TABLE OF CONTENTS

Volume 7 Issue 2 December 2023

1 *Currere*: The Agentic (Re)Writing of the Self
Kieran Forde

11 Reckoning with Self: Curriculum Inquiry as Self-Understanding
Carmel Roofe

19 On Wholeness and Devotion
Bruce Parker & Ren Dawe

28 Moviehouse Poems (2)
Mark O'Hara

32 The Puzzle
Mona Beth Zignego & Ivon G. Prefontaine

41 Using Currere Concepts with Writing during Physical Therapy Treatment
Jennifer Lynne Bird, C. Jayne Brahler & Eric T. Wanner

52 Life Writing and Sustainability Education
Nathan Stewart Hensley

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CURRERE: THE AGENTIC (RE)WRITING OF THE SELF

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This paper is an explication of my understanding of the autobiographical method of *currere,* as well as an account of how I used this method as part of my self-work toward subjective reconstruction. First, I define the concepts of *currere*, agency, and self as I understand and use them in this paper. I then outline the method using my own experience as an example of how *currere* can be applied to (re)kindle one's agency and (re)write one's self. Lastly, I explore some themes relevant to the method that situate, both figuratively and literally, my ongoing encounter with *currere*.

THE CONCEPTS

CURRERE

Much has been written about and through *currere* since it was first described (Pinar, 1975). Given the scope of this paper, I do not propose to quote much from this body of work. Rather, I begin by introducing a definition that sits well with me: *Currere* is "an act of self-interrogation in which one reclaims one's self from one's self as one unpacks and repacks the meanings that one holds" (Norris & Sawyer, 2012, p. 13). *Currere*, therefore, offers us a method to explore how we came to be and to reassess our understandings of ourselves, which, upon more mature reflection, may prove to be inaccurate or incomplete. In tandem, *currere* requires us to view ourselves both as we currently are and as we may come to be in the future, each of these viewpoints representing separate elements of an ongoing formation where each temporal perspective informs the others. Coupled with other forms of self-work—in my case therapy and a twelve-step program—written and verbal accounts of these temporal perspectives can then offer insight into how we might deconstruct our past experience and reconstruct it, such that we are able to loosen the constraints we and others put on our capacity to understand our place in the world. Left unexamined, experience and perspectives become ossified, restricting our potential for engagement with ourselves and with others. *Currere* keeps our experience limber, offering flexibility for it to be reworked and reshaped so that we can continue to use it as the raw material through which we iteratively work our subjective formation.

AGENCY

For this paper, I borrow, Britzman's (2003) understanding of agency as "the capacity of persons to interpret and intervene in their world" (p. 40). Agency, like health, is something that we all have to a greater or lesser degree, but it is also something that we may rarely consider until we feel it has been diminished.

I grew up in a conservative Irish Catholic family in conservative Catholic Ireland in the 1980s where the order of things had been long established before I came along. Admitted—or rather conscripted—into the faith as an infant, the Church, and the Church-dominated culture of the country and the family, shaped how I was raised. This upbringing created clear boundaries around how I might view the world and my place in it. Shame and guilt were the order of the day; compliance and unquestioning obedience were my only options to avoid conflict. The asymmetry between child and parent, parent and state, and state and Church made it clear that my place was to be silent, to accept authority, and to dutifully engage in the pageantry supporting the "normalcy" of it all.

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The world had been interpreted for me. As such, I moved through adolescence and into my adult years with little consideration of how I might intervene in the world. A programmed spectator, I kept silent, clapped when appropriate, and watched the world happen around and to me. However, I have been able to revisit and reorder my past experiences using *currere* and my other self-work. Viewed as valuable information about my subjective formation, I have engaged in this self-work "so that I can wield this information, rather than it wielding me" (Pinar & Grumet, 1976, p. ix). In this way, I have been able to work through the fear, shame, and resentment that dogged me through most of my life (see O'Connor, 2010; Uscola, 2023).

My return to formal studies in 2017 coincided with, and partly precipitated, an existential crisis that forced me to reassess my journey to that point. My interior was in disarray. I was an accumulation of experience—a pastiche hastily compiled in the face of authority and perceived threats—much of it clouded by alcohol from my later adolescence and then further clouded by the passage of time.

Finding and reclaiming agency through my engagement with curriculum—both through formal studies and through the lived curriculum of *currere*—I have developed my capacity for "systemic self-perusal" and the agency to "shift my ontological centre from exterior to interior" (Pinar & Grumet, 1976, p. 14). Through *currere* and my other self-work, I have been able to make a conscious contribution to my own journey, where I am neither a passenger nor yet the "*captain of my soul*," but an oarsman who can influence, to some degree, my pace and direction on life's sea.

SELF

Perhaps more than any other question, the one regarding self—"Who am I?"—is the most enduring. Here I sketch my understanding of self as I conceive it for this paper.

Discussions of what constitutes the self must invariably contend with and articulate the duality of that concept. This division of self into subject/object, self-as-knower/self-as-known, or *I/Me*, bifurcates self in recognition that we regularly engage in dialogue with ourselves, which can only be done if an "other" is present with whom we might engage.

The object-self, "*Me*," is usually viewed as that which is co-constituted through engagement with others. This object-self is mediated and negotiated, to varying degrees, through the perspective of the subject-self ("*I*"). The object-self is that which is presented outwardly to the world but is also that self which, presented inwardly, can constitute Mead's (1934) "generalized other" with which the subject-self can engage.

This subject-self is variously referred to as the soul, the spirit, the transcendental ego, the pure ego, or simply the "*I* self." My understanding of this self is analogous to the irritant that enters an oyster and precipitates the formation of a pearl. Although this is a crude framing, I do not believe that the cosmic randomness that causes a grain of sand to enter an oyster is dissimilar to the circumstances through which my selfhood began. Something—I know not what—caused me to be. I also believe that there is something unique about me: some agentic nucleus that preceded all experience. Whether this is the case is largely irrelevant because I believe it to be the case as a matter of faith, which both empowers and compels me to intervene in the world.

THE METHOD

The method of *currere* entails four steps: regressive, progressive, analytical, and synthetical. I will briefly introduce each step below and outline how I progressed through them.

Regressive

Through the regressive step, we return to our past experience and examine how it came to constitute our present. Pinar (2010) explains that, in this step, “one’s apparently past existential experience is conceived as data source” (p. 178). The inclusion of “apparently” is crucial here, for one might conceive of our past experience, and how we adapted to this, to be largely inaccessible to us and to be something that has already been processed and spent like an exhausted resource. We know, of course, that past experience has a bearing on who we are today, but understanding the relationship between the past and present may be limited if we conceive of the relationship between the two as linear where the past, being past, is sedimented and fixed. Writings on *currere* frequently evoke such geological and archaeological imagery; one is encouraged to “get under one’s exteriorized horizontal thinking” and “to begin to sink toward the transcendental place, where the lower-level psychic workings … are visible” (Pinar, 1975, p. 407). For me, alongside archaeology, I find it helpful to conceive of the regressive step as being similar to mining and its associated processes.

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When we think of how gold is mined, many of us may think of underground mining with its deep tunnels reaching into the earth in search of veins of the precious metal. Or perhaps we imagine open pit mining where huge vehicles tear apart whole mountains. These sorts of extractions involve invasive and destructive approaches. Consider, in contrast, the Nome Gold Rush (1899-1909), noted as being exceptional due to the ease with which gold could be obtained. For millions of years before the first prospectors arrived in Nome, Alaska, melting glaciers deposited sediment rich with gold along a 40-mile stretch of the shore. Thousands of prospectors all walked across this unnoticed fortune as they trudged inland to dig into and along the creek beds in search of gold. All the while, hundreds of thousands of ounces of gold lay right there on the beach, ready to be collected with far less effort and to far greater reward. I mention this because I view *currere* as similar to this placer mining on the beaches of Nome. We all learn from experience to some degree, but there is often more benefit to be had from revisiting our experiences of the past and panning valuable overlooked learning than there is from engaging in new experiences in search of understanding.

To me, the sands on the beach of Nome represent the lived experience that I paid little heed to, but which occurred nonetheless and was deposited over time on the shores of my potential understanding. I may have been too busy, too distracted, or simply not ready to process certain experiences, and so I noticed some and overlooked others (sometimes intentionally). When I entered the regressive step of *currere* through my self-work, I sought to revisit my past and try to see a little more in and around what I had paid attention to originally. Particularly through my engagement with my studies, I was able to revisit the shores of my experience and, following Pinar (2011), begin “disassembling the structures of the present self, providing opportunities for reconstruction” (p. 198). *Currere* allowed me to go back to my past experiences which, unbeknown to me, had become a rich deposit of knowing. When I returned, because I was different, I saw my life experiences through different eyes, so I did not need to excavate to find what I had missed. Instead, I sifted gently through my past, paying special attention to that which the passage of time had made more accessible.

Progressive

In comparison to the regressive step, which relies on looking back, the progressive step involves looking forward to what is not yet present. Understanding that potential futures are part of our present just as much as current understandings are part of our past, we might project how our professional and personal lives might evolve. This step is, for me, the most challenging. The past is territory (both familiar and overlooked) that I have already survived; though challenging, I find I can readily reexperience my past and learn from it. My future, however, is frighteningly uncertain. For many years, I believed I was not a particularly ambitious person, in that I had an aversion to self-promotion and allowed myself only a very limited planning horizon. Through my self-work, I have come to realize that this had much to do with my perceived lack of agency, feelings of inadequacy, and lack of validation. This step is challenging because it requires faith: faith in oneself, faith in humanity’s future, and, perhaps, faith in a higher power.

* * *

Over 70 years ago, Erich Fromm (1947) explained that “faith is not one of the concepts that fits into the intellectual climate of the present-day world” (p. 197). This is likely even more the case today as we so often hear that we should “trust the science” and “the experts” (whichever ones hold your perspectives, that is). We also live in a time when organized religion is increasingly viewed with skepticism and painted as a refuge for fanatics and factions who are anti-science, anti-progress, and, perhaps, variously anti-Christian/Islamic/Semitic as well as anti-immigration/government/engagement. Ironically, my own engagement with *currere* began with a deeper consideration of both faith and “my” faith—that is the Catholic faith I was born into and shaped by, and which I eventually rejected.

My rejection of Catholicism, largely on the grounds that it was irrational, “a fanatic conviction in somebody or something, rooted in submission to a personal or impersonal irrational authority” (Fromm, 1947, p. 204), unfortunately left me resentful, adrift, and fearful. Engaging with rational faith, “a firm conviction based on productive intellectual and emotional activity” (Fromm, 1947, p. 204), still left me feeling adrift. There was something missing. Eventually, I came to realize that I could not solely *think* my way toward serenity. This realization came through a combination of reason and idealization, the latter “useful untruths” (Appiah, 2017) that allowed me to engage more fully with Al-Anon.[1] Through this self-work, I found faith in myself that empowered me to imagine a future where I might be at peace with myself and the world, or at least more so than I am currently. To connect with my higher power, I returned to St. Augustine, knowing that I must believe—in both myself and the possibility for serenity in the future—so that I may understand.

Analytical

In this step, having looked in turn at the experiences of the past and the possibilities of the future, I now take a snapshot of the present. The question, “Who am I *now*?” is easier to ask and answer than the atemporal existential one. When I ask myself who I am now, I take an inventory of myself as I am, “just for today.”[2] In Al-Anon meetings, this happens for me most easily when I am able to suspend the intrusion into my thoughts of the past and of calls to the tasks of the day and beyond. Separated from these, I am able to listen to the shares of other people and make note of how I relate to these *at that moment*, for they are all telling versions of my story. This present is at the centre of the triptych that fills my attention. I can see the past and the future in my periphery, but I give my attention to the present, and I make connections with myself through the connections I make with others. Here, I am vulnerable, engaged, and open to alterity.

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God, grant me the Serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
Courage to change the things I can,
and Wisdom to know the difference.

Most Al-Anon 12-Step meetings open with the Serenity prayer (above), which, to me, is a basic outline of *currere*, where contemplation of the past demands acceptance, imagination of the future requires courage, and inquiry into the present necessitates wisdom. Like *currere*, Al-Anon meetings encourage inquiry into the self—into our lived experience—where we iteratively attempt to identify those things that we might engage with to determine if they are both within our power and to our benefit to change. Where change is not possible, acceptance, at least in the present, is the goal. Where change is possible, faith and determination are required to bring this about. Ultimately, it is through the incrementally accumulated wisdom we gain through engagement with our lived experience, a greater capacity for metacognition, and the humility that is the pre-requisite for all this work, where we can make peace, at least in the moment, with ourselves and the world, striving to be happy while embracing the challenges of being human.

Paul and Beierling (2017) explain that engaging in the autobiographical method of *currere* requires courage and that "exposing or shining a light on our innermost remembered experiences as recovered or recalled is not a simple task" (p. 13). Similar courage is required in exploring and sharing our current emotional condition. We come, in faith and humility, to check in with ourselves.

In 12-Step work, Step Six is a commitment "to have God remove all … defects of character" (Al-Anon Family Groups, n.d.). In meetings over the last few years, it regularly comes up that these character defects are quite often the survival mechanisms that served us well in the past but that have outlived their usefulness. While these survival mechanisms may have helped us protect ourselves (quite often in childhood), as adults they have become distinctly unhelpful behaviours that we have come to believe are simply "who we are." In meetings, we iteratively confront these survival mechanisms and attempt to free ourselves from them in our present.

Twelve-Step work also offers a sort of "time out" from how we usually process our thinking. In my home group, we are reminded just before the sharing portion opens, that "we do not interrupt, provide feedback, respond directly to, refer to someone by name, or interpret another person's share." In such a space, people feel safe enough to share ideas that are perhaps only partly formed, prototypes of potential perspectives, or just raw unstructured thoughts on their experience. Dewey (1910) accurately points out that this sort of reflective thinking, with "judgement suspended during further inquiry," is "likely to be somewhat painful" (p. 13). There is safety and security in certitude, and desperate people will grasp at any truth in panic. Holding judgment in abeyance to allow for due consideration can be challenging in the absence of necessary support.

Through my academic writing, my engagement with Al-Anon, and through psychotherapy, I have been fortunate to have spaces and opportunities where I can reassess my experience, check in with myself in the moment, and incrementally find the most generative perspectives from which I can learn and grow. In such spaces, I encounter my past experiences and current faith in the ongoing process of recovery, intertwined in an intentionally located present.

Synthetical

In the synthetical step, I exist in the lived present. I feel my embodied self—my strength, my potential—and, sustained by my conscious engagement with my be(com)ing, I take my place in the world.

In the synthetical step in particular, I engage with *currere* (in my scholarly work, my self-work, and in my engagement with others) as a means of exercising my agency. I chart my course according to my increasing capacity for understating my place in the world. Here is where I find I have a purpose: to continue doing this work. It is most meaningful because it is *my* task and, like Sisyphus, only I, alone, can do it.

◆

I do not remember when I formed my affinity with Sisyphus. I do, however, recall the impression the 1981 film *Clash of the Titans* had on me when I first saw it, likely several years after its release. I remember being entranced with the adventures of Perseus and Pegasus, sitting transfixed as they did battle with Medusa and the Kraken. The appearance and appetites of Zeus and Poseidon were a chilling contrast to the Christian God that surrounded me at home and at school. I recall learning later about the punishments these older Gods inflicted on mortals, and learning of Prometheus, Cassandra, and Tantalus. But it was Sisyphus and the nature of his punishment that I most connected with. However, it was not until I came across Camus's (1942/1979) *The Myth of Sisyphus* and the final line, "we must imagine Sisyphus happy" (p. 111), that my connection to Sisyphus' fate was solidified. Initially, I was puzzled. But soon, through the course of my self-work, Camus' statement began to make sense to me.

One might well view Sisyphus as a tragic figure, engaged in work that is doomed to fail, repetitive, and pointless, but I now see the heroism of the labor Sisyphus performs. As with engagement with *currere*, the value is in the effort itself. While I have faith, it is not the Christian faith of my ancestors. I do not believe in an afterlife wherein I might be rewarded finally for living well. I do not need such motivation; the reward for living well lies in the practice itself. Fromm (1947) remarked, "Man is the only animal for whom his own existence is a problem which he has to solve and from which he cannot escape" (p. 40). Again, through my engagement with the curriculum of the self, I believe I have come to accept my fate and, like Sisyphus, appreciate that whatever purpose and meaning there is to be found lies in the pursuit of understanding my place in the world and in taking responsibility for positively impacting the world where I can. Having spent most of my life in education, I have been privileged to have the opportunity to engage with ideas and, along with colleagues, learn to have agency over my own learning and, to a degree, the world around me. Like Fromm (1947), I can accept that "there is no meaning to life except the meaning man gives his life by the unfolding of his powers" (p. 45). For now, this sustains me, and I believe, to varying degrees, positively impacts the many people around me.

Themes

Education

One of the elements that separates *currere* from other autobiographical methods of introspection is its focus on experiences of formal education. While others have used the method to explore their life history more broadly (e.g., Wang, 2010), *currere* is particularly suitable for my personal exploration of self as I have spent almost my entire life in and around education: 22 years as a student and 12 years as a teacher. As such, my be(com)ing is inextricably linked with curriculum, both as educational practice and as *currere*—as lived experience, a journey, a curriculum of the self.

Approaching 40, I returned to graduate studies, largely as a way of escaping a life and way of being that no longer fit. Like a hermit crab that had outgrown its shell, I moved to Canada to find a new shell, but, crucially, for a time I was naked, exposed, and vulnerable. Casemore (2017) knows that "the past, however painful and enigmatic, requires our engagement if we are to evoke potential futures" (p. 42). In many ways over the years, I had been trying to avoid opening the Pandora's box of my subjective formation. Physically relocating to different countries afforded me the opportunity to "reinvent" myself in each new place. To my dismay, however, I inevitably (re)encountered myself as the same person on arrival and thereafter. This changed, however, shortly after I arrived in Vancouver. It was there that I encountered the method of *currere*, though, at the time, I was not aware how central a role it would play in the following years.

Place

My educational experience and career have involved a repeated physical relocation, and for the most part, I transitioned to places that were themselves at the beginning of historic transitions. I cannot say that this was intentional, though I also believe that it is unlikely that it was entirely coincidental. Perhaps there was a subconscious draw to these places—part of me knowing, or hoping, that they might offer me a fresh start and somewhere to escape myself.

My primary, secondary, and undergraduate studies all took place in my hometown. When I was 21, I moved to Poland, just as it was preparing to become a member of the European Union (EU). Freshly graduated, I taught English to executives who, along with many others in the country, were brushing up their language skills to be able to take full advantage of the opportunities that would follow in the wake of full integration into the EU.

On September 14, 2001, I arrived in China for the first time, just as the impact of 9/11 was beginning to be processed. At that time China had not yet joined the World Trade Organization; this happened three months later.

In 2004 when I returned to Ireland to pursue an MA, I found myself in a place that seemed very different from the one I remembered. The heady days of the "Celtic Tiger" were in full swing, and I became a tourist in my own country.

In 2007, I moved to Nepal to work with the British Council in language assessment as the country was in transition from being the world's last Hindu monarchy to becoming a secular republic. Returning to China after this time in Nepal and after the spectacle of the Beijing 2008 Olympics was profound. I witnessed phenomenal social changes taking place there over the next seven years as China weathered the global financial crisis, while in Europe and elsewhere the impacts were devastating.

In these places, with youth and privilege in my favor, dynamic environments enabled me to enjoy day-to-day experiences without giving much consideration to who I was or where I was going. I was carried along by the currents of the day, insulated to introspection and self-reflection by superficial social engagement and thrill seeking.

My move to Canada for graduate studies was different. It seemed that the swift winds and currents that had carried me forward had disappeared. I was becalmed, my pride and self-esteem pricked by my reduced status, income, and privilege. It was at this "dislocation" of my *self*, "where what was once familiar abruptly appear[ed] strange" (Greene**,** 1971/2004, p. 140), that I was fortunate enough to be able to actively engage with curriculum—perhaps for the first time—in order to make sense of my life world.

This was not initiated as a proactive attempt at self-work; it began out of desperation. Facing an existential crisis, I sought help where I could. Over the next two years, through psychotherapy and 12-step work, I made a conscious effort to make sense of my present by unpacking and reconsidering my past so that I could begin to imagine a future where I was not entombed in my sedimented and ossified self. I could work through this accumulation, engaging in an archaeology of the self, panning my past experience for wisdom that did not seem to have value at the time. My education greatly assisted me in this.

Graduate study is largely about writing. Although we spend a great deal of time reading and discussing, it is in the work of writing that we focus our efforts. But writing is hard, solitary, lonely work, with few places to hide. Writing afforded me the opportunity to write—and *re-write*—my story. Through consideration of differing ontologies and epistemologies, I found value in my experience and in myself, which assisted me in reclaiming my agency. Later, when I began doctoral studies, I developed a consideration of humility that allowed me to have both a confidence in my own abilities—something that had been largely lacking until then—and an understanding of my responsibility to exercise that agency to be of service. Now, though I continue my studies in Vancouver, I am not tied to the physical place, but to the place I have created within myself whereupon I can stand and face the world. This is the foundation of my self, claimed from but still located in the world. This is where I can continue to be(come).

Becoming

I was struck by a conversation between actors Dondré Whitfield and Will Smith in which they discuss their conception of the "Journey to Manhood." The difference, they said, between being "male" and being a "man" is about service: "Males seek to be served, while men seek to be of service" (Whitfield, 2020, 8:38). While this idea has been touched upon in many ways over the years, there was something about the rawness and vulnerability of the actors*'* conversation that stuck with me. When the concept of service first arose during my 12-step work and I considered my own service in the program and elsewhere, I kept returning to the idea of what it means to be an "adult." Indeed, I have often lamented that there does not exist in my culture a process or event where one *becomes a man*.[3] I think of tribal initiation ceremonies or religious celebrations where the transition from adolescence to adulthood is marked and celebrated. Absent such a formal initiation, how does one know when one is no longer a child?

Achieving the age of majority at 18, I did not feel that I had become a man. Nor at the age of 21. Nor at 31. To my mind, I was closer to 41 before I would say that I had reached a level of maturity where I might call myself an adult. That is not to say I did not attend to my responsibilities before this time. However, until this time, I attended to these largely as a way to seek validation from others, to protect myself from criticism, to maintain harmonious relationships, and to maintain and support a sense of self that was essentially sustained by the approval of others. My motivation was largely extrinsic; I did these things because I needed the approval of others so that they would see me—and so that I could see myself—as a good person. Put crudely, I was a child being "good" so that Santa Claus would leave me a gift. Likely internalized also, was an image of God, watching in judgement, an oddly terrifying entity with love and forgiveness in one hand, vengeance and damnation in the other.

My transition to adulthood, where I finally took responsibility for writing myself, came from a combination of the agency that grew in me as I reassessed my subjective formation and my growing awareness of my capacity for self-validation (Ishiyama, 1993). Rather than continuing to seek approval from others to maintain and direct my being, I was able to shift my focus inward and use this to enable my becoming.

This is not an isolationist approach; instead, it allowed me to achieve a harmony between my inner world, my intrinsic power, and the outer world where I use my agency to take responsibility for and act in the world. I transitioned from *being* in the world—a product of things that happened to me—to *becoming* in the world, an agentic self, involved in my own subjective (re)formation.

Conclusion

Experience is not what happens to you; it's what you do with what happens to you.

— Aldous Huxley

While we are all shaped by our experiences and use them to make sense of the world, it is also true that we have a degree of agency over how fixed that shape remains; it is this fixedness that *currere* addresses. As we grow older, we may lose the physical and mental flexibility of childhood that allowed us to adapt to the world around us. Our bodies and minds might become more rigid, conditioned through schooling, socialization, and other calls to conformity. As we get older still, many people may no longer be able to touch their toes, nor endure for long the discomfort that comes when their understanding of the world is challenged.

In the same way, experience left unexamined becomes ossified, fixing our understanding of the world, and our place in it, into a configuration that may, at a later date, not serve us or others well. *Currere* is an ongoing engagement with our lived experience such that it remains limber, such that our past does not simply accumulate and become compacted. In the same way that stretching through yoga or tai chi, for example, can afford us physical flexibility in later life that can both protect us and offer prolonged mobility, so too can deliberate engagement with our past experiences in the present offer us the potential to reform our subjectivity as we progress through life. Our experience is a sustainable primary data source that we can return to. It can help us make sense of the present and resist accepting the world as it is presented to us and, instead, engage with others in seeking to beneficially shape the world around us.

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Endnotes

[1] I am a member of the Al-Anon fellowship. In contrast to Alcoholics Anonymous, "Al-Anon is not a program for finding or maintaining sobriety. It is a program to help the families of alcoholics recover from the effects of someone else's drinking." See https://al-anon.org/newcomers/faq/

[2] This is one of the Al-Anon slogans.

[3] To be clear, my concern here has to do with the transition to adulthood rather than differences between genders.

RECKONING WITH SELF: CURRICULUM INQUIRY AS SELF-UNDERSTANDING

By Carmel Roofe
The University of the West Indies, Mona

Curriculum inquiry is the art of telling, retelling, and sharing stories through the lens of curriculum by probing experiences that shape, thought, action, and disposition (Schubert, 2008; Sharma & Phillion, 2021; Short, 1991). It seeks to unravel what experiences bring purpose to life (Varbelow & Gee, 2017). Curriculum inquiry, therefore, examines all forms of curriculum but with emphasis placed on the hidden curriculum. The hidden curriculum refers to the implicit and often unintended lessons that are taught and learnt through various forms of interaction (Alsubaie, 2015). Such interactions are usually shaped by teachers, students, family, awareness, knowledge, and the society (Cornbleth, 1984). From this interaction, individuals develop their own interpretations and meanings, whether implicitly or explicitly conveyed. Examining and understanding the hidden curriculum will, therefore, require teachers to understand how it manifests in their own lives so that they can then understand how it manifests in the lives of their students (Aoki, 1993; Jerald, 2006; Pinar, 1994). This requires critical self-examination and reflection as one shares and re-shares stories from the past and present while using the results to inform present and future actions. To this process, Pinar (2004) offers the concept of *currere* to aid persons who are committed to undertaking curriculum as self-inquiry.

Curriculum inquiry aided by *currere* provides an opportunity for educators to combine scholarly reflection on self and practice to educate learners to be thoughtful, active, participatory citizens (Giroux, 2011). It serves as a useful foundation for moving from the individual to the communal and, therefore, provides a base for evolution towards collective action (Garcia, 2021; McDermott, 2022). For instance, such interrogation may reveal oppressive structures in our educational journey that inform our subjectivities and can serve as reminders that our thoughts, assumptions, and actions are rooted in the coloniality of our being (Garcia, 2021). Therefore, as I engage in this inquiry of self as a teacher, teacher educator, and curriculum scholar in Jamaica, I engage in intellectual scholarship through an active process of reflection and action to derive new theoretical and practical possibilities for teaching and learning that are beyond content knowledge (McDermott, 2022). Consequently, such intellectual scholarship offers a reckoning with the past, present, and future and offers opportunities in the classroom for re-storying and disrupting colonial notions of understanding of self (Garcia, 2021; Giroux 2011).

Within the context of this paper, curriculum inquiry involves interrogating my experiences as a student in a Jamaican primary and secondary school, experiences as a teacher in a Jamaican secondary school, the personal experiences linked to my social context, and experiences I have garnered as a teacher educator and curriculum scholar working in a higher education context in Jamaica. It offers an inquiry to understand the meanings attached to such experiences (individual reckoning) and to offer them as a representation of curriculum inquiry that embodies a broadened view of curriculum (Aoki, 1993; McDermott, 2022; Pinar, 2004), consequently, offering insights on how educators may engage in critical reflection and, thereby, improve professional practice.

To reckon with myself, I use retrospective accounts through journaling to recollect memories to answer the question: In what ways have my personal and educative

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experiences propelled me in becoming the teacher educator and curriculum scholar I am today? The re-construction of my story was, therefore, from memory, and as a result, I recognize that this may be partial as I try to bring coherence to my present and past (Ellis & Bochner, 2003). Nonetheless, in this reflection served as a tool for critical self-dialogue and for improving my understanding of myself in relation to others, practice, and social events (Baszile, 2015; Connelly & Clandinin, 2006; Sawyer, 2022). Using a recursive approach, I began with recording memories of my experiences as a student about to exit primary school, as a secondary school student, as a teacher in an inner-city secondary school, and as a teacher educator and curriculum scholar. Through this recollection, I highlight critical events from childhood to adulthood that are connected to teaching and learning through various forms of schooling.

Deciphering my Identity

As argued by Baszille (2015), a journey towards self-understanding requires that the question "who am I" be engaged with through deep and ongoing contemplation. Moreover, identity development is a crucial aspect of the life of a teacher educator, given the roles teacher educators play in pre-service and in-service teacher development. Therefore, my aim in this paper was to utilize a fluid autobiographical process as I describe, interpret, illuminate, and create new insights by reflecting on who am I.

> As I sit to ponder the question of who I am, a series of questions emerge. Why did I decide to do this task? What aspects of my story do I really want to share? There are so many pieces. I never like talking about myself, yet I am always willing to encourage others to talk about themselves. Am I an imposter here or a hypocrite? Hmm … let me give this a try.
>
> My journey as an academic a scholar, as I dare say, started as an unplanned one, and perhaps unplanned is not the right word, or can I say unplanned but focused. Let me explain what I mean by unplanned. So as a student attending primary and secondary school in Jamaica—what I consider to be the years that have shaped me—I didn't know what I wanted to become. I didn't know what career path I wanted to take, not because I wasn't ambitious but because everything seemed so farfetched and so out of my reach.
>
> In my mind, the first stage of doing well was to be successful at the standardized examination at grade six of primary school. At the time, this was named the Common Entrance Examination (CEE). Oh boy CEE! Did I do well at that, no I didn't. So having failed common entrance, the view of everyone around was that I had not done well. Those in my community who did well were seen as the stars; they were lauded as they were the ones to attend the traditional ("bright") secondary schools while I and others would attend less than ideal secondary schools (non-traditional secondary schools); the schools for the not so "bright." We became the outcasts, as our names were not published in the national newspaper, nor did we receive congratulations from the community personnel, nor were our parents given accolades—simply because we were unsuccessful at CEE. In the minds of everyone around, being successful at the CEE meant you were destined to be something great in life.
>
> With determination, I attended the not so bright school. Attending this school was another struggle, but I was determined I would ignore all the negative views about the school, and I always felt I could do well anywhere. Knowing and believing that I can do well anywhere is also an experience that influenced my guidance with

my daughter in later years. At the announcement of her primary exit standardized examination results, she cried because she did not like the school at which she was placed. In my mind, it was a good school, but I think in hers and the minds of other family members it was an "okayish" school. So many persons encouraged me to have her transferred to another school that in their eyes was better. This resulted in another internal dialogue about what lessons I want to teach her as she embarks on her journey, so I kept her at the school in which she was placed.

As a student at my non-traditional secondary school, my friends from primary school who were now attending the "bright" schools would separate themselves from us at the taxi stand and even in our communities. However, that did not deter me. I also recall not having lunch money on many occasions, but no one knew. When I had lunch money, I acted no different from when I did not. This I think has given me my sense of humility and downplaying my own accomplishments at times in my adult life. As I put words to paper, these moments seem so vivid, but until I started writing, these memories were not at the forefront of my mind or so I thought.

Could these experiences be the reason I give so much of myself to my students? Could this be the reason I continue to work so hard and put pressure on myself to do well? Could the hardships and lack associated with these periods of schooling be why I am so empathetic towards my students? This piece is revealing as I am writing. I am being confronted with my past self, but then is this really my past self? Is this self not very present, and is this the self that is propelling me subconsciously?

Fast forward to the end of high school where I needed to sit the standardized examination. At that time, all who went to the not so bright secondary schools did the free examination called Secondary School Certificate (SSC). From this group, there was also a selection of those who were considered bright by teachers to do the Caribbean Secondary Examination Council Examination (CSEC), which required payment in order to sit the examinations. I was one of those who was selected to pursue some of these subjects. Oh boy, looking back now, I see how the decisions teachers make can affect the lives of students forever, and so I take my role as a teacher/teacher educator seriously, as I recall how helpful and supportive these teachers were to us. They became surrogate parents by helping us to make life changing decisions. As I recall the memories of these teachers, I turn the spotlight on myself as a teacher teaching at an inner-city secondary school during 1995-2006. I was stern with both parents and students. I gave them my heart in listening and supported those who lacked funds at times for lunch. No matter how undisciplined a student was, I was able to talk with that student, but he/she knew that when it comes to respecting authority and doing their schoolwork, that's a must. I am emotional just thinking about these students in the inner-city secondary school where I taught. They just needed love and to be shown another way. I meet them all the time in these later years, and it is always so lovely to see them.

But back to my secondary school years as a student. I was determined I would do well, whatever that looked like. Upon completing the Grade 11 year my Home Economics teacher discovered that I did not have enough subjects or enough money to pursue studies after high school. So, thank God for teachers. She suggested that, since I didn't have money to attend technical school like many others who were graduating with me, maybe I could repeat Grade 11 and pursue additional subjects, and of course that I did. During that year, she told me about teachers' college and

> indicated that, because I was doing Home Economics, it would be best to attend a particular college. So, as I thought about attending a teachers' college, I was confronted with the fact that I didn't attend teachers' college because I wanted to be a teacher. I attended because it was a good and cheap option financially. As I am doing this piece, I recall that this was the best decision I made, and I made it because I had teachers who supported me and showed me the way. My parents knew nothing when it came to academics; they didn't understand the system they didn't have to come to school for any disciplinary issues; all they did was allowed me to attend school, and the rest was up to me. When I told my parents that I applied to college and got through, their concern was where would they find the money while my concern was if I can just get in. My application was successful, and there, my pre-service teacher training to become a teacher started. I lived on campus, and to date these are some of my best memories, and for me this began my journey of starting to do well and becoming an academic. I became a teacher and then furthered my studies and met some wonderful teacher educators who inspired and propelled me to always take the next leg of the journey. So, who am I? I am a successful teacher educator, researcher, and curriculum scholar, a successful parent, a mentor to many, and, overall, an academic who loves her students and works hard to help them and myself succeed. I note though that it's difficult to separate these different selves, as they are all interrelated, and one does not exist without the other.

Synthesizing for Self-Understanding

Undertaking this critical analysis through *currere* has allowed me to reveal hidden facets of my life history (Garcia, 2021) and showcase the intersections between self and the structures of schooling and society that are steeped in the effects of colonialism in a country that was once colonized. As noted in my narratives, there is discomfort that comes from talking about myself. This discomfort results from the cognitive and emotional difficulties faced when recalling memories (Richert, 1990), especially for individuals living in countries that were once colonized. Nonetheless exposing the "masked self" (Kelly, 2020) is crucial in unearthing the beauty and power that reside in our stories and create opportunities for decolonizing our minds. Unmasking also allows us to see the various versions of ourselves that we intentionally or unintentionally allow others to see (Guo & Moon 2022; Jacobsen & Kristiansen, 2014). From my story, it is evident that my essence is shaped by my family, social context, school life, and the dispositions of teachers who supported particular desires at different points in my journey. Consequently, this demonstrates the concept of curriculum as cultural construction, as together all of these experiences frame my interpretations (Grundy, 1987).

Curriculum as argued by Pinar (2004) is the collective stories we tell others about our past, present, and our future. These stories are derived from our situatedness and the roles that embody our lives. As educators, these experiences converge in classrooms with those of our students and influence how we teach and the level of attention given to what we teach. As a teacher educator and curriculum scholar, I have often felt that other teachers could benefit from a storying of my experiences but at the same time felt such storying may not be considered academic enough within my context. This for me represents my ongoing struggle with the disconnect between what curriculum truly is and the understanding of curriculum that dominates the country context of my professional practice.

Within Jamaica, a model of schooling that emphasizes examination results and curriculum as product adopted from the British colony continues to dominate the structures of schooling. This represents a narrowed view of curriculum and often reduces students' autonomy, constrains teachers' autonomy, creativity, and innovation, and limits the outcomes of schooling to narrowed measurable outcomes (Winter, 2017). This examination-oriented structure perpetuates a dual education system that has become entrenched in the social fabric of Jamaica and has functioned as the most powerful gatekeeper of the status quo (Patterson 2021; Task Force on Educational Reform, Jamaica, 2004). This dual education system manifests itself in diverse types of schools, especially at the secondary level, that perpetuate a classist and elitist structure (Espeut, 2016; Patterson, 2021). This examination-directed structure facilitates a system of placement and preference based on examination scores and gives rise to tensions such as who attends which type of school, what subjects are offered, and what resources are available (Jennings & Cook, 2019). These structures also influence the pedagogies utilised and the sociological issues with which teachers must contend.

Through reflecting on my history, I have come to realise that pragmatic experiences such as decisions that are made about who is taught what and what students get selected for what tasks or examinations in our classrooms may serve to influence or determine what individuals come to hold as truths about themselves (Varbelow & Gee, 2017). For example, the process of selection for types of school to be attended and types of examinations to sit will influence how students view their place in the society (Sacks, 2001). These decisions have lasting effects beyond the present pragmatic decision and lead to a classist society and a society that is hinged on an inferiority-superiority complex. Additionally, decisions about who does what without attending to issues of fairness leads to low self-esteem of students and students lacking confidence and not wanting to speak in class. While some of these effects may be explicit, oftentimes these are manifested in the hidden curriculum (Alsubaie, 2015). They also lead to entrenched intentional and unintentional oppressive acts that may render one group of students being confident and valued for what they bring to the classroom and another lacking confidence and feeling undervalued because of their circumstances. However, a teacher who is critically conscious of self, the societal structures, and the school culture that perpetuate such actions will create opportunities through teaching that help students derive confidence and own the truths about their circumstances as legitimate and valued knowledge.

Reflecting on my experiences has helped me to understand why I always create opportunities in my teaching learning sessions for each student to share no matter how disconnected a student may seem. This aligns with the views of several scholars who argue that teachers' understanding of the hidden curriculum provides an important means for teachers to improve their practice (Aoki, 1993; Jerald, 2006; Pinar, 1994). Given the colonial structures that continue to dominate schooling and perpetuate an inferior-superior culture in Jamaica, students need to be taught how to have internal dialogue in combatting external pressures that render them less valuable (Cook, 2012). This internal dialogue for me served as a tool for ongoing reflection, self-regulation, and monitoring as I became more aware of my thoughts and actions (Freire, 1968/1992). Dialectical engagements are crucial for decolonizing the curriculum and for identifying, labelling, and combatting oppressive and social injustice actions perpetuated by schooling. These are crucial for moving curriculum from a focus on content to understanding curriculum as being connected with life as lived (Aoki, 1993; Grundy 1987).

Another important lesson in my story is that teachers help to determine students' life chances especially in the context of schools that are under-served, where for many students the teacher serves as a surrogate parent. It was the actions and decisions of teachers that determined that I could sit examinations, and it was the actions and decisions of teachers that determined I could attend a teacher's college. Such influences demonstrate the power that resides in the nature of teachers' work. These decisions and the results I have served to influence the sensitivities I hold regarding my students and in helping them to be successful. A teacher's conception of curriculum affects the decisions he/she makes about what should be done, who should do it, and why it should be done (Dejene, 2020). Such conceptions evolve from teachers' own experiences, their interactions with theory and the reflections that emanate from the combination of theory and experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). As such those who prepare teachers must emphasise for teachers their responsibility to engage critically with self, theory, and research to build their intellectual roles and awaken their critical consciousness (Freire 1963; Giroux 2011).

While years of teaching experience are valuable, experiences alone will not result in the sort of transformative actions required of teachers. Teachers need ongoing professional development through a variety of media including engagement with theory, research, and their own personal search for knowledge, newness, and awakening. Consequently, giving rise to curriculum as the embodiment of the what, the how, the personal, the professional, and the milieu that results from this (Cornbleth, 1984; Grumet, 1981; Pinar, 1995).

Furthermore, issues about better schools continue to dominate the landscape of education in Jamaica, especially as it pertains to secondary education (Jennings & Cook, 2019). Perhaps the time has come for teacher educators to exercise agency and lead the charge for examining the long-term effects of these issues and how they result in a segregated society. My critical consciousness has been awakened about how decisions of my teachers influenced my life and how those decisions are now influencing my professional practice in terms of the issues with which I engage in my teaching, the pedagogies I employ, and my advocacy in helping in-service teachers see curriculum as more than just the subjects they teach. One of the crucial elements of education is to help learners dream and to aid them in becoming thoughtful, active, participatory citizens (Freire, 1968/1992; Giroux, 2011) regardless of their circumstances. Teachers at all levels of the education system (nursery to university) shape consciousness and life chances negatively or positively. Therefore, it is imperative for teachers to critique their experiences and self-understanding to minimise negative influences on their students. To this end, I offer the process of *currere* as a starting point.

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ON WHOLENESS AND DEVOTION

By Bruce Parker & Ren Dawe
Independent Scholars

On December 17, we attended a Yule Celebration at a cabin near Estes Park. Sitting in front of a stone fireplace to fight off the Colorado cold, our hostess asked us to open our hearts and minds to each other and the cosmic energy surrounding us. Sitting in a circle, each of us lit a candle to add our light to the circle. We were then asked to forgive ourselves a past transgression. Fellow participants cast each other's shame into the fire, consumed in forgiveness—a gift that comes more easily when giving it to others than to ourselves. We were then asked to write a word on a piece of flash paper of something we wanted to cultivate in the coming year. Bruce Parker chose *devotion* and Ren Dawe chose *wholeness*. Trusting our intuition, or perhaps the two glasses of mulled wine that preceded the ritual, we gave our words to the smoldering hearth and watched as they evaporated.

In the regressive step of *currere* (Pinar, 1994), we return to the past to capture it as we experienced it and as it influences our present. We focus our inquiries on wholeness and devotion in this article using the regressive step by engaging with our biographic pasts to better understand ourselves in the present. In our writing and activism, there is an understanding that while we must engage with our past selves and experiences, we must not succumb to them—a concept that underlies the regressive moment.

The current academic discourse around wholeness is often grounded in Clark's (1990) claim, "Life is shaped by either an assumption of separateness, in which the essence of reality is fragmentation, or an assumption of wholeness, in which the essence of reality is unity" (p. 47). Ren's autobiographical narratives challenge that binary while investigating the search for wholeness, its relationship to acts of separation, and their connection to *education as experience and experience as education.* Through the lens of transness, these regressive vignettes attempt to analyze wholeness through experiences of amputation, separation, and isolation as a queer academic.

Bruce's Devotions are based on an understanding of devotion as an intense and deep commitment or love that is expressed through action and ongoing practices. The Autobiographic Devotions, taken separately and as a whole, gesture toward a tentative understanding using the regressive moment. They are focused on facts, words, and imagination. They are, at best, partial and incomplete in their exploration.

REN: 1 - WHOLENESS IN TRANSNESS

As a trans person, the search for wholeness is synonymous with the search for identity. It is inherent to my existence in queer spaces, in academic spaces, and in general. Growing up, there was a sense of absence, an unnerving wrongness sewn into my skin. My mother often quoted an authorless set of hermetic principles, a favorite being "before you know what I am, first you must know what I am not." Such was the case with my life as a girl; in each girlish costume resided a sense of emptiness and discomfort.

The discourse of transness is often centered around this experience: gender dysphoria, the sense of unease aroused by a mismatch between biological sex and gender identity. Easily digestible phrases like being "born in the wrong body" and the linear concept of "transitioning" from one gender to another help to generate empathy

Parker, B., & Dawe, R. (2023). On wholeness and devotion. *Currere Exchange Journal*, *7*(2), 19–27.

for us—those presumed to be trapped in the assumed agony of transness. However, my search for wholeness was not in running from dysphoria but walking towards euphoria in environments built to suppress, oppress, and depress queer joy.

When I think of early sensations of feeling *whole*, I smile thinking of my first trans friend's 25th birthday when he drunkenly offered to stab me in the glute with a syringe of testosterone. I quickly and resolutely accepted, and a week of euphoria followed (placebo effect my ass). I think of the first time I saw my chest, swollen from a week pressed under bandages, and the way my body rocked with tears and laughter and ache. I think about myself now, on the brink of an, unfortunately, necessary radical hysterectomy.

As a long-term endurer of endometriosis and a newly-insured working professional, I have the privilege of accessing a procedure wherein my lesion-lined uterus and its accoutrement will be laparoscopically removed through my belly. The desired effect of this procedure is to reduce my pain; an additional effect includes sterilization. It is not the purpose of this piece to analyze the psychological mutations of pain. However, I want to make note of the special kind of horror that accompanies a chronic condition when it is wrought from anatomy intrinsically linked to the emptiness in which you used to (and still may) exist. There is a sort of reckoning with the irony that my pursuit of wholeness has been, and is about to be, wholly reliant on removing parts of me. There is a sense of finality and divorce, of literally and figuratively amputating pieces of me that are linked to my dysphoria.

I am both relieved and grieving in ceasing my association with things that have caused me immeasurable pain. When I research the psychological impacts of hysterectomies, the literature is (unsurprisingly) quite blind to the trans masculine experience. (Alleged) cis women, however, have often reported a sense of "emptiness" after removing their uterus (Silva et al., 2010). Part of me thinks that is a symptom of widespread internalized misogyny: that women's reproductive organs are inherently tied to their worth. Another part of me wonders what sort of space is left in the body after you remove an organ. I worry that I will feel empty, too. The reality is that there is a part of me not long for this world that is destined for, I don't know, an incinerator, I think? When I try to picture it, my mind paints the melodramatic image of a uterus and ovaries, gaping in a barren cornfield, surrounded by vultures. Something about the images of death and decay feels like it gives my soon-to-be-deceased organs a sense of confirmed life—a dramatic end for my dramatic loins.

There is a worry of losing an aspect of a "whole" human experience—I am no longer able to create human life. The psychological literature on infertility and its connection to depression, psychological distress, perceived health, and quality of life is fairly extensive (Klemetti, 2010). I have never wanted to be a child-bearer, nor do I think that my genes—lined with chronic illness and mania—merit inheritance. However, the fantasy of watching someone experience the world for the first time, the way my partners have looked at me when they loved me so much they contemplated wanting two of me, and the crushing social pressure to be a parent or die alone have left me with additional worries of emptiness. The pursuit of wholeness is not necessarily synonymous with the desire for pain relief, but in my case, it absolutely has been; this does not come without sacrifice. However, with this sacrifice comes some aspects of freedom: a hope for relief and, with it, a future unburdened by reproductive function. My gender is a wholeness destined to be felt despite its amputative means.

Parker: 1st Devotion - Facts

When I was in eighth grade, the house I grew up in was emptier and quieter than it had ever been. My brother had stopped coming home from college to visit on weekends, and my mother had decided I was old enough to stay home alone. Those nights were filled with the sound of records and imagined dances with Patrick Swayze to the *Dirty Dancing Soundtrack*; even then I was drawn to bad boys.

My room had a large shelf that was full of stacks of index cards. The stacks were labeled in permanent marker with title cards that read like "Shakespeare Characters" and "Poets 1." I had been devoted to studying these cards for two years. The front of a card might have had the name of a poem and the back the poet, or the front might have had a character's name from a novel and the back the novel's title.

On nights when I didn't feel like dancing, I would pace around the house for hours going through stacks of cards one at a time memorizing or quizzing myself on the cards I had already studied. While attending Pikeville Elementary, I felt dumb and out of place. When I transferred to John's Creek because of being bullied, I felt less out of place, but still behind my classmates academically. I had been an avid reader since discovering the library in 3rd grade but had never heard many of the words pronounced aloud. I believed I sounded uneducated. It was a quiz bowl competition for sixth graders meant to recruit members to the academic team that first allowed space for me to feel intelligent.

Today in a work meeting, a colleague mentioned *Slaughterhouse-Five*. I blurted out "Kurt Vonnegut" without intending to, almost as if I had read the title of the novel on the front of a light blue index card—the light blue cards were my favorites. They commented on how well-read I was, and we moved on. I didn't stop the conversation to explain that I could tell them the plot in about two sentences, character names, and a quote but had never read the novel. I also didn't tell them I was incredibly proud when, at my 8th grade district quiz bowl competition, the speed at which I recalled that *Slaughterhouse-Five* was written by Kurt Vonnegut (1969/1998) won an important match for my team.

Starting the summer that separated sixth grade and seventh grade, the most prominent feature of my room became the stacks of index cards. I learned more facts about literature than many college students do, but it was disconnected and partial knowledge without context. More than a decade later, I came home from college, and on a cold night I burnt those cards, including the light blue ones, in a bucket with my best friend Rhonda at my side.

Ren: 2 - Wholeness as a Queer Academic

To consider "wholeness" as a queer academic makes it apparent that a lot of my educational experiences felt hollow and disconnected. Though I have always been a lover of history and literature, even the history and literature propagated by dreadful white men, the sense of isolation that came with my adolescent transness was augmented by a lack of representation in academia. Neither the content I was learning nor the teachers delivering the information to me gave me any indication of how I fit into the world as a genderqueer person—much less the confidence to try.

My first inauguration to bridging my queer life and academic life came from informal sources: chatrooms, video blogs, chain-smoking on porches long enough to ask a stranger a vulnerable question. I didn't learn the term "trans" until I was a teenager, and I didn't learn about Stonewall until I graduated high school. One of my instructors faced penalty after mentioning the flagrant and casual attitudes to homosexuality in ancient civilizations. I had already graduated with my bachelor's degree before I learned about our trans early pioneers like Candy Darling (2015) and James Barry/Margaret Ann Bulkley (Zvi, 2017). It was several years more before I was finally able to process my anger and grief on their behalf about the ongoing misgendering of these pioneers in academic texts. We continue to proliferate history co-opted from their life's work in entertainment, medicine, queer representation, and beyond to fit within outdated, rigid, and partial curriculum.

In my senior year of high school, my English teacher hated me. He weighed my grading differently than other students to "push me" and, ultimately, to punish me. My queerness was a threat to the Catholic school we both occupied, and my unyielding determination to highlight the presence of subcultures in literature was disciplined. To me, it is the job of the teacher to take nebulous and complex concepts and make them understandable to those experiencing them for the first time. Creating obstacles to learning does not promote resiliency; it creates autodidacts with elitist mindsets. Once, I wrote a paper on the uniquely queer examples of self-isolation and self-destruction of Mercutio in *Romeo & Juliet*. I received a D, a handful of red pen marks highlighting grammatical errors, and the note "incomplete evidence for an empty concept, homosexual innuendo is not an academic theory." The absolute irony, I thought, to be taught not to analyze relationship structures in a romantic text. I still carry the long-standing rage and emptiness I felt in absorbing what he was saying and believing it: my queerness had no place in the academic world. And by that virtue, neither did I.

Parker: 2nd Devotion - Words

Growing up I always had my nose in a book. I refused to leave the house without at least two in case I finished one. I wanted to be an English teacher because I thought that was the best way to make my career about reading. We were required to have a writing portfolio to graduate high school, and mine included two writings I was proud of: a short story about religious intolerance and a personal narrative about my first queer relationship. Both received a distinguished score, which was the highest possible mark. This did nothing to increase my confidence in my writing. I wanted to be a writer, but until college I believed writing for publication was reserved for affluent straight white men.

It wasn't until I read bell hooks, Dorothy Allison, James Baldwin, Eric Rofes, Jeaneatte Winterson, and Minnie Bruce Pratt that I understood there were stories only people who were *not* white affluent straight men could tell and some experiences that could only be theorized by people who had to fight to have their voices heard. These realizations and my devotion to reading and writing led to my interest in curriculum theory. I obtained three graduate degrees in curriculum, which culminated in a dissertation process that took 10 years or two months to complete, depending on when you start counting. There was a point early in those years when I stopped reading and writing altogether. Instead, I filled my time with queer activism. I eventually found my way to completing my dissertation (Parker, 2018) and received my Ph.D. after my activism had earned a position in the Louisiana Governor's Office—at the time the only Democratic Governor in the deep South.

It took the months of loneliness in the early days of the COVID-19 lockdown to lead me back to reading and writing. Rhonda, my high-school best friend and soulmate, and I were in a period of not communicating, but our loneliness brought us back to each other. One quiet Saturday night in the small apartment in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, that I shared with Micah, my partner, I decided to write Rhonda a letter. I started writing to her that night, and in the coming months, it would seem like I never stopped except to read. I then wrote to her about the books I was reading and included quotes that I thought she would like. Over the next year, we exchanged more than 300 letters. Remembering my devotion to Rhonda reignited my devotion to reading and writing.

In one letter I wrote,

> Until I assembled all my letters to you in a binder and considered them each a part of a single document, my dissertation had been my favorite thing I had written, but now this binder is both the longest and the most honest.

In her response to that letter, she asked to read my dissertation. I mailed her a copy in a binder. She was the first person to read it, aside from the members of my doctoral committee and Micah, who copy-edited it prior to submission. Rhonda wrote a 15-page response that ended with her telling me that she was proud of me. While reading that letter, I cried for the second time about completing my dissertation. Those tears wouldn't be the last ones that a loved one brought to my eyes by reading the text.

During that year of my life, when each day found me mailing another letter, I read more than 100 books. I found my way back to curriculum theory texts that had inspired me early in my studies, particularly the work of Janet Miller and William Pinar. I grieved with Joan Didion (2008, 2011) while reading her memoirs about aging and death. I felt the abundance of nature in the words of Annie Dillard (2016). I walked and wrote inspired by Natalie Goldberg's (1986) guide for aspiring writers. I fell in love with the color blue alongside Maggie Nelson and became obsessed and envious of her ability to string together words into powerful, provocative, and beautiful sentences. After finishing *Bluets* (Nelson, 2009), I immediately turned to the front and began to read it again.

Ren: 3 - Wholeness as Experiential Education

I work in higher education, yet I have imposter syndrome, sitting on two graduate degrees I earned online from an inexpensive for-profit college. I worked hard for all the pieces of paper with my name on them in gothic print, despite voluminous commentary to the contrary from my brick-and-mortar peers. I have grieved my inability to have a "traditional" college experience. Over time, I have dulled my jealousy for those who were fortunate enough to have years of aimless general studies, academic advisors, big and beautiful libraries, and social support around every corner. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, I now manage multiple university portfolios as a Faculty Relations Manager for the largest Tech Ed company in the world.

In my working life, I quickly came to dislike how rigid curriculum can be in an online environment. I wonder, though, if this is really the fault of virtual space, as my faculty like to think. Perhaps, like my transness, the online environment just exposes the curriculum for what it truly is: outdated, rigid, and partial. I try to give my instructors as much free reign as possible, ensuring they know how to use the tools available to them to incorporate themselves and their personalities into their classes. I try to remind them (and myself) that nobody can truly control how one presents authenticity in an educational space—whether it is a zoom call, a lecture hall, or a drag ball.

Earlier in my academic career, I was the TA for an Anthropology class. My mentor, Mr. Brian Horne, was an "easy A," and yet, he was more determined to see his students succeed, to operate from a space of kindness, and to celebrate failure with informative forgiveness than any other teacher I have met. He would often forgo lesson plans for weeks and instead weave relaxed sociological conversations into our two-hour-long blocks. Now, when my faculty wax poetic about the "old days" of teaching, Mr. Horne's class is the one to which I like to think they are referring. Part of me understands what they're saying—the intimacy of four white walls and wooden desks, the pedagogy of the erotic's allure in exploring new ideas in an enclosed space. Another part of me wonders if this nostalgia is rooted in familiarity with the elite, the exclusive, and the inaccessible. Are they longing for the days when poor people and marginalized communities were systematically barred from education spaces and ignored in academic texts? When the history of my [trans] community was kept a dirty secret while the history of cisness was kept sanctified, and unnamed as such, in countless textbooks? How could education possibly be whole without my community in it?

I do not believe I experienced "wholeness" in a classroom until my 7th grade history teacher told us that our history book was parading the lies of white men who were ashamed of the truth about their indigenous abuse and racism. This sensation of wholeness came from taking the lesson outside of the book it stemmed from, exposing differing truths, and considering real wholeness in regard to the history we were being taught. In admitting to the cultural amputation of entire segments of history, he showed us that the past is intact in our current world. This colonial cycle of oppressive education threatened to perpetuate its toxic secrecy unless we were brave enough to look at it as it has been, to change what is and what could be. It was our duty to place ourselves in our own curriculum when the experts and teachers would not. This was my first exposure to the concept of *currere*, though I would not become familiar with the term until I fell in love with a curriculum theorist 15 years later.

Seeking wholeness in education means educating the *whole person*. Whole Person Learning terms itself as seeing the human being existing as an interconnected agent, born incomplete and unfinished (Taylor, 2022). Whatever definition of wholeness one chooses and whatever theory of curriculum one may ascribe to, a person is a collection of experiences. This creates the obvious need to incorporate understanding *experience as education and education as experience*. The experiences of transness, of learning to be trans in a world devoted to suppressing free gender expression and of being trans in a learning environment, are critical to my sense of wholeness in both a personal and academic context. Furthermore, my story, and the academic world, will never be whole without it. If we are indeed born incomplete, ignorant, and unfinished and if indeed our curricula are outdated, rigid, and impartial, the queer experience as/of education is not just theoretically beneficial—it is gravely necessary as both learners and educators of and for the whole world.

The queer experience provides a means of opening an aperture to differing perspectives of perceived character in all academic contexts. The queer experience is a formidable teacher of cruelty and kindness. The queer experience is a historical analysis of freedom, pursuing joy against all odds, self-expression, and love and its resistance to be silenced or dispersed. The queer experience exposes both the singularity of the inner world and the deeply interconnected relationships and interdependent systems in the outside world. The queer experience is the bridge between and beyond binary systems of thought and its erosion of hierarchy. The queer experience is a concise lesson in human individuality and our destiny to be unique, unrepeatable, and motivated by the pieces of us craving definition. The queer experience teaches us about individuality, community, and what it takes to be a whole person in a fragmented world.

Parker: 3rd Devotion - Imagination

During a mid-day walk on a trail that runs alongside our apartment complex, I asked Ren, my partner, a question seeking reassurances that I shouldn't have needed.

Earlier that day he had told me that he was exhausted after spending the early morning hours processing with me about our recent arguments on the orange futon we share most every night for most of the night. We fought passionately. We do most things that way.

As I sat on the floor of my home office in contemplation, a memory from my childhood came back to me. I went to my desk to write him a brief note and ended it with, "Today and every day." Until that moment, the many times I had written it before had been referring to the present and the future, but now I meant it looking backwards as well. The writing below that was introduced by and attached to my note was started the week after the Yule celebration that sparked this article and was finished after our fight on January 8, 2023.

January 8, 2023

I recently realized that although I have been reading fantasy literature since I was seven years old, I have never possessed magic items before loving you this past year. You have given me four—the coin, the jar, the ring, and the key.

The Coin

You had been reading a book about currency and became enamored with a particularly rare and difficult-to-find coin that was considered good luck. You found one for both of us that we wear on black cords around our necks. It is the first time I have ever consistently worn jewelry. I rub the coin in moments of anxiety as a ritual of protection.

The Jar

Since befriending an older woman who read my Tarot Cards on her front porch for the first time when I was 16, I have understood Tarot as a tool for inspiring reflection. It was shocking when Cathy, a Tarot reader in Portland, asked me, "Is it possible someone cast a spell on you?" Without hesitation, I said, "Yes." She looked surprised and asked how I knew, and I was honest and replied, "Because he told me he did." When you told me you were neither embarrassed nor proud. I was deeply flattered that you would want me enough to cast a spell on me.

A few months later after we moved in together, I came home from another trip to Portland to find a small jar of honey with a poem you had written about me submerged in it. The note beside the jar read, "This is the love spell I made when we met. Consider this a gesture of me trusting you with my heart."

The Ring

You gave me a ring. Sometimes I wear it on my finger, and sometimes I wear it on the cord with the coin. It feels like it carries with it an unbreakable connection with you. You call it a power ring, and while wearing it, occasionally, my mind wanders just how much power you have over me.

The Key

Yesterday, you gave me a key you found in the parking lot of the Boulder Trader Joe's. You had shown it to me the night before and I wanted you to give it to me, but it felt silly to ask. It has its own black cord and hangs around my neck as I write this, leading me to wonder, not for the first time, if you were able to read my mind or at least my desires. This key and our fight earlier reminded me of some things I had forgotten, hours that are the most real memories of my childhood and that didn't necessarily happen.

When I was a lonely kid living in Coon Creek, Kentucky, I would climb the hills behind my house using sticks as staves to fight monsters and imagine myself a magician *who casts spells to protect my loved ones and the world from evil. I never imagined my gifts to be powerful. My power was in the fantasy versions of my friends or characters in books that I imagined fighting alongside me. I had read everything I could get my hands on about Dungeons and Dragons and Arthurian Legend, so these fantasies were filled with knights, witches, wizards, fairies, and monsters. They are probably why I still play fantasy games.*

Queer and lonely, I fantasized about Lyric, a small framed half-fey prince who would be my partner in my adventures. He was blond, smaller than me, chaotic, all heart, and unstoppable. In the calmer moments, I would imagine sitting with him by the fire in our camp at night resting before battling the monsters that would need to be slain the next day. He was the answer to the question I asked myself when I first realized I was queer, "What is the point of being rejected by everyone I care about if all it means is being alone." He was my permission to myself to be honest about who I was.

Lyric was my first love. As I aged, I began to imagine that these fantasies were another life that I would teleport to as an escape from my real life, which was increasingly lonely and stressful. I used a key that Lyric gave me to teleport between my mundane life made up of school and loneliness and my imaginary one filled with epic quests and love. In my fantasies, I wore the key around my neck on a brown leather strap.

Maybe my devotion to you is influencing my memories and my imagination or maybe some things just don't make sense. Perhaps, our autobiographic past is always understood through our lived present and our desired futures. Either way, these days I am not entirely sure that Lyric, who I understood as my imaginary partner, is not somehow deeply connected to you. If that was you, thank you for making me feel loved even then. Did Lyric look like you, share your energy, and love me with consistent/chaotic devotion, or is my mind subtly reshaping my memories of my imagined adventures?

In the end, I am not sure there is a difference. It remains entirely a matter of devotion.

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Moviehouse Poems (2)

By Mark O’Hara
Stephen T. Badin High School

Rear Window

The screen is a 30-foot skein of skin.
It feels me sitting here, even in back, the 26th row.
A scratchy soundtrack scrolls for early comers, ads for
local businesses, slightly unfocused.
The feature starts, a classic Hitchcock, the opening
shots slapping me in the forehead.
I’m with Karen at the Princess on Beech Street in Oxford.
The screen zooms out, tiny as a postage stamp.
A latecomer jingles down the aisle.
I put my logolepsy on hold
because my eyes are working overtime.
“Give it here, I’ll eat it” from the talker in the next row.
The probing lights of dimness drop from the ceiling.
Raymond Burr’s onscreen now, his voice thin
as a vein of ore. He dips his pen in the well of evil.
Little man squirming in his velvet seat
will hear the heart of the film for days
and watch the spying blues of Jimmy Stewart,
the Tom Hanks of the 1950s, who breaks
both legs in order to heal himself.
“Que haces en tu tiempo libre?”
--your free time that triggers itches in your scalp
and turns the camera of your gaze
back upon yourself, yourself.

◆

Movie Classics

Murals on the walls of this old
art theater show coeds in convertibles,
crew cuts and poodle skirts,
the aisles carpeted in dark flowers
scented with mildew.

After a cartoon the first picture starts,
rows of velvet seats turning invisible
before light blooms from the back wall,
the beam gray on the screen but then
turquoise like the deep ends of pools.

O'Hara, M. (2023). Moviehouse poems (2). *Currere Exchange Journal*, *7*(2), 28–31.

Horns chase the credits before violins
settle the frame gracefully, Myrna Loy
and Clifton Webb smiling at their children,
            or Charles Boyer gaslighting Ingrid Bergman,
            or Spencer Tracy chopping up Ernie Borgnine.

I think of how many houses we've lived in
for two hours—the Columbia Inn, the Victorian
in *Yours, Mine, and Ours*, the Blandings' *Dream House*.
            At intermission the Wurlitzer hits
            the high notes of my heart.

When the features end, I make up a song
in Nelson Eddy's voice, a piece of pure corn
and sentiment, a reprise played
            on a painted cardboard set:
            "Every time I glance at you I fall in love again."

◆

Returning to the Movies

We wait in the parking lot
20 minutes past starting time.
Ticket seller's mask is drab
and fits her face like a frown.
I won't venture to the restroom,
fending off thirst and sitting up
straight through the final preview.
The film moves fast enough,
fight scenes and stunts I've never seen,
and actual good acting around a script
that demands suspended disbelief—
but by the end I've lifted my elbows
off the arm rests, and wondered
what's living under my feet.

◆

Life and the Movies

We join a long line opening day
at the multiplex. Movie's half through
when the sound dies, and the screen goes gray.

From the projection room all that plays
is the ushers' gossip: they're without a clue.
Sorry we joined a long line opening day

we sit in half-dark thinking of a way
to notify the teenage crew
the sound's dead and the screen's gone gray.

Unabashed by what we've heard them say
they fix the platter and apologize too.
Joining a long line opening day

was a mistake, as chaos holds sway
and the flicker and burn begin anew,
the sound dying, the screen going gray

in the manner your best plans sometimes do.
You join a long line opening day
but before the villain's made to pay
the sound dies first, and then the screen goes gray.

◆

Singer Outside the Moviehouse

Listen to the singer on the corner,
sending out long and languorous phrases
blending her tones together like colors.

Her trill is the voice of a mourner
until its range rises and amazes
all listeners to this singer on her corner.

No instruments here: she would sooner
not sing than let guitars or horns rephrase
how her tones blend together like colors.

Her intake's quick, like she's a foreigner
to breathing. Her output's clear and dazes
listeners as she sings on the corner.

You'll remember her voice like your daughter's
first words or laughter, your mind ablaze
with love's blending of tones like colors.

Should I move on? you almost say—armor
myself against the chores of the day?
No. Listen to the singer on the corner
blending her tones together like colors.

FIRST MOVIE

Don’t know its name
    my ear on mom’s heartbeat
    I eat dad’s popcorn
    listen to grandma yell

    at kids for talking
startled by the sudden dark
    grandma scolding kids
    blowing smoke in her hair

I turn toward the light
    as though it’s nourishment
    the beam that carries people
    and puts them on the screen

The Puzzle

By Mona Beth Zignego
Cardinal Stritch University
& Ivon G. Prefontaine
Gonzaga University

Throughout my (Mona's) life, jigsaw puzzles have come and gone. Puzzles came back in full force during Covid to battle the long, isolated days and nights. Going back in time, they were part of my early childhood experiences as I put them together with my mother and siblings. As a teenager, I put together thousand piece or more puzzles at parties or on rainy days, and now I engage blissfully in putting together puzzles with my grandchildren. Lately, puzzles entered my life in a new way in the form of pieces of myself that feel polarized and disconnected as though they don't belong together and can never fit together within my person.

We, Mona and Ivon, are teachers; we met seemingly by chance, connected by common interests about teaching's spiritual dimensions and a quest for answers related to those dimensions. We employ *currerian* mindfulness as a practice to deepen our understanding of the self, including the part of ourselves that teaches, and we view this practice as a journey rather than a destination. We both discovered that understanding of one's self can be revealed by sitting quietly, paying attention, and allowing a space for awareness to open up. We connected the stories of our teaching selves through the journey of our *currere* work (Pinar, 2004), and we wish to share these stories with you.

Our shared journey brought forth questions. Who is the self that teaches? The teaching self often presents as a strong, professional, confident, competent, teacherly persona. So how then does this teaching self connect to other aspects of the self that are not understood as teacherly? How does our teaching self connect to aspects we perceive as weak and incompetent, the parts of the self we feel are not teacher-like? How do the pieces of this puzzle fit together? And, if we willingly and knowingly connect the teaching self with aspects of the self that we find to be not teacher-like, will it strengthen our work? Writing the story of the self who teaches and

its connections to the elements of the self that do not typically manifest in the teaching space, yet help make up who we are, brought our journeys together and brought us peace, clarity, and understanding of who we were, are, and continue to become as teachers and as humans within each of our unique journeys.

The Past Teaching Self as Told by Ivon

I entered the teaching profession as a "non-traditional" student, leaving another career to respond to my calling as a teacher. For most of my career, I taught in a small, hybrid, K-12 school, engaging in a journey towards understanding and uniting the pieces of the self. In August, 2011, preparing to teach another school year, I journaled about feeling apprehensive, uncertain why. I usually experienced anticipation, nervousness, and excitement leading up to each school year, but this felt different. What made me feel this way? What imbalance was I experiencing between life and teaching? Were insights from a mindfulness practice emerging, e.g., recognizing myself as part of the whole, not an island? Who I am as a teacher is a puzzle continuously assembled and reassembled. Problems I saw myself as having no part in, I was a part of each time.

Zignego, M. B., & Prefontaine, I. G. (2023). The puzzle. *Currere Exchange Journal*, *7*(2), 32–40.

Two months later, I re-read my journal. I acknowledged the ideas' importance and emerging significance. My mind, body, and spirit, in concert, were speaking. It took time to form spaciousness for wisdom to emerge. The full meaning is not yet there, but I have matured to recognize there is more to the words than I can understand.

I became attached to the small school where I taught and my role as a teacher. Teacher assistants and parents entered the classroom to be acknowledged as teachers and leaders in their own right. I imagined holding a higher moral ground, and my ego took center stage. My teaching felt distanced from my heart, and I felt like a caricature (Palmer, 2007). Pausing, I sought new questions. Is teaching a calling—a vocation—animating my spirit, giving me voice?

Had teaching turned into a job? If teaching is work, I could teach the same lessons for 15 more years and collect a full pension—a thought abhorrent to me then and now. If teaching is a calling and vocation, I needed to navigate and negotiate the real and imagined obstacles I encountered in different, compassionate ways.

Despite an appearance of confidence, I felt beaten down, fearful my teaching and the school were at risk. I had grown attached to narrow and specific futures, rather than aspirational spaces. Often, people "appear very confident [and] they may think they are making a big effort in the right direction, but without knowing it, what they do comes out of fear" (Suzuki, 2006, pp.

62–63). Did I have the volition to continue? I experienced a protective divide between who I was as a teacher and my practice, encouraged by organizational culture (Palmer, 2007). Despite recognizing school managers' divide-and-conquer traps, I was attached to isolation and its darkness.

I deluded myself with real or imagined wrongs inflicted upon me. I fled to an idealized future, lacking compassion. Blinded by ego and feeling victimized, I became trapped in the past, failed to live in the present, with an unachievable future, never making decisions. Suzuki (2006) proposed that "we should live in this moment" (p. 15). I attributed anger, despair, and non-decisions to others, justifying remaining outside the circle. I was an expert with knowledge, intelligence, and information, but no one listened. Instead of understanding how the person who taught was intertwined in a larger puzzle, I inhabited an island of misery.

I returned to a question I no longer asked: who was I as a teacher? "Seldom, if ever, do we ask the 'who' question—who is the self that teaches" (Palmer, 2007, p. 4)? The who question is spiritual and animating about how I am part of something larger. It is about diverse ways to respond to the heart's longing to feel connected that animates love for work and teaching (Palmer, 2007). To rediscover what animated my teaching, I chose to study who I was and was becoming as a teacher; to listen and respond to the teacher's voice within me honoring my true nature and asked what brings me to teaching today (Palmer, 2007). I reflected on a poetic line, "Tell me, what is it you plan to do/With your one wild and precious life?" (Oliver, 1990, p. 60). I tried to rekindle what brought me to teaching.

The Past Teaching Self as Told By Mona

Who was I as a teacher, indeed? My identity as an educator was in crisis. A teacher for over twenty-five years, I had a full-time job for a non-profit, coaching teachers and facilitating professional development in addition to adjuncting for a university. What I did not know, I asked other professionals and researched and/or attended trainings to build additional relevant content knowledge and confidence in my field. I worked through problems of practice when they arose as I began to connect my practice to care theory to support my teaching during the pandemic, and I found critical friendships with other, like-minded practitioners to help sustain my work (Noddings, 2009, 2012; Zignego & Sellers, 2022).

My internal teaching self was constructed of all my past teaching experiences, and I drew from them to support my work. For example, I felt all the stress and anxiety as my practice evolved through the pandemic, and I constructed reflective tools to support my and other practitioner's work (Zignego & Sellers, 2022). Prior to that, I had worked through numerous curricular changes, administrative difficulties, parental situations, and simple day-to-day classroom content and management circumstances in the schools in which I worked over the years. I had taught essentially every grade from preschool through 12th grade and had added extra-curriculars like coaching field hockey and directing plays into my teacher persona. All the joys, knowledge, experiences, and struggles collectively contributed to the puzzle piece of my teacher self in numerous ways. I felt like I knew my teaching self after all the ups and downs of the past decades in the field. I felt grounded, established, competent, and confident— and then a family member became ill.

This illness was fraught with pain. For months I struggled to care for him as I continued to work. I attended numerous doctor appointments across two states to try to find answers to the pain he was experiencing. None were to be had. We would leave doctor appointments feeling completely broken, trying to keep up hope, trying not to despair, but ultimately losing heart. We yearned to be cared for, to be told answers, and to find solutions, but none were to be found. I felt so broken, flawed, and unknowing—and then I had to teach. Teaching for me consisted of coaching in-service teachers, facilitating workshops, conducting presentations, and teaching masters-level university classes. It was hard to disassociate from my personal life that felt broken and weak. How could I teach under these conditions? Who was my professional teaching self? I felt the lines had become blurred between my teaching self and my caregiver-self. The pieces refused to fit. When I teach, my teacherly self is confident and competent. I support my university students and I provide answers and resources for their important work.

How could I put this broken caregiver-self away and teach? I struggled to suppress the caregiver-self and pull up the teacher-self when class began. Between the teacher-self and the Caregiver-self, it was as though I were comparing apples to oranges. I could not come to grips with these parts of myself—they were so completely dichotomous. Then I received an email from a university student.

This student was going through her own struggles with illness in her family. She was in need of support—support that did not consist of course content and resources. She needed support in the form of excusing late assignments and allowing missed classes. She needed care and understanding. Suddenly the lines between the caregiver-self and the teacher-self were not so blurred, the pieces began to come together, and a deep compassion and understanding emerged, the likes of which I had never experienced before. I had developed a new teacher-self through connecting with this broken caregiver-self. The teacher-self that always had the answers was not enough in this situation, I needed this other broken and unsure part of myself that understood deeply what was involved in caring for another human who was sick.

The Present Teaching Self as Told By Ivon

Who am I as a teacher? I rephrase Mona's question into the present tense. When things do not go my way, I cast blame, rather than take responsibility. Almost a decade after exiting teaching K-12, I am wary of traps of my own making; I peer into thickets for hidden meanings and sometimes become ensnared in the tangles, and more questions lie in wait (Poetter, 2020). In the *currerian* present I ask, “Am I no longer a K-12 teacher, since I left the K-12 classroom?” As I emerge from thickets and navigate tangles, I try to understand them better, negotiate them with grace, and serve each student well in a new role as a student-teacher supervisor (Palmer, 2007).

Mona’s puzzle analogy is apropos. I assemble who I am in a *currerian* present, without guiding pictures or boundaries to reclaim a wholeness of who I am amidst the practice of teaching. I act with care and purpose to regain a radical sense—returning to my roots—of who I am as a person with agency, action, and meaning (Poetter, 2020). Through self-reflection and contemplation, new meaning emerges from past, sometimes buried, educational experiences and what I aspire to, re-membering who I am and what called me to teach, recovering identity and integrity in the process (Baszile, 2017; Palmer, 2007; Whitehead, 1929). In mindful spaces, I ask who is the self that teaches, and how I can share this self with student-teachers I supervise?

Understood as a puzzle, pieces of my self interact with others, interlocking, releasing, not quite fitting to inform who I am and who I am becoming. *Currere* is a reflective, contemplative journey of self-discovery and understanding in relation to others and “positioned in a particular historical moment” (Baszile, 2017, pp. vii–viii). I no longer see myself wholly as a K-12 teacher. Peering closer, I make meaning from pieces in thickets of re-membering. The *currerian* present is an unfolding space, complicated by interacting with others, incomplete recall of the past, and fleeting glances into an unknowable future.

I navigate the *currerian* present with care to give meaning to memories that inform an aspirational future. There is a rhythm where the present absorbs the past giving meaning to the present as I carry on—pressing forward—dislodging myself from being submerged in the present (Dewey, 1934; Pinar, 2012). In this rhythm, there are touchstone questions about what it means to be a teacher, what being a teacher means, and what becoming a teacher means so I might find a way to put the puzzle together. In assembling the puzzle, I continue to learn about myself as a situated knower, about the world around me, and about others who are entering the profession with their own aspirations and memories (Baszile, 2017). I am learning how to share these questions with each aspiring teacher I encounter.

The Present Teaching Self as Told By Mona

I meet with a teacher for a coaching session. She is tired, broken, worn-out, and questioning everything. Faced with a teacher shortage at her school, she subs during her prep periods, her students’ specials (music, gym, art) have all been cut, and her class is a combined 1st and 2nd grade with twice the number of students she has ever had. I am again realizing that connecting with the parts of myself that feel broken and most decidedly unhelpful and unprofessional can provide support, care, and understanding for this teacher. I am learning about myself and others in this moment of my journey (Baszile, 2017).

I now realize that in the past I viewed myself as having two distinct selves: a caregiver-self and a teacher-self. This is untrue, as there are so many personas that we all hold. This truth speaks to me even more strongly than ever as I read Ivon’s words in the previous section on seeking meaning from the obscured pieces of ourselves. Nevertheless, I viewed the teacher-self as strong, organized, confident, and knowledgeable and the caregiver-self as emotional, unknowledgeable, unconfident, and unmoored. I did not want to accept the caregiver as part of myself, and certainly, I did not want to accept it as part of my professional practice.

However, the merging and accepting of selves allowed me to understand the perspectives of those I worked with while bringing the elements of care and understanding more deeply into my practice. I feel such a deep, connected level of care for the university student who is battling her medical situation and with the teacher I am coaching who is struggling to work in impossible conditions. I attribute this to allowing the puzzle pieces to come together as my caregiver-self and teacher-self merge and inform one another. By acknowledging and accepting the caregiver-self, with all the elements that I found so deficient, I was able to provide deep understanding, empathy, and options.

Using *currere* as an avenue toward a deeper understanding of the self, through mindfulness, analysis, regression, and reflection, I found and continue to find clarity. I found an understanding of who I was in my differing selves in the alternate environments of personal and professional. This led to an understanding of the benefits of bringing those pieces together in my professional environment. This brought clarity to my caregiver-self through this analysis and interpretation of my teacher-self and caregiver-self. After this analysis, I was able to apply those understandings to my practice. I had only wanted to acknowledge one self—the strong powerful self. I wanted to hide the other self and render it obsolete. It was connected to negative, painful, experiences. I wanted that self to go away and certainly not to merge with my strong desirable professional self, but in the end, the strength was in accepting all the pieces of myself.

As I work within my present practice, I am meta-aware of caring for those I work with through connecting with parts of myself that feel as though they are disconnected from the teaching profession. I am allowing those parts to rise to the surface to provide care for those I work with. For me, care means offering what is needed for those who are suffering alongside content knowledge and resources for teaching. For the university student struggling with illness in her family, I provided options for assignments that could work with her situation. As I coach the teacher struggling within her practice, I listen, I empathize, I connect, I provide some resources to try to reduce her workload, and I tell her story. I let the pieces of myself become part of me, and like Ivon, they inform my new identity and my future in teaching.

The Teaching Self of the Future as Told by Ivon

All went to the university
Where they were put in boxes
And they came out all the same[1]

I struggle to write coherently about my future self. Puzzle pieces wait amid thickets and tangles, and I encounter them as questions. How do I guide a new generation of teachers into the profession? Although it appears counterintuitive, the future is predicated on re-membering to remember the past, enabling me to reconstruct the present and awaken a purposeful vision for a hopeful future (Pinar, 2012; Wagamese, 2016). Questions, thickets, and puzzles re-member the past, present, and future. I re-member Rilke (1993) advising the young poet "to live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer" (p. 27). The future arrives on its own, emerging from each present moment and re-membering the past.

Today, my teaching involves aspiring teachers and their mentor-teachers. I take care to engage with them, echoing Mona's ethic of care. What does care mean as my present and future self enters K-12 classrooms? Like Dewey (1934), she uses care as a verb: to actively, practically, autonomously, and purposefully mind for others emotionally and thoughtfully. I choose to care for those I encounter and others who will be impacted by teaching future teachers. In these ways, my teaching attempts to create caring conditions (Palmer, 2007). How do I share this feeling with those I encounter each day in classrooms?

I re-member what called me to be a teacher: to make a difference. In conversations with student-teachers and mentor-teachers, I describe how teaching emerges from an inner source that evokes a sense of deep gladness with one's whole being, bringing happiness to others (Palmer, 2007). I describe what this means to me, how I experienced it, and how I continue to unravel its meaning to inform my teaching. I acknowledge there are challenges and suggest when we encounter them we ask, "Is teaching what I want to do? Will it make me truly happy?" These are questions for other future selves—aspiring teachers.

Instead of pursuing dispiriting, measurable, well-defined outcomes based on prescribed curricula and test scores, I ask aspiring and current teachers to embrace hopeful, ambiguous, ill-defined qualities that reveal who they are and their educational experiences to those they teach. (Pinar, 2012). I share how relationships inform teaching after listening to others describe their educational experiences and stories in relation to official curricula. I honor their subjectivities by caring for and listening to them to keep my subjectivities in check. Good teachers express who they are—their subjectivity—linking their lived curriculum with a planned one.

As I enter K-12 classrooms, I experience how schools remain unchanged since I attended.

I can argue that they feel more oppressive in many ways with new thickets for teachers to become lost in. Mentor-teachers ask student-teachers to perform and deliver lesson plans based on curricular outcomes, rather than engaging students in conversations that reveal what they learned and understood. They tell me this is the way we do things. As departments, they design tests all students write; therefore, they all teach the same things the same way, at the same pace. Homogenization and efficiency are cornerstones of 21st Century schools, intended to cram information into students and prepare them for standardized exams (Palmer, 2007; Pinar, 2012). Teachers recycle slideshows teaching from the front of a room, rather than circulating and engaging each student. How do we dismantle new and old walls—thickets—to meaningfully encounter each student?

Mentor-teachers appear interested when I describe how I eliminated tests, used projects, and offered each student a voice in their learning. People who teach differently often feel devalued, forced to measure up to norms other than their own (Palmer, 2007). I observe students taking notes verbatim. I describe how I suggested one student write notes as poetry and introduced ee cummings to them. Today, that student writes poetry and shares it with me. When we step away from imposed norms and order of how to teach, teaching and learning occur in "community—a dialogic exchange in which … knowledge [is] expanded, an exchange in which we are not simply left alone with our own thoughts" (Palmer, 2007, p. 79). When teaching is performed and curricula scripted, it strips each teacher and student of their subjectivity and social purpose, teaching and learning are understood as standardized (Pinar, 2012). Because mentor-teachers express concern over fallout, student-teachers tell me they avoid controversial topics such as climate change, conspiracy theories, certain texts, etc. I went where angels feared to tread. I ask/asked students and myself to search for and speak truths with care and respect for each other as they engaged in complicated conversations linking their lived curriculum with the official curriculum (Palmer, 2007; Pinar, 2012). How do I counsel student-teachers to form and inform safe, caring spaces for mindful, complicated conversations where disagreements can and do arise?

I encourage and offer ideas for active learning and less note-taking. I let student-teachers know that teaching is a solitary profession and that teachers speak with each other about teaching only in passing, failing to touch the heart of each teacher's lived-experience (Palmer, 2007). Teachers' capacity to effectively communicate academic knowledge to their students can be hindered when they are isolated in classrooms. Engaging in adult conversations and enacting curriculum as a complex dialogue informed by academic knowledge, subjectivity, and the historical context is crucial for empowering teachers (Pinar, 2012). Based on this, how do I advise student-teachers that understanding each individual voice—student and teacher—is essential to teaching and learning?

Sometimes the student-teacher, mentor-teacher, and I are in a minority: white and Canadian-born. Many students are visible minorities and recent immigrants. Despite changing demographics, there is limited space for stories based on their personal experience to emerge and be shared (Palmer, 2007). With limited prior knowledge of Canada, how do these students make sense of our foreign, often colonial, history? I observe student-teachers who are immigrants to Canada. How does my future self demonstrate care when they struggle in their practicum? How do I overcome my feeling of being at odds with systemic inertia?

The Teaching Self of the Future as Told by Mona

As I think toward the future, I find myself feeling a bit uneasy with this new identity but all-in and engaged in what is to come. This is a different feeling than hiding or denying pieces and parts of myself. I feel interested, albeit a little nervous, in seeing what is to come and what new parts of myself emerge as life unfolds and as I interact with those I work with. As I notice care seeping into my personal and professional life, I have done much research on care theory in education, but for the future, I wonder about its implications for education as well as for the medical field (Noddings, 2009). Nel Noddings created care theory as a way to explain the reciprocal giving and receiving of care between the teacher and student, which is based on the teacher's moral responsibility to produce honest, upright adults (Noddings, 2015). Care theory can be a pathway to improve teaching and learning (Meyers, 2009; Newcomer, 2018; Noddings, 2012). For me, the more I embrace care within my practice, the more the puzzle pieces of myself come together, improving my self-care, my teaching, and perhaps more importantly working toward cultivating a world where people care for one another. As I see the benefits of care within my practice, I wonder about and reflect on the implications of care theory for the future.

I still have no answers for the family member who is ill. As we continue to see doctors, run tests, and look for answers, I ponder the future and wonder where my role is situated within this medical situation. As I relive the trauma of doctors sadly shaking their heads with no answers for us, I wonder how I can learn from this and help others. Is there a place for my voice? Is there a way to build awareness of care for those like me who are searching for answers? Can I be a voice for those who have no voice? As I consider the teaching world, I wonder and reflect—how do I provide care for our teachers and university students? How can the current system support self-care for teachers? How do I care for teachers and support their daily work? How do we as a society care for teachers? Last of all, what role do I have in this greater picture of society in providing care to those I interact with? Through my own internal work, I can see there are puzzle pieces within our society at large that need to come together. In each moment, I have the power to help with this task through the provision of care for others. I can accept who I am and what is happening within my life and use it to positively interact with those around me.

Conclusion

There are so many parts of the self that we hold as humans. They feel so compartmentalized, yet we discovered through mindfully reflecting together about our separate journeys, they are not separate entities. They are part of who we are. We bring out different selves based on situations we find ourselves in, yet there is an interconnected web within us based on who we are (Van der Kolk, 2014). Van der Kolk (2014) tells us that internal leadership is essential to connecting all the parts of ourselves. This leadership consists of self-care, listening to what the body wants, avoiding self-sabotage, and acceptance of all the elements of the self.

This is crucial in connecting the elements that make up the constellation of who we are. MIT scientist Marvin Minsky (1988) found through his work that, within the mind, there is a society of different elements of the self. These different selves can work together in tandem to help and support one another.

In our past selves, we both felt uncertain about our abilities, experiencing an identity crisis as puzzle pieces became scattered. As we explored our past and present selves through a shared writing activity, self-reflection brought each of us new insights we could count on and fresh perspectives from our less-confident alter-selves to connect parts of ourselves meaningfully. Despite feeling uneasy, we are willing to engage our future selves to better understand how the pieces of our identities might fit together and how we can share the emerging puzzle with our future students.

We traveled similar paths in our search for answers for who we are and how we can bring all aspects of who we are meaningfully into our teaching. We both seek to make meaning of our four decades of lived experiences as teachers. We claim *currere* as a way to piece the parts of ourselves together to better understand ourselves and the world we live in. Bringing our journeys together brought clarity and a deeper understanding of the puzzle pieces that make up who we are and how we can contribute to the world meaningfully.

Endnotes

[1] This is from the song "Little Boxes" written by Malvina Reynolds in 1962. It was written as a protest against the homogenization of suburbia beginning to happen at the time. It appears we attend university and, at best, the changes are superficial. What would Malvina say today?

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USING *CURRERE* CONCEPTS WITH WRITING DURING PHYSICAL THERAPY TREATMENT

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Imagine feeling physical pain that consumes your life, and you can no longer sleep. Your doctor recommends physical therapy, so you find yourself about to walk into an unfamiliar clinic. The clinic seems like a nice environment, with calm music playing from the speakers and inspirational posters hanging on the walls. A (thankfully, fake) spine lurks in the corner in case the physical therapist wants to complete a demonstration. The other patients encompass a mix of humanity and pain levels, but some of them smile when the physical therapists ask them about their interests in the middle of instructions such as, three sets of fifteen. You hope you will be treated as a person, not just a collection of symptoms. The next chapter of your healing journey begins.

This *currere* composition connects the theory of narrative inquiry and the practice of multigenre writing with clinical research for patients as they navigated through physical therapy treatments to remediate painful conditions. In this pilot study, we show that physical therapy (PT) improvements were evaluated similarly when using physical therapy outcome measurement tools and patient self-reporting using short answer expressive writing prompts. This narrative connects the patient experience to the four phases of *currere*. The patients' past experiences influence their outlooks, their confrontation of obstacles influences their future healing, and their desire for clinicians to hear their voices anchors them in the present. Past, present, and future coalesce when a patient arrives to a clinic seeking help; consequently, multiple factors integrate to influence how well a patient will heal. This educational journey uses the *currere* method as a narrative thread by dovetailing multiple perspectives with a researchable scenario to illustrate the value of expressive writing for physical therapy patients.

Our research and writing team consists of Dr. Eric Wanner, physical therapist, Dr. Jayne Brahler, research professor, and Dr. Jennifer Bird, English teacher. While each of us brought our own expertise to this project, in this *currere* narrative we refer to all things our team accomplished with the first-person pronoun "we."

Our dilemma during this *currere* process occurred with how to accurately present patient voices while simultaneously maintaining confidentiality. To include the voice of every patient within the scope of these pages would clutter the writing and confuse the reader; yet, to simply summarize could result in stealing the patient voices from them. Consequently, we incorporate creative elements of multigenre writing to illustrate the emotional truth of patient experiences while grounding the factual truth of the research in a series of descriptive author notes.

In the qualitative interpretive theory of narrative inquiry, Clandinin and Connelly

Bird, J. L., Brahler, C. J., & Wanner, E. T. (2023). Using *currere* concepts with writing during physical therapy treatment. *Currere Exchange Journal*, *7*(2), 41–51.

(2000) explain, "In narrative inquiry, there is a relationship between researchers and participants, and issues of voice arise for both" (pp. 146–147). The research with physical therapy patients used traditional numerical statistics to demonstrate that the discoveries held up under the scrutiny of concrete data analysis, but as researchers we also wanted to experience patients' unique voices. Romano (2004) explains,

> I'll use the word voice—the sense we have while reading that someone occupies the middle of our mind, filling the space with the sound of a voice, the sense we have while writing that something is whispering in our ear. (p. 6)

Studying voice in patient writing helps patients become a person to their clinicians, not just a diagnosis.

Patients in a physical therapy clinic can write in response to short answer prompts to express their voices, similarly to the way students in an English classroom write in response to short answer prompts. Connelly and Clandinin (1988) state, "What is special about the notion of *currere* is that it emphasizes a person's experiential history both in and out of schools" (p. 20). By integrating an individual's narrative into the curriculum of learning, the *currere* process applies to settings outside a teacher's classroom. Pinar (1975) asks, "What role in this biography do my evolving intellectual interests play?" (p. 20). All of us value interdisciplinary collaboration and expanding the boundaries of what others in our respective fields consider normal practice.

Multigenre writing successfully connects the artistry of creative writing genres with technical research. Romano (2000) states,

> When I taught high school seniors to write multigenre research papers, I asked them to turn in one thousand words a week of expressive writing in which they reported, conjectured, quoted, connected, created, experimented, even tried genres that seemed suddenly upon them. (p. 138)

Multigenre writing can incorporate creative nonfiction, fiction, poetry, or other innovative style choices by the author. Romano (1995) wrote, "I asked students to write a note page that explained some of the nitty-gritty, the ins and outs of particular pieces" (p. 142). These author notes elaborate upon the research and explain the author's thought process.

In the description of patient experiences, we use five types of multigenre writing. The first genre, which you read at the introduction to this narrative, is a creative nonfiction piece that breaks the style rule of never using the word "you" in a formal article. Even if you have not been a physical therapy patient, it asks you to imagine yourself in the shoes of a patient who walks through the doors of a clinic for treatment. The second genre is a composite of patient experiences using fictional techniques to eliminate identifying patient information while maintaining emotional truth. Handler (2013) explains, "Emotional truth isn't always provable truth" (p. 155). Nevertheless, emotional truth, or story truth, retains the essence of the narrative while honoring privacy. As writing teacher N. Goldberg (2000) explains, "Fiction lets us unhinge from facts and unleashes the soul of a thing" (p. 129). The third genre is the section of author notes containing the factual, provable truth learned from our pilot study. Even though this is a narrative piece, our research included statistics because, as Wheelan (2013) argues, "statistics can bring meaning to raw data" (p. 4). The fourth genre integrates the four phases of *currere* with a guide of how to apply the information we learned. After treating numerous patients as a nurse, S. Goldberg (2019) recommends,

> It's helpful to create a narrative or story around the situation prior to going to the appointment. This will give your symptoms context and provide meaning to the timeline, and you'll naturally equip your provider with key information you may not even realize is relevant. (p. 123)

Finally, the fifth genre that flows through our writing is a collection of our reflections in our voices as the authors. Since we wrote collaboratively, we use "we" instead of "I" to tell our story.

Physical therapy patients have their own perceptions through which they view injury, pain, and treatment; yet as crucial as it may be to their healing, the patient's voice may not be heard. For example, when patients provide their current pain level and description of symptoms to a physical therapist, the information is assumed by both the therapist and the patient to represent the patient's present situation. In reality, however, the information is a construct based on the patient's past experiences and anticipated outcomes, and the present factual situation is a construct derived from these past experiences and future projections. For example, a patient may feel less pain in a particular moment when speaking to the physical therapist but forget to mention severe pain that occurred the previous day. Consequently, the physical therapist does not have all the information to best help the patient. Writing serves as a method to help the patient remember details to share. Weinert (2023) believes, "Personal writing offers limitless opportunities for personal growth and transformation, but the real magic happens when you let your story leave your body and take the risk of letting others relate to, feel, and engage with it" (p. 253). For the physical therapist to learn the patient's pain narrative, the patient needs to share the story and feel comfortable doing so. Consequently, what if, in addition to the actual physical therapy treatment, we find that the patients' end results are directly affected by the patients sharing their voices in writing? Additionally, what if having the patient's voice heard by the physical therapist is equally as important? Furthermore, what if expressing themselves and being heard by their therapists can predict their physical therapy outcomes? What if this allows the patient to feel they are on a good path for recovery that makes them more compliant with doing their home program and attending their physical therapy sessions?

PATIENT VOICES

Patients begin physical therapy and arrive at the clinic twice a week, maybe more, or maybe less. Depending on the other events of their lives, some patients are in better moods than others. The mood of each patient may even vary day to day. One patient may feel great after completing exercises and vow to complete the same exercises every day in front of the television while watching the nightly news. Another patient may not see hope for feeling better after being awakened by the pain in the middle of the night.

During treatment, the physical therapist sets goals for each patient, but patients tend to have goals of their own. Perhaps the goal is to dance at a birthday party in six months or to return to the same level of playing baseball as before the injury. For other patients, the goals may not be as specific, and the focus is only getting the pain to stop. On the path to achieving goals, obstacles occur. When patients were asked to respond to the following short answer writing prompt, each patient wrote from the perspective of their experiences and expectations.

> What are some actions you plan to take so you could prevent/overcome obstacles that might hinder your progress?

Each of the answers shared below is from a different patient.

> Hopefully, the neck weakness will go away because I'm learning to strengthen those muscles.
> Be careful adding things back into my life as I begin to feel better.
> Continue my home exercise plan (as given by PT) + swimming & walking as I was doing previously. Prevent any exacerbation of injury by maintaining proper posture/movements as much as possible.
> Continue PT@home and here. Search other options of relief.
> Keep on working out.
> I plan on getting therapeutic massages to help with my tightness along with allotting the already scheduled time for my exercises.
> Keep doing what we are doing! It's working. Thank you, Great Staff.
> Get my children and husband to remind me.
> Continue with therapy & exercises.
> Continue daily stretches & focus on progress everyday.
> Make time to do exercises at home.
> Home therapy
> No answer

Author Notes

We conducted a qualitative case series study, whereby the cases were defined as 13 patients at an outpatient orthopedic physical therapy clinic in Florida who underwent physical therapy treatment and provided written insights regarding their experience at the end of their first, second, and fourth weeks of treatment. We designed a survey (Wanner & Bird, 2013) consisting of numerical subjective questions and written subjective questions modeled after short answer writing prompts. We include excerpts from the survey in this section. We evaluated the writing using a rubric adapted from the work of Tom Romano that focuses on both the artistic and technical aspects of writing. Romano (2013) explains,

> The holistic portion allows me to open myself to what the paper is doing, to feel it, just as I want to feel other crafted writing I read. The required elements remind me to examine how well students executed specific skills, strategies, and genres I've taught. (p. 167)

The technical part of patient writing examined how specifically they articulated their goals, while the artistic part of patient writing captured their voices.

For example, in looking at the responses in the previous section, the first response ("Hopefully, the neck weakness will go away because I'm learning to strengthen those muscles.") scored high on both the artistic part of the rubric (for a strong voice and the positive word "hopefully") and the technical part of the rubric (for the specific example "strengthen those muscles"). Each patient response for each question showed variation in both voice and specificity. Additionally, the patients completed objective, standardized physical therapy assessments, such as the Neck Disability Index (NDI), Disabilities of the Arm, Shoulder, and Hand (DASH), Lower Extremity Function Scale (LEFS), or the Modified Oswestry depending on the anatomical location of their injury. Patients completed the standardized assessments prior to their first physical therapy treatment and following their final physical therapy treatment. Standardized physical therapy assessments also provide information regarding the patient's perceptions about their experiences. They were included because the intention of this research was to not only to evaluate the effectiveness of writing on physical therapy outcomes but also to reach the physical therapists, who place credence in the standardized exams used. These objective tests were used to evaluate medical progress that is considered to be objective evidence in the physical realm; although, it is appreciated that even medical progress in the physical realm is influenced by patient interpretation, as well as past experiences and future expectations. Each outcome measurement survey utilizes a different scoring scale. To combine the data from the different assessments, we converted raw scores to change-in-percent impairment scores, analyzed the statistical data, and compared the data to the writing scores from the rubric. The complete survey appears in our previously published article in *The Journal of Humanities in Rehabilitation* (Wanner et al., 2022).

Writing about experiences was a composite of past experiences and future expectations. Patients who expressed a higher positive outlook showed greater improvements according to how they scored on the standardized physical therapy assessments, and patients with a more positive outlook also had significantly fewer perceived barriers to having a successful therapeutic outcome. Physical therapy patients who used positive words in their writing while responding to short answer writing prompts showed higher ability improvement on existing outcome measurement surveys (DASH, LEFS, NDI, or Modified Oswestry) (Wanner et al., 2016). We discovered past experiences + future expectations = present healing.

Connecting to *Currere*

Currere demands that we continuously refine our autobiographies. Dooley (2022) writes about a difficult experience, "Is it possible that this is a better story and that I am becoming better because of it?" (p. 185). Because life constantly changes, autobiographies continue to add new chapters. In our research study, as our patients added new chapters to their healing journey, we added new chapters to both our research and to our own narratives.

Currere shares components of its philosophy with Buddhism, such as focusing on the breath. We find our stillness before we act. Neff (2021) shares the description, "in Buddhist teachings, this powerful action-oriented aspect of compassion is called 'fierce compassion.' It's the force that stands up to harm or injustice" (p. 31). A passion for research and compassion for others motivated all of us on the research team to design an idea that would help other people and make a difference in their lives.

Past Regressive Influenced by Outlook

Past experiences can determine a patient's outlook. Psychiatrist Boardman (2021) argues, "Today, there is increasing evidence that positive everyday experiences and activities that engage, connect, and fortify us are critical sources of vitality" (p. 65). Because we were interpreting the patients' writings, we developed constructs to guide viewing the patients' writings. We labeled the first construct the Positive Outlook Assessment. The theory behind the Positive Outlook Assessment construct is that patients with a more positive outlook will be more likely to achieve their physical therapy goals. Short answer writing prompts for this construct use the artistic part of the writing rubric. The following written subjective questions comprised the construct:

> Have your goals changed since the beginning of the physical therapy? Why or why not?
> What potential obstacles do you anticipate that might prevent you from meeting your long-term goals (at four weeks of PT)?

> What are some actions you plan to take so you could prevent/overcome obstacles that might hinder your progress?

A patient may interpret the present physical therapy experience based on past experiences of healing from pain. If a patient had an effective previous medical experience, the patient may value the healing journey more and view it from a positive perspective. Consequently, this construct focused on responses to short answer written response questions, such as if patient goals had changed during physical therapy and actions patients planned to take to make progress. Patients who used more positive words when responding to the prompts experienced greater healing gains.

After conducting several research studies, Seligman (2011) concluded, “Pessimists give up and suffer more stress, whereas optimists cope better with stress” (p. 207). Learning about a patient’s coping mechanisms can help a physical therapist understand why a patient may or may not comply with a home treatment plan and help the patient develop strategies to manage stress. Medical doctor Tindle (2013) learned from research and studying her patients, “Outlook provides some people with the gumption to seize opportunities, and in other cases seems to sabotage any hope of healing” (p. 6). Writing serves as a method for a clinician to learn not only about the patient’s voice, but also the patient’s outlook. Cameron (1998) believes that “there is no better way to open a writing voice than to write regularly, repeatedly, and from the gut” (p. 154). Too often, patients think of their best questions after they leave the clinic. Writing helps a patient remember questions and helps a clinician learn how the patient feels between appointments.

Future Progressive Influenced by Goal Setting

Future goals can determine a patient’s willingness to overcome obstacles. Duckworth (2016) believes that “grit is about holding the same top-level goal for a very long time” (p. 64). Returning to the research study, we labeled the second construct the Obstacle Articulation Assessment. The construct called Obstacle Articulation Assessment focused on patient stress level, time to complete exercises, motivation to complete exercises, and specificity of identifying goals and obstacles. We used each assessment to stratify the patient’s positivity and their ability to overcome obstacles to achieving their goals. Patients who could identify perceived stress, free time to complete a home exercise plan, motivation to succeed in treatment, and the ability to clearly articulate their goals in writing would be most likely to have a favorable treatment outcome. Short answer writing prompts for this construct use the technical part of the writing rubric. The following numerical subjective and written subjective questions comprised the construct:

> Please indicate the degree that the following potential obstacles could hinder your progress.

Current stress level in your life

A large amount 1 2 3 4 5 A small amount

Amount of time to complete exercises at home

A large amount 1 2 3 4 5 A small amount

Motivation to complete exercises

A large amount 1 2 3 4 5 A small amount

> In looking at your responses to the previous question, how can you make the situation better? (Make time for home exercises by putting them into your agenda, spend more time in less stressful situations, do exercises with friends or a family member, etc.)
>
> Are there any other obstacles that could hinder your progress? Please explain.
>
> What potential obstacles do you anticipate that might prevent you from meeting your long-term goals (at four weeks of PT)?
>
> What are some actions you plan to take so you could prevent/overcome obstacles that might hinder your progress?

A patient may perceive the future based on the present physical therapy experience. If a patient has a specific future goal to accomplish later, the patient may have more motivation to complete physical therapy exercises now. Consequently, this construct focused on responses to short answer written response questions, such as identifying potential obstacles to healing and specific actions to take to overcome the obstacles. Patients who were more specific when responding to the prompts about eliminating barriers experienced greater healing gains.

After reflecting on the past, the next step in the *currere* process involves envisioning the future. Writing can be healing. Psychology professor Pennebaker, who conducted the first research study demonstrating that expressive writing can help people heal physically in addition to emotionally, and his colleague Smyth (Pennebaker & Smyth, 2016) discovered that, for many, "writing may help enhance emotional, psychological, behavioral, and biological processes that, in turn, may contribute to improvements in health and well-being" (p. 64). Through numerous research studies, Pennebaker and other researchers learned that, for writing to be healing, it needs to be expressive writing with a narrative, not journal writing of random topics. Our future vision includes more physical therapy clinics where physical therapists encourage patients to write. If clinicians don't have time for patients to write long narratives, patients can complete short answer writing prompts about their goals, such as the ones we designed. If physical therapists want to add a member to their team, health and wellness coaches often work at physical therapy clinics and other health settings to help patients achieve their goals. Rethorn et al. (2022) argue, "Health coaching is a dynamic and collaborative approach to health behavior change that harnesses the patient's or client's values and strengths to realize their goals for health" (p. 2352). In our vision for the future of medicine, embracing writing as an adjunct to healing would occur in other medical practices in addition to physical therapy clinics.

Medical doctor Mate (Mate & Mate, 2022) argues, "There is nothing novel about the notion of the mind and body being intricately linked; if anything, what is new is the belief, tacitly held and overtly enacted by many well-meaning doctors, that they are separable" (p. 39). Medical doctor Rankin (2022) concurs, "Narrowing in on the quest for a cure while neglecting the healing process fractures human wholeness and can cause harm, even if the cure happens. Yet this dismembered approach is built into conventional medicine" (pp. 3–4). Writing serves as a free resource that can supplement traditional medical care, so we encourage more medical practitioners to implement it in their clinics and patients to practice it in their homes.

Present Analysis Using Expressive Writing

Viewing any life journey through the lens of *currere* means our past experiences and future expectations lead to the construction of our present reality. The journey of the research team to design the study led to a more mindful journey for each patient who participated as they reflected on past perceptions and envisioned future experiences. At the very least, stopping for a moment to write created a pause in the schedule for each patient to articulate an autobiographical snapshot of life and help the physical therapy team learn unique individual narratives.

As we present our analysis, we include strategies for how you can use writing in your life. Even if you don't have a reason to go to a physical therapy clinic, most of us will be patients in a medical clinic during our lives, even if it is simply an annual wellness checkup. As much as we believe in the healing power of writing, it is a supplement to other medical treatments, not a substitute for it. Furthermore, if writing brings up any disturbing emotional issues, we encourage you to follow up with a mental health professional.

Everyone has a medical story. Sometimes pain and symptoms can lead to anxiety, especially when encountering the myriad of information available online. Psychiatrist Vora (2022) argues, "What if instead of fearing and fighting true anxiety, you invite it in and hear what it has to say?" (p. 35). Writing helps us process the story in our heads until we can get the answers we need from a medical professional. Sociologist Brown (2015) believes that, "in the absence of data, we will always make up stories. It's how we are wired. In fact, the need to make up a story, especially when we are hurt, is part of our most primitive survival wiring" (p. 79). The absence of data can be physical, such as not knowing why pain occurs when you move a certain way, or emotional, such as not knowing why a friend didn't return a text. Brown (2018) continues, "The power of 'the story I'm telling myself' is that it reflects a very real part of what it means to be a meaning-making human. It's disarming because it's honest. We all do it" (p. 265). We all tell ourselves stories, but taking a moment to slow down and transfer the stories in our minds to the page or computer in front of us helps determine thoughts and feelings. Goff (2022) argues, "We concoct a believable story that is easier than the painful or more complicated truth" (p. 164). Sometimes experiences that lead to physical or emotional pain can lead to feelings of regret. Pink (2022) explains, "Writing about regret or revealing a regret to another person moves the experience from the realm of emotion into the realm of cognition" (p. 170). Writing brings life into focus and can help the writer move past emotions to realize rationally what is really happening in the present moment. Writing about positive events can help as much as writing about difficult ones. Hall (2022) provides the encouragement to "write down when you are the happiest. Document your wins. Tell the good stories" (p. 121). Stories of past accomplishments can provide motivation for people to continue achieving in the future.

While *currere* encourages its practitioners to reflect on how the past and future inform the present, too often people live anywhere in their minds except the present. Additionally, writing can combine with taking deep breaths as a form of meditation to provide a deeper stress release and focus on the present. Bernstein (2022) recommends, "If for a moment each day you can let your physical symptoms be a reminder to turn inward, breathe, journal, and feel, then you're on the right track" (p. 91). Meditating and breathing returns thoughts to the present. Fallon (2020) describes a strategy she calls the infinity prompt and elaborates,

> Writing in which you name the facts, thoughts, and feelings becomes a diagnostic tool you can use any time to get at the root of what's really going on with you, see clearly the stories you've been telling yourself, unwind the complicated emotions swirling beneath the surface, and carve a brand new path forward. (pp. 101–102)

The way to begin writing practice is not difficult. Cain (2022) suggests, "If you're intrigued by the idea of expressive writing, I'd like to suggest a new daily ritual for you: Find a blank notebook. Open it up. And write something down. Draw on your bitter, or on your sweet" (p. 152). Writing stops us from ruminating on a past we can't change, helps us feel gratitude for the good things in the present moment, and look forward to how we may want to live life in the future.

Synthesis Sharing Final Reflections

This researchable scenario demonstrated how patients who articulated a positive outlook when writing about their experience and when identifying obstacles that could prevent them from achieving a successful outcome also perceived that they had experienced greater healing as was validated using standardized physical therapy assessments. Having and identifying a positive outlook, along with eliminating barriers, can be a strong component to utilize with current physical therapy interventions for patients. Furthermore, this researchable scenario brings awareness to other key components during the active recovery process for patients that should be implemented rather than utilizing objective measurements alone.

Writing provides an easily accessible resource for anyone who wants to try the process. Cameron (2022) believes that "it is the act of writing that makes us writers" (p. 1). So, we encourage patients to pick up a pen or pencil and write the next chapter of their healing story.We want our research to encourage patients to share their narratives with their medical team. The first part of the writing process is sharing their ideas with themselves. Quindlen (2022) believes about writing, "Sometimes it starts just by talking to yourself on the page, writing for an audience of one: you" (p. 21). Niequist (2022) agrees, "It wasn't about sharing the writing or connecting through it. It was about making sense of my life through words" (p. 135). While writing can help us make sense of our lives, sometimes we can't make sense of life on our own and need to ask for help. Consequently, sharing a symptom list, questions, and observations in the form of expressive writing with a trusted medical professional can help them learn our narratives and learn additional information that can help us heal.

Bowler (2021) believes, "So often the experiences that define us are the ones we didn't pick" (p. 183). No one plans to become a patient and need medical care, but knowing our outlook, goals, and writing can make a difference. However, the healing process from an emotional perspective is more complex than simply telling patients to think positively, because some days, pain may make it almost impossible to find joy in life. On difficult days, it is important to find small things that bring happiness, such as listening to a favorite song, cuddling with a pet, or calling a friend. Lee (2018) believes, "While these moments of joy might seem fleeting, they can have lasting effects because they help to promote upward spirals of positive emotions" (p, 167). It is also okay to acknowledge that some days may bring more confidence than others about progress toward healing goals. Havrilesky (2018) argues, "Yet this chirpy insistence on positivity has a strange way of enhancing the dread and anxiety and melancholy that lie just beneath the surface of things" (p. 2). Patients should be encouraged to honor their story, reflect on their thoughts and feelings, whatever they may be, in writing, and communicate them to their medical team. Dalebout (2016) reflects, "Messy writing is often the most healing writing" (p. 39). We need our patients to be messy, be real, and be themselves.

In this narrative, we reflect on a pilot study that confirms that patient self-reporting in short answer writing prompts yields the same physical therapy improvements as patient self-reporting on physical therapy assessments that are considered to be valid and reliable as well as objective and standardized. This researchable scenario does not officially split past experiences and future projections that act on patients from the patients' actual current realities. Subsequent studies should follow the *currere* method more closely along with the writing prompts and be based on the process described in Pinar's chapter to encourage patients to focus on the present. This style of thinking (or practice) has the potential to be a catalyst in healing not just in physical therapy but all of medicine.

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Life Writing and Sustainability Education

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In our rapidly evolving era marked by profound environmental and socio-cultural shifts, the importance of sustainability education has never been more acute. We find ourselves grappling with what some term the Anthropocene—a proposed epoch where human activities have emerged as the main drivers affecting planetary health. This realization brings forth existential questions: Can our planet sustain a burgeoning human population, potentially hitting 10 billion or more? Is it feasible to curb population growth and prevent ecological overshoot? And as we navigate the challenges of the Anthropocene, how can we cultivate innovative, holistic approaches to address the sustainability movement's multifaceted concerns? I posit that, while it's imperative to bolster our scientific understanding, it's equally vital to lean into the humanities for a richer, more comprehensive grasp of sustainability issues.

Reflecting on my eight-year (plus) evolution from a tenure-track faculty member to a tenured professor, I've grown increasingly convinced of the need for diverse, interdisciplinary methods to further the sustainability cause. The humanities, as elucidated by Hulme (2018), don't merely chase empirical knowledge. They seek a heuristic, aiming to "thicken knowledge: adding layers of meaning and significance to our experience and understanding of reality" (Hulme, 2018, p. 334). This thickening of knowledge, especially as articulated through life writing both within and outside academia, proves crucial in propelling the sustainability movement. Life writing serves as a beacon, guiding us through personal narratives and lending invaluable insights into lived experiences. By spotlighting our own journeys and intertwining them with larger environmental and societal issues, life writing illuminates a path forward, allowing us to address sustainability's wicked problems from a place of depth, empathy, and informed understanding. Also, life writing, a method of inquiry into lived experience "with an emphasis on representing that experience in a narrative form that provides rich detail and context about the life (or lives) in question" (Gough, 2008, p. 484) provides an excellent way to reflect upon and advance one's sustainability journey.

Thickening knowledge in the humanities and in life writing involves embracing the complexities and depth associated with understanding lived experience. This can involve examining a subject from multiple perspectives, considering a wide range of sources and evidence, and looking at the connections and relationships between different ideas. For example, studying history can help us to better understand the context and background of a particular issue, while literature can provide insight into the emotional and psychological experiences of individuals. Similarly, philosophy can help us to explore the underlying values and beliefs that shape our understanding of the world, while art can provide a visual representation of these ideas. By studying these and other disciplines, we can develop a deep and nuanced understanding of the human experience. Additionally, life writing can help to deepen our understanding of these issues by allowing us to explore our own beliefs, values, and experiences within the broader context of our cultural and social environment. This can provide a valuable perspective on wicked sustainability problems and help us to better understand the role of humanity in addressing these challenges.

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In this paper, I discuss the power of personal narrative and life writing in the context of modern sustainability challenges. This discussion will leverage the lenses of sense of self, sense of place, and sense of community. Additionally, I will address the question of how the field of sustainability studies might be further enriched, complicated, and deepened by life writing approaches such as autoethnography. Also, I will use the metaphor of a river to discuss the necessity of embracing the meandering pathways inherent to lived experience and the value of incorporating this into higher education for sustainable development.

My Experiences in the Academy

The river of my journey in academia has been long and winding. With over 12 years of working in higher education under my belt, I've felt both the exhilaration of discovery and the weight of not knowing. Many times, I've been brought to the humbling realization of how much more there is to learn. Each twist and turn in this journey, much like the bends and oxbows of a river, has offered me new perspectives and deeper understandings. Through the years, I've come to believe that embracing the narratives of lived experiences—the stories we tell, the reflections we pen—is crucial for enriching our approach to sustainability (Hensley, 2020). The diverse range of narratives that comprise the complexities and nuances of sustainability must be embraced. In this paper, I build from a concept that I employed in a recent piece (Hensley, 2023) and extend the idea of a meandering river while examining the human effort to "engineer" straight rivers, as a metaphor for educational experience. The argument in this paper differs from my previous piece (Hensley, 2023) by maintaining that we must create the space for student reflection and educate our students in the discipline of self-study and personal narrative. When students gain skills in reflection, reflexivity, and communication they are better positioned to tackle the complexities, uncertainties, and adventures intrinsic to sustainability studies.

Life writing is a scholarly approach to studying our own lived experiences that forces us to slow down and to be quiet in order to reflect. Also, life writing allows us to be intentional about enhancing our own sense of self within the rapidly evolving industrial complex that makes up our world. The preeminent curriculum theorist, William Pinar's method of life writing, *currere*, involves viewing lived experience and interpretations of lived experience as a journey into curriculum theorizing. According to Pinar, the *currere* method is flexible and should not be viewed as a strict set of procedures but as a process; its content is indeterminate and personalizable (Pinar, 1975) and is an open-ended exploration of oneself and one's place in the world (Giroux et al., 1981). In this paper, I draw from another form of life writing that has been particularly compelling for me, autoethnography.

Autoethnography is a form of inquiry in which the researcher examines her personal experiences and relates them to broader cultural, political, and social contexts to gain deeper understanding. Evocative autoethnography is one of the most common approaches. Hernandez et al. (2022) explain that "evocative autoethnographies invite readers to enter into the experiences of the researchers—to evoke an emotional response from them based on the commonality of Human Experience" (p. 4). The emotionality of lived experience is not easy to communicate and does not fit within the conventional realm of positivistic and empirical research methodologies, thus it is commonly viewed as non-credible or overly subjective. However, it has value that extends beyond the scientific articulation of our ecological crisis. It goes beyond the realm of facts and figures to communicate marginalized stories. Evocative autoethnography is further defined by Poulos (2017) as “a way of constructing research texts that conjure, arouse, or elicit vivid images, deep meanings, and intense emotions” (n.p.) Evoking emotional responses from one’s readers helps to weave connections between the author and the reader and integrate forms of inquiry that include the human dimensions of our sustainability crisis.

River Straightening

Throughout history, humans have felt compelled to control the natural world, with practices like river straightening or channeling as striking illustrations (Inyo, 2001; Surian, 2007). Such interventions, often aiming to enhance navigability and reduce unpredictability in rivers, typify our propensity to prioritize short-term human benefits over ecological balance. Drawing parallels to education, this tendency to control and streamline is evident. Modern educational paradigms, heavily influenced by accountability and assessment pressures, push towards a version of “straightening,” emphasizing efficiency and predictability, often at the expense of a broader, depth-oriented learning (Surian, 2007). This “channelized” approach to education resonates with the shortsightedness witnessed in river straightening. Both might offer immediate, perceivable benefits, but at what deeper, long-term costs? We risk producing learners molded to fit pre-set standards instead of nurturing them to embrace, understand, and shape their diverse learning journeys.

Both river straightening and the emphasis on efficiency in education can be seen as attempts to impose a pre-established sense of authority and reduce risk. However, the cost-benefit ratio leans heavily towards not engineering rivers or education in this way. Guiding our students to find the value of their own stories and to recognize how their lived experiences connect to sustainability is one way to prevent an overemphasis on efficiency-based education.

Furthermore, the idea of channelizing and straightening in education can also be viewed as a form of “curricular imperialism,” a term coined by Aoki (2005). Aoki argues that the imposition of pre-determined outcomes and efficiency-based education can be seen as a form of control, much like how river channeling is an attempt to control the natural flow of water. Aoki suggests that curricular imperialism, like political imperialism, is an attempt to impose one’s own culture, one’s own ways of knowing and valuing, on others (Aoki, 2005, p. 362). Aoki (2005 warns that we must “guard against … a demand for sameness … [that] may diminish and extinguish the salience of the lived situation of people in classrooms and communities” (p. 362). This demand for sameness is reflected in the standards and accountability deeply entrenched in most formalized curricula. Therefore, it is important to consider the implications of channelizing and straightening in both river management and education and to recognize the potential harm it can cause to the natural environment and diverse perspectives in education.

Use of Life Writing in the Classroom

As educators, one of our most important tasks is to assist students in finding their voices and helping them know that they have important stories to tell. Hall (2019) cogently argues, “You don’t have to be famous or powerful to offer something useful to the public conversation. We can all, with some work, find stories to tell” (p. 43). Finding your unique voice is crucial to telling your story. Lakshmi (in Bowles et al., 2022) tells us that “you don’t need to be a writer to be a storyteller. Your story is enough” (p. xiii). Hall (2019) adds that,

> no matter how you get there, you have to write from your deep self. If you stay at the level of your office brain or your academic self and use the jargon of your profession, you will kill your work. (p. 47)

We must transcend our office brain! In sustainability studies, it is crucial to help students learn the power of story. Stories illuminate complexities and allow the reader or listener to grasp new information through evoking memories, emotions, and connections. Stories are resilient, and Bernier (2020) tells us, "It is well researched … [that] our brains are hardwired to relate to and be engaged by storytelling" (p. 431). This aligns with the fact that audiences are more attentive when a speaker is telling a story versus presenting a fact by itself. Stories activate humans holistically, Cron (2012, as quoted in Bernier, 2020) notes that "regions of the brain that process the sights, sounds, tastes, and movement of real life are activated when we're engrossed in a compelling narrative" p. 431). Also, CUNY research indicates that "frequent writing in courses has been shown to improve content retention, critical analysis, literacy, and, not surprisingly, writing outcomes" (Pease, 2015, para. 1). Additionally, when students are given a life writing assignment, they are provided both voice and choice in how they want to craft their narratives (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2003). Through life writing, students can gain a more nuanced and complex understanding of their own cultures, and they are better equipped to contribute to broader discussions and debates within a given field of study (Ellis, 2004).

Evocative autoethnography seeks to draw from the writer's unique voice emerging from their personal experiences to create a compelling and emotional narrative that engages the reader and provokes thought and reflection. Stories and poems are examples of evocative autoethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). For example, when looking at the ocean, autoethnography provides space to explore the "heart of the ocean" (or its aesthetic dimensions) as opposed to the observable physical shape and size of the ocean. Going beyond what can be observed, counted, and mapped, evocative autoethnography is an avenue for interpretive scholarship that can link ways of knowing that were previously fragmented. This is valuable because it creates space for new ways of viewing sustainability issues that include social, historical, philosophical, political, scientific, economic, and ethical perspectives (Ellis, 2004). Weaving together multiple perspectives opens possibilities for the transgressive inquiry and transformative dialogue necessary to transcend untenable and inadequate ways of knowing.

Sustainability is not a fixed or static body of knowledge, but rather a dynamic and evolving concept and practice that is shaped by a wide range of factors (Hensley, 2011). Thus, studying sustainability is a "complicated conversation" that requires fluidity in forms of inquiry. Accordingly, sustainability studies acknowledges the inherent diversity of perspectives present in contemporary sustainability discourse and creates the intellectual space to adapt and adjust to new information as it surfaces and evolves through time. The reflective practice of writing helps students to gain clarity on their values and passions (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2003). Accordingly, life writing can help students hone their senses of self, place, and community.

Sense of Place

Every time I've relocated—and I've done it six times in the past 13 years—I've felt a deep yearning to connect with my new surroundings. I believe our environment, the places we inhabit, shape our identities profoundly. It's not merely about geographical coordinates or landmarks but about the memories, emotions, and connections tied to them. From the fragrances that fill the air to the community stories echoing around, every place has tales to tell and lessons to teach.

When people have a strong sense of place, they are more likely to value and protect the land, native heritage, water, and other natural and cultural resources that are unique to their bioregion. This can lead to more sustainable practices, such as advancing ecological justice, mobilizing responsible resource management, and place-specific conservation efforts.

A sense of place is a vital component of sustainability education and revitalization because it provides a framework for understanding and addressing environmental issues in a way that is grounded in local culture. By recognizing the unique history and cultural traditions of a place and by engaging with local communities and stakeholders, sustainability initiatives can be tailored to the specific needs and values of a particular location. This emphasis on localization can lead to more effective and sustainable solutions to environmental problems and can also help to build support and buy-in for sustainability efforts among local communities.

Place also helps to advance sustainability because it allows us to operationalize sustainability principles and theories, making them more tangible and meaningful. By engaging with local communities and stakeholders and tailoring sustainability initiatives to the specific needs and values of a particular location, we can create more effective and sustainable solutions to environmental problems. A sense of place can also foster a sense of community pride and encourage individuals to take active roles in supporting and protecting their communities. It can provide a sense of belonging and identity, helping to build social connections and creating a sense of unity within the community. In this way, a sense of place helps to advance a sense of community and is an important aspect of the common democratic project to advance sustainability through self, place, and community.

Sense of Community

In the grand tapestry of our interconnected narratives, a sense of community emerges not as a luxury but a necessity. Echoing the sentiments of Merton (2005), our survival, both as individuals and as a collective, hinges on the bonds we nurture, the relationships we cherish. As I've journeyed through my academic and personal life, moving and settling, embracing various roles—a scholar, educator, and father—I've come to realize that a sense of community is our tether to a shared destiny.

As Snyder (1990) remarks, nature is not just an entity we visit but our very home. Just as our sense of place roots us, our sense of community binds us. It's about understanding the intricate dance between the individual, the community, and the broader environment. Wendell Berry (2012) captures this sentiment beautifully when he highlights the urgency of expanding our community to encompass the world, understanding the shared nature of our existence, our place, our destiny.

Throughout my professional journey, from leading wilderness expeditions to structured academic settings, I've encountered the profound power of stories. These stories, each a testament to our individual and shared experiences, illuminate the deep interconnectivity inherent to human, ecological, and socio-ecological systems. And central to these stories is our sense of community. It's in these interwoven tales that we see the mirrored reflection of our commitment to sustainability, to stewarding the world we share.

To truly advance in our collective quest for sustainability, we must tap into our community's collective power, recognizing that our shared narrative is the key to forging a sustainable path forward. It's about crafting, sharing, and living stories of hope, resilience, and collective action—understanding that each thread, each voice, each action weaves into the larger narrative of our shared future.

Sense of Self

Navigating the intricacies of my academic journey, I've often paused, ensnared by Mary Oliver's (2020) haunting words: "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" These moments of introspection have become a refuge, especially when life's myriad transitions felt overwhelming, drawing me back into a more profound understanding of my evolving self.

If the academic corridors I've traversed have taught me anything, it's that curriculum often omits the most profound lessons—the introspective journeys we undertake when we're stripped of external validations and reckonings. My own stints as a researcher, educator, and father have invariably circled back to this inner sanctuary. It's in these moments, swathed in solitude, that I've felt an intense kinship with Rilke's poetic reflections on introspection and solitude, finding them more than mere words—they're a lived reality.

The juxtaposition of these intimate, solitary moments with the roaring cacophony of the communal sphere is a dance I've grown familiar with, echoing Merton's (2005) sentiments. In the quietude, I'd often find clarity, only to be thrust back into the bustling reality of community engagements, where my sharpened sense of self would intertwine with broader sustainability narratives.

Lakshmi's (in Bowles et al., 2022) poignant assertion that you "your story is enough" (p. xiii) highlights the power of personal stories and has served as a lodestar, guiding me to view my autoethnographic endeavors not just as personal reflections, but as powerful narratives intertwined with broader socio-cultural paradigms. With every bend and curve in my journey, every story penned, every reflection gleaned, I've realized that our unique experiences, as varied and diverse as they may be, share a common thread—they illuminate the intricate web of interconnections that shape our existence (Hensley, 2020). I've endeavored to enhance the autoethnographic tone while staying true to the original voice and style and incorporated the references from the original text.

Relationships, Stories, and Sustainability

Through a combination of a sense of place, a sense of self, and a sense of community, we can become our highest selves and best contribute to the sustainability movement. We must move beyond antiquated forms of scholarly inquiry, academic curriculum, and outdated teaching by embracing best practices in higher education for sustainable development. This may include transdisciplinarity and transformative actions. We must move beyond what Wes Jackson (1993) calls an "extractive economy," the traditional model of economic development that relies on the extraction and consumption of natural resources. In the extractive economy, economic growth is measured by the extraction and conversion of natural resources into goods and services, often without regard for the long-term consequences for the environment or the sustainability of the resource base (Vitek & Jackson, 2010). Alternatively, we must embrace our place and look at nature to provide inspiration to address our sustainability issues (Hensley, 2011). We have to focus on regenerative, sustainable, and life-giving modes of scholarship and teaching. In addition to evidence-based science, we must also learn from the intangibles that we can only understand through lived experience. These intangibles include love of the land, wide awakeness, and a sense of mystery and awe for the places that we inhabit.

The stories that we craft about our lived experiences in place illuminate the interconnectivity and interdependence that is inherent to human, ecological, and eco-social systems (Hensley, 2020). For me, the most compelling stories are the ones that emerge from embracing uncertainty and pushing through the fear of the unknown. For example, on a recent solo backpacking trip that I took to North Manitou Island in Lake Michigan (part of Sleepy Bear Dunes), I attempted to take a shortcut through the woods to get to my destination faster. I had no cell phone reception, and the complimentary park visitor map lacked off-trail detail. Inevitably, I ended up a bit turned around (some might call it lost). I had my compass, but the map was woefully inadequate for off-trail navigation. I experienced the disorientation of being lost and not knowing how far I was from the trail. This was both humbling and humiliating, because I am an experienced backpacker who used to work as a wilderness instructor, leading groups through complex terrain. In this situation, I had to work through the complex internal terrain associated with the fear of being lost. Eventually, I found the trail that I had left, and took the "long," but safe and predictable, way to my destination. This served as a wakeup call for me to not get too arrogant when navigating the backcountry, and it reminded me of the importance of having a firm grasp of the geography when visiting new wilderness locations without an adequate map.

Life writing serves as a map that allows us to reflect on the contours of our lived experiences while making connections to the human and more-than-human world in which we live. When *the patterns that connect* (Bateson, 1985) our experiences to other people's experiences become more evident, we can see the delicate balance that holds the fragile social and ecological systems together. Also, from the perspective of sustainability studies, we can begin to recognize that the "maps" that we currently have in place to "navigate" the sustainability crises are inadequate because they lack the necessary transdisciplinary complexity to reduce the wickedness of existing sustainability crises.

Conclusion

My journey as a professor has evolved from leading wilderness education experiences outside to the formal indoors university classroom setting. I continue to draw from my field-based experiences to inform my scholarship and teaching in higher education. Additionally, I resonate with life writing in the form of autoethnography and *currere* to expand the insight that can be accessed from my experiences past, present, and into the future. The value of understanding where sense of place, sense of community, and sense of self fit into the genre of life writing cannot be overstated. By understanding the complexity and diversity of these relationships, we recognize the importance of maintaining the integrity of the biosphere.

The dawning of the Anthropocene has made sustainability education more important than ever (Sterling, 2010). To adequately address the wicked sustainability problems facing our planet, we must continue to build upon existing scientific knowledge and draw from the arts and humanities. These disciplines can provide valuable insight into the complexities of the human experience and help us to develop a deeper understanding of the social and cultural context of sustainability issues. Life writing is an approach to education and scholarship that promotes deep reflection and integration between the curriculum and lived experience. In this way, life writing is filled with opportunities for transformation and new insight.

Like a river, when we rewild the educational journey, students learn from the texture of their lived experiences, which leads to new forms of insight and expanded forms of inquiry (Hensley, 2011, 2023). By embracing the meandering pathways of lived experience, we can better understand the role of humanity in addressing these challenges and continue to push the boundaries of inquiry in sustainability studies. In the end, it is through this kind of transgressive, transformative, and innovative scholarship that we can hope to tackle wicked problems and make progress towards a more sustainable future.

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