

# EXPLORING THE PROCESS OF BECOMING ART TEACHER EDUCATORS THROUGH COLLABORATIVE REGRESSION

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Throughout our lives we have had many roles—student, clerk, stocker, butcher, parent, facilitator, teacher, photographer, professor, researcher, etc.—identified with different groups at different times, and have come from strikingly different educational paths. As colleagues, we have often engaged one another in rousing debates about the names, titles, and identities that we claim as our own. Currently, we both refer to ourselves as *art teacher educators*, and although we come from fundamentally different educational backgrounds, life experiences, and understandings of what art teacher educators are and do, we have strikingly similar expectations and goals for our preservice art teachers. In a recent debate, Stephanie referred to herself as an “art teacher,” much to the chagrin of Bill who replied, “No, you’re not!” Thus began a long-running dispute over who we are, what we do, and why. This discourse caused us to ask ourselves, “How can two individuals come from seemingly disparate backgrounds and arrive at such similar values for our students?” In an effort to work through this existential quagmire, we decided to engage in an intentional dialogue using the *currere* method (Pinar, 1994) as a guide to explore our fundamental differences, explore the origin of our educative and artistic identities, and illuminate our similarities. How did we become art teacher educators? What are we trying to accomplish with our students? How does our current approach to teaching match up with or diverge from this, and how might this self-reflective process help us better serve our own students?

While reflection is often a solitary act, we chose to collaboratively reflect on our informal conversations about teaching and learning and add a thoughtful structure to them. As such, we intended to get to the root of where our ideologies about teaching and art came from. The *currere* process (Pinar, 1994) offered that structure and instead of setting out to reflect individually, we created interwoven pathways where we explored our own journeys individually, witnessed the other’s journey, and then interviewed one another to better understand the chosen paths. Our collaborative reflection offered insight that would not have been possible individually.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The foundation of the *currere* method is William Pinar’s (1994) four step—regression, progression, analysis, and synthesis—process of self-reflection that sets the stage for an exploration of self-in-journey. This paper focuses primarily on the first step of that journey, regression, which requires an engagement with and rumination over the past. For the purpose of this paper, less attention is given to the next steps of progression: determining what is desired for and missing from one’s current expectations for the present, analysis: exploring the present, and synthesis: examining the conceptual gestalt of one’s self.

Overall, Pinar (1994) asks, “what has been and what is now the nature of my educational experience?” (p. 20). Recently, Gouzouasis and Wiebe (2018) connected Pinar’s query and the questions that other scholars who study narrative, the power of story, autoethnography, phenomenology, life-writing, and the acknowledgement of self in social science research have been asking. They identify the etymological roots of the *currere* method as a contemplation of *how one’s course is made* and connect that rumination to McKnight’s (2006) studies with questions like; “Who am I? What makes me valuable? What is my aspiration? My trajectory? My course?” (Gouzouasis & Wiebe, 2018, p. 15). In this manner, the *currere* method takes on a role of “life writing” (Gouzouasis & Wiebe, 2018, p. 15), akin to what McKnight (2006) also points out as an effort “to identify a purpose and meaning in life,” that is similar to finding a calling achieved by “listening to all of the competing voices within one’s embodied existence” (p. 175). The resulting action McKnight discusses is similar to Pinar’s (1994) description of biographical movement and the personal and professional responsibility of autobiography; the *currere* method is, thus, understood to be simultaneously active and wholly experiential.

Dewey (1934) tells us that, in order to develop understandings that are “universally recognized to constitute experience” (p. 2), we must turn away from our contemporary knowledge of those things and delve into their raw natures or the roots from which those understandings arose. This exploration of raw natures is readily undertaken through narrative inquiry, which falls nicely in line with the *currere* method described by Pinar (1994). Furthermore, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) said that those who wish to understand the narrative inquiry experience “must become fully involved” in the work while also pushing themselves to “see their own stories in the inquiry, the stories of the participants, as well as the larger landscape on which they all live” (p. 81). There simply cannot be a separation of experience and narrative in regard to how educational philosophies and methodologies are developed. Experience exists only because of its recessive nature; the current is irrelevant without the past and vice versa. Hansen (2001) explains that “teachers have similar experiences in similar active terms...through engrossing themselves in the practice, thinking about their precursors, and talking with their peers, teachers make tradition into a partner in a generative transaction” (p. 123). Hansen makes active and experiential what others might see as stagnant in tradition. He suggests that reaching back and moving forward are simultaneous acts that enliven the learning and teaching process for all.

### MODE OF INQUIRY

To add method to the madness for our evolving conversation about teaching, learning, and art, we looked to the *currere* method described by Pinar (1994). We saw potential in *currere*’s multi-layered approach to understanding the educative experience and found that it aligned well with how our informal conversations already played out. Furthermore, it provided an opportunity to challenge one another, elucidate deeper meanings, and consider how winding and diverging pathways would sometimes meet. While there were countless earlier conversations and meanderings that no doubt changed who we were and what we believed about being educators, we only began recording and converting our conversations into collectible data in the summer of 2018.

With each step, we followed our instinctual wonderings about where our artist and teacher identities came from and began considering how our art educational

philosophies had come to be. The regressive step provided us with an opportunity to turn inward and narrate the paths upon which we had found ourselves. To begin, we individually wrote short narratives to answer these questions: What are the origins of our teaching methodologies or approaches to pedagogy? How did we come to art? How did we come to teaching? We wanted to find focus within our conversations and authentically seek out the origins and rationales of our personal histories within education. We then shared the narratives with one another and interviewed each other to further elucidate answers to our questions. We sought to dispel, clarify, and avoid assumptions about ourselves and each other. Initially, we used similar interview questions and then added a few individualized questions triggered by the reading of the other's original narrative. The stock questions were: What were key moments and players in the formation of your methodology in teaching and in art? What moments and/or people caused you to question or step away from your path to teaching and/or art making? What has been the relationship between art and teaching in your story thus far?

The one-hour, online interviews were recorded in both video and audio. The interviews took on a conversational nature and attempted to focus on only one of us at a time. It became easy for us to drift into "what if..." and "remember when..." scenarios that added to the depth and breadth of one another's experience. Once the interview recordings were transcribed, we coded each of them for themes alongside the narratives themselves.

#### DATA SOURCES

Data sources included two, five-page, personal narratives; two, one-hour, informal interviews (Creswell, 2008), which were recorded and transcribed; as well as personal documentation and notes of the researchers. The narratives initiated the regressive process and necessitated interviews for further clarification. The interviews modeled how Van Manen (2016) described conversation as a coming together of ideas:

A conversation is not just a personal relation between two or more people who are involved in the conversation...gradually, a certain topic of mutual interest emerges, and the speakers become in a sense animated by the notion to which they are now both oriented, a true conversation comes into being. (p. 98)

The interviews became conversations as they created openings that animated the narratives' contents and contexts.

The data was collected in the summer of 2018 via digital means. The narratives were written in Google Docs, and the conversations and interviews were conducted and recorded on Zoom. All data was shared and stored on a shared Google Team Drive. All data was accessible to both researchers who served as the participants for this self-study. The data was coded for themes and used to inform the second step of the *currere* approach (progressive), as well as guide curricular planning for the following academic year for both participants. The remaining steps of the *currere* process (progressive, analytical, and synthetical) are currently underway.

What follows is our regressive exploration. While not in its entirety, the segments offer a representative example of the ideas that were uncovered and woven together through writing and conversation.

## THE FIRST STEP: REGRESSION

STEPHANIE:



Figure 1: April 1981. Photo credit: Susette Taylor

I consider myself an artist and always have. My mom likes to tell the story that, when I was three years old, I won a coloring contest, foretelling my future as an artist. From as early as I can remember, I always had an answer to the question, “What are you going to be when you grow up?” An artist. My creative identity was cemented early on by my affinity for creating, by the stories that were told about me, and by the unwavering support I had from those around me. As a painfully shy child—one who would hide under my mother’s skirt at church and avoid the spotlight at all costs—I never had to question who I was. I could be known through what I could do—what I could create. I didn’t need to stand in the middle of a crowd and shout to be heard. Art did that for me.

Fast forward to college. Still very secure in my artist-hood, I worked on a degree in fine arts. As I was finishing, and perhaps knowing all along, I realized that my excitement and desire to make art needed to be shared. I decided to become an art teacher. I would finish my BFA and begin a masters in teaching. I excitedly arrived at one of my final photography studios to share the good news. Alas, my excitement deflated like a balloon not tied tight enough. As I listened to my photography professor’s response, my enthusiasm turned to disappointment and disbelief. “You’re giving up already? You’ll hate it. You’ll never have time to make your own art. Kids don’t know what real art is. Believe me, I know.”

I was confused. *Why* was she a professor if teaching was “giving up”? As my frustration turned to anger and the class began for the evening, I looked out the classroom windows. The sun was setting, and my professor’s voice faded as I began to build in my mind what still stands as my core belief and definition of art. I knew that art mattered—and it could matter to everyone. Art offers a way to live—a way to be in the world that can be freeing and loving and meaningful. Art is a way to understand, express, relate, and engage. It’s not a thing or a class or a degree. Art is a way to live out loud.

I wanted to be part of that. I became an art teacher. Fourteen years later, here I am. I teach undergraduate art education at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. At this point, I've been at Miami for 4 years, in higher education for 6 years, taught at the post-secondary level for 11 years, and been a teacher for 14 years. Three of those years were teaching middle and high school art. The undergraduate courses I teach now are mostly art methods, practicum, and professionally-based content courses that invite my students to consider their philosophies of teaching, practice what they preach, and engage with one another as colleagues and resources. I find more and more that my approach to teaching future art teachers centers around using art and creativity as a vehicle for reflection and thinking about teaching and learning. It matters that I teach future *art* teachers, but the message might just be the same if I taught future teachers of other disciplines.

*BILL:*



Figure 2: June 1992. Photo credit: Terri Stephens

I am an educator. I wear so many hats within that role that it is often difficult to ascertain exactly what that role is. At the undergraduate level, I teach future art

educators to navigate classrooms that they have no context for understanding yet. Then, as a student teaching supervisor, I help them to balance the impossible tightrope of being both students and teachers. As a supervisor for EdTPA, I make decisions about who is—and is not—ready to move from one side of the proverbial desk to the other. At the graduate level, I teach practicing art educators to consider the possibility that their current practices can be improved, connections made deeper, methods be sounder, while also pushing them to be researchers.

Despite this never-ending transference of hats, the one that I fidget with the most is the one I wear when teaching my undergraduate students. I frequently measure the value of the tasks I that I assign to them by the *practicality* of the results; I ask myself, will this help them to *survive*? This notion of preparing them for the nitty-gritty of teaching is incredibly motivating to me and has led to profoundly interesting conversations between Dr. Baer and myself. What is our purpose with these students? How do we know when they are ready? Is it more important to teach them to be great artists, great teachers, or both? Is both even possible?

In high school, I had two excellent teachers; one taught English and the other taught art. What made these teachers great—at least in my mind—was not the content they shared, but the relationships that they built. I grew up dirt poor and went to school in well-worn hand-me-downs with the smell of cigarette smoke permeating my hair and clothes, and I no assurance that I would be in that school for more than a month or two before my family drifted on to the next place. A lack of stability and relatability in my early educational experience certainly caused me to be surprised later on when I encountered teachers who were genuinely interested in me and who saw beyond the poverty. Those two teachers who got to know me—despite my efforts to keep them at arm's length (Mr. Hartman, if you ever happen to read this, I hope you know how sorry I am for the way I treated you back then)—have had a profound impact on what I see as important for educators today. I was able to learn in their classrooms because I felt safe, cared for, understood, and appreciated. As a kid, I never found it difficult to learn content, but until I had taken their classes, I had never bought into the *importance* of the content. I could not relate to the content of a school subject until those two teachers had bothered to relate to me.

In regard to art itself, I always had some interest in it. My parents both encouraged me to be artistic—whatever that meant—as a child, and I developed some skill with a pencil early on, but I never considered pursuing art as a career until I was in my early 20s. Even then, it was a means to an end for me more than a creative endeavor. I decided to work toward a bachelor's degree in Graphic Design simply because I had heard that it was a way to *make money and art*, a cliché that my design instructors never bothered to denounce. As an undergraduate student, I found my professors to be as distant and unrelatable as the vast number of teachers I'd had before. It was, as I stated already, a means to an end. However, during my senior year, I found myself coaching my eldest daughter's soccer team, fell in love with connections I was able to make with young people, and immediately changed my major to Education. Since I already had the studio requirements knocked out, it was prudent to pursue an art education certification rather than any other discipline. It gave me the means to connect to kids, and hey, I could make art too.

### REVELATIONS AND ANALYSIS

The regressive process within the *currere* model was the vehicle through which we made revelations about how and why we became teachers. We both indicated that,

through the course of teaching our art methods classes, we have asked each of our art methods students to describe their favorite teachers, to think about the qualities that made that teacher worthy of favorite status, and to explain how that teacher has impacted her current teaching ideations. Without directly realizing it, we had been asking our students to delve into the regressive process. What surprised us both, though, was that neither of us had ever actually formulated our own responses to those questions. Having seen how helpful it was for our students in their understanding of themselves as educators, it seemed obvious that doing so would be prudent for us as well. While the revelations that we had about each other and ourselves were not necessarily audacious, they were certainly eye opening and have provided a sense of clarity for each of us in our own points of view toward art education and our identities.

#### *PREFERRING PROCESS TO PRODUCT*

The most outstanding revelation that I had about Dr. Baer during the regressive interview was her affinity for the tools. I discovered that, for her, art making was not as much about the product as it was about the implements by which that art was made; she has always been inclined to focus more on the media of a work of art than the aesthetic of it. That is not to say that she does not make visually pleasing work, but that the end result of that work is secondary to the processes of its making. During our interview she said this of her fondness for art making tools early in her career:

My work didn't stand out. What I do remember fondly, however, was when she came by my table one day when I was working and told me I had a wonderful grasp of the tools I used—that I took advantage of what they could do...I still take great pride in being *good with tools*—not just in using tools, but finding solutions for materials and using things in creative ways. (Interview, May 16, 2018)

Later, she described some of her favorite art making memories, not about the artworks themselves, but about the processes she undertook in their making. Stephanie's love for the medium was loud and clear as she described her time as an undergraduate photographer:

I was going to focus on photography. I was captured by the click of the manual camera, the winding of film, the smells and ambiance of the darkroom. I revealed secrets. I could work alone for hours—working with images—making them appear from nowhere with just the right amount of light and the chemicals. (Interview, May 16, 2018)

It was evident that her educational experiences had led her to this predilection that is still apparent in her art and educational works today. It was mirrored by her desire to try her hand in myriad subjects, avenues, and pursuits throughout her educational career. Stephanie said:

Throughout my undergrad, amidst other students who seemed to be more “real deal” artists than I was, I explored. That's what I remember that time as—lots of exploring through making. I wanted to take as many different media courses as I could. I didn't give a rip about picking something specific—I just wanted to make stuff—and learn new techniques. I trusted that I would hit on something that was supposed to be mine. (Interview, May 16, 2018)

Another revelation was just how deeply troubled young-Stephanie was by inappropriate limitations that were set on her by others. She was not one to settle and believed herself to be capable of anything, if she could just be allowed to acquaint herself with the appropriate tools for the work. As a middle school and high school student, she had been inclined to explore a variety of artistic venues and had often been stifled by what she saw as overbearing peers and adults in her life who wanted her to focus her efforts. As someone with a clear love for the *making* of art, she found this infuriating, “they detested my involvement in other activities (band, orchestra... everything music) and told me I was not dedicated and could never fully commit.” She explained that she was later told that she could not be both a scientist and an artist, that she must make a choice between them; “either you’re a band geek or a science nerd. You can’t be both.” She went on, “I resented the implication that I couldn’t be more complex than that and decided to leave science olympiad” (Interview, May 16, 2018). This impinging set of boundaries set upon her arbitrarily by nearsighted authorities plagued her throughout her undergraduate years as well.

*PERSEVERANCE IS POSSIBLE*

The need to complexly interweave and understand self was not in Bill’s early experiences in art and teaching. In fact, pragmatism was the way ahead, sometimes to the detriment of any reflection. In our regressive interviews, he commented,

I really don’t think that I have thought about how my past has affected my current teaching pedagogy until fairly recently. Honestly, when I look back, everything seemed to happen so fast that there wasn’t time for me to reflect on how I had gotten there. It was just dealing with the moment.... I just tried to do the best that I could. (Interview, May 16, 2018)

Bill dealt with the present. He got to the next step by completing the last. Pragmatism was the name of the game, and you do what is necessary for the job at hand. He later reflected on how this theme of perseverance beginning with Grandpa Al, “I am who I am because of where I’m from,” is still present today in reflections from his own children. His son recently identified Bill as the horse from *Animal Farm* by George Orwell—the character who works himself to death. While Bill saw this both as “a compliment and a dark omen,” he added that, now, he is learning to look around more and stop working in isolation.

Isolation can come easily for art teachers but even more easily when one approaches the field so pragmatically. Bill’s early understanding of what a teacher should be came from someone very unlike him.

I remember him being so passionate and energetic...he would never sit still...just a super-energetic person. I was very much not that kind of person. I was shy, an introvert and very much kept to myself. So, when I started teaching, being that person was an act. When I taught, I was putting on a show. I was pretending to be energetic, bubbly, and excited, and passionate. Eventually what happened is, that’s just how I actually became. (Interview, May 16, 2018)

It wasn’t easy, however. Bill asserted that he didn’t set out to change who he was, he just “thought that was how the job had to be done.” As a DJ, Bill’s father emulated a very different persona at home than on the air, “so that notion was completely



normal” to him. Flipping the switch, as Bill called it, didn’t enable him to find a middle ground. He was on or off, in front of students and teaching, or not. Bill said of this time in his life, “It was soul-suckingly exhausting.” His co-worker feared for his health and offered him the perspective that it didn’t have to be that way, that you didn’t have to give 110% all the time. However, Bill struggled with this since the model he had for teaching came from such an animated individual. He was also getting feedback that teaching was a dead end—that Bill had more talent and a bigger personality than teaching would accommodate. What Bill did know was that he was not a teacher for the money. He knew that his excitement, over-animated or not, came from a place of authenticity. He was excited about art-making, exposing students to new ideas, being different than the artist/art teacher stereotypes, and being a “refuge for the refuse.” He knew from experience that it’s important for kids interested in art to realize that they have strengths and that they have as much to give the world as kids with other talents. “There’s something worthwhile there” (Interview, May 16, 2018).

#### *THE BOTTOM LINE*

As we reviewed the interviews and ideas from our regressive process, a renewed sense of purpose and place came over both of us. What we had expected to be disparate in our uncovered journeys became harmonious; where we anticipated our paths would align, we found undulating understandings of our roles, art, teaching, and, at the core, a sense of advocacy. We both identified an early need to advocate for art and art education regardless of our seemingly primary focus on tools, self-identification, perseverance, or pragmatism. The advocate-self was evident early on and helped us drive our ideologies forward in different ways. We may have defined art and the role of the art teacher differently, but a core understanding of advocacy ties our values together and helps us understand why and how this current exploration into the *currere* process is so vital.

So, you and I come from some very different paradigms. You always thought about education as a thing. Growing up, I never thought about there being another side of the desk. When I became a teacher, I still didn’t think about it being on the other side of the desk. Honestly, I just thought of it as a job; And my job was to teach art. (Interview, May 16, 2018)

Bill’s realization points toward a developing identity as a teacher, and while claiming this pragmatic viewpoint, he also identified art as the epitome of art practice, which required time, consistency, heart, and soul. He is beginning to advocate for art as something worth pursuing. He knows there is something deeper to his understanding of the role of art and art teachers, and though he could not put his finger on it then, he now realizes it was advocacy. Stephanie lived in a more conceptual understanding of art—as a way to live and understand the world. Yet, her close focus on tools as an artist has allowed her to concretely ground herself in the work of an artist and, consequently, as a teacher. She has come to realize that her need to self-identify as an art teacher, still, after being in higher education for 10 years is rooted in a lifetime of advocacy for the arts. Responding to dissonance was a reality for both of us and played a role in how each of us chose to move forward as an art teacher educator.

There is a critical element here of trusting our experience, as well as maintaining the courage and honesty in our reflections, for greatest authenticity. Our collaborative, regressive process allowed for a unique look at both of our paths simultaneously. As

we were writing this manuscript and our conversations continued, we found ourselves identifying our expertise, as well as the need for a credo, and we began building centering statements based on our exploration, as follows:

- We believe in the centrality of connection. It is our job as art teacher educators to foster connections between students, content, self, and other.
- We believe in helping students face their fears in teaching through practice and pragmatism. Helping students understand the realities of teaching sooner enables greater confidence earlier in their careers.
- We believe that practice and focus are the foundations of expertise and mastery in art and teaching. Sacrifice is necessary in the pursuit of mastery.
- We teach people who are bridging the gaps between art and everything else. We teach people who see the world through art, so it is important that they find their art teacher community for sustained support.

With this work, we cannot help but look forward to what this means for our students and other professional educators in search of a meaningful and informed foundation. The *currere* method offers an authentic, unique, and accessible structure with which to engage in self-exploration. Engaging purposefully in such a journey allows an educator to uncover and ruminate within the foundational narratives that formed personal and professional philosophies, beliefs, preferences, and actions. The regressive step explored in this study is only the beginning of our journey toward a more democratic approach to engaging future teachers in meaningful and genuine narratives. As Bill pointed out in our most recent conversation, “We’ve been handed these palettes (previous curriculum/people, our experiences/regression), and we don’t know how to use the materials that are on there. We’re trying—we’re mixing, we’re attempting, but it’s not clear yet.” The world we are sending our pre-service art education students into is complex and fraught with endless challenges to the heart of teaching. Equipped with the tools necessary to purposefully and significantly reflect on *who* and *why* they are may allow them to become sincere leaders and passionate advocates driving the field of art education forward.

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