

# THE IMPACT OF IN-BETWEEN SPACES AND OUTDOOR PLACES

## AN EDUCATOR'S *CURRERE* REFLECTION

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When we hold an image of what is objectively “the fact,” it has the effect of reifying what we experience, making our experience resistant to reevaluation and change rather than open to imagination. (Greene, 1995, pp. 126–127)

I began writing using the *currere* methodology twelve months ago, in the winter months. I wanted to understand more fully an educators’ experience of teaching and living in “in-between-outdoor spaces.” These are the spaces we physically walk to, from, and through where we are practicing clinically, teaching, writing, researching, grading reflections/assignments and facilitating discussions with learners. I also reflect on similar outdoor spaces where persons experiencing homelessness live and encamp.

I wanted to explore ways of creating during this time, as my performative act (Fels, 2015) and within my teaching practice in an effort to become a better educator. To develop this work, I leaned into what Cordi (2019) importantly described as “asking good questions [which] is at the heart of good teaching” (p. 82). As well I reflected on what Pinar (2012) stated about the role of *currere* and self-reflection “as a sensibility ... [that] can become precious to educators committed to their—and their students’—ongoing self-formation through academic study” (p. 45).

### FRAMEWORK: A PERFORMATIVE INQUIRY

To create this *currere*, I leaned into what Fels (2015) describes as performative inquiry, knowing that the actual act of creating *currere* is a moment of awakening. During this process, I wondered if I was prepared for the changes and renewed understandings that might ensue (Greene, 2001). Fels (2015) states that performative inquiry is all around us if we choose to look, live, and engage with an element of curiosity. Performative inquiry focuses on the “opportunities and possibilities of learning that emerge as participants engage in arts-based activities” (Fels, 2015, p. 2). In turn, the inquire is also about “who or what calls us to attention” (Fels, 2015, p. 2). For me, performative inquiry provided the space to move and think past the “critics ... the loop in my head, telling me what I failure I am” (Brown, 2018, p. 32), and instead reach toward resilience and self-compassion (Brown, 2018).

Through the *currere* process, I instead wanted to focus on interrupting the present, re-envisioning my propensity to rapidly, physically move myself, my body, into the next class or project and not take time to navigate the uncomfortable space of growing and being otherwise (Greene, 1995). Instead, I wanted to self-reflect, not be fearful and instead engage and be part of the “dance of life” (Greene, 1995, p. 60). I also wanted to be thoughtful in my connectedness to outdoor spaces where I create through photography while on long hikes. Greene (1995) stated that this “participatory involvement with the many forms art can enable us to see more in our experience, to hear more on normally unheard frequencies, to become conscious of what daily



routines have obscured, what habit and convention have suppressed” (p. 123). “This kind of engagement is something that I wanted for every lesson” (Cordi, 2019, p. 83).

### THE REGRESSIVE STEP

In this step, Pinar (1975) reminds us to go back into our educational experiences. I reflected on my long history of journalling and photographs taken on hikes and art created during the previous year. I reflected deeply about the joy of working with many learners whose paths I have crossed in online, hybrid, and face-to-face experiences. As well, I explored the academic spaces where I work with and live alongside university students—street health clinics, classrooms, laboratories, and in community mobile health vans. During these times, I wondered what was occurring to me as an educator who for the past years has spent much time researching, teaching, and writing on diverse topics such as eating disorders and well-being, the evocation of shame, and the importance of prevention of drug injection abscesses for persons using intravenous substances.

Moreover, I wondered if I was learning and liberating my imagination (Macy & Johnstone, 2012) within these spaces where I contribute to curriculum, write course objectives, and translate new knowledge into student learning activities (Pinar, 2012). I wondered how I was reconstructing myself as part of our professional calling, which I understand to be a “communicative process that requires the psychosocial and intellectual education of the self-reflexive individual” (Pinar, 2012, p. 227). Was I becoming the educator I envisioned (Dewey, 1938)? This was important to consider, as at times I found online education forums difficult and depersonalized, as I preferred to engage within face-to-face space where learner-teacher interactions grow my understanding of how learners learn through social interactions (Pinar, 2012).

I also wondered about how I was learning from the outdoor spaces in which I engaged daily through hikes into wide-open spaces (Kimmerer, 2013). I wanted to interrogate my being in outdoor spaces and understand more fully how I was changing as an educator. This was especially important when I noted that, when I physically moved away from the computer, online classes, curriculum review meetings, and completing email interactions, physical tension within dissipated (Berg & Seeber, 2016).

Furthermore, I wanted to understand envisioning the future in “in-between spaces.” This became of great interest as I recognized early that, when I was not answering email or grading student arts-based reflections and assignments, I was full of wonder, questions, and creative actions (Macy & Johnstone, 2012). Therefore, to understand outdoor space and the relationship to academia, I searched the literature and talked with peers about tension-filled times in the academy. When outside walking, I often reflected on whether I was caught in a familiar circle of complacency (Kawall, 2006) or of my “imagination being switched off” (Macy & Johnstone, 2012, p. 164), well aware of work-life balance. I wondered if I was ready to engage with self in uncomfortable conversations of being renewed (Greene, 2001). I yearned to educate in an environment where we embraced Greene’s (2001) notion “that there is always more to be found, horizons to be breached, limits to be broken through, always untapped possibility” (p. 206).

## REFLECTING ON MY CREATIVE, PHYSICAL SELF

As an imaginative person, I wondered how I could utilize my childhood love of creativity as a medium to express my hope for change. I wondered if I could “catch inspiration” to improve my attention and purpose as a reflexive practitioner (Macy & Johnstone, 2012, p. 167). This is important as Macy and Johnstone remind us of how, when taking a holiday or going for a trek into nature, inspiration and a renewed sense of [academic] production can occur. Therefore, I wondered how I could move my journaling, creative art, hiking, and doodling into *curre* to encourage other educators. Furthermore, Schon (1983) stated that when participants realize “that they actively construct the reality of their practice and become aware of the variety of frames available to them, they begin to see the need to reflect-in-action on their previous tacit frames” (p. 311).

To understand the physical aspects of walking and going on hikes as an educator, I rested for a time by re-reading my journals and examining photographs taken. In my notes, I regularly noted that I always wanted to work in the arts and be an artist. I also always wanted to dance, yet as part of my family’s faith it was not encouraged. I remembered my public-high school teachers as minimally encouraging in my theatre, art, and band classes; this lack lustre reassurance did not rapidly push me to study the arts, though my creative heart was there. I also may have been discouraged by my inability to articulate my vision aloud. At the same time, I was caught in the demands of needing to learn a trade (I was told to be a nurse, social worker, or teacher), gain a profession, and live in the practical reality of needing to earn a wage “to pay my bills” (*Author’s Reflexivity Journal*, January 2024).

Finally, I further reflected on my deep yearning to articulate the impact of living in outdoor “in-between spaces” on my body as an educator. I am aware that I am living in an aging body, and I know that “bodies both reflect contemporary discourses ... and, in turn, construct social meaning of identities” (Mandell & Kamenitz, 2021, p. 73). I wondered how I carried tension within myself; I knew childhood tensions to be reduced and or resolved when hiking across the hay fields and through the deep woods with my Dad. I remember my body, energy-rich and fluid in the motion of hiking with my Gramma down the farm paths, swimming in the pond, and playing sports in the winter. In these times, I was connected to my inner strength and my holistic self (Kwee & Launeanu, 2019).

## THE PROGRESSIVE STEP

In this step, Pinar (2012) reminds us that “one looks toward what is not yet the case, what is not yet present” (p. 46). I envisioned my teaching experience being enriched, deeply intertwined, and threaded tightly with my relationship to the land (Kimmerer, 2013; Morris, 2003). Macy and Johnstone (2012) describe this time as important to give us space to catch an “inspiriting vision ... to overcome obstacles” (p. 163). For example, as an educator, I considered how to reconstruct (Pinar, 2012) academic tensions of managing overlapping meetings, contributing to curriculum changes, pressures to obtain grants and funding, and the request to teach in overtime. It is here I imagine a work-life balance that supports sustainability as an academic (Pinar, 2012). In my journal I reflected the following:

When filled with tension, I realize stepping away from the computer as powerful. I know the physical benefits of going for long walks with my dogs deep into the woods, far from

my angst of trying to write the perfect lines in the syllabus so the students will understand the content and assignment. I know taking my camera helps me think deeply about the role of images and learning. (*Author's Reflexivity Journal*, September 2024)

I imagine the time in outdoor spaces as those that embed a “way of reflecting in practice” that I see as essential to developing improved “problem-solving skills” (Tanaka, 2016, p. 185). I envision a space where being outdoors promotes health, and it not just a “walk to release academic tensions, disappointments, and pain” (*Author's Reflexivity Journal*, October 2024). I envision outdoor spaces or the “in-between spaces” as therapeutic, where I as an educator gain perspective on issues, yet I know this balance is challenging at times to achieve (*Author's Reflexivity Journal*, November 2024). In turn, I imagine a future, where academic institutions understand and celebrate outdoor spaces as essential to maintaining and improving psychophysiological responses (National Collaborating Centre for Environmental Health, 2013).

Space is defined as “the dimensions of height, depth, and width within which all things exist and move” (Oxford Languages, 2025, n.p.). To understand this further, I studied the works of the architect Thomas Heatherwick (2023, 2024). He advocates for the creation of buildings and communities that are healthy and enduring and encourage climate awareness. He promotes the use of old building spaces to create new and inviting buildings. He discusses the importance of creating spaces that are welcoming, colourful, and that bring humanization to our living, working, and playing spaces (Gentleman, 2023). I envisioned this as applying to the academic spaces in which we teach. Heatherwick (as quoted in Gentleman, 2023) also states that “boring buildings ... cause mental health problems [and can] aggravate conflict” (para. 8). Whereas re-envisioning older spaces and planting trees, blooming plants, and natural light bring forth wellness and create an ambiance that people can live and practice within comfortably (EcoHealth Ontario, 2017; Hassen, 2016; Twohig-Bennett & Jones, 2018).

I knew that in my practice these are the spaces between the university and clinic buildings built of steel, aluminum, wood, and concrete, and between these hard structures are sidewalks—overhead and paved pathways. What occurs for and in us when we physically move from inside our offices or clinics to outside spaces? Are we the same, or are we changing as a result? Do we research and educate in these spaces? What occurs within us as educators and researchers? I understand that the value of outside spaces is critical to health and wellness (Woodgate & Skarlato, 2015).

For me the study of outside spaces was important as I work alongside a team that supports persons experiencing homelessness. I see people without safe, warm housing and food. I wonder how they view outside spaces without coats, boots, dry socks, and mittens—feet macerated in broken down shoes and boots with the winter winds, rain, and snow pounding. In thinking of persons experiencing homeless, I am challenged as the solution is complex. In contrast, I recognize that I have a home and trails on which to hike; it is a place, not of steel and concrete, but it is within the moss on the trees and paths, the thickly colored bark on trees, alongside the sound of water pouring down the mountainside over the boulders in the creek and into the open spaces.

Schon (1983) states that the yearning to learn, artistically, includes delving into the search for an “epistemology of practice implicit in the artistic, intuitive processes which some practitioners do bring to situations of uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and value conflict” (p. 49). It is the quietness gleaned from nature’s space from which I yearn to learn and grow my perspective (Dewey, 1934).



In response to this want, I reflected on my journals full of short prayers and poems visioning change. This step in *currere* is important, as it is a time to understand our formation. Kimmerer (2003) describes this as the times of “digging my boots into the hill, [to] gather my strength and lunge for the next handhold, a clump of stems above me. A thorn plunges deep in my thumb, but I can’t let go. This is my anchor” (p. 151). In reflection, I think of pauses in life, in my daily work, in my home and creative spaces, and I reflectively wrote:

### FLUIDLY-BEING

It is ‘in’ the ‘outside’ from which I learn  
 Where in my boots  
 I hike and breathe  
 These are my alleyways  
 My walkways and paths  
 Not of concrete, pavement or wood  
 But of soil, moss, and tangled tree roots  
 Covered in snow and ice  
 Saturated in rain  
 It is here, where-  
 I think and breathe  
 And as the fog rolls  
 In and along  
 Gently caressing  
 My face  
 I become otherwise  
 I am blessed  
 (*Author’s Reflexivity Journal*, November 2024)

As an educator working toward understanding, my journals and poems offer a place to release tension—a tension I have carried in my shoulders into the online calls, the planning meetings and team retreats; my strain is rarely released in these settings. My question is, can this tension be managed, understood, and moved to a creative way of being? While I help with development of skin and wound care programs, build curriculum for adult learners focused on eating disorders, body dysmorphia, I wonder when my curiosity lives? Where is the space to explore and create?

Similarly, as classes come to a close, grades are submitted, and I review student feedback, I wonder what more I can learn. Similarly, as research project funding is completed and projects become sustainable, I ask what is next. Do I rush into the next project and agree too quickly? Instead, how might I create the much-needed spaces to thoughtfully question and explore next steps. Where do I spend time to think about the greater good of a project? How do we help each other? How do we help those suffering and experiencing homelessness? I wonder, in these moments of speed (Berg & Seeber, 2016) am I less flexible, inclusive, or respectful?

### THIRD STEP: THE ANALYTICAL MOMENT

In this step, Pinar (2012) reminds the learner to “examine both the past and present ... where we attempt to discern how the past inheres the present and in our fantasies of the future” (p. 46). As part of this journey, I often feel as though I am wrestling with the “culture of speed in the academy” (Berg & Seeber, 2016, p. xv). This includes the pressure to obtain more funding to support dissemination of research learning and to attend the next conference (Berg & Seeber, 2016). I know I carry this tension in my body; sometimes I feel like I am immersed in a barrel of molasses, slow, dark and extracted from reality. When the communications arrive from the grant office: “Sorry you were not approved for that grant/award, please try again on the new round of applications” (*Author’s Reflexivity Journal*, March 2024). I want to reply, “but I yearn to collaborate and meet peers who research and study in similar fields, and this was important to me” (*Author’s Reflexivity Journal*, Dec 2024).



Figure 1: A Broad View of In-between Outdoor Spaces

In is in these moments I want to “stop” (Applebaum, 1995). For the stop to occur, I wonder who brings the stop to fruition? Is it me? Then I wonder, if the stop occurs “what lies hidden in the depths?” (Applebaum, 1995, p. 81). In response I take a long walk with a hot cup of coffee to release the tension in my body (Kwee & Launeanu, 2019). I take my camera and snap an image of the snow on the bows of the fir and maples branches, raw to the freezing cold (See Figure 1). I stand in wonder, the snow melting in my coffee cup. I wonder if I am missing the bigger picture of academia that is occurring around me?

Here I stand alone, far from those living on cold concrete, unhoused, with inadequate clothing and footwear.

I taste the snow on my tongue, each flake cold. I think about those not drinking warm fluids and who do not have meals? I am moved to tears and cry (*Author’s Reflexivity Journal*, December 2024).

### DANCING IN THE WOODS

While creating this work, I experienced an unexpected return of a heightened sense of being in a complicated relationship with my body (Brown, 2018). Alongside living in the tensions of academia, I returned to find a deep sense of safety within my body that only occurs in outside spaces (e.g., walking, hiking, in the woods, by the creeks) but not dancing—never dancing. Here, I am reminded that I am intact, whole, resilient, far from the pressures I hold within my body. In

the deep snow I am grounded (Courtois & Ford, 2016; Mandell & Kamenitz, 2021). I wrote in my journal:

My feet methodically move in the snow trying not to trip over the ever-turning roots heaving in the frost, my old green plaid jacket ripped and torn is my shroud, my camera by my side. Here, I am secure. I hike with renewed energy; I wanted to dance. I see wild hare tracks travelling purposefully across the snow (See Figure 2). I wonder if I too can move this fluidly, free.

I touch the tree bark and withdraw my hand; I try earnestly again and again, afraid of falling. I wondered if it would bear my weight. Would it hold me? Then I did it, I grabbed hold of the tree trunk and gently swirled my body in 360-degree circles at its' base. I nearly fell in my efforts.

Again, I tried to swirl at the tree base, my mittens holding my hand firm. My arm aching my body weight and size, the trunk did not fail me. In these moments the tensions dissipate, and warmth smothers my soul. I danced. (Author's Reflexivity Journal, November 2024)

This is my dance of health, my performative act, alone in the quietness of the woods. Here, I am free-floating, dizzy with the motion of circling. My boots plod a circle of calmness, the snow padded into a predictable path; here, I am safe far from the tensions of life (See Figure 3).

When I pause, stop in the snow, I can hear the Brown Creepers calling. When I wait, stand still, not moving my head or hands, ever so silently they come nearer; their song brilliant clear and their "brownish heads ... hidden against a tree trunk" (Cornell Labs, 2024). These are the healing moments in life. The space in-between the demands of education and research where we think, create, and heal. These meditative moments are intertwined with movement, photography, and journaling practices in which I immerse myself.



*Figure 2: Firmly Grounded*



*Figure 3: My Dance Begins, the Trees My Partners*

### THE SYNTHETICAL STEP: NEXT STEPS ALONG THE PATH OF ACADEMIA

In the synthetic step, we are in the present (Pinar, 2013). We focus on issues to be attended to and attend to "one's embodied otherness" (Pinar, p. 46). In this step, I wondered how

this *curre* contributes to my academic work and professional growth and if it illuminated areas from which to grow (Pinar, 1975).

## ACADEMIC PAUSES AND BREATHING: MAKING USE OF OUR BODY

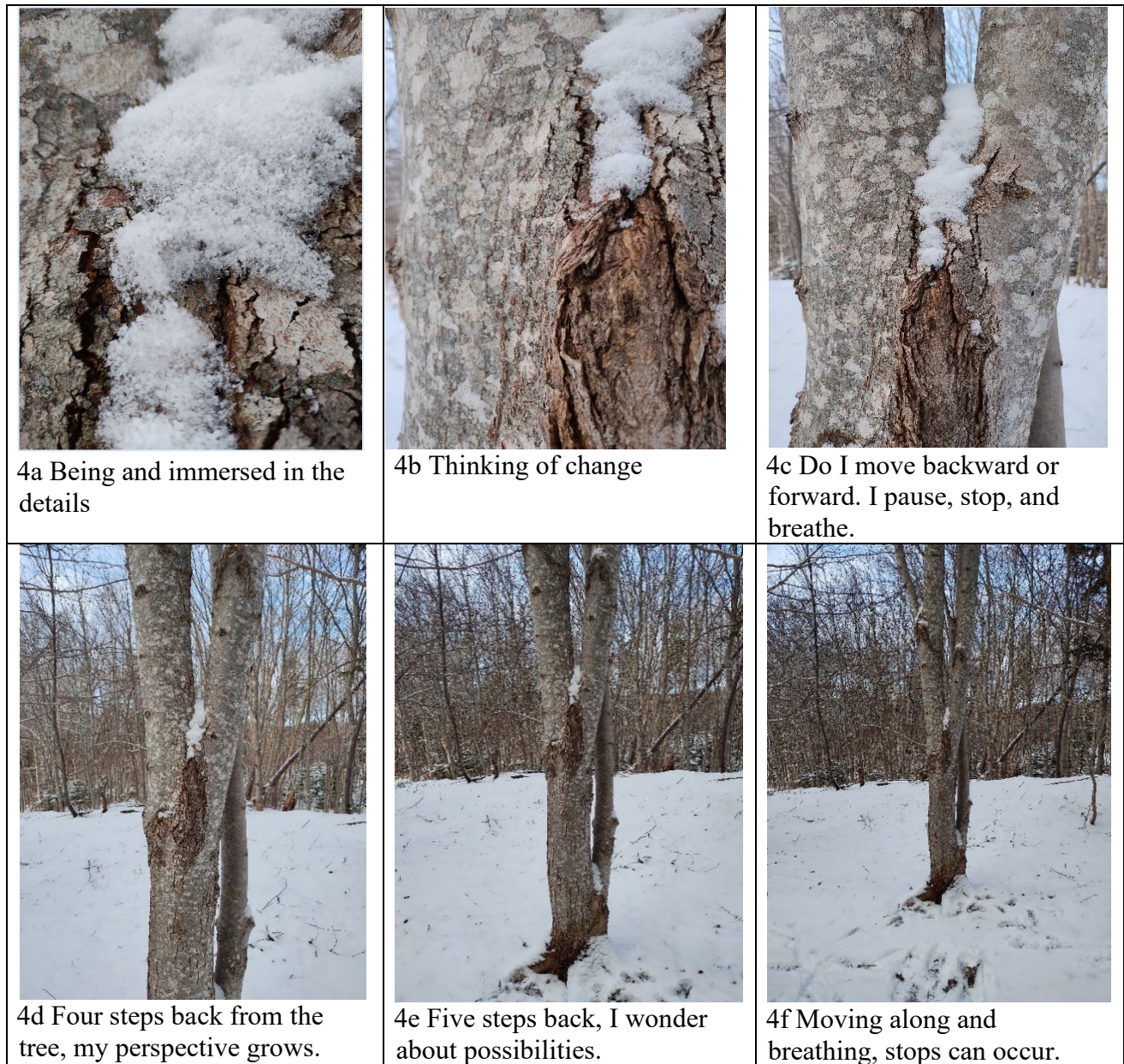
One way to grow authentically as an educator is to provide a space for change and to enact change (Cordi, 2019). This includes recognition that the intertwining of the physical walking and dancing (we may do as part of our *curre* and reflective practice), with the need for outdoor spaces that can support the mental health and well-being of our peers, staff, and academics (Hammoudi Halat et al., 2024). As I want to become a more authentic educator (Cordi, 2019), I believe engaging myself and peers in outdoor spaces may be an enacting of our embodied response to being in the in-between spaces in academia.

This is important, as recent research has focused on the physical health of academics and staff (teachers), especially when many of us moved our face-to-face teaching into online and hybrid formats (Eubank et al., 2023). Of note in the research are the reported high burnout and stress rates in academia and health care professionals (Madigan et al., 2023; Smith, 2023; Taylor & Tello, 2024).

Berg and Seeber (2016) call this a paying attention to our embodied selves, including our use of pauses and breathing while we teach, as these can become the spaces in which we can learn to engage and live as educators. This step is like the sunflower turning at the exact movement of the sun, where the sunflower becomes a “representation of the sun” (Applebaum, 1995, p. 70). It is this pause, this moment of physical health and wellness that I see needing change and revisiting (Cordi, 2019).

Berg and Seeber (2016) remind academics to engage in healthy ways of being. We need to embrace their oft quoted line, “self-care is not an indulgence. It is an essential component of prevention of distress, burnout and impairment” (p. 71). This includes the knowing and utilization of what they describe as “conscious transitions to class” (p. 42). This can and should be applied to include outdoor spaces where we mentally prepare to teach and support learners. We need to heed the physicality of our beings and the influences on how we arrive to our classroom teaching and clinical work. Berg and Seeber (2016) discuss terms like silence, stillness and discuss the act of “holding the space” (p. 42). I am sensing a wave of hopefulness as I now see peers enacting these elements in the classroom and in online meetings. Maybe I can do this as well? I did wonder where they learned to say, “let’s just pause and reflect,” “let’s honour this moment,” and “can we just pause to reflect before we start” (*Author’s Reflexivity Journal*, April, November 2024).

In response, I took six photos to express stillness and efforts to gain a broader perspective. I wanted to physically stop, pause, in a moment of learning (Applebaum, 1995). This is important, as educators are often immersed in the daily, details of snowflakes and the intricacies of bark (Kimmerer, 2003). Yet, taking steps away allows us to create one’s “stop” and provides a space to breathe. One step back, if I wait, I might see the sun melt the snow, taking the nutrients to the roots, where more growth will occur (Kimmerer, 2003). Then again, taking further steps back, can create an in-between space. It is tempting to rush forward, up the trail, to the next project, or instead just step back to think and wonder (Applebaum, 1995). Overtime, just stepping back grows one’s perspective.



*Figures 4a-f: The Spaces In-between and Growing Perspectives*

Dewey (1934) discusses the importance of experience and art. This includes the importance of allowing the process [of creativity] to work itself out fully (p. 229). In reflexive work it is important to not be focused on the end product but the process, which is the changing and growth of an educator. For example, while walking in the morning, winter light, one can live a life of hope and possibilities (Pinar, 2013). Yet, it did not dissipate my sense of being in a position of privilege, of having, of not being without, especially when working alongside persons experiencing homelessness (Community Action on Homelessness, 2022). This research is still in progress and nudges up against my assumptions about the complexity of persons experiencing homelessness; it

is rarely one factor that contributes to the issue. It is several of which I am still coming to understand.

In turn, these moments can be our performative acts in society and in our communities (e.g., journals, photographs) (Dewey, 1934). Fels (2015) states that “reflection through performative inquiry is a collaborative pedagogical act that benefits educator and learners individually and reciprocally” (p. 18). It is those learners, educators, and researchers who make up the institutions where we practice, the communities where we contribute.

Taking dance steps with trees was an unexpected joy, a bringing forth of new possibilities, a new way of releasing the embodied tensions we may carry within. It was through peer feedback, research participants’ comments, and student feedback that these moments of being and living in the “in-between” space provided me a space and place to “question, learn and reflect” (Cordi, 2019, p. 86).

As an expression of reflexivity, methodologically framed within the *currere* steps, the embodiment of one’s life as an academic is enriched as a result of something unexpected, a renewal of hope. Our practice as educators and researchers is not a straight, narrow, restrictive path. It is one of curiosity, kindness, insight, and expectedness, if one is open.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

In this *currere*, I grew in my understanding of embodiment as an educator. It is within where I hold the inner battle of managing teaching workloads. And through time and engagement in the creative process (Dewey, 1934), I know I can now dance in the in-between spaces. This is, and was, joyful. I now regularly dance in solitude between the trees, imagining the trunks as projects and classrooms in which I must engage. Yet, in the in-between space, how I carry or embody my tension is mine, individual, and is a space where I can continue to “personally unravel ... those assumptions” (Brown, 2018, p. 33). *Currere* provides a methodology to unwind past assumption and beliefs and provides a place to light new possibilities (Pinar, 1975, 2012).

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