

**MY CLASSROOM AS MY KITCHEN:  
ATTENDING TO THE CONVERSATIONS WITHIN**

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## **Dedication**

To my husband—who enthusiastically supports my continuing quest for vision  
yet keeps me grounded to the land and place we both love.

To my sons—whose very differences and range of extraordinary talents remind  
me of the possibilities inspired by place.

To the friends and colleagues who lied and said I wasn't too old.

## Abstract

It seems all too obvious that most people find meaning through the conversations they have with others. Yet, the degree to which we have explored the importance of conversation in our classrooms seems minor compared to the role that it plays in the daily life of most teachers and their students. The graduate project, *My Classroom as My Kitchen: Attending to the Conversations Within*, considers the place of conversation relative to student learning and teacher-student engagement and does so using qualitative life writing research in the form of narrative interpretive inquiry, generated in the process of action research. The author weaves together a personal métissage “of place, space, memory and history” (Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, & Leggo, 2009, p. 9), braiding her own creative non-fiction writing with that of her students in a Grade 12 English Language Arts classroom in rural Alberta. The combination of writing voices and genres (journal, memoir, poetry) creates a narrative whole, an interpersonal conversation that reflects the tangled interplay of many current educational conversations. As such, the project considers curriculum theory based on the work of researchers such as Ted Aoki, Cynthia Chambers, Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, Leah Fowler, Carl Leggo, Erika Hasebe-Ludt, and William Pinar. The result is a project that considers the importance of place, family, and conversation as the educational community struggles to create an environment that encourages thoughtful, authentic learning.

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## Table of Contents

Dedication .....	iii
Abstract .....	iv
Acknowledgements .....	v
Table of Contents .....	vi
List of Figures .....	viii
A Place for the Spirit of Trust .....	1
Writing My World .....	7
What Others Have Said .....	9
Searching for Clarity: My Vision Quest .....	13
Research Questions .....	13
Ground Truth .....	23
Method as Complicated Conversation .....	36
A Place for Story: Interpretations and Insights .....	42
A Returning Teacher Regaining Memory .....	42
The Students Speak Out .....	50
This Park Has Snakes .....	56
Life as Lesson .....	64
I Believe .....	68
I Am .....	70
A Time to Listen: Reflecting on What I Have Heard .....	83
References .....	88
Appendices .....	94

Appendix A: Student and Parent Consent Form.....	93
Appendix B: Student Survey .....	95

## List of Figures

Figure

1. Engagement photograph of great-grandmother Christina Morrison..... 30
2. The Backwards Design Process as Action Research ..... 36

## A Place for the Spirit of Trust

### Remembering

He was born in a shack  
along the Milky River  
back when the first of the newcomers  
were making new stories

his family picnicked on lard sandwiches and boiled eggs  
by the banks  
of this sleepy river  
used it to water summer gardens  
bathe the babies  
keep the cattle close  
even skate on slow winter days

the people on this stretch  
were named the River Rats  
bonded  
with each other  
with the strange coulee landscape  
they now called home

carved their names in sandrocks  
from the barn now dancehall  
at Howard Leslie's place

to the Verdigris coulee  
alongside ancient writings on stone  
  
fading signatures  
know no race  
are reminders of past travelers  
perhaps born in a shack  
now being remembered by community  
enough to fill a civic center  
today a church  
enough to run out of egg sandwiches  
though never coffee  
  
enough to wonder how  
an ordinary river rat  
could touch so many  
just because he listened like he cared  
and loved to tell old stories

Recently I participated in an exercise that asked me to create my ideal classroom space. Instead of a desk, the workspace of my dreams resembled the large island in my kitchen with a surrounding dropped bench complete with stools facing inwards in a semi-circle. I envisioned myself working at the island surrounded by students engaged in learning and conversation. It struck me then that my teaching style is very much as I function in my kitchen in my remote, rural farm community. At home, during the

preparation of a family meal, I am usually surrounded by the conversations of those waiting to be fed. The interactions between the participants in the kitchen as we prepare to share a meal are often more important than the food itself. While we all require food to survive, there are many possibilities for the preparation and serving that go far beyond simply meeting a basic need. And just as all students are mandated to attend school, the success of the learning experience itself also can vary dramatically. The degree to which a level of camaraderie is established in the kitchen area directly impacts the perceived success of the final event, despite the quality of the food itself. Camaraderie is defined as “a spirit of familiarity and trust existing between friends” (Collins English Dictionary, 2011). This spirit of trust often grows in the kitchen as a result of fellowship created through conversation.

Interestingly, camaraderie originates from the 16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish word *camarada*, defined as a group of soldiers billeted together (Collins English Dictionary, 2011). Students are not unlike soldiers, lined daily in rows, controlled by bells and authority figures. This common bond creates a rapport by virtue of the fact the students share the experience of being a student. And, in the school I will be discussing, there are female elite hockey players who are actually billeted together, and like the Spanish comrades, develop a strong group loyalty and sense of companionship by virtue of that experience alone. But, my kitchen guests have been invited and the good fellowship created is one willingly fostered, if even through simple politeness. While my students have clearly developed bonds amongst themselves, my role as teacher is that of a host who will bring all the groups together, over the metaphoric kitchen table, in companionship that may not otherwise exist. And, as a host, I must make everyone feel

welcome to the degree to which they can build a spirit of trust together, and with me. My interactions with students have taught me it is often the conversations during our shared time together that are remembered long after the dishes have been put away.

For instance, my students report anecdotally that they remember few details about what concepts they were taught in previous years but have precise evidence regarding the relationship they have had with other teachers. It is my contention that relationships are formed partly on the basis of engaging in conversation-as-story not unlike a tradition Chambers (2003) describes as particular to the Dogrib elders who used story to teach. I believe my classroom space has evolved into a place of learning that has many of the characteristics of the family kitchens in my southern Alberta community that was also a special place to the First Nations people long before the settlers arrived. I am within easy walking distance to the Writing-on-Stone Park, named for the stories written on stone by those visiting this sacred spot. Walking through the sandstones lining the river, the wind whistles through the rocks and if you listen closely you can hear the whispers of an old storyteller. When the settlers came to this remote, almost uninhabitable land they learned about the land and each other through storied conversation, often at gatherings involving food. Such celebrations of storytelling with First Nations people continue to be a regular tradition at the park, now renamed *Áísínai'pi*. Yet, while I honor the tradition of the First Nations storytellers who were here long before me, I am aware I now occupy a place that once belonged to everyone. Such tension is a part of the conversations with my students as we try and explore the nature of this particular place and the implications for understanding the larger world.

Much of the ambience created in our family kitchen is because of the beautiful place it occupies on the home quarter of three generations of ranchers whose ancestor once squatted, patiently waiting to make his claim on the banks of the Milk River at the base of what the settlers named the Sweetgrass Hills. The stories of my husband's family are also the stories of many of my rural students and our shared experience of this history creates a bond, especially as we share these stories with newcomers to the classrooms of our place. And here in this rural community it is the kitchen that is the center of almost all social events. It is the place people gather for morning and afternoon coffee breaks, often even into mealtime. It is over the kitchen table and around the island counter that we share stories about what has happened, how we have responded, what we plan for the future. This is a "lived-curriculum" (Aoki, 1993/2005) where we learn about each other and how our lives are intertwined. When neighbors die the immediate response is to create comfort food to take to the survivors for a visit and a cry, in the kitchen. So, the conversations within my kitchen and by extension, in my classroom are often about the life we are experiencing just beyond the many windows barely holding us in. It is the kitchen where we are most comfortable because this is by nature a place of relational activity. For most people in this farming and ranching community the preferred place is outdoors and the kitchen is the room both physically and metaphorically closest to being outside. It is usually the first room after the porch where the newborn calves are warmed-up and it is the room where the window looks towards the barn and more trouble brewing. Many of my students are products of this environment. They first learned in the kitchen of their family home, listening to the neighbors, watching for the school bus, waiting for the oven timer to ring. There is a sense of family that lives in the rural

kitchen like no other room in the house. This sense of family is an elusive thing to define but I believe it is linked to an ability to engage in meaningful conversation, which includes sharing stories about everyday occurrences in everyday lives, allowing people to explore who they are *becoming*.

As an English language arts teacher and student, I have always used story, in the more traditional sense of the term *literature*, as a way of knowing, healing, and learning. After all, it is through the exploration of other people's stories, both real and fictional, that we come to know human nature. This is central to the curriculum of humanities but the literary texts normally used for teaching are still somewhat removed from the experiences of my students and myself. Until recently, I believe I have underestimated the degree to which I integrate my own life stories as part of my instructional strategies. Many times I have used stories about my own personal experiences to illustrate a concept I am trying to teach in a lesson. Often stories that retell a teaching experience become a poem or a short story in the learning journal I keep. That I am compelled to write is not surprising for a student of English but I believe the content and forms of my writing may be useful research. By exploring and defining my use of conversation in the classroom I may learn more about the role of such exchanges between my students and their teacher, and how this may impact student engagement and learning. The teaching profession is ultimately often a "complicated conversation" (Pinar, 2006) amongst teachers, students, community, and members of the school system itself. My writing reveals a preoccupation with two simple notions. Listen to what others are saying. Engage in conversation. Things I do both in my kitchen and in my classroom.

## Writing My World

It seems all too obvious that most people find meaning through the conversations they have with others. Yet, the degree to which education scholars have explored the importance of conversation in classrooms seems inconsistent in relation to the important role that it plays in the daily life of most teachers. The intent of this project is to demonstrate the significance of the conversations I have had as a teacher with my students, as a teacher remembering my life, and through my written observations of the interactions I have had within my school. Together these observations form a body of work that falls within the approach of action research. I use the term action research as defined by Holly, Arhar, & Kasten (2005) in that such research “is conducted mainly by insiders (practitioners)...has an explicit value orientation and doesn’t espouse objectivity in the traditional sense...is geared toward the improvement of the practitioner-researcher as well as practice...is self-critical inquiry” (p. 31). The observations themselves are written in a variety of forms: poetry, memoir, story, and excerpts from my professional learning journal. Finally, I describe my experiences of teaching, learning, and living and the students’ own experiences of learning, teaching, and living in an integrated text that “combine[s] fragments of this life writing into braided texts called *métissage*” (Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009, p. 35).

I was first introduced to the term life writing in June 2008 when Erika Hasebe-Ludt explained what her Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council grant was investigating as she offered to have me join the team as a new graduate student and practicing teacher. It was then I started a journal documenting my observations as a teacher returning to the classroom after a two-year absence while on secondment at the

University of Lethbridge. Now, over two years later, even a cursory glance at the writing reveals much about my teaching style. As mentioned, like most teachers I often use personal stories to illustrate curriculum connections but I underestimated how often these storied asides turn into conversations with my students. Like Miller (2005), I have come to realize “there are a few moments of clearness and freedom in which I may reveal parts of myself that I typically hide...the interaction and exchanges with my students enable me (often, not always) to respond, to react, to create” (p. 70). Subsequently I often use these conversations to inform my future teaching as I consider what I have learned about my students’ needs through our storied exchanges. The interplay is in itself part of my methodology as I engage in hermeneutic conversation-as-inquiry that considers what is happening in my classroom through my written observations—internal conversations, in fact. Together this qualitative interpretive inquiry considers the importance of conversation for teaching and teachers.

Conversation also implies an exchange with at least one other person therefore choices must be made with respect to the voice one chooses in an effort to engage the other. The matters of how, and what one speaks about, in the course of any conversation are critical to consider in the teaching profession. Integral to this project is the use of my own life writing both as it has been shared with my students and as it has informed me relative to the teacher I have become. By including samples of poetry, classroom journal, and memoir I demonstrate the voices I have chosen to speak my stories with. My choice of *voices* is central to the research because it will impact how others *hear* and who will “pay attention enough to listen” (Chambers, 2003, p. 107) and, perhaps, even learn. Finally, the results of my project will then impact how I understand my own place as I

live out my curriculum as classroom and kitchen. This, by extension, may also inform others as they consider the challenges facing educators as they seek to engage twenty-first century learners whose access to technology is redefining the way we understand communication, conversation and literacy.

### **What Others Have Said**

Chamber's essay "On Being a Disciple of Memoir" (2003) beautifully demonstrates the power of narrative (story) to uncover what Fowler (2006) identifies as difficulties (p. 8) when we "talk" about curriculum in an ever-changing educational landscape. The act of walking the coulee landscape to discover old stories is reinforced by the recounting of the author's own memories as she invites the reader to listen and learn through the art of narrative. Like the coyote, who tracks her movements as the writer walks through the coulee, students of curriculum are encouraged to track their basic assumptions about curriculum through the discipline of uncovering and untangling memory in order to find "one good story" (p.109) to share with another in a conversation about curriculum that really gets at what Aoki names the "in-between" issues (as cited in Hasebe-Ludt & Hurren, 2003, p. xv) affecting us daily in education, in ways that can't help but be personal.

The personal nature of interchange between people is taken up by Deleuze in his exchange with Parnet entitled, "A Conversation: What is it? What is it for?" (Deleuze & Parnet, 2002). Here he explains, "Questions are generally aimed at a future (or a past)...during this time, while you turn in circles among these questions, there are becomings which are silently at work...Becomings belong to geography, they are orientations, directions, entries, exits" (p. 2). The concept of becoming is integral to the

physical and psychological place we occupy as students and teachers and it suggests that the questions and answers are less important than what happens in the middle of the conversation. So, as Deleuze explains, “as someone becomes, what he is becoming changes as much as he does himself” (p. 2). Thus, conversation is merely a vehicle for change or “simply the outline of a becoming” (p. 2). And knowledge becomes less about “the terms or the elements, but what there is ‘between’ the between, a set of relations which are not separable from each other. Every multiplicity grows from the middle, like the blade of grass or the rhizome” (p. viii). It is the act of becoming, both as teacher and as student that I hope to shed light on in the course of this project.

In her essay Chambers (2003) remembers the “Dogrib elders who knew stories that took several days and nights to tell” (p. 107) and points out that these storytellers required audiences “who could still listen for that long...who cared enough to remember” (p. 107). This storied telling is the way knowledge-born-of-experience from elders was passed along. This example of conversation-as-story requires both a teller and a listener and implies a respect for both the process and the people. The importance of this format is that each member of the “audience” will respond, relate, and remember in ways most appropriate to their context while still sharing in a collective experience that honors a person and their understanding of what it means to be alive and human at that point in time. This is not unlike the curriculum of English Language Arts (ELA) that emphasizes the notion of empathy and the importance of listening as a sign of respect and caring so that we might better understand that difference is unavoidable and that the reasons we differ is an educational goal worth investing in.

Not only is story a way of understanding what has happened but as Smith (2008) discusses, it is also a precondition to understanding the “*how we got into such a condition*” (p. 1) and by implication how we will now proceed. Smith further clarifies by referring to the Taoism notion of Way as a practice that “leads to an awareness of how the smallest details of life play into the largest consequences or effects” (p. 3). This attention to detail is implicit for those engaging in meaningful conversation. Related to education, Smith’s understanding of Way asks us to “shift attention away from concepts and forms of rationality about which we may argue and debate, and invites us to consider the very manner of our living” (p. 2).

Likewise, the work of Aoki (1992/2005) asks us to pay attention to the “humanness that lies at the core of what education is” (p. 188) in part by being attentive listeners. He reminds us “certain voices become silent...beckon these voices to speak to us, particularly the silent ones, so that we may awaken to the truer sense of teaching that likely stirs within each of us” (p. 188). So, for Aoki (1996/2005) it is very important to remember that when we talk about curriculum, “let us speak of live(d) curriculum as a situated image, not of an abstract classroom but of a concretely situated live classroom” (p. 419). It is my contention that such a classroom implies a space where meaningful conversation is central to creating what Aoki describes as “a place of ingathering and belonging, where the indwelling of teachers and students is made possible by the presence of care that each has for the other” (p. 189).

In the conclusion of *Creative Expression, Creative Education: Creativity as a Primary Rationale for Education* (Kelly & Leggo, 2008), Leggo reminds the reader, “we are all creative in diverse and delightful ways, but creative teaching, learning, and living

are still daily and lifelong practices that require attention and devotion” (p. 255). Chambers (2003) might call this discipline. Both liken the creative process to a long walk, implying it may be time for scholarship that considers the notion of a journey we are “becoming” along. The cyclical nature of knowing through interactions with our physical and social environment suggests there can be no final resolution to a single question. Instead, many would argue that the students of this century require a curriculum that encourages innovative, creative thoughtfulness. This will require discipline and creative courage, especially on the part of the teachers who are charged with the important task of over-seeing this educational process. Leggo (2008) specifically identifies the “need to own our writing” (p. 240) in order to begin “to live poetically, to live with the spirit of creativity, to call the Muses into our daily experiences of living and learning” (p. 238).

I am reminded of the importance of listening to internal spirits by virtue of the place I now live. The provincial park that is so close to my home is a sacred place for the First Nations people. It was here, according to some (Barry, 1991), that young men would fast for days under the hot prairie sun as they searched for vision in dreams that would guide them in their future living. “The vision-quest was part of a general pursuit of magical and spiritual efficacy in dealing with the uncertainties of life...for there is a mystic of some degree in every man” (p. 26). The discipline and courage required for such a quest was an important aspect of the experience because the single-mindedness required speaks to a kind of devotion where “becomings” became possible. It is in this spirit, hopefully with even a portion of the courage and discipline of the dreamers, I, too, seek a Muse and a vision.

## Searching for Clarity: My Vision Quest

### Research Questions

In order to engage in this research project, the first consideration is an exploration of what the term conversation, especially in the educational context, really means. Deleuze and Parnet (2002) wrote about the concept of a line not passing from one point to another but “passing between the points, ceaselessly bifurcating and diverging” (p. viii) to the point they “become entangled, connect, bifurcate, avoid or fail to avoid the foci” (p. viii). Deleuze and Parnet describe these “becomings” as the manner in which conversation occurs between two people. The organization of conversation is usually described as someone asking a question, someone else replying but eventually, if the conversation engages, these divisions become “unattributable to individuals, since they could not be immersed in it without changing qualitatively” (p. x). Deleuze was actually speaking about the writing of his book *Dialogues II* (2002) with co-author Parnet, and in the process he makes important connections about how the act of conversing is very much like the act of writing together. He likens this to a quote by Miller, “The grass grows between...it is overflowing” (Miller, as cited in Deleuze & Parent, 2002, p. x) and in the act of spilling over conversation takes on a kind of life of its own. Deleuze’s own explanation of conversing suggests a sharing of ideas that grow from the very act of being exchanged so that they eventually must interrupt each other in a way that makes it difficult to remember where the original ideas even began. This growing of ideas, as a product of conversation is an essential understanding when considering the importance of both conversation and group work in today’s classroom. Engaging in conversation creates new knowledge.

The connection Deleuze makes between conversation and writing is also noteworthy in terms of this project. I am participating in conversation by the very act of creating this text. Within this document I hope to engage my audience in an exploration, even a dialogue, that attempts to consider ways that both my ELA students and myself create meaning through what Deleuze and Parnet describe as, “simply the outline of becoming” (p. 2), producing life writing as a result of and in an effort to create our own conversation. As Aadlandsvik (2007) explains it, “In a rich country it is more meaningful to develop the concept of learning *to be* rather than learning *to have even more*” (p. 667). And what is learning if not the act of becoming, of orientating oneself to the world, of learning how to enter, and perhaps most importantly, how to leave? Because, as Aadlandsvik (2007) reminds us, “We live alone, we die alone—and we write alone. But a journey that is not *shared* is a poorer one. Reading and listening to the texts of other people enlarges our world, and sometimes these activities show us alternate worlds” (p. 670).

Of particular importance relative to this discussion is the concept of fluidity as integral to understanding conversation as becoming because, “What matters on a path, what matters on a line, is always the middle not the beginning or the end” (Deleuze & Parnet, 2002, p. 28). Again we are reminded of Deleuze and Parnet’s concept of conversation as rhizome and the fact that grass always grows from the middle and between the cement blocks. Grass is also elegant in its simplicity, in its ability to “ceaselessly renew...transform” (Deleuze & Parnet, 2002, p. 29). As Deleuze and Parnet put it,

In becoming there is no past nor future, not even present, there is no history. In becoming it is, rather, a matter of involuting; it's neither regression or [sic] progression. To become is more and more restrained, more and more simple, more and more deserted and for that very reason populated... To involute is to have an increasingly simple, economical, restrained step. (p. 29)

This is counterintuitive in our educational environment where curriculum outcomes for each grade number in the hundreds and where learning is measured in terms of summative assessment, signifying a completion, a finish, rather than an on-going process.

Deleuze and Parnet further explain the importance of the matter of involuting by comparing the process to cooking. Parnet, in particular, speaks “against evolutive cooking, which always adds something more, against regressive cooking which returns to primary elements” (p. 29), suggesting the preferred middle ground, which she is very clear is not the same as average (p. 30). Involute cooking, which she likens to a kind of elegance, is compared to writing sobriety that is the opposite of overdose and “which is neither the end nor the beginning of something” (p. 29). Here again, the actual narrative dialogue between Deleuze and Parnet underscores a relationship between this involute dimension and the act of being between as a be/coming that is mimicked in the most elemental of human activities: conversation and cooking.

The combination of such elemental actions of speaking and eating *grow* into a powerful, but subtle, space where ideas may evolve partly as a result of the atmosphere created *while* eating and engaging in conversation. And it is the act of writing about these occasions that allows other strangers to witness life's simple though profound encounters as each “becomes” as a result of creative interaction. Paradoxically, writers

are encouraged to “create extraordinary words, on the condition that they be put to the most ordinary use and that the entity they designate be made to exist in the same way as the most common object” (p. 3). As I hear it, such advice translates into a simple concept: Live a balanced life and share what you have learned. Not only would I agree, but also this is how I have come to understand the general philosophy of the residents in the community where I live and teach.

The idea of conversation as an act of finding one’s place between several discrete peoples, places, or ideas is taken up in the work of Aoki (1991/2005). This in-between place is a place of tension because it must by nature recognize an “other.” This may well be the most important role of conversation in our classrooms today: To provide an avenue for conversation is to create a place where students must resolve the inherent tensions between themselves and the “other” that will always exist. To build on Deleuze and Parnet’s (2002) concept of “becoming” the act of resolving tension is the blade that will become a lawn of empathy. And, like a favorite poet of many of my students, Shel Silverstein (1974), writes:

Yes we'll walk with a walk that is measured and slow,  
And we'll go where the chalk-white arrows go,  
For the children, they mark, and the children, they know  
The place where the sidewalk ends. (p. 65)

It is our students, the children, who best understand the tensions that are present, to some degree, in all classrooms, and it is only through conversation with students that these tensions will be understood. We must allow our students to point us in the right direction in order to find that place where “the grass grows soft and white” (p. 65).

Yet the role of education as a venue for conversation that moves towards resolving inherent tension is not clearly defined within the mandated curriculum, either the explicit or implicit one (Lewis & Tupper, 2009, p. 115). As Smith (2003) reminds us, “Living in-between can be exasperating, both for oneself and others, especially in a task-orientated, performance-driven culture like ours” (p. xvi). Smith’s concern regarding the danger of polarity in our post 9-11 world intensifies academic pressure to seek an understanding of the benefits of living in a world where “the truth of in-betweenness” (p. xvii) rests upon an acknowledgment that we all live in a shared and limited space. The difficulty and the inherent hopefulness of this perspective is best explained in Smith’s (2003) own words:

“Are we there yet?” is a question coming not just from the back seat of childhood. It seems to speak most profoundly of our human yearning for a place that we might secure forever and call home. Most of the time it seems just out of reach, just around the corner, a kind of an invitation to find our deepest human dignity not in security, but in openness and in generosity, indeed, in-between, in the *now* time between past and future, and in *this* place, which often seems neither here nor there, but which can only be the real place for now. (p. xvii)

Really the discussion is one of product versus process. If our educational system is based on the concept of discrete outcomes, measurable and attainable, then the matter of embracing in-betweenness as an important pedagogical place to foster human dignity and ultimately empathy is a problematic position for teachers who are being asked to be accountable to the standards above all else. The conversations around process and product in my high school workplace often consider the process of learning as necessary

steps towards achieving a measureable degree of understanding based on the curricular outcomes, thus product.

The understanding of conversation as the beginnings of a place where ideas may grow between random cement blocks is more than an educational definition to underscore the exploration of a position. It is a pedagogical stance, a chalk-like sidewalk drawing, even a potential problem because such conversation questions the norm--and everyone may not be ready to listen.

So the answer to the question, “Are we there yet?” may thankfully remain, “Not yet.” There still may be time for students, their teachers, and their communities, to ask, to discuss the possibilities, to reconsider where we have already been and we will do so in the safe and simple places where the silence in-between the dialogue is a place of learning.

And while we continue to listen for some of these important understandings, a second important question comes to mind. Why do I believe conversation is an important learning strategy?

Like Deleuze’s introduction to the way he defines conversation, Fulford (1999) also defines narrative as story with “shape, outlines, limits; an experience [that] blurs at the edges and tends to merge imperceptibly with related experiences” (p. 4). Story, then, is a form that conversation may take. Narrative as storytelling involves both a teller and an audience and, when effective, can engage and move both to action. As Fulford puts it,

A story matters to us...[it] becomes a bundle in which we wrap truth, hope, and dread. Stories are how we explain, how we teach, how we entertain ourselves, and how we often do all three at once. They are the juncture where facts and

feelings meet. And for those reasons, they are central to civilization, in fact, civilization takes form in our minds as a series of narratives. (p. 9)

The implications for educators are significant because if our students learn their world more effectively through story then as educators we need to create meaningful opportunities for the sharing of story within our curriculum. According to anthropologist Geertz, “humans are ‘symbolizing, conceptualizing, meaning-seeking animals’” (as cited in Fulford, 1999, p. 15) who are eventually unsatisfied with analysis as simply the study of our experience because ultimately “narrative, as opposed to analysis, has the power to mimic the unfolding of reality” (p. 15).

As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) remind us in the work they credit as partially inspired by John Dewey, the importance of research as lived experience is a fundamental starting point for researchers interested in the humanities. Educational researchers are fundamentally interested in life as it relates to “values, attitudes, beliefs, social systems, institutions and structures and how they are linked to learning and teaching” (p. xxii). Thus, teachers as researchers are foremost interested in the lived experiences of their students. But, as Clandinin and Connelly point out, there is a disconnection between social science as a discipline that is interested in “lives and how they are lived” (p. xxii) and current “research conversations...focused on the measurement of student responses” (p. xxii). “Social sciences are founded on the study of experience. Experience is therefore the starting point and the key term for all social science inquiry” (p. xxiii). For an educational researcher who is also a humanities teacher the study of experience seems a natural curricular outcome. Literature and history are the study of lives lived, either real or imagined. And, for the researchers of education, there is a blurred relationship

between the stories taught, such as literature and history, the stories students tell as they respond and personally connect to the learning, and how teachers then use the combined experience as research data that will inform further teaching experiences. “We learn about education from thinking about life, and we learn about life from thinking about education. This attention to experience and thinking about education *as* experience is part of what educators do in schools” (p. xxiv). In my own experience and through conversations with other teachers, there is little doubt most educators rely on lived experiences in the form of shared narratives (story) as a means to engage and relate to students. Yet, I would argue there is less validity given in terms of using narrative to report student achievement, especially in the higher grades. Students may learn from narratives but students generally are not given the opportunity to express *if* and *what* learning has occurred through narrative, except as informal, usually anecdotal, reporting.

This brings me to the third question: Exactly how might an observer recognize student learning is occurring through classroom conversation? With respect to what learning through conversation looks like in the classroom, my own journal describes it as follows.

Today I did a highly interactive activity that asked my Grade 9/10 group to use their very strong minds. I began the class by reviewing a comic strip by reading it aloud, and then discussing why it was funny. This was, of course, a discussion about meaning. I then mentioned I was starting a poetry unit. I continued by asking students to search through my pile of comics collected from various newspapers until they found two comics they felt they “got.” The next task was to place one comic on my whiteboard and write a summary of the meaning

underneath in no longer than one sentence. On a second board I wrote the heading: How are comics like poetry? On a post-it note write, and then post, your ideas—one idea per note and point form is fine. The results were:

- both play with words
- tell a story
- hard to understand
- both can be either funny or serious
- have hidden meaning
- both create feelings and paint pictures
- comics are separated into panels while poems are separated into stanzas
- have to read both carefully and slowly
- both entertain their audiences
- both use irony
- express ideas in a creative way

Isn't this terrific feedback? The entire period was actually a series of conversations; sometimes teacher-directed, sometimes students working together at the boards, sometimes independent internal conversation. Our best days together are the ones where we participate in thoughtful activities that allow students to find their own voices instead of just listening to mine. (Professional Journal Entry: January 15, 2010)

Engaging my students in conversation requires planning that creates a topic or idea worthy of the students' consideration. In other words, for conversation to occur I must be able to grab and hold their attention. Such engagement is usually noisy, often

messy, and generally controversial. I am reminded of the autobiography called *Spilling Open: The Art of Becoming Yourself* (2000) by Sabrina Harrison. This text is a favorite of my students because of the colorful journal format that visually exudes the confusion, creativity, and wisdom of growing up. On the good days my classroom has a similar atmosphere.

The final question is probably also the most important one. Does conversational classroom dialogue improve the quality of student-teacher interaction? According to Hasebe-Ludt (2009) there is an important reciprocal relationship between the knowledge teachers bring to bear as a result of their own life experiences, the manner in which they respond to their students, and how this then becomes another experience in itself. “These reciprocal processes constitute autobiographical as well as cosmopolitan pedagogical acts. Through life writing, students’ and teachers’ memories of pedagogical and personal relationships come alive as part of their curriculum in the cosmos of pedagogical responsibility” (p. 30). This exchange of experiences is a dialogue of sorts in the sense that connections are made in a place “between” as both the students and teacher be/come to a place different than before the exchange occurred. This process of engaging in a professional relationship very often occurs through conversation both verbal and written. Hasebe-Ludt’s insight on the relevance of story, conversation, and education implies a rhizomic relationship:

The *care-full* cultivation of relationships is at once inevitable and necessary while we struggle and soar to perform the complex steps of teaching/learning in order to find “new ways of making sense of the sense children are making” (Gallas, 1994,

p. 161). In order for this to happen, we must talk together and listen to each other, exchange and express the stories of our lives together. (p. 31)

The inevitable nature of conversation as integral to teaching, therefore, makes the case for studying the role of story as central to curriculum a compelling one. Because, like my own professional journal entries, and my use of storied examples during instruction, my students also turn our conversations of and for learning into stories that reflect their own lives in a way that makes more *sense* for them. Similarly, my own memoirs and poems, though not necessarily used to teach, are stories that have helped me learn. This learning, in turn, continues to shape the interactions between student and teacher. In fact, it may be impossible to separate student and teacher learning from their tendency to recreate the experience into a story.

### **Ground Truth**

According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), “experience happens narratively. Narrative inquiry is a form of narrative experience. Therefore, educational experience should be studied narratively (p. 19). This naturalistic approach to studying how students learn and how teachers like myself can best understand and share this knowledge speaks to the term narrative as “both a process and the results” (Holly et al., 2005, p. 243). The exploration of narrative, often autobiographical writing; including, but not limited to, life writing, story telling, memoir, poetry, and professional journals is an important, possibly even necessary, practice for teachers today if they are to stay healthy and productive in the often-difficult setting of school. I am coming to believe that it is increasingly important for teachers of today to take an active role “to improve our teaching by using professional (informed) eyes to observe our own practice” (p. ix). In short I believe I am

engaged in action research that explores how life writing, through storied conversation, both oral and written, may facilitate student learning in my classroom. This form of inquiry “is a special kind of research that relies on a journey filled with action, reflection, and critique” (p. 3). It enables a systematic truthful self-reflection about my own practices, to be shared with other education stakeholders. In my opinion, it is critical for the wellbeing of our students now, and in the future, that teachers become what Fowler (2006) suggests, “mindful of what is being learned and how they themselves are texts that students read and learn as integral parts of the syllabus. Authentic narrative research is one way of making life texts visible for study” (pp. 16-17). Or, as Hasebe-Ludt et al. (2009) reminds us, “Life writing is a way of learning to live with more courage and more hope” (p. 177). It takes courage for the teachers and the students to write about and share their lives but the process itself creates an environment of empathy that may well be the most hopeful lesson our students will learn. As Chapman (2007) writes, “if we are seriously concerned about the character of our students, we must give attention to the transformative nature of life writing” (p. 235). The nature and object of such transformation is the subject of my research.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) sum it up succinctly as follows: “...narrative inquiry is a way of understanding experience. It is a collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or a series of places, and in social interaction with milieus” (p. 20). In the case of teachers, the collaboration is necessarily the relationship between them and their students. As teachers, we are essentially teaching a life curriculum, what Dewey described as a “present life” of “genuine reality” (1897, p. 5). And, as such, our “stories lived and told educate the self and others, including the young

and those such as researchers who are new to their communities (p. xxvi). Of course, one of the difficulties of this type of knowing is that there is no clear beginning or ending. Stories continue as long as there are lives to be lived. “An inquirer enters this matrix in the midst...of living and telling, reliving and retelling...concluding the inquiry still in the midst of living and telling, reliving and retelling...(Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20). Like many things in life, the strength of this form of research is also its challenge. The fluid nature of human experience is difficult to capture and even more difficult to measure especially in comparison to the traditional quantitative measures that value interactions as independent events or see time as having a distinct beginning, middle and ending. The strength of narrative learning and knowing lies in its ability to help “illuminate the social context of individual lives” (Griffiths & Macleod, 2008, p. 121). Griffiths and Macleod explain the concept of “natality” (p. 130) and how this term makes the distinction that not only are each of us unique but we are “born into specific social and political contexts....New institutions appear...new ways of looking at things change our judgments and understandings about each other” (p. 130). The significance of this notion is that every situation is a new one. While we can learn from the past, the stories we are living have nuances and contexts not lived before. The implications for education are that if we are not listening to the narratives of teachers and students we have little hope of truly understanding what is happening and even less hope of responding in a meaningful way that will lead to constructive change.

Stories, by definition, are layered and subject to interpretation (Griffiths & MacLeod, 2008, p. 135) yet the very complex nature of reporting research (knowing) in this form allows for a nuanced, emotional interpretation that in fact gives a more

complete human accounting. Knowledge reported as non-fiction narrative may allow policy makers to make truly informed decisions based on this important way of understanding the *how* and *what* our students are learning. This, in my opinion, is the importance of narrative with respect to the wellbeing of our educational systems. In the tradition of the First Nations people and then the settlers, who told stories as lessons to survive where I now live, educators need to learn to listen differently.

English (2006) describes the process of life writing as “the interaction between a perceiving human being and his/her context” (p. 150) and the importance of this form of keeping record as fundamental to life itself because “life that is not some kind of story is unthinkable, or more precisely, unlivable” (p. 152). This idea hints at a sense of urgency, almost a compulsiveness that we have as human beings to tell our own stories in our own ways (there are many forms of life writing). Yet, in our school system, we have formed the habit of sharing stories (biography and autobiography) of those considered “important” to know about, while the stories of our students are less valued. That there seems to be a growing recognition of this, as demonstrated in Griffiths and Macleod’s (2008) discussion, is reassuring and is why I concur with Knowles and Cole (2008) when they suggest that the appeal of autoethnography (another form of narrative research) is based on “the way the method values the stories of ‘ordinary’ people” (p. 137). English (2006) likens the research value of these stories (notwithstanding the purely aesthetic value of sharing stories) to the dust that geologists get on their boots when “personally grabbing samples of rock, walking, formations, and exposing fresh stone” (p. 144).

This notion of “ground truth” is important from a leadership and research perspective because in order to truly comprehend what is happening you must “know the

territory” (p. 144) by walking on the same ground as those you wish to better understand. To further link this to the present discussion, in order to appreciate the context of the teaching workplace the stories of the “ordinary” teacher must be heard. And, by extension, for teachers to truly “know” their students they must make it possible for those “ordinary” stories to be told in the context of curriculum. Not only do we listen to what is said but, as English points out, we can also know each other by noting, “what the person leaves out is revealing “ (p. 149). Narrative, then, becomes a rather complicated interaction of listening to what is said, what is not said, and what is “revealed regarding the continuities” but also “the ruptures and the dissimilarities” (p. 142). And, ultimately, we must remember that each story is unique and may resist being “summarized into coherent or recurrent patterns” (p. 141). All this can exist within the framework of action research whose power is derived from a “structure that keeps the conversation in existence: the cyclical nature of action research including *action, reflection, observations...* becomes dialog with others out of which comes informed action” (Holly et al., 2005, p. 14).

For teachers to embark on the exploration of narrative as curriculum, they need to first explore and share their own narratives. By living the process themselves, first, teachers essentially get their boots dirty and dusty, even muddy. The ultimate power of narrative as a teaching practice is that “autobiographical inquiry requires and evolves out of collaborative endeavors which can serve the multiple functions of teaching, learning, professional development and research at the same time” (Butt, 1986, p. 31). While engaging in this collaborative process, educators are frequently reminded of the importance of “trust” (p. 21) and can, with new-found/reinforced empathy, begin to build

a classroom environment based on the principles of authentic engagement and meaningful interaction. Trust. This important consideration is mirrored by English (2006) as he reminds us, “we ought to pause and reflect whether our quest for a science of leadership hasn’t lead us to the ultimate Weberian ‘iron cage’ where ‘economic man’ works ‘without regard to the person, sine ira et studio, without hate and therefore without love’” (p. 152). Educational neutrality may seem, at first glance sensible, certainly politically correct, but it may, in fact, be very dangerous. Sharing stories involves risk for everyone involved, but the alternative is to create an environment where love of humanity, with all its imperfection, is less acceptable. As an example, I share two pieces of writing, one written very recently, and one written in my first years of teaching, and both shared with my students.

### I Am Named

I am named for her hands  
 see them while I  
 stir my milky tea  
 roll a hard-boiled egg  
 and carefully peel the sticky shell  
 from my cracking finger tips  
  
 her parchment skin etched with  
 fine threads  
 lace over my bones  
 thicken to calluses  
 joined by a long life line

I see her as hands  
pry open old shortbread cans  
snap in the last puzzle piece  
knit another doll dress  
I am named for her hands  
once covered in soft leather  
colored like milky tea  
holding a woven travel bag  
to match buttoned boots  
the wide brimmed hat  
and the new wedding band  
that now  
only my hand can wear



*Figure 1.* Engagement photograph of great-grandmother Christina Morrison.

This first piece was written as an example of a response to a photograph. This writing prompt is an assignment often given by teachers with the expectation that students must engage, though teachers themselves rarely do. I have found students respond to my sharing in a meaningful way because they know I am giving them an honest glimpse of my own story. Thus the lines between writer, teacher, life-participant start to blur. Conversations begin.

My second writing is my attempt to model writing in the same assignment I give my students. This time students are asked to write about their names, much as Sandra Cisneros (1984) does in her autobiographical novel, *The House on Mango Street*. The

similarities to the first response to my great grandmother's photograph are apparent but it helps students understand the variance in form while the topic is virtually the same.

### My Name

My name was given to me more years ago than I can believe now. It was a long name for a little child born to young parents on a beautiful spring day on a windswept Canadian coast. It was a name made tiny, to match the child, and to suit the aunt who shortened it.

The woman I was named for traveled to Canada as a very young bride. I still have the picture taken on the day she left and the bag she carried across that stormy ocean. Great-grandma told me she was seasick the entire month and was never sure how she tended to her two-year-old son. What she did know was that she was never going to travel back again. Once was enough. And she was stubborn. Kind, mild-mannered, lady-like, but stubborn enough that even when her husband, now with cancer, pleaded with her to go back to the "home place." She declined. The oldest son, my grandfather, went instead. Apparently those tossing seas had left no lasting impression with him.

I spent many summer days alone with my great grandmother. We lunched on canned peaches, cottage cheese, boiled eggs, sponge cake with jam and cream, and lots of strong tea with sugar and milk. I still drink my tea the way my grandmother served it. And, as much.

She told me stories about being the only girl in a family of brothers and the mother who had died before she was grown. What it was like raising her own three sons, and how pleased she had been when her oldest son had a daughter, the

only granddaughter she would ever have. So, when I was born to that girl, it seemed obvious I would carry my great-grandmother's name, my mother's middle name. But, Christina is such a long name when Tina seems much cuter, teeny even, for a baby barely five pounds.

Years later, my family, brothers only, and father, will always call me Tina. But, my passport carries the full name of my stubborn grandmother and I choose the name for myself. And, someday my own three sons may give the daughters I never had my great grandmother's name.

My Grade 7/8 ELA class responded to this reading by spontaneously clapping. They wrote their own responses with an enthusiasm and sense of pride I have rarely been able to recapture since. The act of giving students a portion of your humanity resonates both within and beyond the classroom. Narrative in this sense then becomes an inquiry tool for action research in that "our chief tools include actions, conversations, and a cycle of critically reflective practice. Some of these conversations will be verbal, some will be on paper, and some will appear on the computer monitor" (Holly et al., 2005, p. 3). Thus, narrative in its broadest sense is both the means by which I am engaging in inquiry and the method for reporting my understanding.

Besides the broad philosophical questions surrounding the importance of narrative in the classroom, there are certain practical considerations that should be reiterated. Moore-Hart (2005) reports that "students within their classrooms improved their writing performance just by having the opportunity to write regularly and to write about real-life experiences" (p. 334). She further explains, what might be obvious for most educators, that creating real-life links between students and their community increases engagement

and ultimately student performance (p. 337). The reason such methods work is because “life writing...is a particularly important genre for helping students reflect on life’s purpose and meaning” (Chapman, 2007, p. 228).

Coming back to those broader philosophical considerations, Chapman makes a strong case for the need to consider character development and value formation as part of the curriculum (p. 228). He observes “there seems to be an endless appetite for celebrity biography” (p. 232) yet “it is somewhat surprising how small a role such works play...in curriculum” (p. 233). Most teachers can attest to the truth of this observation. Students are experts on the lives of their celebrity heroes, can find the time and where-with-all to collect seemingly endless information, but they are often challenged to create a coherent response regarding the life of some long-dead, though very important curricular figure. Curriculum outcomes are generally weighted in favor of studying historically significant figures while students are engaged by the actions of current celebrities. This disconnect between who students are required to learn about and who they really want to learn more about is a place of tension that teachers navigate with the students. Interestingly, in both cases it is the life of someone who is well known, or famous, that is often the subject of educational discourse.

The danger of the educational system’s current focus on “important” people and events lies not so much in the lack of student engagement (though that is a significant issue) but in the subtle message it sends to students regarding the “absence of life writing in the curriculum” (p. 234). Here Chapman is likening life writing to autobiographical text, which by implication suggests “that the individual must be submerged within the dominant ideology” (p. 234). It comes back to the dust-on-the-feet “ordinary” person

lessons to be learned by narrative inquiry and how by allowing students to share their life stories you are modeling the importance of those lives. Thus, according to Stanistreet (2008) the lesson students could be learning is: “There are no ordinary lives and no ordinary stories” (p.1). This further opens the metaphorical door to the possibilities for “those on the margins of society” (Chapman, 2007, p. 234) even though theirs were not the stories of a celebrity. The potential of life writing in the classroom, then, is that it allows for students to appreciate “the power and potential to make (and remake) themselves and their visions of the world” (Ryan, 2004, p. 44). But, even more importantly for those who, for whatever reason, are not confident of their place in this world, it can arm them with the knowledge that not only is their voice important, but it is critical to share their stories so that “others do not speak for them or discount their perspectives” (p. 45). The key to this kind of transformative practice ultimately lies with the classroom teacher and her or his willingness to take a degree of personal risk. But, as Fowler (2006) reminds us, “once we put ourselves, and especially our professional selves into question, movement and professional growth become possible” (p. 28).

Life writing as a pedagogical tool, then, can only be possible if the teacher in question is also a practitioner. The ramifications of this in terms of teacher training (and possibly retraining) are significant. If we are to create a living, breathing curriculum that encourages all of our students’ stories we need to be better prepared for the implications of what we may hear and the truths we might come to know. For both the teacher and the student, the real danger in sharing is that you are, in a sense, giving a piece of yourself to the world. As our very technologically savvy students well understand, to share is to provide source material for any number of “rewrites.” There is much to risk and “always

we are caught in a place of tension between telling the truth and fearing the truth...as a result of two needs: our need for love and cowardice” (Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009, p. 177).

For our students, the need for love is quite often translated, within the classroom, to acceptance by one’s peers on the one hand, and, ultimately, marks on the other hand. Part of teacher (re)training may involve such considerations.

This is why the importance of modeling the process is critical to success. If the teacher can first overcome her own cowardice (and this is no small task!), it may be possible to create a place where both “dynamic dialogue” and “polyphonic conversation” (p. 179) are possible. As teachers, we need to be aware and responsive to the many “pressing challenges involved in promoting life writing and autobiographical writing in the classrooms” (p. 178) but despite these risks, there is too much to be gained in terms of lessons of empathy and self-confidence through the act of “remembering with others to affect their own and others’ ways of participating in the world“ (Ryan, 2004, p. 42). Ultimately, for the teachers, who have the experience of some stories, it becomes professionally imperative to explore, to share, to write about life to get “a heart of wisdom” (Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009, p. 233).

## Method as Complicated Conversation

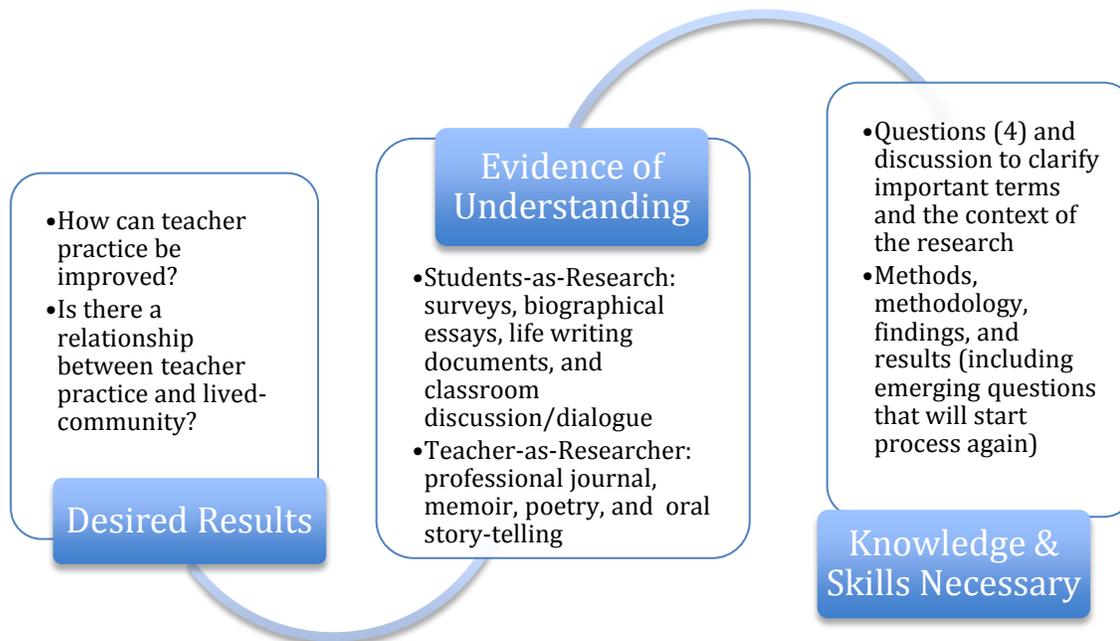


Figure 2. The Backwards Design process as action research.

The above graph, adapted from *Understanding by Design*, by Wiggins and McTighe (2005), represents a visual representation of the complicated nature of an action research plan utilizing a variety of research documents created by both the researcher and the participants in the research. The Desired Results are really samples of possible answers that explore the over-arching research curiosity, or what Stenhouse (1975) describes as the impulse behind the research. In this case the fundamental, or enduring questions are: How can I improve my practice? Is there a relationship between teacher practice and lived community? I see these as enduring because the ultimate purpose of the professional journal was to improve my practice. The particulars of how I would do so only became apparent as I researched the document (my professional journal). It was the journal research that also pointed to the second, as of yet, general, over-arching topic

involving a preoccupation with family and community in my life writing texts. Thus, the four specific questions previously considered in the section Research Questions and referenced in the box Knowledge and Skills Necessary emerged in light of the impulse to improve my practice by better understanding the role of community, including family, in my teaching.

Under Evidence of Understanding, student ways of knowing are included as examples of how, as the researcher, I have documented student responses to a variety of activities as data that will contribute to my understanding and ultimately inform the overarching questions. It is important to note, while the narratives of the students as research participants are explicitly exchanged with mine as teacher researcher, the exchange between my own narratives and those of the students is more implicit. Some research narratives may be shared while other work may inform teacher practice but not form the overt basis of a student-teacher interaction. In the matter of classroom conversations, however, there is always interaction between students and teachers. Even when students are interacting amongst themselves, the teacher observes and takes action based on those observations.

Finally, there are questions and terms the researcher must investigate in order to contextualize the research for those who are trying to learn from it. Knowledge and skills are therefore necessary components in which to frame the discussion. A consideration of the questions that have framed the research helps inform which narratives are chosen to best illuminate the important conversations to be shared as examples of on-going understanding. The process of sharing knowledge weaves together the words of my students and myself in an effort to recreate the conversational pedagogy as it exists in my

classroom. Weaving together the words of many is also a critical aspect of my use of *métissage* because the process of intermixing different personal experiences, even tensions creates new understandings. The intent is that more conversation will emerge from the creation of a crafted collection of life writing “where dialogue among multiple and mixed socio-cultural, racial, (trans)national, and gendered groups can occur. This exchange of ideas and insights—arising from lived experience—constitutes a new space and practice for curriculum inquiry” (Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009, p. 35).

I began this project by researching three questions in order to clarify the meaning of conversation, the importance of conversation as a learning strategy, and, finally, the role conversation plays in student-teacher engagement. These questions were important knowledge components related to my own emerging experience of the importance of conversational exchanges with my students as integral to my pedagogy. By exploring such questions I was able to gain a better understanding of some of the broader research perspectives this project is situated within (action, phenomenological, hermeneutic, narrative, and life writing research). For the purpose of this study, I also needed to use specific research skills or techniques (such as; professional journaling, field notes, creation of survey questions, decisions regarding purposeful classroom conversations) in order to gather meaningful supporting documents. With that in mind, I then considered my life writing as specific examples (data) of how my own family and community relationships may have informed my teaching. In the meantime I documented on-going professional practice in the form of professional journals, which formed the basis by which I was able to identify my preoccupation with conversation, dialogue, or discussion relative to positive student responses within my classroom. It was also my professional

journal writing that helped me better understand the tensions found between my students as they tried to find their place in a small rural school community, either safely entrenched in the predictability of family and community traditions, or as newly arrived hockey players in an alien environment far from family. Finally, specific examples of a variety of writing forms are combined as data providing a considered response to the overarching questions. This final research project includes samples of the following forms of writing:

1. Excerpts from my journal entries—compiled over two years, in response to my observations about the challenges and rewards experienced daily as a practicing educator. These journals record, observe, interpret the conversations, stories, and events related to my professional environment from the perspective of a teacher-researcher. According to Holly et al. (2005), “we use journals as the evolving and reflective professional document that holds our perceptions, plans, descriptions, explorations, and exercises, as well as our trepidations and interpretations” (p. 150). Because these records are compiled in the form of a journal in response to only my professional life only, I have called them a professional journal. Within this handwritten document are examples of anecdotal records (p. 150); critical-incident and/or informal class interviews (p. 150), also called “purposeful conversation” (p. 157).
2. Memoir, written over time and selected to illuminate aspects of my life that I believe may have implications for choices made as a professional educator in the context of the larger professional and social context.

3. Poetry, both as observations in my professional journal and as a method of creative writing used to further elucidate understandings to the questions posed.
4. Excerpts from student writing—from a small group of ten Grade 12 students as documentation of their voices in this present conversation about how they learn and what we might do to improve current practice. These documents include: an open-ended questionnaire (p. 158), field notes from a focus group interview (p.162) addressing a particular topic, and excerpts from two life writing assignments.

My intention was to weave together my own personal *métissage* “of place, space, memory and history” (Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009, p. 9) using these varied writing voices, within a specific time and place, to create a narrative whole, another kind of narrative that recognizes the tangled interplay of many conversations in classrooms everywhere. This exchange explores new understandings resulting from the combined and varied exploration of student and researcher responses relevant to the research questions themselves. However, the answers to the questions posed may not be immediately evident since the concept of *answer* depends on the perception of the participants in such conversations. Neilsen (2002) recognizes the problematic nature of the term *answer* as she explains, “Story and narrative—whether nonfiction or fiction, as if we could locate that border—are luminal spaces that do not call for an answer in the same way our conventional notions of knowledge seek an answer” (p. 1).

As participant-researchers there is always the risk of “being so close to the situation that [we] neglect certain, often tacit, aspects of it” (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007, p.189). So, in an effort to more clearly establish my role as participant in this educational research, I have been looking at my own interest in life writing. When did it

begin? Doesn't everyone create life writing at some level? What part does "knowing myself" play in the choices I make as a teacher? Is my pedagogy influenced by my interest in life writing? Are my students actually benefitting from my approach to teaching? And, in an effort to overcome the "implicit conservatism" (p. 189) of this naturalistic approach I want to look forward as well. What changes should I, could I, make as an educator? How can this kind of knowledge alter the status quo?

The scope of this research will not allow for a detailed exploration of all of the above questions, but posing such questions helps me understand what methods best suit my research activities, much as the over-arching questions helped me find a focus for the project itself. These considerations are especially helpful in interpreting the observations I am making in my professional journal as I consider classroom activities, responses and behaviors, and the accompanying professional implications.

One of the biggest challenges facing a qualitative (interpretive) researcher is the "recursive" nature of the data (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 185) because there is no clear finish to the process of lives being lived. Yet, ultimately, it is the very recursive nature of the emerging themes that are of most interest. It is here I begin to take the assorted pieces of narrative research data and try to gather them together to braid my version of a *métissage*, in the sense that parts of many stories will be linked in order to create an even more colorful, stronger unit. Similar, though never exactly alike, repeating shapes and colors are necessary to create a new relationship, dependent on those parts but very different in the context of the other pieces, much as Deleuze's *becomings* which emerge from a variety of seemingly unrelated parts.

Patterns depend on repetition. In fact the discipline we call science is founded on the principle of predictable outcomes tested on the basis of repeatability. Interestingly, Knowles and Cole (2008) suggest the response to narrative research within the academy is “mixed” suggesting this “tension” (p. 47) may be representative of the potentially positive tensions resulting when student perspectives are mixed within the classroom. While the term “mixed” used in Knowles and Cole’s context has negative connotations reminiscent of the language of colonial occupation, there is also clearly an effort to embrace the potential of tension created through the exchange of diverse perspectives. Patterns may well emerge during classroom conversations in what Aoki (1996/2005) describes as “a space that knows planned curriculum and live(d) curriculum” (p. 420).

### **A Place for Story: Interpretations and Insights**

#### **A Returning Teacher Regaining Memory**

Not only can teaching and learning be characterized by an attitude of scientific inquiry, but they can be conceptualized as a moral craft that demands action on behalf of students whose education we shape. (Holly et al., 2005, p. 15)

Often, we need to reexamine the things we think we know in order to learn how much we have actually forgotten. This may be the place for story. It can teach us how we came to this point and invites others to join us in the narrative as we move onward. For two years I stopped being a high school teacher and when I returned I found I had to learn again what to say, how to act, to carefully watch and listen to a landscape that had once been so familiar. I monitored my return through the creation of journal entries. Following is a series of excerpts from the writing in those early days of that first school year back.

The power of writing about one's own life is clear to me as I read the first journals from my Grade 12 class. I introduced autobiography by reading from four very different texts as examples: *Spilling Open: The Art of Becoming Yourself* (1999), a graphic journal by Sabrina Ward Harrison; Paul Simon's song (1965) *I am a Rock*; a poem by Barbara Kingsolver entitled *Naming Myself* (1992) and the short memoir *Only Daughter* from the autobiography *The House on Mango Street* (1984) by Sandra Cisneros. Most of the authors were female and from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. Because students were engaged I asked them to respond in any form they were comfortable with, telling me "who they were" in their student journals...a few minutes in, one of the students asked, "You aren't going to read these aloud, are you?" I assured them I wouldn't and made it clear I should have told them right away. I could feel the room relax. As I watched them search for just the right word, I realized students like to write if they feel they have something to say and if they know someone will "hear" them...our students aren't necessarily authors. They aren't comfortable publishing on most occasions and as teachers we need to be aware of this. Hear the story while honoring their privacy. I have decided to not give marks for journal responses but to respond by writing in as much detail as possible. There is something to be said for writing through one's life just to learn about self, not for grades.

Wednesday

So the other thing I had forgotten about teaching: the highs and the lows!

Yesterday was a low. The missing team was back and they were posturing for

their place in the school hierarchy. The students who had already been there for several days were responding in kind. By the end of the day I was exhausted, my success measured only by the fact I had maintained some semblance of order, fairly consistently, most of the day. I am also reminded of my personal Achilles heel, girls who roll their eyes and sigh loudly.

So today was much better though the girls-who-roll-their-eyes did push me far enough that I slammed down a binder with enough force to attract everyone's attention. It was a bit of an effort to act as if nothing had happened and that I wasn't annoyed (a lie, of course). I am relearning teacher as performer. I must remember that I am on stage and what I say and how I act sets the tone for this place called a classroom that we must occupy together. I am the model for the behaviors I expect. Eventually, things did settle down and we managed to accomplish a few simple tasks. I've decided one of my most important goals is to spark some interest in English because most students "hate" (not exaggerating) it.

Thursday

Ups and downs continue to be the norm. This morning was excellent. Students were responding well enough that I could relax and share some of my own stories about living in Calgary. We had a great discussion about the place of story in our learning. Then came the afternoon of the snippy sisters. Chances are these girls had other issues totally unrelated to me but the fact is they chose to express themselves in deliberately nasty, aggressive interactions, mostly with me but also with some of the "weaker" prey. Had I known them better I might have been able to get at the heart of the problem but as it was I tried to act like the adult

in charge and proceed with some integrity intact. Example: “Why do you keep saying bibliography instead of biography?” The answers that sprung to mind were:

- a) because I’m simply an idiot (too sarcastic)
- b) the room is unbearably hot, it’s the end of the day, and I still haven’t found my rhythm/confidence for teaching (too honest)
- c) it’s been a long day (also true, yet very safe, so the correct answer)

I manage to keep things light and will likely live to teach another day. Marking is starting to pile up and there is a developing pattern of a number of students consistently late or losing their assignments. My organizational skills are being severely tested.

I am  
 the empty room  
 at day’s end  
 scattered  
 spent  
 a survivor

(Professional Journal Entries: September 3, 2008 - September 16, 2008)

As I found my way back to being a rural secondary teacher I had to listen with care to what/how the students were communicating with me. The messages were often unintended but still clear. Students are uncomfortable with change, especially with new teachers. So much time is spent together that it is in the best interests of the teacher to keep the relationship a positive one. From the standpoint of students, the teacher has

power. Perhaps the landscape hadn't changed as much as my memory of it. It was necessary to find old memory of teaching well and link it to these new students.

Meanwhile, in the two years I had been gone I had learned much about the importance of paying attention to other old memories that were seemingly ordinary, but lingered, begged to be considered, perhaps told. So, the process of listening to my inward voice, of engaging in dialogues with myself as I remembered being in high school helped me *be* a student again. I needed to relearn empathy in order to practice and model it.

The Mothers I Have Known: Sylvia

So often

strawberries remind me of

Sylvia

laughing over lunch

in the tiny camper

perched on a

pink pick-up truck

in the middle of Montana

a summer tradition

Dew Drop Inn

pool foosball

poolside tanning

great life lessons for two girls

in the early seventies

Sylvia and Wes had one daughter  
my friend was  
raised cowboy tough  
like her dad

Sylvia and I washed strawberries  
swept along  
by the charisma of  
their shared bold laughter  
rack them pool balls one more time  
we'll beat that son-of-a-bitch  
next time

it was Sylvia who  
helped me on my wedding day  
wrote the long letter  
about life and love  
still in my cedar trunk

it was Sylvia and I  
who picked out his best cowboy shirt  
after Wes hooked the hose  
to the exhaust of his transit truck  
two months before  
high school grad

while his daughter  
 stayed tough  
 insisted we go out  
 eat pizza      play one more game  
 in memory of  
 that son-of-a-bitch

My life writing is a way of connecting memories and sharing the experience of what it means to be human, locating what Hasebe-Ludt et al. (2009) refer to as interconnectness and interdependencies (p. 10). And like Chamber's (2003), "I continue to scout memory for the significant bits and pieces...to tell the one good story that must be told" (p. 109). Sadly, not all stories are good memories.

#### About Noah

The thing is, I don't really know Noah's story. I remember him as bright but unmotivated. I probably wrote one of those politically correct comments like the one on my own Grade 5 report card: "Is capable of better results. Cheerfully not meeting expectations." The thing we all knew about Noah was that his older sister had driven off a cliff, drunk, and most people in our small town called it suicide. She had been bright too. Noah loved to write poetry and that was really our only connection. He would write and I would respond, in writing, but he never talked in class and I never made him. His younger brother and my son were good friends, we went to the same church, and I knew the parents had had some tough times. For all these reasons I tended to keep my distance.

All I know for sure now is that while I was teaching Noah, but was gone to Edmonton for two weeks working as a standard's confirmer and a lead diploma marker, Noah hung himself in the barn where his mother discovered him. An administrator caught me "on the floor" to let me know before "everyone in town found out" and all I could think was how couldn't I have seen it coming? What was I doing in Edmonton, supposedly advocating for 30-2 students, while the ones I really cared about were home, dying on my watch? I've always said one of the best things about teaching English is how every now and then you get a chance to see into the beautiful souls of the children through their writing. Not always.

If we are to create a living, breathing curriculum that encourages all students' stories, teachers themselves must be equally implicated in the creation of the story itself. The importance of Noah's story is that I didn't pay enough attention because I was busy being the "expert" pursuing professional development opportunities. Ours is a system that overlooks the ordinary teacher as much as the ordinary student, yet these are the voices that matter most, simply because in our democratic system they represent a majority. Most people are ordinary.

As this project explores the importance of engaging our students in meaningful dialogue within the humanities curriculum, it must be acknowledged that there are "pressing challenges involved in promoting life writing and autobiographical writing in the classrooms" (Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009, p. 178). Even as we speak, there is a notice under section 11.1 of the Alberta Human Rights Act (2011, Alberta Education) limiting the discussion of such subjects as religion, human sexuality and sexual orientation. Yet,

the nature of critical and thoughtful discussion encourages uncomfortable topics and conversations, which, taken out of context, might be considered problematic, especially from the perspective of parents. But despite these risks, the lessons learned through the act of “remembering with others to affect their own and others’ ways of participating in the world” (Ryan, 2004, p. 42) are too important to ignore. The power of life writing as it relates to storied telling and classroom dialogues may be its role in helping to create an authentic environment where students can find a voice and learn to belong together.

### **The Students Speak Out**

If teacher educators want to enhance the working conditions and experiences of teaching, we must also fight to stay in the conversations that determine policy. (Grumet, 2010, p. 67)

Diploma results were back this week and both the principal and the superintendent were disappointed. I am concerned my academic, university-bound students are not placing in the standard of excellence, but at the same time I am thrilled all three students who did not speak English two years ago were able to do much better than expected on their exams. The fact that I teach both the academic and non-academic classes at the same time may be part of the issue, in terms of raw score test results. But, that is also the reality of working in a school with small student numbers.

Early Monday morning administration had a talk with students and asked them to complete a survey to determine how well they had prepared for exams by studying and the degree to which the exam questions and format were familiar. In other words, did the students make every effort to learn the material ahead of time and did the teachers adequately prepare the students for these government tests?

Valid questions, certainly. Yet, the context of the discussion itself and subsequent questionnaire made us uncomfortable and by the time the students came to my social studies class we were both feeling unsuccessful. The students shared that they were told that they very much under-performed and were one of the biggest disappointments in recent history. They have responded by shutting down and try as I might I can't get them interested in social studies.

In response to the students' reaction the principal asked me to have a talk with the Grade 12 class about "how they are feeling about school right now" and if they would like to be involved in a focus group to improve student morale. My students made the following observations:

1. We never have fun.
2. Never a single class goes by that we aren't reminded to "smarten-up" and listen because this may be on the diploma exam.
3. No thanks to the focus group. And, yes, you can share our feelings with administration. We agree as a class that we absolutely do not want to participate.
4. Please remember we are the ones who did poorly on the exams and we are still trying to recover from not doing as well as we had hoped.

Guilty. The teachers have been so caught up in the "results" we have lost sight of how our reactions are affecting the students. I have made my students a deal. I will not breathe the "diploma" word until June and as student union teacher coordinator I will help organize a dance. The Grade 12s are a bitter bunch right now but at least we're still talking. A teacher assistant was kind enough to

observe, “You are teaching them things they will remember long after school.”

Good thing, because the school stuff is a bit of a bust right now. (Professional Journal Entries: February 22--March 3, 2009)

In my professional opinion, there was no doubt my Grade 12 class required some sort of discussion, my version of a critical incident purposeful conversation (Holly et al., 2005, p. 157), that would help them come to terms with and learn from their collective diploma exam experience. We spent the better part of a social studies class engaged in a purposeful conversation regarding accountability and the importance of treating one another, at all levels of education, with respect. While these are topics that can be clearly linked to the social studies curriculum, the context of this discussion as it related to student needs at that moment made the learning experience entirely different than teaching a planned lesson, using related resources, on exactly the same topics. What made this classroom experience truly a conversation, in Deleuzian terms, is that we began with many pieces of disparate information and were able to grow a new conversation whose core understanding now rested upon the experiences of the past, yet moved forward. We were able to take action in an effort to rebuild our community.

As a high school teacher, life writer, storyteller, and researcher, I serve as an example that “life writing tells how we are related to one another and how to relate to one another” (Hasebe-Ludt et al, 2009, p. 130). Because we had shared stories about our lives over the course of over one year together, we as a collective class had created a trust relationship. We had become a family of sorts. It was because of this we were able to have such a frank discussion about how to create an environment where this group could function for the remainder of their Grade 12 year. They still had one more semester of

diploma exams and many of the ten hockey girls had large American college scholarships on the line. And, from the standpoint of administration, the school's academic credibility was also at stake. Poor academics could spell the end of an elite sports program that was keeping the school operational. This incident is a reminder that our schools are full of stories. Each student and all their teachers are "tangled" together even as they play out their roles in seemingly disparate worlds. The process of engaging my students in meaningful dialogue within my classroom is a lengthy one, based mostly on the use of narrative to create connections. But, the importance of keeping these lines of communication open are critical for student success as they sometimes struggle within the educational system.

Week one of the new semester and version five of the timetable!

The first days of the week the players were gone to a hockey tournament. They won and are now top of the league. That's a good thing because the results of some key exams have just come back and some of our top players are struggling...the balance between academics and sports, especially at higher levels, is often an uneasy one.

On the bright side, one particular "top" player, who has been what I would describe as "sullen" all year, gave me cause to find hope today. She barely worked during the first of our double-period class and when I pressed her she shrugged her shoulders. Her response was indicative of the general response to our social studies class all week. "Do we have to learn about politics, history, and economics? What for?" All week I've been performing at top pitch, but...nothing.

As an introduction to some important philosophers (prescribed by the curriculum) the text includes a comic representing a little boy who is asking about the meaning of life. The speech balloon reads, “Why?” I pose the same question and note a few flickers of response but they fade quickly. Rushing in to fan those fading flames, I tell the Grade 12 class a story about my first memory of “Why?”

I recount the experience of how, at the age of seven, it dawns on me that I am mortal. I am in bed and am stunned by the certainty I will one day die. I shared how I then calculated that the average life expectancy of women at that time was about 76 and since I was seven, I probably had actually only lived approximately one-eleventh of my life. Therefore, I still had plenty of time. It was too soon to worry yet. This worked and I was able to go to sleep.

My here-to-fore, rarely-interested-in-a-thing-I-had-to-say student perked up, looked me square in the eye and said, “You have to be kidding? You thought like that at seven?” I was a little unnerved but tried to honestly reply, “That’s the way I remember it. Granted I might have been a little odd.”

“No, that’s not what I mean. You were a math genius. You were doing fractions at seven!”

Surprised by this unexpected turn in the conversation, and still trying to be truthful I explained, “I hadn’t ever thought of that. It didn’t seem like fractions – just life!” Then our class had a terrific conversation. One student talked about how she had had a panic attack when she first thought of dying. Another student wondered if being dead would be like “nothing” for eternity and didn’t relish the thought. I offered the thought that since the time before I was born hadn’t been

traumatic perhaps after would be equally so. Not all offered their opinions on this uncomfortable subject but it was clear all were listening and even deeply interested in each other's opinions. We agreed none of us had exactly the same opinions, ideals, or values about the meaning of life but we all had a vested interest in it.

I used the moment to gently remind everyone we share humanity but not always perspectives. Another curricular outcome had been reinforced, even learned! As they left class, I overheard one "reluctant" student say, "Well, at least the second half of the class was decent." (Professional Journal Entry: February 3, 2010)

As the mother of three grown boys, I can't help but smile at the sheer confidence some of my students exhibit, even as I know they are often unsure, even afraid. This group went on to do very well on their final social studies government exams and many contacted me in the summer and even into the beginning of those first days at college, just to talk. Following is the final journal entry I recorded after they wrote Part B of the social studies diploma exam:

The students were at loose ends after today's test. They are now officially done Grade 12 but not sure how to say good-bye. I received several thank-you notes and lots of hugs. I will miss this difficult group. No matter how they score on the exams, I know this feisty, well-organized, kind-hearted group will do well in life. (Professional Journal Entry: June 24, 2010)

### **This Park Has Snakes**

...There is a deeper and more important way of remembering...This is the memory of a past that has written itself on you, in your character and in the life on which you bring that character to bear. (Rolands, 2008, p. 46)

As a rural high school humanities teacher raised in a number of large cities, I find myself telling stories of adjusting to this isolated world of my husband's family's place. Many of my students have a history here as rooted as my last name and they help me understand what it *is* I belong to.

I belong to a place that was settled only a short time ago by men like my children's great-grandfather; a Catholic, French-Canadian carpenter, who had enough confidence to believe he could begin again as a cattle rancher in an area not even surveyed yet. I belong to a place that is sacred to the First Nations people; a place they would never presume to claim because it is a place so special it must be shared. I belong to a place near a North West Mounted Police (NWMP) outpost, nestled in a long coulee running across the American border where horse thieves and whiskey traders tried to make their living. I belong to a place where I can walk amongst the rocks and find the names and dates of my old neighbors who walked before me. And, if I walk a little further, and if the Park gives me permission, I can have my lunch by a place the locals call Signature Rock. Here almost every NWMP officer stationed to this remote outpost carved his name into the soft sandstone. Many are beautifully crafted testaments to a human need to tell others where they had been. Like a cemetery, the sandstones of my yard are full of such markers; documenting lives lived in the context of a different time and place. I belong to a place that reminds me to linger longer.

As much as I remain the newcomer in this area slow to embrace change, many of my students are much newer to this place. Our school also houses an elite girl's sports team, which draws from teams all across Canada, the United States, and sometimes even Europe. This group of about twenty-two 15-18 year olds come together in a shared residence and, in the course of a school year, learn to make themselves into a family.

In my classroom it seems clear that while many of my students have a perception of a role they are playing ("town kid" or "hockey girl") within the dynamics of our interactions, they are also struggling to belong in a way that crosses these artificial boundaries. When Ted Aoki (1993/2005) spoke to the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development he summarized what I observe on a daily basis: "Identity is not so much *something* already present, but rather as production in the throes of being constituted as we live in the place of difference" (p. 205). As a humanities teacher, the process of finding one's identity in the midst of difference is an enduring theme found throughout my curriculums, both "lived" and "planned." In fact, this *is* the curriculum. So, as I see it, my primary responsibility is to model the importance of being thoughtful and watchful (Pinar & Irwin (Eds.), 2005, p. 19). I listen, to try and hear how each of these students understands their world on this particular day. I do so by reading their writing, listening to their stories, and using both my own life writing and oral stories to begin our "conversations" (p. 81).

### Pretty Stories

I

day's first light finds me

inside a picket fence where

I tend my yard  
of landscaped happiness  
strong brown fingers pinch  
wilted blossoms      tie back daisies  
bent on messing up my yard

## II

wrapped in her favorite crocheted blanket  
fluffed into a flowered chair  
she sits on the edge of a sunny puddle  
and smiles old dreams  
while fingers stroke the worn picture  
of a beautiful princess  
from a storybook  
my mother used to read to me

## III

spreading out her well-used flannel blanket  
she tells pretty stories  
to her family dolls  
chubby hands set them in a miniature house  
complete with Waterford crystal  
fine Monet prints  
and a Claiborne closet

roads that pass this sunlit house  
wind through weedless gardens  
scattered with plucked daisies

There is a place of “tension” (Pinar & Irwin (Eds.), 2005, p. 17) between those whose families have long claimed this place as their prairie home and the sporty female newcomers who come here as a stepping-stone to even better, bigger, places. It could even be said that Aoki’s curriculum-as-life (Aoki, 2003/2005, p. 449) is lived through the world of the “town” students’ 4-H clubs, spring seeding schedules and annual fall suppers while the curriculum-as-plan is evidenced in a team calendar filled with the daily game/practice schedule, post-secondary admission deadlines and reminders to book the early flights home. The town students live their lives according to many traditions established long before they were born and most are comfortable just *being*, while the hockey girls have clear goals for their futures and parents who have paid significant fees to ensure these goals are achieved.

Both groups appear to be so entrenched in these seemingly diverse positions that they often miss opportunities for exploring each other’s situations. Our educational system has created a space where the rush towards acquiring a specific knowledge set, as demonstrated by the high stakes Alberta Diploma Exam system, has compromised the ability for teachers and students to “linger” in an effort to learn as a process of understanding how each other *is*. Like Aoki, “I know that what I see and how I see is because of who I am” (p. 348). The challenge for both myself, and ultimately my students, is to explore and broaden the concept of personal identity so we are better positioned to really “see.”

The Tour

I take my place  
among the curious  
lined to catch a glimpse  
history recounted in bright tones  
dressed in a blue uniform    brassy  
diamond willow stick  
traces the high points  
careful not to touch ancient memory  
pointed-shoulder man        Shoshone  
square-shoulder man        Blackfoot  
round shield man    warrior  
now    horses appear  
open lines at mouth  
tell us this one still lives  
  
two o'clock sun melts my interest  
wandering    I hear familiar rattle  
dancing instinct    hop    step    and scream  
audience moves my way  
  
later they will only remember  
this park has snakes

As a teacher I struggle to create a space where all my students feel comfortable “being in becoming” (Pinar & Irwin (Eds.), 2005, p. 12) and often this is achieved by humorous stories that remind us all how this is not always an easy place to live. By opening the door to some of the difficulties we face together, my students begin to feel more comfortable sharing their discomfort. But, like Aoki’s Miss O, I “must listen and be attuned to the care that calls from [my] very living” (p. 15). In an effort to create this space I follow Aoki’s advice and speak “so that we may awaken to the truer sense that stirs within each of us” (p. 17). Though mine is not a voice entirely silenced by “the cacophony of voices” (p. 17) in the original sense of “political” constraints, it is a voice struggling to be true to the curriculum of possibility created in a room where I share my own life writing.

The Mothers I Have Known: Aunt Julie

My Aunt Julie didn’t  
 seem to mind  
 when her brother dropped us off at their farm  
 for a spring  
  
 he needed to go to Calgary alone  
 to find a job  
 a house  
 a housekeeper  
 for three children  
 only one in school

it was a glorious holiday  
we made hay bale forts  
jumped from the loft (when nobody was looking)  
slid down the silver spouts of junked combines  
learned how to save air on the path  
to the outhouse  
so you didn't have to breathe inside

had scummy Sunday bathes in the big copper tub  
(littlest ones do go last)  
and bread and jam on Monday

I even got to go to school  
on a bus  
long enough to get a report card  
good attitude            tries hard  
still no files to say what grades completed  
keep up the good work

kick-the-can at nightfall  
near death experiences with the nasty left-over Christmas goose  
and dropping the baton in the annual  
spring parade  
the stuff holidays are made of

skipping school with my cousin  
 to watch fuzzy television  
 because we couldn't get close enough to see  
 when everyone was home

I was never afraid of the dark in those days  
 so cozy        all seven of us  
 in the converted basement    now dorm  
 the bucket in the corner  
 because the outhouse was too far    too dark    too cold  
 for nighttime visits

I never got the feeling  
 my aunt        minded sharing her holiday life  
 especially those evenings she gently placed another warm facecloth  
 over yet another terrible earache

As I engage my students in conversations both written and oral we uncover layers of being and in so doing model a mindfulness (Pinar & Irwin (Eds.), 2005, p. 12) that will allow a space of speech for those students who have been silenced by difference. I am reminded of Aoki in that I “present myself not so much to tell stories, but to participate in a questioning” (Aoki, 1987/2005, p. 349). Like a parent or the old man in the community coffee shop, I am the stories of my youth. Many before us have also lived through difficulties related to being separated from family or just trying to fit in to a new place. Life might be simply the process of learning to belong. Hopefully the voices of my

students will create conversation that questions why the whispers of so many cry, “Where?” in the imposed silence of our shared humanity, only to be broken periodically by the far-away echoes reminding everyone, “We’re still here.”

### **Life as Lesson**

...I think that if I and other teachers truly want to provoke our students to break through the limits of the conventional and the taken for granted, we ourselves have to experience breaks with what has been established in our own lives; we have to keep arousing ourselves to begin again. (Greene, 1995, p. 109)

Like autobiographical writing in/about the classroom, autobiographical stories are also fundamentally good practice because other methods of instruction “do not require the author to examine how he or she is implicated in the very topics under analysis or criticism” (Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009, p. 38). It is one thing to learn *about* a topic but quite another to know you are engaged as a participant in the “curriculum of being human” (p. 2). Through the process of interacting with my students through my own carefully chosen experiences my students begin to position themselves within the larger context of “universe” even as they are finding points of contact with one another. Therefore engaging my students in conversation that is often storied is fundamental to my pedagogy as I invite them to explore their identities so they may be better prepared to place themselves in relation to other lives in literature and in life.

I had an afterschool conversation with one of my students who had been upset all week. I thought it was because she had done poorly on her last exam. She said her mom might be calling me, which isn’t too uncommon, especially with the students from out of town. “Had I heard anything?” she wondered. When I said no, she shut the door, which is an odd thing in my room. She said she just wanted to let me know why she had been so upset all week. It appeared her best friend

forever wasn't one any longer because she found out my student was gay. She also was concerned because this ex-friend was going to tell her parents, who apparently didn't know yet. My student added, "I can't believe I'm telling this to a teacher but I thought you should know." We talked about options and how supportive her parents were in all other ways yet I could also tell she didn't want me to make a big deal out of this. After she left the room, the other student who had been there for this conversation, and who also lived with her in residence, reassured me, "She'll be OK. She has a lot of support. Last week was a bad one but next week will be better." Sometimes my students are so wise. The longer I am here, the more tangled our lives become. (Professional Journal Entry: January 12, 2009)

As mentioned, there is risk involved in opening the door to honest student conversation and the potential for serious consequences makes even the best-intentioned teacher wary. Fortunately, my intuition was correct, we didn't make "a big deal" out of the problem but she continued to update me on how the dialogue with her parents was progressing. I measured success in this case by the letter the parents sent to the Premier (their home was outside Alberta) praising the kind and personalized care the school and community provided while their daughter lived far from home. They even identified specific individuals. Some stories do turn out well. Yet, I can't help but wonder what role the specific and individual life experiences of each teacher plays in creating opportunity for specific students' stories to be shared. Even though teachers may not always overtly share their own life stories, they *are* their stories and therefore create an environment where individual students are intuitively comfortable *becoming*.

### Memoir of Loss

My youngest brother grew up to be a very annoying person He was awkward socially, frequently lied, and embarrassed me often. Going home with our flamboyantly gay neighbor the night of my best friend's wedding comes to mind. This event happened soon after I was married when I was still trying particularly hard to make a good impression in one of the most conservative areas of Alberta. So, along comes my brother, blithely wrecking my carefully constructed image. I was cool though polite. Causing a scene would have been bad form.

He soon moved to Vancouver, rarely visiting, so I seldom had to consider why I found him so difficult to be around. The night I received the call from Vancouver General Hospital I was more than a little surprised to find Larry had designated me his next of kin in the event of an emergency. Hanging oneself in a garage definitely constitutes an emergency. Steve said he had been having lots of trouble with anger and addiction and after another big fight had just stomped out of the house. He was still alive when they called and luckily Steve was able to stay with him. We agreed it would be best to wait until the next call before I contacted anyone else.

As I waited through the next hours, during the darkest part of the night, I remembered what a cute baby my brother had been. I clearly remember my mother bringing him home from the hospital. She was balancing the baby with a dozen roses, long blonde hair streaming back as she reclined in the front seat of a white convertible. I think I was the most excited about our new brother. I fed him banana baby food (my favorite), warmed his bottles, and even changed

diapers. My other brother never seemed to like him much and that didn't change with time (my grandparents in Edmonton later claimed the reason they only had me come to visit each summer was because the two boys fought too much).

Later, when Larry was in elementary school and I was just starting to care about boys and clothes, he bought me a shiny Avon ring for my birthday. The lady I babysat for told me he had worked in her yard for hours to make enough money to buy me the present. I still have it in my box of old school buttons though I haven't looked at it in years.

By the time Larry was a teenager, I was preoccupied by my own social world, which purposely had little connection to my family. I had gladly relinquished the "parental" duties I'd handled when the three of us still lived with our mom when my dad took over custody. He had hired a housekeeper who lived with us for five years though we never really bonded. When the same housekeeper left I assumed many of her jobs but by then parenting my rascally brothers was no longer an option. My dad was a committed but scattered authority figure. He did have rules but avoided controversy at all costs. When my oldest brother started getting into trouble with the police Dad's solution was to move the family to Lethbridge. By then he was finding life with three teenagers difficult and hoped a change of pace would help everyone. It was my Grade 12 year.

The house we moved to should have been condemned (Dad thought it was a great deal because it was on a double lot) and because he figured we weren't staying in it long he didn't bother buying much furniture. The boys slept on

mattresses on the floor. I moved on the first chance I got. The boys weren't so lucky. It was never the kind of place you could bring friends to so increasingly nobody came home. Dad could never keep track of where the boys were, even when they should have been in school. Neither graduated from high school.

Of course Larry didn't have great social skills. Who would have taught him? Of course he lied. He wanted people to like him. The reason I didn't like being around him was he reminded me too much of the very insecurities I wanted to overcome, to forget.

Very early in the morning when Steve called to say it was all over, I asked why Larry had named me as next of kin. He told me, "Larry once said you were the only person in his family he could count on." I'm hoping to be a better teacher than I was a sister.

### **I Believe**

For life is no uniform uninterrupted march or flow. It is a thing of histories, each with its own plot, its own inception and movement toward its close, each having its own particular rhythmic movement; each with its own unrepeated quality pervading it throughout. (Dewey, 1934, p. 37)

Back when my present Grade 12 students were still in Grade 10, I had them do an assignment based on the old CBC radio program called *This I Believe*. It was one of the first assignments I gave to them and I deliberately set it up as a life writing activity in order for me to learn more about these students who had been strangers less than two weeks ago. The combination of this assignment and a journal response based on *The Power of a Word*, an assignment which asked students to identify a word or a phrase that had been a powerful force in their life, and why, told me much about my new students. I learned that this small group of students, mostly longtime residents of the area, were not

the right wing, stereotypical “rednecks” they had been portraying themselves as thus far. In fact, they were extremely thoughtful and knowledgeable regarding the present state of the world and their place in it. And they were storytellers! After a fairly brief lesson on incorporating narrative as a form of support within their responses, they created moving testaments to what they truly believed as sixteen-year-olds. The list included such profound ideas as: Nothing is really for free unless it is just little stuffed animals or t-shirts to promote a product, and we all know even that isn’t really free because they add it on to the product price. Or, people shouldn’t hide what they believe especially when it comes to discrimination. Discrimination is the monster in people’s hearts and it is wrong. Another student told a story he had heard during family supper about how people are targeted because they don’t conform. He used this to explain how he believed the world was unequal and not free and believed this was wrong. Another student worried about the increased religious discrimination in the aftermath of 9-11 and talked about how she believed the world needed more heroes. Yet another student reminded me of the power of second chances and related personal experiences where his family had supported his mistakes and given him second chances. He compared this to school where usually you don’t get a second chance and instead must keep working harder to make up for past mistakes. There were only a few hockey girls in this group and they all talked about their belief in the power of family, friends, and hard work.

This was not what I expected. That I was able to learn that this was a group of students who valued family, a strong work ethic, and social justice above all else was humbling. Everyone of this small group of eleven students took the assignment seriously and tried their best to explain what *is* most important for each of them. Their journals

were also surprisingly frank. An entry from my professional journal dated August 29, 2008 is telling.

As I mark journals this first Friday of my full week back to teaching I am reminded how amazing it is to be an English teacher. How quickly our students worm their way into our hearts and minds! One entry almost made me cry. It is from the brassy boy who keeps trying to trick me by changing his name with the other boy next to him. Much to his delight, he is often successful. I asked the class to complete a simple version of my Power of a Word assignment and he wrote about his family's move off their farm into town. He was struck by how an important place that was really his whole life could be taken away so quickly. He marveled how it had only taken a single day to move, to change his life so completely. Already so many stories and it is only the first week.

I listened and what I heard impacted the choices I made as their teacher for the next three years of our English Language Arts time together.

### **I Am**

Transforming the private into the public is a primary process of work both in art and science. Helping the young learn how to make that transformation is another of education's most important aims. (Eisner, 2002, p. 3)

Now these same students are in Grade 12 and are poised to live in this world as educated adults confident in what they believe and who they are. Well, not exactly. My research with this group shows an interesting tension that I have also observed with past Grade 12 students. While they feel the school system has prepared them in terms of a skills and knowledge set, many, irrespective of academic success, lack confidence in their ability to make successful personal choices in their immediate future. This was clearly

demonstrated during an informal interview with students in the form of a “purposeful discussion” (Holly et al., 2005, p. 157) one day during a class lunch in November, 2010. Twelve students participated in a discussion in response to questions posed ahead of time. “Does literature help us learn about life?” and “Does school help prepare us for life?” The intent of these questions was to talk about a) the place of story (as used in curriculum through literature and various texts) and, b) in the spirit of John Dewey, to better understand the role schooling has played in preparing students to become functioning members of a “democratic learning community, one which values both the general social welfare and the full development of human beings as individuals” (Dewey, as cited in Holly et al., 2005, p. 40). Excerpts from my journal reveal a class who has much to say about the role of education as it has shaped who they are *becoming*.

The first thing of note as I write about today’s conversation is how intensely engaged this group became for such an extended period of time. Students had been asking me for a homemade soup lunch, complete with my famous brownies, for ages. It has always been my tradition to “spoil” the Grade 12 class. I make breakfast on the morning of the diploma exams (always including Grandma Audet’s scones) so I can be sure all students are well fed, present, and emotionally calm. It has become a tradition that this group has been looking forward to since we first met over two years ago. Lunch is part of us spending time together –an English family of sorts. I made a deal that we would exchange some lunchtime for our class which immediately followed the break. In fact, we ate, talked, even argued, over lunch, all through class, and were late getting to next class. On top of that, a presentation on graphic novels that two students were supposed to

present was entirely missed. They offered to make the presentation during the last period of the day, which was a spare for them and which, luckily, I also had.

Remember this is last period of the day on a Friday and normally a free class for them. Everyone agreed to come back for the presentation and we continued the conversation for that hour-long class as well.

In answer to the first question about the importance of literature for learning, the consensus was that literature has definitely helped them learn more about life. As one student put it, “Stories about people seem to stick with us for a long time.” Yet they went on to make a distinction between old stories and current ones. While they acknowledged they needed a grasp of history to understand the context of “stuff now” they were frustrated by how little time was spent on what they described as related and meaningful learning. Most students nodded in agreement when one student gave an example, “We should be talking about actual events more...like what’s happening in Korea now.” This comment sprang from a conversation we had in English class because students had heard about a nuclear test program in North Korea and they wanted to understand more about it but “nobody would talk about it because it wasn’t their subject.” One very academic student suggested, “I understand how teachers have to teach the curriculum so we do well on our exams but there are lots of things to be interested in, to know, that we just don’t talk about.” This was the same class that had written so passionately about social equality when they were in Grade 10. Of course they needed to talk about this! While they recognized the importance of such core subjects as science and math they wished the concepts could be linked to more real life examples. As

one student quipped, “some courses are necessary but not necessarily engaging.” I am also reminded of an underlying sense of unease reminiscent of last year’s class who “shut down” once they received their first set of diploma results.

As in most conversations, what started out as simple responses to a teacher’s discussion question, one person at a time, soon evolved into sentences falling into each other’s ideas. Engaged learning can be chaotic. The following topics seemed most important for these students at this time.

Students resent the fact that courses for graduation are so prescribed. Many felt that by Grade 12 many of them were well aware of their strengths and weaknesses and that as long as students were “trying their best” they should be able to take a range of subjects that interested them, not necessarily academic. This led to a discussion about differentiated learning (they didn’t call it that) wherein they felt “all students should be supported at whatever level they were at.” As they talked, they came to an agreement that a certain amount of mandated curriculum “needs to be covered” so they could do well if they went on in school. But, they were very clear that more choices needed to be given to students about how they demonstrate their knowledge. One student gave the example of how I usually give a variety of choices for the ways in which students can complete assigned projects. In summary the consensus to this portion of the discussion was, “School is necessary for life but not related and really boring.” Ouch!

I then asked my students how teachers, including me, could make school more engaging. They suggested we need to pay more attention to what exactly students were having trouble understanding. They said they want more control

about what they should learn but only when they are old enough to have the necessary knowledge to start to think on their own. Eventually, through dialogue, these students came to recognize some basic skills were educational foundations that couldn't be skipped. But ultimately they could never agree on exactly what those were and at what point students were capable of making their own choices. Finally, they spoke about the importance of having the opportunity to actually talk about their education and wished they had been given more chances previously.

(Professional Journal Entry: November 26, 2010)

Several points are worth considering here. That eleven students, from a variety of places, with a range of academic success, can explore educational issues with such maturity is truly impressive. Given their demographics, I would suggest they aren't much different than students in many other schools across Canada, perhaps North America. Why aren't all students given more input into a system that clearly does much to shape their identity, for better or for worse?

The second point is that the students' own admitted disengagement with an academic culture that seems to have very little to do with the "real" world being discussed in their homes, often over the kitchen table, is surprising and troubling. Our school division recently installed Smart Board technology in every single classroom because it was deemed well worth the expense. In part, such technology is integrated into every room in an effort to increase student engagement through its ability to help teachers quickly access powerfully current information. Clearly, according to my students, it doesn't seem to be working. The question is, "Why not?"

The discussion continued. It related to the degree to which students believe school has prepared them for the next stage of their life and was particularly interesting because students strongly voiced a very simple opinion. “It hasn’t really.” The reasons given were very practical ones. While the intent of a class such as Career and Life Management (CALM) was an excellent one, most agreed the class itself “was a waste of time,” especially with regard to preparing them for future careers. This is particularly notable in view of the fact that, considering the small student sample, six different versions of the course were represented. “Schools should help us learn more about other schooling because lots of parents haven’t gone past high school so just don’t know how to help.” This led to a discussion about the role of parents relative to school. The students saw the role of parents as primarily supportive and financial while the school should be offering “a college preparation course to help high school students make better decisions about what they should do.” When I explained they had just described a portion of the aforementioned CALM class they seemed surprised. Interestingly, students were split on this discussion as several were of the opinion that while some direction regarding future choices might be helpful, at the end of the day “experience” is how we will learn best. Which brought us back full circle and to our missed presentation two students had prepared in response to the graphic novel *Maus I* (1986) by Art Speigleman. These students had no problem engaging their classmates in a serious consideration of the importance of the novel to help raise awareness about genocide. As well, they linked the discussion to current organizations (TAG, Red Cross) that encourage students to make a

difference. One student summed up their talk, saying, “Perhaps the point of us learning is to just get out there and do something about it.”

On a last note, impulsively I asked my students to describe what a classroom would look like in an environment where they were actually learning well. The answers were quick bursts of excited brainstorming. “We would have comfortable chairs, in a circle like we do when we are reading together in your class.” And there would be more stories because “I’d rather hear a story than read a chart because I’ll remember the story but I won’t remember the whole pros/cons thing and what was on each side.” Finally, one student explained she “...liked the days when I gave lots of choices about activities to do after I went over the stuff in class and after we had a discussion to make sure everyone gets it. Then we can each ask for individual help where we need it.” To me this sounds like Basic Lesson Planning 101. And, I thought I always did it! (Professional Journal Entry: November 26, 2010)

Such conversation told me a lot about the strategies that were working well for my students and the things I needed to change to become more effective. What they were saying was also very consistent with notes from the previous two years as discussed relative to issues already raised in this document. What I heard was, students are engaged through personal and meaningful dialogue about authentic topics in an environment where trust has been established.

I also learned my intuition with respect to the importance of familial structures was important to this group of students. They saw their own families as their major support group and expected the school to be an extension of that. The recognition that

their parents couldn't always give them school advice because they "hadn't gone past high school" or, for the hockey girls, were just too far away to maintain that kind of discussion, didn't mean they didn't see their family as the primary factor in shaping their identities, now and in the future. This was especially evident in their responses to my first major assignment of the year. The activity is a combination of students interviewing and recording responses for each of their classmates and then using that information to create a biography of one of the other students in the class. The student that each will write about is chosen randomly thus prompting conversations with students who may not have normally interacted.

The important aspect of this assignment is that students are not writing about themselves. They are asked to write about someone they may not know well; are making judgments about how they perceive another human being; and understand that that writing will be published and read by that person. One of the most gratifying parts of this assignment is the anticipation as students share what others have written about them. Obviously, as in many life writing activities, there is a certain amount of risk involved but this is far out-weighed by the genuine excitement created in the room as students share their work. That the work will be shared is made clear at the beginning of the activity, which also inspires the authors to rise to the occasion.

My eleven students wrote carefully constructed stories that scratched the surface of who they believed the subject of their biography to be. But in this, the first assignment, it was clear they were still getting to know one another. Four girls were new to our school and all were members of the hockey program. As well, several girls had left the school so they were still freshly missed. The theme of family, as identified by

other students, continued to be evident, even, not surprisingly, with the four newcomers, all away from home for the first time. These are some of the observations they made as they wrote about one another:

- She enjoys living on her family farm because of all the animals, and how she can go outside as soon as she wakes up and it doesn't matter what she looks like
- Her grandma has inspired her because of her honesty: she's trustworthy and pushes her to be a more individual person
- Knowing everyone in a small town is one thing she appreciates but she does not like how it gets boring, and if you get into trouble, everyone has a way of finding out
- She always has time for her friends and family
- Being in a small town is what he likes best: it's all he's known
- He also enjoys working on the farm and would like to own land of his own one day
- Everyday people are his inspiration. His dad, uncle, brothers and friends are a huge part of his life. He has learned a lot from the people he cares about and worked with them to know what it takes to get to where you want to be
- She has as grown up knowing everyone around her, however living in a small town has disadvantages. Everybody knows everything about her
- As he ages he is finding some of the finer things in life such as the true meaning of friends and family

- If he was able to, he would invite all of his friends and family to come live with him
- His school friends, memories that have influenced his life choices, what career he chose, and the person he has become
- Living in a small town is nothing like the city life, you know everybody, and she loves that
- She may seem like a “tough guy” but she really does have a soft spot, especially for her brother
- Her average day mainly revolves around a routine of going to school and doing consistent work that makes her miss being back at home...with her family, friends and Mittens, her cat
- She is from a small town so she’s used to living in a small town
- This compassionate attitude comes from her grandmother who she cited as one of her most inspirational role models. And she could cook! She remembers cinnamon buns and pickles (not together though!)
- After her intense practice and afterwards her workout with all of her fellow teammates they make their way back to their home away from home, which they simply call rez (Professional Journal Entry: September 19, 2010)

The cover page of this same assignment requires each writer to include a picture of the student being written about as well as a title summarizing the essence of what has been written. This group titled the assignments written about each other with such titles as: A Country Classic and Small Town Ginger, or, # Eight: No Big Deal, Only Just Begun, and The Winner Goes To... These titles indicated a second important means of

identification, especially at the beginning of the semester. As discussed in the vignette, *This Park Has Snakes*, there was an obvious polarization of the class into two distinct groups: the “town kids” and the “hockey girls.” That was one of the major reasons why I often rearranged the room into a circle of desks. When given the choice, these students usually sat in the two distinct groups. Yet, as previously documented in my professional journal entry (cf. p. 73), the students preferred to be in a circle, as a single undivided entity. I come back to the notion of family and community being a fundamentally shared group value despite their apparent tension. As discussed at the outset, my experience in this community has told me the kitchen is central to family and community relationships. My students have told me they learn best when the room is arranged in a fashion they themselves described much as my own description of the ideal kitchen-like classroom. By the end of the semester they also identify the importance of story and discussion as their preferred method of learning. In fact, most students compare their favorite classroom interactions, which I identify as informal “purposeful conversation” (Holly et al., 2005, p.157), with the conversations they regularly engage in with their own families, often at mealtime.

For the hockey girls this link to family is especially complicated, but I would argue the ability to engage in meaningful classroom conversation, both oral and written, is even more critical for their learning. They live in a residence far from home with about twenty other girls, most of whom they have never met before. Nobody has their own room and all meals are eaten in the dining room at a single long table. The housemother is a grandmother figure who sleeps in a suite slightly separated from the girls. Because they miss their families, it is important they fill the void to avoid becoming overwhelmed

by homesickness. That they form a bond, familial in nature, over the course of a year is undeniable. But, this bond also creates a barrier with the other students.

Critical to my teaching pedagogy is the ability to have meaningful inclusive classroom discussion. In order to do so my students must form a relationship of trust that supersedes school clichés. My research over the past two years indicates that the most effective way for me to establish camaraderie is to create a new school family within the walls of my classroom. Activities at the beginning of the semester focus on introductions, followed by literature that helps open doors in order to begin a process of sharing experiences through life writing activities. Slowly, we build a trust relationship that allows for dialogue and disagreement; one that fosters a certain amount of engagement and more opportunity to listen to and think about other perspectives. And, eventually, like family, we share dreams and disappointments. We disagree, we try to compromise, and we move on. Sometimes we even share meals. But, the food isn't the most important thing because if we couldn't stand to be in the room together food just couldn't be enough to keep us together. Just like my kitchen on the ranch.

The initial tension between the two groups of students is actually also, finally, an advantage because it is through the different shared perspectives that each is able to see a much broader spectrum of the human response to being seventeen in southern Alberta. These students learned best when they were given the opportunity to discuss as a way of finding meaning. In the spirit of *métissage*, these students are learning “to seek rapprochement...without erasing the differences” (Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009, pp. 37-38). In the course of a semester, or many more for some, they *became* much more aware of their place in a world much larger than their family, school, and the place they grew up.

The Final Student Survey, completed by this entire Grade 12 class on the last day of English, reinforced this finding.

The questionnaire (see Appendix B) consisted of five open-ended questions asking my students to comment on their experience while in my classroom. All students responded though one forgot to return his consent form, therefore total responses are out of a possible ten. The questions were asked in the same spirit as our verbal conversations, with a clear intent to learn from our experience of living educationally together for an extended period of time.

The activities the students found most memorable were overwhelmingly the two themed units. One, The Perils of Indifference, had *Night* (1960) by Elie Wiesel as the core text, and, as one of my students said, “*Night* and things relating to it were something that just stuck with you.” Interesting that creating an enduring memory of a text had become a criterion for success for this group. The second unit cited explored Individuality Versus Conformity and was a favorite “because of the important issues it discussed.” What I was hearing in answer to this question was that students first need to emotionally connect to text before they are able to explore it more critically.

The third question asked students to identify aspects of the class that would contribute to lifelong learning. All students noted the importance of class discussion relative to preparing them for life. Comments such as, “Discussion...focus us to think (or try to) objectively and discuss real world topics and issues” and “...opened our eyes to world issues and made us have our own opinions about it” were indicative of all responses. As one student wrote, “When we study texts we learn about human nature and life concepts that can be usable [sic] in the future.”

However, the responses to the question regarding which activities were helpful for diploma preparation as well as any suggestions for future classes varied, mostly according to students' preferred learning styles, and were often even contradictory. Students did agree a variety of literature and practice exams were helpful but there was little consensus beyond those. It seems students were leaving my room more confident about their lives than their diploma exams, which was an interesting lesson in terms of evaluating my own practice.

The last observation of note regarding the final student survey relates to the last question asking students how well their small, rural school prepared them for future success. Interestingly, every student felt the core subjects and those teachers were "good." A majority also expressed the idea that their school was too small to offer enough choices, especially where students had to take courses through Distance Learning (which can be likened to a correspondence course). The reason for this dissatisfaction stemmed from the lack of personal interaction in such classes, making them "a waste of time" and "boring" because "no one wants to learn from a book." So, these students made a clear distinction between learning *with* texts *through* discussion involving a teacher-participant and independent seatwork utilizing books.

### **A Time to Listen: Reflecting on What I Have Heard**

As I consider the final thoughts of the students themselves, I believe they feel it is critical for teachers to engage students in conversation as a primary learning strategy. As reported, students in Grade 12, six of whom had been my students for three years, cited discussion as the most important aspect of their learning in my English Language Arts class, in terms of a life skill. They strongly advocated for the use of entire class

discussion because they felt it contributed to understandings beyond their own personal perspectives. As one student summed it up, “discussion forces you to have opinions and think critically” (Student Survey #5).

Students were also strongly supportive of conversations between students and a teacher as a way to problem solve. Students appreciated the chance to speak to issues they felt were important to them and would agree with the observation of Holly et al., (2005) with respect to the importance group interviews, what I call conversation, because, “By inviting students (and parents) to have more of a voice in the classroom and a chance to challenge our understandings and actions, we are establishing conditions that encourage reciprocity out of which genuine understanding can grow” (p. 163).

However, in order for meaningful conversation to occur in a classroom, either between teacher and students and/or between the students themselves, there must be an atmosphere of trust. It is clear from this research that such a trust relationship is a lengthy process, requiring personal risks on the part of the teacher as (s)he establishes personal connections with the students, often through storied conversation and the sharing of life writing.

This alone has significant implications as we consider such issues as class size and the tendency to group and move students according to subject majors. Whether a student is in a class of ten or forty will significantly impact the ability of a teacher to engage students in whole class conversations. Whether a student moves from teacher to teacher throughout six or seven class periods or has a single homeroom will impact the student-teacher relationship. And finally, whether students are regrouped for each class

according to ability level or whether they stay together as a mixed-group long enough to learn their differences will affect opportunities to think and speak critically.

This research also highlights the importance of teacher reflection, in my case through life writing, as necessary professional development in order to critically consider the effectiveness of my teaching practice. My professional journal notes suggest the recursive nature of my practice. I make observations about individual students' responses to lessons and each other that indicate a specific kind of watchfulness. This informs choices for the next lesson and a process of learning and of pacing continues. And just barely underneath this professional watchfulness is the awareness that my personal experience is an integral part of my teaching self, just as the students themselves have brought their own personal stories to our classroom.

As teachers we are naturally building and rearranging the lessons of yesterday, but without the benefit of enduring evidence of the specific successes and failures as a result of the choices we make, it is difficult, even impossible to monitor progress. We must find ways to remember what we have done. For me monitoring progress is about writing the stories of my day. For example, my own notes suggest a tension most teachers feel as they struggle to engage the students while making sure all mandated curriculum outcomes are met. "I'm trying to figure out how to turn this life lesson into a conversation that aligns a little better with the standardized outcomes" (Professional Journal Entry: Oct. 31, 2008). Eventually these same notes become a longitudinal measurement of my professional well being some might describe as "a rich, evolving database within which the scholar can converse with herself" (Holly et al., 2005, p.17). I believe it is this kind of self-reflective wondering that also contributes to a deeper

understanding of how well my students may be learning. By extension, I would suggest the conversations teachers have with themselves are as important as the ones they have with their students since the nature of the “self” they bring to class is critical for student-teacher relationships.

In the course of this project, I have left many of these conversations with self unexplored. Not due to lack of interest but in the interest of brevity, and, admittedly, lack of confidence in my ability to give such important subjects their due respect. As I continue to move onward in my teaching and in my learning, I would like to explore the role of tension as a necessary factor in students’ ability to engage in dialogue resulting in new perspectives. I am increasingly directing my attention to the decisions that are made outside the classroom doors and would like to explore how conversation involving administration at all levels can include the students in more meaningful ways. Finally, I am most interested in finding ways to incorporate authentic life writing activities in curriculum planning across subject areas.

Through the reflective process of studying my professional journal and my life writing documents I have come to realize I bring to my teaching a strong sense of the importance of place and family. I am the tangled barbed wire wrapped around and between the fence posts that mark this place I now belong to. That my students share a strong sense of both place and family has been documented. But, is it because we both live in the same place and because it is the nature of this place to value family? Or, have my students simply come to mirror my own preoccupations?

Over the course of many conversations my students and I have grown to overflowing and are now so “entangled” (Deleuze & Parnet, 2002, p. viii) from our

dialogues it is difficult to tell where it all begins. But, perhaps the starting point matters less than the moment itself. It is enough to know many of my students learn best through the conversations we have had because we have shared our stories and have grappled with being human together. Just as the residents of our small rural community continue to visit over coffee in the time-honored tradition of sharing news and learning about life around the kitchen table.

Still Here

quietly drinking

overheard voices

of hot coffee talk

no sugar please

pass the milk if it isn't sour

it's really true

he sips

over porcelain cracks

like a snaking river

interrupting the comfortable pattern

of quarter sections lines

on a county map

funny how everyone enjoys

a taste of truth

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## Appendix A

### Student and Parent Consent Form



## PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

### **My Classroom as My Kitchen: Attending to the Conversations Within**

Your child is being asked to participate in a study entitled *My Classroom as my Kitchen: Attending to the Conversations Within* that is being conducted by Christina Audet. Mrs. Audet is a graduate student in the Faculty of Education at the University of Lethbridge and you may contact her if you have further questions by phone (403-647-2151) or by email (christy.audet@uleth.ca).

As a graduate student, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a culminating project resulting in the degree of Master of Education. The project is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Erika Hasebe-Ludt. You may contact my supervisor at 403-329-2066 or by email at erika.hasebeludt@uleth.ca.

The purpose of this research project is to consider the place of conversation relative to student learning and teacher-student engagement and to do so through a qualitative life writing research narrative.

Research of this type is important because it hopes to make the following contributions: 1) create a meaningful understanding of the term and role "conversation" as it applies to education, and 2) develop an increased awareness of the importance of students' "voice" as a means of engagement. 3) It also highlights the importance of teachers' voice through autobiographical narrative and research.

Your child is being asked to participate in this study because the themes that arise in the course of the research may be based on observations made while working with your child in an educational setting.

If you agree to allow your child to voluntarily participate in this research, your child's participation will include teacher's observations about instructional conversations only, which will be recorded in written format as the teacher researcher's journal entries. These entries may be reconfigured into life writing narrative as research.

The potential risks are mostly of a social nature since there is a possibility that the people written about may recognize themselves even though names and details have been altered. This could create a sense of alienation or create a change in relationships, especially if the observations are not agreeable to their own perceptions regarding the situation.

These risks will be balanced with an opportunity for all participants to read the research before it goes to final publication and they may request changes to mitigate those risks at that time. All names and details will be altered to protect the status of the participants.

The benefit of this research is that by observing and writing about conversation students, teachers, parents, and others who are part of the education system will be more informed regarding the use of conversational and life writing strategies as important components to create more cooperative, empathetic classrooms.

Your child's participation in this research is completely voluntary and there are no grades attached to the observations. If you do decide to allow your child to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw from the study your child's data will not be used.

In terms of protecting your child's anonymity names, gender, and any other identifying information will be altered.

Your child's confidentiality and the confidentiality of the data will be protected by destroying electronic audiotapes immediately after they have been transcribed into field notes. The original version of field notes will be destroyed five years after completion of the project.

It is anticipated that the results of this study will be shared with others as the written final project and possibly in educational journal articles and public presentations.

In addition to being able to contact the researcher and the supervisor at the above phone numbers, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Chair of the Faculty of Education Human Subjects Research Committee at the University of Lethbridge (403-329-2425).

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researchers, and that you consent to having your child participate in the study.

<i>Name of Student</i>	<i>Signature</i>	<i>Date</i>
<i>Name of Parent or Guardian</i>	<i>Signature</i>	<i>Date</i>

***A copy of this consent will be left with you, and  
a copy will be taken by the researcher.***

## Appendix B

### Student Survey

#### Grade 12 – ELA Final Survey 2011 – Mrs. Audet

**Could you please fill out the following survey in order that I have a sense of the activities that were helpful to you both in this, your last year of English, and in other years you may have spent with me.**

What activities (texts, units, assignments, food, ideas...anything, really) did you find most memorable? Please explain why.

What activities helped prepare you for your diploma? Please explain. Also give suggestions for improvement.

What aspects of classes here in this room do you think will be of use to you as you continue with your "life"?

Did you use a graphic novel as support in your diploma exam responses? Why or why not?

Would you say Warner School provides its students the opportunity to find future success? Explain, please.

***Thanks for doing this.  
I'm going to miss all of you so email every now and again  
to let me know how you are doing.  
Take care☺***