One Question – Two Answers: Confidence and My Education

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As a practitioner of the *currere* method, I find myself often looking back on past events and wanting them to connect to my more recent experiences. I've caught myself forcing these connections a few times—searching for an elusive through-line bridging the past, the now, and the future. In contrast, there are other moments when I notice a direct, clear link that I would rather avoid. This piece is about one of the connections I accept but would prefer not exist.

I work as a college English professor, and I am working on my Ph.D. in English. However, I began my teaching career as a music teacher. My undergraduate degree is in music education, and I like to joke that when I passed English Composition II, I celebrated that I would never need to be in an English classroom again. Though hyperbolic, there is some truth in that recalled private celebration. I didn't really like English growing up. I was not an avid reader or writer, and I spent most of my time and energy exploring other interests. I was not like Cassidy (2019) who writes, "My expertise has always been school, and it's been grounded specifically in writing for many years, an obvious connection to my present (pre-service) and future as an ELA teacher" (p. 49). I was certainly not a strong writer or reader during my K-12 education, and frankly, I had little interest and confidence in my reading and writing skills.

Something changed during my junior year of college. I found myself interested in reading "the classics" for some reason I can't quite recall, though I wish I could. Something woke up that interest, and as a result, I willingly read a few novels and short stories for the first time in many years. That interest gained momentum, and I kept reading. As a result, literature became an increasingly significant part of my life during my junior and senior years.

I graduated in December of 2006. Winter is a difficult time of the year to find a teaching position, so I worked—as many education majors do—as a substitute teacher for the spring while searching for a full-time position. This let me visit the classrooms of different disciplines, and I began to wonder about the discipline I had selected. I had been playing music since elementary school, and I had invested a lot of time and energy in studying music. Yet in the back of my mind, there was an inkling that I *might have* been wrong, that English was the subject I was supposed to teach.

I decided to ask for advice and thought it would be wise to get some guidance from professionals.

First, because I was substituting from time-to-time in the school district in which I had grown up, I decided to ask one of my previous English teachers. I had been subbing in the district's schools often, so I had the wonderful opportunity to reconnect with several of my previous teachers. I approached this teacher and asked, "Hey, do you, have a minute? I could use some advice."

"Sure thing. What's up?"

"I've been thinking about going back to school and … becoming an English teacher. I love music, as you know, but I really like English, and I've been reading a lot. What do you think?"

"Well, I have to be honest. I don't think you have what it takes. Without studying English previously, I think you'd have a really hard time."

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I like to think that I hid my immense disappointment well, but I doubt I did. The response cut the core. I had known changing subjects would be hard and that I would almost certainly struggle, but I had not considered that I was incapable of studying English. At the time, I thought I had acknowledged and accepted my limitations. I was not great at math and had reaction time that made me pretty miserable at most sports, but I had been reading regularly for three years and genuinely enjoyed it.

"Got it. Thanks for the advice."

"Anytime."

At this point in the recollection, I need to pause. This could have been the end of it. I could have accepted this former teacher's advice and lived out my days as a music teacher. Maybe I'd read a few novels a year for the rest of my life while thoughts of teaching English faded. Afterall, according to one teacher, who had *taught me English*, I did not have what it takes.

But I am profoundly lucky, and I have an uncle who is an English professor. Somehow, I mustered the resilience repeat my question to him a few weeks later.

"Hey, do you, have a minute? I could use some advice."

"Sure thing. What's up?"

"I've been thinking about going back to school and … becoming an English teacher. I love music, as you know, but I really like English, and I've been reading a lot. What do you think?"

"Oh my God, yes! What are you thinking about studying? Literature? Writing?"

"Well, I was thinking about getting another bachelor's degree in English, so mostly literature I guess. I thought that maybe I could get certified to teach English. Then, I could teach music and English."

"You don't need another bachelor's Johnny. Just go for a master's. It'll be fun!"

"I could do that?"

"Yeah! And I think you'll have a blast. Grad school is so much fun."

I paused because the idea of English graduate school had not crossed my mind *quite* yet. I figured I would go back for a BA in English, and based on my former teacher's prediction, I would either fail out or—if I were successful—struggle immensely. How could I go to graduate school for English when I had only taken English general education courses?

"Look John, if you're worried about it, how about this. Have you read *Moby Dick*?"

"No."

"Here's my suggestion. Pick up a copy, read it, and then we'll talk about it. How does that sound? It's one of my favorite novels, and I think you'll like it."

So I did. I went out to Borders books and picked up a copy of *Moby Dick*.

The previous memories are bittersweet for me, but this pairing has continually shaped my pedagogy since that spring. Soon after those conversations, I was hired to teach elementary and middle school music and moved in with my aunt and uncle who lived near my new job—the same uncle mentioned earlier. For that entire first year of full-time teaching, I fell more and more in love with English, and my uncle and I discussed novels and stories often. At the end of the year, I accepted a position teaching music in Philadelphia, which put me close to several schools with English graduate programs. That spring, I enrolled in a master's program, and a few years later, I completed my master's. After graduating, I taught English at several colleges in the

Philadelphia area, and in 2016, I began working on my Ph.D. in English composition and applied linguistics. And just a few days before submitting this piece to the *Currere Exchange Journal* in January of 2021, I accepted my first full-time English professor job, which has me filled with joy, wonder, and excitement.

When I look back on my varied teaching experiences in music and English, which span kindergarten through college courses, I see one clear, unwavering goal that continually shapes my pedagogical decisions and teaching philosophy. I want my students to become more *confident* through their experiences in my classroom. When I taught music, I was most proud of my efforts when students shared a musical composition created in music technology courses or had the courage to perform a solo in a concert. As a writing teacher, I am continually awestruck at the ways in which students share their ideas, thoughts, opinions, and creative pieces in my classroom. These memories are some of the teaching moments I most cherish, and I work hard to cultivate spaces in which these moments can occur.

I used to think that I was a music teacher who taught writing, because music teachers are often quite concerned with student confidence. But in retrospect and through a lens of *currere*, I realize that I have always been trying to answer, for my students, the question I asked years ago—even if students were not asking it. I never want to be the teacher who leaves a student feeling like I did when I was a substitute teacher. Instead, I want my students to leave the classroom with a belief that they can move forward towards whatever goals they have or may someday have.

And on the rare occasion when a student does ask me about changing their major or pursuing a different career path, I think back to the answers I received during the spring of 2007, I think about where I am and where I might have been, and even though I avoid prescribing *Moby Dick*, I tell them that they can achieve their goals, that they can change their mind, and that they have what it takes.

Because I am currently working on my dissertation, which uses the *currere* method, I can't help but consider these two memorable conversations alongside several other important conversations linked to my own identity as a teacher, writer, reader, and person. Those memories are all connected. I think about Neri (2019) questioning film as a material form of regressive memory, who writes, "Were these events recorded because they were critical moments, or were they critical moments simply because they were recorded? The answer, I have come to realize over the years, lies somewhere in between" (p. 44). The dual answers to my question appear to be critical moments in my memory, but I wonder if I asked anyone else for advice. I probably did, but those two answers were committed to memory. And I have a rather difficult time imagining my life with only one of those memories being recorded.

If I only had my uncle's answer in my memory, I may have missed out on the great lesson that accompanied the blow to my confidence. I can't imagine my pedagogy without my preoccupation with confidence, and I think that focus is very much informed by the answer my former teacher provided me.

Had I only asked my teacher and lost the motivation to risk a second defeating response, my entire career and life would be different. Similar to Pinar's (1994) progressive phase, Bruner (2004) explains that "Given their constructed nature and their dependence upon the cultural conventions and language usage, life narratives obviously reflect the prevailing theories about 'possible lives' that are part of one's

culture" (p. 694). It is impossible for me to meaningfully imagine what my life would be without studying English. When I consider some of the "possible lives" available without studying English—a subject I truly enjoy teaching and studying—I am not *entirely* unhappy. Currently, I still teach a little music as a private instrument instructor, and I think I could have been fairly content teaching music. I think English may have played a role in my life. Maybe I would be a dedicated member of a book club and enjoy meaningful discussions about novels with good friends, or maybe I would join a continuing education course to learn how to write stories or poems. Other imagined possibilities are far worse because of the great joy and purpose I feel teaching English and the wonderful friends I have made studying and teaching writing. Especially now, at the beginning of a new teaching position and chapter in my career, I cannot imagine doing anything else with my life.

Looking forward, though, I wonder when I'll shake it—that feeling that I do not have what it takes. I still carry that conversation from spring of 2007, and here I am, in 2021, thinking about a teacher's answer, picking it apart, trying to shake it. Cashdan and McCrory (2015) evoke the image of dragging a corpse to describe how familial histories might impact writer identity, and through my ongoing *currere* work, I wonder about how we might *drag* some of our own memories too. As much as I have learned about confidence due to my former teacher's response, it is not a memory I carry with joy. Instead, I carry it with a tinge of regret and self-doubt. In that way, I drag the memory, because it's heavy.

I'm also glad for that weight, because the burden of the memory is part of what makes it memorable. The memory's significance allows it to continually inform my teaching, and I am lucky to be able to hold it beside my uncle's answer too. I like to think that I am living up to my uncle's confidence in me as a person, teacher, and student, and his confidence is one of the things I try to pass on to my own students.

Baszile (2017) writes that, "The only access we have to advocating with/for others is through the self" (p. viii). With this in mind, I realize that continued examination of these answers is one of the ways I can most effectively become a better advocate for my students and combat some of the myriad societal barriers students experience during their education as well as pressures that linger after their in-class experiences end.

That examination forces me to wonder: What might happen to students who don't have someone like my uncle championing their newly discovered interests and goals? What might happen to students who timidly ask some version of "Am I good enough?" only to be met with a response that weakens their hope? Or what might happen to students without connections to multiple teachers and mentors to field these sorts of questions?

As educators, we could—at any moment—have a current or former student approach us for the same sort of advice I sought years ago, and as a result, we have opportunities to help students see their greatest potentials and pursue future endeavors with confidence. Our answers to students' questions about future plans matter immensely, and while we may not know if we are the only person they have asked for advice or if we are one of many people with whom they have shared their dreams, I know that it is an honor to be trusted with these questions and guarantee that our answers have profound consequences.

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