

SEEING THROUGH THE SANDSTORM: ENVISIONING A FUTURE THROUGH CRITICAL FRIENDSHIP AND ALONGSIDE THE PRESENT

By **Stephanie Baer**

Miami University

& **William D. Cavill, Jr.**

University of Nebraska at Kearney

There is a well-known parable:

A professor stood before his class and had some items in front of him. When the class began, he wordlessly picked up a very large and empty jar. He then proceeded to fill the jar with golf balls.

“Is the jar full?” he asked his students.

“Yes,” everyone responded.

The professor then picked up a box of marbles and poured them into the jar. He shook the jar lightly; the marbles rolled into the areas between the golf balls.

“Is the jar full?” he asked again.

The students responded with a unanimous: “Yes.”

The professor next picked up a box of sand and poured it into the jar. Of course, the sand filled up all the space left.

He asked once more: “Is the jar full?”

“Yes, of course,” everyone responded.

The professor then pulled out two bottles of beer from under the desk and poured the contents entirely into the jar, filling the empty space between the sand. Everyone laughed.

“Now,” the professor said as the laughter subsided. “I want you to recognize that this jar represents your life. The golf balls are the important things. Your family, your children, health, friends and favorite passions. If everything else was lost and only they remained, your life would still be full. The marbles are the other things that matter like your job, your house, or car. The sand is everything else, the small stuff. If you put the sand into the jar first,” he continued, “there is no room for the marbles or the golf balls. The same goes for life. If you spend all your time and energy on the small stuff, you will never have room for the things that are important to you.

Pay attention to the things critical to your happiness. Spend time with your children. Spend time with your parents. Visit your grandparents. Take your spouse out for dinner. Go out with your friends. There will always be time to clean the house and mow the lawn. Take care of the golf balls first, the things that really matter. Set your priorities. The rest is just sand.”

One of the students raised her hand and inquired what the beer represented. The professor smiled and said: “I am glad you asked. The beer just shows that no matter how full your life may seem, there’s always room for a couple of beers with a friend.”

While this seems to be a fitting allegory describing the chaotic lives we all lead, we found it lacking when put to task against our own life situations. We were able to determine what our own golf balls, marbles, sand, and even the beer represented in our

own lives, but neither of us could explain why our jars were continually being filled with sand. We wondered what part of life this parable was missing that related to our own situations, and this *flaw in the parable* became part of the impetus for our exploration through the progressive section of the *currere* process (Pinar, 1994). Having already navigated the churning, though insightful, waters of the regressive step together (Cavill & Baer, 2019), we were prepared for the next leg of our metacognitive journey, determining our answers to Pinar's (1994) call to consider our vision of the future. Having a better understanding of where we had been, we were ready to question what we envisioned for our futures. As teacher educators, we asked ourselves, "where are we going, what is important to us, and how can a continued collaborative conversation help us to elucidate a clearer vision of purpose for ourselves and our work?"

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: *CURRERE* METHOD AND SELF-STUDY

The *currere* process helps us clarify and feel more authentically connected to our choices. I came to the conclusion that the heaviness I was feeling was that, in order to experience anything in depth, we have to make a choice—and that will always mean not choosing something else. This, wrongly, leaves most of us with a sense of guilt—which if you think about it, is just massively egocentric...to think that we have the ability/should even try to multitask a million things at once. Humans have not evolved that far yet. We still need to be singularly connected to make meaning. (Stephanie progressive narrative writing, March 29, 2019)

CURRERE METHOD

Pinar (1994) invites us to consider the following as we enter into the progressive mode of thinking,

if a teacher, focus on your teaching, on your relationship to students and colleagues, especially on the emotional content of these, and on the intellectual content. Discern where these appear to be going. You might imagine a future, perhaps a year hence or perhaps several years hence; describe it. (It is important to free associate, and to avoid use of the rational, critical aspect. Don't for example conclude that an imagined futuristic state is unreasonable. At this state allow usually buried visions of what is not yet present manifest.) (p. 10)

Following Pinar's instructions, we had to reiterate to one another that he asked us to consider relationships *to* people, not *with* people. As teachers, we found it simple and rather automatic to discuss the centrality of our work *with* others, particularly students and colleagues, as well as the intricacies of those relationships. However, what Pinar seems to point toward in his progressive approach is a concern for the self in relation *to* others, rather than putting a primary emphasis on the care of others. As teachers, we are servants to others, and it is easy to lose our own identities in magnanimity.

The collaborative nature of our progressive exploration allowed us to return repeatedly to the notion of an envisioned future for self. We worked to keep one another accountable in staying true to Pinar's (1994) intentions. The collaboration also lent itself to other methodologies, including self-study and critical friendship.

CRITICAL FRIENDSHIP IN SELF-STUDY

Self-study in teacher education is explored intimately in the journal, *Studying Teacher Education*. The journal focuses on the experience of teacher educators working

on enhancing the quality of their work with students in the context in higher education. Much of the work completed for this paper was done under the flag of critical friendship. “A critical friend acts as a sounding board, asks challenging questions, supports reframing of events, and joins in the professional learning experience” (Schuck & Russell, 2005, p. 107).

During the process of working through the progressive component of the *currere* method, we have both taken on rolls that have challenged, complemented, frustrated, and built up the other. The role of critical friend has shed light on the progressive narrative as it was being constructed, which has helped both of us navigate the blustery sandstorm in which we currently find ourselves as we contemplate who we are as educators and particularly as art teacher educators. As faculty who have been charged with the immense task of preparing future art teachers, we have come to realize that the critical friendship we have developed over the years is a weapon with which to combat the frustrating lack of mentorship and direction that exists for people in our positions (Sultana, 2005; Taylor, Klein, & Adams, 2013). By having a critical eye during the progressive stage of the *currere* process, we have pushed one another to see more deeply into the courses we currently teach, to look to the future to imagine what our teaching will look like years from now, and to contemplate the ways in which what we are currently doing will get us to that vision. It has been a journey that would be impossible to embark upon without a critical friend. We have grown to depend on and look forward to the criticism of our counterparts, as we recognize the importance of candid criticism and the nurturing of honest friendship.

The work of this paper, and the larger context of this study, serves as an example for how critical friendship can be embodied in many ways. Intent to engage in the *currere* process as scholars and art teacher educators, we leaned on and continue to lean on the unique benefits of a collaborative search for purpose. Our individual journeys are made more whole and more complex through the checks and balances provided by our partnership. Further, our dependence and focus on a wider vision for ourselves and our field have allowed us to continue to return again and again with open minds and a more flexible palette for considering the future. The *currere* process and critical friendship of self-study have woven new pathways for the work we do as educators and researchers.

MODE OF INQUIRY

While the regressive step of the *currere* process led us to better understand how and why we are the teacher educators we are, the progressive step necessitated a journey into the unknown. In order to access those deep-seated ideas that we have for the future, Pinar (1994) instructs us to free associate and avoid censoring our imagined futures. Early on, we needed to clarify that these futures were centered around our own identities as teacher educators, scholars, humans, etc.—and not about the futures we imagined for our students. Many of our discussions tended to evolve into considerations for how our journeys will and should affect our pre-service students, but our progressive comments needed to be about us. These progressive moments needed to be spent on turning inward and toward our own futures.

We had every intention of continuing our pattern of individually writing personal narratives, sharing our writings digitally, and then conversing via web conferencing about what we wrote as we did with the regressive step. However, amidst the attempts of writing about our imagined futures, we found ourselves in constant conversation about the difficulty of the task. As Bill wrote early in his progressive narrative,

this is tough to write about. I don't typically like the interplay of my private and professional lives. Honestly I currently feel like when I focus on one I neglect the other. There is an incessant sense of impending doom for the other when I am focused on one. (Progressive narrative writing, March 22, 2019)

Bill later identified his shifting perspective about the purpose of the progressive step in the *currere* process. He found that “this process is as much about considering how to reach the goals that you have, as it is about actually being cognizant about what you want.” Stephanie, like Bill, also focused on the centrality of this emerging need to consider the personal and professional in tandem. She noted in her progressive narrative,

Envisioning the future seems mostly emotive in nature at this point. It's intended to be dreaming and picturing a whole life—not just a work life.... Considering the future cannot mean ignoring the present or past, as it is those contexts that lead to some kind of future. Perhaps the difficulty resides in the idea that the present contains challenges that we do not want to take with us into the future. Maybe the mediary, then, is a notion of acceptance—coming to terms with the present; accepting the difficulties as steps; understanding the fear and anxiety as part of the path. For it is often those things that motivate us to move forward into an envisioned future. (Progressive narrative writing, February 19, 2019)

In one particular conversation, the metaphor of the rocks, pebbles, and sand came up:

Bill: Yesterday I cleared out 400 emails. At least 150 were flagged and were telling me, “you need to follow up on this, you need to follow up on this, you need to follow up on this...”

Stephanie: Have you ever heard that metaphor with the jar and the big rocks, the little rocks, the sand, the water...? The first time I saw that, I thought, that's brilliant and beautiful and visual! The more that I see that, I just think it's crap. It's all about having priorities and I KNOW what my priorities are. At least, I think I know.

Bill: I think the part of that illustration that is missing is the fact that you're trying to do all of that while in a sandstorm. Because yes, I should be focusing on these big rocks, but until I can get the sand out of my eyes, I can't do that.

Stephanie: The expectations are everywhere. I feel like you just have to have that gross, disgusting feeling of neglecting things in order to get anything done. Then you apologize and you do the other thing.

Bill: Everything is never done. It just can't be. In my progressive [narrative], I keep coming back to this. Like you said in your narrative, “I look forward to a time when things are just slower.” What happened to when things were slow? What happened to the time when it would take forever to get to the weekend? Now it just keeps ticking by—there went another weekend! There went another weekend!

[Chimes go off on Stephanie's computer]

Bill: And there goes your machine! There's some more sand for ya!
(Online research meeting, March 25, 2019)

As we continued our conversations amidst the attempts at writing, we came to the realization that our collaborative, progressive step was just as much about the process of being able to consider the future as it was identifying what that future might be. We leaned into the process together to figure out why we were having such difficulty constructing a narrative for where we wanted to be. Honoring the call to avoid censoring ourselves and to continue to free associate, we explored what those roadblocks were and what role they had in our vision for a “slower” future.

DATA SOURCES

Data sources for the progressive step included four written narratives, two of which took on a journal-type format with multiple shorter entries. It also included twelve research meetings completed via web conferencing software, of which seven were audio recorded and saved for review. As we have been engaging in this study for over a year and meeting weekly, we decided to stop video recording and rely on audio recordings due to lack of storage space. Throughout our journey, some meetings ended up being catch-up and support sessions for one another and were, thus, not recorded. As Calderwood and D'Amico (2008) put it, we were often, “leaning on and borrowing from each other's authority and authenticity” (p. 52) in all aspects of our personal and professional lives.

Stephanie: We need and want others to be as invested in the problems we're dealing with as we are. I don't know how you do that as a human. Your experience is yours, and it's hard enough to translate that to someone else when you haven't figured it out yourself.

Bill: I don't think I'm done with my narrative yet.... It seems that, so far, the times I have written have been frustrating times. I want to write when I don't feel that way. I know there are those times—I had one yesterday, but I was so caught up in it that I didn't think to sit down and write about my future.

Stephanie: It has to come when you're ready to write. There's some element of not forcing this.

[Stephanie mentions her experience with Julia Cameron's (1992) work, *The Artist's Way*, and her “morning pages” and talks about engaging in regular creative practice without censoring yourself.]

The practice we are engaging in is very much like morning pages.... I used to have my [high school] students do this every morning. The idea behind it is that it would open something up in you. It activates your inner thoughts in a way that you can't do just sitting there. I wonder if what we're doing is engaging in this practice with a particular content in mind. We go into it with this beautiful narrative that you started with where when you're sitting out on this porch and you're hearing things and you're seeing things and your thoughts drift towards, “Okay, this is what I want to be thinking about right now,” and then it comes out a lot more easily. I wonder if that's the process. The idea isn't necessarily to come to some kind of epiphany

about content, but rather, I think it's an epiphany about the process. Our progressive experience is not writing a narrative and interviewing each other, but it's about figuring out how to think about it and taking time to consider it.

Bill: I think you're absolutely right. That's what I was trying to do this morning. I was trying to recapture that—sitting out on the porch. I was writing longhand, and it worked so much better for me. It's really bizarre to me because I'm such a computer guy. But maybe I'm not. I was trying to recapture that in here [office], and it was impossible. It was just impossible.

Stephanie: Part of what we have to come to, though, is that it's not about finding that one place or that one mindset. It's about learning to center—not like yoga or anything—but finding the center of what you want to say wherever you are. So, if you're sitting in your office, I think you can still notice things. You were writing about that already! Sometimes the writing is just about getting that stuff out.

Bill: Sure, but I think that it is that yoga center. Because in order to find that focus, you have to work through that, what's the word—miasma? You have to work through all the junk that's rattling around up there. Putting it to paper allows you to acknowledge it and move on from it, I think. Only then can you see the trees for the forest or see the forest for the trees—or either way. Then you can see what's actually happening. I think that doing this more frequently would cause a person to be capable of doing it quicker. I can see some serious benefit to being able to focus my thoughts much quicker. I spend a lot of time...I think I have 25 tabs open on my computer. All of which I've gone through a couple of times to see what I can shut down...it's all stuff that I need. I need to—I want to do this more before we stop. (Online research meeting, March 25, 2019)

Our online meetings became centering moments for both of us to acknowledge the sand that was in our eyes and how we might see our way through those storms. The narratives we completed individually provided a grounding for where we were starting and represented a struggle for what we wanted and needed in our futures as art teacher educators. They also provided a platform to express our individual needs, a mirror to discover and confront what was truly on our minds, and fodder for complicated conversations about life.

As with the regressive step we took together, the analysis of our progressive experience was woven throughout our conversations and writings and continued as we wrote this paper. While we were focusing on the progressive step most recently, the regressive work we did together was often connected in conversation and brought up as intimately connected to how we envisioned our futures. Similarly, the analytic step that will follow this progressive exploration remained on our minds as well and played a role in how we made meaning of our work. Pinar's (1994) *currere* method and our critical friendship, exemplified by Curtis, Reid, Kelley, Martindell, and Craig's (2013) concept of braided lives, offered a transformational structure with which we engage in authentic study about both the content and context of our lives as art teacher educators.

COHESION AND CRITICAL FRIENDSHIP: WHAT WE LEARNED

Macintyre Latta and Olafson (2006) described the centrality of identity in-the-making and self-understanding as the key for authentic and engaged learning. Their focus

on the connectedness between self and other and self and the learning process gives a solid grounding to how our collaborative work in the progressive step of our journey can feed more authentic teaching and learning. Our work as art teacher educators is called into productive inquiry and asks us to consider both what we prioritize for ourselves and our students, as well as how our own perceptions shape the work of future teachers.

Just as greater self-understanding should be at the core of all learning, and must be known in order to foster such understandings in others, so the tradition of self-study research needs to be at the core of teacher education programs. (Macintyre Latta & Olafson, 2006, p. 77)

We would argue that the *currere* process aligns with this idea as well. We are called as teachers to consider and reconsider a holistic version of ourselves, our students, and the learning journeys we embark on together. We must work to find others who can mirror our frustrations, challenge our assumptions, and empathize with our unique contexts.

Stephanie: I have not been able to explain it to someone in my life that's part of one of those places.... I think everybody has a feeling like this. For whatever reason, the jobs that we have right now require so much multitasking that I think it creates a tighter pull in all directions.

Bill: That's so true. I will be talking to my wife, and she's like, "What do you do with all of your time? You only teach three classes!" So, I try to explain, and when you explain what you've done with your time, you always do it in terms of what you've accomplished. And I haven't accomplished anything all day after day after day. It's just, aaagggghhh!

Stephanie: I think part of it is not knowing how to explain to someone, "Well, I sent 500 emails because it moved everything a millimeter forward. But I can't do the next thing if I don't do this in-process thing." How do I explain that sitting at my desk for five hours in a row is exactly what I needed to be doing at that moment. I couldn't have avoided that.

Bill: And this makes it worse [holds up cell phone]. Especially now, with what I'm doing with my online classes. I thought that it was a good idea for me to give them my phone number so that if they had an emergency-type situation that I could respond. That's been one of the big complaints with my students—that I don't respond quick enough.

(Online research meeting, March 25, 2019)

The collaboration we sought was not automatically available, but rather nurtured in time through multiple encounters, experiences, and conversations. The organic nature of the *currere* process has fed and, thus, informs the self-study within which we continue to work. We have found that the cohesion of ideas and commitment to collaboration is critical in our continued search for identity and purpose. The sandstorm is inevitable, but not without grounds for change. It is in our change in perspective that true learning can occur.

Moving forward, we recognize, as Feldman (2003) did, that “self-study recognizes at least implicitly that to improve our teacher education practices we need to change our ways of being teacher educators” (p. 27). Inspired by the writings of Bahktin (1990), Macintyre Latta and Olafson (2003) recognized that this means encountering, “answerability, outsideness, and unfinalizability” (p. 88) throughout our work. It is through the negotiation of self and other and our place within the world that we begin to confront productive catalysts, urging our ideas and perceptions forward. We must work through the sandstorm both in ways that recognize its place and purpose as well as fight against its potential to swallow us whole. What this requires is not a traditional sense of balance and linear priorities, but rather a renewed devotion to being fully present in each context and situation we are in. The balance comes from making the decision to prioritize each moment in its authentic context—to avoid the urge to multitask—to not live within a constant state of guilt for the choices we make.

Perhaps a more apt colloquialism than the rocks and sand in the jar is that of the eternal questions: What do you want on your gravestone?, or What will be your legacy? Encountering these questions early in our *currere* process, we were able to sift through and beyond the sand.

Bill: What will be your legacy?

Stephanie: A curriculum; A set of experiences that champion the pre-service, early teacher voice and encourage the early teacher to stand up and trust themselves and say something and be part of the conversation. And to want to get better; to not be ashamed of mistakes. I hope. That’s what a legacy is, right? It’s hope.... Now I want to ask you that question.

Bill: When I was at the state conference last year, they had a woman stand up, and she came down to the stage. There were two-hundred or so people in the room. The presenter said, “Every one of you in this room who, as an art teacher, was affected positively by this woman, stand up.” Everybody stood up. That’s what I want. I want to have a big effect. I want to change lives.

Stephanie: Well, you got one. I could stand up.
(Online research meeting, May 16, 2018)

As our futures continue to approach, a passage from Stephanie’s progressive narrative brings a shared sense of productive discomfort, urging us to continue our journey.

The relational aspects of my future circle around a self I do not know yet. At certain points in my life I feel as though I have come to know and understand who I am and who I want to be—and there is definitely continuity in what I find interesting and passion-worthy. However, we are constantly asked as artists, teachers, researchers, parents, friends, spouses, etc. to re-situate ourselves among others. That inevitably leads to needed alterations in how we self-identify, what we find important, how we prioritize, who we count as allies, and how we go about making decisions—which then lead to a newer self image and concept. I enjoy these changes, overall, and revel in coming to know myself differently and being seen and understood by

others. The process isn't without complexity, as often we are met up with challenges to who we thought we were, but then if we stick with it—keep searching—remain in ambiguity for a little while longer, we can be met with newness and insight. This process we've been exploring with *currere* has invited this and in a place where I have found myself in regular need of renewal and re-self-identification. (Progressive narrative writing, March 26, 2019)

References

- Bakhtin, M. M. (1990). *Art and answerability: Early philosophical essays*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Calderwood, P. E., & D'Amico, K. M. (2008). Balancing acts: Negotiating authenticity and authority in shared reflection. *Studying Teacher Education, 4*, 47-59.
- Cameron, J. (1992). *The artist's way*. New York, NY: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam.
- Cavill, W. D., Jr., & Baer, S. (2019). Exploring the process of becoming art teacher educators through collaborative regression. *Currere Exchange Journal, 3*(1), 95-104.
- Curtis, G., Reid, D., Kelley, M., Martindell, P. T., & Craig, C. J. (2013). Braided lives: Multiple ways of knowing, flowing in and out of knowledge communities. *Studying Teacher Education, 9*, 175-186.
- Feldman, A. (2003). Validity and quality in self-study. *Educational Researcher, 32*(3), 26-28.
- Macintyre Latta, M. & Olafson, L. (2006). Identities in the making: Realized in-between self and other. *Studying Teacher Education, 2*, 77-90.
- Pinar, W. F. (1994). *Autobiography, politics and sexuality: Essays in curriculum theory 1972–1992*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Schuck, S., & Russell, T. (2005). Self-study, critical friendship, and the complexities of teacher education. *Studying Teacher Education 1*(2), 107-121.
doi: 10.108017425960500288291
- Sultana, R. (2005). The initial education of high school teachers: A critical review of major issues and trends. *Studying Teacher Education, 1*, 225-243.
doi: 10.1080/17425960500288390
- Taylor, M., Klein, E., & Abrams, L. (2014). Tensions of reimagining our roles as teacher educators in a third space: Revisiting a co/autoethnography through a faculty lens. *Studying Teacher Education, 10*, 3-19. doi: 10.1080/17425964.2013.866549