

PREDICTING AND ADJUSTING MY SELF AS TEACHER: A CURRERE ACTION STUDY

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HOW I GOT HERE

A few months ago, I began following some English Language Arts (ELA) teacher accounts on Instagram as a way to gain lesson plan ideas and to get a feel for what real, hip English teachers are like. I was so engrossed with reading about teaching for school coursework that I was forgetting that, eventually, I would have to actually teach. Scrolling through the photos, I gawked at beautiful classrooms that were full of second-hand, velvet sofas that invited students to curl up and dive into a book. I gaped at hand-drawn worksheets that enthralled students with aspects of Transcendentalism. I gazed at book after book held by smiling teacher with obligatory coffee in hand. I began to dream, perhaps for the first time, of what my classroom would look like physically. More importantly, I began to imagine myself sitting in that perfect, flea-market-find of a chair, emanating all the positivity of the book-loving, student-centered, diversity-focused, ever-smiling teachers behind those accounts. I could picture myself flawlessly executing one of the many lesson plans that I had gleaned from my ELA methods courses, supported with research-based pedagogy and sprinkled with a fun-loving, goofy, but cool, attitude.

But then, I began thinking: what if that's not me? What if that's not my style? What if the impatience I show in other aspects of my life seeps into my so-called separate school life? What if my knack for perfection makes it impossible to get beyond just the standards and focus on what's really important? With these doubts marinating in my mind, I stopped looking as closely at the Instagram posts. I didn't want to know the creative ways these teachers were trying to reach their kids; they only reminded me of all the traits I knew might get in the way of my success as a teacher.

The course I took this past summer, Action Research for Educators, taught by Tom Poetter, came around at a good time. I had been working through my reading list for my master's thesis. I had chosen the topic of art in the ELA classroom, a subject I've been passionate about since I first entered my Master of Arts in Teaching program. Fortunately, the readings only fueled my fire. I was feeling inspired again, feeling confident in my potential to teach again. My mind was filled with idea upon idea of how to integrate art into my classroom, but that threw me right back to imagining myself as a teacher, doubts and fears and all—what if my personality, my history, my experiences, my knowledge, my time in the educational space, my privileges, my biases, and my culture don't allow me to be this teacher I'm dreaming to be? Coming across Pinar's (1975/1994) *currere* method, my gears started spinning. By examining my educational past, I could tackle my uncertainties head on while also making use of my tendency to overthink. I could narrow in on the contexts that shaped me as a person, for good and for bad, to better analyze who I will be as a teacher. Kanu and Glor (2006) explained that “[t]o be able to see the direction an experience is heading the educator must understand his/her own history” (p. 106). I intend my autobiographical study to allow me to better plan for and take actions towards being an effective educator, the kind I dream of being, by revisiting my past and my present to reshape my future.

How I Did It

I looked into my past in multiple ways. I brainstormed by myself, moving from my earliest to my latest educational memories. I tried my best not to interpret the memories and simply describe them as I recalled them, as Pinar (1975/1994) suggests. When I reached the present moment, I reached out to “critical friends” (Hinchey, 2016), people I deemed close enough to both have memories of me in school and be truthful about any negative habits (past, present, or future) they may notice. I encouraged them to be as reflective as I, the researcher, was being (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 2007; Hinchey, 2016). In talking to these friends, the syncretical step happened naturally. They would start sentences like, “You’ve always been...” or, “This is a perfect example of how you’re...” Additionally, I utilized a journal. I recorded analytic memos (Saldaña, 2014) and brief observations of my life. I also read through my past journal entries to find clues about what I was thinking, reading, and feeling that related to the themes I saw emerging throughout my other data.

WHAT I DISCOVERED

After almost 20 years of education, it is no surprise that I have masses of memories. Some stand out more prominently than others for various reasons. Some memories I deemed important as a personal memory but not important as a window into my soul as a teacher. These were tough and probably controversial calls to make because, as Sameshima (2008) explained, teachers must live “embodied wholeness” that combines both public and private spheres. If I had infinite pages and time, I would weave together a narrative that incorporates all of my defining educational moments. Alas, I have finite pages and finite time (as do you), so I have chosen to present a smattering of the memories that I feel directed me most toward a lesson and, therefore, an action step. I present my data as supporting evidence for the themes I coded and chose to highlight, as opposed to presenting a straight chronology of my educational history, even though my data-gathering process was more or less chronological. I also want to note that the themes presented in this piece are not representative of all my data codes, nor are they completely separate from one another. Rather, they are important starting points for analyzing myself holistically.

MY LITERAL MIND

In speaking to my mother, I landed upon what may be the overarching theme of my life as a student and person (but what’s the difference, really?). She immediately recalled an interaction with my 2nd grade teacher, Miss Ellis:

Miss Ellis came to me and shared a math worksheet you had done. The sheet said to circle half of the pies. So, you had very carefully circled one half of each pie instead of circling 6 pies out of the 12. (Mom, informal interview, 7.7.18)

My mom continued to explain that it was always the same situation with idioms. I took everything so literally that she could never speak in idioms because I would get frustrated that she didn’t mean what she said. I would “turn on [my] heels and walk away” even after she explained the real meaning (Mom, informal interview, 7.7.18). In her analysis, this kind of literal thinking explains why facts are important to me and, therefore, why I excelled in my test-focused schooling career.

Through this dialogue with my mom, I stumbled upon an additional connection. As a literal thinker, I can get one notion of something in my mind and then not consider other meanings. When I converse using this one idea as my basis and it’s

not what the other person is meaning, I can sound ditz. This leads to embarrassment because I think of myself as bright. As my mom explained, facts are important to me. If my mom, acting as “critical friend,” hadn’t mentioned this, I wouldn’t have connected the following journal entry about an embarrassing moment to this aspect about myself:

It was a 12th grade AP English class.... We were talking about banned and controversial books. Harry Potter was brought up. People had trouble with the sorcery. “But what are some good things about the book?” asked the teacher. I’d never read them before, but my cousins and sister spoke passionately about them and their Latin-based spells and smart, subtle references. I thought those were AP level answers. But no—[the teacher] thought those were obvious. Her voice lost its practiced, even tone for a moment as she looked at me and spoke in a very high school tone of voice: “Well, yeah, but...” (Journal entry, 9.13.17)

Reading this entry now, how was I to know that she was looking for themes like “friendship” and “courage” as answers to her question? In the moment, I was humiliated. I had certain facts in my mind that I didn’t think to question or expand, and since I was often praised for my answers, I didn’t think to stop and consider other interpretations of her question.

While experience has allowed me to better understand idioms and avoid silly questions like, “How can I taste my own medicine if I’m not even taking any medicine?” this realization about my literal mind explains some of my more mature, present-day habits. I am still a black-and-white person. I follow the rules. If the recipe calls for a teaspoon of salt, I won’t eyeball it. I feel best when all the dishes are cleaned up before relaxing for the night, so I grow frustrated when others want to put off clean-up until later. One critical friend called this the “Becca way,” which he also noted is “usually right, but you aren’t made for adapting in certain things” (Joey, informal interview, 7.8.18). His prediction for me as a teacher was that I would have to make my expectations clear in the first couple months, but once students “have conformed to those expectations, it will be a better learning environment.” In this instance, my “literal mind” is conflated with my “organized mind.”

I see the progression from 2nd grade until now and into the future as Joey predicts. I don’t disagree with him, but I do resist his characterization of me as incapable of adapting. This was one of my major fears about teaching—that I would let my way, the Becca way, get in the students’ way. By recognizing this fact, I am acting as Kanu and Glor (2006) suggested: I am self-examining *before* I get into the system as a teacher so that I can transform any dispositions and beliefs that need changing. Their hesitancy mirrors mine, that once teachers get into a teacher position, they often see it as the “real world” where they must only survive; there is no time for reflection and growth. I must reflect *now* in order to change.

MY COMPETITIVE MIND

Never a particularly athletic person, my competitive side lies in my incessant need to be right, which is consequently based in the self-congratulatory truth that I am often right. As mentioned above, facts are important to me. I stow them, whether consciously or not, for future use. Being competitive in this way, I found that, in the past, I drew comparisons between my strengths and others’. For example, I used to have art lessons at home with my sisters. In one journal entry, I reflected, “I remember thinking myself good at art, but not as good as my sister. She was much more precise. She excelled at those grid drawings” (7.3.18). This continues into the present and how I classify

myself as “not an artsy person.” When people hear I majored in art history, I am quick to emphasize that “I only *analyze* art. I don’t *make* it.” In another culled memory, I mentioned again how my sister was “always better at the creative, hand-made stuff. But I was good at the schoolwork” (Journal entry, 7.3.18).

This classification of myself into the category of academic versus creative is certainly a way that I kept and still keep my competitive edge and placed myself as expert of something. 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. In 3rd grade, we wrote stories in “bare books.” Though they started as assignments, they transformed into fun activities with my friends on weekends. We would meet up to write new stories and illustrate our pages with printed photos, which were *much* more professional than just drawing the illustrations. In 4th grade, my friend Leslie and I began writing a story about a girl and her horse called *Chestnut Dreams*. We were encouraged by our teacher to keep adding to the story, extending it beyond the limited pages in a bare book. It was our intention to publish the book and become the youngest published authors. We never did publish it, but someone had already beat us to that record, anyway.

The wish to publish it was certainly a manifestation of my competitiveness, but it was also a sign of my confidence in my writing ability, a confidence reinforced when I was put into a gifted ELA class. These two traits went hand-in-hand, though, as shown in one memory:

Once we were placed in groups and had to act out a story we wrote using famous taglines. I have memories of the other kids thinking ours was funny. More importantly, I remember Mrs. Taylor, the teacher, cackling at our clever lines. (Journal entry, 7.4.18)

My confidence and competitiveness grew in tandem. My competing for the teacher’s approval and my pride in gaining it stemmed from the confidence that other teachers had already instilled in me.

A journal entry from September 12, 2017, sheds more light on how my competitive mind followed me into my high school years. For a 10th grade English assignment, we had to create a soundtrack for *A Tale of Two Cities*. Recalling my frustration, I wrote:

Mrs. Mullen is sitting on that stool she always sat on. Really pale wood, definitely cheap. I’m at the front of the classroom, excited to share my CD and proud of the “deep” connections I made between songs and themes or scenes. I play my first song...oh did Mullen have something to say. Her hands start waving and moving, she’s interpreting for me. I’m silenced, unable to explain my super deep and exploratory reasons for my choices.... I keep the soundtrack moving along. I don’t want Mullen to keep talking about that song, about how this oldie makes her remember her glory days or some such.... I go to explain it, but there’s Mullen again. (Journal entry, 9.12.17)

My anger at not being able to get a word in edgewise showcases my weakness in collaborating, in exchanging ideas and dialoging with others. In this instance, I was competing for a voice with my teacher, who I felt was supposed to give *me* the floor to offer my carefully contemplated criticisms. My analysis of this moment was deepened when I stumbled upon my notes from reading Johnston’s (2004)

Choice Words in my Teaching Writing course. I had written a note to myself that I must learn with my students; I must distinguish between being a competitor and a collaborator (Journal entry, 10.25.17). In that moment with Mrs. Mullen, I, as a student, was not collaborating, though one could argue that Mrs. Mullen, as a teacher, was not either. However, it gives me hope that my reading habits and my educational experiences since that time in 10th grade have awakened me to embracing dialogue and collaboration. After all, I willingly embraced them for this action study.

MY HUNGER FOR KNOWLEDGE

I have recently recognized the power of reading and its effects on my outlook as a teacher. Pinar (1975/1994) advised his readers to make a list of the areas of study in which they are involved, noting which subjects most interest and most bore them. Thinking about my reading list of late, I was a little unimpressed with its narrow spectrum. For the past year and a half, my nose has been buried in teaching books—on a wide range of topics, to be sure, but that range is still isolated to the “teaching books” category. However, these books have interested me, and I considered the growth that I’ve experienced over this time:

The more I’m in school, the more I realize how much what you read affects your outlook in life. To be honest, I’ve sometimes wondered, “Will diverse books/ curriculum *actually* make a difference in kids’ worldviews?” But then I think, the *only* reason I’ve grown at all as a pre-service teacher and a person is because of what I’ve read in grad school, because of the people I’ve come across, because of the variety of people I’ve met in traveling and by stretching myself. (Analytic memo, 7.9.18)

That final line gives me hope as future teacher. It leads this study to a more positive conclusion. While I do have a literal, organized, competitive mind, I also have a mind that has always sought new, wide-ranging information. I’ve studied abroad three times in my life: once in high school in Dijon, France, and twice in college in London and Copenhagen. I’ve made it a point to use any saved money to travel. I’m well known among my friends as an all-too-serious pub trivia player who laments when others aren’t as dedicated to the weekly game at the local bar. I used to spend hours scrolling through the message boards on the Internet Movie Database (IMDb), accumulating an unnecessary amount of information about actors and movies (hence the trivia thing). I took up dance classes again when I felt my job wasn’t engaging, entertaining, or challenging enough. I still practice yoga after 8 years, not yet bored with it because every teacher and class offers some new takeaway. I’ve taken a couple of personality tests, one around the time I was searching for my next move after graduating from college. My number one trait? Learner. The results told me, in part:

You love to learn. The subject matter that interests you most will be determined by your other themes and experiences, but whatever the subject, you will always be drawn to the process of learning. The process, more than the content or the result, is especially exciting for you.... Your excitement leads you to engage in adult learning experiences—yoga or piano lessons or graduate classes. (Gallup, 2018)

It was almost eerie reading that description a few years ago, but it, much like this autobiographical study, provided a window into my soul that didn’t just open by itself. It took time to answer the survey, and it took time to wade through my educational

history. In the words of Kanu and Glor (2006), “it cannot be assumed that teachers will be just granted voice” (p. 113). We must foster it ourselves through conscious examination.

It is in this section that I most recognize what Anderson et al. (2007) called the spillover effect. It’s hard to keep my autobiographical study contained to one area of my life, namely, my educational experiences, because almost everything I do is based on learning new things. Of course, reading books in graduate school is one of the main ways that I’ve learned new things and altered my perspectives. Joey (informal interview, 7.8.18) commented that, based on what he knew I had been reading about multicultural and social justice education, he thinks I’ll be someone who tells a different narrative to my students. I think he’s right, but that’s only because I’ve made concerted efforts to engage in the texts I’ve been assigned, and I’ve only been assigned them because I made the choice to attend graduate school. I could have just gotten a teaching license, but I wanted to know *how* to teach. Boy, am I grateful for that decision! And my future students should be, too. I have grown enormously in my outlook on life, education, students, the subject of English in particular, and myself.

FINAL THOUGHTS AND NEXT STEPS

Achieving such growth has required significant action on my part. Active engagement, committed reading time, and self-reflection (both required and not) have begun to build my teacher identity. Sameshima (2008) described precisely the vision I had for myself before I began grad school: “The teacher continues to wear the mask of all-knowing and perfection, filling the ‘wounded world’ with knowledge from books” (p. 39). To some extent, this is the vision that I am still fighting and, with the self-knowledge this research provided, the vision I hope to alter.

This is not to say that such change is easy for, as this *currere* exploration has revealed, my hindering personality traits are buried deep within me. Researchers who use the *currere* method and autobiographical study agree that lifelong self-exploration is essential; there is no other way to be empowered, to stop reproducing the same old educational system, to break away from the traditional view of a segmented school where public and private don’t mix (Kanu & Glor, 2006), and, I would add, to enact social justice. Despite the discomfort and shock that digging into your past may produce, Felts (2017) explained how the method is also invigorating:

Currere, for me, is a reminder that, if I ever find myself in a drought of growth, I can look at the past with new eyes, bothering the present, and progressively placing hope in the future to bring a waterfall of nourishment. (Felts, 2017, p. 78)

I have also found, through my experience with this study, that Kanu and Glor (2006) were correct: collaborative dialogue *must* take place. There must be an exchange of ideas and, specifically, an exchange of stories. However, everyone involved must recognize the importance of the study and be invested. I noticed this in my conversations with my “critical friends.” Those friends who thought the research was a good idea and would be helpful and lead to growth dug deeper into my past with me. One friend from middle school also works in education but has a much more traditional mindset. When I explained my project and began the conversation by revisiting school memories, she only said, “You were super well rounded. Like, you did a variety of things.... You just had a wide variety of interests” (informal interview, 7.8.18). It was fun to reminisce with her, and many moments did provide deep insight into my inherent traits, but more importantly, our conversation extended connections to

other friends' analytical or synthetical commentary. I tried my best to be an outsider to my own life, but sometimes the perspective of a real outsider can't be beat.

As for next steps, for the "action" part of this study, I intend to continue my self-analysis with a more focused eye. I know that I am a black-and-white, often inflexible person, so in my student teaching and eventual real teaching environments, I will have to make efforts to curb this habit because it can be a detriment to my relationships ("Becca's way or the highway"). I factually know many strategies to put student interest and ability first in the classroom, but it will take action on my part to embody this pedagogy in my soul in order to enact it in authentic ways. My journal entries show true growth in this regard, where I noted strides in my patience, grace, and understanding. I am hopeful that, with my disposition for learning, I can continue reading, reflecting, and changing before it's much too late. Importantly, I plan to enact lifelong learning and self-exploration to dig into more of the doubts I mentioned at the start of this project, especially those concerning my privileges, culture, and biases. It is these, especially, that are engrained in my being and, thus, are manifested in my past, but they will not necessarily dictate my future.

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