Roofs, Nesting Instincts, and Student Evaluations of Teaching During a Pandemic

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Currere is a four step research methodology that "seeks to understand the contribution academic studies makes to one's understanding of one's life (and vice versa), and how both are imbricated in society, politics, and culture" (Pinar, 2012, p. 45). As an educator, I have come to appreciate and frame issues within the generous arms of the *currere* method, thereby, coming to understand the four moments "as a sensibility … precious to educators committed to their—and their students'—ongoing self-formation through academic studies" (p. 45).

The virtues of this autobiographical/biographical inquiry method are several. It supports my desire to explore "what … [has] been and what will be my educational experience[s]? (Baszile, 2017, p. vii). Moreover, it scaffolds my wonderings: "how have and how will these experiences shape who I have been and who I hope to be?" (p. vii). I also lean into Greene (1995), because she reminds me aesthetic education is "integral to the development of persons—to their cognitive, perceptual, emotional and imaginative development. We see it as part of the human effort (so often forgotten today) to seek a greater coherence in the world" (p. 7). As well, it is my hope that my use of imagination and my subsequent creation of art will allow readers to experience the potential of entering and exiting moments of tension (Clandinin, 2013) while embraced by creation, art, and colour, resulting in "vibrancy and vitality" (Greene, 2001, p. 13) of self, potentially introducing "new [educative] ways of seeing, hearing, feeling and moving" (p. 7).

This inquiry reports on how an educator in a tenure-track position in the midst of a global pandemic navigated the four moments of currere: regressive, progressive, analytical, and synthetical (Pinar, 2012) while modifying and delivering courses to teach online (synchronously and asynchronously). The modification in part included efforts to teach students about the value of submitting course feedback and evaluations. The inquiry is framed within the *currere* method (Pinar, 2012) and the aesthetic education so richly developed by Greene (1995, 2001). As well, I leaned into Dewey's (1938) "principle of continuity of experience … that every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after" (p. 35).

Regressive: Cycles of Impostership and In-Between Spaces

From April to August (2020), early into the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, I engaged in online training activities with my university's Centre for Teaching and Learning. I participated in virtual, roundtable discussions, explored how to use online platforms, and attended virtual workshops focused on effective online pedagogies. I focused on successful navigation of the skills and knowledge needed to teach class and laboratory activities virtually. It was also during this time that I agreed to participate in the piloting of a new, online student evaluation process. I was interested in participating because I was able to add feedback questions for students, and I was told I would receive student evaluations in a timely manner; previously, this had not always been the case. Knowing that I would, in the end, need to attend to student evaluations of my teaching,

as I prepared to teach online, I reflected on a number of teaching memories, which resulted in some tension (Clandinin, 2013).

Over the course of my education and teaching career, I regularly experienced feelings of impostership. I learned to teach while growing up in a rural, faith-based, working-class farming community, where there were frequently opportunities to teach younger children. With encouragement from my parents, I came to know myself as a first-generation college and university graduate (Brookfield, 2015). When I returned home, I experienced critical comments for wanting to study; they came not from trusted family members, but from those who did not appear comfortable with my questioning of community-held norms regarding education (Brookfield, 2015).

When I began formal teaching, I primarily taught nursing and interdisciplinary health care professionals face-to-face in small, acute care hospitals and in home care and long-term care settings. I enjoyed the collegiality, laughter, and relational aspects that sometimes resulted when coming alongside learners (Clandinin, 2013). Yet, during these years, feelings of being inferior, unworthy, and being an imposter would arise, including sensing I was less knowledgeable than the nurses I was supporting. Mid-career, I remember feelings of impostership when I returned to complete master (Aird, 2017) and later doctoral studies (Chakraverty, 2020).

In the last two years, I have come to know exploring student feedback as an opportunity to learn and grow professionally (Jack-Malik & Kuhnke, 2020); however, knowing something and experiencing it are two different things, hence the tensions. I was also concerned for and wanted to support peers who tend to focus only on students' negative comments and miss the rich, salient learning opportunities from which to grow (Brookfield, 2015). Having engaged in previous *currere* explorations where I was able to read student evaluations and learn from them, I wanted to support peers who strive to do likewise.

I have taught in the post-secondary environment for nine years, and I am aware feelings of being an imposter can surface and prevail; for me this was especially true when learning to teach online and during a pandemic. Brookfield (2015) reminds educators that "we wear an external mask of control, but beneath it we know that really we are frail figures, struggling to not appear totally incompetent to those around us" (p. 58). This was especially relevant as I did not choose to teach online. I prefer face-to-face classroom and laboratory activities. I work to actively demonstrate patient assessment skills and to embed discussions with theories of compassion, while building trust filled relationships with and between learners.

Brookfield's (2015) reflection offered me hope when he discussed educators who admit to struggling when trying to make sense of teaching related challenges, often publicly, and who subsequently experience professional growth. Being in a tenure-track position, I acknowledged I felt internal tension around student evaluations of my teaching (Berg & Seeber, 2016). I also wondered how student feedback would differ when teaching online. I wondered how creating my online presence and recording my voice aloud would influence evaluations. These two requirements of online teaching were not in my comfort zone.

Progression: My Vision Forward

The *currere* moments (Pinar, 2012) framed my projection of self into the future. Specifically, I envisioned a place, time, and "in-between space" (Moore, 2013, p. 2) where I could explore the dominant narrative that student evaluations hold "weight"

(Peters, 2019, para, 1) and may influence my tenure-track. Moore (2013) describes the "in-between space" as a place and time where "identity formation is uncomfortable at best and can be agonizing at worst, [knowing] challenging situations have great power to shape individuals" (Moore, 2013, p. 2). For me, this envisioned space included the calming voices of the university educational developers who with regularity answered my questions about voice-over-lectures, pre-readings, skill videos, development of secure forums, and chat rooms. As well, I actively planned to apply three recommendations (Brookfield, 2015) to build my self-confidence while teaching online as part of my teaching plan. The following describes how that plan and the three recommendations were operationalized over the duration of the course.

First, I shared a PowerPoint presentation I had created to introduce myself to learners. It included my artwork (Greene, 1995), research studies, service activities, and my growing understanding of being an educator. A key statement from Brookfield (2015) was embedded: "The image of a fully formed, omniscient teacher trained to respond immediately and appropriately to any and all eventualities is indeed part of the veil of illusion" (p. 267). This statement was included to reflect my own vulnerability. I also included autobiographical details, including struggles from formal schooling. I spoke of repeating a nursing, math calculation course, as it was taught in metric, not imperial, measures. I described working full-time in intensive care and as an educator while studying. I reported asking for assignment extensions, utilizing the writing center supports, and having an anxiety attack prior to defending my doctoral work. I concluded my introduction with Brookfield's (2015) words, "starting the first class of a course with this disclosure is repeatedly described by students as a very effective way of keeping their anxieties in check" (p. 200). I was hopeful, therefore, that Brookfield's words would be reflected in my online evaluations because students had experienced my honesty and ongoing desire to learn from them.

Next, I shared that I was not an expert in all nursing concepts; we would learn and discuss concepts together. I explained how I often moved text-based paragraphs into images and tables or created concept maps to make sense of relationships and the complexity of nursing. As well, I purposefully opened each class with a case study example to scaffold previous reading and frame it within clinical practice.

Finally, I reminded students that timely, honest, and constructive feedback would benefit me and next year's learners. I committed to embedding their suggestions and improvements into future classes. To support ongoing development of my teaching self-confidence, I shared the following cycle. I described how their feedback would be utilized, valued, and respected (Brookfield, 2015). I explained that upon coming to the post-secondary environment I was not always sure what to do with student feedback and that this cycle, when applied, helped me to grow in my role as an educator (Vanderbilt University, 2015), while improving the course for students. I invited them to contribute to this working model (See Figure 1).

Analysis: Student Evaluations Arrive

As I create this *currere* (text, artwork, and reflections), we are months into the COVID-19 pandemic (Government of Canada, 2021). With regularity, during "COVID-times," I have and continue to journal, create art, and photograph my hikes into the bush, reflecting on my work as a university professor. This brings comfort as I learn to teach and research differently, albeit somewhat painfully. I have been wondering about the notion of nesting instincts (Anderson & Rutherford, 2013) and the benefits
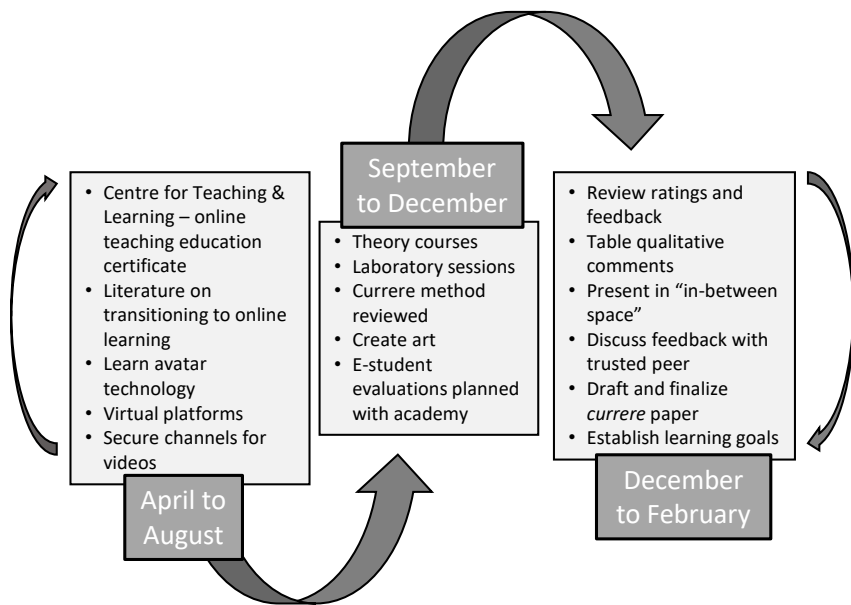
September
to December

- Centre for Teaching & Learning – online teaching education certificate
- Literature on transitioning to online learning
- Learn avatar technology
- Virtual platforms
- Secure channels for videos

- Theory courses
- Laboratory sessions
- Currere method reviewed
- Create art
- E-student evaluations planned with academy

- Review ratings and feedback
- Table qualitative comments
- Present in "in-between space"
- Discuss feedback with trusted peer
- Draft and finalize *currere* paper
- Establish learning goals

April to August

December to February

Figure 1: Feedback Cycle Working Model

they can provide during a pandemic, teaching online, and while experiencing many COVID related challenges. Being at home, tucked safely in my office, with the gardens and bush at my doorstep, I regularly experience the benefits of nesting. At the same time, I wonder how to create an in-between space (Moore, 2013) where I can quietly read (uninterrupted), reflect, and attend to students feedback in ways that sustain my protective nest while contributing to myself, my peers, and students.

MY NESTING STORY AND THE CREATION OF AN IN-BETWEEN SPACE

Today I sat on top of our garage roof applying asphalt shingles. Secured by a roof strap, I felt relatively safe though cold winds whipped around me and my husband passed roofing materials to me. I was in my glory—hammering and adjusting shingles to create the ridge cap. Two crows hovered, noisily, bantering loudly; I was within their space. As I rested between nailing, I gazed into two tall, dying larch trees gently embraced by younger fir trees. It was as though the older trees were comforted and nested securely amongst younger, more energetic trees who seemed to offer some protection as winter gusts pressed forward. I wondered if this was the same comfort and protection I was seeking before receiving "the email" with students' feedback to my online courses. (*Journal*, November 2020) (See Figure 2)

Figure 2: Rooftops and Nesting

Later in the week, I electronically received a link to student evaluations. As part of the pilot project, I was able to include four additional individualized questions. My questions focused on students' perceptions of my effectiveness to teach theory and laboratory sessions using virtual platforms, avatar technology, videos, discussion forums, voice-over-lectures, and readings (synchronously and asynchronously). Because teaching completely online was new to me, I read with curiosity the ratings and comments. As well, I was aware, as Brookfield (2015) states, of my propensity to remember students' negative comments. For example, some did not enjoy the patient case examples I had so carefully prepared, while others were frustrated with internet challenges or finding themselves in the wrong online classroom. I internally acknowledged the comments and then moved on to intentionally focus on comments from which I could "learn something new and difficult" (p. 269) and not default to feelings of being the imposter online educator, because as Brookfield notes, there will always be negative comments.

Synthesis: My Nesting Instincts are Sustaining

Receiving feedback from leaders, peers, and patients is embedded in a nursing career. Utilizing feedback, with collegial discussion, has aided in developing yearly goals and opportunities to nudge forward my "way of being" as a nurse educator and researcher (Schon, 1983, p. 137). What was new to me, once I moved into the academy, was knowing that student feedback about me as a nursing professor in a tenure-track role could influence "high-stakes personnel decisions" about my ongoing career (Flaherty, 2018, para, 4). In recent years, efforts have been and continue to be made within the academy to frame and weigh students' feedback with some temperance; however, concerns remain (Farr, 2018; Grey, 2018; Peters, 2019).

In preparation for reading student evaluative ratings and qualitative comments, I nested and curled up in my favorite reading chair. Blue-heeler dogs at my feet and a cup of coffee ready, I covered the chair arms with books and articles to be read. I began by rereading and reflecting on related literature. Specifically, I re-read Brookfield's (2015) kind reminders that student comments are part of an academic's world. He wrote that even the best professors receive negative feedback as the university environment and "learning is often highly emotional, involving great threats to students' self-esteem, particularly if they are required to explore new and difficult knowledge and skill domains" (p. 271). I think about students who are being pushed to learn, and at the end of the course, we ask them to be objective about a professor's effectiveness. We ask this of them at the precise moment when their learning is also asking them to let go of pre-course certainties and embrace new ideas, skills, and sometimes new identities, all of which can result in evaluations that are "expressed in emotional terms" (p. 272).

While pondering these ideas, my nesting instinct is embodied and strong; it draws me to hike deep into the bush as early winter winds around me. I utilized my camera to find and photograph emptied bird nests; they appeared exposed as the protective maple and birch leaves had fallen to the quiet, moss-covered earth. The nests also seemed vulnerable, at risk, unprotected from raw, early winter snows. Student comments journeyed alongside me, just as the small, delicate nests floated and seemingly hovered on fine threads above my head (See Figure 3). I considered Brookfield (2015) who reminds me to keep a broad perspective and to accept that "risk is endemic to skillful teaching" (p. 271).

Figure 3: Look Up

Look up, look up, they call.
I too am vulnerable.
I need the shelter of leaves to protect my young.
The canopy shields from ravens and eagles, large.
My young and I have gone south.
We will be back in the spring
When a new teaching season will start.

IN SUMMARY

In this *currere*, the four moments allowed for educative pauses where I reflected with the goal of gaining insight into how student evaluations and my responses to them are threaded through my past, present, and into my future (Dewey, 1938). Pinar (2012) further states:

> without the lived, that is, subjectively structured temporality the method of *currere* encourages, … we are consigned to the social surface, to the never-ending present, and what we see is what we get. When we listen to the past we become attuned to the future. From the past we can understand the present, which we can reconstruct. Subjective and social reconstruction is our professional obligation as educators. (p. 236)

Making methodical use of *currere*—carefully attending to each temporal moment and utilizing Moore's (2013) notion of in-between spaces—I quietly reflected through time

(Dewey, 1938) and experiences such that I was able to use "self-knowledge to make conscious, informed decisions about [my] … practice as an educator" (Moore, 2013, p. 4). Specifically, I attended to student feedback that I concluded was useful as part of my ongoing efforts to improve my teaching and learning practices. I also worked to read and release potentially harmful commentary; it was my deliberate intention to keep "things in a state of congenial, rather than disruptive, tension" (Brookfield, 2015, p. 274). It was my experience that this was more possible when I was tucked safely within my nest, engaged with this *currere* and the related literature.

Embracing the *currere* method framed a journey of exploring student feedback in an academic setting (Pinar, 2012). In the regressive moment, we see how the joy of teaching was embedded in early experiences as a youth and young adult. Slowing down, carving out time, I experienced gratitude for the connections I made to past educative beginnings lived out in quiet, farming communities, to ideas about my future as an educator. Through the progressive moment, it was possible to envision purposefully using student feedback (Brookfield, 2015). The model (Figure 1) when shared with students, created an in-between space for both students and myself. This was the case because they understood I valued and intended to utilize their feedback. Moreover, the model created a structure for me when reading less than constructive comments. This was followed by the analytical moment where I utilized the safe and nesting space to hear and learn from comments that could be used to make changes in upcoming courses. It allowed for a drawing inward of comments that could be realistically utilized and embedded in courses (Vanderbilt University, 2015). Finally, following Moores' (2013) lead and moving into the synthetical moment allowed space to write specific teaching goals for the next term when I will teach these courses again. As well, I took time to intentionally grow through the process of developing this *currere*. This was not an easy process. It included "complicated conversations, informed by a self-reflexive, interdisciplinary erudition" (Pinar, 2012, p. 183) with my research partner. Intentionally and purposefully anchoring student feedback in the *currere* method and embracing an "in-between space" afforded me time to become "wide-awake" (Greene, 1977) to the possibility that student evaluations can be educative to my ongoing desire to improve my craft (Brookfield, 2015).

As I hike, leaves have fallen from fruit trees and empty nests become visible. Once filled with young, hidden by lush foliage and safe from predators, they are now filled with snow (See Figure 4). The songbirds have gone for the winter; the chickadees, juncos, and cedar-waxwings wait and feed on frozen apples not harvested.

Figure 4: Feeling Vulnerable and Learning

My final note is to recommend educators create a nest, embrace the *currere* method (Moore, 2013), and encourage themselves and their peers to frame students' feedback in a constructive manner (Brookfield, 2015). In so doing, you may support a peer along their tenure-track journey (Berg & Seeber, 2016). It is essential to come alongside (Clandinin, 2013) peers, to contribute to and encourage educators who may be daunted by student feedback (Brookfield, 2015).

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