

# Being and Becoming Online Teachers: A Collaborative Autobiographical Narrative Inquiry



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## Abstract

In this paper, we retell the process of our collaborative autobiographical narrative inquiry into our experiences of teaching online. Our research wonders come from two questions: What is online teaching? Who are we in this space? Early in our time together we came to understand how our individual backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives have influenced the ways we see, create, and navigate our place, and our students' place, in online classroom communities. We also came to understand how our diverse identities—the stories to live by that we each carry of becoming “teacher”—shaped the ways we live and experience online teaching. From this collaborative experience we see the potential and value of autobiographical narrative inquiry for all those being and becoming online teachers.

*Keywords:* online teaching, online learning, autobiographical narrative inquiry, online learning spaces

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The four of us teach at a Western Canadian university, in a Faculty of Education. At the time of the inquiry we were at different places in our academic careers, with differing experiences with online teaching, as well as in the K–12 schooling system. We had a range of online teaching experiences (from 2–19 years). Despite these differences we found ourselves sharing stories of our previous teaching experiences in relation to our online teaching experiences. These stories brought to the surface key questions about our relationships with students, technology, and the idea and reality of online communities. In particular, we wondered what might be learned from deeper consideration of our differing and shared perspectives, experiences, and stories of online teaching. Our research wonders come from two questions: What is online teaching? Who are we in this space?

As we felt ourselves called to this inquiry we looked to get a sense of the context, as was articulated in current literature. We found that online courses and the technologies used to facilitate them are reshaping the way graduate courses are offered, the pedagogies that are used, and the ways instructors and students interact and communicate (Bowness, 2015; Karber, 2003). Since the move to online teaching is new for many instructors and students, much of the literature has focused on identifying the opportunities, challenges, and effective approaches for teaching in online settings (Li & Irby, 2008; Palloff & Pratt, 2013). Research into Communities of Inquiry (Pellas & Kazanidis, 2014; Rubin & Fernandes, 2013; Zydney et al., 2012) have examined how students and instructors exist in, and create, inquiry communities in online environments. What we found lacking in this preliminary search was a deeper examination of how instructors see themselves as teachers in online spaces (Boling et al., 2012). Therefore, in order to better understand and develop online learning experiences for students, there is a need to more deeply explore the diverse experiences of instructors as they navigate and negotiate online teaching spaces (Kraglund–Gauthier et al., 2010). This is especially true when those instructors also have experience as classroom teachers in the K–12 school system. This, along with our own seeking of deeper understanding, called us to engage in a collaborative autobiographical narrative inquiry process.

### **Collaborative Autobiographical Narrative Inquiry**

Only one of the authors had previous experience with narrative inquiry as both a research methodology and as pedagogy. The three additional authors were interested in autobiographical narrative inquiry and felt that engaging in a collaborative autobiographical narrative inquiry process would offer an important experiential learning way to learn. We began by first reading various articles articulating the process of engaging in autobiographical narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Caine, 2013; Clandinin et al., 2015; Dubnewick et al., 2018; Huber et al., 2013; Saleh et al., 2014). As we read, inquired into, and unpacked the articles, we worked to co–compose a shared understanding of our approach to our research.

Autobiographical narrative inquiry (Cardinal, 2010; Saleh, Menon, & Clandinin, 2014), with its emphasis on telling and re-telling stories, urged us to attend not only to the specificity of our work in online teaching but also to the stories we carry within as we enter into those online environments. From our early, or beginning, stories (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Greene, 1995), across all of our ongoing identity making, that is “stories to live by” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999), we have each been living, telling, retelling, and reliving (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998; Connelly & Clandinin, 1999). Our living and teaching is continuously informed and reformed by who we are as human beings, by our personal views of curriculum, education, and schooling, and by our varied online and face-to-face teaching and learning experiences.

As described by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), the multidimensionality of experience requires that narrative inquirers attend to the continuous unfolding of experience across time, place, situations, and relationships. As we attended to the “three-dimensional narrative inquiry space” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 50) that opens up through narrative inquiry, as we moved backward and forward, inward and outward (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 50), we attended to the *temporality* of our experiences and an awareness of “people, places, and events as always in process” (Clandinin et al., p. 23). As we attended to the *sociality* of our experience, we inquired into the interactions between our personal worlds and broader social worlds. As we attended to *place*, we acknowledged that “*where things take place* always makes a difference to how one may understand a life space [and a life in the making over time]” (Xu & Connelly, 2010, p. 361; emphasis in original). As Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) describe:

The focus of narrative inquiry is not only a valorizing of individuals’ experience but also an exploration of the social, cultural, and institutional narratives within which individuals’ experiences were constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted—but in a way that begins and ends that inquiry in the storied lives of the people involved. Narrative inquirers study an individual’s experience in the world and, through the study, seek ways of enriching and transforming that experience for themselves and others. (p. 42)

Engaging in collaborative autobiographical narrative inquiry allowed us to situate ourselves within the research and to follow our interests and passions about this particular topic through inquiring into our stories of experience (Clandinin & Caine, 2013) while also contributing to broader social and theoretical conversations from diverse perspectives (Clandinin & Caine, 2013).

## Methods

After we came to a shared understanding of autobiographical narrative inquiry, and how we would collaborate as a research collective, we continued the process of coming to know each other, and to know narrative inquiry with a discussion about what field texts (data) we would gather/create and how the process might unfold. “Field texts can include transcripts of conversations, field notes, family stories, memory box artifacts, photographs, and other texts

that are composed by narrative inquirers and participants to represent aspects of lived experience” (Clandinin & Huber, 2010, p. 11). We chose to begin with annals (Clandinin, 2013). We drew on these to begin to inquire into stories of our “early landscapes” (Greene, 1995, p. 73) and how we each have gradually come to understand teaching and teachers. From the annals and our collaborative inquiry, we then turned toward sharing and inquiring into memory box artifacts, which we used to evoke more stories of experiences, this time with a more deliberate focus on online teaching experiences.

Over an entire year we individually and collectively wrote, and shared, and collaboratively inquired into particular stories of educational experiences that helped us reflect on the connections between our experiences over time and the ways we understand teaching in online environments. Finally, we co-composed our final research texts. As threads emerged in our sharing and narrative inquiry into our stories (Downey & Clandinin, 2010, p. 392), we continued to revisit and engage with existing literature to deepen our understanding, guide the ongoing inquiry, and identify areas where our research is most needed to further the conversation. What follows is one telling of our experience and how each method, each sharing of experiences and inquiry into those stories using the three-dimensional narrative inquiry process, led to our deeper understanding. We were awakened to how the stories to live by that we carried of becoming “teacher” shaped the ways we live and experience online teaching, and we also became aware of the potential of autobiographical narrative inquiry for all engaged in online teaching.

### **Annals and Chronicles: Formative Experiences of Teaching and Learning**

We began with the annal process as a way to inquire into how it is that we came to know what teaching and learning meant to each of us. We took this opportunity to “recollect [our] experiences and to construct the outlines of [our] personal narrative[s]” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 112). Annals could be thought of as a “list of dates of memories, events, stories, and the like” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 112). Our annals had the feel of chronicles in that we asked each other to create the “sequence of events in and around a particular topic or narrative thread of interest” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 112), in this instance with a focus on our coming to know ourselves as teacher and what teaching and learning meant to us.

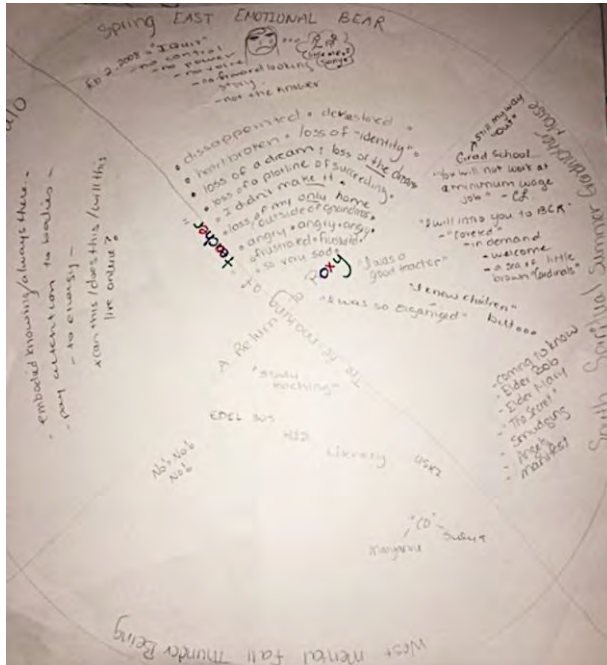
#### ***Trudy: Four Directions Teachings***

As a Cree/Métis scholar, from rural northern Alberta, early in her academic career at the time of this research, Trudy had not only begun to think about teaching in an online context but was also still in the midst of negotiating who she was and was becoming as an academic, and a teacher educator in an urban context. Woven across the annal (see Figure 1) were the complexities of a life, the interruptions to schooling, that were also part of her becoming. Despite having only taught one course fully online, at the time, she had included other online

experiences in face-to-face courses and found herself curious about the differing experiences. As a way to inquire into them, she took her initial linear, timeline-style annal and considered what new understanding would come from rearranging them to align with the four directions teachings she had come to know in her work alongside of Indigenous Elders.

**Figure 1**

*Trudy's Annal*



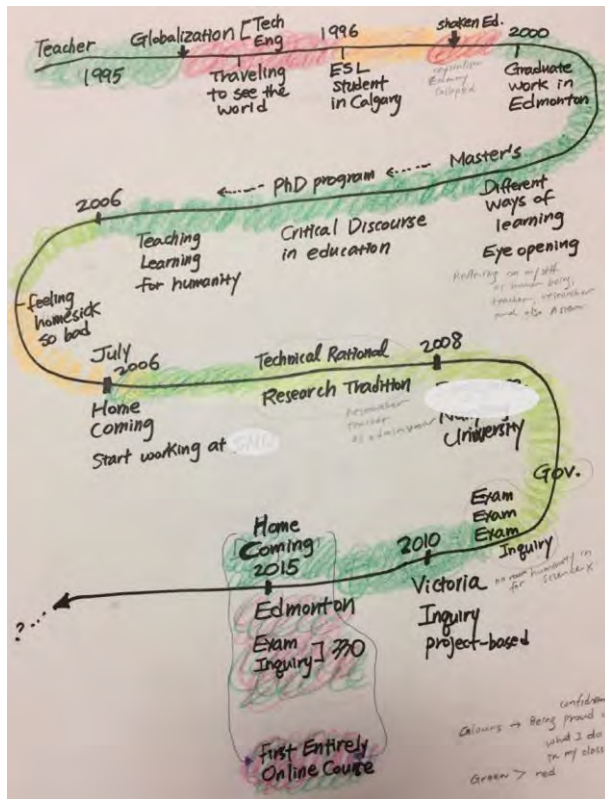
*I started at the beginning because I realized that a lot of the unpacking we were doing went right back to my childhood. The annal became more about who I am as a teacher and a learner, who I am as a whole being. This was important to see because I have wanted to be a teacher since I was a little girl. I was looking to see where I lost what it meant to “be teacher”—where those ideas were shaped, and interrupted. I started to re-remember the moments where my story of teaching bumped against someone else’s story, with mine being dismissed. I also thought about moments where I was told I was not a knowledge holder. I realized that I carry a story of not being a knower throughout my undergrad. How did I ever survive becoming a teacher?*

### **Mijung: Border Crossing**

Mijung grew up in Korea where education is given the first and foremost priority for people, society, and the nation. Being a teacher is an honourable position with responsibilities, care, and respect.

Figure 2

## Mijung's Annal



*My parents really respected teachers not as a job, but as a human being with dignity so they wanted me to become a teacher rather than a scientist. So, I became a teacher. Teachers in Korean culture have much respect and value. We used to say, "you don't even step on the teacher's shadow." So, that's how much you respect teachers. They are people who are going to take you into the right path of life. It's not only about a professional success, but also for a whole human being. The night before my first day of teaching, my dad said, "you are becoming a teacher." That means you're not there only to teach the content, but teach humans, you are teaching children. It meant a lot.*

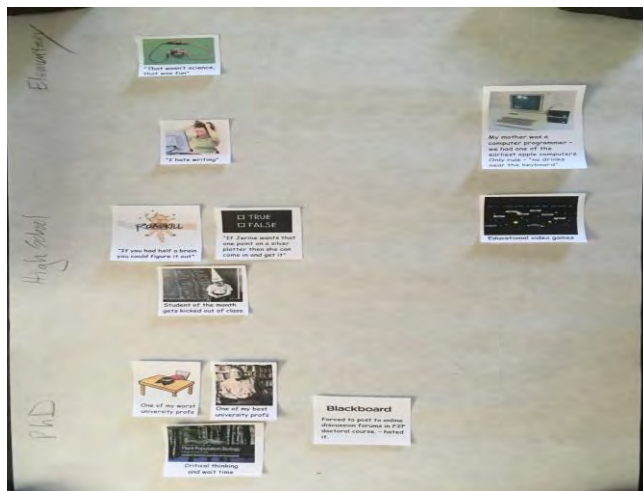
After several years of teaching in the public school system in Korea, Mijung made a couple of border crossings for her education and career from Korea, Canada, Singapore, and back to Canada to teach at the current university (see Figure 2). Her lived experiences of border crossing led her to question what it means to be a teacher in the very place and time that she lives in. The unsettling question on good teaching was challenging her understandings and actions in classrooms. Her question about what it means to be a good teacher continues in the context of online teaching. She struggled in the first online course as teacher and human being, situated in the virtual space.

### *Jerine: Science Stories*

Jerine's path to postsecondary teaching began with a passion for science, an initial career as a wildlife biologist, 4 years teaching junior high science and mathematics, and eventually a PhD in science education. At the time of this inquiry Jerine had been teaching at the postsecondary level for 11 years and over that time had taught 10 fully online graduate courses. In her annal (see Figure 3) she shared a series of memories related to her early experiences with schooling and technology.

**Figure 3**

#### *Jerine's Annal*



*My initial science experiences were once a week when the teacher would pull out the textbook and read to us and that was science. So I hated it. In fifth grade I got to be part of a program where we went to the science museum once a week, and one of the times they had this table of batteries and wires and bulbs and we just got to play with it and explore, and that was my memory of what shifted my thinking about science.*

*... So I pulled out three memories from high school, and I don't know exactly why these are the ones that come to me, but they're all examples of negative interactions I had with teachers ... This one is a social studies class where ... he'd lecture for 15 minutes and then he'd give us worksheets to fill out. No discussion, he didn't want any talking.*

*... In my PhD program I took a plant population biology course, and the professor made us think. He posed problems, he would take a research study and he would maybe give us the context of it and give us the key research question that they were looking at, and then he would make us predict what we thought the result of the study would be.*

Jerine's reflection on her annal highlighted how her positive memories of schooling included learning opportunities that were intellectually challenging and engaging and occurred both in

and out of school environments. In her annal, Jerine also reflected on her early experiences with technology and its relationship to her later engagement in online teaching.

*Technology has always been embedded in my life. My mom was a computer programmer, from the time I was in elementary school—we had one of the earliest Apple computers and—we could just play with it, we could do whatever. She really made it comfortable to play with technology and not be afraid of it, and that’s had a big impact on me, especially as I moved into online teaching.*

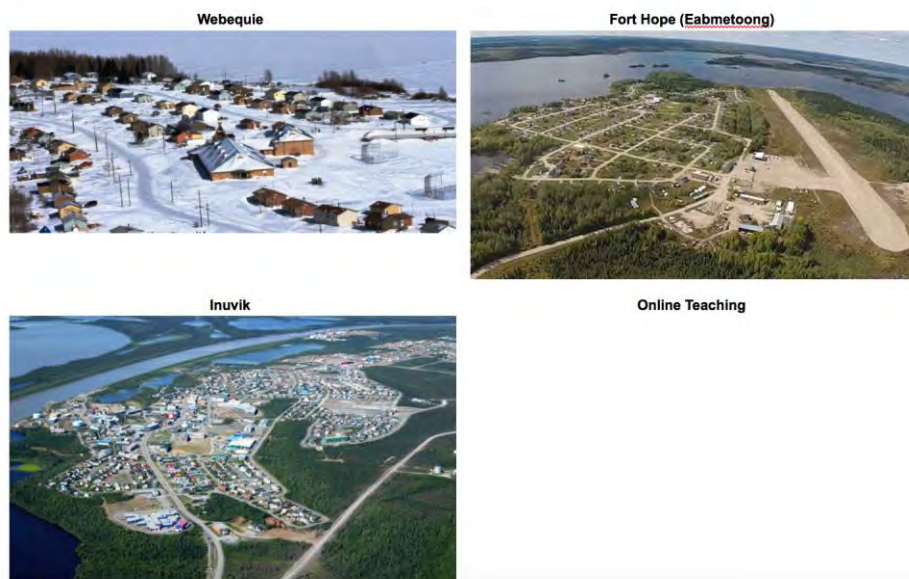
Jerine’s memories highlighted the important role of play and experiential learning in her familial curriculum-making world, the tension she felt when this bumped against more traditional modes of schooling, and the way this playful approach to learning and interaction with technology supported her transition to online teaching.

### ***Jennifer: Community Photos***

Jennifer spent 8 years as a teacher and teacher-librarian in Webequie, Fort Hope, and Inuvik before moving into an academic position in 2000. In those small Indigenous communities she was firmly connected to the place and community as an integral part of the teaching process. She took her first online class in the fall of 1998, while in her doctoral program, and started teaching online in the summer of 1999. For 20 years, Jennifer has been engaged in discussions around what it means to teach and learn in online communities. When asked to share her annal (see Figure 4) as part of her stories of teaching, Jennifer shared photographs of her teaching and learning spaces and the communities where this work was situated.

**Figure 4**

### ***Jennifer’s Annal***





*Webequie was my first story of teaching. So when I was asked to think about teaching for this annal, I went upstairs and I printed out my teaching places. I printed out a photo of Webequie, I printed out Fort Hope which is where I went the next year. And then I taught in Inuvik for 6 years. When I think about my teaching, because I taught in Indigenous communities, it's about live-in communities, right? It's living in community.*

When she came to select a photo for online teaching, nothing came to mind, so she left the page blank. The space and place is one challenging piece of online teaching and learning for Jennifer. She encourages her students to share a photo of their workspace so she can imagine them in “place” when they are learning.

### Our Artifacts

After exploring our annals as part of our process of being and becoming online teachers, we each brought an artifact to share that represented an online teaching experience. Memory box artifacts, including photographs, are “used to trigger the telling of stories” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 45). As we shared the stories we collectively attended “to the ways individual narratives of experience are embedded in social, cultural, familial, linguistic, and institutional narratives” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 45).

#### *Trudy: The Dusty Laptop*

Trudy’s artifact (see Figure 5) was her dusty laptop, her constant companion, as she named it.

### Figure 5

#### *The Dusty Laptop*

An assignment to upload.  
 Readings to read.  
 An online conversation to negotiate/navigate  
 Maybe their first.  
 They want some time to plan.  
 A whole week.  
 More details please they ask.  
 So we can plan.

I respond quickly.  
 I check eclass.  
 I line up the dates.  
 I double check.  
 I get a second set of eyes.  
 Confirmed.  
 My dates are correct.  
 The assignments alright.  
 All is right in the land of eclass.  
 They get the instructions.  
 Written in the waiting room.

*My artifact is this dirty old dusty laptop. I thought of the laptop for the artifact because it has been part of all of my online teaching experiences but also because I was in the midst of family stuff that got woven in and it was there, easily accessible and always with me. I have two images of it. One a clear photograph of the laptop and one a faded version. I was in my car, it was sitting up against the steering wheel. I've got all these millions of windows open on the screen. The calendar on the screen is carefully crafted, colour coded, filled in, checked daily. No decision is made without its guidance.*

*That day it was a fail. I was feeling like "good professor" but then I remembered. A missed meeting. No record of it. Not digitally. Not on paper. I sent my regrets to the research team and then I returned to the dusty old laptop. I looked at the eClass page. Keep it simple. Organize eClass so that it makes sense. To Tab or not to Tab. Another box, all documents here. All assignments here. No, it looks confusing. Messy. I can't follow it. I want tabs and dates separate, one topic at a time not to overwhelm. Logical order, steps one, two, three. Is online teaching like that? Can it be? Steps one, two, three?*

In Trudy's annal, earlier in this paper, we noticed how experiences outside of schooling, personal life experiences, have always been woven tightly in the midst of the more linear and structured schooling experiences. In this same way the stories to live by Trudy carried of herself as a teacher and as a teacher educator were strongly shaped by colour coded schedules, carefully crafted plans, due dates, and deadlines. With an online course, connected asynchronously via technology, who Trudy was and was becoming as an online educator was knotted and tangled up with who she was and wanted to be in her personal life.

### ***Mijung: The Email***

Mijung shared an email (see Figure 6) she received from a student as her artifact.

**Figure 6**

*Email to Mijung*

I REALLY am enjoying it! FAR more than I expected!

You've been an amazing facilitator of some difficult topics!

Have a great day!

Her online course was unfolding and one student was so keen and anxious to learn, he often contacted her via online class and emails. She shared:

*One day, I was trying to help a student with his questions, and then at the end of our email conversation thread, he wrote, "I'm really enjoying it far more than I expected." And he goes on, "You've been an amazing facilitator of some difficult topics. Have a*

*great day.” At first, I was happy that he was relieved to get answers to the questions and enjoying the course so far, but then, this email challenged me to ask, “Am I a facilitator?” “Who am I in this space and in this course?” I like the word teacher—not professor, but teacher, but he was using the word facilitator. A good facilitator ... I think I am expecting something more ... I’m still struggling to identify who I am in an online space, and who I want to be. My expectation is that I want to be a teacher in my own definition.*

In Mijung’s annal and also in the email, we see her coming back to the story she tells of “good teacher.”

### ***Jerine: The Website***

As her artifact, Jerine shared a website (see Figure 7) that a student had created in a recent online course that she taught.

**Figure 7**

#### *Website Example*



*This is my graduate-level science and literacy course—how I designed the main project really brought together everything that I value about teaching graduate courses, and teaching online. I wanted the teachers in my course to be able to really connect what they were learning to their own practice. I wanted them to interact with each other around it, and I wanted the assignment to be embedded with the learning we were doing. And so what I decided to do was to have each student create a Google Site where they would create a page for each module and on it they would discuss the theory we were learning and use the theory to create a learning activity they could use in their own teaching context. They picked a grade level and science area and created their project around that. So as we went, they built the site. Each week, they had to build something,*

*get feedback from their peers, and revise. It created the space for them to apply what they were doing in the course to their classroom practice, rather than it just being an assignment to turn into me. I had one student who said that it had more impact on his practice than anything else. And so to me, it was taking advantage of the online, the technology affordances... to really pull all those things together.*

Jerine’s artifact was a culmination of the years that she had taught online and the things she had tried and learned from. In the artifact we can also see threads of the nature of learning that Jerine highlighted in her annal. Learning for Jerine is about experience, in her artifact this is evident in the way in which the assignment set up learning experiences for students that allowed them to connect their learning to things that matter to them, to their own classrooms, and to students. The artifact also highlights the embeddedness of technology in Jerine’s teaching and taking risks to embed technologies into the teaching and learning aspects of the course.

### ***Jennifer: The Rubric***

Jennifer’s artifact was the rubric she uses to assess engagement in small group discussions (see Figure 8) in her online classes. A two-sided, colour-coded page that, for Jennifer, represented years of thinking about the online, group-discussion component of her online classes.

**Figure 8**

### ***Jennifer’s Discussion Rubric***

Objective/ Criteria	Excellent	Good	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory
<b>Presence (Value = 15)</b>	Establishes and maintains a consistent and valuable presence in the conversational flow of the materials covered in the course. Responses to comments celebrate, elaborate and encourage the contributions of other participants.  15-14	Contributes well and conscientiously in general, with leading contributions in areas of individual interest or expertise. Responds appropriately to the flow of discussions in ways that demonstrate good timing, lively consideration and quality of thought.  13-12	Somewhat sporadic and/or scattered contributions. Some responses may be off-topic, poorly paced, or discouraging to broader participation.  11-10	Non-existent, sporadic and/or scattered contributions. Does not respond or responds in ways that are off-topic, poorly paced, or discouraging.  9-0
<b>Response to Others (Value = 15)</b>	Consistently follows discussion threads and raises the discussion to new levels with creative and original interventions, and/or starts new discussions that carry the discourse.  15-14	Provides original thoughts and inspirations relative to topics of individual interest or expertise.  13-12	Some responses may not follow existing discussions or may echo existing comments.  11-10	No responses or responses that do not follow existing discussions. Most responses are simplistic and echo contributions.  9-0
<b>Integration and synthesis of concepts and principles (Value = 20)</b>	Course materials as well as research and professional articles, social media issues and ideas, webinars, videos, etc. are always referred to, when appropriate, and responses reflect a deep understanding of fundamental principles. Ideas are creatively synthesized.  20-18	Course material is usually referred to, when appropriate, and responses reflect an understanding of fundamental principles.  17-15	Course material is sometimes referred to and some responses reflect an understanding of fundamental principles.  14-12	Course material is never or rarely referred to and few responses reflect an understanding of fundamental principles.  11-0

*I guess when I think about my becoming an online teacher, it all goes back to how do we live online, and work online, and share online, and discuss online? How do we build that*

*graduate seminar model in an online world? This rubric has developed over years of fiddling with it, and trying to determine the value of different components, so presence, response to others, and integration and synthesis of concepts and principles, and how to support students through the process of engaging in course discussions, how to extend discussions, bring more to it, support the learning. How do we honour, value, assess, support, teach, mentor this different way of learning for them?*

In reflecting on the choice of this artifact, Jennifer realized that she was still thinking about the place of teaching and learning—the community space that is central to Jennifer’s stories to live by. Just like in her annal when she situated her stories of teaching in place, the rubric also represented this tension of what was “place” in online teaching. The rubric was Jennifer’s way of trying to create a place on a blank piece of paper.

### **Retelling: Who Are We as Teachers in Online Spaces?**

In narrative inquiry the terms—living, telling, retelling, and reliving—have particular meanings:

We understand that people live out stories and tell stories of their living. Narrative inquirers ... engage in narrative inquiry into ... lived and told stories. We call this process of coming alongside [each other] and then inquiring into the lived and told stories retelling stories. (Clandinin, 2013, p. 34)

As we moved into the analysis, and looked across the transcripts and shared experiences we clearly saw the diversity of our understanding of teaching, learning, and being teacher. There were common threads of our collective dedication to student experiences, and the curiosity of pedagogy and practice but what this looked like and what we privileged was shaped by our experiences. In this next section we draw on sections of our narrative account that articulate our coming to know “who are we as teachers” and in this retelling we come to some deeper understandings of online teaching and who are we in this space.

***Trudy: “I did not always feel fully human . . .”***

Trudy shared,

*In this online space I did not always feel fully human in my responses to students, but I realized that this is not the way our souls had been living the experience. Instead as our eyes met during our only face-to-face meeting, our souls said “there you are.” They knew me. I knew them. We hugged and said, “it is so good to see you face to face” and I would add, “and your whole body too.”*

In the creation of my annal I came to see how even when I was focusing on school experiences they were never separate from the whole of my life. Each school grade memory came with memories of where I lived and with who, always transitioning between my mom’s home and extended relatives for a diversity of reasons. In all memories teachers are there, but on the

periphery and important, not because of their pedagogical approach and teaching practices, but more how they created safe spaces for me to feel a sense of belonging, and an ability to just be. For me, learning didn't happen in direct transaction between teacher as knowledge holder and I as learner. It was an organic fluid experiential learning that happened over time and in a variety of spaces.

This inquiry has allowed me to return to my stories of being the learner and wanting to become "teacher." I see how my ways of knowing, being, and doing in online spaces is very much still shaped by this sense of creating safe spaces, co-composing with students a sense of belonging, and creating opportunities for us all, students and teacher(s), to "just be." What I also realized is that I did not yet know how to do that without attending to the whole of their being in the ways that I would have attended to children in elementary classrooms. I came to better understand the bumps, the moments of tension, and my attachment to my dusty laptop, in the artifact unpacking. The laptop kept me connected to students in a physical way, my body, to that artifact, to the students. This contact was something that I had been missing when I only saw their words, or pictures of their faces, or heard their voices but was never (rarely) in their physical presence. While I also felt tension when in the midst of the pull of those lives I also would have felt a loss had we (online students and I) not built relationships with an ethic of care and compassion at the heart of them. I did not come to answers about how I will create the online classroom to replicate that sense, but I did come to a deep understanding of who I am as a teacher, in and out of online spaces, and the interesting possibilities online, connected via technology, holds for future imagining.

***Mijung: "I'm haunted by the ideal of good teacher"***

My beliefs of "good" teachers were developed based on my lived experience of human relationships and the fullness of physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual being. I felt the ache of "not being a good teacher" in an online space. When I became a teacher, I understood "teacher" in the Korean culture to have so much respect and value.

*[Teachers] are people who are going to take you into the right path of life. It's not only professional success, but also as a whole human being. There is kind of an interrelationship between teacher and students based on trust, respect, and care. That should be there for you to be a teacher and for you to be a student. That was what I was always looking for and trying to build up in my teaching and in my classroom. That's the kind of picture that I had in mind ... the dream, the vision, everything.*

Most of my teaching and learning experiences involved connections and relationships in face-to-face classrooms where the teacher and students were physically there to share their humanness, emotions, and difficulties together. In online spaces, without the physical and emotional beings, I keep questioning if I am the teacher I dreamed about. Maybe I need to give

up some parts of this dream, or maybe I have to change my ideas about “good teacher” because some things in face-to-face meetings are not always possible in an online space. What does a good teacher look like in online space? Who do I want to become?

***Jerine: “How I was being taught and how I wanted to learn”***

At first I was resistant to the idea of teaching online courses, I thought something was lost when the students and the instructor didn’t interact in the same physical space. However, after teaching my first few online courses, I realized that I loved the flexibility that came with moving the learning outside of the four walls of the classroom. It opened up new opportunities for engaging in teaching and learning in ways that crossed boundaries of time and space. As a class we could engage in ongoing conversations that spanned days rather than being limited by the 3 hour/week class schedule, students could participate no matter where in the world they were, and we could more seamlessly integrate digital technologies into the course activities. Reflecting back on my annal helped me understand that my comfort with the boundlessness of the online teaching space came from my early educational experiences.

*What do you want to be when you grow up? “Veterinarian, scientist, definitely not a teacher.” My perspectives on teaching and learning are primarily informed by my own experiences within my family and in school. School should challenge your mind, but learning also did not all happen in school, learning happened in the woods, it happened through educational video games, and it happened at the dinner table as someone grabbed the encyclopedia to determine who was right or wrong about whatever random piece of trivia we were arguing over. My early memories of school often involved conflicts between how I was being taught and how I wanted to learn. Even as a young child, I didn’t really see the importance of being in a classroom to learn.*

*I don’t have an idealized image of school.*

*I have few positive memories of learning IN school.*

*To me, what’s important is creating learning moments, learning situations  
—that, doesn’t have to happen in a classroom.*

Engaging in this narrative inquiry has helped me better understand how my prior experiences of teaching and learning have informed my approach to online teaching, the tensions I experience with it, and the needs I have for professional development. It has also helped me understand that my approaches, my tensions, and my needs are not necessarily the same as others.

***Jennifer: “What is real teaching?”***

I have taught online for 19 years, and yet I still struggle with feeling like a teacher in the online environment. My story of teaching began on a fly-in reserve in northern Canada and continued in two other northern communities. In those places you know everybody, you teach everybody’s

kids, cousins, aunties, and uncles. As I told and retold my stories of online teaching they bumped against my stories of teaching face-to-face.

*I gather up my materials, notes, attendance sheet, day plan, textbook, leftover handouts, and my coat, scarf, backpack and a water bottle. Keys and phone go in my pockets as I head to the elevator, I feel exhilarated after my 2-hour class with preservice teachers.*

*The elevator opens and I walk down the hall to my office. I drop my backpack onto the floor and melt into my office chair. I am exhausted. I reflect on the differences in my teaching life as I open up eClass to check in on my online grad class. I think about place, pace, preparation, and the opportunity to pause.*

I have come to understand through this collaborative narrative inquiry that teaching for me is firmly connected to place. Online teaching doesn't always feel like "real teaching" and the selection of my artifact indicated that this is still a place of tension for me after 20 years. The stories to live by that I carry with me as teacher and university instructor shape the learning experiences that I include in my online courses.

### **Reflective Turn: Collaborative Autobiographical Narrative Inquiry and Online Teacher Educators**

We began the collaborative autobiographical narrative inquiry with two wonders in mind: What is online teaching? Who are we in this space? As we engaged in the methods of creating annals, bringing artifacts, and writing stories of our experiences over time, we stayed awake to both the process as well as the understandings we were coming to. We listened carefully, and stayed with each of our stories over time, and noted the diversity of who we were, our experiences in online teaching, and what it was that kept us there despite moments of deep tension. We are all seeking to create online learning experiences that honour our differing understandings of who we were and were becoming as online teachers. As we are now at the end of the process, we contemplated the questions of justification: "the personal, the practical, and the social" (Clandinin et al., 2007, pp. 24–25).

What we have done in this paper is to take you through the process we engaged in, the collaborative autobiographical narrative inquiry process that we lived as a way to show you the personal justifications of this work. We came to understand how the stories to live by that we carried of becoming "teacher" shaped the ways we live and experience online teaching. Our individual backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives have influenced the ways we see, create, and navigate our place, and our students' place, in online classroom communities.

Each of our teacher narratives were unique and personal and were central to understanding what each of us prioritized when building an online course, working with students, creating assignments and learning experiences, and planning for assessment. For Trudy, an important aspect of teaching was being able to attend to students' whole beings and create a space where



students could feel a sense of belonging. She experienced this as more challenging in an online teaching environment and through this inquiry became aware of the importance of creating time and space in the schedule for coming to know each other as humans through introductory and ongoing videos, photographs, letters, and online discussions. For Mijung, her definition of a “good teacher” was integrally connected with building relationships with students and she questioned how she could bring the human relationship into online classes. Changing the teaching mode from face-to-face to online teaching in her graduate courses was a huge challenge for her to reflect on her being a teacher and the idea of “good teacher.” Jerine did not have an idealized image of schooling and her most positive learning experiences often occurred outside of traditional school settings. The reflections on her personal narratives of teaching and learning helped her see how the online teaching setting gave her the freedom to step outside of the constraints of traditional classroom environments that she had struggled with as a learner and a teacher. Jennifer, who had taught online for the longest period of time, still struggled with feeling that teaching online didn’t count as real teaching, because for her teaching was integrally connected to the place in which it occurred and online teaching did not exist in a place. Exploration of her teaching narrative helped her see the importance of creating “place” in her online courses by building community through her course activities, assignments, and assessments. Exploring our personal narratives of teaching and learning allowed each of us to better understand how we can build on our strengths and the areas of tension we need to grapple with.

Exploration of our personal narratives allowed each of us to see how the transition to online teaching aligned or bumped up against our deeply embedded beliefs about learning, what counts as teaching, and what spaces teaching and learning occur within. For some of us, our images of teaching were deeply connected to the physical space of the classroom and physical interactions between teacher and students. For others, the online teaching environment brought freedom from the constraints of traditional classroom learning environments and new possibilities for linking learning experiences to students’ lives. The explorations of our narratives highlighted how the shift to online teaching created tensions and wonders about what is lost and what is still possible when the learning environment moves from the physical to the virtual. With new technologies that can be integrated into LMS platforms and with many web-based applications, there are many creative possibilities for sharing, connecting, and building new knowledge with students. We are in the process of learning new, creative ways of online teaching and learning, which will keep re-shaping our thinking, being, and becoming as a teacher.

### **Implications for Supporting Online Teaching**

When we began this collaborative autobiographical narrative inquiry, we thought we would come away with a list of takeaways—what are the most important things we need to know about online teaching and learning. We shared our stories and searched for commonalities, but

came to realize that the richness and value was as much in the diversity as in the commonalities. What we realized was that the uniqueness of each of our personal narratives and the ways we personally viewed “teaching” meant that there was no list of “best practices.” What we learned was that what is most important for online teaching and learning is to start by understanding our own stories of teaching and becoming a teacher in this very space of online. This was the big takeaway for us as narrative inquirers and as online teachers. When preparing for online teaching, it is important to think deeply about what you believe about teaching and learning, and recognize that this will shape your online teaching experience.

What matters to each of us as teachers and learners shapes the experiences we value in our online classes. Educational technologists should spend time listening to instructors’ stories of teaching and learning to help determine how courses should be designed. Keeping in mind what we know about quality online learning, courses can be tweaked to more closely reflect the values of the instructor. Our stories of teaching and learning matter and should be central to the instructional design process.

The COVID-19 pandemic has drastically changed the postsecondary landscape and required many university instructors to quickly transition to online delivery of courses. This has resulted in a critical need for professional development and instructional design support. We recognize that the immediate needs will focus on training instructors on the use of online technologies and pedagogies needed to deliver online courses. However, our study highlights how the transition to online teaching is about so much more than learning new technologies and pedagogies for the online environment. Successful transitions to online teaching cannot only focus on mechanics and strategies; they also pay attention to the personal stories and beliefs that instructors hold about teaching and learning. Transitioning to online teaching can be overwhelming and having a grounding in your personal beliefs about teaching and learning can help instructors focus on the areas that matter most as they wade through the multitude of tools, apps, and techniques that are available for teaching online courses.

As we experienced the rapid move to online/remote learning because of COVID-19 in March 2020, reflection on our narratives of teaching helped us support our colleagues as they grappled with moving from the physical classroom to the virtual one. Because of COVID-19, there will be so many more stories of online teaching to be shared in the coming years. Colleagues who have never taught online will have stories to tell. They will be stories of musical instruments and math manipulatives, science experiments and colour theory, physical education games and children’s literature. These stories will be of working with pre-service teachers who are new to online learning but now see why thinking about online learning is so important to their future lives as teachers. There will also be stories of questioning what good teaching means in this virtual space, going beyond what technologies are available and how we

implement them. These stories will highlight the values those teachers bring to teaching and learning and as we listen to those stories, we will hear our own stories.

From our collective experience we see the potential and value of collaborative autobiographical narrative inquiry for all those being and becoming online teachers, from diverse contexts and ranges of experiences. Hearing each other's stories and spending time engaging in a collaborative autobiographical narrative inquiry is a profound experience. In the narrative cycles of living, telling, retelling, and reliving (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), the work of the narrative inquirers and participants rests in the retelling of storied experiences. While living and telling often shapes field texts, as we engage in thinking narratively with these lived and told stories in the co-composition of interim and final research texts, the possibilities for retelling and reliving open up. Clandinin and Connelly (1998) wrote that:

The promise of storytelling emerges when we move beyond regarding a story as a fixed entity and engage in conversations with our stories. The mere telling of a story leaves it as a fixed entity. It is in the inquiry, in our conversations with each other, with texts, with situations, and with other stories that we can come to retelling our stories and to reliving them. (p. 251)

In our busy lives as academics we rarely have time to slow down to talk about teaching. This narrative inquiry allowed us to delve deeply into our stories of being a learner and teacher. With these narrative inquirers or others, the simple act of one person telling stories of teaching helps to shape the way those who listen understand their own teaching stories.

We continue to negotiate the tensions and the moments of success while we also continue to wonder: How do we honour who we are and how it is that we live in the world in these online spaces without creating a single story (Adichie, 2009), but instead allowing each of us to create the online learning environment we need to feel like a "good teacher"? Our questions and stories on being and becoming a "good teacher" in online spaces will be continuously experienced and challenged by many teachers who are teaching their students virtually in these strange COVID-19 times. We look forward to sharing, listening, and reflecting on more stories together with others to creatively rebuild our understandings of what it means to be a good teacher in this rapidly changing space and time.

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