

**ON THE TRAGEDY OF NEST-BUILDING: A HERMENEUTIC INQUIRY INTO  
CARE AND POSTSECONDARY DESIGN EDUCATORS**

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## **Dedication**

To all the students and colleagues  
who have inspired me to  
wear my heart on my curriculum.

## **Abstract**

Although postsecondary design education has and continues to depend on practitioner-educators to teach design studio courses, little research has been conducted into how practitioner-educators impact the curriculum and classroom, and thereby the discipline. Through a hermeneutic inquiry approach including two interviews with practitioner-educators at a Canadian art and design university, the thesis explores the experiences of designer-educators and how their understandings and self-understandings impact teaching and learning in the studio classroom. Multiple conversations explore the deep care that educators have for the students and the discipline and the accompanying tensions that make an education based in Noddings' ethic of care both rewarding and difficult. I argue that the limitation of an ethics of care lies in the assumption of the separateness of being and look to Sōtō Zen founder Dōgen's teachings to understand care in the context of interconnection and the inbetween.

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## Prologue

I am usually not a superstitious person but “Friday the 13th” was heavily on my mind that day. On what would be my last day in room 552—a fluorescently lit concrete space with mismatched desks and chairs and an out-of-date and oft broken heating system—I was keenly aware of the distance between me and my students. The physical—and now “social”—distance was there, but more than anything else, it was the distance created by my own fear of the unknown. I felt the same from some of my students, though it could have been my own projection. After weeks carefully developing relationships within the design studio classroom, an invisible and little understood force was working to pull us apart.

As is common practice in a design studio, that day students were to gather in small groups to critique each other's work one final time as they prepared to submit their assignment the following week. Before starting such an exercise, I often remind them of some points of consideration that I would like them to touch upon, as well as to keep the critique to the work, rather than making it personal. That day, I started with something wholly different. It went something like this:

I know that there are things going on that none of us really understand. I have as many questions as you do, but regardless I want to make sure that you feel comfortable. If you do not want to be in a small group, I will discuss your work individually at a distance.

I tried to keep class as “normal” as possible. About a third of the students requested to meet with me individually, so we did at what we felt was a safe distance. We had no masks at this point. We didn’t even really understand what we were in fear of. The conversations were not dissimilar to what would occur on any other day—What formal design choices were made? Is the intended communication supported by those decisions? If not, why not?—but I have a distinct recollection that it was quieter than usual that morning. There was an eerie feeling. Less energy, less laughter.

I did not have to once ask the group to quiet down—something that was happening at least once a week with this particular group of students.

I remember thinking to myself, “what is the appropriate distance to keep”? What if some of my students are more susceptible to illness? What if they have loved ones at home who are immuno-compromised? Afterall, one student had already emailed me in the morning to tell me that she would be absent that day fearing exposure for her multi-generational household. It is not like I am a family doctor who knows the family medical history of each person, but at that moment, I wished that to be my superpower (I know, it’s weird). I wanted to respect all those particulars and simultaneously protect myself, and in turn, my own family.

By the end of the class a few hours later, there were already rumours about the possible closure of campus the following week. Instead of discussing expectations for next week and fielding questions about their homework, we talked as a class about concerns for which none of us had answers. I tried to assure them that their learning will not be jeopardized, regardless of the decisions administrators will make (as if I have any control). Most were concerned about how they will hand in homework, or whether they will be able to access their lockers should the campus close. As students, their worries were generally about the practicalities related to being a student—heartwarming for me that they are not panicking about a pandemic, but also worrisome because I could already sense that locker access and project submission could be the tiniest of concerns in the grand scheme of things. People were dying, and we knew very little about anything surrounding this new virus. “Hopefully I’ll see you next week. If things change, I will email you.” And that was it. I didn’t step into a classroom or interact with students in person for 560 days until September 24, 2021.

Although my students and I “got through” that day—they received constructive feedback from me and their peers to reflect upon and iterate their designs—the rest of the semester became very different from what any of us had planned. Following the lead of other institutions across Canada (and the world), by the end of that weekend communication was sent out to the university community informing everyone that the campus would be closed for at least the week. Monday evening, communication regarding the use of the school’s online meeting software was sent to all students and employees. Although not official, it seemed inevitable that the rest of the semester would happen from home, so on Tuesday, the department Chair, another instructor, and I set up an online group for departmental faculty so that we could begin meeting as soon as possible to share information and learn the new technology required to continue our teaching and learning. Regardless of whether we returned or not, we felt that it was better to plan for the worst and hope for the best.

My email account and organizational chat during this time are a record of a flurry of activity. Many correspondences were to ask and answer questions and to help faculty to prepare for the remaining four weeks of the classes. Many others were to students, reassuring and calming fears. As I have been doing regularly for the last three years, I continued to send information emails to students in the communication design department. Usually these included information about events and news items, and to remind students of upcoming deadlines for opportunities such as employment and scholarships. Now these emails became not only about providing academic-related information, but also my way of keeping a human connection with the student community, if only through disembodied words and images sent through the digital ether. Reading these months later, my desire to maintain a sense of normalcy for the students is palpable. There are jokes, emojis, and memes, and “good” news amongst the more banal or

sobering. They are attempts to make light of a situation that in no way resembles any sort of normal that any of us had ever experienced.

For a faculty group with almost no online teaching experience, understandably their focus became about technology. In addition, without a dedicated teaching and learning centre in our institution, the resources provided were sparse and mainly technology-focused. As useful as “how-tos” are, there was little information about the “why-tos”. Both the institution and faculty worried about instrumental issues around curriculum and teaching. From administration: *How much of the semester’s work has been completed? Have the majority of course outcomes been met?* From faculty: *How would students submit assignments? How can I get students to do the in-studio work at home? What if students do not turn their webcams on? What if they don’t attend class?* Although these concerns were understandable and by no means unnecessary, it felt to me that there was a lot of “covering of asses” and “checking of boxes” from an institutional perspective, and from the faculty perspective, there seemed to be a misunderstanding or forgetting that acquiring digital skills out of context may not necessarily address their teaching needs or support student learning, especially now that at least some of the curriculum-as-planned could not make its way to becoming a lived curriculum as they had envisioned (Aoki, 2004). Nor does technology alone address issues regarding student-teacher relationships or the abrupt severing of the ties that students themselves had developed over the semester.

Frequently, both formally in emails, conversations, and meetings I advocated for a focus on maintaining a relationship within and through the curriculum. To me, teaching the skills and knowledge is never enough, but at this juncture, I wondered if it was even the most important thing. This is not to say that abandoning the curriculum entirely would be a solution. As a design educator, I have both a desire and obligation to address the subject matter. It was rather a

question of how to balance the needs of the subject matter, teacher, and student simultaneously when we are all facing more than the usual range of difficulties.

In my mind, even during times we consider normal, this is what the design curriculum should be—a relational and “situational praxis” (Aoki, 2004, p. 116). Curriculum is and should be a living breathing thing, arising from a continuous dialogue between the three parties — subject matter (and the field which it represents), student, and teacher. It is not centered around any one party, but rather arises out of a conversation between the three and continuously evolves through conversation. With the disruption, we would need to find new ways to have these conversations. However, even during the last decade when we weren’t under these pandemic circumstances, what I have witnessed over the years is not always a dialogical, messy, and alive curriculum. At times I have found the design curriculum to be too neat, with a disproportionate focus on aesthetics and skill-acquisition and less consideration for the human needs of the parties involved—students, teachers, and the people for whom ultimately design is meant. Aesthetic understanding and skills are no doubt important. Without them, a designer could not create, for example, a mobile app that is simultaneously functional for its purpose and aesthetically appropriate to that purpose. However, what is often overlooked is that although the two alone may produce a competent design artefact, something more is required for it to be elevated to the type of artefact that connects people—the “audience” or “user” in design speak—with what matters to them.

Although I had been reading about and around the ideas of an ethics of care (Noddings, 2002) and curriculum as “complicated conversation” (Pinar, 2015, p. 109), in the weeks and months following March 13, 2020, something became much clearer for me. Without care and conversation—based in trust for one another, generosity, and humility—no amount of exercises,

readings, essay writing, projects, critiques, and presentations would on their own help students in becoming thoughtful and caring contributors to society, both within and far beyond their capacity as communication designers. Yet to commit to a curriculum based in care and conversation is to simultaneously commit to the uncertainties and tensions that accompany it.

## CONVERSATION 1

### On a Hermeneutic Approach to Thesis Writing: What the Robins Taught Me

There's no set method with hermeneutics. You might not make that nest you're envisioning now.

—Richelle Marynowski<sup>1</sup>

Each year a pair of robins (*Turdus migratorius*) breed in my backyard. Their nest is intertwined with and perched upon the electrical cables that connect my 60-plus year-old bungalow to the urban grid. It sits just above and to the side of my back door. They have used it for three years now, and each season I have watched their comings and goings with curiosity. They have become important signs of the changing seasons, especially during the pandemic while I am so often homebound.

In the late spring and early summer as they wait for the chicks to hatch, the protective parents fly back and forth, swooping above our heads as we enter and exit the house, until they realize that we mean no harm. When the clutch arrives, male and female each take turns to care for their young. While one keeps a protective watch from a nearby branch, the other flies off to secure sustenance for their perpetually open-beaked brood. The eager and hungry chicks look like a collection of ceramic pie birds. After a few weeks of gorging, sleeping, and jostling, they come down from the nest, not so gracefully and unperturbed by our curious but gentle dog, to practice the flying and worm-finding that will further fuel their growth and flight. Their habitat expands larger day by day, until after a few weeks they are gone, ready to migrate and perhaps return to the area the following year to start the nest-building process themselves.

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<sup>1</sup> This comment that Dr. Marynowski made during my thesis proposal presentation has stayed with me.



Although a single species will build similar nests, no two are the same. For bird species that cover a range of ecosystems, the materials that they use vary according to what is available in their habitat. In my suburban backyard in Western Canada, this seems to be mostly dry grass, twigs, leaves, as well as weathered frayed rope of some kind and shredded bits of white plastic, perhaps from a shopping bag. In past years and in other nests, I have also seen tinsel, plastic twist-ties, and cloth ribbon. They use what the land provides, and the land here is a mix of natural and artificial. I see them bringing these materials to the site, grass by grass, twig by twig, mostly small but at times surprisingly large relative to their bodies. They can also be seen flying away with materials that, for whatever reason (or by instinct), have been deemed unsuitable for its dwelling at this time. The robins seem to make deliberate choices of materials in the construction of the structure (Biddle et al., 2017).

A nest's shape, although taking a generally spherical and cup-shaped form, is site-specific. A quick search reveals that there seems to be no particular geometric form other than "nest-shaped". In this instance, my feathered neighbours have judiciously built against the exterior of our house and around the two electrical cables that protrude out of its side. As such, it is lopsided and rounder in the exposed areas but flattish against the wall. Although south facing, they are protected from the heat and elements by the generous soffit above. It is a perfect place from which to raise and send off their young. This is perhaps the reason they keep returning, year after year, once even raising three clutches in a season.

The robins have no blueprint to work from, and the nest they have formed is a product of their own biological instincts imprinted into their genetics, their environmental context and how they relate to it (or learn and adapt to flourish within it). It is, in many ways, a metaphor for writing a hermeneutic thesis. Or rather, it is a metaphor for writing this specific thesis.

Its construction—the thesis, not the nest—in a loose sense began when I started to contemplate my own situation as a design educator. *Who am I? Why am I the educator I am (and conversely why are others the way they are)? How did I get here and where am I going?* Questions without simple answers. A call (Heidegger, 1927/2010) to something that I had yet to recognize or understand. My graduate school experience since has allowed me the time and space to better understand myself both professionally and personally and how these interconnect through interpreting and trying to understand the ideas and experiences of others who have asked similar questions before, such as Ted T. Aoki, William F. Pinar, David W. Jardine, and Nel Noddings.

I had always felt that my own background as a Japanese immigrant, my prior education in the sciences and social sciences, and my work as both design practitioner and educator have had something to do with the way I approach design education (and perhaps life in general), but these feelings were still dormant and not connected to words. Reading Aoki's (2004) writings in which he contemplates his own inbetweenness and the accompanying tensions as a Japanese-Canadian and what meaning that holds for him as a teacher and scholar gave form to my feelings for the first time and gave me permission to explore my own inbetweenness. Trying to understand myself through and with others uncovered my interest in ethics, the central importance of relationships in my life and that of being in between, as well as my need for an aesthetic expression. With these (self-)revelations, so too did the topic come into greater focus.

Although my positionality as a researcher was and continues to be important and learning about myself was and continues to be of great value, after some study I realized I no longer wanted to be focused entirely on myself. Perhaps this is what the Kyoto School of Philosophy (itself a philosophy of inbetweenness) calls “negative education”, in which “by letting go of the

self, of the attachment to the subject (and its duality from the object) of its adherence to the one-sidedness of life vs. death, good vs. evil” (Seville, 2016, p. 643)—by becoming *no-self*—we can become better attuned to and come to understand the complex and paradoxical nature of reality and the self. This is, however, being overly generous to my own intellect. It is perhaps equally so that I would be lonely and bored if it were just myself and my thoughts. I need others to be part of the conversation, much like at a lively and discursive dinner table with friends and family, good food and wine.

In addition, my perspective is but one of an infinite ways of seeing and being. As I dwell in the world, my perception, my body is directed in certain ways while turned away from others (Ahmed, 2006). What is behind me and in my periphery are obscured and occluded. Without reaching out to others for their perspectives, any understanding I will arrive at will lack robustness and dimension. Not only do I seek conversation with others, I see conversation as a *requirement* for understanding. Thus, it is the conversational heart of hermeneutics—humble yet not withering, open yet not yielding, steadfast in its service to the topic of inquiry—that called me from my own conscience, from the future, and from the past (Gadamer, 1960/2013).

Perhaps too my response to the call of hermeneutics reflects my own quiet rage against the current political and cultural climate. Further enabled by technology that all too often serves itself and a select few rather than serving all humankind, idle chatter, magical thinking, spiteful rhetoric, and moral grandstanding masquerade as dialogue and conversation. Everyone has their personal megaphone on full blast while we each wear noise-cancelling headphones. In such a climate, I don’t feel that I need to be just another loud and disembodied voice advocating for me above all else. For this reason too, hermeneutics and its ethical orientation to the other (Dostal,

2021; George, 2020; Moules et al., 2015) is something I feel is crucial at this time. Not only does it call to me, it also supports and protects me, and gives me strength in an uncertain time.

The existing literature itself provided much opportunity for such conversation, but the particular context in which I dwell—postsecondary design education—has not yet been addressed in a substantial way. In part because there is so little existing literature on the lived experience of practitioner-educators in design education, it is important that this thesis in a small way begin to lay the foundations for such an understanding. The conversations about what it means to be a design educator is already in play, and we must begin to listen carefully. If the conversation has not yet begun in earnest, it is important for someone to start asking questions. A hermeneutic interview then, is ideal for this particular thesis because there is no theory or hypothesis from which to start, rather only a need for uncovering the hidden and taken for granted (Moules et al., 2015). Data collection therefore took the form of conversational hermeneutic interviews with two design educators in a Western Canadian art and design university.

Hermeneutic interview subjects are chosen for a reason (Moules et al., 2015). In this inquiry, the two interviewees were selected for a number of reasons. First, leading up to and during the interviews, I was a sessional instructor with an extended full-time contract and held the position of Associate Chair in the department. This meant that despite not being a permanent faculty member and holding no real authority—my duties were mainly in communication, Chair support, and faculty and student support—many within the university community saw me in a leadership position. To eliminate any sense of a conflict of interest, it was important that any interviewee was a full-time permanent faculty member whose position was secure and who did not feel obligated to participate in any way. Second, the department graduates a diverse range of

students including graphic designers, photographers, illustrators, and advertisers. Despite our different roles, we take the view that all students are communication designers<sup>2</sup> above all else. Regardless of the subject matter, the purpose is always communicating with an other. In order to represent this particular characteristic, it was important that the faculty members with whom I would engage in hermeneutic conversations represent a discipline other than my own, namely graphic design. As such, the two interviewees selected are an advertiser and illustrator in their non-teaching professional lives. Finally, the two have very different backgrounds in that one, like myself, is a graduate of the program in which we now teach, while the other is not. I felt that this too was an important difference that may help to shed light from multiple perspectives. As with all research involving human participants, the research process and procedures, including participant selection criteria were submitted to and approved by the University of Lethbridge Human Participant Research Committee in March 2021.

Data analysis as interpretive writing are my equivalent to the robin's nest-building. Like the robin's process, my own process is an organic one. There is no blueprint. No hypothesis. No set method (Moules et al., 2015). There is no initial plan of what "materials" my nest would be composed of—only questions and a desire to understand. There are countless articles and books ranging from the theoretical to practical, philosophical to psychological, historical to contemporary. There is even a novel. Like the robin who collects from its environment and at times even discards materials, I too have collected and discarded as I have seen fit for *this* inquiry. The words of others and myself—in themselves artifacts of lived experiences (and rich in interpretation)—are the stuff of which this nest is inspired and made. Reading, writing,

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<sup>2</sup> Communication designers, and visual communication designers specifically, "work on the interpretation, organization, and visual presentation of messages... This job, beyond cosmetics, has to do with planning and structuring, production, and evaluation of communication." (Frascara, 2004, p. 3)

interviewing, conversing with peers and professors are my equivalent of the robin's mudding and weaving. In the place of twigs and frayed rope nestle such things as the ideas and words of Aoki, Noddings, Jardine, Pinar, and Dōgen; the experiences, reflections, and interpretations of colleagues; old emails exchanged with students; those who have taken this path in education, healthcare, and social work (Moules et al., 2015; Spier, 2018); and my own experiences. Push and pull, in and out, folding over and under, adding and removing. It is a process that is both of this moment and one in the making since the beginning of time. It is one that cannot be replicated.

It is doubtful that the birds had any idea what their nest would look like before and while it was built (and perhaps it doesn't really matter to them). Regardless of its form, the nest speaks volumes in all its beauty, density, functionality, and complexity. It is a representation of the robin as a species and its evolutionary history; a singular mating pair and its relation to their environment; and the care this pair has for its young and for the future. Like the nest, this (necessarily messy) thesis is unplanned, except in its purpose—to better understand how I (we) simultaneously as design educator(s) and design practitioner(s) make sense of who I (we) am (are) in the classroom. It represents the traditions of the practitioner-educator in design education; practitioner-educators in one particular educational context in a small corner of the world; our own personal histories; and the care we have for our discipline, the students as individuals, and for the future of our community. Both nest and thesis are, in their own ways, conversations given aesthetic form, things that reveal much about its builder, its environment, and the relationship between, a place where cultivation (*Bildung*) occurs (Gadamer, 1960/2013), and from which something might possibly take flight.

## CONVERSATION 2

### On Ethics of Care and Higher Education: The Space/Time Between Persons

How I treat you may bring out the best or worst in you. How you behave may provide a model for me to grow and become better than I am. Whether I can become and remain a caring person—one who enters regularly into caring relations—depends in large part how you respond to me. (Noddings, 2002, p. 15)

“I’m here for myself first. Then the students. The institution is last.” Despite teaching for only a couple of years, this blatantly hierarchical statement made by a long-time instructor dumbfounded and angered me. The context in which the words were spoken was a faculty association meeting which, at least from my perspective, seemed more an opportunity to voice grievances and place blame, rather than to discuss and try to solve the problems that affected our ability to do our work as artists, designers, and educators. Perhaps the outburst came from a place of frustration or exhaustion accumulated over the semesters. It would be unfair to speculate what was behind the statement, especially after all these years. I have heard similar sentiments on multiple occasions since. Regardless, the significance here is that I have carried this statement with me since as a reminder of what I *do not* want to become.

By no means is this the only way I have experienced university faculty. I have also seen warmth, generosity, and genuine care. I have been in classrooms where the instructor not only knew my name but asked questions about my welfare. I can still distinctly visualize one instructor during my final year of design studies knocking at the door of another class I was in so that he could lend me rare books that he felt would help me with my research. Another time a German professor invited our entire class to her home for a traditional German Christmas celebration. We crammed by the fireplace in a cozy living room, ate Pfeffernüsse, drank Glühwein and played with her Airedale terriers while trying to converse in a language which we were only starting to understand. Another design instructor invited the entire graduating class

and faculty to her home for a party where she prepared a whole meal including shepherd's pies—both regular and vegetarian—in multiple giant commercial-sized pans. We ate, drank, danced, and laughed into the night, knowing that we were finally free from school deadlines and exams. Such experiences of care by educators continue to inspire me to “pay it forward” in my own teaching practice.

Still, if I consider the times I have felt anonymous and distanced from those teaching me, the times I have felt a true sense of care in my postsecondary educational career—three undergraduate degrees and this graduate degree—are in the minority. I have sat in many lecture halls with hundreds of other student peers. In many of these classes, assignments were graded by graduate teaching assistants and the multiple choice exams were fed through a machine. The instructor of record likely only knew us by our student identification numbers. Even in more intimate classrooms, there were instructors who could not (or would not bother to) remember our names. I also know that this is not only my experience. Since I have become an educator myself, multiple students who have completed some level of postsecondary education at larger comprehensive universities have commented on how I and other instructors make them feel like they matter, not just as students but as individual human beings with a life beyond the classroom. Is true care that rare? This is distressing.

If it is rare in life, there has certainly been much scholarship in care, the relationship between ethics and care, and the role of care in education. Indeed, the question of *how we shall live* has been the focus of many philosophers, educational theorists, and the general public since the time of Aristotle. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, he examined in depth what it meant to live the good life (*eudaimonia*), what traits or dispositions were needed to do so, and observed that virtuous people had certain characteristics and acted in ways that allowed them to live the good



life (Noddings, 2002). Therefore it was important that these virtues be identified and studied to provide people with real life examples which they too can emulate. Morality, for Aristotle, was agreed upon by a community, and could be learned, acquired as a character of the person (Noddings, 2002; Slote, 2010).

The influence of Aristotle's virtue ethics is everywhere in character education today, in which stories, parables, and biographies about those deemed virtuous are used as examples for students to identify with and model (Noddings, 2002). I too am reminded of these virtues when I drive past an elementary school close to my neighbourhood. *Patience. Courage. Justice.* Each month, the outdoor reader board announces a new "virtue of the month", and I often wonder what happens to the other 11 while the teachers and students focus on this month's desired disposition. Are they collecting dust in the storage room, quietly (and no doubt patiently) waiting for their turn to come around again? I also wonder about their relationship with the months. December is always the month for generosity. Surely, there are many more virtues than just 12, so who chooses which virtues get the spotlight, and based on what criteria? (Hermeneutically) inquiring minds want to know.

Unlike Aristotle who based his understanding of ethics on empirical evidence, Kant's highly influential categorical imperative (Johnson & Cureton, 2021) removed ethics out of the real world and into the abstract (Noddings, 2002). For Kant, only those behaviours that can be objectively and rationally derived using logic are considered virtuous and universal moral absolutes, with any deviations considered irrational and immoral (Johnson & Cureton, 2021). For example, lying would be considered immoral and irrational under any circumstance. Even if it could mean that someone's life might be saved. Under this strict standard, lying to save the life of a persecuted family—something that Jewish sympathizers did throughout WWII— would also

be considered irrational and immoral. There is no room for emotions or contextual specificity for Kant. It seems incomplete and too blunt an instrument for a classroom full of living breathing human beings.

As for the ethics of care, its roots can be traced to the moral sentimentalism of the 18th century British Isles, itself influenced by the Judeo-Christian emphasis on love (*agape*) and kindness (Slote, 2007). Although each philosopher held a slightly different perspective, moral sentimentalists such as Hume, Hutcheson, Shaftesbury, and Smith, in general argued that morality was not based on reason alone (Kauppinen, 2021), a very different stance than that of Kant and other ethical rationalists. Although the term only appeared in German in the 19th century (*Einfühlung*) and English in the early 20th century (*empathy*), moral sentimentalists saw our ability to feel another's pain (and to want to remove that pain) as the source of our ethics (Slote, 2007). For them morality was not based on a set of rules that reside separately from ourselves, but rather in how we see ourselves in others. Moral sentimentalism not only acknowledged that emotions indeed play a part in moral judgements, but rather that they supersede reason (Kauppinen, 2021).

Contemporary ethics of care can trace its roots to moral sentimentalism and gained prominence in the 1970s and 80s with the emergence of feminism in the academy (Slote, 2010). From a psychological perspective, Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice* (1982) presented a groundbreaking critique of Kohlberg's stage theory of moral development. Kohlberg's theory is firmly rooted in a rational view of morality and highly influenced by Piaget's developmental theory of cognitive development and Rawls' Theory of Justice (Noddings, 2016; Adams, 2015). In this framework, as an individual develops moral reasoning, they progress through three levels (pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional) each with two stages (Adams, 2015).

Gilligan's research found that on average respondents whose decision-making was based not only on principles of justice but also on care considerations scored lower in Kohlberg's framework. As the traits representing care are often associated with women, Gilligan critiqued the inherent bias in Kohlberg's model—specifically that the perspective was limited by Kohlberg's own taken-for-granted assumptions which led to research that only included male subjects. Gilligan coined this approach “ethics of justice” in contrast to the “ethics of care” (Gilligan, 1986, p. 327).

From the educational philosophy perspective, the work of Noddings has been most influential since the 1984 publication of her *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*. Noddings too critiques the limitations of traditional moral education such as those based in Aristotelian, Kantian and Neo-Kantian virtue ethics, utilitarianism, and pragmatism (Noddings, 2016; Noddings 2002) and looks to a more relational approach to ethics.

Especially in contrast to Aristotelian and Neo-Kantian ethics which view the individual as a moral agent who makes reason-based moral decisions out of an obligation to do the right thing, Noddings' ethics of care—also referred to as relational ethics—takes a care-based approach to morality which is contextual, situational, and relational (Bergman, 2015). Because of this, there is no list of universal virtues that guide our moral behaviour in an ethics of care. There are no categorical imperatives to which we must adhere. What guides the care ethicist are the questions “what is the good life?”, “how shall we live?” (Bergman, p. 156) and to further emphasize our interconnectedness with one another, I would add “how shall we live together?”. For Noddings and other care ethicists such as Michael Slote (2007), what one ought to do cannot be separated from the particularities of the situation and the nature of the relationship between the carer and cared-for.

As an example, I return to truth-telling, a commonly held virtue. If it is based on Kant's categorical imperative, lying would not be permissible under any circumstance. As it happens, my name, Naoko (直子), means "honest/direct child" in Japanese<sup>3</sup>. As a child I recall thinking how difficult it was to live up to my own name. As any child would, little white lies were something I would tell from time to time, only to feel a deep shame about my inability to be who I was in name. However, being a precocious child, I would also wonder whether lying could be okay under some circumstances. If, for example, I could save someone from being hurt with a lie, would that be bad? If I tell my friend that the path to school is under construction and take a different route instead because I knew her bully would be waiting for her on our usual route that morning, would such a lie be wrong? My friend would neither be anxious nor be hurt physically; her bully would not get into trouble (nor perhaps feel shame long after the incident); I would not be caught in the middle. Honesty, I felt, was clearly not a virtue in this scenario. Kant would have disagreed, and who was I to refute such a great and influential philosopher? I was only a kid. But I think Noddings or Slote might back me up.

Instead of being duty-bound to universal principles, ethical decision-making is guided by the relationship—the *stuff* between two individual human beings. Aoki demonstrates this poignantly through the example of Miss O who daily lives out the curriculum-as-planned with Andrew, Sara, Margret, Tom, and the other children, tending to their individual needs. (Aoki, 2004). In another example, when reading about Jardine "squatted down beside the student's desk" (Jardine et al., 2003, p.2) as he helps her with a grade 2 math problem, I can visualize the care he has for this student in the rounding of his back as he squats (not easy for some of us as we age) and the wrinkled fingers he spreads out for her to bend and extend as she adds and

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<sup>3</sup> The kanji character 直 also has the meaning of "to fix" or "make right".

subtracts. These are not examples of teachers acting out of a sense of duty and adherence to an abstract principle, be it derived through logic or from the divine. Since caring for the other means attending to the *individual* needs of the other in that moment, the specificity and contextual aspect of the ethic of care is crucial. Returning to Miss O's classroom, Tom's needs today are different from Sara's or those of any other student, and different from his needs yesterday. Miss O knows this only because she has dwelled with them and cares for them as individuals, rather than as abstract and generic students (Aoki, 2004). Aoki and Jardine's examples are examples of care—of human beings responding to the needs of other human beings<sup>4</sup>.

This response to the need of the other is at the heart of the ethics of care in education as theorized by Noddings. While some caring—such as the natural caring that a parent has for a child—is spontaneous (Bergman, 2015), others are not. In such circumstances (such as in education), why and how do people come to care for others beyond the obligations of their occupation and without a moral imperative such as that of Kant? What compels them? Noddings (2002) says it is “because we value the relatedness of natural caring” (p. 14). If we understand ourselves as relational beings and we value caring and being cared for, teaching students to give and receive care can be seen not only as a responsibility to their moral development but also a benefit to our own moral self-understanding.

A relational ethic thus benefits both the care-giver and care-recipient, or in Bergman's words: “in the single act of giving and receiving care, the self of each person is confirmed.”

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<sup>4</sup> These very human examples can be contrasted to the stories shared by individual schools and jurisdictions about the ways in which they support character-building and citizenship in their local context in the 2005 Alberta Education report “The Heart of the Matter: Character and Citizenship Education in Alberta Schools”. The descriptions are of activities that can be conducted with either a class, grade, or the entire school. Although these too are important in school life, I cannot visualize the individual students and teachers in these narratives. Unlike the stories told by Aoki and Jardine, I cannot see the relationships and am not moved by them. It seems that Alberta's moral education curriculum too suffers from the curricular “tax audit” (p. 118) that Pinar (2015) laments.

(Bergman, 2015, p. 152). This focus on the relational—the inbetween—reminds me of how the Japanese language reflects our cultural understanding of being human. Written in kanji characters—人間 (*ningen*)—it translates literally to “space/time between (間) persons (人)”<sup>5</sup>. I—growing up in between—understand this to mean that without connecting to another we are by ourselves incomplete. Without me and the other facing one another this relational loop cannot be closed.

As is evident in Aoki and Jardine’s examples, an ethics of care assumes an inherent asymmetry to the relationship between care-giver and the care-recipient (Bergman, 2015). In the primary and secondary contexts, it is more obvious that the teacher is the care-giver while the student is the care-recipient. However, this asymmetry does not mean that care is unidirectional or benefits only the care recipient. Both the act of caring and being cared for confirm the self, so that whether you are in the position to care for, like a teacher, or are being cared for like a student, the act confirms the self (Noddings, 2002). However, this inherent asymmetry may be part of the reason why care is often mistakenly seen as more appropriate in the education of young human beings we categorize as children and not so in higher education. .

Unlike in childhood education where there is much scholarship around the ethics of care, there is, as both Barrow (2015) and Tang et al. (2020) report, a “dearth” of literature on the role of care in higher education. As it relates to teaching in design education, it is precisely zero at the time of writing. Despite evidence to the contrary (Meyers, 2009; Barrow, 2015) and much to my own distress, care is yet to be seen as important in postsecondary teaching and learning.

Among the reasons against care in higher education is the idea that caring only harms the student by coddling them (Barrow, 2015) and that care gets in the way of effective instruction

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<sup>5</sup> Time, on the other hand, is written as 時間 (*jikan*) and can be translated literally as “between moments”.

and learning, suggesting “that caring implies the absence of academic rigor or lowered expectations” (Meyers, 2009, p. 208). I too have heard these lines of criticism against care. One common question I have heard many times is “what happens when they have to go out and work in the ‘real world’?” implying that we will just make them soft and unable to cope outside the classroom context. Aside from the lack of understanding of the role of care in teaching, I find this type of thinking highly offensive, as students already live in the *real world alongside us*<sup>6</sup>. Another line of thinking that gets in the way of care is that all too often in higher education, we often see our role as that of “producing” future academics and professionals. This notion—the academy and faculty as producers and students as products—not only assumes that students can compartmentalize their lives neatly and atomistically, rather than live whole human lives (as if we are able to do that ourselves) but also dehumanizes them. In addition, when we dehumanize others, we are also in danger of dehumanizing ourselves. A final argument against care in the academy is less antagonistic, but more concerned with becoming too permissive or blurring the lines of a teacher-student relationship (Meyers, 2009; Barrow, 2015). Seeing the student-teacher relationship portrayed in popular culture and having heard rumours or read accounts about faculty members fraternizing with students in inappropriate or unethical ways, this is a valid concern, though such “care” I would say is not actually care but something more sinister<sup>7</sup>.

Despite the limited research into care in higher education teaching, existing scholarship points to its significant positive impact on learning. Care shown by the instructor supports students in learning difficult skills and knowledge (Meyers, 2009). The accusation that care lacks

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<sup>6</sup> Plus, if this real world is indeed so harsh, perhaps the problem is not with a student. If, indeed, care is soft, then perhaps the real world needs a little softening? I have much to say about the idea of soft vs. hard skills, but this is probably best left for another time.

<sup>7</sup> Related to this issue, I have also spoken with male colleagues in particular who worry that their care may be misinterpreted in such a way that may even jeopardize their livelihoods. This creates a barrier to their ability to be authentic caring teachers and requires investigation on its own.

rigour also seems unfounded, as care does not preclude maintaining high expectations. Meyers also cites studies by Abrami et al. (1997) and Lowman (1995) which found that students perceive instructor care as falling under two broad categories—one aligned with the instructional role and the other more personal. Care in the instructional context includes an instructor’s organization, clarity in communication, and “ability to stimulate student interest” (Meyers, 2009, p. 206). On the other hand, students see care in the personal domain demonstrated in such acts as respectfulness, availability and approachability, and expressing an interest in students as individuals. Although both expressions of care are important, faculty tend to place more emphasis on the first while students focus on the second (Meyers, 2009), creating a sense of disconnect between teacher and student, even though care may be important for both groups. Clearly, we in higher education need a better, more common and nuanced understanding of what care is, is not, and can be.

In 2021, students and educators alike are living more complicated lives both within and outside the academy. With so many obstacles—personal, medical, economic, socio-political, technological, etc.—care is needed now more than ever to understand each other and learn alongside one another. For this reason too, I believe the conversations within the context of this thesis are much needed.

Jardine (2013) says that “there is a story already underway, one in which we are already moving and living” (p. 1). We are born into a conversation, one that is already in play (Gadamer, 1960/2013). As I join in on this conversation regarding care and design education, it is important that I first ground myself in an understanding of the history and present state of design education, to understand why we are the way we are.





### CONVERSATION 3

#### **On (Canadian) Design Education: Between Privilege and Purse**

We have to set the bar high enough that we abandon the idea of training designers, and get on with the practice of educating them, even if, in the end, they begin to think differently than us. At least they will think, and will not just copy, like trained monkeys, the miserably superficial look of things. (Frascara, 2007, p.68)

Although the evolution of design education can be traced to 13th and 14th century guild systems (Souleles, 2013), there has been minimal scholarly documentation of the history of postsecondary design education as separate from postsecondary art education. Most such research even now occurs within the British (Souleles, 2013) and American contexts (Harland, 2017), with Harland pointing out that little has been added to the scholarship of teaching and learning in graphic design since the U.S.-focused *The Education of a Graphic Designer* (Heller, 1997).

What most scholars seem to agree upon is that design education began as apprenticeships in the trades whereby craftsmen honed their skills as masons, carpenters, carvers, sculptors, and painters mainly working for the Church (Davis, 2017; Souleles, 2013). This form of master-apprentice education was strictly hierarchical, with the student-apprentice working under the master from as young an age as 13 or 14, and served not only to pass on the tradecraft, but also to keep the knowledge and skills to a limited and powerful group (Souleles, 2013).

Remnants of this master-apprentice model can still be seen in the art and design studio classrooms to this day. Although I did not experience it in my own education in the early 2000s, I have heard contemporaries discuss how faculty members would drop by the studio irregularly and say a few cryptic words about the work, as if bestowing crumbs of wisdom. More regularly, however, the master-apprentice approach remains in what Davis refers to as the “cult of

personality’ teaching” (Davis, 2017, p. 10) where the faculty’s art direction leads to a visually similar work amongst the students, as if they had walked “in the shoes of the master” (Davis, 2017, p. 10). Other ways that the master-apprentice model continues to manifest is in the practice of instructors who view teaching also as an opportunity to look for new talent that they may eventually collaborate with or hire, a practice that makes me as an educator feel highly uncomfortable.

The industrial revolution, especially in the United Kingdom, provided the context for the next major change in art and design education (Souleles, 2013). The South Kensington System, as it is known, evolved from the establishment of the School of Design in 1836, motivated mainly by the economic needs of mass manufacturing to increase British exports. The schools were thus training facilities for the working classes to learn the skills required to decorate wares such as bone china and textiles (Burton, 2020).

By the 1880s, the South Kensington System had been exported around the world, and Canada was not exempted. In Ontario, the provincial Education Department established the Ontario Art Schools, which under the leadership of Samuel Passmore May, provided ‘practical, industry oriented, art education’ that would lead to economic prosperity for all (Chalmers, 2005). Whether it be in England or in Canada, the South Kensington System’s centralized and systematized art education focused primarily around reproduction drawing from texts or copy books, with students assessed through scaffolded examinations, certificates, and prizes bestowed upon the most excellent students (Chalmers, 2005).

Although the curriculum was taught in elementary to high schools, it was also taught in night classes established near manufacturing centres. Here, working adults learned drawing skills alongside what can be considered more core subjects such as English grammar, arithmetic, and

the highly practically titled ‘writing and bookkeeping’ (Chalmers, 2005). May (1884, as cited in Chalmers, 2005, p. 215) claimed that “[Art] concerns the advancement of the rich as well as the poor; it exercises an influence for culture and refinement and when applied to the commonest product of labour, it increases its value”. For all its seriousness, his comment makes me chuckle as I think about the trend in home decor from about 10 years ago, when everything seemed to have had a deer, owl, or a bird illustration on it. The illustrations became so ubiquitous and overstayed its welcome for too long to the point of ridicule (I still see it on mugs and tote bags, t-shirts and even hotel lobbies). Not only did it become the butt of jokes around designers, but it was even satirized as the comedy sketch “Put a bird on it” (Cost, 2011) in season one of the comedy series *Portlandia* (Michaels et al., 2011).

Although the practical and instrumental came to be the main focus of art and design education at the time, there were also opposing views such as those of John Ruskin in the United Kingdom, as well as the Royal Canadian Academy and Ontario Society of Artists. Ruskin was chief among those who criticized the South Kensington System as “being boring and inflexible” (Burton, 2020, p.13) as well as for its inability to produce true artists, advocating for a more holistic and liberal education (Burton, 2020). The Royal Canadian Academy’s criticisms of the Ontario curriculum were similar, citing “efficiency of teaching impaired by injudicious arrangements and restrictions” imposed by the curriculum and leadership (Chalmers, 2005).

Despite their differences, I see in May and Ruskin a shared and condescending view of design education and of the working classes. May’s comments suggest that the working classes can benefit from culture and taste already possessed by the affluent classes (Chalmers, 2005). Ruskin too shared this patronizing notion. Despite teaching art classes at the Working Men’s College in London, UK, he felt that “most people were incapable of becoming real artists.”

(Burton, 2020, p. 10). Rather, Ruskin saw the teaching of the “highest forms” of fine art as the exclusive domain of an elite few he considered “thoughtful, sensitive, earnest, kind men, large in their views of life, and full of various intellectual powers.” (Ruskin, 1859, as cited in Burton, 2020, p. 11). With this strong and supercilious British influence from both sides, it seems that art and design education in the Canadian context began as a fractured enterprise from the start, caught between the agendas of a privileged few and that of a young nation's purse.

It is simultaneously fascinating and frustrating that, over 150 years later, the debate (and perhaps this in itself is the problem—it's a debate rather than a conversation) around the art and design curriculum has changed so little. Although creativity is cited by international frameworks as an important competence for the 21st century (Voogt & Roblin, 2012), the value of 21st century art education and of creativity in general continues to be largely in service of the economy (Sawyer, 2015). In the higher education context, this consumerist focus can be evidenced in the countless centers for Innovation Excellence/Creative Inquiry/Creative Innovation/(insert-ironically-not-so-creative-title-here) initiated by institutions, as well as the increased programming to teach students design thinking, one that often takes an interdisciplinary approach between business, engineering, and design (Klawe, 2017). This is not to say that creative education should be completely separated from economic considerations. Creative professionals should be compensated for their contribution to society like any professional, and for design education in particular, the reality is that the profession is very much commercial in nature. To ignore this aspect would be to ignore a major part of what makes it what it is. However, to frame and value design and design education solely around its commercial considerations feels not only shortsighted but also unrealistic and unethical.

The British influence is not the only influence in Canadian design education. Just as the industrial revolution spurred on design education across the pond, it also accelerated the need for design education in the United States. Here too, the growing middle class were becoming a growing market, but were unable to afford wares from Europe. In order to provide them with lower cost products (and thereby increase corporate profits), American industrialists took it upon themselves to train workers in independent schools (Davis, 2017). Here, curriculum was set not by a central government body, but by profit-motivated manufacturers based on their own needs. Examples of current schools that began as independent training facilities include the Cooper Union (initially the New York School of Design for Women founded by industrialist Peter Cooper) and California College of the Arts (founded by cabinet maker Frederick Meyer) (Davis, 2017)<sup>8</sup>.

This American influence also weighs heavily on Canadian Design education. Because of the influence of our neighbour to the south, scholarship in Canadian design studies continues to be limited (McLean Knapp, 2015). This has been very much my experience too, as during my studies, there was limited discussion on Canadian graphic design. Design history focused mainly on European and American designers and their works, with some mention of Japanese design (which seems to be revered by designers the world over). Only after I became involved with the Graphic Designers of Canada (formerly Society of Graphic Designers of Canada) did I begin to learn about the rich tradition of Canadian graphic design and its impact on Canadian and global visual culture. Even today, Canadian design history and Canadian designers are rarely featured in the curriculum.

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<sup>8</sup> In a similar vein, technology companies like Google and Amazon are now entering the postsecondary education sector to train for their own specific needs (Fain, 2019). For example, Google currently offers certificates in IT Support, Data Analytics, Project Management, and UX Design (Google, n.d.).

The third and final main influence in the evolution of design education in Canada (as well as the rest of the world) is that of the German Bauhaus and its founder Walter Gropius. Although industrial concerns were not ignored, unlike the South Kensington System and the American industrialist-led schools where the technical and instrumental motivations were the main drivers, the Bauhaus School—which began as a response to the lower quality of mass-produced products and a return to the Arts and Crafts—saw the artistic and technical aspects of production in greater unison (Davis, 2017; Findeli, 2001). As such, the Bauhaus curriculum aimed to integrate the practical and theoretical, with a foundational course that focused on “natural objects and materials; analysis of the Old Masters; and life drawing” (Davis, 2017). The curriculum’s emphasis on the elements and principles of design and a variety of media is still clearly visible in today’s higher education curriculum (including my own institution’s), and especially in the common foundation year curriculum that many North American art and design students experience at many colleges and universities.

In my own art and design foundation courses (one that did not, and for the time being continues not to differentiate between the intended paths into which students progress), the focus was on drawing from observation, experimentation in two and three dimensions, and the elements and principles of visual art and design.

The foundational drawing classes revealed what I see as ideological differences within art and design education. Although drawing continues to be fundamental to the art school experience, there has been and continues to be debate around what constitutes “drawing ability” (Fava, 2019). The word *draw* has multiple meanings that can be traced back to 13th century Old English, where two meanings include “give motion to by the act of pulling”, and “make a line or figure” (Online etymology dictionary, n.d.). Having experienced multiple drawing classes with a

variety of instructors and in speaking to both students and art school alumni, I believe that some drawing instructors emphasize the first meaning—i.e., to “draw out” from within the artist (a more psychological conception) which may or may not be executed as a *drawing* of the second sense<sup>9</sup>—while other drawing instructors emphasize the second meaning which focuses on more technical aspects of drawing such as light, value, line quality, and form. There are, of course, those who feel that both are important, but there seems to exist empirical (representative) and psychological (expressive) turns to the act of drawing which are evident in the way drawing was and continues to be taught by different instructors. In my own experience, an instructor with an illustration or design background tended to view drawing as representation to be a foundational skill, while my fine arts instructors tended to emphasize personal expression and downplayed, or even argued against, what were considered traditional (western) drawing skills. This discrepancy in the meaning of drawing and the skills associated with the act of drawing have long been the source of tension amongst those who teach drawing (Fava, 2019) and a source of frustration for many students who come with their own conceptions of what it means to draw.

In the three-dimensional form class—which was taught by an excellent and well-known Japanese Canadian artist-teacher who first had me consider my own self-understanding in relation to practice—I recall working with wood and plaster while others worked with found objects, paper, seeds, plastic, and various other media (in one instance, toy army men pinned to a pillow case!). The point was not to gain mastery in any single material or technique, but to explore ideas of form and space and our own relationship to them through various themes and the handling of assorted materials.

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<sup>9</sup> For instance, as a student I recall being perplexed when I walked into a “figure drawing” class exhibit to find, among many works that did not resemble the human figure at all, a student only in his underwear writhing on the cement floor.



The class in which the elements and principles were taught was always taught by design practitioners. I too have since taught this type of course, and the curriculum is very much about the meanings that can be communicated through the use and manipulation of visual elements such as shape, line, and colour. There is also always the assumption that there is an acknowledged viewer at the other end of that communication. In comparison, audience and communication were not as much a consideration for the fine art focused instructors.

Supplementing these studio courses were and continue to be the liberal studies courses—art history, English, and social science and science courses, depending on the institution. In a stand-alone art and design university like my own, these options are often limited. During my time, art history courses were mainly survey courses with much memorization of slides, with the majority of work representing the western canon. Although I know this to be changing somewhat, I personally felt a disconnect between the majority of these courses and my own studio learning, especially as it relates to communication design, and this continues to be a concern I hear from current students. This is not unique to my own institution, as McLean Knapp (2015) writes that both as a student and educator, she too “consistently encounters situations in which design material is introduced in a partial, marginal way in relation to the traditional areas of ‘fine art.’” (p. 23).

Two decades into the 21st century, the needs of the students, the skills and knowledge with which they arrive, and the skills and knowledge which they require upon leaving have changed dramatically. A few years ago, I recall distinctly asking in a faculty meeting whether what we consider to be foundational learning in visual communications still holds, a notion that has been emphasized by both Frascara (2017) and Littlejohn (2017). It was met with silence. It is not that there is no appetite for change—especially amongst younger faculty members—but

change in design curricula has been slow to occur. Some of the assignments that I have seen taught in multiple schools for example have only slightly changed in two decades. This is not to say that we should change for change's sake, but only that these types of conversations are difficult to have when educators are busy with both the classrooms and their practices, with limited time for professional development. The practice/theory separation too still exists, with few studio instructors able to teach the underlying theory (Frascara, 2007). If instructors do not possess certain skills or knowledge because they themselves were not taught, or cannot articulate them, or the needs of the profession have changed, then how can they make meaningful decisions about what and how they will teach students? Can they even begin to have truly genuine conversations?

## CONVERSATION 4

### On *Phronesis*: A River Runs Through It

Practical knowledge, *phronesis*, is another kind of knowledge. Primarily, this means that it is directed towards the concrete situation. Thus it must grasp the “circumstances” in their infinite variety. (Gadamer, 1960/2013, p. 20)

I have to admit. I like conversations. Conversations about art, religion, politics, science—I have limited talent for small talk but I love robust and meaty conversations. Lately, I am starting to think these conversations are, ultimately, about the same thing. But before I go there, I want to know. What *is* a conversation? What makes it what it is? Before we settled upon our current meaning—“an oral exchange of sentiments, observations, opinions, or ideas; an informal discussion of an issue by representatives of governments, institutions, or groups” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.)—the word had a different meaning. Its Latin ancestor *conversari* meant “to live, dwell, live with, keep company with” or to “turn about, turn about with” (Online etymology dictionary, n.d.), as in the way the ladies turn about the room in Jane Austen novels while they gossip in hushed tones. Unlike today’s meaning, there was a real sense of dwelling together in a place or space, beyond a communicative exchange.

I also think about this word *dwell*. Until graduate school, the term *dwelling* was mainly a noun to me—a natural formation or structure in which animals, including humans, protect themselves from predators and the elements. There is also a particular architecture magazine, *Dwell*, for which I had a subscription for some time. I had not thought much about what it means in verb form—to *dwell*. In addition to the residential meaning, *to dwell* means to “remain for a time; to keep the attention directed; to speak or write insistently” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Dwelling brings images to mind of stillness, focus, perhaps a little bit of dampness. For me

dwelling is not cheerful or carefree, but it is by no means negative. There is a sense of closeness or coziness.

For the last few years, I too have been dwelling in and around the topic of curriculum. I have been in conversation with the past, the present, the future, in search of something important—something that flickers and flits, disappearing even as it appears. This conversation has been, borrowing Pinar’s (2015) most apt term, *complicated*. It has been an overwhelming, confusing and cluttered conversation with as many tangents as there are understandings. There is so much to listen to, all with something important to say. Yet not everything can be included. One cannot dwell on everything, or there would be little point in the dwelling. But as experiences have been gained and reflected upon and tens of thousands of words have been read and written, spoken and listened to, what has been revealed to me is that in all its guises all the conversations have been about one question: *How shall we live well together in the design classroom?*

Beyond the conversations I have been having with scholars past and present (as well as with myself), two important conversations have shaped my understanding and self-understanding (to date) of the lived experience of practitioner educators within the context of design education. Both are long-time colleagues who have seen success in their professional spheres. My choice in their participation was deliberate in that they are both well-liked and respected by students and colleagues, represent different facets of the varied field that is communication design, and their paths are quite different from one another.

The first conversation was with George (pseudonym), a former creative director in advertising, who has taught advertising and senior-level design courses on and off since the mid-eighties at two local postsecondary institutions. For a decade now, he has been teaching full-time in our department. In the meantime, George has also obtained a master’s degree in a related field.

His office is—or was before the pandemic—one which students often visit to discuss coursework or just to talk about life. In addition, he is a reflective and passionate educator with whom I often discuss both the practical and the more philosophical aspects of the work we do.

Frank (pseudonym) has also been teaching for over two decades, and his teaching trajectory is somewhat similar to mine. Like me, he attended the program in which we now teach. After graduation he went on to have a fruitful career as a scientific illustrator, drawing and painting delicate and exquisite images of wildlife and nature. He began teaching when a former instructor sought him out and encouraged him to teach as a sessional instructor while maintaining his illustration practice (this too parallels my trajectory). For the past decade, he has been a full-time educator. He was also my instructor in a number of courses early on. Frank is thoughtful and draws (literally and metaphorically) from wisdom gained over time spent dwelling both in the studio and in nature. In addition, for some years before the pandemic he had been organizing an extracurricular drop-in drawing club to which he brought natural wildlife specimens to draw and paint alongside the students.

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In design education, it is standard that the educator is also simultaneously a practitioner to some extent. For full-time educators such as Frank, George and me, our focus turns to the classroom and our non-teaching practice is often limited either in scope or in number, or both, especially during the academic year. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, I have had no client work because my teaching and administrative duties, combined with my own research, have meant I cannot allot the time needed to engage in client work with the thoroughness that it both requires and deserves. However, the practitioner in me—as designer, project manager, researcher—continues to express itself in the classroom.

This is the *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, which Gadamer defines as knowledge “that is directed towards the concrete situation”. (Gadamer, 1960/2013, p. 20). This type of knowledge, in contrast to *techné*—the skill, knowledge to “make some specific thing” (Gadamer, 1960/2013, p. 325)—is one that cannot be reasoned or gained through a knowledge of theory alone, but one that is gained over time and with practice (Gadamer, 1960/2013). Although much can be learned from books and from others (and now often online), *phronesis* can only come from the “doing of the thing itself” (Figal, 2002, p. 109), experiencing both the general and particulars of the thing, and reflecting upon them. The conversations with the interviewees revealed an abundance of such practical wisdom, both as practitioner and educator, and often as something inbetween.

For George, his many years of experience as a creative director and copywriter working with teams and with clients have built in him a tacit understanding of the potential in advertising and design concepts. This can be heard in statements such as “I know a good idea when I see one” or in the following:

I will see rough scripts or ideas that a student has been talking about. And, you know, there’ll be one example that comes to mind but... but it can be a little something here and a little something here and they can be inconsequential things. But I can look at it ’cuz I know how to look. I can say, “Well, how about this, connected with this? There’s already some sort of a conceptual link here.” And they’ll say, “Oh no, no, no... I just put that there and then this was separate. No, those aren’t really connected.” Yeah, but they are. You know whether you consciously can tell me, I did this so that it does this or not, it doesn’t matter. It’s there. And then, some of them will kind of go, “Hoh, you’re freaking me out a bit now. (laughs)

Where did he learn this ability to look and discern? How did he get to a point when he can confidently say that he knows a good idea when he sees it? There is no set formula, and he didn’t learn it from just reading theory alone. Nor is it through logical reasoning. Rather, the years of practice doing the work and being a creative director, copywriter, and teacher seem to permeate his being, allowing him to teach from a place of deep understanding that can only be

gained over time and with the accumulation of countless particular yet interconnected experiences.

George also compares this gaining of deep and embodied understanding to his own personal and more recent practice of poetry-writing.

One of the things that I still struggle with is, in poems that I've written, it's very difficult to make those observations and be objective and so on. I'm getting better at that but it's easier on somebody else's work, you know, particularly when you are sort of expected to do it, which, as a teacher, you are.

In making this connection, George also understands what it means to be a student or novice poet, one who does not yet possess the practical wisdom of perhaps an Oliver or a Auden. Unlike with his own poetry, in the classroom when discussing the work of students, he is able to “make those observations and be objective and so on”. In this self-understanding as both novice and expert, he is not only able to relate to the student's limited ability to distance from the unfamiliar and critically reflect (Gallagher, 1992), but also recognizes his own ability as an expert to do exactly that. It is important to note that this objectivity George speaks of is not a true objectivity, but an objectivity still connected to the practice of advertising design—its context, its tradition, to George himself—which allows him to support his students as they learn to become experienced (Gallagher, 1992).

Frank's practical wisdom too comes across throughout our conversation. He speaks of balancing his two practices—intensive and time-consuming each in its own way—from early in his teaching career when he was only teaching part-time.

...by that point you have a pretty good idea about what the timelines are for certain projects, so if you know this and that's going to take you a certain amount of time... I sort of factor that [into] how many courses you're teaching.

Time management (Diederoff, 2020) is a subject that is often discussed among designers and design educators. Leaving aside the ethical implications, the design industry is often fast-paced

and requires designers to work long hours, to meet demanding client deadlines. Typing in “time management” into Google yields over 3.6 billion results of articles, videos, strategies, apps, books, and other products that purport to boost productivity and worker efficiency. Yet, time management is not something that can be easily taught, as much of how one organizes one’s time as a designer is so particular to the designer’s skill set, skill level, their unique design process, as well as the particular work situation. For example, an illustrator who uses traditional media such as ink and watercolour has a very different process from one who uses digital tools and the time commitment may be similar or different depending on the techniques used. Even amongst illustrators who use traditional media, one whose work is bold with less detailing may take less time than another whose brushwork is highly detailed, requiring hours of manual work. Because of these particulars, time management strategies can be taught, but your time management skills can only be learned through your experience, both in school and as a professional designer. Frank’s “pretty good idea” about timelines and requirements for client projects was learned and earned over many years of practice.

Another instance in which Frank’s phronesis reveals itself is in his descriptions about the importance of research and critical thinking in a third-year class.

I really reinforce that it’s you [the student] becoming an expert a lot of times in those conversations, when you’re dealing with an art director and might or might not have a brief. Then you have to go and make sure that you look, do a lot of critical thinking. What’s your question? What’s out there? Look at both sides of an issue if you’re doing something contentious. How does that relate to your audience? How are you going to bring your audience into the image? What are the things that your audience is going to respond to? Then try to put yourself in the position of your audience. You’re trying to be empathetic to their needs and their desires and their interests. And you want to engage them.

He continues:

If you want to take something on... climate change or loss of biodiversity [for example] ... you know you’re going to have opinions on both sides and it helps to know those



opinions. [It] makes your message that much stronger. So you can anticipate “Oh you didn’t do your research”. “Well, yes, I did, and this is why.” You can start to see that you know you’re going to have some differences of opinion, but how do you leverage that to say, “Yes, I’ve taken that into consideration”? When you do have those conversations with an art director or client, you can show that you’re showing them respect. You’ve gone through and looked at these things in that way.

The ability to ask the questions he asks, to recall those conversations—these too are not learned from a lecture or from just observing others. Even if he was initiated by his instructors into asking such questions as a student, this knowledge is the fruit of experiences gained over a long career filled with as many questions and conversations as there have been sheets of paper, bottles of ink, brushes, and tubes of watercolour. This is the *phronesis* that he has generously shared with so many students, including my long-ago self.

There is one particular piece of wisdom that Frank has shared with his students which I feel has had a profound impact on me. I recall him telling us often to look at our work upside down to examine and improve our composition. In doing so, he showed us a way to look at the work from a new perspective, rather than in its usual taken-for-granted right-side-up-ness. All of a sudden, things I was unsure about became emphasized and the compositional problems stood out more clearly, calling upon me to attend to those areas in order to improve the work. Not only did this practical wisdom borne of experience—passed down from Frank, his instructors, and earlier artists and designers—affect the way I judged the aesthetic, but it continues to remind me that by taking an unfamiliar perspective, new insights may be gained.

The conversations with my colleagues regarding *phronesis* reveal the importance and interconnectedness of the educator’s experience both in the classroom and as a practitioner in their respective disciplines. In describing the relationship between his teaching and illustration practices, Frank—also a lifelong fly-fisher—quotes McLean. “In our family, there was no clear line between religion and fly fishing.” (McLean, 1989, p. 1). The way the conversations move

naturally between both teaching and professional practice also reminds me of the easy rhythm of the fly being cast back and forth. That their work is now more with students than with clients in some ways seems to make little difference for either of my colleagues. The experience, over time, has transformed into their practical wisdom—it has become a part of who they are. This wisdom, as it relates to the profession that students aspire to, is the thing they bring to the curriculum and what helps to enliven the “curriculum-as-plan” (Aoki, 2004, p. 159). This conversation is endless and full of bounty, like the glacier-fed rivers of Western Canada.

## CONVERSATION 5

### On Critique and Study: A Magical Weird Hard-to-Access Intangible Space

In a genuine conversation, on the other hand, one seeks to open oneself to him or her, which means holding fast to the common subject matter as the ground on which one stands with one's partner. (Gadamer, 1977/2007, p. 33)

Life in the design studio classroom as I have experienced it is one full of conversation. Perhaps not always a genuine conversation as Gadamer envisions, but discussion, talk, chatter, fills the classroom in one form or another. Even the idle talk (*Gerede*) has purpose in the classroom, bringing students together as they commiserate about their academic or other struggles, discuss the latest video game or movie release, or just gossip and chat about current affairs or what they had for dinner last night. These conversations may not disclose our *Dasein* (Heidegger, 1927/2010)—our own experience as a particular being in our everyday lives—to ourselves, but they are important to let off steam, be with one another, and get through the difficulties of being a student together. It is something I have missed while teaching remotely through the pandemic, and what most other instructors too have mentioned.

Conversation in the design classroom doesn't just happen out loud. It also and often happens in silence. Students and instructors alike engage in conversation with visual artifacts, text, ourselves, and each other. As they work through the creative process, students are encouraged to read, interpret, and ask questions of images, including their own work. *What elements are included in this composition? Why have they been composed in this particular way? What colours are being used? How can it be interpreted or misinterpreted? How (if at all) does this work address the design problem?* Students quietly observe the actions of instructors and peers and make sense of what it might mean and how that might affect them. Instructors wordlessly read and interpret the classroom for understanding or whether they are tired,

distracted, and disengaged—something difficult to do when you stare at a screen filled only with icons and names. When they submit their work, we also assess silently, asking the same questions that we teach our students to ask, listening for the work to speak. In this way, the conversation in the design classroom is as full of listening to a silence that communicates (Risser, 2019) as it is of voicing our understanding of the world through spoken words and artefacts.

One type of conversation that requires special mention is the critique. The critique, or crit, is simultaneously assessment (formative and at times summative), an opportunity to verbalize our interpretation of an experience of a visual design artefact, and a place to exchange knowledge. Orr and Shreeve (2018) refer to the crit as a “key site for the creation of value” (p. 40), while Scagnetti (2017) calls it a “meeting place, a public social reality where students and faculty uses [sic] a project to talk about Design” (p. S787). In one form or another, the crit has and continues to be an integral part of the studio experience in art and design education.

A crit can be a one-on-one discussion between student and instructor (desk critique), but often involves multiple students facilitated by the instructor. It is not just a conversation about anything, but rather a conversation about a shared topic, and as such, houses the potential of hermeneutic conversation. The topic is usually the student’s work—either in-progress or complete—but we can also discuss a professionally published example. While prompts may be required to keep the discussion on topic in the more junior level courses, in senior level courses, it is less guided by the instructor and moves toward becoming something like an authentic conversation amongst peers, including the instructor. Such a conversation is generative and constructive, helping students to make sense of their work and their relationship with it (Scagnetti, 2017). Students ask questions, provide comments about their own interpretations,

suggest alternate perspectives, all to get the person whose work is critiqued (as well as other participants) to reflect upon their work (and self). It is difficult to say how often such an authentic conversation occurs, that a critique has been “successful”. For one, there is always the fact that we are having the conversation in an academic context in which the instructor will ultimately assess the student’s work and attach a grade to it. The critique would not be happening otherwise. Our roles as assessor and assessed may prevent us from being lost in genuine conversation. Further, as we focus on the design artefact, we cannot know in the moment if a conversation is generative, as the assessment of the work which both informs and is informed by the critique may happen days, or even weeks later. If the ultimate goal of a design critique is “reaching an understanding” (Spool, 2018) and becoming better designers, it may be impossible to determine the success of the critique as a singular event.

Perhaps I can look at it from the other extreme. What is a bad or unsuccessful crit? As a student, the crit that I and my colleagues experienced 20 and more years ago was generally one in which the entire class discussed each student’s work one after another. Although there are times during which this can be useful, as an educator now I personally find that it is difficult to have each student engaged in a critique when there are over 20 students. More often than not, the confident or keen students do all the talking while the majority sit silent. Instructors may try to encourage participation by asking for someone who hasn’t spoken up, or forcing students to comment, but neither is ideal. Such a situation lacks the diversity of voices that Pinar (2004) stresses is crucial for genuine conversation. In addition, as students often have similar challenges, the critique can become repetitive if 20 students’ works, all with similar objectives, are discussed one after another. Finally, five-hour (or more) crits are mental endurance exercises that are difficult to sustain even with regular breaks. Both as a teacher and student, I have always

felt bad for the last few students whose work is being critiqued in such a situation, as all of us are exhausted and have little new or worthwhile to contribute by the end.

Another way that a critique can be unsuccessful is when it lacks focus. A less experienced or permissive instructor can either take the conversation off topic or allow the group to go off topic. These conversations can be interesting and entertaining, and one may even learn something from it. However, when the topic to be discussed—the student’s work—is forgotten, it no longer becomes a critique. In the context, it becomes *Gerede* (Heidegger, 1927/2010). In my own experience, early on in my teaching career, it was difficult to get students back on topic. Reflecting upon it now years later, I feel it was because I lacked the confidence in my own authority as an instructor to facilitate and maintain the conversation. As I gained experience, I became better able to nudge the conversation back to the topic when it went off course.

The third—and in my mind the worst—type of an unsuccessful critique is one in which one or more participants make the critique about themselves, rather than focusing on the learning and shared topic of conversation. For example, a student with a personal grievance against a peer can use the critique as an opportunity to put down another students’ work or ideas. These incidents are not always easy to perceive, and left unaddressed, can undermine the entire exercise by eroding trust in both the critique process itself and the instructor’s ability to maintain a respectful learning environment. It is not only students that can undermine the critique (Barrett, 2000). Most artists and designers<sup>10</sup> can recall an instructor or professor who was inappropriately harsh—emotionally, physically or both—in the critique. On the extreme end, I have heard of instructors breaking or throwing work into a garbage bin; tearing up student work; knocking work off of the display stand; or, when unhappy with the overall quality of work, turning around

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<sup>10</sup> A quick online search for “harsh art critique” yields over 10 million results.

and walking out without a word and not returning for the rest of the class. More often though, instructors would undermine the conversational nature of the critique through judgmental and shaming personal comments rather than focusing on the work itself such as “You’re never going to make it with this kind of work,” or “What is this? This isn’t a junior high art class, you know?”<sup>11</sup>. Some artists and designers still reminisce and speak fondly of such instructors who are lauded as passionate artists who are dedicated to the craft. For me, such an instruction method (if I could call it that) is not a critique at all, but rather a demonstration of power and an expression of insecurity that can have long-lasting and damaging effects.

Keeping in mind such issues, and in preparation for a reduction in class time, beginning around 2015, a number of instructors in our department began to reconsider the format based on research, student input, and our own experiences <sup>12</sup>. As a result, design critiques in our department now happen more often in smaller groups. The more intimate setting allows for shy students or students who are self-conscious about their language or learning abilities to participate under lower-stake conditions, allowing for greater variety of feedback, both in breadth and depth. Each student can participate in shorter critiques and therefore not only are they *not* bored and exhausted, but they also have the time to work independently while other groups are in their critique sessions. If a particular learning needs to be shared with the larger group, it can.

At other times, we may opt for a paper (or now online) critique, where students take the time to provide written feedback on the peers’ work. Here again, students who are more

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<sup>11</sup> This was an actual comment I heard as a student, though not directed at myself.

<sup>12</sup> The instructors, together with students, came up with several methods to experiment with and discussed the merits of each. For example, “The Conga line critique” in which each person critiqued the work of a person adjacent to them and moved through the entire class, although not without some merits, was one that did not get much use after a few tries.

comfortable with writing than speaking for whatever reason have an opportunity to participate in ways that they can better contribute. In addition, the feedback provided in writing often seems more detailed and thoughtful, perhaps as a result of the time they have for reflection. Regardless of whether it is spoken or written, instructors (and students) in our department have discussed that these new ways of conducting critiques not only better take into account individual learning needs, but also seem to generate more meaningful discussions around the work and a better sense of understanding.

The discussion around a specific topic and sense-making as purpose—these characteristics lead me to believe that a critique can be an opportunity for genuine hermeneutic conversation, if not come close. In the critique, the willing participants are in play, both with the topic of the critique (the design work in question at that moment), but also with the other participants. While we play, we are also simultaneously being played (Gadamer, 1960/2013). None of us can know for certain the outcomes—what insights and understandings may emerge from the critique, but we give ourselves over to it, we trust that it will lead to something. It is not a coincidence, then, that Scagnetti (2017) likens the effective critique to a tennis match. With the majority of our conversations with students revolving around their work, critiques are perhaps the most important type of conversation that occurs in the studio.

The importance of the critique as conversation is reflected in Frank and George's words throughout my own conversations with them. Through conversation over the work, they connect with students, not only about the work, but also beyond and beneath it. The conversation around the artefact—a drawing, a website design, a sketch of an idea for an advertisement—is an opportunity for George and Frank to guide the student in their understanding of what it means to be a *communication designer*, but it is also a path to understanding what it means *for the student*



*themselves* to become a communication designer. For example, Frank talks often about supporting the student's intention while guiding them in the practice of being a professional illustrator.

...we try to contextualize the content for the individual. A little bit like a poker game. We're trying to play to the person, right? We're trying to see what are the things that the students drive on and and what are the things that they are interested in and you can sort of bring those elements that speak to their... their intention. Some of them might not be interested in scientific illustration so you start to show them something that's a reinterpretation of what they're interested in, into something that's more or less stylized so they can see. You know, you're still validating their intention, interests and desires and figuring out how to contextualize the content for [them].

That Frank likens teaching to a poker game seems more than mere coincidence. "We're trying to play to the person right?" he says. He is trying to figure the student out. *Why are they in this class? What will draw them out of their shell?* There is an implicit understanding of the relational aspect of his practice as a teacher—that the student's learning is already in play, and that he as an instructor needs to play to that student. In order to contextualize the curriculum for the individual, Frank converses with the student to get to know their interests, motivations and intentions that drive their learning. How does he find these out?

It depends on what you see. If you're looking at a class and the students are drawing and you see that they're having a really tough time drawing... and you're trying to sort of deconstruct how they're looking at something at that time, so that they can look at it [through] a different way.

And further:

It's sort of massaging that kind of interface, between developing that relationship with a student. You can often see the kind of body pantomimes where they're.... they might sort of start to either verbalize it or you see some sort of movement within their body, and you can say, "Okay well you know, what you're doing is cool, you know, how can we make it look a little bit better...".

Just as in his illustration practice that requires keen and careful observation of lifeforms and their environments, in his teaching practice too Frank is someone who observes and listens carefully. By paying close attention to the student's body language, their work, or listening for

even the slightest changes in their tone of voice, he knows when to offer guidance, encouragement, or to ask questions. Gadamer (1960/2013) would confirm that this non-verbal reading of the student is still conversation. Even before words are exchanged, Frank's eyes and ears are attuned to hearing and listening to the voice of the individual student. Frank continues:

It's trying to find that.... relative language with the students and how they relate to certain things. You know, that's sort of the wonder of having a studio course. It's that you have that time to build that up. I'm never going to sit there and marginalize what they're doing and what they like, because I think that's one of the most damaging things that we can do. It's like, all of a sudden, don't say 'Manga is horrible. We're not going to look at that.' That's why they're there! That's what often brought them to the institution. Because they just love to do that! The worst thing you can do is say, 'Well we're not going to do that'. Okay, well you know, the manga is sort of a lot of repetition and that, you know. But that manga shape! You know, it all starts with shape. You're still doing that. So let's try to transfer the same bit of knowledge to what we're looking at in terms of a representational thing.

When they do begin to verbalize, Frank is careful to simultaneously address both the curriculum and the individual. With a design student taking an anatomy course as a requirement, he draws parallels between human anatomy and letterform anatomy to help them relate to the learning. A student's interest in manga—often reviled by art and design instructors as overly stylized and commercial—is not something to be discouraged or dismissed for Frank, but an opportunity for him to access their motivations for learning so that he can help the student to gain new understandings and build upon what is already there. Frank's teaching is not a monologue (Godoń, 2004). In fact, he says, "It's a relationship thing right? And then the interface is always some sort of banter back and forth that's happening. God, if it was just one way it'd be horrid..." Frank's curriculum *is* conversation. Without the Other of the student, it may not be teaching at all for Frank.

In Frank's words not only can I hear the ways in which he cares for the students as individual human beings, but also the different ways in which he is "nurturing the ethical ideal"

(Bergman, 2015, p. 154). In Noddings' ethics of care (2002), care has four distinct components—modelling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation. It goes without saying that a shared dialogue around the topic of communication design is an indispensable component of Frank's care, but both modelling and confirmation are also important components.

In care-based education, students need an exemplar of care in their teachers (Bergman, 2015; Noddings, 2002). Frank models care both in how he relates to the students, but also in his care for the discipline and practice of illustration itself. As a teacher, he interacts with them in a caring manner, considering not only their skill acquisition but also their self-cultivation. As an illustrator, his ability to draw from his own experiences both in and beyond the studio classroom all further help to support the students. In relating to the student in a caring manner, he also confirms the student's self (Noddings, 2002). An excellent example of such confirmation was revealed in the part of our conversation when Frank spoke passionately against how some colleagues dismiss the needs and desires of the students.

I'm never going to sit there and marginalize what they're doing, what they like, because I think that's one of the most damaging things that we can do... don't say 'Manga is horrible. We're not going to look at that.' That's why they're there! That's what brought them to the institution. Because they just love to do that. The worst thing you can do is say, well, we're not going to do that.

I can relate to his sentiments because I too have heard it before from students. About not just *not* being encouraged by an instructor, but actively being discouraged to pursue an interest, or perhaps even worse, being told that their interests are of little to no value.

The care that George demonstrates looks different from that of Frank. George talks about his role as one to “marshal [the students'] profound talents” in the creation of effective communication that makes the audience “give a shit”. George sees the role of the communication designer as not only being that of effectively executing a client's communication objective, but

beyond that, having a responsibility to contribute to the “larger discourse of our culture and society”.

To this end, he uses conversation around curricular topics to discuss not only the technical aspects of creating advertising design, but also the larger societal implications of the work that we as communication designers of all sorts do. He recounts a conversation around a 2018 Nike ad featuring the former NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick<sup>13</sup>.

It was about an eight-line headline. Stand up for something even though you know it'll cost you everything or words to that effect. And a wonderful photograph. A very carefully crafted short headline. Words and pictures. But [it] conveyed so much. Given the timing of its release, given all the extra communications artillery that was behind it with Kaepernick's exposure in the media, etc. So we'll talk about ads and you know I try to... I try to always get them to make those observations, right? I don't want to say “Here's an ad and here's why it's great. Any questions? No? Great, okay let's move on.” No, I'd much rather say, “So what's goin' on here?” So what I try to do is have students spend enough time and invest enough of their grey matter to see examples of... for this case in point, simplicity wrenched out of complexity.

In this quotation, and in the intonation as he speaks these actual words, George's passion for the craft that is involved in advertising design is apparent. But equally important is what he says in the latter half. He says, “so we talk about ads,” and asks the students, “So what's goin' on here?” To help the students develop both as critical consumers and producers of advertising design, he engages in purposeful conversation. He doesn't provide them with answers but provides an opportunity for them to draw from and share their own experiences to make sense of the work. I have seen George's class in action. He loves the back and forth as he and the students question each other's assumptions, build upon one another's ideas, and draw from their experiences and examples.

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<sup>13</sup> It featured a black and white close-up photo of Kaepernick overlaid with the sentences “Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything.” in a relatively formal serif font set small in comparison to his dramatically lit features cropped.

There are other examples of George's deep commitment to the role of conversation in design learning. For him, although the completion of the assignments, the learning of the skills and knowledge are important, in these conversations, his purpose is deeper. He says, "So there's the specifics of what you have to do to complete the assignment, and then there is this other far more magical weird hard-to-access intangible space. And that's where I'm always trying to push them." When I press him for explication on how he creates the opportunities that help students to access those intangible spaces and what that looks like in the classroom, he responds:

I think it usually looks like... it looks like a longer, deeper one-on-one about a project versus a seeking-the-instructor's-approval-to-move-forward. And I must admit, with the time pressures and various other factors, if students are not wanting or, you know, they have a tell-me-what-I-need-to-do-and-I'll-do-it mentality, then I respond to that and that's what they will do and, and they will do the work. I will put a grade on it and we'll move them through. Others who maybe pick up on that notion of going to some deeper, more profound, more challenging space, their tactical... responses—their list of deliverables—may not be as strong. In fact, they may dwell too much on that weird little intangible space. But in my view they're the better for that, having tried to, as I say, wrench simplicity of complexity and discover what the real heart of the matter is.

Further he goes on to say, referencing a specific project:

If there is a really profound and interesting conversation going on about something as simple as "what's it like being in your car?", that can be such a profound growth in a student coming out of a 20-minute real conversation. I'll take that over technical excellence and looking slick any day of the week.

George's reference to a "real conversation" strikes me. Although he does not discount the technical aspects—far from it—the daily discussions that focus on the *techné* of communication design are not what lies at the heart of his curriculum. For him, the purpose of the curriculum, of dwelling with the students, seems more in service of how students understand themselves and their relationship to the world through the subject matter that is communication design. For those who are open and willing to venture into and dwell in that "weird little intangible space", the opportunities are always, as he says, "on offer".

Of course, even if the opportunities are on offer and the desire is there on the part of the educator, genuine conversations that arrive at new horizons of understanding are not so easily achieved. Time pressures and the student's motivation, for example, are two factors which George mentions. When asked how he helps students to gain access to those intangible spaces, George admits that this is an ideal, and not something that is always attainable.

Okay, well, I think I must qualify. All of those sort of broader objectives, higher minded things that I just listed, the minority of students actually grasp those. I would say, maybe I always feel that if, maybe a quarter or a third of any particular class I've got really gets that stuff... gets that role of a communicator in our society, gets that manifesting [their] talents towards some sort of greater purpose, those sort of higher-minded things. I think it's important to state I never feel that I get that across to everybody, I think, maybe, maybe a quarter to a third.

Throughout the semester, he may only be able to have a genuine conversation with a quarter of the class. And this may be because some, as he says, "are not wanting to" for whatever reason at the time. This is not to pass moral judgement in any way. George understands that genuine conversation cannot be had with one who is not willing or ready. And of course, there may be times when he himself may not be ready. However, being *in* conversation cannot be separated from George's being as an educator (Spier, 2018). Conversation is a part of both George and Frank's *Dasein* as design educators and as human beings.

The experiences that Frank and George recount remind me of McClintock's concept of *study* (Pinar, 2015). For McClintock and Pinar, it is study—rather than teaching and learning—that leads to understanding. Beyond the curricular outcomes and the tangible and more easily assessed acquisition of knowledge and skills, Pinar (2015) states that "*understanding* is the *raison d'être* of the curriculum" (p. 112), and that such understanding, achieved through study, is at once intellectual and emotional, individual and social, informed by the past, focused on the present, and directed to a future. Unlike instruction, in which the initiator is the teacher, study

requires initiative that emanates from within the student and recognizes the student as an autonomous, creative human individual (McClintock, 1971). This is not to say that no instruction should occur, but rather that the deeper motivations for learning can only begin with the student while the teacher guides the student and facilitates their pursuit of understanding as the one in the partnership that, having experienced the subject matter, possesses the practical wisdom.

The student interactions that Frank and George recount closely fit this model of study. The conversations that both George and Frank engage in with their students, and encourage their students to have with themselves, with works of art and design that have come before them, and with one another, all are directed toward this understanding as a purpose, through their particular discipline. Both work hard to recognize and face the individual human beings in their classes, but also seem to be aware that the desire to study can ultimately only come from within each student. They can only, as Frank says, “meet in the middle”.

Furthermore, “art of study”, writes McClintock (1971), includes both “discipline and delight” (p. 164). When the instructors get to know and understand the students as individuals through conversation, both understand that they will be better able to facilitate the students in connecting discipline and delight, and perhaps even to find delight in discipline. Their passion for the shared topic, their practical wisdom, and their genuine interest in the *person* alongside whom they study, all allow them to do more than instruct. However, they cannot do this on their own. They need a partner in the play. In conversation with the students, Frank, George, and their students are better able to move beyond instruction toward a model of study.

*Study*, as I read in the writings of McClintock and Pinar, is not the same as the “I have to study” that I and perhaps most students mutter, as if it was an unrewarding chore forced upon us. I *have to* study. It feels burdensome. Not only that, it feels like a solitary pursuit. *I have to* study.

The focus is never on the study, but on the subjective or the feeling of being forced by some external and authoritarian Other. This may be a case more fitting with students in primary and secondary school. For them, school is not an option. As minors, decisions are often made by the adult others. At least sometimes, study must feel forced upon them. Studying for tests set by adults based on their values may take them away from friends, family, and activities that genuinely interest them. Even in postsecondary education, there are likely many situations in which students view learning activities and even whole courses as something to be endured, instrumental for a somehow better future state such as entry into a desired course or specialized program, a degree, or a career.

In comparison, when focusing on study, rather than on *I* and *have to*, something relational comes into view. Of course, as I read, think, and write this thesis, much of the time has been spent alone, cloistered in my home office (also known as a *study*). However, I have never once *felt* alone. In my solitude, I have been able to travel through time; converse with scholars who I never imagined I could, both through their writings and virtually in conferences; correspond with grad school peers to share and discuss readings. When we were able to be together during our summer residencies, we supported each other, cooked with each other, made each other laugh, talked late into the night trying to understand what, in fact, we did understand about curriculum theory, if anything. Even though we are now distanced, we continue to support each other. In this way, although the desire to initiate and continue to study comes from within, study has never been a lonely venture. For me, it is a multitude of conversations. It is a partnership between those who have mutual respect both because of and despite their differences.

For Frank and George too, study has been a lifelong relational activity. After finishing his illustration diploma, Frank continued on to complete an honours degree with the initial intent of



becoming an art teacher<sup>14</sup>. Many years on, he continues to learn about his own craft and practice as an illustrator which—a conversation again—both informs and is informed by his teaching practice. “Whenever you’re doing a [client] project now, it becomes sort of a ‘Can I apply this to the classroom?’ and vice versa. So it becomes this sort of never ending circuit. It’s kind of that infinity loop.”

George, who admits “was kind of thrown into” advertising, recounts that early professional development in the form of industry certification helped him to not only better understand the advertising practice, but would later help him to relate to his students when he began to teach. Later in his teaching career, he took advantage of opportunities provided by academic institutions to learn about teaching. Finally, he sees his graduate studies as a turning point for him as an educator.

The shift for me I think kind of occurred when I took my master’s degree. At that point, I’d worked in advertising for 30 years, 35 years, something like that, and you know, written thousands of ads, most of them crappy, but I was also... you know very interested in advertising and what it is and how it works and how potent it can be, and all those kinds of things. But when I started to get into communications theory and started to look back at all the tactical things that I had been involved in, some strategic campaign work and some brand things and so on and so forth, I started to see that... grander sense of communication culture, business, commerce, economy. I started to see how the things that I had been doing fit into this grander scheme. And I thought ‘Wow, I wish I had known a lot more of that broad sense when I was 30 and asked to run a creative department’. And so I think that’s part of why, you know, I evolved into... less an enforcer of standards for students and more of a learning facilitator and wanting them to get it; to see how important the work that they think they might be good at doing can be and how fulfilling it can be. If they enjoy it, if they understand it, and if they have a sense of the implications of what they’re doing in some sort of grander scheme.

Throughout his career, George has also continued to learn and to share that learning. This in turn has led and continues to lead to opportunities for further learning, both for himself and for others.

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<sup>14</sup> Frank found his experience with K-12 art education at the time, which he found to be heavy “on the mimicry side, very little on the conceptual sort of critical thinking side,” disappointing.

All three of us, in our own ways, seem to have McClintock's (1971) sense of what we do as *study*, rather than teaching. What we do is something that goes beyond the outcomes, deliverables, and artefacts. It is done as we strive for genuine conversation with the students, our partners in study. Through the design studio critique, we have learned over time to dwell in that which we care deeply about—advertising, illustration, communication design—and to dwell with the individuals who choose a path that we too have trodden before. On occasion, we are even able to reach that “magical weird hard-to-access intangible space”. Yes, we are educators, we are teachers, and now some of us are also administrators, but what we do is not unidirectional. It gives something back to us as individuals and to society. It is an investment both in ourselves and in the potential of another to continue in the tradition that is study.

## CONVERSATION 6

### On Time: Whiling with Momo

‘The time being’ means time, just as it is, is being, and being is all time. The 16-foot golden buddha-body is time; because it is time, it has time’s glorious golden radiance. You must learn to see this glorious radiance in the 12 hours of your day.

—Dōgen, *Shōbōgenzō*

One of my favourite authors growing up was Michael Ende, who, for many of my age, is synonymous with *The Neverending Story*. With its complex themes such as the power of imagination, transformation, and how we make sense of ourselves and the world, it is more than merely a children’s fantasy story, which it also definitely is. I loved this book. It is not only the story that I love, but the maroon and red text of the hardcover version symbolizing where the story is currently taking place (the “real” world or Fantastica) and the medieval illumination-like illustrations that begin each chapter. To this day I flip through it from time to time. This book, however, is not my favourite of Ende’s stories, nor is it the one that has stayed with me most.

*Momo* (Ende, 1985) was published in the original German in 1973, the year I was born. The story is about a mysterious girl who arrives one day in an amphitheatre ruin of an unnamed but contemporary Rome-like city. Despite her ambiguity of origin, lack of possessions or real home, her ability to listen to children and adults alike endear her and bring about a sense of play, joy, and generosity amongst the children and adults of the neighbourhood. However, when the city is overtaken by the “men in grey”—whose existence depends on smoking hour-lily cigars made of time stolen from the people—the vibrancy of the neighbourhood is replaced with the constant pace of work alongside a sense of urgency, meanness, and emptiness. Momo, assisted by a subtitled tortoise and a professor who lives beyond time, must find a way to return to the people the time that is rightfully theirs. Although marketed as a children’s book, Ende’s

conceptualization of time as material—as money, object, and substance, to be exchanged, saved, and stolen—is complex and one that has since been connected to compelling evidence in social science research and philosophy (Cánovas & Teuscher, 2012).

Despite being only 11 or 12 when I read the book, and obviously without even the recognition that there was a deep tradition of philosophical inquiry into the concept of time, Ende's message—that time was limited and of greater value than money, possessions, or status—had a deep impact on me. Around the same time as I was reading *Momo* in its English translation, the Japanese translation struck a chord in my homeland, where the post-war economic miracle had come at the enormous cost of Japanese workers' time which was both renowned and valued for efficiency and productivity first and foremost. In *Momo*, many Japanese saw their own predicament, in which their time had been claimed by industry and for the pride of a nation, in exchange for material wealth and status that did not necessarily bring about the happiness it promised, but rather discontent, loneliness, mental illness, and in some cases even suicide (Siniawer, 2018). For me, *Momo's* message was that intangible, immaterial concerns such as imagination and the company of others were most important, and that without time, it would be difficult to access either. Since then, I have tried to be generous with my time and to enjoy it when shared willingly, but I have also been careful not to have the men in grey steal my time.

Unlike in larger university settings, the art school studio learning environment is often much more intimate. In my own institution, 20 years ago the class capacity for the studio courses was at 18 students, and a studio class spanned a whole day: three hours in the morning, two hours break during which time students had lunch and a liberal studies class, and three hours again in the afternoon. Over the semester, that would add up to approximately 80 hours together,

depending on the statutory holiday. There was much time to work independently, converse with peers and instructors, and also time for community-building within the class. There was even time to “waste”, though I believe that it was time needed to replenish and recharge. Even after the instructors had gone home, students would often study late into the night together, some even hiding from the security guards so that they could pull all-nighters in the studio.

This rhythm of the class has changed over the years. For one thing, limited resources have forced class sizes to increase from 18 to 22 per studio class. This may still seem luxurious by the standards of K-12 teachers, but for those used to teaching 18 students, it was an increase nonetheless. In addition, some years ago, in order to prepare for a now-abandoned strategy for institutional growth, the studio hours were cut from six total hours to just under four and a half per week per class. One studio classroom now holds one class in the morning, and after a lunch break, another new class comes in for the afternoon. These administrative decisions based on the reality of dwindling resources have led to many issues, but many have to do ultimately with time (Jardine et al., 2003)<sup>15</sup>. Less time for instructors to spend with each student. Less time for students to spend together around the warming fire that is the topic. Less time for conversation and study. This truncation—this further fragmentation—may be particularly felt in art and design education because time is necessary to get into the flow (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002) of the creative and critical undertakings.

Directly or indirectly, this industrial and mechanistic experience of time looms menacingly in the background during my conversations with Frank and George. For Frank, who has known the studio as both student and teacher, one of the main benefits of the studio

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<sup>15</sup> It is not only institutional decisions. Students today have more commitments outside of their studies that many can no longer afford to “spend” the kind of time that students could 20 or 30 years ago.

classroom is the time it affords him and the students to linger—to *while* (Jardine, 2012)—over a topic that is worth whiling over. In whiling over the topic together—for instance, the topic of scientific illustration—students develop not only the skills and knowledge required of to create a competent scientific illustration, but a deeper understanding of what it means to be a scientific illustrator and communication designer, as they together search for the interconnections (Jardine, 2012) between themselves, the subject, and the world outside the studio. “It’s trying to find that.... relative language with the students and how they relate to certain things. You know, that’s sort of the wonder of having a studio course. It’s that you have that time to build that up.”

The studio is not just a classroom for Frank, but a place of wonder where those interconnections and becomings begin to emerge. It is a sacred and ethical space (Pinar, 2015) where the focus is on the relationship between two individuals *through and around* the shared topic of the curriculum. To “build that up”—that trust, that relationship—takes care and time. Creative work requires not only skills and knowledge, but also an openness and vulnerability. For students to become more open—open to new ideas and perspectives, open to entering an uncertain place of *not* knowing—so that they can find a connection between the self and the topic *as they become*, the confidence of knowing that Frank will be there to share in both the failures and successes must be a great support.

For George too, the studio can, at the best of times, be an enchanted space of study. Through discussion, George is always trying to push students to the “magical weird hard-to-access intangible place”. Such a place, however, is not only difficult to define, but also not one that students can jump into immediately without the trust that someone will be there ready for and with them, to support and challenge, to guide and to walk alongside. George is keenly aware of the need to build up this trust between himself and the students. “If I can get a rapport with a

student or a small team of students that gets at some of those really personal, really potent notions... Even if they dip their toes in those waters in school. Magic.” George’s teaching mantra is “Never sacrifice rapport,” and he refers frequently to rapport and to relationships in both his teaching and professional practices.

While I’m always after that sort of commitment to get to something more core, I don’t scrutinize deliverable technicalities and specifics of execution of details. I don’t scrutinize those near as much as I think a lot of my colleagues do, and that’s part of how I justify that. That, within the context of the program, there are many opportunities for the students’ technical skills to be developed, things like kerning and various different sorts of the technical aspects of visual communication. I’m just not built that way and so, and this is why my teaching practice stems from that “never sacrifice rapport”. Because I want to be able to convey the importance of that depth to all the students and I’m never going to get it without rapport.”

The word rapport first appeared in English in the 1660s, and is defined as “a relationship characterized by agreement, mutual understanding, or empathy that makes communication possible or easy” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). In contemporary French usage, it has multiple other meanings including that of a relationship, a report (as in a news report or a dossier), and quite differently, a meaning related to gain, profit or income (Larousse online, n.d.). However, the current English usage is directly descended from the French for “bearing, yield, produce; harmony, agreement, intercourse” (Etymology online, n.d.). George’s use of the word reveals many of these meanings. George builds rapport through intercourse characterized by respect and empathy, and this rapport is vital to yielding opportunities for study, cultivating understanding and commitment to a discipline, with some even leading to long-lasting and mutually enriching relationships. George is also backed by the research. Rapport has also been shown to positively affect attendance, study time, and whether students enjoyed the class (Benson et al., 2005; Meyers, 2009).

Can all this happen in an environment in which student contact hours are collected for audit, student numbers are increasing, and efficiency is a major concern? Jardine (2012) does not think so. Jardine goes further to say that not only is such fragmented time regular time sped up, but rather, it is empty time, in which “things are no longer understood to have a time of their own.” (Jardine, 2012, p. 183). Building trust foundational to study needs time. Genuine conversation needs time—to listen, to reflect, and to find the words with which to express our developing understanding. All are processes, and in the service of the cultivation of the self as it relates to the discipline of communication design, itself a process. For the process to unfold, what is not needed is empty and disembodied time, but time to while, time to dwell, time for time to take its own course.

Momo (Ende, 1985) would agree with Jardine. When the men in grey start to steal the adults’ time, Momo and her friends Beppo the street sweeper and Guido the storyteller notice that they are seeing their friends less often, and that when they do, they no longer have time to listen to Guido’s imaginative stories or to while away in each other’s company. At the same time, they are seeing more and more of the children, left to their own devices with material distractions like toys and pocket money for the cinema, quickly losing their ability to play the imaginative games that they used to enjoy with Momo and her friends.

[Guido] Once upon a time, people used to like coming to see Momo because she listened to them and helped them to know their own minds, if you follow my meaning. Nowadays they seldom stop to wonder *what* they think. (Ende, 1985, p. 74)

Something is “closing in” (Ende, 1985, p. 69), and that something is time. When the men in grey arrive, the adults become busy, trying to save time and to reduce wasted time, all the while spending their time in exchange for material goods to distract the children for whom they no longer have the time. Time becomes commodified and monetized (Cánovas & Teuscher, 2015)



and becomes valued only as a means to obtain something else. Momo and her friends, who value time together, to listen to and support each other, and to enjoy one another's company, are all of a sudden considered "a bunch of lazy good-for-nothings" who have got so much time on their hands that "other people have to make do with less and less" (Ende, 1985, p. 73).

At its best, the studio classroom seems very much like Momo's amphitheatre, where people from different walks of life gather to spend time together, to help each other "know their own minds", and to wonder together not only *what*, but also *why*, *how*, and *what if*. It truly can be a space where "magic" can happen (from time to time), if the time and care—like that which Frank and George demonstrate—to "do the thing itself" are readily available and on offer. It is, no wonder then, that the two educators place such a high value on such things as building rapport and having "real conversations" as well as time, without which neither can happen.

In one scene in the story Momo goes to visit her bricklayer friend Salvatore to investigate why there has been such a sudden change in the adults' behaviour. He is overworked, drinking, and apologizes for being too busy to visit her. Things have changed, he says—everything done in "double-quick time" as they "work like a fury" and "everything's organized—every last move we make..." (Ende, 1985, p. 76). Salvatore's words remind me of the Amazon fulfillment centres where, in order to deliver up to one million packages daily from a single facility, algorithms track and specify the movements of robots, packages, and human employees represented by dots and lines on multiple screens (Kantor et al., 2021). Despite the relatively generous pay and benefit packages, the employee turnover rate in these facilities far outpace those of its competitors, with some current and former employees reporting that they feel as if they are not human, but merely tools to meet daily and weekly quotas (Kantor et al., 2021). For these workers, even the time to stop to wonder is a distant luxury.

When money as the only measure of time is taken to these extremes, it is demoralizing and inhumane. Salvatore's following words further illustrate this. Valued only as a means to achieve quotas for productivity and another's profit and not able to build something he can be proud of as a craftsman, he has turned to drink.

I'm drunk again, Momo, and that's the trouble. I often get drunk these days, there's no denying it, but that's the only way I can stomach the thought of what we're doing over there. To an honest bricklayer like me, it goes against the grain. Too little cement and too much sand, if you know what that means. Four or five years is all those buildings will last, then they'll collapse if anyone so much as blows his nose. Shoddy workmanship from top to bottom, but that's not the worst of it. Those tenements we're putting up aren't places for people to live in, they're—they're hen coops. It's enough to make you sick. Still, *why should I care* as long as I get my wages at the end of the week? Yes, times are changing all right. It used to give me a kick when we built something *worthwhile*, but now... Someday, when I've made enough money, I'm going to quit this job and do something different. (Ende, 1985, p. 76, my own italics)

To build something worthwhile is an aesthetic endeavour. Salvatore speaks of how the work being done “goes against the grain” of his being as an “honest bricklayer”. With each movement of the trowel and stacking of a brick, he must make an aesthetic judgment. *Is there enough cement? Is there too much sand?* In Salvatore's new work environment, where time's only value is in its ability to be monetized, *phronesis* —the practical wisdom accumulated with experience and orientated to the particular—is no longer valued and he is unable to create something he sees as *worthwhile*. Yet *phronesis* cannot be acquired in an instant. It requires time in order to develop. It needs to be cultivated. All the practical wisdom he has gained—while laying bricks that would become lasting homes, through trial and error, and that allows him to make these judgments that others less experienced cannot—could not have come to be without time and whiling. Like Salvatore's work, Frank and George's work too is an aesthetic endeavour, in which their practical wisdom as educator and design practitioner is valued in the cultivation of the

self—both of their own self and that of the student—in relation to the discipline of communication design and the wider world.

It is hard not to think that Ende—whose books reveal to me an author and craftsman who values whiling, *phronesis*, and relationships—chose Salvatore’s occupation very deliberately. Bricklaying, after all, was the example used by Bobbitt in his highly influential 1918 book, *The Curriculum*. In it, Bobbitt claimed that under a scientific method of curriculum making, curriculum could be objectively measured and particularized so that students could be educated efficiently. As an illustration he used the example of the bricklayer, claiming that education will aim “not at the average bricklayer, but at the best type of bricklayer” for which the criteria was “those where bricklaying has been carried to its highest practicable level of efficiency” (Bobbitt, 1918/2017, p. 17). Only someone who lacks an understanding of the subtleties and complexities of masonry could devalue a craft so much<sup>16</sup>. Only someone who cannot see that his perspective is but one perspective can so blatantly ignore the practical wisdom cultivated brick by brick, layer by layer over centuries and by so many.

Frank and George’s studios too—and mine and other colleagues’ studios for that matter—face this particularization and call for efficiency, this “closing in”. Over the last three years, for example, the provincial government of Alberta has cut the operating grants of many postsecondary institutions, including our own. Money is now tied to employment-focused key performance indicators, many of which can be difficult to achieve for an art school that graduates

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<sup>16</sup> I have to admit, when I first read this article almost four years ago, I felt that this lacked ambition as an aim for education. This only revealed my own prejudice and ignorance at the time. Now, although I still see Bobbitt’s vision as lacking, it is not for the same reason. If education can help a bricklayer be the best kind of bricklayer, this is a noble aim. It is just that I vehemently disagree with Bobbitt on what it means to be the “best kind”.

illustrators, painters, ceramicists, among others who do not have a more typical employment path. We continue to be challenged to do more with less.

Over the dozen years I have been teaching, I have seen an increase not only in the number of students in the class, but also an increase in the diversity and complexity of their learning needs. Universities, including our own, recruit international students with limited consideration of the ethics of enticing young and eager human beings with promises of a quality education and hopes for a better life (Stein & Andreotti, 2016). Once they arrive, schools may not be able to support their needs, and international students can face culture shock, language barriers, and racism inside the classroom and beyond. Simultaneously, with the rise in awareness of accessibility and inclusion, there has also been an increase in students who have more complex needs such as mental health disabilities that require accommodation and careful planning (Condra et al., 2015). In the classroom—in person or otherwise—it is up to the faculty members to address these complex issues and support the students, even if we have little understanding or training. No matter how much care we may have for the students, at times it feels like no amount of care is enough to overcome the difficulties of teaching in this time, especially in 2021 during a global pandemic.

Ultimately and regardless of what is being reduced or how, the reduction impacts us through time. Time we have for each student to understand their particular learning needs; time for the administrative staff to prepare the required reporting documents; time for critically considered future planning. Of course, it is not as if nothing can be learned from it. The different and more inclusive critique methods which many in our department now use are an example of something good borne out of critical reflection of the curriculum as well as time-restriction needs. As faculty, we must also be mindful to plan our time with and for students with purpose

too, and not take the time we have with them for granted. Time is of value, but all the time in the world is not enough on its own. Along with time, what is still needed is another magic ingredient—care. *That* is something to while over.

## CONVERSATION 7

### On Care and Suffering: The Gaps that Can't be Closed

One wants to say that the hermeneutical experience always entails the event of exposure that belongs to tragedy. (Bruns, 1988, p. 197)

During the time in which the COVID-19 pandemic forced us into remote course delivery, I sent out weekly emails to the students in the communication design program. Each began with a short introduction and was followed by news, online events, scholarship, competition, and job opportunities related to communication design. Although I had already been doing this every couple of weeks during the semester since 2018, the emails took on a new significance both in my writing of them, and according to some student and faculty responses, in their receiving and reading. At least for me, the significance is in the short introductory “greetings” from week to week which included jokes, emojis, and even memes. A few are provided below.

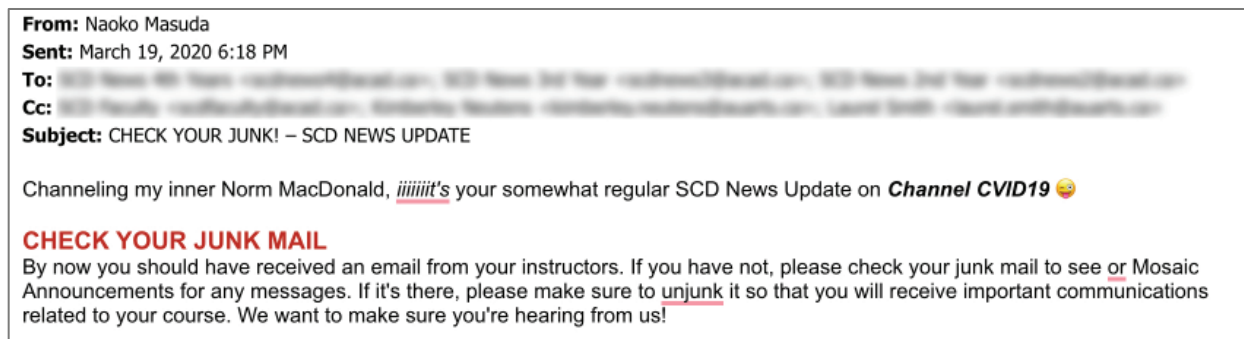


Figure 1: *Email, March 19, 2020*

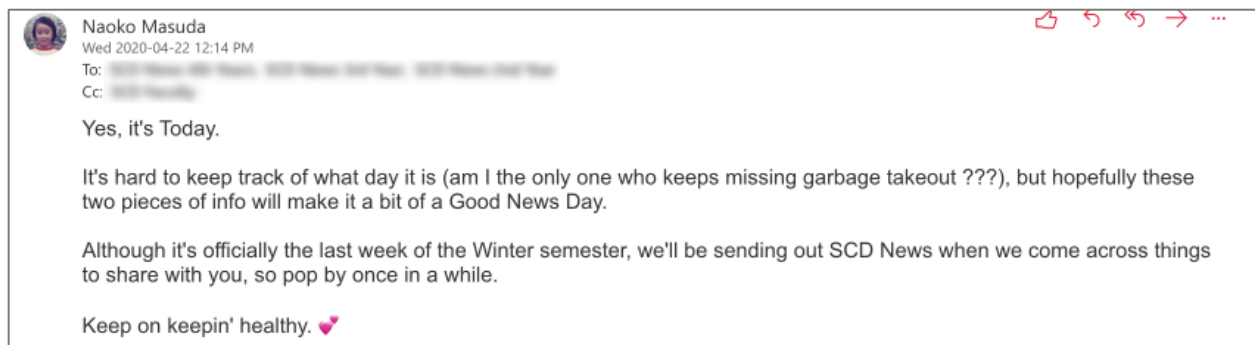


Figure 2: *Email, April 22, 2020*

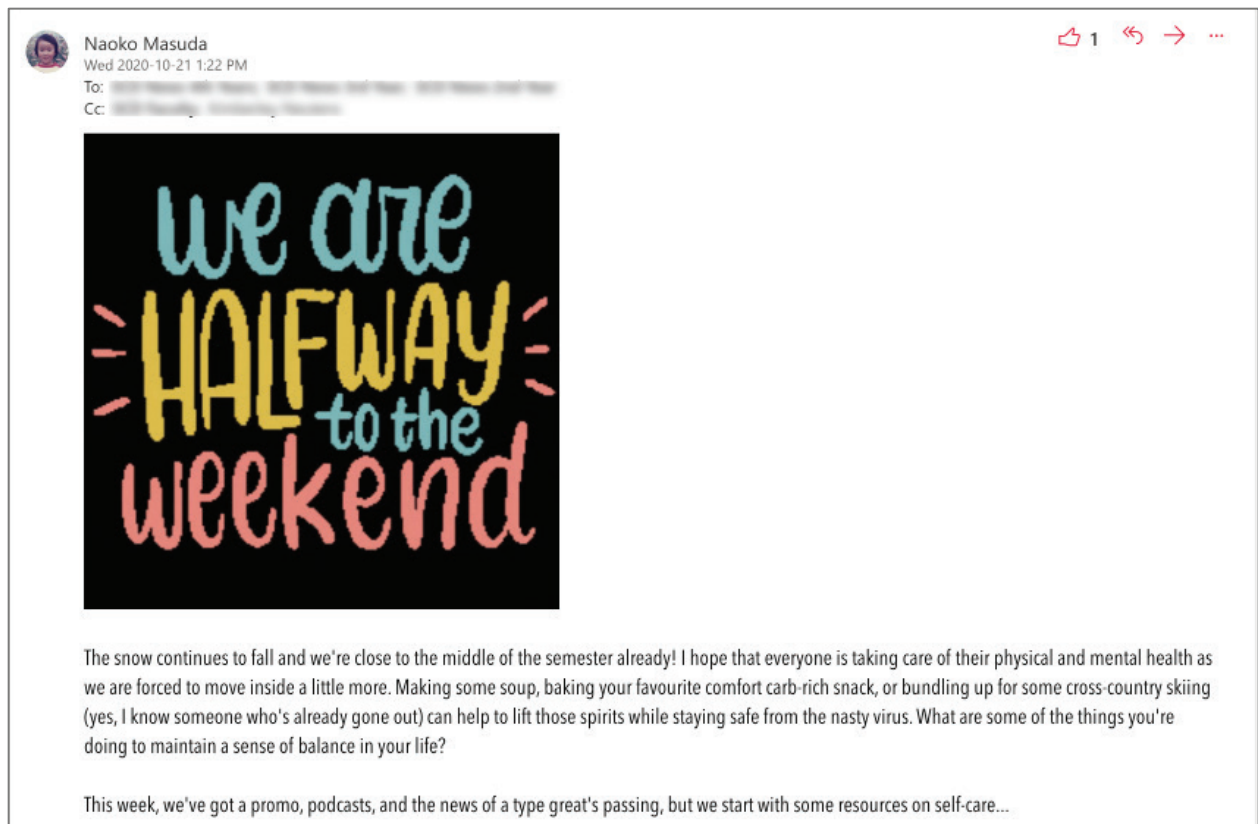


Figure 3: *Email, October 21, 2020*

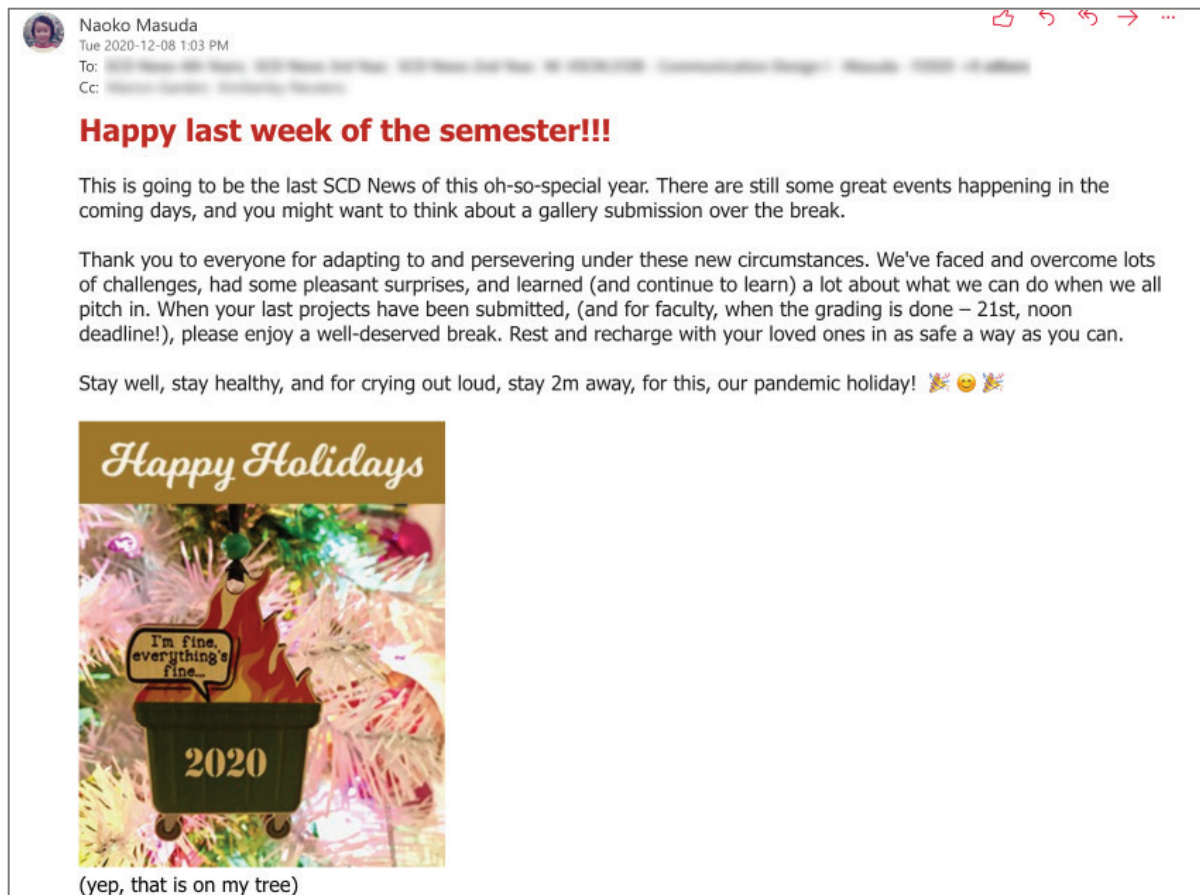


Figure 4: Email, December 8, 2020

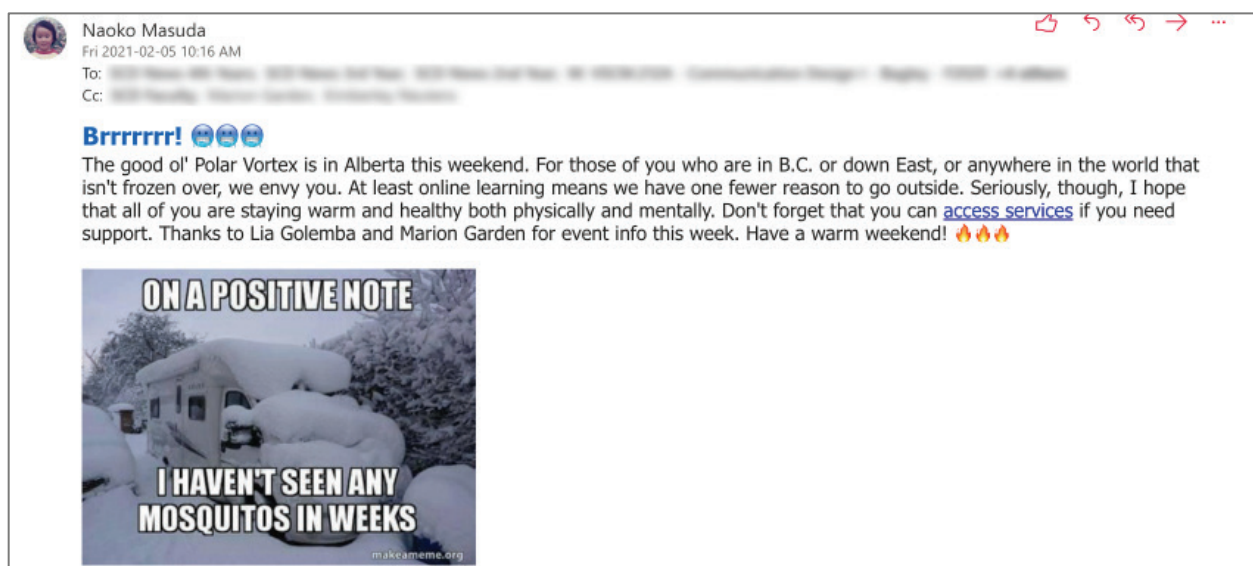


Figure 5: Email, February 5, 2021



In theory, these emails are not that complex. I collect information, include it in an email, write an introductory short paragraph, and send it to the database. In practice, it is something that lingers in the back of my mind all week. In between teaching and administrative work (as well as thesis musings), I collect news items from the internet, scour my own email lists, solicit recommendations from colleagues and students, and think about timely and light apolitical topics that might help to create the illusion that we are still experiencing something together. *Perhaps we are being affected by weather? Is there a holiday coming up? Am I being inclusive with religious holidays? What about international students?* Sometimes there is nothing and the weight of another week of being confined to the home has me at a low point. At those times, I think, “I must not be the only one feeling like this,” and search for humorous ways to express “our” collective weariness. Even the sense of not being able to experience something together is something we must be experiencing together, if apart.

When it finally comes time to sit down and actually write the email, it often takes me the bulk of my morning. I want to think that I am carefully crafting the correspondence with deliberately chosen words like Salvatore desires once more to lay his bricks, but perhaps I am just slow (a real possibility). I put all the new topics in one document. I think of the order in which to list them. I look for text if it is available from the news source, but also write brief summaries if it is not, or if the source text is poorly written (which it often is). I format it. I add in-text links and images—often memes or gifs, which I sometimes make. I check to see if the links work. Only then do I get to the writing of the introduction and the subject line. I think about the students who will receive it. *What might be going through their minds right now? What are we both experiencing together while we are apart? How can I connect with them?* I want the email to be useful, but also let them know: “I see you, even if we’re each confined to our

bedrooms and home offices.” Only after I have read and re-read, to myself and aloud at least three or four times, would I feel it was ready to go. SEND.

On occasion, I would agonize over a news item I missed. Bigger still, I recall missing one religious holiday when I had made a note to include it and had been including all others. This upset me, as it meant that I wasn’t being careful enough and didn’t communicate that I saw *these* particular students, including their faith. I felt that I had let them down, not as students, but as people. More often, however, I would get a reply from a student thanking me for the weekly emails. They were able to get a job because of a news item. They attended an inspiring online event. The meme made them laugh. There were weeks when I was exhausted and writing these emails felt like a chore, and at those times, these students’ comments buoyed me.

One student’s kindness stood out for me regarding these emails. I had taught Kat twice before. Hardworking, dependable, and caring, she once joked that despite the lack of age difference with her peers she was often the “mom” in the class. She must have intuitively known that these emails took time. She would send me news items to share with her peers that were formatted exactly in the way that I would send them out, links and all, so that I could just check the link, copy, and paste from her email. Alone at my desk, my teary response to this gesture was a sign that despite the brave façade, the whole situation was indeed more than I could bear alone, and that I too “desperately wanted to be cared for” (Noddings, 2002, p. 149). Her thoughtful gesture not only helped her peers but was also the care I needed at a time when care as a postsecondary educator had become more than what it meant before.

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As Barrow (2015), Meyers (2009) and other researchers have pointed out, care in postsecondary education is not yet an area of major study, reflecting an academy not yet

concerned with care as a foundation for education. Not only is there a lack of understanding of the role of care in higher education teaching and learning, research indicates that among postsecondary educators there also exists negative perceptions about care in teaching. These include concerns that care will lead to permissiveness and lowered standards of academic rigor (Meyers, 2009), and that care leads to the coddling of students (Barrow, 2015). Despite the emerging evidence, some in higher education continue to think care is only appropriate for young children (Meyers, 2009).

The conception of care from a students' point of view, however, is different from those of their instructors. In a study of university students in Hong Kong, Tang et al. (2020) found that students conceived their instructors' care in three distinct ways—pedagogically, holistically, and sustainably—as trust deepens over time.

First, students perceived what Tang et al. (2020) refer to as pedagogical care in the “teachers’ primary responsibilities” (p. 578) such as curriculum planning and delivery, availability (e.g. office hours, email replies), and responsiveness in support of their learning. If an instructor never makes themselves available to answer questions, or if the organization and delivery of the course content seems haphazard, students find it difficult to feel confidence in the instructor’s ability to effectively teach.

A demonstration of such pedagogical care is revealed in Frank’s recounting of how he supports students to draw complex forms in an anatomy class. Specifically, he discusses drawing a model from the viewer’s angle which foreshortens the entire figure. The student is learning to create the illusion of the body projecting toward the viewer in a two-dimensional drawing.

If you’re looking at a class and the students are drawing and you see that they’re having a really tough time drawing... you’re trying to sort of deconstruct how they’re looking at something at that time, so that they can look at it through a different way. So you can say “Okay, do you know why this isn’t working? ... How do you sort of reconstruct what

you're looking at? Okay, rather than a prostrate figure that's extruding towards...". [it's a] hard thing to draw. So what do you say? "Well don't look at it. Look at the spaces around it." So then, you can see there's an angle here and that's between the buttocks and the heel of the foot and there's a little triangle of stuff in there, so look at that shape. Don't even look at this. Look at that.' So then it changes, how they look at something, and so that is oftentimes the biggest thing, the sort of breaking down some of the ways we tend to see...

Before such a class, Frank knows the purpose of their gathering that day. He organizes a figure model for the class. He has taken care to create a context in which students can develop a certain set of skills and knowledge. In such a class, Frank will move from student to student, supporting each with their particular challenge. He makes himself available to the students. He attends to their needs and supports them in their development as illustrators who can communicate believable human forms.

Once the student perceives that their teacher is showing pedagogical care, students can start to perceive holistic care (Tang et al., 2020). This type of care is no longer limited to the subject of study. The teacher takes on more of a mentorship role. This type of care goes beyond the academic and is future-oriented toward a life beyond university. Students saw this type of care in those teachers who share with students their own work experiences; allow students to "experience trial and error in their self and professional developments" (Tang et al., 2020, p. 581); and support students when needed, providing an invisible but dependable "emotional security" (p. 581). Frank's comments on the distinction between the more foundational and senior-level courses demonstrates how this type of care can come into greater focus only when the students have their pedagogical needs met. He talks about how the learning "in third year gets more expansive and a little more self-directed." With some foundational learning already under their belt, his concern becomes more about how the student can express their intent and gain a unique voice through their work. He also talks about reinforcing that they are becoming

more experienced in the conversation (of their work), much like a professional would be when discussing work with an art director or client. “I find that [their desires and interests] become more part of the conversations that you have. It’s sort of holistic and in the sense, you know, a parent’s style of communication.” It strikes me that he uses the terms “holistic”—like Tang et al. (2020)—and the term “parent”. It reminds me that the students are more than just who we see in the classroom and that they are with us for only a short period before they fly off into the larger world. It also reveals how much Frank cares for the students beyond their becoming a professional illustrator.

For students who further developed trust, responsiveness, and mutuality of care, a desire to sustain the relationship with their teacher beyond academics was perceived (Tang et al., 2020). Such sustainable care was no longer about the teacher caring for the student, but one that was more reciprocal and long-term. This type of relationship, I imagine, is not as common, but I know that Frank, George, and I all have had students who have in time become more friends than a “former student”. There are two such people in particular that I can think of who I have been fortunate enough to become friends with over time. Much younger than me, they will check in from time to time to see how I am doing, as I do with them. I know that they care for me when they invite me and my partner to their homes for dinner, or to celebrate milestones like a wedding or birthday with them. One friend in particular, Nina, will text me from a store when she has found something—often home decor or vintage clothing—that reminds her of me. “Do you want me to pick it up?” she will say. We try to make time for each other, though we are all busy in our daily lives, and it feels a great privilege to be cared for. Visual communication was what brought us together in the first place, but that shared interest is no longer the only or main thing that keeps us together. Rather it is a desire to share our lives with each other.

Moving from pedagogical to holistic, holistic to sustainable, students can articulate and value the care they experience from educators (Tang et al., 2020). Although I question whether the move from pedagogical to sustainable care relationships needs to always be linear and chronological, when I observe and reflect carefully, I can find evidence of such care in design education, at least in this particular institution in which I work. But to show just the positive aspects of care in teaching would be to look at only one aspect of the multi-dimensional and inevitable messiness that exists when humans relate with other humans.

Take George's care for the students. Through my conversation with George, it is clear that he wants the students to gain the skills and knowledge of the discipline. But it is also abundantly clear that his care for the students goes beyond the obligations of the classroom.

You know, I did a little sort of a clean up here in my office over the last few weeks, and you know, there was a card from students... cards from students for a while that I hang on to. And one you remember... I dunno, three, four years ago, he graduated? His little comment was: "I liked the way you don't put up with our BS". And I like that. I was flattered by that comment. I can do it verbatim, I think. I put them away not too long ago. (rummages in desk drawer) Okay yeah, here it is (reading from card): "You've always been such a strong mentor who isn't afraid to call us out on our BS. Thank you for always caring so much for your students and really sticking your neck out for us. Never change George, and thank you." So that's nice and... But again, that, you know. Not putting up with our BS. I think that speaks to the rapport. Because the thing is, I understand that students got lots going on, they got multiple courses, they got work, they got house kind of stuff, so if they, you know, if they haven't been able to put the time and energy into a project just tell me. Don't try and bluff me, give me a break, you know, and that's what he's talking about...

Care in George's classroom involves listening, challenging, and sharing of ideas, but also includes not putting up with the students' "BS". George is well aware of the complicated lives students navigate in and out of school and respects this, but in the words "Don't try and bluff me, give me a break," I sense that this respect is something he wants reciprocated. George's sense of care seems, like in any valued relationship, to be one founded on honest and open communication, in which both members of the relationship are valued equally despite their

different roles within it. One-on-one conversations such as those that George engages in with his students is one way to help build those relationships (Barrow, 2015), and over time (“two or three classes”) some may even become ones in which both parties feel no need to “BS”. In such a case, the care George gives is received and acknowledged by the student, “confirming the self of each person” (Bergman, 2004 p. 152) in the relationship.

Although this student reciprocated George's care, and despite Noddings' (2002) assertion that the outcomes of care must be observable, care given is not always received promptly or as intended. Just like a lost letter finally arriving at the right address many years on, a teacher may not find out if their care was received until a long time after the caring event, if ever. Like learning, the fruits of care are not always immediate, nor can they be measured with a test. In other cases, George's care may be rejected outright for reasons beyond his control.

I think I know that um... I intimidate some of them. Not meaningfully but you know, I'm confident, I've been there a long time... I'm three times their age, etc., etc., etc., so I know that there's intimidation for some of them. But I think... and this is why I'm glad to teach the courses that I do in third and fourth year. Because I think, once they get to know me and I get to know them... usually the rapport can be pretty good and I'm usually very encouraging of the students. Always, you know, wanting to do more, tell them they've got the capabilities and all that. So I think they sense my investiture, as a word you use. I think they sense that. They sense that I do care about their progress. That I will encourage them and I will facilitate their learning in lots of different ways and... I do think for some, the fact that I'm, you know, an old white guy who's been around a long time, you know, right off the bat negates my currency to them. By not being a designer negates my standing in their mind. Those are factors that I'm sort of aware of. But typically you know, by the time that... I've had them in two or three classes and thankfully, a lot of the smaller classes, where we've been able to have the meaningful one-on-ones, by the end I think they're all pretty thankful that I was there to... listen to them and... and push them.

George knows that being, in his words, “an old white guy who's been around for a long time” and “not a designer” means that he can simultaneously intimidate students and be written off as lacking currency and relevance. His own *Dasein* which allows him to support the students may simultaneously work to hinder their study. This is an *aporia*—a tension that is impossible to

overcome—for George. His awareness of these tensions coupled with the value he places in meaningful care-based relationships may go a long way to overcome stereotypes such as those about men’s ability to provide appropriate care (King, 1996) or ageist attitudes toward older educators (Arbuckle & Williams, 2003), but no matter what, George cannot stop being George.

In this way, a relationship based in care is full of tension, ambiguities, and complexities, many of which are beyond the control of even those within the relationship. It requires negotiation (Sumsion, 2000) both internally and between the parties, the building of mutual trust, and the desire and ability from both parties to make the relationship work, though this may not always be the case. Although care in the context of higher education is often focused on the student, as a fundamentally relational ethic, care must also be considered from a more comprehensive point of view that includes educators and the institution as a whole (Meyers, 2009; Barrow, 2015).

Specifically, within the context of the classroom this means that our role as educators is ultimately to support students in their learning of the course subject matter, which includes the fact that we must organize and plan curriculum as well as assess student performance (Barrow, 2015). If we are to abandon these important roles, the student-educator relationship will no longer be founded in its primary purpose. Equally harmful is care for students at the cost of care for faculty (and other staff) members’ well-being—often couched as student centered learning—which can lead to well-intentioned but unintended and possibly negative outcomes for both students and educators (Barrow, 2015).

I can think of many such examples in my own experience, where the well-meaning care of educators or others in a role of authority led to possibly harmful, or at least unhelpful outcomes for the student. Often such misguided understandings of care lead to students not



having to take responsibility for their own actions and decisions. On a number of occasions, for instance, I have seen instructors pass students through a course despite the student not meeting the minimum expectations of the course. Perhaps it is because the student is having difficulties in their personal lives and the instructor feels that they could help by giving them something positive. It would, after all, be easier at that moment.

Sumsion's excerpt from her professional journal recounts one such ethical dilemma in which she suspects that a student is taking advantage of her and a colleague's sympathetic stance and efforts to accommodate their learning while they deal with personal issues (Sumsion, 2000). She has come to know, respect, and admire the student, but with multiple negotiated deadlines missed and now a final administrative deadline looming, she must tell the student that if the assignment is not submitted the next day, she will receive a failing grade. With this as the background, Sumsion investigates the tensions educators experience while they navigate a profession that demands much of them and pulls from different directions. I too have experienced multiple such situations in which concern and sympathy for a student have created an ethical dilemma.

One experience still pains me to this day and involves a student with complex learning needs. In a design class where students are required to grapple with uncertainty and ambiguity as they problem-solve using words and image, Tracy (pseudonym) required specificity and certainty with detailed but simplified instructions, one task at a time. Their motivation to learn was high but they had difficulty planning and thinking flexibly and demonstrated repetitive behaviour patterns such as repeating simple and already answered questions over and over and constantly interrupting myself and others. Although the other students were accepting and sympathetic, Tracy's behaviour and needs impacted the class to the point that their classmates

requested a meeting with me halfway into the semester. The students found Tracy's repetitive questioning disruptive. The required group work was almost impossible because of communication problems and Tracy's inability to collaborate and contribute. They wanted to help Tracy but felt that Tracy's behaviour and inability to contribute was creating a great deal of stress for them and affecting their own learning. I understood how they felt, as I too was feeling a great amount of stress trying to find a way to support Tracy while also tending to the other students.

In Alberta, "Any student or visitor who has a characteristic that meets a protected ground under the Act, such as mental disability or physical disability, may request an accommodation from a post-secondary institution" (Alberta Human Rights Commission, 2021, p. 3). It is also common that students who qualify for learning accommodations do not request it due to further stigmatization. Yet, without formal accommodation, it is difficult to support the student in a meaningful way. I knew that Tracy had a diagnosis because they slipped me a card identifying their needs during our second meeting. I asked if I could photograph it with my phone and they agreed, and I began to research what I could do to provide better support. However, and despite the complexity of their needs, Tracy would not initiate the process needed to organize learning accommodations for the class. They felt that all they needed was extra time, which I provided, though in the end, they never needed. Wanting to support Tracy regardless, I spent extra time trying to provide various ways to help. For most of that semester, I met Tracy multiple times a week outside class time to go over instructions that had been already given numerous times in a variety of modes. I would write them down in short sentences. I would dictate short sentences and ask them to write it down. However, what I could not do was interpret and understand the course material or make decisions for Tracy. For example, if an assignment required choosing a

colour palette to communicate certain attributes (e.g. powerful, reliable), they could not understand why certain colours tend to be associated with certain meanings in western culture nor could they provide the reasons for their own colour choices. A discussion about representation, appreciation and appropriation in visual culture and the communication designer's role was foreign to Tracy. They did not understand the point of such a conversation, let alone engage in the critical thinking and nuanced discussions.

In the hopes of getting some advice, I reached out to the university's sole learning assistance officer. There was little they could do without a formal application for accommodation and the little advice they offered was well-intentioned but not helpful. Try to offer the instruction in multiple ways. *I have.* Maybe your instructions are too complex. *I provide instructions to them one sentence at a time and ask them to write it down.* A colleague suggested that I be lenient in assessing their work. Afterall, they said, their goals may not be the same as other students. This comment made me extremely uncomfortable.

Beyond my care for Tracy, I also had a moral obligation. A duty to accommodate does not mean that a postsecondary institution needs to lower its academic standards. Nor does it exempt students from developing "the essential skills and competencies expected of all students" (Alberta Human Rights Commission, 2021, p. 4). I wanted Tracy to develop the skills and knowledge necessary to advance in their learning, but I did not want to create the illusion that they were capable if they were not. Tracy should have access to the same opportunity as their classmates should they choose, but that also means that they have the same opportunity to both *succeed and fail*. I did not want to pity Tracy, like it seemed some others were comfortable doing. Yet, I felt that I was being harsh. I wondered if I was somehow misusing my authority as an educator.

I also pondered the limits to accommodation, whether Tracy had formally requested it or not. The duty to accommodate states that “There is no obligation on the post-secondary institution to provide an immediate or perfect accommodation, or to accommodate beyond the point of undue hardship” (Alberta Human Rights Commission, 2021, p. 8), and a “significant interference with the rights of other students” (p. 11) is an example of such hardship. If classmates were now confiding that their learning experience was being negatively impacted by Tracy’s behaviour, whose needs are to be prioritized? As much as I care about Tracy’s right to learn, so too do I care about that of the other students. What is the point at which this becomes “undue hardship” for everyone involved, including me? I was in a state of *aporia*.

My stress began to show physically. My eczema flared up. I could not sleep. Every time an email from Tracy arrived—often multiple times a day in quick succession—I felt what could only be described as a twisting in the core of my abdomen. I became nervous before each class and dreaded having to say once again, “I’m sorry Tracy but you have to make the decision. I can’t do it for you.” They would become upset and storm off, only to return to my office the next day when we would repeat the same thing. Even as I write this, at times my throat feels like it is closing in. Yet, I know that this is important and needs to be investigated in the context of an ethics of care.

What helped more at the time was when I reached out to Christine, my wise friend and graduate school peer, who has an abundance of experience working with students who have complex learning needs, though in a much younger age range. I could talk to her about my being torn between Tracy’s learning needs and the need to maintain the integrity of the curriculum; of wanting to support them in their learning, but not to cheapen that by assessing them differently (and more leniently) in comparison to the rest of the class; of the need to balance Tracy’s needs

with the needs of the other students in the classroom; of wanting to feel excited again about being in the class rather than being anxious about it. Christine would walk me through my own thinking, provide helpful guidance, and perhaps most important of all, remind me that I am not alone and that if it weren't for care, I wouldn't be wrestling with such an ethical dilemma.

Norwich (2008) states that such dilemmas of difference—whether we perceive difference as stigmatizing or enabling and the risks associated with each view—create tensions which are not only difficult to overcome but even to recognize, and which underlie key issues in education in the areas of student identification and placement as well as curriculum design. In identifying (and self-identifying) under some label, a student like Tracy would be able to access additional resources for learning which would allow for greater inclusion. Yet in doing so, the very act of identifying and self-identifying within that label sets them apart from their classmates, leaving them vulnerable to possibilities of “devaluation and stigma” (Norwich, 2014, p. 502). Regarding curriculum design, unlike in K-12 situations where access to education is a right for those between the ages of six and 19 (Alberta Education, 2021), this is not the case in higher education. Not being a right, at least in Alberta, postsecondary education is not bound by legislation beyond the duty to accommodate. Not everyone gets to go to university or college, even if the desire is there, because of academic requirements as well as financial and other barriers. There is an inherent tension between inclusive curriculum and teaching practices and such an exclusive system. Within the system too, longstanding practices reflect the exclusionary culture. In art and design education, the portfolio admission, in which students submit a number of original works that address specified requirements for faculty review, is one such exclusionary practice, especially if it is required in addition to the completion of prerequisite courses. If faculty are confident in their own and their colleague's curriculum and assessment decisions,

why do students need to provide more proof that they can progress in their intended pathway? Another exclusionary practice is reflected in the more general university “weeder class”, an introductory course with hundreds of students, unrealistic expectations, difficult exams, and a high dropout rate (Cochiloco, 2014).

Adding to this dilemma of difference, and despite the growing number of students with additional learning needs and disabilities entering postsecondary education, educators still have limited understanding of accessible teaching and learning practices (Marquis et al., 2016). In my own experience, there has been little by way of institutional initiative or faculty professional development opportunities that address this issue, and many instructors including myself have a limited understanding about developing inclusive and accessible curriculum and teaching and learning practices. Finally, design education, with its roots in the medieval guilds and inextricably tied to a profession through its practitioner-educators (Souleles, 2013), is steeped in a long history of exclusion and prepares students for a highly competitive industry. This lack of educator knowledge and our own discipline’s past and present may make it even more difficult to introduce inclusivity and accessibility into the curriculum in a meaningful way.

I do not know how Tracy ended up in this class. It was clear that, despite the prerequisite courses taken and passed, they were entirely unprepared for the complexity and ambiguity of researching, developing, and working through a process, and the critical thinking and problem-solving that was required of them. It is probably many things. Some are big things like current theories of inclusivity and inclusive education and the social and educational policies formed upon them (Norwich, 2014). Others are smaller, but nonetheless impactful and cumulative, like individual decisions made by Tracy and their family; healthcare providers; and well-intentioned teachers and instructors, including those who may have said “Let’s give Tracy a break,” out of a

sense of protection or pity; or people who were frustrated and stressed like me and just felt they couldn't think straight. Regardless of the reasons Tracy ended up in this class, I had deep respect for them and this meant that I could not assess them according to a different and easier standard than their peers. Not because the Alberta Human Rights Commissions document says so, but because just like any other student, Tracy had the right that I be honest with them: "Tracy, with the grades you have currently, it will be very difficult to pass the course."

The first two of three graded projects were submitted and although the mechanics were there, the final product was confused in its communication. The process documentation that should provide evidence of research, critical thinking, creative problem-solving, and informed decision-making, though submitted, showed little of those, and was not a process in the sense that each "stage" of the process felt isolated from the rest, like a collection of snapshots taken at different times and places. I set up a meeting with Tracy to discuss the assessment. They could not understand why they were getting the grade they did. They had submitted everything required of them. I could not refute this. But without evidence of understanding and informed decision making, without a process that tells the story of a journey toward greater understanding, and without a final product that can communicate meaning, it could not be considered as meeting the expectations. I could feel their frustration and anger. At that moment, I wondered why I could not be like my lenient colleague. It would be easier.

But that is not me. I respect Tracy as an individual beyond the student they are, and they should have the opportunity to succeed on their own terms, but also the opportunity to learn from the less successful experiences too, just like everyone else. Their differences should not exclude them from what we share—the classroom, the curriculum, and the expectations we have of one another within that context. If I was to be lenient in the assessment of only Tracy's work, I would

be assuming that they are incapable of success on their own terms. To pass them would mean that I have lost all hope and faith in their ability to learn. To pretend that they are doing better than they are would only give them false hope. Furthermore, to be lenient in the assessment of only Tracy's work also devalues the learning of other students and the subject matter itself, all of which I care for deeply. By being lenient, I would not be including, but further segregating and discriminating. The irony of it all was that truly including Tracy meant that I had to have the painful conversation that would lead to them withdrawing from class.

What would Noddings say? In her ethics of care, not only are the selves of both care-giver and care-recipient confirmed in the act (Noddings, 2002), but they must be so in order for such a relationship to be called care. "You've always been such a strong mentor who isn't afraid to call us out on our BS....Never change George, and thank you." When George rummages through his desk drawer and proudly reads the sentiments of a years-old thank you card, it is clear that this care-giver and care-recipient have both felt confirmed in the relationship. If, however, as Bergman (2015, p. 151) says, "for every moment of engrossment and motivational displacement on the part of the would-be carer, there must be a reciprocal reception of care by the intended cared-for," then I am not sure if my own actions would count as care. I definitely did not experience a confirmation of the self. In fact, I was racked with doubt and here I am years later, still questioning my decisions and motivations. I am not sure if Tracy ever received the care or even saw my actions as remotely caring. What I observed was a confused and aggrieved young person who wanted to pass the course (and achieve high grades) and who felt I was standing between them and that thing. They told me as much at the time. Still, after much reflection upon this event, I do still believe (or perhaps want to believe) that my actions truly came from a place of care, not only for Tracy, but also for their classmates and the curriculum.



If it was not care, then what was it? Bergman (2015) notes that Noddings “speaks of moral duty as arising from ‘faithfulness to an ideal picture of ourselves’.” (p. 153). Though Noddings acknowledges this self as one in relation to others, if true, the “care” I gave—in quotations here, because it is yet to be determined as such—and (felt) did not receive in return during this time may not have been able to meet my own ideal of a care relationship as Caring Naoko. Regardless of my motivations or the outcome, this discrepancy could not be overcome, with this student and this set of circumstances—in this event. Not being able to unite the ideal and the actual has exposed me, leaving me vulnerable, ashamed, and feeling like a failure. It is me in unfamiliar territory, lost but still hearing and guided by the siren call of the ideal Caring Naoko, wanting and trying to close the gap between her and the Naoko *at this moment and in this world*. Perhaps this is what is meant by “the tragedy of hermeneutical experience” (Bruns, 1988, p. 191), where only in experiencing failure and being confronted by the call to reinterpret one’s own (seemingly certain) self-understanding, can we arrive at a new (and always temporary) self-understanding. Perhaps this is *all* learning.

In my weeks with Tracy, this care—if it indeed was that—was not permissive. It was not uplifting. Every day it was disorienting and frustrating. Care felt like being an asshole and a villain. Some days I wanted to avoid the issues. Even pleasantries like asking Tracy about their day or their interests—usually conversations I enjoy having with students—became difficult, even if once in a while, I could see a quick smile. I wanted so much to support them, but it was to no avail. Tracy dropped the course rather than stay and face the real possibility of failing the course. When they did, I felt a deep sadness but also a sense of relief, which led to more doubt, shame, and guilt, feelings that both Noddings (2002) and Sumsion (2000) conclude are inherent and unavoidable risks in an ethics based in care. Did I do enough? Could I have found a way for

them to learn and pass the course if I had approached the situation differently? What if I had taken the course that my graduate studies peers took on inclusive education? Would I have then been able to close that gap between me and my ideal self?

It is likely that despite all my what ifs, I could not have done much more at that time given the particularities of the situation. Upon sober and informed reflection, to think that I can somehow “solve” such a complex situation is in itself naïve at best. Perhaps there is nothing to solve, nothing to fix, but only to experience and from which to learn. Afterall, Tracy is not the problem. They are not broken. They too are just one human being living in tension, though a different one from me. But to this day, and despite all the readings about care and its different expressions, its contextual specificity, and the tensions inherent in simultaneously caring for the individuals involved, the curriculum, and my own self-care needs, I am still unsure if my conduct was truly out of care, or if it was an act of self-preservation.

## CONVERSATION 8

### At a Junction: Flickering Between Light and Dark

Opening up does not “amass” like verified knowledge. *Alethia*, as a privative term, always reminds us that truth, in this hermeneutic sense, is a dance between revealing and concealing, between opening up and closing off. (Jardine, 2006, p. 283).

If there was a “beginning” to this thesis journey, it was when, some time in my second year of graduate school, I finally began to think of myself as a teacher. Until then, the term felt both high above and heavy for me—a title for which I felt unworthy. Why did this term feel so out of reach for me (and why now could I begin to feel comfortable with it)? How do I decide what is important to teach, and why? What gives me the right? After all, like many of my colleagues, I did not *train* to become a teacher. I was an accidental teacher. I answered a call—both literally and hermeneutically—and 12 years later, I am still here. So the questions began, as it were, with my own questioning of who I am and my own relationship with what I do professionally.

I have been lucky in many ways to be blessed with the care of my family, my friends, and many generous colleagues. They have shared with me of themselves as I share with them, and this generosity and kindness has meant that even in the most difficult moments of my life, I have always felt that I am part of a community—an interconnected web of experience, wisdom, and support. I realize that this is not the case for everyone.

As I wrote about my experience with Tracy, at times I felt like I was squeezing myself like a lemon. There was bitterness and sourness. It took me months to be able to even consider writing about this particular experience. But in the end, I came to the conclusion that sharing my own struggles and vulnerabilities was necessary for greater understanding of both the joys and the difficulties of pursuing an education based in care, not only for myself, but also perhaps for

other educators. A lemon may be bitter and sour, but it also packs a lot of vitamins and without it, you can't make lemon tarts. Aeschelus would call it *pathei mathos*—"learning through suffering" (Gadamer, 1960/2013, p. 365). Only by recollecting and reflecting upon an event that still evokes pain and confusion am I able to gain deeper insights not only into my own understanding of the event, but also into myself—both my potential and my limitations. This, at least for me, is a worthwhile endeavour.

Yet, as I was dwelling in a space filled with the tensions associated with teaching and learning based on an ethics of care, in another corner of my world, others were deliberately extricating themselves—their experience, wisdom, and support—from the students who they were responsible for teaching and mentoring. COVID-19 has revealed many facets of people in how they cope with, rise up to, and even retreat from challenges, but a university-wide vaccine mandate leading to the departure of colleagues took many in our workplace by surprise. It was not so much that some were not willing to get a vaccine that would not only protect themselves but also others, but the way in which they made their exit. Indeed, one colleague made this decision for themselves and did all to minimize the effect of their departure. For others, however, this was not the case. Not only did they step away, but they also abruptly denied their students access to all materials and resources in the digital course repository. They erased everything just days before the last day they could submit their vaccination status. To allow for students to complete the semester, multiple instructors were asked to take on the last three weeks of the courses. With the transmission of COVID-19 being a continued reality, they expressed concern for the health of their colleagues. But when we found out that the class had no access to the learning resources and little or no record of assessments, some still had difficulty believing that such actions were possible from educators like themselves.

*How could those who claim to be educators betray their students in such a way as to jeopardize almost an entire semester of learning? How can they depart without providing the bare minimum that could allow for some continuity for their students? How could they have built a relationship with students over the semester knowing that if they did not get their way, they would destroy that relationship?* Try as I might, I could not understand these now-former colleagues. Not only could I not understand but having “discovered the other person’s standpoint or horizon” (Gadamer, 1960/2013, p. 314), I also felt that I did not want or need to understand these abhorrent actions. I could not see myself anywhere in them. From my standpoint, and from those of my many colleagues who were left to pick up the pieces in the aftermath of their sudden and vitriolic departure, their actions had no place in an ethics of care (Noddings, 2002) or in education for that matter. Their curriculum was anathema to a complicated conversation (Pinar, 2015). It was not a conversation at all.

As expected, students were confused and upset. The semester in the midst of our second pandemic year had been challenging enough without this. The instructors were knowledgeable and well-liked. It created some arguments amongst students in one particular class. A number of students came to speak to me about the situation. With limited information and privacy issues, I could only say that our department was a community of committed teachers, staff, and students, and much more than a few people. Our conversation focused on how so many others were willing to jump into a difficult situation on short notice so that students can continue to learn. And perhaps, what this event reminded and revealed was the strength of community in comparison to that of any individual. In fact, I told myself this often during this time. Why should I focus on those who behave selfishly and uncaringly when there are so many who do care? Afterall, without community, there is no communication, and no communication design.

I continue to contemplate what it means to be a teacher in my context, one in which I and my colleagues teach communication design. The word *communication* is important here since the underlying purpose of the design artefact is *to communicate*. What, how, and why it communicates can vary, but ultimately it must communicate something to someone for some purpose. The Latin root of communication is the verb *communicare*, which means “to share, divide out; communicate, impart, inform; join, unite, participate in” (Etymology online, n.d.). It is significant that the first word in this list is “to share”. Sharing is something one does with another. It is necessary that there is a sharer and a sharee, as well as something—concrete or abstract—to be shared. If the thing shared is concrete—like food or space on a bench—then the decision to share would mean that there is less for the sharer<sup>17</sup>. If the thing shared is abstract—like subject matter knowledge or an account of an experience—then it is not depleted, but rather becomes part of the sharee. However, in the sharee, the thing shared is no longer the same thing as the thing the sharer shared. As a teacher I can share my knowledge about design and my experience of being a designer and human being without fear of depleting that experience and knowledge, nor without depleting my being. But when I share, I must come to terms with the fact that the thing shared, once received, is no longer the thing I shared. It becomes a “living inheritance” (Jardine et al., 2003, p. 12). I must learn to let it go. I must learn to focus on the sharing itself—the stuff that is between. I cannot expect something in return since this would be imposing me on the students. This is not to say that I cannot ask them to submit an assignment on a given date that meets certain requirements and criteria that will help me to assess their knowledge and skills. What I cannot do is to ask them to understand it like I do, in the way that only I can. I cannot understand *for* them, because each of us is “affected by history” (Gadamer,

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<sup>17</sup> Though, this does not take into consideration intangible gains such as friendship.

1960/2013, p. 311) in a different way. That is a process that will have to unfold for each student in their own unique way. This may mean that at times I will have to act in ways that cause suffering, or it may mean that taking no action may be the right thing to do, even when it is the hardest. As it is the students' work to understand themselves and the curriculum, as a teacher it is my work to understand them as much as possible.

One place that I have been turning to in order to make better sense of this is my own heritage. I want to say at the onset that I do not want this to sound like a cliché: *Woman finds solution and solace in her ancestral past!* But perhaps it does. Although I was born in Japan and can still speak and read the language proficiently, my educational history is steeped in Western tradition. However, I have always felt an indescribable discomfort with the way in which Western (and also now more commonly Japanese) thought premised itself on the concepts of the individual and independence (Chang & Bai, 2016). I felt—with no theory or learning but just my gut—that such a focus limited the understanding of something far larger and infinitely more complex. When I was introduced to hermeneutics, and to discussions of inbetweenness and complicated conversations, I was drawn to it, addressed, because of the curiosity, richness and depth of understanding that it pursued, and also because it gave primacy to being and becoming over and above knowing. Although contemporary Japan too has its share of problems like climate change, an aging labour force, rise in mental health issues, and reduced job security, there are traditions, specifically in Sōtō (Zen) Buddhism that may provide alternative ways to approach the ethical dilemmas inherent in an education based in care.

Before inquiring into how teachings from Zen Buddhism's, and specifically Dōgen's perspective on interdependence (Iino, 1962) could help a design educator such as myself to understand what it means to be a teacher, it is important to state that my understanding and

experience of Buddhism is, like many Japanese, something that may or may not be categorized as religious in the Western sense. The categorical distinction between religiosity and secularism which is taken for granted in western discourse does not allow for the nuances of the Japanese “religious” experience (Horii, 2020). Instead, Buddhism, along with, Shintoism, Taoist and Confucian world views have been woven into the very fabric of Japanese culture over time, expressing itself in our everyday lives through language, food, and how we relate to the world in which we live in ways that defy these narrow categories (Nakamura, 1964; Horii, 2020). Horii, who is critical of this categorization, gives the example of a scholar insisting that the taking care of a community shrine, considered non-religious by the community residents, is in fact religious. “She somehow thinks that it is a form of reductionism to argue that the activities surrounding the Jizō shrine are not necessarily ‘religious’” (Horii, 2020, p. 7).

I see this blurring of categories in my own life. My parents have always had a miniature Buddhist altar (仏壇, butsudan) in their home in Calgary. Unlike the freestanding cabinets seen in traditional Japanese homes, it is only the section of the built-in oak shelves in the family room, but it houses the ancestral o-ihai (位牌, memorial tablets inscribed with the deceased’s name), as well as accessories such as bell set, incense, candles, flowers, and pictures of family members long gone. In addition, there are foodstuffs which are placed on the altar when my parents receive special gifts of food or make something that a particular ancestor may have enjoyed in life. Because one ancestor “housed” in the altar is my sweet tooth grandmother, there are often multiple Japanese and European sweets placed on small plates, each at a different stage of dessication. Oddly too, and especially as my parents age, prescription medicines and medical devices also seem to end up beside or even on the altar, as the medicine cabinet happens to be close by. From a western point of view, this (aside from the medical items) may seem



“religious”. The altar is Buddhist, and our family has traditionally associated ourselves with Tosenji (東泉寺), the Sōtō Buddhist temple near my hometown. Yet, our family, like many Japanese, consider ourselves non-religious. We do not go regularly to a local temple and we do not pray or study scriptures as devout Christians might. We see the altar and its offerings as something that is partly religious but not really. It is just part of being Japanese. It is important especially to my parents who grew up in post-war Japan and moved here in the 1970s. It is a daily part of their lives and a way to remember the importance of the connections of which we are a part, both ancestors and a homeland they left behind. For me, although it is a connection to my past and not-so-past too, it is primarily more evidence of the inbetweenness of my own being.

Unlike in Eastern philosophical traditions, the view of the self in Western discourse has, for the most part, assumed a bordered self that is separate from the environment in which it exists (van der Braak, 2021; Kuperus, 2019). Noddings’ ethics of care (2002) too presupposes this separateness of being, which can be evidenced by the need for observable reciprocation to know that care given has been received (Chang & Bai, 2016). Much like an electrical circuit, in order for care to manifest, the circuit must be complete—indicated by a light turned on or a motor beginning to whirr. This deeply conditioned understanding of the separateness of self from the other is echoed by scholars of care in education such as Thayer-Bacon (1993):

By caring, we mean “being receptive to what another has to say, and open to possibly hearing the other’s voice more completely and fairly. Caring about another person (other people’s ideas, other life forms, or even inanimate objects) requires respecting the other as a separate autonomous person, worthy of caring. It is an attitude, that gives value to an other, by denoting that the other is worth attending to in a serious or close manner”.  
(p. 325)

Some, including Barrow (2015), Sumsion (2000), and Chang and Bai (2016) have questioned this need for observed reciprocity, as have I<sup>18</sup>. In requiring an observable outcome, do we limit ourselves only to that which can be observed? This reminds me of how some colleagues continue to assess students on “participation” and see observable participation as the mark of an “engaged student”. If questions regarding different ways to engage or reasons for their lack of engagement were investigated, then we may see possibilities of different and more abundant ways in which students could participate in their own education. But if we assume that something must be observed, then we may continue to miss new and fruitful opportunities. Also, if observable reciprocation is necessary for an ethics of care, at what point would care reciprocated be considered reciprocation of the initial care given? If care is reciprocated some while later, then how do we know that the care received was truly the result of that which was given? Furthermore, what if the receiver of care was incapable of responding (Chang & Bai, 2016), such as a person who has a severe cognitive disorder? Such questions complicate the ethics of care.

Among the scholars who have addressed this problem of reciprocity from a philosophical perspective are Chang and Bai (2016). As teacher educators, they present the case of a practicum teacher-candidate who is overworked to the point that the situation has taken a “toll on her mental and emotional well-being” (p.19). Despite her timely and constructive feedback, opportunities to re-submit work, and the countless hours spent marking, the students have not responded in a way that she had expected (and perhaps desired). Consulting Noddings does not address this “breakdown of reciprocity” (p. 21). She, or more precisely her writings, instead

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<sup>18</sup> Although I will not take this up here, I also question Thayer-Bacon Bacon’s notion of giving “value to an other”. It has always been my understanding that the value of an other is not for me or some other to determine, but rather inherent in that other.

point to institutional issues as the source of the teacher's inability to cultivate and maintain caring relationships. Although they acknowledge the reality of such issues, the authors find that there is no practical guidance to help their students during such trying times. As true as it may be, "It's the system," is not particularly helpful when you're spending many weekends and evenings preparing and marking as many teachers do. Chang and Bai turn to Mahayana Buddhist philosophy for guidance in supporting the student.

Central to Mahayana Buddhism is the view that "although entities *appear* distinct and separate, they do not exist independently" (Chang & Bai, 2016, p.23). Unlike in Western philosophical traditions based in "self and other", this conception is that of interdependence—a "self-in-relation-with-other" (p. 24)—in which enlightenment is not an individual achievement but that of all beings (Chang & Bai, 2016). In such a worldview made up of "a myriad things" (Kuperus, 2019) interweaving and infinitely connected to one another, there is no reciprocation, but only ripples along the fabric of an infinite being. Such a relational view of being aligns well with an ethics based in relationality.

Chang and Bai see a way for the teacher in the Bodhisattva, one who seeks to enter Nirvana and who is known for compassion and wisdom (Silk, 2016). If the teacher is to model herself after the Bodhisattva, she would recognize her own mutual co-existence with the students. Carer and cared-for are one and the same. There is no room nor need for reciprocation because there is no self and other, but only a self-with-other (Chang & Bai, 2016). In this perspective, the teacher's hard work is not diminished because of a lack of recognition or response, but rather becomes one opportunity from which she can learn on her journey of becoming.

This idea of interdependence can also be found in the writings of Dōgen (Iino, 1962), the 13th century founder of Sōtō Zen Buddhism, a sect that traces its roots to Mahayana Buddhism. Dōgen wrote the *Shōbōgenzō* (正法眼藏), *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye* (The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism, n.d.), a collection of essays on Zen Buddhist philosophy and practice. The first chapter, the Genjōkōan (現成公案)<sup>19</sup> was written with the lay Buddhist practitioner in mind. It begins:

When all dharmas are the Buddha Dharma, there is illusion and enlightenment, practice, birth, death, buddhas, and sentient beings. When myriad dharmas are without self, there is no illusion or enlightenment, no buddhas or sentient beings, no generation or extinction. The Buddha Way is originally beyond fullness and lack, and for this reason there is generation and extinction, illusion and enlightenment, sentient beings and buddhas. In spite of this, flowers fall always amid our grudging, and weeds flourish in our chagrin. (Dōgen, translated by Waddell & Abe, 1972).

“All dharmas are the Buddha Dharma” yet “myriad dharmas are without self”. There is illusion and enlightenment, but there is no illusion and no enlightenment. Simultaneously there is and is not. In the Buddha Way, there is no duality. Life and death, joy and suffering are all parts of a single unified reality. For Dōgen, there is no self, no other, but only self-with-other (Iino, 1962). Dōgen’s words overlap in my mind with those of Gadamer when he writes, “One should entertain a completely different notion: whether the movement of human existence does not issue in a relentless inner tension between illumination and concealment” (Gadamer, 1976/1981, p. 104). Dōgen’s “illusion and enlightenment” and its simultaneous lack seem to have much in common with the tension between illumination and concealment of which Gadamer speaks. If I think back again to my time with Tracy, to George and the students who see him as an “old white guy”, or to how Frank observes and inquires to understand the student’s motivations, how could

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<sup>19</sup> Waddell & Abe (1972) translate Genjōkōan as “ultimate reality in which all things are distinctively individual, and yet equal in the presence of their suchness”.

Dōgen view each situation? If all dharmas are the Buddha Dharmas, and myriad dharmas are without self, then Tracy is me, and I am Tracy. My well-being is their well-being, and their inability to succeed in this particular context, their frustration, is also mine. Seen this way, perhaps the tension I feel comes from the flickering of that illumination/concealment.

In George's case, the students are just as old and white as he is, but at the same time, George too is young and not white and inexperienced because the students are experienced in ways George is not and perhaps never can be. George too flickers inside, trying to understand without ever being able to understand fully. Meanwhile, there is the caveat that any understanding he arrives at is fleeting, affected not only by the process of his own aging, but by the values of the world in which we live today.

As a skilled hunter, Frank has decades of experience in listening and observing for imperceptible and short-lived signs that announce the arrival and departure of the deer. They are skills he engages in with all his senses—the very same skills he also brings to the studio classroom. Through observation and conversation, Frank too is always trying to find the self-within-the-other to support and guide them in the way that only that particular student can be supported or guided. Frank too is caught in the tension of illumination and concealment.

In contrast, how would Dōgen see the colleagues who stepped away from the classroom? They were perhaps unable to see themselves in the other—in the students, the colleagues, the staff who spent countless hours changing course assignments, writing up new contracts, updating digital access—but saw only themselves and a separate other to whom they were indifferent and perhaps even felt superior. For them, at least in this regard, there would have been little tension. But what they saw as enlightenment, I saw as illusion. The illusion of the autonomous individual (Christman, 2020). Yet, the instructors who walked away from their students too are also me,

and I am them, as much as I may not want to admit it. Have I not ever wanted to walk away from a difficult situation? Have I not wanted to protect myself at the expense of others? So why do I stay? Why do I continue to live willingly in this tension?

Because I am drawn to the illusion and concealment and the understanding that arises as I, the students, and my colleagues go to and fro in our lives at an art and design university. I love that our understandings are expanded and enriched with every encounter, every conversation, despite the tragedy and suffering that is learning itself (Jardine et al., 2014; Bruns, 1988). I have learned much from Tracy and the others and the wisdom they have shared, and without them, I would likely not be writing these words or wading in the cosmic confusion that is the life of a teacher. With Tracy specifically, there was the illusion that I could somehow find a way to help them. In my attempt to support Tracy in their learning and in wanting to believe in their Buddha nature within, could I have come closer to my own Buddha nature? Of course, my anguish at the inability to support Tracy or anger at the colleagues surely makes me a sentient being. Revisited in this way, in each event, would it be fair to say that I did as much as I could do within each context with the tools I had at hand, both handed down to me from my ancestors and acquired over a half-lifetime of experiencing the world both inside and outside the studio classroom? In each context, I responded only as I could at that time to that situation with others who are also me. When another different yet same Tracy (who is also me) walks into the classroom, and other different yet same colleagues join and leave the community, I too will be the same yet different, having acquired new tools and finding myself in a new situation. But there too will be a new world in which to experience being-with-others, along with new tensions, new concealments and new opportunities for illumination.

Frank and George too are drawn to this tension, for some of the same but also for different reasons. They too, despite falling (*Verfallen*) into this world of higher education by chance, have not just given themselves over to the daily lives we so often take for granted. They have willingly struggled for decades to illuminate something which is not only difficult to see but also ever changing. Whatever reasons we may each have for being called to this practice that is both painful and rewarding, we all continue to do this because of love and care—for the students and for our disciplines, and for something perhaps even larger.

Later in the Genjōkōan, Dōgen continues:

To learn the Buddha Way is to learn one's own self. To learn one's own self is to forget one's self. To forget one's self is to be confirmed by all dharmas. To be confirmed by all dharmas is to effect the casting off one's own body and mind and the bodies and minds of others as well. All traces of enlightenment [then] disappear, and this traceless enlightenment is continued on and on endlessly. (Dōgen, translated by Waddell & Abe, 1972)

In this passage, I see a way as I fumble along the process of becoming a teacher and a more compassionate human being. “To learn one's own self is to forget oneself”. The more I participate in the world with attentiveness to the situation (rather than focusing on myself), I will learn about myself. “To be confirmed by all dharmas is to effect the casting off one's own body and mind and the bodies and minds of others as well.” By casting myself wholeheartedly into living, so as to forget that there is a me and them, I might be able to be part of something larger.

In my mind, Dōgen's words again coincide with Gadamer's, this time about the concept of play:

The point shows the importance of defining play as a process that takes place “in between.” We have seen that play does not have its being in the player's consciousness or attitude, but on the contrary play draws him into its dominion and fills him with its spirit. (Gadamer, 1960/2013, p. 113)

Teaching and learning are already in play, regardless of whether I join in or not. But as someone being addressed, as one who has been compelled to dive into the world of learning, scholarship,

and complex human relationships, only when I give myself over to the world of design education already in play—one rich in history and teeming with students and teachers, practitioners, and inbetweeners—will I be able to further understand both of the world and myself, albeit always impartially. If I am lucky, I may even be enspirited at times.

Finally, when Dōgen writes “All traces of enlightenment [then] disappear, and this traceless enlightenment is continued on and on endlessly,” it is further confirmation of an ever-changing *alethia*, in which truth will always be incomplete and impermanent. It is forever a process where there will be ups and downs experienced as moments of insight and illumination as well as feelings of loss and confusion. It is inevitable that being a teacher, I will often feel as a student does. I will also feel like I am not enough. But if I am consciously fixated on the idea of being a teacher—or the attitude of teaching—I will surely be less able to listen to the call when it does call out to my own conscience (Heidegger, 1927/2010).

This graduate school journey and this thesis journey have been much like learning the Buddha Way, which I have come to understand is much like the hermeneutic way. Perhaps this is nothing new to more experienced hermeneutic scholars. Years ago, when I began to question the ways in which I was taught to teach, there were quiet voices addressing me. When, in my first course in graduate school, I could not convincingly place myself in any of the categories of education theory in the introductory textbook, the voice called again. When I decided that I would write a hermeneutic thesis, it too was an address. It was always there in its absence, “summoning [*Anruf*] Dasein to its ownmost potentiality-of-being-a-self by summoning [*Aufruf*] it to its ownmost being-guilty.” (Heidegger, 1927/2010, p. 259). It took me a while to hear the call clearly, and I took more time to answer the call. But once I did, I cast “one’s own body and mind” into the many conversations already in play (Gadamer, 1960/2013), past and present,



foreign and familiar, allowing myself to be taken where the conversations took me. There were times that, in the moment, I felt I strayed off course, or that the path seemed impassible. There were also *a-ha* moments when my hunch was affirmed by learned scholars or by something someone said or did, giving me hope that this was indeed a fruitful path on which I should continue. There were also instances when I felt that something significant had changed within me, only for that feeling to dissipate as the conversation took a new turn. In taking this thesis journey, in immersing myself into this complicated conversation, I learned about teaching, learning, and perhaps most significantly, about myself. If any truth (*aletheia*) were to be found, it is definitely that understanding is a “dance between revealing and concealing, between opening and closing off” (Jardine, 2006, p. 283). In trying to understand—in articulating the process of trying to understand (Jardine, 2006)—I have come to understand much more and much less than what I had expected at the start of the journey. And that is alright.

I cannot speak for everyone as the route I took could only have been taken by me, and I do not intend to stay long in this place at which I have arrived. I am in transit, like a migrating bird. I cannot be otherwise. The journey that began as questions that lacked even words has led, through a myriad conversations with a myriad things, to a temporary clearing that seems small and fragile, like the eggs in the nest of the robins. The momentary insight that lies in this clearing seems obvious and insignificant. However, at least for me, it is an insight that I feel is too often forgotten. It is only that care in teaching is hard and that it takes practice and time.

C, a, r, e—only four letters, used often with little care (*I don't care!*), yet so layered and dense. The word initially conjures up images of kind and loving family and friends (*care packages*), supportive teachers (*Ms. P is really caring*) and empathetic nurses and doctors (*healthcare*). Yet the word's origins are thought to lie in the Old Germanic for “cry”, “lament”,

or “grief” (Etymology online, n.d.), revealing its sorrowful and privative nature. The difficulty of care has always been hidden in plain sight.

Care is difficult because it isn’t black and white, but rather a ball of tensions and dilemmas, always tugging and pulling from different directions (Barrow, 2015; Sumsion, 2000; Thayer-Bacon & Bacon, 1996). Whether it is balancing curricular, student, and administrative needs, or working through an ethical dilemma, a move in one direction changes the entire landscape. Care is also difficult because care often seems scarce and undervalued (Barrow, 2015; Meyers, 2009), especially in higher education. Because of its scarcity the act of caring can feel isolating at times. Because it is undervalued, when one does care, some make you feel like you are somehow weak and silly, not serious enough. Finally, care is also hard because who and what you care for and about is often not up for negotiation. Care too is hermeneutic. If care summons me, although I could try to ignore it, I will not be able to unhear it. It happens, “over and above our wanting and doing.” (Jardine, 2006, p. 269). For all these reasons, care is not for the faint of heart.

Care requires practice too because I am a sentient being that has a tendency to be lost in illusion and not see myself in the other and the other in myself. In practice, I must remind myself to listen to and attend to the other in myself and myself in them, to find ways to unite them, which will not always be easy. It is a practice of the hermeneutic conversation in which I listen with intent to the conversations already in play. In the classroom, this may mean providing more opportunities in which students (and I) can explore our relationship with the subject matter, with each other, and with our own selves. With colleagues, it may mean providing support and opportunities for them to thrive and in return contribute to a dynamic learning community in art

and design. Such a practice may be especially difficult in a time where we are all distracted by a world so intent on focusing on ourselves and ignoring those with whom we share this only home.

Practice also requires humility in the knowledge that I am only one of the myriad things. I must practice to fight the feeling that I am any more or less important in the lives of the students and colleagues. Or that I can fix all that is broken—because it may not be. I need not martyr myself, for without care for myself, I cannot begin to care for others—we are, after all, one and the same. Nor should I seek out recognition. The robins in my backyard spend hours every spring day building their nest then feeding the chicks, but it does not require its mate, its chicks or its northern flicker neighbours to praise it for being a robin and doing robin things. In conversation too, I must practice humility, open to the possibility that the other may be right (Gadamer, 1960/2013).

This care is not just difficult, but also takes time—not time as measured by a clock, but rather time for the “doing of the thing itself” (Figal, 2002, p. 109). Dōgen’s writings on time have a similar view. For him, “‘The time being’ means time, just as it is, is being, and being is all time.” (Waddell, 1979, p. 116). Time and being are not experienced as separate in Zen teachings. It is not a resource to be saved, rushed, or wasted. In this understanding, the theft committed by the grey men in *Momo* (Ende, 1973) is not just of time, but of being itself (Goodhew & Loy, 2002), and the insatiable desire for greater efficiency and productivity cuts up and particularizes existence itself. In education, denying time is to deny simultaneously the student, teacher, and curriculum and the interrelationships within—the very reasons for the institution’s existence. Learning a skill will take as long as it takes. Building a relationship with students will take as long as it takes. Writing this hermeneutic thesis will take as long as it needs to take. Of course, the practicalities of our lives and society’s obsession with the abstract and objectified time

disassociated from the activity itself (along with its commodification) will make this difficult<sup>20</sup>.

But here too, practicing patience and a Zen understanding that to honour the time it takes for learning is to honour the self-with-other, may help me to focus on the learning at hand and my relationship with students (and the world) in the moment.

For the moment, what I can do as a design educator, as a teacher, is to practice. Like the practice of a Zen monk, it is a practice of patience, a practice of humility, and a practice of wisdom (Smith, 2014). Unlike the Zen monk whose practice is meditation, however, it is a practice in hermeneutic conversation and a practice in care, always with and in the world. Like the Bodhisattva, it is a practice that strives always to be in service to others—students, colleagues, and all the other myriad things—who in turn are also me. I know I will often fail, but in those failures too, there will be learning (*Bildung*), both of myself and of life. In caring for myself, in learning for myself, perhaps others—especially the students—will see the potential in themselves to continue to learn and care. As they see me fumbling as I continue on my own journey of understanding, building a nest with no form in mind but always with purpose, I can only hope that it will give them the courage to open themselves to the infinite possibilities in becoming.

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<sup>20</sup> As I write this, it is December 31, 2021. Time is much on the mind. The Alberta government, taking a lead from other governments, has only hours earlier reduced the isolation period for people who test COVID-19 positive from 10 to five days. Clearly, isolation is not about the time to recover and be non-contagious, but rather an objectified time that is, in the words of Goodhew and Loy (2002, p. 101), “outside the activity and regulating it.”

## Epilogue

Eighteen months have passed since that Friday the 13th. My nest is formed for the moment. It is unruly and messy, made of East and West, past and future, art and science, theory and practice, reason and emotion. It feels both significant and yet also like cerebral vomit. Some birds use their spittle to make nests, so perhaps it is not so inappropriate after all. I am reminded of Richelle's—Dr. Marynowski's—comment during the thesis proposal presentation—that the nest may not end up looking like what I envision. I am not sure what I had envisioned then, but I feel that, for now, what has formed feels right aesthetically. It feels right because it is not just my thesis, but it is the collective effort of George, Frank, Tracy, Noddings, Aoki, Jardine, Dōgen, Ende, Gadamer, and all the other scholars, designers, students, colleagues, and mentors who provided the twigs and strings of this nest. Perhaps this is only the start of something. Like the robins, I may add or remove bits and pieces another season. But this is a good place to stop. It will be a new year in a few hours.

December 31, 2021

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