions and concerns has helped to clarify certain things for me. Still, writing about this thinking feels inadequate. Karen Meyer observes that “it’s very bizarre that being true to yourself has become a risk in this society” (20). Yes. Even narrative inquiry feels risky. People ask about your thesis and lose interest as soon as you begin talking about something they don’t recognise as normal or accepted. Who can blame them when I have trouble accepting my own work? I’m not comfortable. I wonder what can be accomplished by using an uncomfortable process to attempt to make sense of an uncomfortable situation. I doubt that the double negative rule that applies in grammar and math applies here, but if only it could.
TEACHING AS ART?

I feel inadequate, unprepared, off-balance, out of place

A Wolf in Sheep’s Clothing

He says he wants to run with me.
I made a promise to myself to run for thirty minutes every day in August. It’s already August fifth and I haven’t run since the first.
I want to want to run. I want to be a runner. I want to own running tights. But I refuse to buy myself running gear until running is a habit, and so I look like I’ve just stepped out of a high school gym – circa 1993.
I want to feel as though my day isn’t complete until I run, and I want to look forward to the high everyone promises me is there. As it stands, I usually run in the morning to get it over with.
I want to be able to run without running out of breath. I want to be able to chat with a running partner, but I can’t. And now he wants to run with me, and he’ll find out that I can’t run.
I hear the five year old in me complaining: “We don’t do anything where I’m better than you.” Why do I need to compete? I have visions of snowboarding – him dipping in and out of the trees, me on my hands and knees, trying to get over the flat lands. The whole time on the chair lift with him I worry about the appearance of my inability. “Just have fun,” I tell myself. “Just board. Just run.”
He says he wants to run with me, that he doesn’t mind going slowly, but he competed in international pentathlon competitions and is a runner. Why does he want to run beside me, a wanna be?
I try to explain, but he comes anyway, dressed in black running tights, red and white Canada flag running shorts, yellow and blue striped football socks, a bright orange mistake of a shirt, and a black cap with gold Guinness lettering. Is he trying to tame me, to make me realise that it doesn’t matter if I want him to come or not, he’s going to anyway? Or is he trying to lighten my obviously tense mood, to make me laugh? Not good. I don’t have enough breath for that.
We begin, and I worry about my pace. The dilemma: if I start out slowly, he’ll know right away how pathetic I am, but if I start out fast, I’m only putting off the inevitable, and making myself too tired to last for thirty minutes. So, I go slowly and begin to feel small, not because I feel the pounds falling off, but because this can’t be a workout for him. He’s going slowly for me.
I remember playing Sesame Street memory with my dad and sister, and thinking that they were letting me win. I hated that. And when I began to beat them on my own, they couldn’t convince me that they were trying.
He talks and I can’t answer, partly because I have no breath, partly because I’m moving from humiliation to mortification. I don’t think I can keep going, yet it can’t be more than six or seven minutes since we started. I’m ready to stop, but I can’t stop now. That would be too terrible.
“Why don’t you go on ahead,” I pant.
“Don’t be silly. Seriously, I wouldn’t be going that much faster on my own.”
Sure. He thinks I believe that. Is he patronising me? Check yourself, he’s being a gentleman. Put your pride away – it takes too much oxygen, and you need all you’ve got right now.
I check my watch: thirteen minutes. Inconceivable. Not even halfway there. But almost. Almost halfway. And if I slow down just a bit – there – I may be able to go for another seventeen.

He talks again. I still can’t talk, but at least this time it’s only because I’m out of breath. I wish I were a runner. I think I’d even not buy any shoes for a year in exchange for cardiovascular fitness. I wish I could run fast enough that he’d ask to go running with me again. I look at my watch: twenty-three minutes. Already? Only seven more. I can do that. “Do you want to go down to the beach?” “Sure.”

Uh oh. Running on sand. Maybe I can’t finish this run. And a hill? Don’t stop. Don’t run for twenty-six minutes and then stop. Okay. Flat pavement again. Catch your breath. Catch yourself...smiling.

I see a tree and start to speed up, to move slowly faster and faster. I reach the tree: thirty-one minutes. He checks his GPS: almost five kilometres. Not terrible. We walk together for another two, talking now, feeling better for having run. But I’m still not a runner.

We walk by Coast Mountain Sports and Lululemon and I don’t buy anything. Not until I like it.

I mentioned earlier that while I’m not comfortable thinking of myself as a writer, I am at home with being a teacher. On second thought, I don’t even think that’s the case. I’m comfortable teaching a class, certainly. I’m at ease in front of a group of teenagers. This isn’t the same as being at peace with the work I do with those same teenagers. I’m not even sure how to describe what it is I do. I can reflect on successes, but struggle still with understanding what might be responsible for what works and what doesn’t work in the classroom. Barrie Barrell offers a new method of analysing teaching, this time as an art. This feels promising to me, although I hesitate to call myself an artist. He suggests that “if we can begin to conceptualise teaching not as individual pieces of behaviour or as the application of scientific principles, but more as the weaving together of parts of a performance and a vision, then it is possible to gain new insights into the landscape of classroom teaching” (5).

What Is My Job...Exactly?

Plan lessons; learn, practice, assimilate, model, scaffold and teach strategies that will help students become better readers, better writers, better thinkers, better speakers; photocopy...everything; develop a classroom atmosphere conducive to learning and discovery; develop criteria, share models that do not meet, meet, and exceed these criteria...for all assessment; plan formative assessments prior to summative assessments; evaluate pieces of writing, oral presentations, projects, tests, group work; lead discussions; find poems, short stories, film clips, song clips, artwork, articles, interviews...that touch on the various themes I teach throughout the year; create year-long curriculum maps that: cover the prescribed
learning outcomes, integrate key reading strategies, allow for formative assessment prior to summative tasks, provide choice and flexibility, make use of challenging texts, engage learners and teachers alike; meet with counsellors about students who are struggling for various reasons; adapt and modify the curriculum for students with special needs; plan with the resource teachers for students with special needs; develop Individual Educational Plans for students with special needs; assign and collect work; manage seven classes of students; discipline; summarise novels; recommend novels; lend novels; promote literacy; sign out books; collect books; scour second hand sales for books for my classroom library; tidy the bookroom; read as much as I can; read aloud; work with students to find a novel that they’ll enjoy; encourage reading; participate in professional development; participate in study groups; participate in book clubs; read professional journals and resources; attend classes at university to stay astride new methodologies; deliver workshops; attend workshops; co-plan with other teachers; share strategies with other teachers; discuss educational theories; order novels; take attendance; order supplies for the members of the English department; organise the division of resources throughout the year (who will teach Macbeth in February? Who will wait until June for Romeo and Juliet?); collect dropped pencils and pens to fill my “need a pen? take a pen” cottage cheese container; manage a budget; find money in my personal budget to supplement the school’s budget; attend staff meetings and Educational Facilitator meetings and Staff Collegial Council meetings; disseminate information to members of the English department; develop teacher course loads; read and respond to department mail; organise English department meetings; write course and funding proposals; learn how to perform minor photocopy machine repairs; invigilate exams; enter marks; enter comments; enter work habits; write report cards; make seating plans; complete a teacher-on-call duotang; answer emails; return telephone calls; meet with parents; meet with book sellers; collect forms; hand out forms; write homework on the board; supervise assemblies; attend school plays; attend grad ceremonies and winter formal dances; supervise dances; chaperone school trips; practice safe exits from the building in case of fire or earthquake; ensure that the earthquake kit for my classroom is complete and current; write MLAs and the Ministry advocating for improvement to the public education system; engage in political protests against legislation that erodes the public education system; organise field trips; decorate bulletin boards; display student work; praise; console; encourage; listen; challenge; question; mediate arguments; develop relationships; engage in conversations about...stuff after school with groups of students; include the excluded; engage; excite; interest; imagine; argue; debate; take risks; be vulnerable; fail; make mistakes in front of audiences; act; compromise; talk, whisper, sing, and try not to scream; perform; lecture; coach; learn.

It has taken me a long time to develop even the foggy, grainy vision of teaching that I now have, and while part of that is of course due to experience – I needed and still need more – part of it is also, I think, due to the climate of the day. I can’t always find the words, or at least the words that will be acceptable to members of the board, or of the School Planning Council, or of the administration team, or of the Fraser Institute, to express what I know or what I think I know about teaching. Because my intuition is undervalued, I begin to question it as well, but the fact remains that the moments that keep me going are the random ones, the ones that often
can't be predicted, the ones we hope to encourage by creating a certain atmosphere of
collaboration and inquiry, but that we cannot ever demand. Sometimes we work to create the
ideal conditions and nothing extraordinary happens. Other times we are overwhelmed by the
response to what we might characterise as an ordinary lesson, by the questions, the interest, the
connections the students make, the learning. These are nebulous indicators of good teaching
and learning, but, as Lorri Nielsen explains, they are the reality:

Teachers who have taught the same elementary grade for a number of years
reach a point where they can look back on past years and extract the elements
that made a particular year go well. They can pinpoint the worst experience they
have ever had with a mathematics group, or detail the willingness of a particular
class to stretch their investigation skills and sweep the awards in a local science
fair. But whatever elements make these classes good or difficult or exciting
came together at a particular time and in a particular room for those involved
and could not be pre-planned or predicted nor repeated. A technical view of
teaching has difficulty accepting the transience or randomness of these factors.
Scientific studies of classrooms tend to look for data that can be made
generalisable. (22)

Eisner, too, in An Artistic Approach to Supervision suggests that “the whole [act of
teaching] is not equal to the sum of its parts” (qtd. in Barrell 18). This view is not held by all
districts. Evaluation of teachers by administrators continues to be, in my district at least,
centred on criteria that are distinct, and the idea is that if each is met, then the learning situation
will be deemed satisfactory. The headings of the teacher evaluation reports in my district are
professional growth, knowledge of child growth and development, knowledge of subject
matter, instructional competence, management of the learning environment, student-teacher
relations, management of evaluation and assessment process, staff relations, and
school/community relations. We know, intuitively, that a teacher may meet all of these criteria, but that there may still be something missing, and the teaching may be decidedly ineffective. Barrell suggests that little “has been learned over decades of research on teacher effectiveness as conceived as a clearly measurable endeavour” (16). Effective teaching often comes down to something that can’t necessarily be easily expressed, a sense of excitement, of engagement that is created in certain classrooms and that doesn’t know the inside of others. How do we explain this? By considering that teaching may be an art: “It has often been common practice for educational researchers, whenever they reach an impasse in their definition of teaching, to allude to the art or the artistry of teaching to explain any enigma” (Barrell 18). This view of teaching brings with it a lot of complications. After all, “to accept an artistic view of teaching challenges the traditional bureaucratic evaluation and assessment procedures offered by school administrators. Those who have the responsibility for teacher evaluation are not usually trained to criticise art or to view teaching as a performance or as an orchestrated structure, but rather to witness teaching as distinct, observable pieces of behaviour” (Barrell 8). There are so many variables to teaching that one can never be sure how a lesson will go let alone evaluate teaching by observing a class here and a class there. This is why it is more helpful to conceptualise teaching not so much as the delivery of stand-alone lessons, but as an on-going, fluid, responsive interaction with a group of students. From this perspective, viewing teaching as an artistic endeavour is less shocking. Teaching as a series of moments.

I agree with Lorri Neilsen who writes: “What I know about teaching, reading and writing, I know not only in my mind, but in my bones. This knowing transcends words on the page and goes deep into that twilight zone that makes all researchers wary: personal knowledge…traditionally the most undervalued knowledge in the educational enterprise” (5). After my colleague and I presented a sabbatical presentation to my staff, one of my
administrators asked how I knew the changes we proposed would help kids. I replied, honestly, that I didn’t know, but that the indications I would look for wouldn’t necessarily be countable.

Our English department handed in a rather Mickey Mouse School Planning Council goal this past year. We wanted to know whether more choice novels increased the numbers of recreational novels students read over the course of the year. I rarely teach a class novel anymore. I see so much value in collecting a number of novels on a similar theme and having students read their novel, discuss it in small groups, and then work with the whole class on short fiction and poetry and media around the overarching theme. I find that students read more. They’ll often switch groups partway through the unit after hearing people talk about this novel or that novel. I’ll also have students ask for two off the bat because following my short book talks, they can’t decide. The results of our survey showed that students overwhelmingly preferred choice to class novels. They also showed that students who were given more choice read more throughout the course of the year. I didn’t need these numbers to convince me, though. They didn’t make me more confident in my shift from class novel to choice novel. That confidence is built more by Eric’s dad telling me his son read more in September and October than he did in all of last year; in my grade 12 students asking me if they can read for 45 minutes again today like they did last class, they’re so into their books; in the beauty of that class in early May where I spent about 40 minutes talking about the 20 book titles I had gathered for my grade 12’s to read over the last few months and then watched as they browsed for the last 35 minutes of class, taking three or four books to their desks before deciding on one, or at least the first one; in my observations that my Block D English 11 class, who had been assigned to me last period for the first quarter of the year, and therefore had me for silent reading, which we do at my school for 20 minutes after lunch each day, read more than my Block G English 11 class who didn’t see me for silent reading until the new year. I was able to see the impact that modelling and establishing routine and time spent with reluctant readers had on the reading
habits of my students. When we use numbers, or methods of scientific inquiry, “we are left
with the feeling that something is missing; something in the impact teachers can have on the
lives of their students is being simplified or misjudged in its intent and impact” (Barrell 13).

Even so, I worry about this paper, given I have no numbers or charts or graphs to work
with. I have feelings and intuition and I want to value these, but hesitate largely because others
do. And I have questions and concerns, surrounding both any work I do in response to them
and my life as a teacher. Karen Meyer writes about feeling like an impostor in a new role as
administrator and director of a graduate unit in her essay “(In) different spaces: Re-imagining
pedagogy”: “At times I still ache with vulnerability and struggle with my footing” (21). That’s
how I feel. I’m floundering. She then discusses the term “graduate student” and I relax a bit.
I’m a student of this process. I’m writing to learn about my teaching and to research the causes
of my malaise all the while knowing I may never arrive at a diagnosis. I’m attempting to
observe my classroom, with me in it, from inside and outside the walls and to articulate what I
see there, drawing on the words and ideas of others, ones that resonate with me, to provide
context and to add clarity and insight and direction to my own thinking. I’m trying to make
sense of my time as a teacher-practitioner/teacher-artist using the tools of narration and
reflection, and in so doing, I am learning their value.
EVALUATING EVALUATION

I feel constricted, caged, caught, bound

I Am a Teacher?

Basketball game Monday,
Practice Tuesday,
Practice Wednesday,
Practice Thursday,
An hour at the fax machine
Trying to schedule a tournament
For my one free weekend in February –
But I walk in the gym
And pick up a leather ball
And challenge a student to a game of one-on-one
And forget the piles of marking
Waiting impatiently for me
On my floor
(There is no room on my desk).

I will collect one hundred and sixty essays this week,
And I will carry them with me everywhere
And leave them in my car
And think to myself:
"I don't want my car to be stolen,
But if it's inevitable that,
Living in Vancouver,
My car will be stolen one day,
Let this be the day."
I'll make a list,
Another list,
And set a goal of ten per day.
A week will go by –
I will still be stepping over the piles on my floor.
A deadline will loom,
And I'll mark my weekend away.
I'll consider just giving each paper a mark
And then I'll see a place where I might comment,
Where my words might improve a student's writing,
And I'll settle into the rhythm of ten minutes per essay,
Spending time with and without my students.

Monday after school,
Before the basketball game,
A staff meeting
Where I'll sit,
Anxious to coach.
I'll speak twice,
Once as SCC Chair,
Updating staff on the status of new courses and the timetable committee,
Once as RTA Rep,
Outlining the new directives from the BCTF,
Beginning the election process for our staff representative on our School Planning Council.

My name will not be on the ballot.
I cannot spend my time measuring students
And being accountable to a government I don’t respect
In terms and language that have nothing to do with true accountability.

Standardised tests
Raw scores
Measurable goals
Accountability
Percentiles
Rank
Grades
Statistics
Pathways
How do we count the stops?
The smiles.
The times students linger after class
To share a poem,
To give an update on their script or novel,
To philosophise,
To see how you’re doing
(They noticed you were wearing two different shoes the other day).
The time students started an impromptu book talk before the bell,
Sharing favourite titles:
“Can you spell the author’s last name for me?”
The time a student interrupted the silence of USSR to say,
“I just have to read you guys this passage.”
The tears.
The student drawing on her forearms
With razorblades,
Watching the blood drip into pools
On the tiled bathroom floor
And then writing about it
In vibrant and fluid red ink,
Thick and painful.
I notice my tears have smudged my evaluation sheet:

Not yet within expectations
Minimally meets expectations
Fully meets expectations
Exceeds expectations
The lines blur.
How do they expect me
To mark this student
When she’s marking herself with a knife?
I will sit for six hours Wednesday and Thursday
Meeting parents.
It’s usually a pleasure to meet new people,
Caring people,
But the conversations are rushed,
Fruitless, repetitive, forced.
I am jealous of the wasted time
And demoralised by the focus on grades.

When will I plan?
When will I sit alone, with a colleague, with students
And create?
When will I develop the lesson
That sustains me,
That stays with my students,
That matters?

I talk with a colleague who’s not finding the time either,
Who’s not able to do what matters to her,
And I talk with another colleague
And another
And find little comfort,
No solace.
And then I walk up the stairs to my classroom
And stand in front of my students
And curse their eagerness,
Their innocence,
Their sincerity
And my idealism.

When will I create the lesson that matters?
What else is there to do on the weekend?

My issues with teaching are many. The two that are always highlighted in my mind, though, that are the staples in my “worry repertoire”, are evaluation and time. They can’t be separated, really, because my frustrations with the evaluation that I do are partly a result of my not having enough time in a week to use the evaluation practices I believe in. There are other problems with evaluation, however, that I will look at here, and other ways time affects my teaching, that I will touch on later.

I’m concerned with evaluation, particularly with respect to how our current evaluation practices affect student engagement. I fear that the evaluation I do in my classroom, particularly
of students’ writing, may be more harmful than helpful. Yet I am required, if I want to keep teaching, to report on student progress with a number three times a year. The agenda of the current Ministry of Education is clearly geared toward accountability that can be measured. This government’s initiatives are making summative assessment more of a priority, and I’m not sure that effective writing instruction can occur in such a climate. I care about public education and I want to work to improve the learning situation for my students, but to do so I need to work in a system that I believe is compromising the learning situation for all students. And in this system, how do I evaluate with compassion while reporting according to guidelines that lack compassion? How do I engage students in writing creatively while the emphasis shifts more resoundingly toward the analytical?

**Standardised Tests**

One of the biggest culprits of poor evaluation practice is the standardised test. And it’s not simply the test that’s the problem, it’s the fixings, the mashed potatoes and stuffing and carrot/turnip casserole – everything that goes with it.

My grade 10 students had to write a provincial exam for the first time last year. It didn’t even begin to address the myriad of learning outcomes for the course, used texts and writing prompts that were in my opinion dry at best, required that students write in a timed situation that failed to honour the writing process, and yet I’m sure that many people will trust that mark and that the data collected will be used to inform future decisions. At the same time, I doubt that I will be consulted regarding these decisions, my experiences in the classroom not considered as objective or verifiable as results from standardised tests. Lorri Nielsen suggests that we would be better off listening to teachers and parents rather than to test scores:

The public still believes in the outdated notion that test scores are the most scientific way to determine student achievement. But science, as we know, isn’t
any more objective or value-free than any other enterprise. In fact, some researchers are now claiming that unless we look at learning as complex, ongoing, and often situation-specific, we are not being scientific at all. A wise teacher’s observation or a parent’s intimate knowledge of a child is often a more reliable indicator of learning. (119)

Testing Popularity

Testing has become so pervasive in our culture, partly because it’s in line with the dominant worldview. Renée Kuchapski, professor at Brock University, summarises Manzer’s work on the different types of liberalism at play in Canada since its inception. Manzer suggests that the purpose of education changes depending on the current understanding of how schools can best help in the development of the social good. If we look at ethical liberalism, a view that was widespread in the middle of the 20th century, versus technological liberalism which took hold in the latter part of last century and is still favoured today, we can see that the politics of the 1960’s “favoured...a society focused on developing individual potential” (Kuchapski 536). As a result, “teachers became accountable for providing students with learning experiences appropriate to their unique needs and for monitoring individual student growth” (Kuchapski 539). This movement in education circles is often referred to as student-centred. The focus was on the democracy. Teachers, students and the system were accountable, but not through standardised tests. They were accountable for providing programs that met the individual needs of all learners (Kuchapski 539).

Today, under the philosophy of technological liberalism, the purpose of education changes from a focus on the individual to a “means for collective economic well-being” (Kuchapski 539). Poor results on standardised measurements of success such as dropout and literacy rates, and subject-specific tests have led to a conclusion that the public education
system needs fixing (Kuchapski 531). According to Manzer, the interesting point is that the problem is identified by technological liberals, basically, as “muddled purposes, fragmented curricula, and inadequate accountability” (qtd. in Kuchapski 540). “Muddled purposes” and “fragmented curricula” are the individualised educational programs and student-centred learning of ethical liberalism. I have no issue with policy makers looking for ways to improve education. There is definite room for change in our education system. My concern is that rather than addressing real problems in education, we assume that what needs fixing is that which separates ethical from technological liberalism. We address areas that will distance ourselves from the previously held philosophy. Is “the return to a content-centred education” (Kuchapski 540), for example, being done for its own merit, or so that standardised testing is made easier? Do students benefit from this change?

I would align myself with ethical liberals, and so feel real tension whenever the word “accountability” is used today: “Increasing standardised testing improves accountability as defined by technological liberals but falls far short of an accountable education as envisioned by ethical liberals” (Kuchapski 542). Standards have their place. I often use performance standards in my classroom, and I can even see value in standardised tests when they’re done selectively to inform teachers and educators involved in curriculum development. But I don’t feel as though I’m being accountable to my students whenever I spend time preparing them for standardised tests even though I may be held accountable for their results.

Content over Skills

What a wonderful change it would be, not just for me, not just because I would be teaching within a system more in line with my own philosophies, but for the students, if British Columbia’s Ministry of Education decided to significantly reduce the pressure on schools to teach a certain amount of content and to test the acquisition of that content, and instead
encouraged the teaching of skills necessary for critical thinking and life-long learning. I’m not advocating a student-centred model, but rather, in Jeffrey Wilhelm’s terms, based on Vygotsky’s research, a learning-centred model that teaches skills in a child’s proximal range of development through an inquiry approach.

An article published in The Globe and Mail in 2003 described the Institute of Child Study’s laboratory school in Toronto, run by the University of Toronto’s Institute for Studies in Education. Here, “there is no focus on tests, no marks, no reminders that accountability is paramount, no imperative to rush through learning units” (Mitchell F1). The article is entitled, “Slow Schooling” and discusses the merits of spending more time on fewer topics, allowing students to explore topics in an in-depth way, giving both students and teachers the flexibility to explore areas of interest. The students here, when they do write the Canadian Test of Basic Skills, “routinely score in the 94th to 99th percentiles” (Mitchell F10). Indeed, as educator Maurice Hoft claims, “the supreme irony of the slow school is that precisely because it provides the intellectual nourishment students need…good test results follow. Success, like happiness, is best pursued obliquely” (qtd in Mitchell F10).

Associated Costs Would Be Better Spent Elsewhere

Unfortunately, success in our schools is being targeted directly, and the measures of that success are school rankings (based largely on standardised test scores), standardised test scores themselves, and School Planning Council goals. Our SPC, for example, favours goals that are attached to summative assessments: the reading scores for grade eight students will go up by 4%, math scores for grade nine girls will improve by 6%. There are a number of resources available for teachers who would like to work towards these goals, and there are rumours that funding will soon be attached to the development and achievement of these goals. Hopefully, voices that have been and continue to be raised against such a movement will be listened to,
and moneys will not be linked so closely to all initiatives that seem to go hand in hand with the improvement of standardised test scores, but will rather be directed toward initiatives that raise the engagement level in the classrooms that are heavy and damp with boredom when it comes time for exam review. What would support me would be more time for teacher interaction, more time for co-planning with other teachers in the district who are embarking on similar initiatives, more time to complete quality performative assessments, more resources, specifically money for books to ensure that there are enough titles for struggling readers on the themes we’ll be looking at in the class, as well as more non-fiction titles, something that is lacking in most English departments. I’m jealous of the money spent on standardised tests because I can see it being used in better ways, and I’m only talking from the perspective of one department in the school. The money would be equally well spent on paint or field hockey sticks or a piano or a sewing machine or an address from a visiting scholar or current maps, for example. Anywhere but where it’s going. Educators should begin to publicly question the reasons we continue to pour resources into standardised tests: “Supporters of most tests argue that using the results judiciously will, in the long run, improve schools, but this argument has been used for thirty years. Perhaps it’s time to redirect the money to areas that are known to make a difference in student achievement” (Neilsen 118-19). The education system in the United States is rife with high-stakes testing, even though University of British Columbia professors Sandra Mathison and Wayne Ross report that “the accumulated evidence of two decades of research indicates…that high-stakes testing does not lead to better educational policies and practices” (3). So why are we following suit in Canada? Why are we looking to the American education system as a model and potentially making the same mistakes?
Standardised Tests and Private Education

Yes, it costs money to purchase, transport, administer and evaluate tests, but the movement doesn’t stop there. The shift is deeper than that. When a social program such as our public education system meets a conservative economic climate where priorities are clearly moving towards privatisation and don’t include the preservation and support of a strong public education system, other problems will arise. The words of Maxine Greene speak well to the myriad of issues at play:

Meanings that emerge from the transactions between schools and the existing socio-economic order tend to have more to do with channelling than with opening opportunities, with constraining than with emancipating, with prescribing than with setting persons free. I am not sanguine that teachers can resist these meanings, given the nature of bureaucracies and their administration. Nor am I comfortable with the thought of career ladders and the identification of “master teachers” in the days to come. A new taken-for-granted attitude in respect to meritocracies, hierarchies, and ladders demands new kinds of critical interpretation, new ways of questioning lived worlds, and it is difficult to predict if a human science orientation will be strong enough to withstand such an attitude. (Releasing 51)

Public education has long been considered the great equaliser. How can it continue to play this role when private schools are becoming more and more popular? Across the border, there is not equity even among public schools because their funding comes from municipal tax revenue. Thankfully, that is not the case in B.C., but one look at the yearly rankings done by the conservative think-tank, The Fraser Institute, and we can see the role socio-economic background has on student achievement. In Vancouver, you can trace the schools on a map from west to east, and there will be very little variation in the rankings from that geographical
order. With the new movement towards choice, parents may soon be able to enrol their children in any school that has space. This will inevitably mean even more disparity between west-side and east-side schools. Charles Ungerleider, in his book *Failing Our Kids: How We Are Ruining Our Public Schools*, suggests that “increasing public school choice is unlikely to bring dramatic positive change...but one thing is undoubtedly accomplished – increased economic and social segregation” (203).

If the research points to little benefit from school choice or charter schools, why is it such a priority for governments these days? Perhaps because it’s in line with current trends. These trends are leading governments to make changes to public education, but not the right changes. According to John Ralston Saul, “The wilful undermining of universal public education by our governments and the direct or indirect encouragement of private education is the most flagrant betrayal of the basic principles of middle-class representative democracy in the last fifty years” (qtd. in Ungerleider 201). It’s difficult to work in a system that you believe in strongly, and watch it be undermined by the people in power. How can public schools possibly compete in school rankings? Teachers at my secondary school teach an average of 210 students per year. They teach seven out of eight blocks. They teach students with a wide range of intellectual abilities and social needs. Everyone is welcome. Contrast this with a private school where students must pass an entrance exam to enrol. A friend of mine is leaving the public education system after 23 years of teaching to teach in a private school. English teachers there teach only six out of eight blocks, in recognition of the heavy marking load they have, and because she is the department head, she teaches five out of eight blocks. She will have between 10 and 15 students per class, so compared to my 210 students, she will be teaching no more than 75, but likely closer to 68 or so. And she’s getting a raise. She will have more time to spend giving her students specific feedback for their writing, in addition to helping them individually. She will not have to spend the time to differentiate lessons to the same extent, and
will therefore be able to concentrate her time developing more powerful instruction. She will have more time both during the day and as a result of a reduced marking load, to plan, to learn, to discuss ideas with colleagues. All of this translates to the possibility, at least, for increased learning opportunities for students attending private schools. And as Charles Ungerleider explains, the outlook for teachers and students in public schools in British Columbia is getting progressively worse, not better:

Our public schools cannot continue their successful trajectory if they are starved for resources, overburdened by demands too numerous to be achieved in the time allotted, pulled in different directions because of competing expectations, destabilised by changes arising from fads, fashion, and ideologies, and staffed by people who are routinely ridiculed, only modestly paid, and work under adverse conditions. Unfortunately, these are becoming the dominant trends in Canadian public schooling. (294)

Misleading Data

We should also question the conclusions we draw from the results of standardised tests. A young teacher discusses resigning from teaching: “Perhaps the main reason for my resigning was the widening chasm between what I experienced in the daily broken world of a large inner-city school and the public rhetoric about our amazing successes” (Fowler 164). I remember feeling a real sense of discomfort after an administrator congratulated the staff at my school on their excellent efforts. Our school had been the number one Richmond school in the recent Fraser Institute rankings. Further examination of these rankings demonstrated that one of the main reasons for this was that our students wrote more provincial exams than the district average, a number that was used to come up with these rankings. About half of our students are French Immersion students who take the Français Langue provincial exam as well as the
French 12 provincial exam. Essentially, they take two provincials for one course, because they’re able to challenge the French 12 exam. This is one of the reasons we rank higher than some of the other high schools in the district, even though two of their provincial exam averages were higher than ours. So our ranking is what it is as a result of a program that happens to be housed in our building. We have nothing to do with that, and yet our administrator passed on that he had received a number of phone calls from parents congratulating him and thanking him and his staff for providing such a strong learning environment for their kids. Many among our staff were disappointed in the attention these rankings gave our school.

Thoughtful Reflection Versus Test Scores

Creating standardised tests and other assessment tools is a huge industry, one that has been successful in convincing politicians that its products are essential for a strong education system. The argument reads something like this: You need to know how your students are doing. That’s the only way to figure out if the system is working, and what needs to change in order to make it work better. How do you know the students in your jurisdiction can read if you don’t test them? David Jardine discusses the goal of the more traditional forms of research “aimed at pinning down the life of the developing child in such a way that, in the end, nothing more will need to be said” (117). He goes on to explain that “[technical-scientific discourse] longs for the last word” (118).

For years now, students in British Columbia schools have been writing standardised tests in numeracy, reading and writing in grades 4, 7, and 10. Thousands of dollars are spent every year on this initiative, and in the end, teachers learn if a student does not meet, meets, or exceeds expectations in each of the topics. This information does precious little to inform teaching. If a teacher has a student in grade 5 who did not meet expectations for reading in May
of his grade 4 year, that teacher could discover the same thing with a 5-minute think aloud reading interview that she gives the student in September. If she has the reading performance standard beside her, she will have descriptors of what “Not Yet Within Expectations” behaviours look like. In addition, she’ll leave with useful information. The think-aloud will likely highlight some problems that she can work with. The student may read and do nothing but connect personally with the text. These personal connections may be word-based. So, for example, the student may see the word “apple” and share her memories of apple pressing on Thanksgiving weekend at her uncle’s orchard in the Okanagan. The teacher may glean that this student has been taught to make connections to text, but that this strategy is not helping her with comprehension. Since decoding or fluency aren’t issues, something else the teacher would discover during the interview, she may decide to begin by teaching this student predicting and visualisation strategies to help build comprehension. After a couple of months of modelling and practising these strategies, another think-aloud interview may demonstrate a need for the teacher to move to summarising strategies and questioning techniques. This type of assessment-for-learning is valuable for students and teachers and parents. It does not, as does so much of the current research and testing practices, “operat[e] with an implicit image of the life of the developing child as an objective picture with specifiable component parts” (Jardine 118). It’s concrete and it works, and in addition to offering instructional information, it gives the teacher the opportunity to connect with the student and to work on developing an understanding of that student’s subject preferences and on beginning to build confidence. Teachers of struggling readers know that any information that might help them help students find that perfect book is invaluable. It offers no information to politicians, though, and it requires that they trust teaching professionals as opposed to test creators to do the assessment.

Now no politician is going to say that standardised testing is meant to take the place of in-class assessments. They’ll say that it is a necessary addition to the assessment and evaluation
teachers do. Why, though? What does it achieve? And if it achieves something, is that something worth the money that is thrown at it? “Howard Gardner, a noted Harvard psychologist, argues that more money is spent in psychological circles testing and ranking children than in helping them. If we took the money we are currently using for testing and used it to reduce class sizes and increase support for teachers, he claims, we would see more improvement in student achievement” (Neilsen 118). Beyond simply asking what it achieves, though, I think we need to look at what this shift towards a public education system run by data costs.

A classroom focussed mostly on test scores and on the improvement of test scores must be dreary, and a collective school focus on the same is far removed from my ideal. It’s the dynamic and immediate nature of teaching that inspires me, and the more reading I do, the more planning sessions I have with colleagues where we systematically and purposefully design curriculum and discuss how best to implement specific reading and writing strategies, the more I experiment with new methodologies, the more I’m able to act and react positively in the classroom. The more I’m able to help students become better readers, writers, thinkers, speakers. It’s the excitement of a student who breezes into the classroom Monday morning bubbling over about the book he borrowed from me Friday afternoon. He couldn’t put it down, and what else did I have in my bins of books that was similar? It’s looking out into the classroom and understanding, by observing my students, that a large number of them are struggling to make inferences. I need to back up and model how I make inferences. Perhaps I’ll try doing this with pictures. I’ll stop my students mid-task, and have them switch over to the writing activity we’re working on until I can gather some scaffolding help for their reading. What picture book do I have in my collection that requires students to make inferences about character? This is what I do that afternoon – browse my collection, perhaps stop off at Kidsbooks to find a better source. It’s noticing how much more engaged my grade 12s were as
we played with Othello this year than last year’s groups were when we looked at Hamlet. I’m at my best when I’m noticing and responding to what I observe in my classroom, and the energy level in my classroom is always at its highest when my students and I are struggling with questions that engage all of us. It’s at its lowest when I’m preparing them, overtly, for the provincial exam.

I’ve worked for seven years now, and my students have been involved in standardised tests for each of those seven years. The results of these tests have had no impact on the teaching I have done in my classroom. They have done nothing to inform my teaching. I have never received a report outlining areas of strength and weakness from any FSA tests. This year I did not even receive this from the grade 12 provincial exams. I only received student marks and school marks compared to district marks compared to provincial marks. I do believe, however, that I was a better teacher last year than I was the year before, and I’m confident that my teaching this year will improve, as well, because I’m committed to staying abreast of new educational research, to collaborating with colleagues who challenge my thinking and my assumptions and who care about pedagogy and best practice and to reflecting, alone and with others, about the experiences I create or fail to create for my students.

I’ve done a lot of reading over the past few months on reading instruction. My strength is teaching writing – not something I’ve mastered by any means, but certainly a subject I’m able to scaffold for students and explain in detail. My assessment strategies for writing are becoming increasingly clear to me, and I’m working on making them more useful for my students. I have, however, been quick to depend heavily on creating an atmosphere in my classroom conducive to reading, without working with students on specific strategies to help them become more successful readers.

I have an extensive classroom library, and opt for literature circles and independent reading as opposed to the study of a class novel to allow for choice for students. I stress the
importance of finding something to read that engages them. If students begin a book they don’t like, I have them bring it back the next class, and we search together for something they’ll like better. I organise my units thematically, and have amassed some good collections of novels for literature circles around themes such as war and the psychology of violence. The best collections include some fiction and non-fiction, as well as texts for a range of reading abilities and student interests. Students usually find something that interests them, and most complete the reading for reasons that are more intrinsic than extrinsic. I don’t give reading quizzes or tests, but instead continue to work with the class on other pieces of fiction, non-fiction, poetry, film, art...that compliment the overall theme of the unit and that hopefully provide students with more background for whatever novel they’re reading, enriching their experience with the text. Last year in September, the only homework my grade 11 students had was to read. I had piles of novels in my room, and they read independently. At the first parent-teacher interview in the fall, I had parents comment to me about the amount their children were reading. I guessed that the informal, reading-for-pleasure approach worked for their daughters and sons.

I do a lot of modelling with the reading of short stories and poems and artwork and film, and hope that students will learn to read more successfully as a result, but I’ve never really checked; I’ve never been sure. I tell students to create images while they read, but I don’t show them how. I encourage them to make inferences, but I’m not explicit about what that means, or what that looks like, or how to do that. I ask them for the main idea of what they read, but I don’t develop a schema for those who struggle with this. I just give them more examples, more practice. Or at least that’s what I did. I realised last year that one of the components I wasn’t doing well was teaching students how to read. So, after months of reading and thinking and talking with colleagues who have a lot to share on that front, I’m heading into this school year with more understanding, more strategies, and most importantly, a clear idea of what I want to accomplish with my students. I will, for the first time, be teaching students how
to read, how to write and how to think, instead of teaching them how to write, encouraging them to read, and hoping that the essential thinking piece will simply fall into place. This realisation of a weakness in my teaching didn’t come from test results, but from observations, and from my own feelings of incompetence when reflecting on my teaching practice. I believe that I will be a more informed teacher as a result of my work on reading instruction, and given that I will focus on the explicit teaching of reading strategies such as finding the main idea in a text, inferencing, questioning, making connections, visualisation, and summarising, that students will learn more transferable skills than they have with me in the past – really my goal as a teacher. I’ve been content to stand at the front of the room and inspire, to plan flashy lessons that are engaging and fun. I’m now conscious of what students take with them when they walk out my door at the end of the hour, and while inspiration has its place, so does a knowledge of reading strategies students can use when they’re given challenging texts to read in any setting.

Robotic Teaching

The emphasis on the lesson plan over a more artistic understanding of teaching, one that involves both reflection and inquiry, leads many educators to search for that great resource – the one with the blackline masters – that requires little creativity on their part. I was handout crazy at the beginning of my career. I spent hours photocopying texts and binders, not wanting to forget a single lesson idea that crossed my desk. I found myself choosing workshops at conferences based on the thickness of the handout, and I would even walk into a workshop session, pick up the handout, and leave to attend the one next door. Two for one. And I’m not suggesting there’s anything particularly wrong with wanting the grab-and-go lesson. I certainly benefit from the infusion of new ideas and techniques into my teaching. Many dedicated teachers read journals and collections of teaching ideas and professional resources outlining
strategies for instruction or assessment in their content areas. Where this becomes a problem is when the strategy is at the centre, rather than the teacher, when we value the strategy or the technique more than the understanding teachers bring to how best to implement that strategy or technique – the knowledge of where it might work most effectively and under what learning conditions, what will need to be done for scaffolding, what other strategies or techniques might complement it, what should come before it or after it, what adaptations will need to be made to meet the needs of the each student in the classroom. When this happens, and it does, teaching becomes disjointed and lost.

Even more frightening is when certain programs become the required curriculum. Reading Mastery and Open Court are examples of textbook programs for phonics instruction (Beers 44). These resources can even go so far as to include scripts – suggestions for what teachers might say as they introduce the lesson, or as they transition from one activity to the next. It’s paint-by-numbers instruction. This has serious implications: “Scripted instruction provides a script, giving teachers a detailed plan of what to say and when to say it. Such programs suggest, first, that teachers cannot make instructional decisions and, second, that all learners need the same instruction at the same level, at the same time, and in the same order” (Beers 44). The next step, already in development, is to replace the teacher with self-directed learning on a computer, where students simply follow the instructions on the screen. Imagine the money we’d save. Monica Hughes writes of a community in the future in her young adult novel, Invitation to the Game, where teachers have been replaced by robots – these lock-step teachers’ guides make that future seem less unrealistic than it might first appear. Why do we need teachers trained in pedagogy and psychology and reading instruction when all they would be required to do is be able to read and deliver instructions? The answer, according to Kylene Beers, is that our job is not to give instructions, but to give instruction (47). Still, instructions are too often mistaken for instruction.
These strict programs don’t only make robots of teachers, they also make robots of students. According to Ted Aoki, they “place teaching in a grey box, if not a black box, wherein teachers are mere facilitators to teaching built into programmed learning packages. These are teacher-proof packages wherein the preference is for noncontamination by teachers’ presence” ("Layered" 18). A scripted lesson allows for little flexibility, little room for various learning styles, and no time for those teachable moments, or at least less time. Teachers are not able to discover their students’ interests and to plan units around questions kids come up with on their own. Inquiry is stifled, as is creativity and imagination and critical thinking. I think we’re fooling ourselves if we don’t see, though, that this is indeed the goal of this movement towards standardised teaching. Lorri Nielsen reminds us that “the purpose of schools, in spite of what the latest mission statement says, is to socialise children. I distinguish here between fostering social development, which connotes learning how to work within community, and socialisation, which connotes learning conformity, compliance, routine, gender role placement, class and ability placement, and deference to authority” (88). People working in the educational system often have conflicting goals; therefore, it’s not surprising that what one group espouses as a fabulous instructional tool for teaching, another group might consider a waste of time and money – or even something that will have a negative impact on learning. Ultimately, “the less we depend on programs and the more we depend on our own knowledge – informed by practice and research – the less likely we are to be controlled by politically driven mandates, expensive programs that appear and disappear from our classrooms without rhyme or reason, and federally or provincially funded (or not funded) programs” (Beers 36-7). This assumes continued teacher autonomy over what happens in our classrooms, something that exists today but that could certainly be in jeopardy in the near future. Teachers in some parts of North America have already had that autonomy taken away.
In the fall of 2001, I learned that my district was going to be making significant cuts to its budget, and the speculation was that much of the money would come from teaching salaries. Resource and ESL departments would take a hit, but class sizes across the board would likely increase, allowing the district to lay off a number of teachers in all subject areas. Some thought as many as 300, while others hoped it wouldn’t be more than a hundred. As it turned out, just over 200 teachers were given pink slips – everyone with less than five years’ experience. I was one of those teachers.

Morale was relatively high given the circumstances. I remember joking with the other eight people on my staff who were laid off that we were going to have pink T-shirts made, and that we would bake cupcakes with pink icing for the next staff meeting. Imagine my disappointment, then, when I finally received my pink slip, and discovered that it was printed on beige paper without a fleck of pink in sight. Where was the sense of humour? It would have been a nice touch, at least, if the Secretary Treasurer who signed the notice had used one of those pink gel sparkly pens. My principal at the time came to see me to ask how I felt about her distributing a list of the names of laid off staff members to the entire staff as many people were curious and wanted to know which of their colleagues were affected. I told her that I had no problem with such a list, but asked if she wouldn’t print it on pink paper to take the edge off my earlier disappointment at the colour gaffe. She complied.

As it turns out, I was laid off in May, only to successfully post back into my job in June. In the fall and winter, however, I decided that I would actively seek employment elsewhere – not sure whether I would accept a job should it be offered me, but not wanting to arrive in June with no job, and not even being able to say that I tried. Around this time, a superintendent from New York Public Schools was in town recruiting BC teachers. I signed up for the interview.

I arrived after teaching one night and was ushered into a large conference room at The Wall Centre in Vancouver. There were close to a hundred people in the room. I hadn’t had a chance to make dinner, so I was pleased to see a refreshment table at one end of the room, but there were only tea bags of all varieties, instant coffee and hot water. I should have left then.

I sat down at a round table with five other hopefuls and promptly pulled out my marking. I have trouble with down time. If I have to wait for anything and I don’t have a book or marking or a journal or at least a crossword puzzle with me, I get frustrated with myself for wasting time. When I worked in West Vancouver and lived in Richmond, I’m ashamed to say I even read in the line up for the Lion’s Gate Bridge. It’s why I took up knitting. That way I can watch my favourite shows on TV without feeling guilty. By the time I reviewed the assignment criteria and organised myself for marking, though, I only got through two papers before I was interrupted, thankfully – I’m always grateful for any interruptions to my marking – by the superintendent’s assistant who informed us that we would be interviewed in groups of 15 or so, according to subject. French and Spanish teachers would be first, followed by English teachers, and the list went on, but I stopped paying attention, glad I didn’t have to wait too long.

When my turn arrived, I walked into the room adjacent to the ballroom and sat down around a large oval table with the other candidates. It’s not often I sit at oval tables to discuss business. They’re covered with tablecloths and laden with food in my experience. When I’m at work, the closest we get to the oval table of the boardroom is eight desks pushed together with orange and green and blue and maroon plastic chairs to sit in. If we’re lucky, we will be in a classroom where all the chairs match, courtesy of a teacher who ran around in August taking four grey chairs from one classroom, three from the next, and so on until she had a class set. But we do usually have more than tea and instant coffee. Still, I can’t blame the table for what happened next.
The superintendent sat at the head of the table and we English folk, all 16 or 17 of us, filed into the remaining seats. He began by explaining the group interview procedure: he would ask a question and then we would go around the table, giving him our answers in turn. I quickly learned I was the only one there who had already finished her practicum. I was in my fourth year teaching. It was January, so everyone else, most were students at UBC, had completed their two-week practicum and were about to begin their long-term practicum in a few days. I thought this might bode well for me. Every other candidate was talking in "woulds" and "ifs" but I was able to share how I deliver my spiels on meet the teacher night and my approach to discipline, and when it came to describing the most effective lesson I had ever taught, I had more than two to pick from. While I spoke, the superintendent nodded a lot, and it occurred to me that I might have to make a difficult decision - accept the job in New York based on the possibility of not getting back on with my district, or decline the job, hoping that I either wouldn't get laid off or would indeed be hired back.

About two-thirds of the way through the interview, though, the difficulty of that decision dissipated dramatically. The superintendent asked us how we felt about teaching a reading program that was going to be implemented into his district's schools in the fall. The program was based on recent research in reading instruction and demanded rigour on the part of teachers. Everyone would be following this program, and all involved were excited at the results they were confident it would achieve. The people ahead of me said they would have no problem following such a program. They were happy to hear there would be something concrete to follow, that they wouldn't have to create their language arts lessons from scratch. They mentioned that they had a lot to learn yet as young teachers, and would likely be focussing on things such as classroom management. A strong reading program would give them confidence.

I could have echoed those responses, and I might have if I really wanted the job, but I knew that I was simply doing this for insurance purposes. Armed with that knowledge, I decided to go for honesty. My goal was certainly not to make a point, though. I only wanted to answer his question.

I began by saying that I wasn't sure how I could comment on whether or not I would be comfortable implementing a program without first having a look at that program and also meeting my students. Perhaps I would see real possibility, perhaps I would see places where the program needed to be supplemented or adapted. For example, were the reading passages in line with my students' interests? Were the reading strategies the ones all the students in my class needed? Did the program allow for flexibility? I was also careful to say that I was sure, given that the program was going to be implemented across the district, that it had been studied and that it had merit, but that still, without the program in front of me, it was difficult to say for sure.

I was respectful. His reaction was therefore even more than surprising - it was shocking. He was a fairly round man, yet he literally jumped out of his chair. I was glad I was sitting at the opposite end of a long table. He was incredulous. How dare I question a reading program his staff had decided would work best for his students? The program would work. It would have results. I tried to explain that I wasn't yet questioning the program, only that I couldn't comment on the merits of something I hadn't studied myself, and by this time had concluded that I had no chance of landing a teaching job in his district, so went on to say that I did prefer making the instructional decisions for my students, and that the lack of freedom and autonomy would certainly be a change from the environment in which I teach in BC.

The rest of the interview was uneventful, except that I noticed he stopped making notes whenever I was talking. At the end, three of us were taken aside by the assistant, and told that the superintendent didn't think the fit would be right. I'm not suggesting that I was any better
than anyone else in the room, but he hired twelve teachers who had not even taught a class for a week straight ahead of one with two satisfactory teaching evaluations from principals in separate districts as well as reference letters pertaining to teaching I had done. Even given our differences of opinion, this struck me as strange.

As I left the interview, I thought to myself how grateful I was to be working in a jurisdiction that afforded me autonomy. I walked down the hallway of the hotel a bit embarrassed, wishing I was the one who could have said no thanks, but looking forward to planning the following week’s lessons, simply because I could.

Today, I could imagine even less going into a teaching situation having to teach a certain lesson a certain way. I plan year-long curricula for my students from scratch. What’s challenging in teaching, what also makes the job fun, is building a course: going over (hopefully broad) learning outcomes and distilling them into enduring understandings; conceptualising the year; deciding on themes; sequencing strategies and skills throughout the units and the year; collecting resources while single-handedly paying the wages of at least one Kidsbooks employee for the month of September; taking the big ideas, the resources, the strategies, and developing individual lesson plans, then meeting the students and modifying things to suit the group; assessing the students’ work and the course itself; working to improve areas of weakness; learning from the students; helping them to learn; exploring topics of interest together – this is what I love to do... the planning and the interacting with the students. But this takes a tremendous amount of time and energy and enthusiasm and commitment and a test at the end provides a tool that not only facilitates the work of statisticians and politicians and reporters, but that could also potentially facilitate my work. It’s easier to simply transmit the rules of math and to give students practice problems similar to the ones on the final exam than to create an environment where students are involved in doing math, in coming up with their own formulas and patterns (Jardine, Friesen and Clifford). That takes time. It’s messy. It’s difficult to test. It requires patience. It requires thoughtful planning. It’s also the kind of math instruction I hope my own children will receive.
Over and over again, "the system tempts us to uncomplicate the world, to give the right answers, to speak of people as sifted through a grid of numbers or filtered through a mesh of words" (MacArthur 52). I’m not anxious to uncomplicate the process of teaching. I have hundreds of encounters with people every day, and people are complex. That’s where the teaching happens. I encourage students to examine complicated texts, and try, anyway, to provide complex learning experiences. And it’s in this complicated place that learning happens. The most straightforward lessons in my repertoire are those I teach a couple of weeks before a provincial exam. These review sessions are easy. They don’t require much of me. The rest of the year I resist their – I was about to write temptation – but it’s not even that because I would hate my job if I taught in uncreative ways, and in fact those days when I teach uninspired lessons, and I have many, I spend too much time reflecting on my failures. So I resist the ease that comes with picking up a scripted teaching resource, or following the teacher’s guide to the textbook lesson by lesson, and I try to surround myself with other teachers who are doing the same. I hope their will to continue to resist is strong. I hope they’re not wondering, like I am, if the energy supply is limited. I hope they are more optimistic than I am that this technical view of the world will somehow morph into something better for all concerned.

There are other less overt ways of controlling teachers, and in so doing, making classrooms more rigid than they need to be. Scripted programs are the extreme. Damaging, too, are calls for teaching certain topics, or in certain ways that are thought, not proven, to be better for students. Often these ways hearken back to more traditional methods of learning.

There has recently been a call for more grammar instruction – students need to know how to parse those sentences. At the younger grades, we hear the debate rage: phonics vs. whole language. Philip Pullman, author of the widely successful Amber Spyglass trilogy, addresses the grammar question in a recent article written for The Guardian. He discusses a report published by the University of York that suggests that "there was no evidence at all that
the teaching of grammar had any beneficial effect on the quality of writing done by pupils” (par. 1). He goes on to say that rather than knowledge of grammar, “The most valuable attitude we can help children adopt – the one that, among other things, helps them to write and read with the most fluency and effectiveness and enjoyment – I can best characterise by the word playful” (par. 5).

One of the problems is that a curriculum that stresses play is more difficult to reduce to a step-by-step teacher’s guide. It demands creative professionals to be successful. In an era where many people in power are looking to create a rigid learning environment that is easily controlled and measured, play is not as attractive as grammar, which can be tested through multiple choice tests, not even requiring human markers. Moreover, “the confidence to [play and question and fool around with ideas], the happy and open curiosity about the world that results from it, can develop only in an atmosphere free from the drilling and testing and examining and correcting and measuring and ranking in tables that characterises so much of the government’s approach, the “common sense” attitude to education” (Pullman par. 7).

So not only does instruction in play not lend itself to testing as easily as grammar instruction does, it also requires that there be no testing for it to flourish. I don’t want to suggest that the study of grammar cannot also be playful and powerful. It’s the style of teaching that is normally associated with grammar and phonics instruction that is the problem. Even so, Ben Levin, Professor of education at the University of Manitoba, explains that “in the past two decades, policies throughout the English-speaking world have followed the fast model. Britain, Australia, New Zealand and Canada have increased the amount of testing, the attention paid to international standings of students, and generally the amount of pressure on schools, teachers and students to show that they are mastering a set curriculum” (qtd. in Mitchell F10). He suggests that “the goal has been to cut spending and improve outcomes at the same time, a theme that has had tremendous appeal to a tax-conscious public worried about how its kids will
fare in the global economy” (qtd. in Mitchell F10). But, if they’re turned off school at an increasingly young age due to boredom, if they’re stressed in grade school about performing up to standard, if there’s no time to encourage inquiry in a curriculum that is too overwhelmed by content, then chances are these students won’t fare well at all. Professor Levin believes “that schools can’t intensify forever. Putting too much pressure on them can suck the joy out of learning, a phenomenon he sees happening all over the world. And expecting children to learn without heart doesn’t work” (qtd. in Mitchell F10).

Smells

I step on the way inside the school to gather some dirt from the garden just outside the office. I reach inside one of the four bags I’m carrying to find the empty yoghurt container I remembered to grab on my way out the door that morning, and out spills a jar of thyme, a can of coffee grounds, a few sheets of aluminium foil, purple finger paint and a bag of white rice that I decided I wouldn’t miss now that I had discovered Basamati rice, the kind that smells of popcorn as it cooks on the stove. Whenever I laden myself down with bags and boxes that need carrying from one place to the next, I always tell myself to make two trips, that by the time I drop something and have to manoeuvre the rest of the load to pick it up, I won’t have saved any time, but I continue to resist. And so my arms are sore and the bags have worked a third crease into my fingers and there’s a bit of dirt on my coral shirt as I lower my lunch, my school bag, and two extra bags of ingredients for my grade eleven classes onto the first desk inside my room. I quickly disengage myself from the straps and empty the contents of the two extra bags, one item for every two desks. In addition to the items I dropped earlier, I add more spices, the guts of a music box I broke when I was younger, bubble wrap, watermelon pickle, stress balls, starbursts, lego, a stuffed teddy bear, some cheap liquid soap, a metal puzzle and nail polish remover – all gathered last night on a quick tour of my house. (Once a month I have to scour my classroom for items I need to take back home again, usually the day after I arrive halfway through a recipe only to remember my cumin’s at school.) Beside every item, I leave a large piece of paper with one of the following words printed at the top: smell, taste, touch, sound. My students arrive to a room smelling a bit like my uncle’s kitchen – he had never cooked in his life, but decided at fifty that he would make stew once a week to help my aunt. I tell them to take out a pen, not to sit down, to put their backpacks (I’m not sure why we even assign lockers anymore given that kids carry their lives with them, compromising their backs and the safety of everyone who attempts to move in a classroom) in a hill in the corner, and invite them to follow my example. I choose coffee, of course. It’s still early.

“Sit down at a ‘sense station’ and smell or taste or touch or listen and write a memory, or a connection, or an observation. I might write:

- smells like morning
- I raise my hand in math class, and then, when I see Mr. Campbell holding that ubiquitous white paper cup with the green insignia, I decide that I’d rather fail than be held hostage by his breath. ‘No, sir. No question. Just stretching.’
• I hear the drip of the machine and the pounding of the coffee filter on the sides of the sink. My grandmother wincing at the noise.
• I remember always wanting to try Mom and Dad's coffee and making a face after I’d tried it. Why didn't they just drink orange juice? So much better.
• I taste the vanilla morning
  The coffee filter pounds in the cold aluminium of the sink
  as I stumble into the kitchen
  arms reaching out for the pottery mug
  as soft as blanched almonds
• I know even as the liquid consciousness burns my tongue that today will be a good day

Try to be as descriptive as possible. Remember to use specific detail – name things – and play with figurative language. Enjoy."

For forty minutes there is a buzz in the room. Students write. All of them. They settle in to a favourite station at the end of the freewriting period and we spend the rest of our time together sharing the best lines from each piece of paper and figuring out why they work. They write down a few of their strongest lines and use them as the starter for a poem or short piece of descriptive writing that we will share in the form of a gallery walk next class. As the bell rings and the students file out of the room, the smell of a good lesson lingers.

It lingers like the smell of citrus after my grade eight students have written joyful and imaginative biographies of lemons. Many of these most sour of fruit are born in Florida or on the Mediterranean, but they end up in a myriad of circumstances.

It lingers like the smell of bubblegum. I want my grade nine students to describe something without focussing on the sense of sight. The gum has to stay in their mouths for seven minutes of writing before they can start blowing bubbles. There are always a few students who have never learned how, and another few who are determined to teach them, and yet another few who have mastered the bubble inside the bubble inside the bubble inside the bubble trick.

It lingers like the smell of awkwardness after my grade nines link hands with one another in two human knots. They race against each other to untie themselves and then move back to the desks we had pushed back to brainstorm writing topics: a memoir about the grade 6/7 dance where all the boys were sitting on one side of the room, and all the girls were milling about the other side, wiping their hands on their pants and skirts every so often in case someone asked them to dance; an essay on the frustrations involved in cooperation; an essay or poem highlighting their competitive drive – they were getting anxious when they felt the other team was beating them; a found poem with the lines people said during the untying of the knot; a short story of a student who has a secret crush on another student and who spends the entire time in the knot hoping that the hand she’s grabbed is his; a descriptive piece focussing on the movements of the untying.

It lingers like the smell of old musty toys after students at all levels have fingered the lego pieces I pulled out of my parents' attic. I separate the pieces into fifteen plastic bags. Inside each bag I put two of each of twelve pieces: a Noah’s ark of blocks. Students find a partner and with one of each of the pieces of Lego, build a structure and then write a set of instructions for how to arrive at the same creation – down to the colour of the two knob by six knob yellow rectangle. They keep their structure intact, but hide it from the pair who has come to check the accuracy of the instructions. This is peer editing that works. The students exchange sets of instructions, along with the necessary pieces of Lego, and follow them. If the structures
are identical to the originals, then the instructions are clear. If there are mistakes, the authors revise the instructions and then test them again.

It lingers like the sting that follows all the lessons where kids learn and participate and write and revise and play and laugh and forget about watches and ipods and that 54% on the history test they just got back and the mustard stain on the carpet beside their bed from the hotdog their mom forbid them to eat in their room. There’s Alex, serious and sincere, pen poised above his agenda. “How will this be tested? Will you give us different pieces of lego next time? Will there be a different flavour of bubblegum on the test or will it be candy? What should I study?”

Corrine A. Glover writes of a teacher teaching in a Louisiana school who threw away the curriculum guide and taught Dewey-like lessons. I would want my child in her class. She wondered why teachers stuck with boring lessons, but then came April and standardised tests, and she began to understand. This teacher noticed the following:

The pressure placed on teachers to teach these test skills was bad enough to begin with – and our principal only worsened matters when she announced over her adored loudspeaker that all test results would be posted if not published in the paper with each teacher’s name next to his or her class results. I was not surprised to learn the following week that one of our kindergarten teachers gave her students the answers to the test in order to avoid any embarrassment. (16)

The more standardised tests are used and valued, the more their results appear in the media and are the basis for high-stakes decisions, the faster teachers will succumb to the pressure to alter their methods, often in ways that take away from rather than add to the level of teaching and learning in a classroom. Time spent teaching students how to answer test questions, time spent going over practice exams, emphasises the limited set of skills tested using timed paper and pencil tests. There is also less time left over to engage in meaningful lessons that foster creativity and critical thinking skills. There is less time left over to allow for student-led inquiry. There is more emphasis placed on two types of intelligence, to the exclusion of all others: “achievement tests are universally biased toward children with strong verbal and mathematical intelligences. When we accord too much weight to these tests, we diminish the
value of the visual, athletic, mechanical, social, musical, and other abilities of our children, the very qualities we value in a well-rounded adult" (Neilsen 116).

In British Columbia, we now have mandatory provincial exams for English, Science and Math at the grade 10 level, in Social Studies at the grade 11 level, and in English at the grade 12 level. In addition, grade 12 students going on to post-secondary institutions will more often than not take provincial exams in their other academic courses. These exams almost exclusively test verbal and mathematical intelligence, but when you look at the assessment teachers do in their own classrooms, the assessment that makes up 80% of the final mark in grades 10 and 11, and 60% of the final mark in grade 12, it rarely compensates for this imbalance by providing an increased number of assignments that allow students to explore learning in different ways, Gardner-style. Rather, the opposite happens. These opportunities are taken away to prepare for the test. Many teachers pattern all their tests after provincial exams to give their students as much preparation as possible for the final, so the assessments that require verbal and/or mathematical intelligence to the exclusion of others approaches 80 or 90% of all classroom assessments. And these teachers are also often deemed the best teachers by parents and students alike because they prepare students well. Barrell provides a clear critique of this practice:

It is the quest for efficiency and certitude in schooling that has governed a prescribed and scientific approach to the study of teaching. The underlying metaphors are of production and measurable outcomes. Thus, hard binary improvements are sought in the products of students. But what of the other competencies we wish students to possess that are not easily measured or quantified? These competencies include but are not limited to communicating, observing, finding information which is needed to achieve a particular goal (and which had to be collected by observation or by talking to people rather than by
reading texts), inventing, persuading, or showing leadership. How do we quantify a student’s ability to take what is read and to think laterally about it or to discard what is irrelevant and to reformulate required information? (25)

And because we can’t test these skills as easily, they become less valued. We seem to have arrived at a place where we value what we can measure.

Reclaiming Professional Development

This move to standardised tests, an unerring trust in experts and a distrust of the abilities of teachers also has costs in terms of professional development. Too often, we turn to the “experts,” trusting that only those who have done “research” can talk with any credibility about what to do in a classroom. This has detrimental effects on teacher confidence and on the willingness of teachers to participate in professional development. Lorri Nielsen summarises the argument clearly:

While no one can deny that some educational research has provided us with useful generalisations, the cost of these marketable “truths” has been too high. More than just the intellectual price of deskilled teachers who “teach from the book” (although that, in itself, is cause for alarm), our willingness to rely on truths created outside our experience has cost us the heart and soul of our profession, our belief in ourselves. (64)

A number of study groups meet weekly and monthly across our district. Many of them meet to discuss the work of one of the current leading educators – Barrie Bennett, Richard Stiggins, Jeffrey Wilhelm, Stephanie Harvey, Nancie Atwell… Everyone in the group gets a text paid for or subsidised by the district, and the formats are often similar: a portion of the text is assigned for reading, and participants agree to try one of the strategies in that section in their own classroom; participants report back to the group on their experiences, sometimes bringing student samples to the study group; participants discuss the strengths/weaknesses of the
strategy, as well as adaptations that worked for various grades or for specific needs of students; participants decide what to read for the following meeting.

Reading back, it sounds like I’m belittling these groups. I’m not. I belong to a study group that operates very much along the above lines, and it has been a rich experience for me over the past few years. I’ve developed some wonderful relationships as a result, and have had the opportunity to deliver workshops in a variety of settings. What’s important to note, though, is that the richest sessions have not been the ones where we discuss how to incorporate a Chris Tovani strategy in our classrooms, but where we each bring something of our own (whatever that means in a profession where borrowing is critical for survival) and share our own techniques, or philosophies, or concerns, or questions, or struggles. I’ve stayed with my study group because these discussions happen, even if a text is the focus of our meetings. In Parker Palmer’s words:

Our tendency to reduce teaching to questions of technique is one reason we lack a collegial conversation of much duration or depth. Though technique-talk promises the ‘practical’ solutions that we think we want and need, the conversation is stunted when technique is the only topic: the human issues in teaching get ignored, so the human beings who teach feel ignored as well. (145)

I’ve been in other study groups where the text was the focus, and where there wasn’t the atmosphere where people felt safe enough to share real issues, and I was bored. I crave conversations with teachers not about the latest technique or idea or lesson I might use the next day, although these are good “snacks”. Fifteen minutes of that is plenty for me. Beyond that I want to discuss more overarching issues: how to effectively develop criteria with students without the process becoming tedious, how to develop curriculum maps, how to support the district’s literacy initiative at the school level, how to teach note-taking across subject areas, how to integrate technology in the language arts classroom. I also want to share my struggles
with other teachers and to hear their concerns. Teaching can be such a solitary act that simply knowing I’ll be spending one Thursday afternoon a month with people who have as much marking as I have and who have similar questions and tensions provides support. It’s a place where I can relax, complain a bit, and then move on to restorative conversation and work.

Last year, I spent a five-day sabbatical developing a curriculum map and assessment framework with a colleague. We didn’t talk at all about specific lesson plans or techniques. We had the time, finally, thankfully, to conceptualise our teaching on a broader scale. The time I spent reading in preparation for the sabbatical and for university courses has been equally empowering. I’ve learned that there are those, experts even, who value the individual teacher’s experience. This helps give me confidence that, though “we have traditionally looked outside ourselves for the answers to our pedagogical questions” (Neilsen 62), we don’t have to. Most importantly, I have exposed myself to a broad scope of ideas – something extensive reading always does. But how often are teachers able to indulge in that kind of work? And at what cost to our profession?

One of the primary reasons this doesn’t happen as often as it probably should, is, of course, time. It, “the school’s primary mechanism of control, is seldom in our hands. As a result, when we are struck by an unease about what we are doing, are challenged by a uniquely troublesome learner, or feel uninformed or powerless (which can be often), we want the benefit of others’ knowledge or experience, a borrowed truth, the wisdom of a colleague, or the promise of valid research” (Neilsen 62). It’s easier for us to turn away than to turn within. For our entire careers, or for mine, anyway, “knowledge from Up There has been the guiding force in professional development, and teachers, for lack of time, energy, voice, and opportunity, have been unable to assert that equally authoritative knowledge is In Here, in classroom experience and teacher wisdom” (Neilsen 50). How can we ever expect the public to trust our
judgement if we often don’t trust it ourselves? We need to assert our own wisdom, and we can begin at our own school-based Pro-D days.

School Pro-D committees have an unenviable job: provide professional development opportunities for staffs, often of 60 or more at the secondary level depending on the organisation of the district, where interests vary widely and energy level is low, at best. They often turn to the experts. Two years ago, I sat through a videotaped address from Richard Stiggins who offered some good suggestions for assessment and evaluation and who also offered moments of such patronisation that a large portion of the staff was completely turned off and tuned out for the rest of the workshop. I had already read a couple of his books and so was content to pay more attention to the reactions of the staff than to the information being delivered. Even when the experts are riveting and offer nothing but powerful ideas, though, there are issues with putting them at the forefront of professional development: “These leading educators are inspiring and can challenge classroom teachers in new ways; nevertheless, an unquestioned dependence on their knowledge devalues and silences the teaching wisdom and experience that sits in the audience” (Neilsen 49). We need more support for professional development that begins at the classroom level, with the classroom teacher. This support needs to come in the form of valuing. Teachers need to begin to value their own words as much as they do the words of experts before we can ever hope to convince anyone else to.

Teachers teaching and learning from other teachers does happen. Reading and writing groups, and we may be able to thank Oprah for this, have become popular of late, and this trend is spilling into the schools. I am part of a young adult book club made up of fellow teachers, and we are planning to expand to a writing group as well in the fall. More and more, “we are hearing the voices of reading and writing teachers who are claiming opportunities to ‘read’ their professional lives and ‘write’ their own classroom experience and as a result claim the authority for their professional growth” (Neilsen 46). In addition, one of the most successful
professional development opportunities I’ve taken part in over the past three years has been an after school share-in, put on by members of a study group I belong to in Richmond, called Strengthening Student Literacy. For the past two years, on a Wednesday or Thursday afternoon in May, an organising committee has put together a powerful event. The workshop begins after school with a keynote address, again, from members of our group. This past year, four of us put on a scripted scene, outlining some of the ideas people had been working on, and integrated this with a musical number, performed by the students at the host high school from the play they had just mounted. The scene was narrative, personal, and a number of people expressed how much they enjoyed it following the presentation. I was, frankly, surprised. We weren’t experts. It was a humble performance. But it was honest and sincere, and this seemed to have an impact. Following a brief coming-together, there are two sessions of workshops. All the presenters are members of our group, sharing stories from their own classroom experiences. What they tried, what worked, what didn’t work, what the highs were, what the lows were. There’s a publisher’s display and dinner and prizes, of course, and participants leave refreshed, despite the length of the day.

There’s room for more of this type of sharing and celebrating of each other’s work in our professional lives, and in order for our lived experience to continue to be valuable for us, I daresay we need to make room even if there doesn’t appear to be any at first glance. Indeed, even in the academia, narrative forms of research have, until recently, been dismissed by some, and are still marginalised in many circles. Narrative research means very little to a large portion of the public. And in the public education system, narrative research is not valued, at least not unless it is accompanied by other, more positivistic forms of inquiry. What are the consequences of this stance for the teacher in the classroom who understands implicitly that the numbers that correspond to each of the students on his roster are meaningless without taking into consideration home life, playground life, health, spiritual well-being, or emotional well-
being? How can he help but do the math and question the spending. How many books could she purchase with the money spent on that test? Probably enough for a non-fiction book on each set of tables, a perfect beginning for her next writing unit. We are faced with such a multitude of graphs and tables and charts at yearly district and monthly staff meetings these days that an outsider might never guess that we were indeed a collection of educators who taught children and young adults. Yet we’re asked by administration, school boards, School Planning Councils, made primarily of parents, PAC groups, government and the public to frame our discourse in ways that can be graphed and teachers who present findings with numbers invariably get more nods, more interest, more open listening. And teachers who resist that kind of discourse are given other kinds of nods – the condescending ones – accompanied by “I was that idealistic once”. The message is clear. You’ll learn to live in the real world – eventually. One would hope that the public education system might be an institution that would try to uphold some semblance of balance. David Jardine warns:

In education, once our understanding of being human becomes estranged from the ongoing, interpretive narrative of everyday life (a narrative rife with possibilities, ambiguity, and risk) and is reconstructed into an object ripe for technical manipulation – once the difficulty of human life comes to be seen as a mistake to be corrected – we begin the horrifying task of chasing our own tails with the hope of eventually closing down the risk-laden conversation that such a narrative involves and requires. (122)

The problem with narratives is that they can’t be charted. They can’t be manipulated by Excel. Numbers have more power than words these days, it seems, and narratives are not only not numerical, they’re often not even linear. Most times they provide fewer answers than questions, and can leave some with a feeling that nothing has been accomplished. Even in the discussions I do have with colleagues, when people share a problem, they are often looking for a solution.
And if they leave without one, they will sometimes ask why they bothered. What a waste of time.

We need to start valuing our own stories more than we do, but even as I write this, I question the value of mine. We cannot underestimate the difficulty of valuing something society doesn’t, or at least of flipping the value system that exerts the most power in our world today. By not questioning this value system more, teachers are losing out on professional development opportunities that may very well address feelings of alienation and despair. Ultimately, “there are no formulas for good teaching, and the advice of experts has but marginal utility. If we want to grow in our practice, we have two primary places to go: to the inner ground from which good teaching comes and to the community of fellow teachers from whom we can learn more about ourselves and our craft” (Palmer 141). If we trust one another more, we may achieve two things: a stronger professional community, and more respect from the public.

Our intuitions are important. Our understandings are worth examining. What would happen if “teachers gather[ed] around the great thing called ‘teaching and learning’ and explore[d] its mysteries with the same respect we accord any subject worth knowing?” (Palmer 141). We need to find out in order to continue healthily in our professions. Discussions around teaching and learning with other educators – not only about lesson plan ideas or how to fulfil the requirements of our SPC goal or who will be using Othello in January – these sustain me. They don’t rob me of time. Instead, they make more valuable the time I spend teaching.

Tests and Their Impact on Job Satisfaction

The discussions must change. They have to move from constant dialogue surrounding standards and tests and measurement and statistics and rankings and percentiles and marks. The profession paying what it does, and demanding what it does, many teachers continue because
they love their work – no other reason. In his profile of an outstanding art teacher from North Carolina, Donald Forrister, Tom Barone notes that “the onslaught of standardised testing had, it seemed, lowered the satisfaction level of many of his colleagues” (121). When teacher satisfaction is negatively affected, I worry about the future of the public education system, because job satisfaction is the only thing that keeps many of us where we are. Barone explains the reason behind Forrister’s deliberations about leaving the profession:

The emphasis on test scores and grades seemed to dampen student enthusiasm for learning. The emphasis on extrinsic rewards stifled an intuitive delight in knowledge, disconnecting learning from real meaning, from what made students who they were and from their aspirations. These changes served to reinforce Forrister’s tendencies toward physical and mental retreat. He began to ponder leaving teaching. (121)

Surely we need to not only pay attention to what in our current system is responsible for making teachers pause and consider changes in careers, but also to respond to it.

Teachers at the aforementioned Institute of Child Study’s laboratory school in Toronto have the privilege of being able to respond to student interests and to build the curriculum around them. This of course increases engagement with learning. One grade four teacher spent the entire year studying light, and didn’t get to sound until June. Teachers of Science 10 in British Columbia, a course which now has a provincial exam, have so much content to cover that they must resort to more teacher-centred lessons just to ensure they will get to the last unit before the end of the year. One teacher who works with me laments that she’s not able to do the interesting things she used to do with her students, because there is simply too much material. Even when she knows that her struggling students have not mastered a concept, she has to move on because there is no time to slow down and delve into a topic more thoroughly. This can’t be doing anything for students’ enjoyment of science or for their understanding of the
central principles. I’m lucky that I teach in an area that is based on skills rather than on specific content, but teachers in Social Studies and Science and Math are tied to an increasingly content-heavy curriculum.

**Living Beside Standardised Tests**

Some may suggest that teachers should simply continue to teach the powerful lessons, without preparing students for standardised tests. If the teaching is that good, students will perform well on any outside assessment. Alfie Kohn suggests that this theory, “a very appealing blend of pragmatism and relativism that might be called ‘the more, the merrier’”, is based on an unsound argument (“Apples” par. 1). He cites two studies in his article, “Education’s Rotten Apples”, both of which suggest that teachers cannot simply apply two conflicting strategies, perhaps one they agree with and one they are employing simply to conform to the demands of the system. In the case of the teacher from Louisiana, if she had continued to plan Dewey-like lessons, but finished each class with ten minutes of exam prep, the results of these two studies suggest that any benefit from the Dewey-like lessons would be lost. One study looked at math instruction, and found that students taught the underlying principle of the problem succeeded much better at transferring that knowledge to new, slightly different problems, while students taught how to solve the problem using step-by-step instructions were not as able to transfer knowledge. Students taught both ways performed no better than those taught strictly the step-by-step method (Kohn, “Apples” par. 3-5). A second study examined the evaluation of writing. Some students received narrative feedback, others received grades, and others received both. Interestingly, “irrespective of how well they had been doing in school, students were subsequently less successful at the tasks, and also reported less interest in those tasks, if they received a grade rather than narrative feedback. Other research has produced the same result: Grades almost always have a detrimental effect on how
well students learn and how interested they are in the topic they’re learning” (Kohn, “Apples” par. 6).

This is a depressing argument. I don’t disagree with it, but I try to put it out of my mind, or else I’d be hard-pressed to see value in what I do. I start the year giving nothing but narrative feedback, providing students with as many opportunities as my time allows to write and then to use comments and instruction to improve their writing before moving to any summative evaluation. It’s usually the end of October before they receive their first grade from me. Still, I’m required to begin grading at this time in order to have a percentage for the first report card, and my marks are due into the office around the third week of November. So does all the work I do at the beginning of the year help, or is it simply nullified by the grades I’m required to give in the public education system of British Columbia? Brian Huot writes: “Grading, even in a portfolio, freezes student work and teacher commentary. Ungraded but responded-to writing in a portfolio directs the articulation of judgement toward the evolving written product rather than at the student writer, giving students an opportunity to explore, experiment and compose across a body of work without receiving a summative evaluation of their effort (73). This would be the utopia of teaching for me – a public school where I was able to give feedback, to comment on student writing, without ever having to submit a summative grade.

I flip through the report card drafts that have just been printed for me by my secretary, where all 200 of my students are listed, last names first, some first names cut off because parents chose to pair long given names with long surnames. These students are the lucky ones. They’re not really being graded. I respond to Ekaterina’s writing, and listen to Benjamin’s comments in class and congratulate Alexandria on her dramatic reading of Portia as the judge in The Merchant of Venice, and these interactions don’t have to be tainted by evaluation, because the grade my computer program prints out doesn’t go to these students but to strangers: Ekate, Benj, and Alexan. Lee, Jon is not a stranger, though, nor is White, Lisa. I cannot pretend that these people don’t exist. And someone from the school office staff, after a year and half and five reporting periods, finally changed my name in the operating system from Mr. Ediger to Ms. Ediger. Those months as Mr. Ediger were freeing. Not only was it amusing to see students walk into my room in September only to turn around and re-check the room number, visibly confused and trying to reconcile the woman with long red hair in a jean skirt with the Mr. written on their course schedules, but it was also a kind of “get out of jail free card.” I could evaluate students each term as was required of me, but as I proofread the report
cards, I never saw my name anywhere – not really. Not so anymore. Ms. Ediger is printed clearly at the top, and beside each student is a grade for English 11 or English 12 or Writing 12 or Humanities 8. How misleading. The report card should not read simply “English 11” but “Work assigned in English 11 that was handed in from September 7th to November 12th,” as an example. Students aren’t letters and grades often don’t represent ability. Let’s make that clear. Instead, what becomes increasingly clear to me as I finish circling mistakes and making corrections in my purple pen to facilitate the work of the secretary who has to key in the changes, is how unclear these letters and numbers are, and I wish my name wasn’t attached to these documents at all.

Our system is far from perfect. We often espouse the practice of taking the best from a variety of methods, so when Kohn reminds us that “the quest for optimal results may sometimes require us to abandon certain practices rather than simply piling other, better practices on top of them” (“Apples” par. 9), we don’t quite know how to respond. When it comes to evaluation, this would suggest that we should abandon grades in favour of narrative feedback, not simply do both: “Two kinds of motivation simply are not better than one. Rather, one (extrinsic) is corrosive of the other (intrinsic) and intrinsic is the one that counts. To make a difference, therefore, we have to subtract grades, not just add a narrative report” (Kohn, “Apples” par. 15). This, I know, is not on the horizon. What choice am I left with? It’s easy to understand why teachers elect to use both narrative feedback and grades. It’s difficult to let go of practices we know to be effective, even though combining them with destructive practices may nullify their effectiveness. It’s also demoralising to suspect that the six hours you just spent marking a class set of essays may have little impact on student writing and performance because of your responsibility to grade students.

On a more practical level, it is useful to examine the issues associated with a graded paper in terms of student learning, in addition to student motivation:

Returning graded and marked papers to students eliminates the need for response or defines it in very narrow, perfunctory terms, often encouraging students to rather perfunctory revision. Instead of focussing on questions involving the improvement of a piece of writing, students are often focussed on
what will get them a desired grade, whether they think the revisions improve the writing or not. Writing papers for a grade creates a role for the student in which assessing the value of writing is secondary or moot and the attainment of a specific grade is everything. (Huot 66)

My own students are more involved in reworking and improving their work when I don’t give it a grade. Real instruction takes place when I hand back a set of reading responses with comments and no grades and we work together to develop criteria for improving our work. The same principal holds true when it comes to parent-teacher interviews. The conversations I’ve had with parents over the course of my career that have not been concentrated on grades but rather on activities or the map of the year or philosophies or strategies have been so much more fruitful than conversations centred solely on grades. I had a parent call me after a lesson I did with grade nine students a few years ago that strayed away from the ordinary. I had students move around the room and create individual statues responding to a character from a section of literature. Then I asked them to think of short responses to prompts, in role, and they shared these aloud whenever I touched them on the shoulder. I walked around the room, creating soundscapes. Students then formed their own groups and continued on with other controlled drama activities before moving back to their seats to do some role-writing. I had a call from a parent the next morning, wanting to tell me that the family had talked about the lesson over dinner, that her daughter thoroughly enjoyed it and why. It was the why that sparked a rich discussion on the importance of providing students more opportunity to experience literature rather than to simply read it, and reinforced my own feelings about what mattered in the classroom. I was also able to provide feedback to this mother about her daughter’s participation in the activity, and the writing she did as a result. Given that this feedback was specific to a task, rather than general, I daresay it was more telling and helpful than any of those report card
comments that I choose from a bin, often at 2 or 3 in the morning the day (or the day after) report cards are due.


Classroom Evaluation

What Do I Accomplish by Marking Students?

I’ve felt a real discomfort with my own classroom-based testing and evaluation of students for a number of years now. This began shortly after my third year teaching, when I became a touch more grounded, more at peace with myself in the classroom. This gave me the room, finally, to begin to question my practice, whereas before the only question I had room for was what I was going to do with my students the next day. And so here I was, asking myself what I was accomplishing by marking my students, and not being able to come up with an answer. I had no problem understanding how formative assessment would help – it’s the summative assessment I was concerned with. The mark on the report card at the end of a term can be meaningless. A student may score between 95 and 100% on every math test, but never do homework, and depending on how his teacher sets up his marking bins, may end up with 80% on a report card. Another student may be a poor writer, whose work is best characterised by the descriptors in the “minimally meets expectations” column on the performance standards, but may put a lot of effort into homework assignments and project work, and find herself in a classroom where writing assessment isn’t weighted that heavily. She could end up with a B on her report card one year, and the following year find herself in a class where 90% of the mark is based on writing. Suddenly, she’d be in danger of failing a course she had thought was one of her strengths. There are so many variables at work that a grade at the end of the term means very little without a thorough understanding of how that grade came to be.

Unfortunately, the structure of the grade is rarely a point of discussion; the grade is everything. I don’t dread parent-teacher interviews, I just find them a bit depressing. The conversation often centres on the question: What can my child do to get an A? Perhaps it’s just semantics. The A is a symbol, after all, for work that demonstrates skilful reading and writing, so translated, the question might read: What can my child do to become a more successful
reader and writer, and what can you and I do to help him or her achieve that goal? But the language sets a tone. The goal is the mark, really, not the learning that leads to the mark. And I see this from students more than from anyone else. The times when I return pieces that I have graded summatively do little to improve student learning. I suppose that some would point out that the point of summative evaluation is to assess what has been learned – that formative assessment is meant to and does provide the opportunities I allude to. But should we still not question the time spent on summative assessments given that they do not help students improve?

Many teachers spend more time performing summative assessment than they do formative assessment, simply because one is necessary to fulfil the requirements of the job, while the other may never happen in a class – with no consequences save the negative impact on student learning. And students learn quickly which assignments are important and which are not. Teachers often go over the expectations for a summative assessment with more rigour than they do for a formative assessment, and may also outline the consequences should students choose not to hand it in. If students are absent and miss a test, then they are usually expected to write the test at lunch or after school the following day; however, if students miss a mini-lesson or a presentation or a discussion, they are rarely required to make up that time. And when students are given an Incomplete in a course, teachers are required to outline the work that needs to be done in order for the Incomplete to revert to a Pass. A common approach is to list the summative assignments a student has missed, in essence distilling the course to its “most important” elements. Laura Wood Richter, a former teacher, writes about her discomfort with the rhetoric around student achievement. She expresses “a sense of unease...a discomfort with an understanding of education concerned with getting to the end – essentially a hurrying us to a place where nothing more is expected to happen” (8). This is certainly an uninspiring view of education, but it is also, in my experience, all too prevalent. I teach mostly senior secondary
students and many of them are concerned simply with graduating. They can’t wait to leave the system. We don’t even need to look that far, though. What happens in any subject area at the end of a school year? Many students don’t even bother to take their binders home. On locker clean-up day, they throw everything out, while teachers in our resource department look through the white recycling bags for empty binders they’ll be able to offer their students the following year.

This reality depresses me, certainly, but I’m also concerned about the impact grades have on the stops along this journey to nowhere. Even if I may reconcile myself that the narrative assessment I do has value, despite the grades I give, what about the negative impact of grades themselves on student and teacher enthusiasm and enjoyment? Marilyn Low discusses marking ESL learners and the problems associated with the evaluation of communication and the expression of ideas. These are things teachers want to encourage, but when we have to evaluate, even if we might use a set of performance standards in the hope of using assessment for learning, we need to consider that we might be discouraging students despite every attempt to the contrary. It takes a mature outlook to receive a marked paper, look at all the highlighting in the Not Yet Within Expectations column and turn around and say, “This is such useful information. Next time I write, I’ll now know what I need to do to improve. I may not know how to improve. I may not have any idea how to get from Not Yet Within Expectations to Minimally Meets Expectations, and I may not be taught this explicitly at all, or perhaps I won’t learn this until after the next assessment, but that won’t keep me from putting everything I have into expressing my ideas. And I’ll continue to take risks with content and meaning, even though the more risks I take the more grammatical mistakes I’ll likely make, and the worse I’ll do in the sections of the evaluation that look at style and form and conventions. I won’t simplify my ideas, though, for the sake of correctness.”
We’re kidding ourselves if we expect students to respond this way, particularly in subjects that encourage students to communicate. This risk requires all the support we can give. Tom Wayman, in a poem entitled “Marking”, writes about the feelings of a teacher evaluating student papers. He personifies the hand performing the marking and it accuses itself: “It feels it has led the students on / to try to express themselves / and then betrayed them: / attacking what they have exposed / of their ideas and emotions... We both know my weighing of their skill / will be taken to be an assessment of themselves.” I question whether evaluation can ever help students improve. Marilyn Low cites an International student who expresses, succinctly, one of the key problems with evaluating students: “I want to know how you know my mark. It’s not me. I am more than this number,” (60). We are dealing with human beings, and many of us cannot help but associate our self-worth with external evaluations. The student’s comment, “I am more than this number” resonates with me. How many times have I, even with the best of intentions, made students feel worse about themselves as they left my classroom than they had when they came in? How often have I inadvertently “stripped [student work] of its mysteries, complexities, ambiguities, and situational character”? (Low 62) How many times have my ESL students simplified their ideas and sentence structures in order to ensure fewer mistakes? Another International Student of Low’s makes me question my practice further: “Sometimes I don’t like question. It just repeat what study in class. I know more so I try to say but sometimes it worse. I make many mistakes and I get low mark” (62). In my rush, with my large student caseload, did I ever notice? If I consider communication to have elements of the artistic in it, or even if I consider that a possibility, then how is it that I separate a student’s attempt at communication into meaning, form, style and conventions? How can I evaluate the parts in good conscience? Too often, “our well-intentioned acts of assessment reduce students’ humanness to the technical power of a number” (Low 61). This number is “a text in which the whole is already more than the sum of its parts” (Low 61). The grade on the report card takes
on more meaning than the lessons in the classroom, than the formative assessment that led to
the numbers that went into the grade, than the narrative comments on assignments, than the
one-on-one conversations with students, than the before-school tutoring sessions, than the
excited talks about novels, than an interim report sent home noting significant gains part-way
through the term. We use grades because they’re easy. They’re symbols most of us are familiar
with and we think we understand them. What we often don’t realise is that “technology
becomes an efficiency aspect of consumptive assessment that attempts to reduce living
pedagogy to plain language, where students, labelled and marked, are held in place by the
power of a ‘simple number’” (Low 61). We also don’t consider the negative impact that grades
for the sake of efficiency might have, especially on the most vulnerable of learners.

So, Is My Responsibility to My Students or to My Employer?

At what point does my responsibility to my profession, to my students, to public
education, and to myself, shift from fulfilling the requirements my employer places on me, to
insisting, despite the consequences, on best practice? Part of the difficulty of this question is
that no one knows, conclusively, what best practice is. There is so much research out there that
one could find arguments to support a number of different perspectives. Ultimately, we need to
listen to ourselves, and value our own voice. This may help others. It doesn’t help me much,
given my voice is constantly conflicted. My aim is to continue on a path of becoming a teacher
much like the ones profiled in Dr. Seuss’s Hooray for Diffendoofer Day! These teachers “are
remarkable, / They make up their own rules” (1). The school is full of joy and inquiry and
learning, and the educators are all different and quirky: the librarian, Miss Loon, “often cries
out, ‘LOUDER!’ / When we’re reading to ourselves” (17). Then one day, the principal
announces that “All schools for miles and miles around / Must take a special test, / To see
who’s learning such and such – / To see which school’s the best” (21). If the school doesn’t
perform well, it will be shut down and the students will have to go to the next closest school where everything is standardised and dreary and students are made to conform. Miss Bonkers doesn’t worry at all. She tells the students that they’ll do fine because their teachers have “taught [them] how to think” (25). Of course, the students score better than anyone else in the land, even though there was no test preparation, and the story ends with a celebration – after all, the students and the teachers will be able to continue teaching and learning in their beloved school using methods they’ve always known, and in ways that have now been validated by a standardised test.

I wonder, though, if this is not an idea I cling to because it’s the only one that provides me with any comfort. It’s certainly tempting to believe this scenario and to ignore Kohn’s arguments, or to think that while they may have merit, the consequences are not as dreary as he suggests. Other arguments and perspectives exist:

Cognitive evaluation theory suggests that if students get feedback that helps them make progress, then motivation and control should increase… Students will behave because their efforts will cause learning, and because enhancing perceived competence is motivating in and of itself. Students will perceive grades and other assessments which teachers use to provide informational feedback as more soundly based and reliable than grades and other assessments used to provide controlling feedback. (Brookhart qtd. in O’Conner 296)

I’m still bothered by the attitude that we do what we can – we accept that standardised tests aren’t going anywhere and so teach the way we believe is best, trust in these methods, and believe our kids will do well on the tests. We don’t let them stand in the way of our teaching. I feel complacent when I adopt that attitude, that somehow by complying, I’m contributing to this testing mania. Indeed, “How is the teacher to cope with this? How is she or he to avoid
feeling like a chess piece or a cog or even an accomplice of some kind?” (Greene, Releasing 11). An accomplice. Is this want I am?

The Hypocrite

Why am I, in all my idealism
Content to live in the midst of hypocrisy
Admiring those who do what I can’t
Who can speak without fear
Because they don’t depend so much on what they may lose

They have a faith I can’t find
An uncompromising ethic that for me is hidden behind weeds
of expectation, desire, comfort

Their passion is greater than mine
Is purer than mine
Is not clouded by the haze of conformity that keeps me from seeing through the rain
That has me wondering if perhaps They’re right

Harper Lee advocates baby steps
But is it not those willing to run
Demanding longer strides
Who begin to tear away at the undergrowth
And allow for movement of any kind to occur

Tentative steps do not have the strength to move these lies
FURTHER FRUSTRATIONS

I feel pulled, harried, incomplete, undervalued

I ran into a friend from high school at UBC one day at the beginning of the fourth year of my B.A. He and I had always been fairly close — we chatted a lot at parties, invited each other to our respective weddings, had a lot in common, but we didn’t call each other on the phone, we didn’t have a monthly date for Japanese — we had that kind of friendship. He now lives in another province and I haven’t spoken to him since a wedding, years ago. I do hope to cross paths again one day, partly because I sincerely enjoyed his company, and partly because, even though I doubt I ever will, there’s a bit of me that wants to finish a conversation we started on campus nine years ago.

People were deciding what they were going to do following their undergrad degree, and so the ubiquitous “How are you” had been temporarily replaced by “Hey, so’ve you decided what you’re going to do next?” I answered that I had decided to try my hand at teaching secondary school. His response: “Really? But you’re capable of so much more. You could be anything. Are you sure that all you want to be is a teacher?”

No, I’m not. This was the first time I second-guessed my choice of profession.

Time

If I had known then how often I would do the same in the years to come, I wonder if I would still be waking up in the middle of the night, as I did just two nights ago, with an idea for a lesson for my English 12 students and having to write it down before being able to go back to sleep. This is my struggle. After seven years of teaching, I still get excited about the next lesson; about figuring out a second way to use watermelon pickle in the classroom; about a picture book I heard of while at my district study group, one that would work perfectly with my unit on ambition and power; about a student who considers himself a non-reader who returns Catch-22 to me three days after he borrowed it and tells me he loved it, that he couldn’t put it down, and what else did I have that he might like; even about my floor in September, how for that one week it is free of black scuff marks and dust bunnies. I have days when I feel confident that this is my calling, that the work I do has real purpose, that the 60-hour weeks are worthwhile. And then I have days when I berate myself for not being able to think of anything relevant to connect with a certain piece of Canadian history and I resort to having my students
read a portion of the text and complete a graphic organiser – one, I would of course remind them, may be of use to them on their upcoming open-book test; when I come home after a long week and struggle to carry my marking up the stairs knowing that not only will my weekend suffer, but that Monday’s lessons will, too; when the RTA’s bargaining bulletin reminds me that our contract’s up and that this time negotiations will be even more difficult given we no longer have collective bargaining rights; when I work for three hours after school one day rewriting the English department’s School Planning Council goal in response to feedback I received from our SPC committee that our goal was not scientific enough; or when a student’s dramatic reading of an original poem is interrupted by one of our secretaries over the PA asking if Cindy Bale could be excused as she has not yet handed in her grad gown.

Mostly, though, I enjoy the time I spend in the classroom, the time I spend collaborating with other teachers, the time I spend planning, and I dread the time I spend evaluating student work, because there is no time to do it properly. I dread the piles, I dread having to put a mark on a paper once in a while, and yes, I’ve tried a number of strategies, and continue to employ some and seek out new ones, but at the end of the day, I’m required to put a mark on the report card. I don’t like having to compromise what I know to be good practice with what is practical for an English teacher with 210 students. This is simply too many to be able to mark with meaning and care, and I’m jealous of the time I’m required to take to do a mediocre job of evaluation because it means less time for things that matter.

My most successful marking experience last year came in October with my English 9 students. We had worked on memoirs over the course of a month. Students had written two or three different memoirs, and then had selected one to take through the editing process. I marked each draft, not with a grade, but with comments and suggestions. Students were then able to use those suggestions to revise their work. When they handed in their memoirs for the second time, I was thrilled with their improvement. I wasn’t jealous of the time I spent marking them,
because I saw real application of learning. I try to emulate this practice in different ways throughout the year with all my classes and with all assignments, but time constraints require me to take short cuts I resent. And so I try to conference with students as much as possible while they’re drafting a piece in class, and I always offer students the opportunity to rewrite a paper after it has been evaluated, but nothing I’ve done is as effective as the lengthy process I used with the memoirs. When I slow down and follow process, I’m more satisfied in the work I do, but the time I spend outside the classroom increases, which puts strain on other parts of my life.

I want to write. At no time was this desire more pressing than during this past school year, when I taught Writing 12 for the first time. I saw my students writing, and I wrote with them during class activities, but found myself so swamped with schoolwork and concerns and questions at the end of the day that I had no energy for any personal creations. I suppose some would say that if you want to write you need to make time to write. That’s fair, and I don’t disagree, but I, rightly or wrongly, see writing as something I do for me, and my work as a teacher takes precedence. I already don’t have time to teach the way I want to teach, and still maintain balance. This creates yet another conflict for me. Is teaching what I want to do if I’m not able to juggle writing and teaching English full time? Renee Norman writes that “what surfaces and resurfaces when juggling teaching and writing in the air is this: when you’re teaching, you’re not writing. Teaching is a giving art” (245). She goes on to say that teaching drains her. (245) I don’t like hearing that, but at the same time wish I heard it more because it acknowledges my reality. Teaching fulfills my need for challenge and scope and possibility, but the same aspects of teaching I often find exhilarating sometimes weigh heavily. Pinar expresses my feelings exactly. I have “tasks to do, tasks I want to do, but which, in their number and urgency, twinkle at times too brightly” (279).
There is a tension here that I’m beginning to understand is inherent in good teaching. Ted Aoki observes that “if you’re alive there’s tension. If you’re dead, no tension” (qtd. in Norman 244). Even though I realise that this is likely the case, I still feel lost. Perhaps I turn to writing to find answers, but feel paralysed. Not enough tension, I suppose, or too much. I echo Leah Fowler who asks, “What is it we need to learn/to study/to know/to ask/to say when we locate ourselves in language-scopes of difficulty?” (159). What do I do in response to these questions? I went through a period a couple of years ago when my response was complaint and blame. That’s not enough anymore. I’m a political being and will continue to voice my opinions, but I also feel a responsibility as a professional to look to myself for change. To begin to deal with this tension, “an important question for us as teachers today might well be, what specifically are we in-between and in what ways?” (Smith xvi). I’ve already begun to articulate where my tensions lie, in evaluation and in time, but there are other places I haven’t yet explored. Teaching is never simple.

System

This system is taking its toll on too many young teachers. We need a healthy balance in our lives if we’re meant to inspire that in others, but we lose heart sometimes in the face not only of challenges, but also of a landscape in education where little seems to be happening to overcome these challenges. “Thich Nhat Hanh emphasised that ‘the practice of a healer, therapist, teacher or any helping professional should be directed toward his or herself first, because if the helper is unhappy, he or she cannot help many people’” (hooks 15), and while this is certainly wise advice, it’s difficult to implement, to give up the feeling that by taking time away from work, we’re somehow improving the work we will be doing in the future; that by not marking that class set of essays this weekend that we’ll somehow be better off the following week. I agree that our lessons might be better because we’ll be sharper, and I also
agree that by modelling lifelong learning we do inspire some of our students. Furthermore, many of my ideas for lessons, or simply connections I make that liven a class come from my own life experiences. Much like some authors carry around journals to note scenes or snippets of conversation or sketches of people that may later inspire a plot, a dialogue, a character, some teachers find lessons in the world around them. It was as I was watching the Swedish film “The Five Obstructions”, where one director challenges another to modify his short film in five different ways, one of them being to transform it into a cartoon, that I thought to borrow that idea and have my own students develop writing challenges for one another. Write a poem of five to eight lines, using the word “iron” three times, and ending with a rhyming couplet.

\[
\text{I was ironing as usual} \\
\text{Your shirts, not mine} \\
\text{And I ran out of the distilled water} \\
\text{You demand I use} \\
\text{So I opened the tap in the kitchen} \\
\text{And filled my funnel} \\
\text{With iron-laced liquid} \\
\text{And conspired} \\
\text{This day,} \\
\text{To get myself fired.}
\]

Okay, so I didn’t follow all my rules. We still had fun. The challenges became quite specific:

Write a poem of four lines in iambic pentameter using the words “colour” and “worn” once each. The title? “The Fourteen Socks of Love.” My attempt:

\[
\text{The Fourteen Socks of Love} \\
\text{I walked up to my sister's coloured door} \\
\text{And shook my head at what was on the floor.} \\
\text{I cleaned as best I could but in the end} \\
\text{Fourteen worn socks were too threadbare to mend.}
\]

And at a visit to the Vancouver Art Gallery last year, I entered into a dialogue with three other women about a piece where the artist had taken apart and rewoven a woman’s suit. One of the women was from India and she shared an interesting perspective on the “power suit”, on how women in North America chose to pave their way into the male dominated work force by doing
what they could to be inconspicuous, to not draw any attention to their femininity. She contrasted this with women in India who carved a place for themselves in their male dominated industries while preserving their femininity, while wearing saris. We discussed how that likely gave Indian women more strength. This discussion found its way to my unit on gender.

Whenever I read, I read with a pencil, and note passages that would enrich this unit or that lesson. I read newspapers with the scissors close by; I watch movies with an eye for scenes that might work with a lesson on mood I’ve been wanting to develop, or for dialogue that provides the background to a character – my writing students will be starting their short story unit soon. I also share my experiences at university with my students. I let them know when I’m completing an assignment I’m interested in, or when I have to go home to start and finish one that doesn’t speak to me. I use my own work to demonstrate my writing process. And I’m not alone. Many teachers teach from their lives. Irving Layton writes about how important this is in his essay, “The Role of the Teacher”: “Only by pursuing knowledge, that is, by constantly enlarging his own intellectual horizons, can the teacher retain his original freshness and enthusiasm. In the successfully creative teacher, knowledge spills over like water from a seemingly inexhaustible fountain. This kind of teacher is always an inspiration to his pupils” (338-9).

I think I would be a better teacher if I read more than I do. My shelves are filled with must-reads and I add to the pile faster than I’m able to make dents in it. I also know that I’d be a better teacher in some respects if I did less schoolwork, ironic as that may sound. But in other respects, mainly in providing my students with timely and meaningful feedback on their writing, I wouldn’t be. If I don’t mark that class set or four this weekend, it or they will pile up and I’ll be left with even more the following weekend. Carl Leggo concurs: “Teachers live such demanding and challenging lives that it is difficult to maintain the time and location for nurturing the inner life” (“Tangled” 30).
Whenever I speak with my close teacher friends, we invariably end up discussing the challenges of teaching. There are times when we share successes, and the majority of the time we run over lesson ideas or ask for and give feedback on a plan for scaffolding note-taking strategies or on how to introduce concept mapping to a junior class. But there is always the undercurrent of mental exhaustion and of discouragement: we could teach so much more effectively if only we had the time.

We need time to plan and evaluate, yes, but we also need time for ourselves in the course of a week. We all of us put in too many hours and – here’s the most disheartening part – still are not able to teach the way we’d like to, the way we know how to. We can’t forget that for four to five hours a day at least, we’re also “on” for 30 students. And the better our lessons, the more demanding those hours are. Parker Palmer discusses the emotional toll good teaching can take:

> We lose heart, in part because teaching is a daily exercise in vulnerability. I need not reveal personal secrets to feel naked in front of a class. I need only parse a sentence or work a proof on the board while my students doze off or pass notes. No matter how technical my subject may be, the things I teach are things I care about – and what I care about helps define my selfhood… As we try to connect ourselves and our subjects with our students, we make ourselves, as well as our subjects, vulnerable to indifference, judgement, ridicule. (17)

**Boredom**

*How Does a Little Education Sound?*

> Everything is labelled with a thick black marker: computers, desks, chairs, books, audio-visual equipment, and even the posters that adorn the walls. The insignificant, serviceable carpet and the glow of the artificial lighting complete the décor of the institution. The room is cluttered with such a variety of objects, completely unrelated to one another, that they all become indistinct and unimportant, especially once the voice begins to speak,
interrupting the incessant murmur that has originally dominated the sounds of the room. Reluctantly, the murmur is reduced to a faint but persistent level of background accompaniment, as the voice takes centre stage, amid the loud cracks of three-ring binders, the constant zipping and unzipping of pencil cases and the click click click of mechanical pencils.

For a while, the audience, clothed in the latest fashion, with name brands prominently displayed, scratches furiously, brightly coloured and patterned nails drifting from left to right across a page. The whisper of a grating pencil, the muted tapping of a ball-point pen, dotting i's and crossing t's, and the occasional swish of a felt-tip pen, sliding effortlessly from one word to the next, replace the clamour of before. At the request of the voice, someone jumps onto a nearby counter to open a window. The musty air needs to be refreshed; however, the open window seems to have a negative effect on the energy level in the room. Someone yawns. Someone else pulls out an elastic and proceeds to run her fingers through her hair, straightening and pulling it back into a tighter, neater ponytail. When she has finished, she takes the elastic in one hand and stretches it around the ponytail three times in order to secure it in place. Someone else gets up and moves to the other side of the room to throw something into the garbage. On his way back, he stops at a desk to whisper something in his friend’s ear. They both laugh.

The inattentiveness is contagious. Soon the room is filled with distracting movements, not conducive to concentrated focus. All hands are kept busy with numerous types of fidgeting. The left to right direction of the pen or pencil across the page becomes focused in a single area. Writing utensils create sounds that become increasingly pronounced as note-taking is replaced by shading, colouring and darkening designs in the upper left-hand corner of lined paper. Some abandon their binders completely in favour of planning their schedules, organising their responsibilities and amending their telephone directories in their agendas and palm pilots. Others work on perfecting the pen trick where a pen is woven through all five fingers first one way and then the other, until a continuous pattern is established. Not everyone is an expert at this. An occasional dropped pen or pencil cracks on the surfaces of desks or on metal geometry cases. Undaunted, the culprit picks up the magic wand and begins again, moving it from the thumb, to the index finger, to the middle finger, to the ring finger, to the pinkie and then back to the ring finger and then – crack. He pauses to see that the voice has not faltered, and begins again.

After exhausting the more engrossing and taxing forms of wasting time, the students resort to holding their pens or pencils between their first and second fingers at the second knuckle and moving the writing tools back and forth faster and faster. If done with enough speed, the illusion of a butterfly is achieved. Or they play with their hands: adjust their watches, twirl their rings around their fingers and tap their fingers one immediately after the other, in a manner generally associated with impatience and boredom. Feet move every which way, at times banging against the legs of chairs or desks, at times rubbing together the soles of shoes, at times clapping down onto the carpeted floor. Sleeves are unrolled and then rolled up and then unrolled and then rolled up until the roll is satisfactory. Earrings are taken out, in order to clean away the wax build-up with the sharp tip of a pencil, and then put back in again. Fingers comb through bangs and the ponytail needs fixing yet again.

The focus of attention then switches from hands to mouths, which have to endure the hard, gritty texture of fingernails, plastic pen caps, and the wood that surrounds the lead of HB pencils along with the smoother textures of skin from around fingernails, material from a scrunchie, and the orange paint on the wood that surrounds the lead of HB pencils. Those who have continued to or have reverted to paying attention to the voice often bite their lips in thoughtfulness, sometimes carefully removing the first layer of skin that covers their upper lips. Some are more gentle to their taste buds and opt for the traditional stick of gum or candy, or
settle for simply running their tongues along their teeth, or trying to remove that bit of food stuck between their teeth that has been bothering them since lunchtime.

While the mouth seems to be the body part of choice at this point, other parts of the body are not ignored. One student decides to clean his ear without the aid of a Q-tip, sticking his little finger painfully far down his ear canal. He collects the wax from his finger onto his thumb nail and dives deeply once again into his ear. After completing the same process on his other ear, he flicks the resulting wax ball onto the floor as discreetly as possible, under his desk towards the outside of the room. Someone else does the same with the dirt she has gathered from under her fingernails with the metal tip of her mechanical pencil. Others check for sleep in the corners of their eyes amid the coughing, the sniffing, and the clearing of throats that puncture the incessant din that reigns in the classroom.

Comfort gains importance as time goes on. Hands drop what pens and pencils they are still holding and move to neck muscles and temples where they begin the deliberate movements of a massage. Afterwards, they move from massaging to supporting chins or foreheads. Soon two heads fall from this position and lie in the nook created by a bent elbow on a desk. Binders, agendas and opposite arms are manoeuvred to hide closed eyes and to feign listening.

Then, slowly, one movement becomes more predominant than all the others. One after the other, students push up their sleeves, to glance at their watches. The scratching of pencils on paper begins again, dotted with pauses as watches are checked with increasing regularity. Then the snapping of three-ring binders and the zipping and unzipping of pencil cases and the closing of books begin to compete with the voice. A loud ringing interrupts the myriad of sounds that have escalated to a murmur once again. The teacher stops talking as the last student leaves the room. Only the labels remain, along with the posters and the carpet and the variety of objects lining the shelves. He switches off the overhead projector and begins preparing for his next class. A new sound is heard, indicating that his students are already coming through the door.

I want so badly for students to enjoy, or at least not dread, coming to my class. I suppose on the one hand lie the feelings about school I wish students had, and on the other hand lie their real feelings. The same students who adore school in grade 2 grumble all the way through grade 12, living for graduation day. And I don’t blame them. There are many excellent and exciting learning situations that happen in our school every day. There are also wasted hours, reams of wasted paper and too many depressing moments. This wouldn’t be too much of a problem if they were focused in one or two or even seven rooms. The problem is that most of the time they all, the good and the bad, happen in most spaces. My goal is still that there be more exciting than depressing moments in my room. Part of my own problem is that I focus more on the negative than on the positive.
It’s the first day of school last year, the beginning of block A, and I’ve already heard from a girl in my homeroom, “Only ten more months until summer.” How awful. Perhaps Zen should be a part of a teenager’s education. Really. In my school it would be. These comments, and more importantly my dwelling on them, are like the wet towel, smelly for lack of air, I hurriedly stuffed into the wet sack and squished into the toe of the kayak – the one that took ages to pack. There was no time between my morning swim and take off time to dry the towel properly. It smelled, obviously, but worse, it indicated an inability to take care of things, to keep house, to have a dust-free, dirt-free environment. I wonder if my student knows how draining her words are. While I suppose they provide me with something to work towards, to rise up against, I wonder if they don’t do more harm than good. Not that she has a responsibility to me. If the learning process continued to be the one of delight we find at elementary school, then would she say these things – or at the very least, would as many students nod alongside her?

Why do I hear these comments all the time? Perfection isn’t even on my radar screen, I don’t think, not consciously anyway. I only expect improvement from myself and my students. Always improvement. The way I hear criticism, though, the way I see it in so many places, in slumped shoulders, in students who need to be reminded to take out their novel for silent reading, in less participation than there was two days before, weighs on me. I know there are a myriad of reasons for all kinds of behaviour, and I’m not so self-consuming to think my teaching is always or even often responsible, but this understanding doesn’t stop me from re-examining my lessons with more vigour when next I sit down to plan.

I was driving home from school one day and I accidentally hit my horn. The man ahead thought this was directed at him, so he gestured rudely in his rear-view mirror. At the next light, he stopped, and made a late left turn signal, so I didn’t have enough time to get into the right-hand lane to avoid the wait. I remember thinking to myself how ridiculous it was, sad even, that he jumped to conclusions about my horn, that we all do, and then I did the same, assuming he decided to turn left to punish me. I didn’t even consider that he may have legitimately needed to go left, and that he just forgot his signal.
When I work with student teachers, I’m good at preaching perspective, but this rarely helps sensitive souls like mine. My whole life, first my father, and then my husband, tell me not to worry so much, that worrying won’t change anything, and they’re right, of course. And I know this full well, and I continue to worry.

This past June, I received a letter from a grade 11 student full of those comments teachers love to hear. She looked forward to English class every day, my classes inspired her to consider teaching as a career, she was impressed with how I immersed my students without resorting to bribery. But this isn’t what I remember about the letter. It’s not why I took it home with me this summer when I left the rest of my cards at school. She began the letter this way: “In grade 9, I thought you were boring.” Her opinion changed this year, but after reading the lovely cards some of my students wrote to me, this is the only line I can repeat verbatim. I even went back two years to search through my lesson plans for that class to try to figure out why. Two years ago. And I usually change half of what I do each year anyway.

At the Surrey Writer’s Conference, 2004, I listened as Jack Whyte told the story of how, in the course of one class where they discussed Milton’s “On His Blindness” no less, a teacher changed his life. He looked up his teacher a few of years ago to thank him, only to find out that he had quit teaching long since because he thought he was being ineffective. Jack Whyte’s message to aspiring writers was to thank the mentors and teachers who may have had an influence. I think, though, that teachers also need to learn how to receive that thanks. I keep a folder of student cards at work – not the have a good holiday, thanks for a great year ones, but the ones with messages – yet I never go back and read them. And if I did, I know I’d reach for Jessica’s and read that line over and over again: “I thought you were boring.”

Nothing bothers me more. One of the biggest culprits of the boring class is that first day spent pouring over the course outline. Teachers are responsible for killing that September enthusiasm. Students spend every period Wednesday and Thursday of that first week of school
hearing eight different sets of rules, expectations, mark breakdowns and procedures. I'd like to walk into a science classroom and do an experiment (I'm sure there are ones that don't involve chemicals and therefore won't conflict with the need for a safety test prior to working in the lab). I want to play with geometric puzzles in math. I want to listen to a wonderful short story in English. University is no better. I dread those first days. I was refreshed by a course taught by Lynn Fels on Performative Inquiry where we began right away with a role-play exercise. At the end of the class, she stood by the door and handed us our course outlines, asking us to read them over and telling us that she'd devote five minutes the next class to any questions we might have.

So I spend a lot of time on the first couple of lessons of the year. Three years ago, I used The Little Prince as inspiration, and began each class by reading the first few pages. The boa constrictor eating an elephant and the perfect lamb inside the crate became metaphors for the kind of inquiry I hoped would occur in the classroom. We moved from there to poetry, where I focused on reader response strategies, and to creative writing, trying to demystify the "rules" surrounding writing and literature analysis that so often serve to hamper student engagement rather than promote it.

Two years ago, I turned to Maxine Greene's book, Landscapes of learning for inspiration. I wrote the following quotes on the board:

We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn. (42)

The social philosopher Alfred Schultz has talked of wide-awakeness as an achievement, a type of awareness, 'a plane of consciousness of highest tension originating in an attitude of full attention to life and its requirements.' This attentiveness, this interest in things, is the direct opposite of the attitude of bland conventionality and indifference so characteristic of our time. (42)
The opposite of morality, it has often been said, is indifference – a lack of care, an absence of concern. (43)

This became our metaphor for that year.

I share with my students my desire that each of them walk into our classroom wide awake so that our time together can be as rich as possible. I’m honest with them. I tell them I’d love it if they each ran to class everyday in anticipation, but that I know they don’t all love English. Still, I hope that I can create a welcoming enough environment, a challenging enough environment, that they don’t drag their feet, either. Partway through the year, the grads had a talent show. I was lassoed into participating in the worldly “how many soda crackers can you eat in one minute contest” and while I was chewing, they were chanting “Live wide awake! Live wide awake!” My smiles didn’t help me to a victory.

This year, I think I may do something with McDonald’s. I’ve been reading Joe Kincheloe’s The Sign of the Burger: McDonald’s and the Culture of Power, and I want my students to examine ways of seeing and understanding and challenging images that permeate our culture. I want students to look critically at things we normally think of as part of our landscape. I want them to explore that landscape. Regardless of what we do, I won’t be handing out a course outline on that first day. I need to honour the clean floors, the new white sneakers, the remnants of elementary school anticipation. I need to begin the year with pedagogical experiences that I hope will inspire and set the tone for the inquiry I want to promote throughout the year. I may not have control over the political situation or the reporting procedures or the lack of ventilation, but I do have a lot of control over the learning spaces I build with my students, and I feel fortunate to be teaching in a place where I do. These can flow and create a certain energy that leaves me and hopefully my students with a sense of satisfaction.
Bottom line: in order to connect with students, in order not to be boring, and in order to encourage them to connect with language in a myriad of ways, we need to be creative, and that takes time. Too many young teachers are literally wearing out.

**Well-being**

This wearing out has only partly to do with too little time to create and maintain those spaces where engaged learning can take place. It also has to do with the erosion of teachers’ senses of well being. I spend a good part of every day in August reading professional resources, getting together with teachers to plan for the new year, learning new instructional strategies and then playing with my course overview to see where I might integrate them – in short, preparing to be a better teacher in the fall than I was in the spring. I also spend a good chunk of July and August catching up on reading fiction and non-fiction, most of the time with an eye as to what I might order for the classroom. I see lessons in advertisements as I flip through magazines, in a line-up at Safeway, in lines from a play I watch, in a fireworks display, in my observations of the friendly racoon in Stanley Park. I don’t stop being a teacher in the summer, and so I’m not sure how to respond when people say, and they often do, how I’m so lucky to have such a long summer holiday. Why can I not simply say, “Yes, I am” and be done with it? Partly because I don’t feel as though I really do have a long vacation. I’m not being paid. I also don’t stop working for nine weeks. Most importantly, I hear disdain in these comments. I hear that we should complain about nothing since we have the holidays we have. Don’t get me wrong – I love my summers. I love the flexibility they provide me, I love that I finally have time to read and think and plan and recover and take time off, too. But teachers pay for these holidays. We pay financially and in the increasingly negative light in which the public holds our profession. We also need them in order to do the quality professional development that is required to teach
well: the reading, the mulling, the planning, the discussing. We don’t have the time to spend doing these essential things during the school year.

The holidays and perceived holidays teachers have still irk many people. Friends recently invited my husband and me to their place on the island. He suggested we take one of those Pro-D day weekends and come up. My husband, not a teacher, could book off work, and I basically have the day off anyway, right? I mean, teachers don’t really do anything on those days, do they? And he continued to share that he had done a count one year when his kids were in school. They had four 5-day weeks all year, what with all those holidays and Pro-D days. I can’t believe that’s true, but what do I say in a situation like that, when everyone around me is nodding in agreement? All I can say is that the calendar he described seems odd and that Pro-D days are not holidays for me. If I go on to say that the School Act specifies numbers of days in session for each school year, and that teachers in the 1970’s voted to add six days for professional development to the calendar year – that these days were not stolen from days in the classroom, or that I spent an average of ten hours preparing materials in each of the weeks leading up to the three Pro-D days this past year where I delivered workshops for other teachers, that these hours were in addition to my regular teaching load and responsibility, and even that they were hugely rewarding despite the extra time demands because they forced me to consider my practice in ways that the regular rhythm and demands of the teaching day rarely allow me to do, I would sound defensive. If I went on to say that I regularly give up weekends and evenings to attend professional development opportunities because I want to/need to to develop as a teacher, that I have yet to teach for a year without also being registered for courses at university, I would sound even more defensive. I could decide to comment on what wasn’t being said so explicitly, but was clearly in his subtext, that teachers had it so easy, by suggesting that “in comparison to other occupations, teacher working conditions are poor. They rarely have proper work areas; they cannot go to the washroom except at scheduled times; they
have to compete with one another for the use of telephones and computers to contact parents or
gather information" (Ungerleider 275). This would have simply started a debate. It wasn’t
worth it. Besides, it wouldn’t have fit the tone of the conversation. We weren’t talking seriously
about education or politics. It was the summer. We were on a porch overlooking a lake. It was
light banter. And it ruined the next couple of hours of my afternoon before I was able to put it
into perspective and move on.

It didn’t help that earlier that morning, another friend was sitting beside me eating
breakfast, and felt the need to tell me she’d hate being a teacher. I wasn’t suggesting she
become one. We weren’t talking about me and my work, but she needed to tell me that anyway.
What other profession do we chastise so openly to its practitioners with seeming immunity?
Lawyers, perhaps, but on the other hand we also accord them respect, and they receive
significant remuneration for their work. And ultimately, we can judge what we value by the
money we spend.

As I write this, British Columbia teachers are at a crossroads with their employer. There
is talk of job action for the fall, and everywhere I go, I’m asked if there will be a strike. People
have admonished me for even considering holding students hostage. Others have joked that
teachers just can’t work that hard, and that they’ll want to schedule the strike for October to
give themselves another break between the summer and Christmas. Sometimes, if I feel the
person might be responsive, I explain a perspective they don’t read in the media. Sometimes I
excuse myself as quickly as I can. I’m not here to make a political case, but I do want to say
that these episodes, which are what they become in my life, take a toll. Parker Palmer observes:

In our rush to reform education, we have forgotten a simple truth: reform will
never be achieved by renewing appropriations, restructuring schools, rewriting
curricula, and revising texts if we continue to demean and dishearten the human
resource called the teacher on whom so much depends. Teachers must be better
compensated, freed from bureaucratic harassment, given a role in academic governance, and provided with the best possible methods and materials. But none of that will transform education if we fail to cherish – and challenge – the human heart that is the source of good teaching. (3)

I still find joy in my classroom, but many veteran teachers will say that teaching is not as much fun as it used to be. This corresponds to the devaluing of the teaching profession in the eyes of the public over the past thirty years, and in the increasing demands placed on teachers. So issues of power and time are at the forefront. It’s a testimony to the professionalism of teachers that the quality of the public education system in Canada remains high. Still, “it will be difficult to maintain that standard if the working conditions of teachers do not change to accommodate the additional demands and the complexity of their work. Put simply, teachers spend too much time teaching and too little time preparing for teaching. Although scheduled preparation time has increased, the increase has not been enough” (Ungerleider 156). When I speak of being disheartened, the little time I have for preparation is most responsible. Yes, the media’s coverage of education bothers me, and yes, comments by acquaintances, friends and family sometimes lead me to a corner of the house to count to ten before I can return to the conversation and be civil, but nothing compares to the frustration I feel at not being able to teach students the way I know I could if I had more time to plan effectively.

Control

David Blades writes about the future in an essay entitled “The pedagogy of technological replacement”. In it, an android stumbles upon a Historian’s history of the 21st century. The Historian is the last organic human on an earth now inhabited by immortal androids. He discusses our present:
Features such as timetables, fractionated knowledge, and final exams represented the highly technical nature of public education. Aoki (1988) argues that ‘this technological orientation, strongly instrumentalist in orientation, is rooted in the human interest of intellectual and technical control of the world’ (409); thus education at the start of the 21st C was not only historically technological in organisation, but philosophically committed to the agenda of modernity, which was to master nature. (Blades 218-219)

I hope other educators have more trust than I have that the need for control that seems to be increasing will somehow wane.

The consequence of more robotic teaching is, of course, a more robotic student. And in addition to lock-step forms of teaching, the conservative climate is also having an impact on the content – the topics students study in science and social studies, the literature students read in English. There is a definite concern among teachers of parental complaints, and not always a lot of confidence in the support they may expect from administration in the event of complaints. Many teachers don’t want to take the chance and would rather play it safe. The result? A more bland curriculum. Charles Ungerleider discusses this problem:

One of the principal sources of student alienation from schooling is that school is bland and inoffensive. Censorship of texts, fear of controversy, and inexorable routing conspire to rob schooling of its excitement by removing its primary function: education. Education necessarily involves uncertainty and controversy.

Too many Canadian teachers are wary of controversy. They have become fearful of discussing topics and issues that might provoke debate for fear that such debates might erupt into controversies in the wider community…Will parents, the community, administrators, and trustees approve
of these issues being raised in school? Too often the issues have not been addressed in the classroom because the answer has been “no!” We must support teachers who engage their students in grappling with important and controversial ideas. They must be free to discuss ideas that may challenge the beliefs of parents and the wider community. (121)

I hope I continue to have the energy and drive to question curriculum, and not to blindly accept it. I have a poster in my classroom that reads: CENSORSHIP CAUSES BLINDNESS. I struggle with the question of what I can and cannot use in the classroom too often for my liking. I wish I didn’t, but there it is. While I expect to question my practices, and do so everyday, I do not like having to think: Will parents complain? Will the administration approve? I would rather think: Is this too violent for my students? Is this too suggestive for our purpose? Does this meet the needs of the lesson? Will students find this appealing? Anything I would like to bring into the classroom will be tame compared to what students have already seen, heard, and experienced. Why should we not talk about topics that matter to kids? To improve citizenship, Ken Osborne, in Education: A guide to the Canadian school debate suggests “schools should introduce students to the widest possible range of knowledge and activities that they might not otherwise encounter and help them think about the big questions of life, however simply” (21). I am not convinced that these big questions can be addressed without relaxing the boundaries of the classroom.

I encourage students to think beyond the boundaries, to reach higher levels of thinking, and to make connections. But if I have to be constantly concerned with limiting these boundaries, in censoring their connections, then am I doing students a disservice? I am not calling for no distinction between classroom and playground discussion, and I appreciate that all students need to feel safe for their voices to have a chance at being heard, and that open discussions do require monitoring. I spend time deliberating over any piece of literature I bring
into the classroom. My concern is that our classrooms are so conservative that some may find that pushing these boundaries is too stressful and time consuming to be worthwhile. It is easier not to challenge the status quo, and students know this better than anyone.

My students are respectful of the classroom, and so will ask me when they’re unsure, “Can I say this? Can I include this?” They’re aware of the need to be appropriate, which is both good and necessary, but I sometimes wonder if they’ve become overly tentative, and if we’re not to blame. I want to say yes to everything. Let’s talk about these things! I want to echo Parker Palmer who says, “only when people can speak their minds does education have a chance to happen” (75). However, there is this nagging voice that questions whether or not this or that topic is safe – not the responsible voice of my teacher-self questioning the validity and appropriateness of my lesson, but the safety voice, the voice that cautions me to be more timid than I would like.

This illustrates a power struggle between the decision makers and me. The politics of education will sometimes, and in my experience oftentimes, demand that teachers attempt to jostle their ideas and ideals, as best as possible, to fit the constraints of tradition, administrative goals, and parental pressure. The result may be lessons that are less vital, less energetic than they may otherwise be.

This is perhaps the most significant of all the problems created by our current political climate. It’s threatening to change the way we teach, and not for the better. It’s making me question whether the things I value – stories, stops, reactions, energy, emotion – matter as much as I think they do. And I’m afraid that things will not change significantly during my career, that the system in which I work will continue to be a still-life like the cogs on the trompe l’oeil that look as though they’re moving, but only from one angle. From another angle they’re still and stoic and terrifyingly unchanging, like the strip of wall behind the radiator in my bathroom that isn’t painted and I’m afraid won’t be until we decide to sell the place. I fear
waking up one day and deciding I don’t have the will to continue. I fear turning to the private education system in search of a more manageable workload but then finding that the extra time is spent being frustrated with myself for having given up on a system I value so much. I fear that our public education system will be eroded to the point where it is simply not viable anymore. And while my experiences have certainly left me cause for optimism, they have also left me cautious. It’s true that “the more one loves teaching, the more heartbreaking it can be” (Palmer 11).

Schools are not only a locus for control, but they are also, as is everything these days, part of the marketplace. The companies that offer programs to evaluate schools often own, or are owned by, other companies that manufacture tests as well as scripted programs designed to improve results. These companies own periodicals and some of their top executives are politicians or are affiliated with politicians (Kohn, “Gorilla” 113-4). In short, “schools – and, by extension, children – have been turned into sources of profit in several distinct ways” (Kohn, “Gorilla” 114). I was aware of Channel One, a project from the 1990s that gave free televisions to schools in exchange for a captive audience for its news programming and commercials. (Kincheloe 5). I was surprised to learn, from Joe Kincheloe, that McDonald’s also “produced advertisement-laden curricula for almost every academic subject” (5). Advertisers in general have become subtler. Product placement in film and on television is an important part of the business these days, and it appears in schools, too, in Math word problems, for example (Kohn, “Gorilla” 114). Another more problematic example is “chemical companies [that] distribute slick curriculum packages to ensure that environmental science will be taught with their slant” (Kohn, “Gorilla” 114).

In addition to concerns associated with the advertising of products in schools, Kohn argues that there are real problems when “a business ethos takes over education, with an emphasis on quantifiable results, on standardised procedures to improve performance, on order
and discipline and obedience to authority” (“Gorilla” 116). He suggests that public schools will have a hard time competing with private schools because they are not able to select students. They will try to compete with private schools through charter schools, perhaps, or vouchers, all of which will undermine public education (Kohn, “Gorilla” 115). One of his most interesting arguments is how the testing machine will work to promote privatisation of schools:

When many students perform poorly on [standardised] tests (an outcome that can be ensured from the outset and then justified in the name of ‘raising the bar’), these results can be used to promote discontent with public education.

“We are shocked – shocked! – to discover just how bad our school are!” Again, this can create a more receptive climate for introducing vouchers, for-profit charter schools, and other private alternatives. (“Gorilla” 116)

Lack of adequate funding for public schools also plays into the hands of corporations. I made one of many trips to Office Depot today to purchase supplies that I need for school. Office Depot has a teacher appreciation breakfast every year where they give out bags filled with goodies – sample pens, a purple tube of paint, a neon protractor, two duotangs, a stencil of a forest scene... This year we also received a huge poster meant for our classrooms as well as small wallet-sized cards they suggested we hand out at parent-teacher interviews advertising their new promotion: “Cite your child’s school code whenever you make a purchase, and a percentage of what you spend will go into that school’s account. Business assistants may use the money in the school account to offset the next purchase order of supplies.”

We operate under very business or factory-like conditions at my high school, at many schools, and students are extremely well conditioned. I’ll often notice a sigh of relief, a relaxing into a more comfortable sitting position, an overall sense of calm when I deliver a lesson I’ve put together out of desperation, usually in a subject other than English where I’m most comfortable. I admit that in a Social Studies class I taught last year I resorted a few times
during the year to having students read a section of text and answer questions. I was amazed at how compliant they were, how quickly and quietly they got to work, how there was no resistance to what I considered a boring task. I spend hours trying to come up with ways to animate the Social Studies curriculum and to make it relevant to students, creating materials and lessons from multiple sources, bringing in Fringe theatre or a panel of politicians and environmentalists and business leaders, organising field trips, and the students seem happiest answering questions. I soon realised that it might be because they were finally in their comfort zone. They knew how to be students who turned to page 82, read for three pages and then answered the odd-numbered questions they found there. They didn’t need to think much – the teacher would go over the answers the next day, and the keeners would volunteer the answers – they knew that too. They could fill in their notes then. It was now time to relax.

We’re doing a good job teaching students to follow orders, to complete mundane tasks without complaining, without even talking, oftentimes, to do useless work just to maintain the appearance of business. And most of them do whatever we ask them to, without question. I try to explain to my students the purpose behind the work I have them do, but sometimes I’ll joke and give them instructions for a particularly dry assignment, like a book report. Some may look at me quizzically, because they were paying attention the week before when I shared my opinions on the standard book report, but they’ll usually, if somewhat resignedly, begin to take out paper and pen before I tell them I’m only kidding.

A student asked me the other day if he could go to the bathroom. An ordinary question. But on further inspection, a 17-year-old boy asking to go to the bathroom strikes me as odd. The balance of power has recently been tipped even more towards administration and management, and I feel acutely the sense of helplessness and bitterness that is now permeating schools. Am I recreating that in my classroom, even indirectly?
Businesses are interested in what “will maximise [their] profitability, not necessarily by what is in the best interest of students” (Kohn, “Gorilla” 118). So why are we listening so closely? I wish public education was one place where corporations didn’t have the control they have over so many aspects of society, but that’s certainly not the case. Kohn suggests “we might even go so far as to identify as one of the most crucial tasks in a democratic society the act of limiting the power that corporations have in determining what happens in our schools” (“Gorilla” 119). A scenario described by Kincheloe in his book suggests that the opposite is the case. He discusses an assembly at a high school in Connecticut where a McDonald’s executive was invited to speak. A student, during the question and answer session, “denounced McDonald’s corporate policies” and was not only made to leave the assembly, but was forced to apologise to both the company and to the staff and student body (5-6). For asking important questions, raising legitimate concerns, engaging in democracy. We are privileging the wrong voices.

**Teacher Attrition**

I recently took students on an exchange to France, home of the 35-hour work week. Teachers there teach 18 hours per week – actually more like 16 ½ because each “hour” is only 50-55 minutes long. The government acknowledges that for every hour in the classroom, teachers need an hour to plan and mark. We know that the reality is that it takes more time than that, but at least their in-class hours are limited to accommodate the other aspects of their job. They also get six more weeks of vacation during the school year. There are even discrepancies among Canadian teachers. Secondary teachers in British Columbia teach seven blocks out of eight, or 23 ½ hours a week, while those in PEI teach six and receive similar salaries. Those in Ottawa teach six and receive about $15,000 more a year. That extra time is doubly important. First, these teachers have more time during the week to plan. Second, they have one less class
to plan for and 30 fewer students on their caseload for marking and reporting and the like. The bottom line for me is that I spend more and more time each week being a teacher because that’s the only way I can attempt to stem my feelings of inadequacy. In order to deliver the lessons I want to deliver, in order to do the kinds of assessments I think are valuable, I need to work long hours and spend a lot of my own money on resources. There are times when I’m excited by a new title I’ve read and there’s no more money in the budget to buy books, but it works so well with the unit I’m beginning in a couple of weeks, that I’ll go out and buy ten copies of the title to ensure there will be a lit circle set for each of my blocks. I don’t mind. I’m rewarded when students rave about the book and read it quickly and pass it on to others, but there’s a nagging voice that says things shouldn’t be this way. The aforementioned art teacher, Forrister, spends thousands of dollars on materials for his classroom and works sixteen-hour days (Barone 111, 113). I’m not there yet, in either category, but I recently learned how my husband perceived my relationship with my career as we sat down to the delightful task of developing a budget. When we arrived at hobbies and entertainment, feeling stressed and frustrated as always when I spend time on our finances, I whined about the money we allotted to his hobbies – motor biking, hunting, and fishing. “What hobbies of mine cost nearly so much?” I asked. “I should of course get the equivalent added to my shoe budget.” “Teaching,” he replied.

These realities, the realities of our system, will certainly affect the future of public education in B.C. The direction teaching is taking is ushering a lot of people away from the profession. Some people in the field are more optimistic than I am. Lorri Nielsen, for example, suggests that “the passive educator...is quietly and steadily being replaced by motivated teachers who think and act courageously according to their students’ needs and their own professional imperative” (13). I disagree. I see the opposite happening. Young teachers are leaving the system. I often have conversations with other colleagues who, like me, are considering a change in careers. I’ve also seen a number of colleagues leave to work in the
private sector or to go back to school to pursue another career. In a study on teacher attrition conducted by Doune Macdonald, quoted in a recent article in *The Georgia Straight*, there are five main reasons for this:

- Alienation and lack of support for new teachers; low pay compared to the pay for similar levels of education and skills in other professions; a decline in the status of teaching (which affects both how teachers perceive the job and how students and parents relate to teachers); increased bureaucratisation/standardisation (which leads to decreased creativity and power); and difficult working conditions (such as class sizes, lack of resources, and workload). (Richmond 45)

Thorn Wong, a 5-year TOC in Vancouver, now pursuing a degree in law was quoted in the same article as saying that in addition to more pay, “the status of the legal profession was also a draw. ‘In teaching, I could stand up and say what was wrong with the system, but my voice wouldn’t count. As Thomas Wong, Q.C., ironically, my words might carry more weight’” (qtd. in Richmond 46). I notice this same phenomenon in my own social network. Whenever the topic of teaching comes up, if my husband talks about the hours I work or the money I spend on resources for the classroom or the problems created by the government’s denying teachers the right to collective bargaining, people listen. If I talk about the same issues, with obviously even more knowledge, understanding, and passion, people nod, but I know that in their minds all they’re thinking is that I have two months off in the summer. Again, with how many professions are people outside the system deemed to have more knowledge about its workings than people inside the system? If we want to safeguard the future of public education, and this is a big if, Ungerleider outlines what need to happen:

- We must recruit the most intellectually capable and compassionate people to public school teaching, pay them well, and create the conditions most likely to
favour their successful achievement of the goals we set for public education.

Teachers need more time to plan for instruction and to work collaboratively in support of the enduring tasks of improving student learning and reducing the inequalities among students in terms of the outcomes of schooling. (295)

Yet how do you recruit intellectually capable and compassionate people to a profession that pays relatively little for the number of years of university it requires, that is undervalued by society, that requires long hours to do the job well, that in many cases requires that the professionals pay out of their own pockets when they want to be especially creative or to do something that requires materials not in the book room without even receiving the benefit of tax credits, and that is becoming increasingly tied to a system of standardised evaluation the results of which serve political, not educational ends, and that has negative impact after negative impact on the students and teachers it reportedly seeks to assist. Another young teacher, Jennifer Muir, who left the system, says it well: “We don’t need billions of dollars. We don’t even need all new computer labs. What we really need are some new books and some more power to make decisions. And we need society to support us” (qtd. in Richmond, 46).
WHY I TEACH

I feel hopeful, encouraged, fulfilled, at peace

Ruminations on the Mail

The TV Guide arrived
Pictures of stars
I’ve never seen.
You ask why I subscribe to TV Guide.
I watch West Wing every Sunday
At eight
And that’s all.
But that wasn’t always all.
And so maybe
I don’t cancel the subscription
To remind me
Of you

Magic in the Classroom

I feel disillusioned, frustrated with the lack of time, with too much bureaucracy, with data, with constraints, and yet I’m still here. Why? I think I’m here because of the creativity teaching affords me, the relative autonomy I have to shape my course. If I were to start over, I wouldn’t enter the profession, but I’m not unhappy with my choice, either. I’m still enough of a champion of the public education system that when I get students telling me they want to go into teaching, I encourage the energetic ones, the hardworking ones, the compassionate ones… I don’t discourage them, respect them though I might. A big part of me remains idealistic and hopeful and even inspired in between periods of doubt and frustration. Amid the criticisms I have of our public education system and the worries I have for its future, there is still room for magic. The classroom, even one with filthy carpet and grey, institutional walls, and five more desks than there’s room for, making it difficult to move around with ease, can be a place where students learn and question and struggle and fail and try again and improve and succeed and laugh and play and converse. The classroom can be a place where ideas are shared and created
and debated. It can be a place where students find their voices, where they learn to use them with increased confidence and poise and ability. It can be a place where students feel comfortable and safe and able to be themselves, to take risks, to explore aspects of their personalities they wouldn’t explore elsewhere. The classroom is a space often filled with 30 minds and bodies that come together two or three times a week. There can be power in this coming together. There is something magnetic about the possibilities in these assemblies. What might be achieved tomorrow? What might happen next Tuesday during H block that will impact the life of the student in the back left-hand corner?

I have my students write and deliver spoken words in my grade 12 classes. My stronger students generally perform powerful pieces, but they’re often used to positive responses from audiences. I remember the student with a slacker’s reputation, from whom people expected very little, who got up and delivered a piece full of such raw emotion and honesty, he left half the students in tears. The response from the students in the class was genuine and generous and spontaneous and that moment happened in a classroom.

I remember leading students through an exercise in writing imagist poetry, and one activity called for them to tape a poem they had written to the wall. No names required. We all went around the “gallery” to read each other’s work, and I paused in front of one I felt was particularly strong. I drew the entire group’s attention to it. A student of course called out, “Who wrote that?” Although I recognised the handwriting, I didn’t respond, but glanced at the student who had, a boy who struggles in all his classes, who often has incompletes until the last couple of weeks in June when he hands in enough to get his 49.5%, and I saw his back get a little straighter. For the rest of the year, although he still put in minimal effort and chose not to complete a number of assignments, he did perk up whenever we discussed poetry, and would participate in these discussions, offering comments and suggestions with an enthusiasm he lacked in our discussions of other topics. Maybe next month I’ll be able to draw him into a
novel. Maybe not. But the more small successes I have with students, ("I’m actually reading this novel, Ms. Ediger"), the more I hang on to these maybes, the more I think they will happen again in the space I create with my students following every bell, despite the challenges. And it might even be that the challenges make the moments even more magical.

**Creative Planning**

I can spend hours thumbing through collections of literature trying to find poems and short stories and essays that relate to a new theme I want to explore with my students. I’ll stop off at the video store on the way home and wander through the aisles, looking for titles that might offer clips that would fit. I go home and eye my CD collection. And then I’m able to piece everything together and integrate reading and writing strategies – the content of the unit. I lay all my themes out in front of me and decide what skills I’ll focus on for each – what would fit best. I design the learning experiences for my students and in conjunction with my students. That is the core of my job. I have a multitude of resources at my fingertips and I consult them daily. They and my colleagues and the experts are my support. But ultimately, the final decision and implementation of what will happen in the classroom rests with me. If this goes, I’m not sure there would be enough reasons to stay: “When the right to make professional decisions – how to inform practice or what to choose as reading material – is denied, the human right to intellectual and academic freedom is denied as well” (Neilsen 76). If the job becomes less intellectually challenging than it is, it will become more difficult to do. Personality, voice and style are as important in teaching as they are in writing. Take that away, and teaching becomes a job, not an art, or a calling, or a profession.
Inspiration from Literature and Language

In addition to the more general teaching moments that inspire me to continue despite the tensions I feel frequently during the course of a teaching day, I’m also inspired by the subject area I teach. I believe what I teach to be critical: learning to write, to read more strategically, to make meaning. The more I consider how best to deliver lessons on writing, the more I learn about the art and craft of both writing and teaching. I consider myself a student of both, and my students know that they are often in some way part of my experiment for a particular lesson or idea. Writing is a strategy I use to help me to think through ideas or to make sense of something I’ve read. I want to equip my students with this tool. I don’t get tired of looking for better ways of helping students express themselves because after all, “Learning to write is a matter of learning to shatter the silences, of making meaning, of learning to learn” (Greene, Releasing 108).

The importance of teaching students how to write and speak and read and think with more skill and confidence humbles me. I will never know how to do this in the best way possible. I will always have things to learn. This reality also draws me to the teaching of English. There is no end of challenges. And it is at this point that Barrie Barrell’s argument that teaching is more art than craft brings a certain level of comfort. He suggests that “teaching conceptualised as an art form is not inherently good or bad. It does recognise, however, that teaching does not necessarily get easier with the passing of time; the work never catches up to the critical sensitivities of the thoughtful teacher” (119).

I still have not had that experience I dream of having, of arriving at the end of a year and looking back on one class, not even all seven, and saying I’m really pleased with how things went. There’s not a whole lot I would change. As it is, I have trouble even looking back sometimes. But I do. I’m happiest when I find things there I want to write about. The only problem is that this leads me back to the struggle I have with regards to time.
One afternoon two years ago, I was sitting in my Literature 12 class, listening to, enjoying, and evaluating student presentations on *Paradise Lost*. I was feeling somehow removed from the process, even though the presentations were powerful and meaningful and imaginative. I realised I wanted to be the one creating. Yes, I had created the assignment, and yes, I often do assignments alongside students, and yes, I'm a student at the university and have my own assignments to do, but I still felt a real desire to leave the responsibilities of teaching, especially of evaluating, and to play. These are depressing moments for me. I look back now and realise that I should have presented my own version of the assignment, and assessed whether or not the project even needed to be formally evaluated.

Some of my most uplifting moments come from a strategy I used first in a course taught by university professor Carl Leggo. We push the desks away and students sit in a circle and we take turns reading aloud a piece of writing. Students respond to each other’s work, and I don’t assign marks to anything or anyone. Students still get specific feedback, and motivation is high. One student remarked one year how powerful the pieces were and how he wished he had spent more time on his. But inspired teaching takes energy, and it’s sometimes easier to sit at the back of the room and watch once in a while, even when we know that participation will make us feel more satisfied and less overwhelmed. It’s like exercise. I tell myself I’ll get more energy if I go for that run, and I’ll feel less hungry to boot. And sometimes I lace up my runners, and sometimes I eat raspberry gelato.

**Constant Challenge**

Part of what I’ve found so far is that, for however much longer I teach, be it a year or tens of years, I still have a desire to improve the learning situation in my classroom.

*Learning Curves*

*Why do I ignore*
How nervous you feel about getting your N?
How you check your phone between every class
  Hoping, waiting for him to call
How you’re trying to figure out how to lie to your parents
  About this weekend’s party
  Maybe you’ll say you’re going to Sasha’s place for a sleepover
  Then you’ll have no curfew
  No questions to sidestep
  Less guilt
  Never no guilt
How you sweated through class the last week of May
  In a turtleneck
  To hide the hickey Justin Travis gave you
  At the house party last Friday night
  Where you fell down the stairs
  And uprooted the railing
  And went down on him
  Without protection
  And you’re nervous about going to the doctor
  And just as nervous not to
How you were caught skipping Biology
  And your teacher won’t let you
  Redo the test
  And so your 4.0 is now a 3.8
  And is there enough time to raise the grade to an A
  Before the next report card?
  Before UBC needs your grades for early entrance?
How your basketball coach got angry with you
  For missing the tournament
  “But it’s the play’s opening night”
  “Maybe, but people were cut from this team
  You have a responsibility to them
  Tryouts for the play were in December
  The team list was posted in November”
How you were just assigned groups for the Cold War project in History 12
  And the teacher put you with your ex
  Probably on purpose
How your friend has been increasingly introverted lately
  And has taken to writing morbid poetry
How you are tired of the juvenile name calling in the hall
  And how you long to be in a place
  Where people look beyond the next grad prank
How you had to laugh all through Monday’s lunch hour
  At the conversation
  Can you call it that
  About what your friends had to drink on the weekend
  “Where were you”
  “Babysitting”
  You lie
You'll have to lie to Mom and Dad again next weekend
Or you may not be asked where you were
But you ask yourself
Is this the place you want to be?
You're not ready to answer that yet
How your black and white visions of the world
Are colliding with the grey that is streaming
Toward you.
No one prepared you for this
And I expect you to leave your turmoil at the door
To separate parts of a sentence
When you are already disjointed enough
To live beside instead of inside language
To listen to my words more than to your own
I'll learn
I'll learn to give you the space
To explore your place
And to be yourself
In writing, in learning, in speaking
In being

At the beginning of my career, I couldn’t see clearly beyond the lessons, and it took a few years to realise, as bell hooks suggests, that “to teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin” (13). Again, my frustration with evaluation is largely based on the difficulty of marrying grades with an atmosphere of care. It seems to me that a kinder classroom would be one where numbers and letters were used for math and writing, rather than for reporting, but given today’s reality, my question must change. How might I evaluate ethically with regards to my professional responsibilities as well as my students? How do I transfer some of the work I’ve been doing with formative assessment, work that looks at evaluation as a learning tool, to summative assessment, so that all of the work I do evaluating has value for me and my students? This question still looms, unanswered. Maybe next year.

Lately, I’ve been zeroing in on the conversations that happen in my classroom because I find that I’ve been too content with allowing volunteers to dominate discussions – I haven’t
done as good a job at bringing in the voices of all students. And I know that “we need our
students in order to create a community of learners. We can’t operate without them” (Palmer
140). If I analyse the level of participation in my classes over the past few years, I’d have to say
that I’ve been successful in creating a community of learners, but that there were students in
each group who remained outside that community, or at least on its outskirts. While many
engaged in the activities, some went through the motions. It’s time to address that.

Part of what I’ve been trying to do recently is to put into place a different understanding
of what it means to listen, as put forth by Aoki. He asks us to move from listening carefully to
“a listening filled with care” (“Layered” 22). For me this means paying closer attention to
student reaction and responding accordingly. Before, I had a lesson, and apart from minor
changes I’d make to accommodate the need for more time, or a problem with an overhead
projector, or a gap in student learning I realised I needed to fill before proceeding, or a pause
for a teachable moment, I would still follow the lesson through to its conclusion. Herbert Kohl
observes that “most teachers pay more attention to the game and its rules or to the material used
than to the children playing” (61).

I find myself more attuned lately to students’ responses to the work we do together, and
as a result, the changes in my lessons are more substantial. I also make an effort to spend more
time conferencing, even if it’s only for one or two minutes, with each student individually
while they’re working. I sit down less now than I did earlier in my career. When my students
are writing, I don’t take that time to mark a set of tests, I wander, reading introductions, or
checking transitions between paragraphs, or the integration of quotes – whatever we might be
working on at the moment. I’m not suggesting this is best practice – I’m still searching for that
– and from one perspective I probably should take more advantage of the time students spend
writing to mark. Students would get their work back faster. As it is, I teach during the day, and
prepare future lessons/attend meetings/conference with students until about 5pm, so any
marking I do happens after that or on the weekends. The result? My turnaround time isn’t great, and research shows that students learn more from feedback if it’s timely. I would also need to spend less time in the evenings and on weekends working, which would lessen the resentment I sometimes feel about my job consuming too many hours each week. But I shouldn’t need to steal from the moments I spend working with students during the time set aside for English class in order to balance my work load. And there are benefits to what I do. I learn about what my students need, and this formative assessment allows me to identify common needs among small groups of students. I’ve been doing more pull-out sessions, going over how to avoid comma splices, for example, with the eight or so students who make this sentence error often, rather than with the entire class. I also begin the process, albeit in a limited way, of connecting with students on a more individual basis. I need to do much more of this, though. I’m certain a number of students in my class still feel as though they are passive participants. More time would help. This is becoming a mantra, I know, but without it, we won’t be able to keep improving our education system.

There are still better ways of using the time I do have in the classroom. The notion of agency is important to me, as I’ve said before. Even though I accept the responsibility of creating a classroom atmosphere where rich discussion can take place, I also feel that students share that responsibility, and that they need to be encouraged to accept it and act on it. I agree with bell hooks, who believes that it’s “crucial for [her] and every other student to be an active participant, not a passive consumer” (14). To that end, I’ve employed more discussion frameworks of late that require participation from everyone, but that allow lots of think time, as well. Protocols such as “Say Something” as outlined in Faye Brownlie’s book Grand conversations, thoughtful responses: A unique approach to literature circles require comments from all students, and I began the year, literally, by using them often, first by modelling, then with the whole class, then with small groups. We used one on the first day of class, with my
grade 8's, 11's, and 12's, and by the second day we were using them in small groups. I began all my courses with an emphasis on discussions, and I gave students tools to use to facilitate these.

Soon, my older students would begin by using a protocol, but their discussions would become spontaneous after the first few speakers. I did so much work with discussions in September that the October literature circles have never been more successful. My students work so much better in small groups this year than they ever have before, and as a result, more students are talking and being listened to more often. And I've been conscious to focus on valuing the listening. I'll praise any piggybacking I hear, where a student uses another student's comments as a springboard to further the discussion. I'll praise debate and respectful arguing. I find that students will often shy away from conflict, so I share with them how much I enjoy a good argument and try to demonstrate how to argue with ideas rather than with people.

The time I spent on how to have conversations has of course paid dividends in other areas, as well. Peer editing sessions have been much more fruitful this year than they have in the past. In fact, I was just about ready to give up on peer editing, but given that my students were working so well together this year, I thought I'd try it again and was happier with the result. When they read each other their pieces, I could tell by the comments that they were genuinely listening to each other's writing. Now there is a lot I need to do and to learn, but there has been improvement, and I have identified an area that was lacking in my teaching that I've been able to address. Kohl suggests: "What is essential is taking time for what the Germans call Sprache...a serious continuing discussion which allows people's voices to develop and be heard" (111). I focus a lot on the development of voice with my writing students. I will be focusing much more in whatever future I have in the classroom on developing voice in a broader sense with all my students.
In addition to simply developing voice, I’m also interested in the kind of voice students will develop, and in what kinds of discussions their voices will be used. Ted Aoki outlines the problems that arise when people argue for a child-centred curriculum versus a subject-centred curriculum. Often we argue between three types of curriculum: teacher-centred, subject-centred or student-centred. He argues that much of what happens happens in the in-between spaces:

For instance, we might begin to be more alert to where we are when we say “a child is interested” or “a teacher is interested.” So “to be interested” is to be in the inter-textual spaces of inter-faces, the places where “between’s” and “and’s” reside, the spaces where “and” is no mere conjoining word but moreso a place of difference, where something different can happen or be created, where whatever is created comes through as a voice that grows in the middle. This middle voice is the sound of the “interlude” (inter/ludos – to play), the voice of play in the midst of things – a playful singing in the midst of life. (“Child-Centred” 69)

I like the notion of “and” being a place of difference, a place where new meaning is formed. There are few greater thrills for an English teacher than when a student makes a connection between a novel and a poem and draws insight from that connection. I teach thematically in order to encourage those connections, but the spontaneous ones are most rewarding, because then I know that knowledge and understanding is being applied. This “and” also relates to Louise Rosenblatt’s reader response theory, that a new poem is created whenever a reader and a text come together. That’s exciting. I put a poetic text on the overhead and, assuming all the students actually read it, 30 poems are created in the room. Aoki’s idea is also daunting. Valuing meaning that is created in these in between spaces requires that teachers let go of certain expectations. One can never know what will arise from lessons where teachers
encourage students to make meaning. Teachers of course plan the lessons and have learning outcomes they’re trying to achieve over time, but these are loose enough to allow for genuine learning to take place, the kind of learning that is inspired by play, the kind of learning that happens more frequently in primary grades than in secondary school, accounting in part, likely, for the stark contrast between a first grader’s and a tenth-grader’s attitudes toward school. The teacher, the subject and the student are all important. Take one away, and you’re also taking away the possibility of more in between spaces. And so the voices I alluded to earlier, the voices I want to help my students develop, are ones that are interested and confident enough to create.

I remember being a student in a class where we would go over the answers to a worksheet by providing them, in turn, down one row and up the next. I suppose following such a lesson, a teacher could say that every student in her class spoke, but I would argue her voice was still the only one that resonated in that room that day. John Steinbeck writes passionately of one of his elementary school teachers:

She aroused us to shouting, bookwaving discussions. She had the noisiest class in the school and she didn’t even seem to know it. We could never stick to the subject, geometry or the chanted recitation of the memorised phyla. Our speculation ranged the world. (She did not tell but catalysed a burning desire to know). She breathed curiosity into us so that we brought in facts or truths shielded in our hands like captured fireflies.

(qtd. in Barrell 11)

Clearly she was someone who valued the in between spaces and was able to elicit genuine participation from her students.

This removal of (some) boundaries does require thought and maturity. I wouldn’t have been able to run my classes this way at the beginning of my career. Others may be
able to. I’m not suggesting that it’s something that requires years of training to achieve, only that my process was slower, and I haven’t arrived anywhere yet, not even at the place where I’ll be comfortable never to arrive anywhere. In the past couple of years, as I’ve been learning to listen more and to respond more actively to what I hear, I sometimes find myself puzzled about what may have taken place in the classroom. I’m reminded of a line from Jorgen Leth’s short film, “The Perfect Human”: “Today I experienced something that I hope to understand in a few days” (The Five Obstructions). There is an element of calm in that line. I don’t take things as personally as I used to, and gone are the days where I would go home and spend all night replaying something that happened in the classroom. I’ll still spend an hour or so stewing, perhaps, but after that, I am able to prepare that salmon casserole or answer Aunt Amy’s letter or scrapbook pictures from 2002 (I’m slowly catching up) or mark half a class set of essays. The dusting will still have to wait.

Last year, after a unit on power and ambition where we looked at a number of pieces of literature, among them Macbeth and The Crucible, I had my grade 11 students write a piece about power. One of my students handed in a plagiarised essay with an added, original paragraph at the end. Here’s the final line: “I have given you an essay on power and added a few things that make it my essay giving me the power and satisfaction that I’ve cheated you, but still followed the rules and did as you requested.” Now, of course, there were problems with his argument. He didn’t follow the rules because he didn’t write the paper himself. He also didn’t cheat successfully, because I didn’t accept the paper. Instead, I had him stay after class and lectured him on the ills of plagiarism. This was a bit of a different case, though. He had admitted at the end of the essay that he had plagiarised to prove a point, to explore the issue of power. I needed to honour that. So I gave him the opportunity to rewrite the paper, suggesting he explain more fully how plagiarising gave him a sense of power.
He began by explaining that “there are always ways for the little fish to fight against the big fish. Not by challenging their orders or commands but by following them in an unexpected fashion.” He suggested that he may have indeed “won” because he forced me to spend time looking for the stolen essay and most likely caused me stress. After all, it’s easier to simply mark a paper and hand it back than to find evidence of plagiarism, confront the student and deal with whatever paperwork a school may require in order to document the transgression. He even quoted lines I used in my lecture. I had admonished him for “wasting my time” and for “insulting my intelligence” and he had incorporated these quotations, successfully, I might add, into the body of his paper. 

I could have responded to his paper with anger; the tone of the paper is such that the administration would likely have supported such a response from me. It could have been taken as a blatant display of disrespect. But I was engaged by his argument and as I read, I noted evidence of real thought. He suggested that he could have written about how I had used my power for good by teaching him that plagiarism was wrong, but he decided that “a topic such as that would be the same as [his] announcing defeat. Whereas [his] pointing out how [he] gain[s] power by failing gives [him] a sense of pride and power; therefore, [he’s] turned the tables.” My goal with my grade elevens is to get them to push their thinking, and he did. So I congratulated him on that, noted where his arguments needed strengthening, and ended by saying, honestly, that this was the best piece of writing I’d seen from him all year.

I encourage my students to take risks; therefore I need to be prepared for the unexpected from time to time. The learning that takes place on the edge of boundaries is often powerful. In this case, the student was likely fully engaged in developing his argument, much more than he would be arguing for or against school uniforms or the legalisation of marijuana, for example. And he reminded me that I always have a choice in how I respond to students, and that my response could have made this issue into a
disciplinary one rather than an opportunity for more learning.

I also cannot “refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks” (hooks 21). I need to take risks myself and be honest with my students about when these risks don’t turn out well. When I look back on the my years in the classroom, the lessons that hang in the air long after the students have left their desks, six or seven of them forgetting, again, to push in their chairs, are ones where I’ve taken a risk. Part of this is perhaps because I’ve been more invested in these lessons. I give more of myself, and I monitor the reactions more closely. Lessons where I invite students to role-play fall into this category. There is much to be gained by full-class enactment strategies, but if students refuse to participate, then these fall flat. I also share my writing with my students prior to their first peer evaluation session, and the entire class critiques three or four of my pieces. In the strategy I use, borrowed from Pat Schneider’s book Writing along and with others, the author reads his or her piece aloud and then the others in the group respond to the writing, in essence engaging in a conversation about the writing in front of the author without the author participating. The author listens, makes notes, and at the end may comment, perhaps defending a decision, perhaps simply thanking everyone for their time, suggestions and interest. And so I stand in front of the classroom and listen as students discuss the relative merits of my work. This was uncomfortable the first time I did it, but now I enjoy it, and am rewarded with some excellent suggestions once in a while that I implement following the lesson. The more important result is that this modelling helps the small group peer sharing sessions that follow to run more smoothly. I’ll also share the writing I do in response to a writing practice prompt, especially when this writing is not special in any way. Many writing teachers will tell you that much of what we write in freewriting or inkshedding sessions is less than wonderful. I read mine aloud sometimes to give voice to that mediocrity. I don’t write
something poor on purpose, I’m simply honest about what I wrote and may demonstrate that in a page of writing, there may only be one line that I like, that may be the seed for a future piece, one that I’d spend more time crafting.

It doesn’t take long for me to realise that taking risks leads to effective lessons, but it does require more energy and active participation on the part of the teacher. I’ll often wax rhapsodic about the freedom more preparation time during the day would bring, and what my lessons could be, if only... After all, the lessons where I put myself out there don’t only last for that one class. There is the added advantage that when I take risks, I’m implicitly encouraging students to, as well. This improves class discussions, projects, and presentations. I was surprised one day when one of my students, a grade 10 student in an English 11 classroom no less, began a presentation on the psychology of violence by asking everyone to play a game of follow the leader. She led the students down the stairs and out the door and then began to skip. I was at the end of the line, and I worried as soon as I saw her start to skip, because there was a group of boys I feared wouldn’t participate at the risk of not appearing cool. After all, she hadn’t even waited until we were out of the line of sight of the students in the building before she began skipping. I might have walked or done something else equally dignified until I found refuge in the trees of the adjacent park. But they all skipped, and without any cajoling from me. And they followed her over the hill and across the bridge and down the slide and through the colourful tubes and over the swing, hopping first on their left and then their right feet, turning in circles on cue and returning to the class wondering what her topic could be. When she began to speak of the importance of playing outdoors to the healthy development of children, and to projects across North America devoted to the development of playground space in communities in the hope of curbing violence, I could see everyone in the room engrossed in her presentation. Afterwards, the very boys I was concerned about asked if we couldn’t start every class that way, that the fresh air and exercise put them in a better space to learn.
I need to move beyond the kind of risk taking I do in a couple of ways, though, in order to further improve my teaching. First of all, I need to do more of it. I’ve discussed a few lessons above, but I teach an average of three and a half lessons a day. There are times when a week will go by without my taking any significant risk. I also need to be willing to be even more vulnerable. Hemingway advises aspiring writers to “write hard and clear about what hurts.” I can take that advice into the classroom arena. I’m not suggesting I use it as a psychologist’s couch, but rather that I be honest about some of the concerns I have, even if these may be controversial. I commented on the lyric, “My generations will put it right / We’re not just making promises / That we know, we’ll never keep” from a Phil Collins’s song “Land of Confusion”. I asked the class if they felt that lyric was sincere, or was he suggesting the opposite. Is this idea of making things better for everyone really the struggle, or is the struggle actually more selfish? One student questioned what I was hinting at and I skirted the issue because it meant getting involved in a discussion of my political views and of ideologies. My response to her question was weak, and I look back on that moment with some regret. It was a Writing 12 class, so the students were mature, and here was an opportunity for me to frame a discussion on economic policy, and it would have been a perfect lead in to the next unit on non-fiction. I could have shared my opinion, something I know some teachers don’t do in hopes of remaining neutral. I don’t believe any person can be completely neutral; therefore, I like to arm my students with some knowledge of my views so that they are better able to read the comments I make. I’m careful to present both arguments to controversial discussions in my role as teacher, but I think it’s more dangerous to claim neutrality and then to overplay one side than to be honest about your views. Then, when presenting both views, you don’t need to worry as much about what you may be communicating non-verbally that may influence a student one way or the other. My goal is not to change students’ minds, but to inform, and more importantly, to help them learn how to become informed and then to make their own decisions.
But I know that I am a human being and am not neutral. It’s critical to know the views of the
author of any article or textbook, and the same applies to any lecturer or teacher. In any event,
this discussion on economic policy could have led to a short research assignment, and the
following class, we could have had a more informed discussion followed by a choice of writing
assignments: a political song, a letter to the editor, a persuasive essay, a persuasive speech, an
ad campaign, an interview. This or something else like this, essentially a class or two stemming
from a student comment that would have involved students in an authentic discussion and
debate and in a valuable writing exercise, was lost because I feared the discussion. I hadn’t
done my research and so could very well have exposed myself to arguments I couldn’t have
defeated. And the topic wasn’t safe. There would be disagreement. I would have to be careful
about how I monitored the discussion. This would take more effort than I had that day.

I’m also ashamed to say that I don’t challenge assumptions as much as I might.
Cameron Fahlman writes: “If a teacher does not take risks and attempt to demarginalise ideas
and peoples, he concedes to and embraces the paradigms associated with modernism” (83). I’m
careful not to challenge students too much. Too careful. I also need to stop myself from arguing
a position with a student and allow students to argue with other students. This is much more
powerful. In a recent discussion on whether American fast food outlets opening in developing
countries was a positive or negative addition to the landscape, I sat back, and most of my
arguments against this type of globalisation were made by students in the class, to much greater
effect than if I had taken on the students who were for this development. I was able to observe.
I offered arguments for both sides, ones that students missed, and was able to mediate the
discussion much better than if I had jumped in at the outset. Besides they’re the ones who need
the practice developing argument. I need to teach them how.

My belief in the need to be honest with my students about my views in order to better
equip them with the tools necessary to read any bias I might show relates to the need for all
teachers to be authentic and genuine in the classroom. The process of writing this paper has required me to reflect on my concerns with my profession, and also on what I value. The more I think about what I want to accomplish in my classroom, or about why I’m there, the clearer my objectives and purpose. This translates into more intentional lessons and into more cohesive courses overall. It also translates into a teacher more at peace with her situation, even if being at peace ultimately means accepting a situation that is at odds with her beliefs. Indeed, as Palmer says, “knowing myself is as crucial to good teaching as knowing my students and my subject” (2).
DO I STAY OR DO I GO?

I feel lost, disoriented, cautious, torn

Patriarchy or Romance

Maybe it has nothing to do with any kind of stance against a patriarchal society, my keeping my name. Maybe my sister’s right. Maybe I’m just not romantic enough. After all, I’m basically just carrying on the male name on my side. Some inroad.

Ediger is not reflective of my paternal grandmother’s experience, a Pole born to immigrant parents. Nor does it reflect the small-town Saskatchewan French-Canadian childhood that my maternal grandparents gave their children. It says nothing of the family leaving Southern England, passing through the United States but, loyal to the crown, making their way to a land where their neighbours would also know the words to “God Save the King”.

It isn’t even representative of my paternal grandfather. He wasn’t only his father. His mother was the only one he knew until he was an adult. She took him on the train to Siberia, where they buried his younger brother, and on the journey to Canada, to a farm in the prairies. She raised him while she waited the fifteen years it took her husband to join her. Ediger isn’t her name. It only passed through her. But I don’t know her story.

Her stories can never be guessed at. They cannot be inferred. How quickly we lose even the Shaw or the Bellefleur or the Weisner that at least allow us to locate women on maps—with an absolute sense of probability. All we have are the maiden names of the most recent generations—good for passwords for bank accounts but unable to even approach the name of the father of the father of the father of the father of the father of the father. Stories don’t go back that far.

His story continues because of a name. I am only one fraction—only one of an infinitely large fraction Ediger. And yet I am all Ediger. I keep this name, rather than relinquish it following my marriage, but remain unsatisfied with such a futile gesture. When my daughter is born, I ask that she have my name, but do not want an argument, and when I see hesitation on my husband’s face, drop the subject. I insist that because the last name is his, that the middle names stem from my side of the family, but know that these won’t last.

My great grandchildren may never hear Ediger, but they will know Kidston. It will linger longer, even in the female line. I will be a more silent part of future generations than my husband will, and I resent how this tradition silences me not only tomorrow, but also today. It is so entrenched in our culture that too much deviation from the norm would cause raised eyebrows and hushed conversations and accusations of feminism directed at me with the same distaste that accompanies sour milk. As it is, some members of our acquaintance address mail to Mrs. Hamish Kidston. Who is that? I leave it for my husband to open. There is only an extra “s” that separates this name from his. It’s too far removed from mine to even be recognisable.

All of this indignation, I remind myself for a single generation. I don’t deserve to be called a feminist, disguised though this compliment may be in insult. Perhaps I’m romantic after all.

As with my last name, where I take some action without really achieving anything, I talk a lot about changes I want to make in my teaching, follow through with many, and even notice how some have a positive impact on the learning that happens in my classroom and on
my level of satisfaction with the job I do, but I am still left with feelings of doubt. I'm not at peace in my career.

The dissatisfaction I feel towards my assessment and evaluation practices led me and a colleague to apply for a weeklong sabbatical offered by my district. Our goal was to wrestle with the following five questions:

1. How do we get students to write more?
2. How do we get students to read more?
3. How do we get students to move from process writing to demand writing?
4. How should we reflect the essential thinking piece necessary for everything in our program – how do we assess this? Do we need to?
5. How do we do this in a meaningful way within reporting periods/given time constraints?

Needless to say, after having spent two years mulling these questions over before even applying for the time, as well as a week devoted entirely to them and subsequent days putting together presentations and workshops on the work we did, we are of course left with some suggestions for improvements to our practice and more questions – no answers. The one question we did find the answer to, though, a question that was plaguing both of us, was whether or not we should continue teaching. In some ways, this was as significant as the assessment framework we developed for English Language Arts. We were both reenergised by the time we spent together reflecting on our practice and so titled the resulting presentation, “One more year”.

Near the end of our week together, we formulated some questions to help us assess, or at least reflect on what aspect of the process, if we do feel more satisfied as a result of the changes we plan to implement, we feel had the most impact. Would it be the conceptual
framework of our assessment, the curriculum map, the collaboration and processing time, the matching of our assessment tools with our framework, the decision to be intentional about using a limited number of assessment rubrics, our teaching strategies and which ones in particular, or simply clarity about all the above? Conversely, if we feel just as dissatisfied, why might that be? Lack of time (including prep time, class time, time with resources, time to mark, to reflect, etc.), lack of resources, problem with the conceptual framework, problem with the curriculum map, problem with the assessment tools, students’ ability and/or motivation, class size and composition, lack of follow-up support? The time we spent together was so valuable, we ended our presentation with some final questions: To what extent are teachers disempowered by not having the time to engage in this process? What is being lost by not enabling teachers to plan effectively? We also emphasised the need for time to continue the collaboration and ongoing assessment of this process and time to do quality performance assessment. Of course, when we presented our project to our district’s educational committee, we were cut off before we were able to ask these critical questions. With another year in us, though, perhaps we’ll be able to ask them yet.

And so after seven years of teaching, I really am year to year. I can’t see myself in the classroom 28 years from now. I can also see myself in the classroom 28 years from now looking back and saying “Ask me 28 years ago and I would have told you I wouldn’t be here.” My feelings change quickly, too. Just last week I was browsing through Kidsbooks in Vancouver, spending my usual hundred dollars on young adult fiction and picture books I want to use with my students, thrilled it was June, but knowing that come the end of August I’d be excited too, for different reasons. A couple of weeks before that I was looking seriously into the requirements of another career.

There are people genuinely upset about the current state and the future of our public education system, but there is little agency. The historian in David Blades’s parable, in looking
back at our present situation, "notes widespread discontent with schooling at the end of the 20th century, from curriculum developers to teachers to children and their families. Everyone knew the system needed changing, yet despite this impetus, the changes did not occur. Why?" (221-22). His answer is that there is no social action. Teachers complain about working and learning conditions in schools, but do not go on strike in order to demand change, or we do, but go back without achieving significant gains. People talk about how the environment needs to be protected but few are willing to stop using their cars, even with gas prices at the level they're at. The historian suggests that "what was needed...was a system-wide rebellion initiated by brave teachers who encouraged children to ask questions" (Blades 220). Furthermore, to be successful, this movement would have required children and young adults to have had the skills to think critically and to question effectively (Blades 218). Questions allow us to "challenge...the social structures that bind and define us...Questions are thus crucial to the survival of humaneness" (Blades 219).

I don't think it's a stretch to suggest that standardised tests are partly responsible for and certainly symbolise a darkening of our education system. Blades writes, again from the future, that "schools in the late 20th century and early 21st century encouraged students to leap to the sanctioned right answer, effectively policed by a testing mania that seemed to grip public education. The call to the correct answer considerably narrowed the vision of what else might be, limited what other questions might be posed, and failed to explore what opportunities might exist" (220). Luckily we don't know for sure what the future will bring, but even today, there are clear problems with testing that, though highlighted by expert after expert, don't seem to bother many people.

While I certainly have control over how I react to unsuccessful lessons and encounters with students, and while I can concern myself more with engaging students than with protecting myself from controversy, I have little chance of escaping the constraints of the
public school system. Noel Gough suggests that even the managers of education systems can be rendered powerless by them (48). So I will continue to question, to make mistakes, and to try to make my classroom as independent as I can for as long as I have the patience and perspective to work within the system. More than that, though, I must, if I believe in public education with as much passion as I profess to, continue to push for and to work towards better learning environments for teachers and students. Rather than lament about what is, “it may only be when we think of humane and liberating classrooms in which every learner is recognised and sustained in his or her struggle to learn how to learn that we can perceive the insufficiency of bureaucratised, uncaring schools. And it may be only then that we are moved to choose to repair or to renew” (Greene, Releasing 5). This is an interesting perspective. Perhaps those of us concerned with public education have yet to expect enough. Perhaps we need to quit trying to work within the constraints of the system, because this may indeed be lowering the bar so much that we’re not able to see what we need to see in order to make change. And “the starting point...is not out there – in the state boards, the school administration, political offices, or publishing houses – but in ourselves, what we say and do now with our students and with each other as professionals” (Neilsen 13). We are too “willing to let others define us, buy us, sell us, and consume us: we are willing to let government and business interests hold up any stick at all, and then we either use it on ourselves or walk away with a sigh because, well, they just don’t understand” (Neilsen 100).

I’ve mentioned a number of reasons for this response from the overwhelmed teacher who begins to feel despondent – time being the most important one. Many teachers feel that they have only so much energy and it should first be directed to the classroom. They espouse the following philosophy: “I would sooner teach than spend my energies helping a movement along and taking the hits that come with it” (Palmer 182). I agree some days. Other days, I think that continuing to advocate politically for education is as important: “Yet if I care about
teaching, I must care not only for my students but also for the conditions, inner and outer, that bear on the work teachers do” (Palmer 182). I need to care about current students as well as future students. We need to ensure the profession remains one that attracts vibrant, intelligent, thoughtful and energetic teachers. I’m tempted to say that the future of public education will be determined by how much the public decides it values the system. And I do think that’s the case. I also think that teachers can have an impact. We need to ask ourselves how much we value our profession and what are we willing to do to protect it.

So there is not enough time or resources or energy and I go to school everyday struggling with feelings of hypocrisy. There’s so much about the public school system I find problematic, and yet here I am, teaching within it. If I were to believe Parker Palmer, he’d say I was dealing well with these issues, because I’m not ignoring them: “If I do not fully live the tensions that come my way, those tensions do not disappear: they go underground and multiply. I may not know how to solve them, but by wrapping my life around them and trying to live out their resolution, I open myself to new possibilities and keep the tensions from tearing me apart” (86). I suppose one of the real benefits of living in and within the tension is that I don’t become complacent, and I continue to seek better ways of fulfilling the requirements of my job while at the same time staying true to my beliefs. Freire discusses this ongoing exploration: “Critical acceptance of my inconclusion necessarily immerses me in permanent search. What makes me hopeful is not so much the certainty of the find, but my movement in search. It’s not possible to search without hope, not even in solitude” (qtd. in Leggo, “Backyard” 142). His idea that searching necessitates hope helps me to make sense of how I’ve been feeling over the past couple of years. I’ve been frustrated with the movement toward more standardisation, where dialogue is only valued if there are charts and data to support arguments because I fear that the public school system is being eroded in our province, and that I will see it deteriorate over the course of my lifetime. Despite these feelings, I’ve also continued to search for better ways of
teaching, and this search has kept me feeling positive about my work. I don’t dread the mornings. I look forward to my classes, and Friere’s comment helps to explain why and how.

**Understanding teaching as a process**

I struggle to constantly improve my teaching, and I have in the past thought that there was a finish line somewhere, that the ridiculous hours I put in at the beginning of my career would result in my gathering together a skill set that would facilitate my teaching in the years to come. And they have. I of course teach with more confidence now than I did seven years ago, and my students are learning more. But I spend as much time now preparing and marking as I did in my first year teaching, it’s just that the time is spent differently. More effectively, I hope. It’s both depressing and encouraging to think of teaching in this way:

Much is to be gained if teaching can be conceptualised more as a work in progress than a finite ability. There are too many conceptions of teaching that believe and assume that teaching will be served and improved if only we can get the techniques “right”, if only we polish appropriate “teaching skills”. Teachers never reach a point where they can exclaim: “I now know how to teach biology, the sixth grade, or freshman English.” Rather, they struggle with the medium, looking for new ways of knowing, new ways of getting students inside the form, new examples, new ways of listening. (Barrell 116)

I’ve begun to realise this over the past couple of years, and it’s part of the reason I’m still in the classroom. It’s exciting to be involved in work that needs constantly to be renewed, re-examined, reviewed and revised. I’m working this year with a group of four other teachers, all teaching Humanities 8. We’ve each taught the course before, some for five or six years in a row, yet we start, not from scratch, but from the beginning when we get together on Saturday
morning to conceptualise the next unit. We share what we’ve done in the past and debate how best to proceed this time, given our change in focus, which in our case is the development of reading skills. We integrate some of the lessons and ideas we’ve already prepared, but we end up with something rich and new and most of all, thoughtful, by the end of the afternoon. We don’t often leave with materials ready to be copied, because we spend so much time discussing pedagogy, and haggling over what might seem like insignificant details to observers, but which are critical to the development of the program.

Even though this kind of planning takes time, it is, for me, what teaching is all about. I’m not teaching when I give my students a writing activity, even if it’s a fantastic one, if I haven’t thought about why I’m asking them to do the work, and how the activity fits within my broader objectives. I’m not teaching well if I haven’t identified the skills necessary to complete the task and thought about how to scaffold for students who will need the extra support. Collaboration with colleagues who are equally interested in refining their practice is indispensable because like any good editor, they offer a new set of eyes, and can often identify weaknesses in lessons that the author may overlook. They’re better able to read lessons or units with the eye of the audience.

I still don’t feel as though I’ve reached a state of equilibrium with teaching as a process, though. This may be because our culture values the product more, even though we hear lip service paid to the importance of the journey. We want our athletes to bring home medals from the Olympics and their journeys become stories only once they’ve succeeded. In English classes across North America, the writing process is often taught, and portfolio evaluation is used by some teachers so that the process becomes part of the grade. But in-class, demand writing still forms a large part of the summative evaluation of senior English classes, and the majority of the marks on British Columbia’s English 12 Provincial Exam come from demand writing, as well.
With teaching, even though I’ve come to honour the process, I still look for the increase in time I devote to process to bear fruit in terms of product. I don’t engage in the process for its own sake. My ultimate goal is to find the way to best teach students how to read, to write, to think, and to learn. I’m not yet satisfied with working towards that goal. And perhaps part of my frustration with teaching comes from my ability to only acknowledge rather than to fully espouse this truth:

If life dwells in an original difficulty, an original ambiguity that cannot be mastered but only lived with well, the pursuit of such mastery can only lead to immobility or exhaustion – it does not lead to understanding human life – as lived in a deep way. Life as something to be mastered seems to deny what we already know about being alive. A hermeneutic notion of understanding is centred on the dispossession of understanding from its methodical, prepared self-security. It returns inquiry in education to the original, serious, and difficult interpretive play in which we live our lives together with children; it returns inquiry to the need and possibility of true conversation. (Jardine, “Reflections” 124)

I value process, but not nearly as much as I do the final product. I hide behind the idea that the better the process the better the product and while there may be truth to this, I think I also say this to keep from having to or feeling the need to change my practice to include an evaluation of the process.

In my personal life, too, I struggle at times to find pleasure in the process. I want to enjoy running, but I don’t. I run because it’s the most efficient exercise and I want to be able to work out without spending time going to the gym; I want to be able to step out my door and start my watch immediately. I take no pleasure in the view, or in the peace, or in the time to think, or in the rhythm. I run, and hate every minute of it, because I want to lose weight. I’m
not like this with everything. I enjoy the time I spend flipping through cookbooks for ideas for a menu, grocery shopping and preparing the food, in addition to serving it to guests or eating it myself. I have as much fun with the preparations for a celebration as I do with the celebration itself, but overall, I certainly have not reached a state of Zen in any part of my life.

I began teaching with a good knowledge of my subject, and learned over time to make more of an effort to get to know my students and to give them more of a voice. Then I started implementing more thoughtful and effective strategies. These are the how to's of teaching, and "technique is what teachers use until the real teacher arrives" (Palmer 5). I haven't arrived yet, but the process of considering and contemplating my career has certainly helped. I've attempted to author my experience, and in so doing, have perhaps gained some confidence and with that, authority:

External tools of power have occasional utility in teaching, but they are no substitute for authority, the authority that comes from the teacher's inner life. The clue is in the word itself, which has author at its core. Authority is granted to people who are perceived as authoring their own words, their own actions, their own lives, rather than playing a scripted role at great remove from their own hearts. When teachers depend on the coercive powers of law or technique, they have no authority at all. (Palmer 33) Polonius says famously in Shakespeare's Hamlet, "To thine own self be true" (1.3.78). The problem is that this is at times made difficult when your beliefs cannot be acted on because of an inflexible system.

Teaching as something to be mastered seems to deny what I've learned about teaching over the course of my career, short though it has been. The process of writing this paper and of reading and thinking and dialoguing about teaching brings me closer to a full welcoming of the struggle I've attempted to articulate not as something that needs to be resolved, but as
something that will continue for as long as I teach. Indeed, once I don’t feel the struggle, I
don’t be teaching anymore.

Maxine Greene “finds the very effort to shape the materials of lived experience into
narrative to be a source of meaning making” (Releasing 5). It’s true that this exercise has
allowed me to come closer to understanding that I need to view teaching as a process in order
to ever find peace in my career, but am I simply talking myself into something that I don’t fully
embrace? I still feel as though when I’m in the process I’m searching, and this implies that
there is something out there that can be found and that the game will then be over.

Another explanation of how I can remain hopeful and engaged amid my many questions
and concerns comes from Palmer: “If a work is mine to do, it will make me glad over the long
haul, despite the difficult days. Even the difficult days will ultimately gladden me, because they
pose the kinds of problems that can help me grow in a work if it is truly mine” (30). I am a
teacher. It’s what I want to do. Sometimes.

And so here I am, at the end of what is essentially an examination of my feelings about
teaching, about the public education system in British Columbia and my place within it.
Someone asked me the other day what the conclusion was to this paper I’d been working on
and I felt sheepish, like somehow I was being a fraud. I don’t really have one, after all. All I
can say is that while I’m not fully comfortable with accepting that teaching is a process, I am
aware that that’s what I need to learn to do in order to feel more at peace with teaching. I need
to continue to search for answers, but also to accept that I won’t find all of them…ever. I need
to continue to identify the tensions that teaching creates for me and live within these, searching
for ways out but knowing that I won’t find them. What I’ve been doing is “paying attention to
my practice of paying attention and not knowing” (Oberg 123), and as long as I can attend with
care, I will be a teacher, inside or outside of the classroom.
Works Cited


---. "The Child-Centred Curriculum: Where Is the Social in Pedocentricism?"


