

CIRCUMSTANCE AND POSSIBILITY

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Broken windows and barred doors enclose the remnants of paper and steel mills once vibrant and filled with noise in this small, blue-collar, town. Hunger, homelessness, and poverty follow when employment and community resources wither. Out of the shadow of this brokenness, public schools become a refuge providing warmth, meals, and safe spaces. Schools present the possibility of a brighter future; they foster hope. Well, school is where I put my hope. It is through these conditions that I developed my love of learning particularly through reading stories of lives that were different from mine, lives filled with families playing games and visiting the beach, lives that I could only imagine, but imagine I did.

Boylorn and Orbe (2016) describe autoethnography as “cultural analysis through personal narrative” (p. 17), and they add, “by engaging the retrospective lens of autoethnography, they use their stories to engage their identities as evolving and vulnerable” (p. 21). Autoethnography, in this sense, is similar to Pinar’s (1975) *currere* method in that it is biographical, reflexive, and analytical regarding my educational journey. It synthesizes the impact of the temporal, socio-cultural, and educational experiences on my life path—past, present, and future—and my current professional role in higher education as an academic coach, mentor, and researcher. *Currere* in practice might illuminate where our narratives connect with or diverge from our students’, and acknowledging these stories could inform our relationships with and support for them.

The *curre* model provides a vehicle for “living with a simultaneous sense of intrasubjectivity and intersubjectivity—both an individual and shared sense of making meaning, making self, and making the world” (Gouzouasis & Wiebe, 2018, p. 4). This autoethnographic and *curre*ian reflection, through critical theory and as a critical research methodology, endeavors to “understand the lived experience of real people in context, to examine social conditions and uncover oppressive power arrangements, and to fuse theory and action to challenge processes of domination” (Boylorn & Orbe, 2016, p. 20).

Here, I present a glimpse of my story and three students’ stories; these are our lived experiences. Impoverished social conditions, particularly in economically depressed geographic locations such as what I and these students have experienced, may be difficult to transcend. However, this story illustrates how education is a beacon of promise and hope. It always has been and continues to be such for me, and it is for these students and many like us.

Circumstance can be harsh, and it can be serendipitous. This small town has a beacon that attracts the unprepared into a new and strange world—a world with tall, brick buildings, long hallways, offices, paperwork, schedules, and fees. But it is also a world with many familiar and welcomed comforts: libraries, books, classrooms—a continuation of the safe spaces where I first imagined my life could be different, better. If it were not for the circumstance of geographic location, I would not have known how to attend college, and I never would have. I suspect these are similar circumstances that now prompt students to my office, in this strange and unfamiliar world, seeking encouragement and guidance to navigate these challenging spaces. And, these are the circumstances that drive my passion to support them.

WHO AM I AND WHY AM I HERE

An example—definitely
 A role model—hopefully
 Resources, support, encouragement
 A harbor for physical and emotional refuge—only after trust
 Only through an open heart

WHO ARE YOU AND WHY ARE YOU HERE

(all pseudonyms)

ALLISON

mother, friend
 mourning the suicide of a loved one
 mental health, depression, OCD
 strong, determined
 seeking,
 seeking...

MARIA

mother, laborer
 forging a path for her children
 conqueror of language barriers
 proving it's never too late to finish what we start
 commitment, dedication
 seeking,
 seeking...

BRITTANY

mother, provider
 juggling work, school, financial aid
 overcoming obstacles to achieve dreams
 passionate, determined
 seeking,
 seeking...

Stewart (2020) explains Pinar's four component *currere* method of regressive–progressive–analytical–synthetical as a reflection of and discovery between the individual's lived experiences relative to time and place and one's conceptualization or understanding of how this situates and informs our personal and educational journeys. *Currere* inspires us to compose our autobiographic narrative, to analyze the temporality of these socially constructed experiences, to help us derive a path forward. It can encourage agency, agency for us as individuals and as educators. Gouzouasis and Wiebe (2018) expound on the method of *currere*:

In the process of describing the connections between ones' personal experiences, the many relationships between and across professional and personal work, and various ways of knowing, we may arrive at a predominant question: what has been, what is now, and what can be(come)—regarding not only the nature of our educational experiences, but how those experiences are related to the broad, interpretive spectrum of the auto in coalescence with the lifeworld. (p. 2)

My journey is reflected in the previous student vignettes, and I hope my vignette will inform a piece of their journeys. We are intertwined culturally and personally through

our vulnerabilities and through our strength, commitment, and determination. We share a goal to transcend our impoverished circumstance through education; education steers our meaning making and our seeking. Why do working-class and first-generation students decide to attend college? Seeking, Seeking... What does it mean to them to graduate from college with a four-year degree? Hope, possibility...

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