

SHAME ON COURSE EVALUATIONS: *CURRERE* AND DUOETHNOGRAPHY

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READING COURSE EVALUATIONS

I am thinking about Dewey's (1938) continuity where "every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after" (p. 35). Ontologically knowing this to be so, I wonder, is one ever done with an experience? How much self-reflection is sufficient? How many nights will I go to bed knowing "the most powerful shaming experiences are often self-inflicted" (Brown, 2007, p. xvi)? Will I ever be able to "know what...[I] know and to feel what...[I] feel without becoming overwhelmed, enraged, [and] ashamed" (van der Kolk, 2014, p. 205)? Finally, is it possible to interrupt and/or stop Dewey's (1938) "taking up" of early familial curriculum making, that curriculum I experienced that was "situated and composed...outside of school, within family and community" (Lessard et al., 2015, p. 198) on my tenure track, specifically course evaluations?

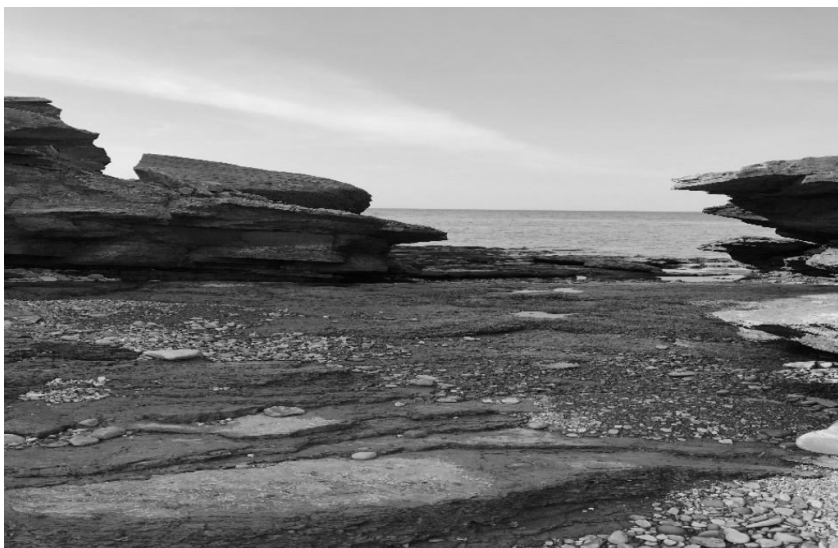


Figure 1: *The beach*

These wonders swirl as I contemplate opening an email that includes a link to course evaluations. I tell myself, rather sternly, that who I am and the value of the work I am endeavouring to do cannot be judged solely by student evaluations. "I hear an irresistible voice which invites me away" (Thoreau, 1995, p. 6), and I leave the link untouched. I head outside to the beach and hope for what Slattery (2017) described as a proleptic moment where I "transcend linear segmentation of time and [create] a holistic understanding of the past, present, and future simultaneously" (Slattery, 2017, p. 185).

The following day, I read the course evaluations. I highlight all of the negative comments in bright orange. Looking at the glowing sentences, I slip into a “cycle of self-loathing and shame” (Brown, 2006, p. 23). I am certain I will be fired or denied tenure.¹ I feel myself shrinking, which activates my self-criticizing hamster wheel. I shove the evaluations into an envelope and attempt to halt the emotional imploding that results from a shame cycle. I struggle to redirect my thinking. I reread an online, *University Affairs* article (Farr, 2018), where the author describes how an Ontario (Canada) arbitrator, William Kaplan, informed Ryerson University that student evaluations of teaching “are not to be used to measure teaching effectiveness for promotion or tenure” (para. 14). I also flip through Gilligan’s (2011) book where I read the following, “the initiation into patriarchy is driven by gender and enforced shaming and exclusion. Its telltale signs are a loss of voice and memory, an inability to tell one’s story accurately” (p. 26). I will myself to remember previous jobs where I was mostly competent.

In September of 2021, I am due to apply for tenure; I must speak to the big three: research, service, and teaching—including course evaluations. I cannot, however, bring myself to revisit the course evaluations nor put a plan in place that demonstrates I heard the feedback and am working to improve. I return to the online article:

Student...[course evaluations] are merely opinions that are not reliable, particularly when two students can sit in the same class for a full semester and have totally different experiences. How is it that one student experienced a 5 and the other student experienced a 1?? In sum, course evaluations are simply surveys of opinions and student opinions should be heard but not fixed as the determinant of faculty employment. (Grey, 2018, para. 1)

This resonated with me as my student evaluations included the following comment:

Not a good instructor at all. Made everyone afraid to speak and talk. Put us out in the hall because we did not do a reading, and, not an approachable professor.

In contrast a second student wrote:

I loved this course. The class always seems to fly by. I loved the activities we did in class. Sandra was the only prof who genuinely asked how we were doing, so I know she cares a lot. She gave us opportunities to be creative. She is kind and thoughtful, and I now have a great understanding of the course materials.

Struggling to unravel and understand the divergent comments and my reactions to them, I desperately need a trusted friend and colleague and Janet agrees. She suggests I read Brookfield’s (2015), *The Skillful Teacher*, and particularly to consider the following:

when students greet our efforts with anger, resentment, or indifference—we immediately conclude that we have failed. We need to remember...that when we are doing our job properly some hostile student evaluations of our teaching are inevitable. (p. 273)

I go online and order the book. When it arrives, I attack the reading with my orange highlighter. I experience relief as I see myself and my reactions reflected on the page. Moreover, I read concrete suggestions for how to improve and experience profound relief.

METHODOLOGICAL DECISION MAKING: LAYING DUOETHNOGRAPHY ALONGSIDE THE CURRERE PROCESS

With Brookfield's (2015) book in hand, Janet and I continued our discussions, thinking narratively with stories (Clandinin, 2013). We wondered why my reactions to the course evaluations were immediate, severe, and shame filled. Moreover, we wondered how my reactions were influencing my forward-looking tenure track stories. Because we were interested in a deeper understanding of these stories and how they continue to shape my lived experiences and because I was struggling to move beyond reacting to the negative comments, we wanted a methodology that made room for the other. We wanted this because it had been our experience that, within the trust of our relationship, each of us was able to hear and consider the thinking of the other. Hence, we laid *currere* (Pinar, 1975) beside duoethnography as it allows "for emergent meanings and meaning making to become dialogic within the text and between the text and the reader, problematizing reader (and inquirer) alignment with implicit metanarratives" (Norris & Sawyer, 2012, p. 10). Moreover, we integrated the tenants of duoethnography methodology in efforts to create "texts that promote the exposure and reconceptualization of perceptions of experience" (Norris & Sawyer, 2012, p. 89) through dialogue. This resulted in dangerous conversations² including tension filled³ moments (Clandinin, Murphy, Huber, & Orr, 2010).

Moreover, because we are courageous women we know "one remedy, and that is to undertake something difficult, something new, to reroot [ourselves]...in...[our] own faculties. ... For in such moments, life is not just a thing one wears, it is a thing one does and is" (Heilbrun, 1997, p. 44). *Currere* and duoethnography are methodological tools that provide a structure where our experiences (past, present, and future) are the site of inquiry. They afford us opportunities to retell, "to interpret lives as told in different ways, to imagine different possibilities," and to relive stories "to live out the new person" (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 478).⁴

Initially Janet was not interested in duoethnography; she was focussed on the *currere* process. I, however, was gently and then increasingly insistent we consider duoethnography, because I felt the stories I was sharing and the stories I observed and heard Janet share were based on and later nurtured in shame. I imagined we were both going to have to take risks if we were to deepen our understanding. Reading Norris et al. (2012) reminded us that duoethnography

involves taking a risk through the sharing of one's intimate experiences on a mutual topic in relation to the Other who has differing and at times opposing points of view. Duoethnography is about trusting the Other to be open to new and challenging points of view. It is also about trusting one's self to be open to new and challenging points of view. It is about seeking and finding, not holding on to; about letting go and ultimately moving and transforming. (p. 526)

As we tentatively continued with writing and discussions, Janet asked if I had reflected on early familial curriculum making experiences and how they might be influencing my reactions to the course evaluations. I said nothing came to mind; however, I would continue to think about it. We concluded by agreeing how difficult our conversations were becoming. Le Fevre and Sawyer, (2012) helped us frame the difficulty by describing dangerous conversations:

Duoethnography is a conversation, and whenever we reveal ourselves, we become vulnerable. Such conversations can be both difficult to disclose and challenging to

articulate. They are potentially dangerous, and if the danger is considered too great, they may be silenced out of fear. (p. 263)

We would return to this idea as we wrote, rewrote, thought about, discussed, and lived with these works.

THE WRITING AND THE DISCUSSIONS BEGIN

With methodologies in place, we began. We previously decided we would individually write a *currere* and then share it with the other as we engaged the duoethnography. The *currere* shared here deals only with Sandra's experiences. Our intention was to create an additional, thick layer of description (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) while utilizing the structure of the duoethnography for our conversations. I gave Janet a copy of my course evaluations. Handing them off was both comforting and shame inducing. I felt confident that, together, we could analyze them in ways I was incapable of doing on my own; however, I knew Janet would read all the negative comments students had written about me. This did not thrill me.

Once we had individually written pages, Janet, having written a *currere* not related to my course evaluations, posted her work on Google docs, and we read and discussed it over the phone. We immediately felt we were treading deep within temporal stories, including complex, mis-educative early familial curriculum making (Lessard, 2015). We sensed the enormity of the task. Having previously created *curreres* (Jack-Malik, 2018; Jack-Malik & Kuhnke, 2019), I knew it was important to listen and respond in ways that created spaces where the other could imagine educative forward-looking stories, while dealing with "the imprints of the trauma on the body, mind, and soul" (van der Kolk, 2014, p. 205) and while reconceptualizing what I thought through time.

A few days later, in the midst of a Google doc writing session, including a phone conversation,

Janet (commented): "Sandra, your evaluations had plenty of positive comments. I enjoyed reading them. I marked them in blue—like the brilliant sky."

Sandra (thinking): hearing this, triggered me. I quickly directed our conversation back to the shared writing task. Later, I felt Janet's comment left no room for my initial reaction to the course evaluations. I wondered if she understood my perspective and my feelings. I felt in judging my course evaluations she had also judged me and my reaction. I sent Janet an email including Wiseman's (1996) operationalization of empathy. Wiseman (1996) argued that empathy involves the following: "to be able to see the world as others see it; to be non judgemental; to understand another person's feelings; and to communicate your understanding of that person's feelings" (p. 1165). The next day when we met face to face in my office, I referred to the course evaluations and to the email, including Wiseman's ideas.

Janet responded as follows: I took your course evaluations and put them into a new manila folder; they needed to be wrapped in the safety of a comforting scarf. I knew they hurt you, and therefore, I wanted them safe from all other eyes; I felt it imperative to keep the contents confidential. I wanted to sit by the woodstove to read them and think deeply about the comments. Our dean directed me to frame student

evaluations in Brookfield's (2015) maxims of skillful teaching: "if you don't take care of yourself emotionally, then you'll be in no fit shape to help students learn" (p. 265). Thinking with Brookfield's (2015) ideas, I learned to recognize my emotions associated with receiving student feedback and to utilize them in productive ways. I wanted to talk with you about your evaluations. I wanted you to move quickly towards that same knowing. However, overnight, and in reflection of Wiseman's (1996) ideas, I appreciated that while I had understood the shame you shared with respect to the course evaluations, I had not communicated this understanding to you. Furthermore, and again thinking with Brookfield (2015), I appreciate it takes time to step back from the emotional reaction to negative course evaluations. I know you need time.

Listening to Janet and understanding why she did what she did, and why she said what she said, created a space where I felt heard and understood. In this space, I began the process of considering tweaks to my teaching practice that will hopefully result in a more inclusive classroom environment. I also continued to reflect on early familial curriculum making and wondered "how these lived experiences have affected my teaching and learning practice" (Brown, 2014, p. 527).

REGRESSIVE STORY ONE

A few days later we discussed the 11 years I was in private practice as a tutor for students living with dyslexia. During this time, my efforts focussed in two areas. First, we worked to improve reading fluency and comprehension. Next, to remove barriers. Over time, I purposefully became increasingly aggressive towards teachers who were not, in my estimation, teaching and or behaving in ways that supported the students I tutored. Reading the comments on the course evaluations got me wondering how 11 years of tutoring was shaping my current teaching. Charged with the responsibility of training up future generations of teachers, perhaps it was time to reconceptualize myself as an educator of pre-service teachers. I appreciate this is an important work to do; it does little, however, to help me understand my reactions to the course evaluations.

REGRESSIVE STORY TWO

At age 18, I left home to participate in a national youth exchange program. For nine months, participants aged 17 to 21 from across Canada lived in three different communities. My first community was in Ontario. We were young, able-bodied, clueless, and desperate to be well-liked. Each day a trip was made into town, including a stop at the post office. When dinner was completed, mail was distributed in what quickly became a ceremony. One of the participants, who was funny and articulate, became mailman. He would stand next to a cart and read out the names on the letters and packages while providing commentary. He would comment on:

1. frequency of letters received from a certain someone,
2. additional work that had gone into making the envelope or package unique, and
3. as letter writers and package senders became aware of the antics of mailman, they increasingly included comments, colours, pictures, and drawings that served to ramp up the response of mailman. Some invited the mailman to open packages and share the contents (cookies, balloons, pencils etc.).

It quickly became clear which participants had families and friends willing to write and include treats. I received enough mail to keep me from being known as one who had no support. I understood that, to receive mail, one had to write. I, therefore, wrote to my parents, siblings, and friends.

One evening, mailman, got up to do his thing. He had almost reached the end when I felt him looking at me. He had a couple of envelopes left in his hands. He called out two additional names; I watched as friends received their mail. Mailman remained with a single envelope, and his eyes locked on me. I felt I should snatch the letter; I did not move. The group was expectant. “Who’s the last one for?” and “Read the name!”



Figure 2: Looking at this jar of peanut butter resulted in a computer search where I read the following: “*fatso: disparaging and offensive*” (Dictionary.com, 2020).

Barely audible, mailman read, “Fatso Jack, this one is for Fatso Jack.” I got up, grabbed the letter, and headed outside. Later that night, alone with my thoughts, I understood I belonged to a family and had a brother who would purposefully hurt me in the most public of formats. In a previous letter, I shared with him the antics of mailman, and he used this. My brother underlined the word Fatso in orange crayon. In the days that followed, I was repeatedly reminded of the letter and the salutation (see Figure 2). My shame was complete; I was unable to take an active role in pushing back. Lyons-Ruth (2003) wrote “if you cannot tolerate what you know or feel, the only option is denial and dissociation” (p. 123). I was unable to “make sense of what had happened and...to imagine a creative alternative” (van der Kolk, 2014, p. 53). My best friend stayed close; she repeatedly ran interference. I now understand Janet is attempting to do likewise with the course evaluations.

ANALYTICAL: THINKING ABOUT THIS TODAY

I am sitting quietly and letting my thoughts return to early familial landscapes in efforts to deepen my understanding of my reactions to course evaluations. There is much to consider. I grew up in a home where alcohol was abused. Woititz (1987) describing adult children of alcoholics said, “we judge ourselves without mercy. Since there is no way for us to meet the unattainable standards of perfection...we are always falling short of the mark we have set for ourselves” (para 4).

I am also thinking about Bruner (2004) who wrote:

stories happen to people who know how to tell them. Does that mean that our autobiographies are constructed, that they had better be viewed not as a record of what happened (which is in any case a nonexistent record) but rather as a continuing interpretation and reinterpretation of our experience. (p. 691–692)

This idea of continual interpretation and reinterpretation keeps me hopeful and willing to continue on this journey. Committing this memory story to the page, sharing it, and listening as Janet’s sister⁵ Laura read it aloud over the phone represented a significant risk for me. The perception of risk was made significantly easier because we were in different geographical locations. My willingness to participate in what I imagined would be a dangerous conversation was heightened by the distance (Le Fevre & Sawyer, 2012). My willingness to sit quietly as Laura read my memory story aloud over the phone was possible because they could not see me, and so I felt safe. I imagined I would cry; however, the fact they would not see me or be able to physically comfort me was a relief. I could hear their suggestions and respond to their musings while not feeling overcome with emotion.

Reading course evaluations transports me to complex, dysfunctional, early mis-educative familial curriculum making (Lessard, 2015). Highlighting the negative comments in fluorescent orange was a temporal trigger. Through this process, I am coming to understand how I “continue to organize...[my] life as if the trauma were still going on—unchanged and immutable—as...[if my reaction to the course evaluations is] contaminated from the past” (van der Kolk, 2014, p. 53). Will I ever be able to “terminate this continued stress mobilization and restore the entire organism to safety” (p. 53)? This frustratingly circles back to the idea that “every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after” (Dewey, 1938, p. 35). There are times when I wish this was **NOT** the case! Other times I wish I could “take up” something more helpful in the moment.

Sandra (online writing conversation): It is so hard to think about this memory because I know one of my parents knew about the letter. My brother would not have spent his own money on a stamp. Last night, I was flipping through albums containing pictures taken when I was a teenager; in every photograph, I see a slim kid. I think about my brother, and I cannot imagine being so intent on hurting another. I know, however, each of us regularly endured multifaceted, familial dysfunction associated with alcohol abuse.

Janet: Was your brother living at home then?

Sandra: Yep.

Janet: He was old to be at home (*questioningly as captured in voice inflection*)?

Sandra: (*a long pause*) Maybe no. That's a very good point Janet. Maybe he was already gone. We all fled very early, and I am the youngest. (*a pause and Sandra in a tiny, broken voice*). It is not possible that he was living at home (*another long pause*).

SYNTHETICAL: A NEW INTERPRETATION

Sandra: I feel a fissure forming in my memory, like a fault line. I always believed my mother was implicated having paid for the stamp and mailed the letter. This knowing, this reconceptualization of the memory provides an alibi for my mother, and this comforts me. When I think about the reconceptualization in terms of student evaluations, I wonder in what other ways I might read and interpret them. Is it possible they don't have to trigger me? How do I release "outdated assumptions and beliefs from childhood" (van der Kolk, 2014, p. 285) while respecting the function they served and at the same time rallying my strengths before clicking on the link? Thank you, Janet.

Janet: My sister says memories get unwrapped and re-wrapped and, therefore, new understandings are possible. Course evaluations are like mail, like the link in your email, like the mail your brother sent. When you click on the link, you are never sure what you will find in terms of content.

Sandra: That is a good analogy Janet. It creates another space to step back and consider anew. The emotional wrenching and shame I experience, reading this aloud reminds me, my body remembers (van der Kolk, 2014); however, in sharing, I am afforded an opportunity to re-story, "to interpret [my life]...in different ways, to imagine different possibilities" (Connelly, 2006, p. 478). For over 40 years, I regularly "put all my energy into protecting...[myself], developing whatever survival strategies...[I could]...I repressed...[my] feelings; [I] got furious and plotted revenge. [I]...decided to become so powerful and successful that nobody can ever hurt...[me] again" (van der Kolk, 2014, p. 280). This is precisely what I have done and to what avail? How does one release a memory that no longer serves? In the moments when shame comes calling can I "find a way to become calm and focused" (van der Kolk, 2014, p. 280). I am spent Janet; this process is exhausting.

Janet (listening and then speaking on the phone): Shame, re-shame, and re-shaming occurs regardless of self-talk. This is how I hear and see you. You are a capable, kind, and funny writer. In your office, there are shelves full of tutoring books, fiction for kids, colourful games, and stuffed toys. The shame, in my perception, has become so dominant it is overshadowing the books and literature—Wilbur and Charlotte, your kind and trusted friends (Jack-Malik & Kuhnke, 2019). This angers me. So I am thinking, if I call shame out and name it, we could talk about it and maybe release it from its hiding place (Brown, 2007). I realize now calling shame out is your job, not mine. Therefore, I sketched this image as words often fail me (see Figure 3).



Figure 3: Your courage is evident to me in this image.

Sandra (experiencing tension and irritation whilst writing over Google docs and talking on the phone): I do not appreciate this illustration because the shame appears outside the body. Through this *currere*, I have struggled to own the idea that shame lives within. It must be this way if I am to mobilize shame resilience (Brown, 2007).

MOVING FORWARD AND MAKING ROOM FOR OTHER POSSIBILITIES

Through the process of *currere* and the ongoing duoethnography conversations with Janet, I was able to identify and then step back from the binary of right or wrong, good or bad, and create a space where other interpretations were possible. Prior to this work, I would not have had Janet review my course evaluations, nor would I have spoken about my shame. Doing so has allowed me to begin to see the image Janet drew as having merit, because it challenges me to think of other explanations and other ways forward. In addition, this work has shortened time required to resuscitate myself from course evaluations. And, it has demonstrated ways to mobilize a shame resilient response before clicking on a link to course evaluations. Nothing about this is easy; however, it is possible. Furthermore, by reflecting on Brookfield's (2015) insights, I was able to talk about setting one or two achievable goals in response to the student evaluations. I have rewritten the course syllabi to reflect the goals.

When I focus specifically on my shame reaction that was first triggered by reading the evaluations, I defer to Brown (2007) who argues that shame resilience is important. She defines it as:

the ability to recognize shame when we experience it and move through it in a constructive way that allows us to maintain our authenticity and grow from our experiences. And in this process of consciously moving through our shame, we can build stronger and more meaningful connections with people in our lives. (p. 31)

This is precisely what Janet and I have done; I am profoundly grateful.

Brown (2007) suggests that possessing high levels of shame resilience makes us capable of giving and receiving empathy. This highlights the importance of imagining and living out Wiseman's (1996) notions of empathy. Throughout this process, Janet and I have endeavored to listen empathetically and to receive empathy. Because of this we were able to engage in dangerous conversations (Le Fevre & Sawyer, 2012) that allowed us to deepen our understanding of how early familial curriculum making was shaping my reaction to course evaluations and, therefore, my tenure track journey. In the safe, trust-filled spaces where the giving and receiving of empathy flourished, we were able to begin the process of imagining other possibilities, and on occasion, we lived out new stories. We did this while reminding ourselves of Dewey's continuity (1938) and the words of Heilbrun (1989):

there always seems to loom the possibility of something being over, settled, sweeping clear the way for contentment. This is the delusion of a passive life. When the hope for closure is abandoned, when there is an end to fantasy, adventure for women will begin. (p. 130)

These hard stories are part of who we are; however, the new stories we imagine are bold examples of what is possible. They are in stark contrast to what can happen when one "chooses to stay right where...[one] is, to undertake each day's routine, and to listen to...arteries hardening" (Heilbrun, 1989, p. 131).

FINAL THOUGHTS AND WHY IT WORKED FOR US

We experienced the writing of the individual *curreres* and the subsequent dangerous conversations as challenging and emotionally draining. There were many moments when we needed the comfort and safety of a warm, wrapped scarf to shield ourselves from the onslaught of complex emotions and to take a break from our commitment to engage in the related dangerous conversations. We needed to pause. We needed quiet to read and reflect. We needed moments for ourselves, to hold steady in a torrent of dangerous conversations (Le Fevre & Sawyer, 2012). There were days when we wanted to give it up. There were other days when one of us was unsure if we had the individual strength to be empathetic within a dangerous conversation—regularly unsure of what could or should be asked and how best to respond and how to proceed. Sandra began using the phrase, "my guts are on the table." There were many times when it felt precisely like that. For both of us, these dangerous conversations, including "guts on the table," were only possible because of the pre-existing bedrock of relational, personal, and professional trust.

As we quickly approach the date when we will submit documents to be evaluated for tenure, Heilbrun's words ring out strong and clear. She wrote,

I do not believe that death should be allowed to find us seated comfortably in our tenured positions. ... Instead, we should make use of our security, our seniority, to take risks, to make noise, to be courageous, to become unpopular. (p. 131)

We are endeavoring to be tenured professors who do precisely that. Writing these *curreres*, engaging in dangerous conversations, struggling to tell, retell, and live out the women we are in the midst of becoming is all part of our efforts to take risks and be courageous tenure track hires.

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Endnotes

¹ Student evaluations were intended to help instructors improve their teaching. However, they were quickly adopted by chairs and deans and tenure committees to help make personnel decisions, such as hiring, salary increases, and promotions. Today these ratings are used ubiquitously and are considered the single most important indicator of teacher effectiveness (Stroebe, 2016).

² Le Fevre and Sawyer (2012) described “difficult professional conversations to include dangerous conversations, silenced ones, problematic self-disclosures, daring publications, and unfettered electronic communications” (p. 263).

³ Tensions that “live between people...are a way of creating a between space, a space which can exist in educative ways” (Clandinin et al., 2010, p. 82).

⁴ Connelly and Clandinin (2006) used four terms to “structure the process of self-narration.” Lived stories are those we live. Told stories are those we tell. Retold stories are those used “to interpret lives as told in different ways, to imagine different possibilities” (p. 478). To relive stories is “to live out the new person” (p. 478).

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