

# CURRERE, COLLABORATION, AND OUR TENURE TRACK JOURNEY

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## INTRODUCTION—WE BEGIN IN TENSION FILLED EXPERIENCES

### *SANDRA'S STORY: MY REACTION TO THE YEAR ONE REVIEW LETTERS*

At the end of year one, I received three letters: one from the chair, the second from the dean, and the third from a tenured colleague who chairs the Probation, Promotion and Tenure Committee (PPT). Each described a mediocre first year performance and the need for improvement. Letter one arrived in my inbox just before I was about to go to sleep; that night, I did not find sleep. I was gutted, ashamed, cut off at the knees, and wanting to run and hide. Over the next couple of months, as outlined in the *Collective Agreement Between Cape Breton University Faculty Association (CBUFA) and Board of Governors CBU* (Cape Breton, 2016), I received letters two and three.

I went to work each day, entered my office, and closed the door. My thinking patterns were reminiscent of a hamster, running round and round and round and always arriving at the same place. I thought about the countless hours, days, and weekends I had spent working, preparing, evaluating, reading, and writing. I thought about my service work and wondered if I ought to cut it back. I wondered if my research had value.

I read the three letters a second time and experienced the reading as injurious. I put them in a binder and tucked them away on a shelf where they sat for a month. I did not forget about them. On the contrary, each time I looked at the bookshelf, I experienced worry because I knew it was paramount that I create a plan of action if I was to remain employed.

I asked my partner to sit with me as I read the letters. He listened quietly as I teared up repeatedly. Once the reading was completed, we sat in silence for a long time. Eventually, he asked if I wanted his response. He began by focussing on positive comments about my teaching. We named teaching as a strength. Then, he suggested we create a spreadsheet (an engineer by training, visual organization is part of his process). He pulled out his laptop and began. He entered all the concerns into what felt like a never-ending column. In the next column, he listed specific outputs for each concern. We mapped out a plan for the year, and on the bottom of the page, we inserted a footer of positive comments taken from the letters.

I took the chart when I went to see the dean. I sat in her office and immediately began to cry, which I did not appreciate; she was gracious. We discussed the letters and my plans for moving forward with a focus on outputs. I left with an increased understanding of what was expected of me. However, I did not deepen my understandings of my reactions to the letters, nor did I understand why and how they were continuing to influence me.

When Janet and I began talking about writing an article about our experiences with year one of tenure track, I knew I would revisit the letters, and I knew it would be complex, because like Van der Kolk (2014), I understand that the body remembers.

*JANET'S STORY: PROCESSES NOT UNDERSTOOD*

I am swirling, my speech is fast, and I am walking intensely and intently across campus. Ten weeks earlier, I had successfully defended my doctoral work. As a result, I feel the shroud of physical, emotional, and spiritual exhaustion deep within. I am often bone cold and donning a heavy Cowichan Tribe's sweater on summer days. I am unsure of what tenure track means, what the specific expectations are, and how I am going to meet them. I remember the time I spent as a nurse specialist-clinical educator. When I expected nurses to follow procedures or produce reports, I made readily available a repository of exemplars in multiple formats (written, verbal, hands-on, video, etc.). Nurses commented on the benefits of the repository. Yet, I do not have access to anything similar. I am unsure of the language: dossier, curriculum vitae, SharePoint, "load up the documents merged," "use an additional program to merge your documents before loading," "and you will be okay" (J. L. Kuhnke, *personal communication*, September, 2018). I am uncertain how to present my research, service, teaching, and successes at my one-year review. In addition, I am startled and dismayed when I read an email that explains that my review presentation and discussion are slotted for 15 minutes. On the day my review is scheduled, I will teach a morning lecture (150 minutes) to 35, year-two nursing students and an afternoon clinical laboratory session (180 minutes) to 9, year-two students. I am newly teaching both courses and, therefore, spending considerable time preparing. In conversation with a colleague in another department, I learn he chatted with his chair, and together, they set a time that worked with his teaching schedule. I also learned 45 minutes had been allotted for his presentation and discussion.

*CURRICULUM PRACTICES, CURRERE AND REFLEXIVITY*

Sandra recently completed the mandatory year two renewal process, and Janet completed the mandatory year one review. We arrived in academia after long and productive professional careers—one as a registered nurse and the other as a teacher. We brought with us our ways of knowing as teachers, professionals, leaders, and women. Our previous work experiences taught us to value reflective practice (Brookfield, 1990/2015; Schon, 1983) because we understand that it makes us more effective educators and tenure track hires. As well, we arrived knowing the importance of autobiographical work (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) because we know "every experience enacted and undergone modifies the one who acts and undergoes, while this modification affects, whether we wish it or not, the quality of subsequent experiences" (Dewey, 1938, p. 35). In addition, we arrived prepared for the "social and subjective reconstruction" (Pinar, 2004, p. 2) that is possible when one is willing to inquire into stories. We understood our curriculum practices as curriculum making, described by Clandinin and Connelly (1992) "as a course of life" (p. 393) including considerations for temporal, shaping influences of familial curriculum making (Clandinin, Murphy, & Huber, 2011). We learned that "a curriculum of lives is negotiated not only in school but, as significantly, in familial (home and community) contexts" (Clandinin et al., 2011, p. 17).

We wanted to deepen understandings of our reactions through self-facing (Saleh, Menon, & Clandinin, 2014) and move towards reflective responses. Our reflective practice is in part grounded in an aesthetic inquiry, which allowed us to explore the meanings of our individual and collective aesthetic experiences—the interaction of a human and works of art (Greene, 2001). We were also mindful of Greene's (1995) notions of social imagination as the capacity "to invent visions of what should be and

what might be in our deficit society, on the streets where we live, in our schools” (p. 5) and, we would argue, in our universities and colleges. Finally, taking direction from Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) writing, we understood that “tomorrow, with more experience and insight, ... [we] shall possibly understand it differently, and possibly reconstruct ... [our] past ... [and our future] in a different way” (p. 403). We understood our tenure track experiences were being written into each of us in the moment through spatial, temporal, familial, and aesthetic lenses.

### ANALYSIS — INTRODUCTION

Using Pinar’s (2004) analysis, we individually began an inquiry into our reactions. Sandra focussed on her reactions to the letters, and Janet examined her reactions to the process.

#### *SANDRA’S ANALYSIS OF HER REACTIONS TO THE LETTERS*

Reading the letters more than a year later continues to be a complex process; however, when I employ Pinar’s (2004) analytical frame, I see my experience otherwise. I see a much younger self standing before adults being scolded for reasons I did not understand. My lack of understanding initially resulted in curiosity; however, over time it morphed into what might be described as “developmentally appropriate” shame and a desire to flee. Today, I understand that if I do not acknowledge and engage in self-facing (Saleh et al., 2014), then the temporal shifting I am experiencing, including shame and a desire to flee, will shape my future tenure track stories in miseducative ways (Dewey, 1938). In addition, as I sit and transcribe thoughts as words on a page, I am experiencing a tiny ray of hope, because I know I bring my adult knowing to the tenure track letters. I can return to childlike curiosity of a flawed tenure track system. In so doing, I willingly relinquish the shame because I appreciate the letters are embedded within a historical, powerful, and, at times, hegemonic university-wide tenure track narrative. This feels like tentative, albeit solid, ground from which to move forward.

#### *JANET’S ANALYSIS OF HER REACTIONS TO THE PROCESS*

As the review date approached, I went in search of a repository of exemplars of the required documents. None was available. I tried to articulate my need to understand the process of tenure track and specifically the precise expectations for required documentation. I also wanted and needed to understand what would occur at the review meeting.

Pinar’s (1975, 2004) analysis leads me to understand that, because of my lengthy and diverse career, I believed I possessed the knowledge, skills, and attitude to negotiate tenure track; this was not the case. My personal, practical knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988) was wanting as it relates to the complex, idiosyncratic nature of tenure track. Also, the exhaustion caused by my doctoral journey influenced how I experienced tenure, because I was recovering from the enormity of the five-and-a-half-year journey. I recognize that I was not always absorbing information that was being shared with me by peers. Moreover, I had expectations for something that did not exist or that I could not easily locate. As one who regularly thinks systematically and reflects-in-action (Schon, 1983), I experienced it as frustrating that there were not readily available resources that detailed the process. Furthermore, my attempts to reschedule the review meeting were grounded in my early, familial curriculum making (Clandinin et al., 2011), a place and time when I came to value order and structure

as part of feeling safe. I wanted and needed to feel safe. Finally, my reaction to the emails included temporal shifting (Dewey, 1938) to experiences of being valued and trusted, in contrast to other experiences where I felt a lack of trust and a withholding of information that I needed in order to be successful.

### SYNTHESIS—INTRODUCTION

As we individually struggled, we appreciated that “life can be regarded as a constant effort, even a struggle to maintain or restore narrative coherence in the face of ever-threatening, impending chaos at all levels” (Carr, 1986, p. 91). Furthermore, as we reacted to our tension-filled tenure track stories, we could have and may have remained hidden and solitary. We were fortunate in that we share a dean who values reflective practice. She suggested we meet and possibly collaborate. Janet reached out to Sandra. Cautiously and as we moved toward a collaborative inquiry, we were able to engage in reaggregation of our experiences, which “constitutes the labor of subjective reconstruction and its consequences; it is the final phase of the method of *currere*: synthesis” (Pinar, 2004, p. 35). We began wondering about the possibility for creative, reflexive, aesthetic responses to our tension-filled tenure track stories.

We met a couple of times in efforts to discuss elements of our developing research agendas. We also participated in a school-wide workshop on research and scholarship with a focus on reflective practice. Janet was one of the presenters, and Sandra one of the organizers and panel members. This was a turning point for each of us, because we observed the other behave in ways that hinted at honesty, risk taking, thoughtfulness, and a concern for those constructed as “other” (Said, 1978). Observing the other behave in ways that were inclusive and familiar, we began to wonder how the space between us and our individual ways of knowing might create a supportive community. Reading Lugones (1987), we wondered how a “failure to see oneself in other women who are quite different from oneself” (p. 7) influenced our tenure journeys and our present efforts to collaborate.

When engaging in *currere* and autobiographical work “there is an interesting space opened for a different language around the position of the individual and in the social context” (Smith, 2013, pp. 11-12). We continued to meet. I drove to Janet’s home, and we went out on the land. I entered and experienced the spaces Janet goes to when she seeks refuge. The hand-hewn benches, a creek, tall trees, two playful puppies, and stillness. On another visit, we worked in her office surrounded by her books—friends at the ready on every page. We experienced the space between as a sacred, still space, where increasingly trust was the bedrock. As we became more comfortable with our community of two and as we grew bolder, we imagined up a desire to grow the community (Pinar, 2004). Janet showed me her artwork, sewing, painting, and needlework. We explored the harvest from her fall garden, and I saw tobacco hanging to dry, soon to be gifts for Elders. Increasingly, we understood the importance of purposefully creating other worlds in efforts to help understand and move forward from our reactions to the tenure tensions.

### SANDRA SYNTHESIS

I begin by noting “knowledge is not logically ordered and waiting to be discovered, rather it is constructed in experiences of the whole body and being” (Slattery, 2013, p. 253). Knowing this, I went in search of trusted friends found in the pages of books that line the shelves of my private library, and I went on the land to take photographs (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: Tenure track, “it’s a miserable inheritance, said Wilbur gloomily” (White, 1952, p. 39).

I woke up with the “miserable inheritance” (White, 1952, p. 39) every morning, and it sat heavily upon my being as I struggled to sleep.

Let me tell you  
 It was terrible  
 Hardest day  
 I ever had  
 I was there  
 So believe me  
 It was bad  
 IT WAS BAD (Fitch & Mongeau, 1992, p. 1)

My reactions to the tenure track letters were oppressive. Because of my early, familial curriculum making (Clandinin et al., 2011), I am well acquainted with oppression. I know its breath and breadth, its shadows, and its proclivity for obscuring every other possibility. I also know “there is quiet water in the center of...[my] soul” (Kavanaugh, 1970, p. 70). I knew that, if I was to continue along the tenure track journey, I was going to have to do two things. One, I would have to honour how I was feeling “all this sameness leaves...[me] blue and makes...[me] ache for something new” (Lies, 2008, p. 2), and second, I would need to find a trusted friend.

“Do you want a friend, Wilbur?... I’ll be a friend to you. I’ve watched you all day, and I like you” (White, 1952, p. 31). I wanted a friend who would welcome me and say:

Come tell me of your sadness  
 where the forest flowers grow

Where the whispering breeze  
Blinds the lips of trees  
And only I will know (Kavanaugh, 1970, p. 59)

Being with Janet, being on the land and in her office soothed me. “Wilbur loved the barn when it was like this—calm and quiet, waiting for light” (White, 1952, p. 33). Our time together made the sharp, prickly comments from the letters less injurious. As well, it allowed me to breathe deeply, experience calm, and it reminded me that I am better when I am living with literature, photography, nature, and a trusted friend. There were moments when I “hated to break the lovely stillness of dawn by using...[my] voice, but...[I] couldn’t think of any other way to locate the mysterious new friend who was nowhere to be seen” (White, 1952, p. 34). I knew and I felt I was okay in these spaces; therefore, I began to share my words, thinking, temporal experiences, and my dance with photographs and literature (see Figure 2).

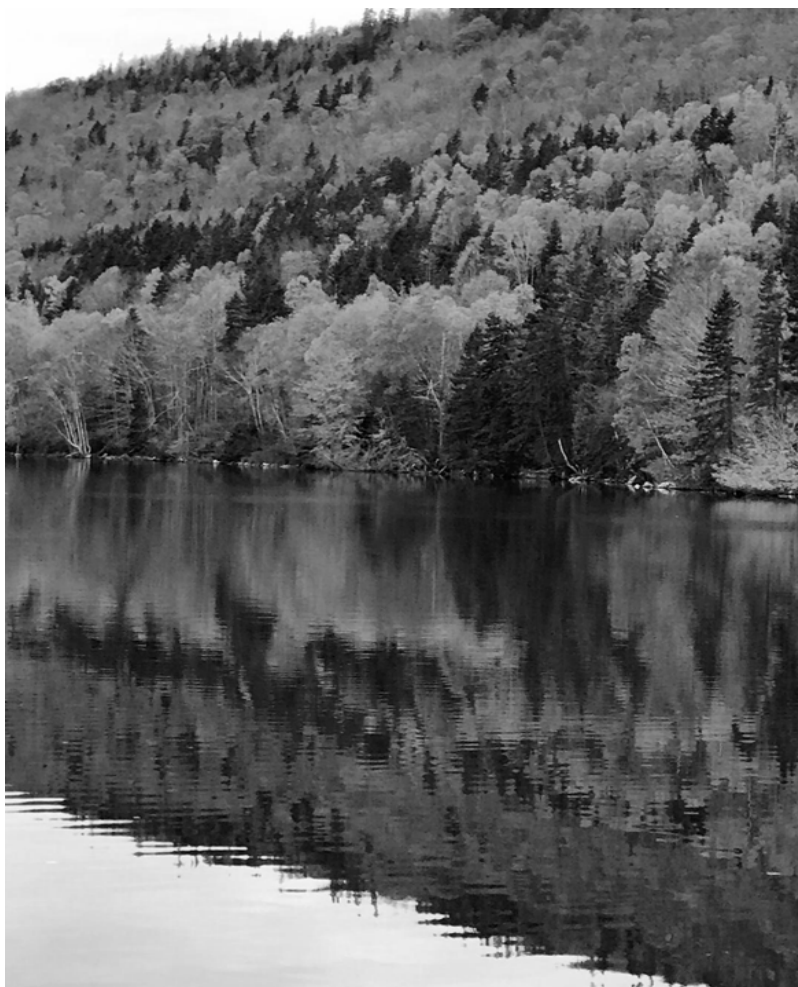


Figure 2: Reflection



*JANET: SYNTHETICAL—NATURE AND EXPERIENCES ARRANGE THEMSELVES*

Pinar's (2004) synthetical and Slattery's (2017) notion of prolepsis linked my experiences such that I was able to "transcend linear segmentation of time and [create] a holistic understanding of the past, present, and future simultaneously" (Slattery, 2017, p. 185). I began to understand my tenure track process in new ways.

My dean encouraged me to read Brookfield (1990/2015). Sandra introduced me to writings by Pinar (2004) and Clandinin and Connelly (2000), which offered me a frame for deep reflection. It was educative to be introduced to and subsequently utilize literature that helped me experience comfort, imagine forward-looking stories, create, and place myself within a supportive community (Dewey, 1938). I also began to slowly and tentatively set aside scientific terminology and literature that had been my guide for many years but that was, in this situation, not helpful.

Speaking with Sandra, my increasingly trusted peer, a still space to think deeply about my first year review was in the midst of becoming. Leaning into my familial curriculum making (Clandinin et al., 2011), I was able to move beyond dismay and nausea as I sought out and experienced quiet spaces in wide-ranging geographic areas. When I feel the coarseness and peeling of birch tree bark under my hands, and I see the changing hues of Naples yellow, portrait pink, cerulean blue, and cadmium yellow and red, and am deafened by the crashing stream, I know time as temporal and stillness, as a space for me to grow and respond (see Figure 3.)



Figure 3: Nature frames order.

Nature frames order for me; bark peels each year, and reveals the delightful colours and hues, giving meaning to my yearning for order and alignment. Hands on the bark and with wide awake perceptions (Greene, 2001), I begin to know my

reactions as tiny signals towards forward-looking tenure track stories. I imagine Sandra and I working together to create multi-sensory materials for other tenure track hires that serve as detailed signposts along the track and that result in improved understanding, communication, and knowing as it relates to an educative journey (Dewey, 1938) through tenure track. Equally important, I am also able to pause and name and honour my need for order and knowing. Dewey (1938) reassures me:

It is, then, a sound instinct which identifies freedom with power to frame purposes and to execute or carry into effect purposes so framed. Such freedom is in turn identical with self-control; for the formation of purposes and the organization of means to execute them are the work of intelligence. (p. 67)



Figure 4: I am in the midst—resilient as an Oak.

Through reflexive practice, I recognize and own my responsibilities (Dewey, 1938) for what occurred during my review process. My desire is to discuss possible system changes. Wondering how best to proceed, I return to walking and deep thinking in the sacred, still spaces of the bush, because nature regularly provides alternative perspectives. The smells, sounds, and feel of moss under foot ground me, and I know I am becoming a professor. I am in the midst (Greene, 2001), strong and resilient as a young oak tree (see Figure 4). I am also keenly aware of the interconnected and symbiotic relations between much of what I experience in nature. This knowing returns my thinking to the systems of the academy, in particular tenure track, and I know there is a place for the resources I imagine. Furthermore, my walking and thinking reminds me of nature's complexities. In reflection, I appreciate and value the work Sandra and I are doing together, each contributing to making the work better and each sharing the load of miseducative tenure track stories.

#### THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS WORK

Our enacted *currere* provided a structure to return to familial curriculum making stories embedded in memories of our earliest experiences. Remembering and retelling these stories helped us retell our pain-filled reactions endured along tenure track such that we were able to consider the possibility of shifting our stories. Moreover, looking



with adult eyes and knowing on early, familial curriculum making experiences, we remembered brave, resilient, and imaginative little girls who routinely found ways to navigate their complex lives. By giving ourselves permission and by making time to return, remember, and share experiences and by acknowledging our former selves as brave and imaginative, we created a safe, still space to ask, wonder, read, create, and listen while acknowledging the tension-filled moments of the dominant and, sometimes, hegemonic, institutional tenure track stories.

Sandra remembered how curiosity, literature, and photography have always been trusted friends, particularly in moments of tension. Janet remembered and honoured art-as-event (Greene, 1995, 2001), spirituality, nature, and books as part of her process to understand what is expected and as an integral thread in her efforts to “walk a good path.” When Sandra visited Janet, the exploration of tension-filled stories and possibilities for shifting stories expanded, because Janet took Sandra on the land and shared bits of nature that provide a lens from which to consider stories through alternative perspectives and worldviews. Janet also behaved in ways that demonstrated a deep and complex grounding in the land and nature. Sandra experienced familiarity in this rootedness and relaxed into it. In so doing, they were able to imagine up educative (Dewey, 1938) tenure track stories.

#### SHIFTING

When we purposefully made time to wonder, whilst embedded among things that comfort and support us, we were able to move past reaction towards critical reflection. Through this process, we understood that, by engaging relationally through time, we were able to challenge and then shift our stories. In part, this capacity was possible because of our early, familial curriculum making experiences. Janet pulled forward resilience and a knowing that spaces in the bush are places where other explanations and possibilities emerge. Attending to the relational, Sandra remembered that “each book...[is] a world onto itself, and in it...[she] took refuge (Manguel, 1998, p. 11).

As we continue along the path of trusted friendship including collaboration, critical reflection, and art-as-event experiences (Greene, 2001), we are able to see how our newly emerging relationship is reverberating with potential to remake and reconceptualize (Pinar, 1978) the dominant, regularly hegemonic, institutional narrative of tenure track. We know that:

both of us have preferred positions in relation to...[tenure track], and we both have shifted, constructing our positions in light of the other’s arguments. A more complex, dialogic text has emerged that neither of us could have produced separately. Our process parallels the construction of all stories—multiple voices and identities come into play. (Reisman & Speedy, 2007, p. 428)

We are thinking deeply about creating counterstories to interrupt hegemonic tenure track narratives. We imagine up spaces where stories from our familial curriculum making are honoured. We also imagine ourselves engaging the dominant narrative of tenure track, and we willingly step into tension-filled spaces because our ways of knowing (*currere* and self reflection) will guide our journey and keep us awake to other possible iterations of the journey. Last month, we met with a member of the tenure track committee and began the process of creating readily available resources to support new hires. “Our intention is to explore the spaces that move beyond prescriptive boundaries that are narrowly focused and/or suggest a certain pathway for lives” (Lessard, Caine, & Clandinin, 2015, p. 199). We also want to call

upon tenured professors to “imaginatively stretch past taken-for-granted assumptions, to see the richness of” (Lessard, et al., 2015, p. 212) the diverse experiences and ways of knowing and world views that tenure track hires bring to the academy, often willing and ready to make contributions.

Our *currere* experience is sunk deep into a bedrock and ocean of knowing, depicted in azure blues and umber, pecan and hickory browns (see Figure 5).



Figure 5: *Currere* visualized on the plane of an artist’s canvas and then shaped and coloured into motion through intersections with other worlds: political, social, temporal, familial, and aesthetic.

The center of the oil painting is swirling pink, red, blue, and green reflecting uncertainty and tension. The visioning of *currere* is now lit with yellow, violet, and blue hues. Here, we live out educative stories. Wagamese (2016) reminds us of how important it is to:

Keep what’s true in front of you,  
 Old Man said.  
 You won’t get lost that way.  
 I was asking about making my way through the bush.  
 He was talking about making my way through life.  
 Turns out, all these years later,  
 It was the same conversation. (p. 72)

We understand the happenstance of our coming together as fortunate. Possibilities for curriculum making including engaging in *currere* ought not be left to chance; there ought to be a well illuminated path for the journey (see Figure 6).



Figure 6: Our goal is to walk an inviting, illuminated path towards tenure while leaving well marked guide posts for those who will also walk the path.

Engaging in inquiry and a reflexive practice is of benefit to educators regardless of where they are on the tenure track. Furthermore, a reflective practice, including *currere*, is part of our research agenda; we challenge the tenure track gatekeepers to value it.

Finally, *currere* reminded us of the importance of being awake to alternatives, including the alterity of art-as-event (Greene, 2001). Our *currere*, including aesthetics, deep reflection, and collaboration, led us towards a “subjective dissolution or regression so that the structures of selfhood...were reconstructed,” and we shifted our stories from reactions to responses (Pinar, 2004, p. 13). We know who we are, and we know who we want to become as professors. *Currere* reminded us of the importance of the temporality of stories as shaping influences and provided a still, safe space for us to imagine up other possibilities.

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