

International Journal of Education & the Arts

Editors

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<http://www.ijea.org/>

ISSN 1529-8094

Volume 12 Number 7

July 18, 2011

Circles of (Im)perfection A Story of Student Teachers' Poetic (Re)Encounters with Self and Pedagogy

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Citation: MacKenzie, S. K. (2010). Circles of (im)perfection: A story of student teachers' poetic (re)encounters with self and pedagogy. *International Journal of Education & the Arts*, 12(7). Retrieved [date] from <http://www.ijea.org/v12n7/>.

Abstract

Teaching is vulnerable work where self and other enter into intimate encounters that can change one's sense of self and purpose within the world. Through this poetic rendering, I seek to piece together a story of communal becoming within the space of a student teaching seminar. The work was collaborative and ongoing as students engaged with one another's words and began to (re)write their relationships with themselves, the community, their peers, and practice. Boundaries were blurred, selves disrupted as student teachers began to engage with their own positions and perceptions of the world around them, (re)encountering pedagogy in a space of praxis.

New Beginnings and Introductions

They walk amidst
laughter
Tears becoming bright
glistening anticipation
Here we clap for them
a line of black robes
seeking
as they enter
into the space of the unknown
We have been there
awaiting our own arrival
pieces

As I write this, my student teachers are graduating – eager and unsure as they step out of the life they have known for four years to embrace the life they have for so long imagined. I have high hopes for this dynamic group of eight women; however, I know the path they have chosen is uneven and unpredictable. Teaching is vulnerable work where self and other enter into intimate encounters that change one's sense of identity and purpose within the world. It is a profession that is both fulfilling and trying as one works to weave idealism with expectation, amidst a culture that often dismisses the unspoken challenges of a misunderstood profession. Few outside the classroom can ever be truly aware of the facets of self that are continuously on the move for young teachers. I think in fact, very few young teachers are aware of this movement and if they are, they do not recognize that it is something that is both shared and unique. Instead, many of the beginning teachers I have worked with, including myself, find themselves alone in their negotiations, perhaps at times feeling like failures as they begin to lose sight of the order and the images of self they had identified with when they stepped into their first education course.

Across this space, I seek to piece together a story of communal becoming within the context of a student teaching seminar where students came to interrogate practice, while making sense of and accepting (their imperfect) selves as teachers. While starting perhaps first with the fragments of my own experiences as a student teacher, I seek to piece together a holistic story about uncomfortable beginnings, as I consider what happened when my students were invited to engage in artful and spiritually oriented self-inquiry as a means to explore themselves as teachers. From the first day of our student teaching seminar, student teachers were asked to engage in writing and art-making practices that placed them in the position of reflective inquirer as they tried to make sense of what they observed in the classrooms and communities

where they would be/were teaching, while acknowledging their own desires and sense of experience. The work was collaborative and ongoing as students engaged with one another's words and began to rewrite their relationships with themselves, the community, their peers, and practice. As student teachers began to engage with their own positions and perceptions of the world around them, they arrived at a new sense of self and community within practice, reencountering pedagogy in a space of praxis.

Pondering Poetically

To frame the lens of my storytelling, I draw on poetry as a means to return and research the experience. The poetry is fragmented, interrupted by more traditional research prose, shifting then to collective creations drawn directly from the experience. Poetic inquiry is not about answers, but as Leggo (2006) remarks, "Instead a poetics of research is about searching, and returning to the texts of our searching, again and again, constantly ready for surprises" (p. 90). I make no claims in my words but rather I seek to engage with them in process as a means to discover new patterns, relationships and ideas. Through poetic inquiry, knowing is always unfolding, blurring and becoming, sending off reverberations of language, sound, and emotion to be distorted, embraced, and reorganized toward new meaning.

Brady (2009) remarks, "Nothing speaks for itself. Interpretation is as necessary to human life as breathing" (p. xi). The nature of poetry is such that through the senses, it creates spaces for one - the reader and writer, to enter into meaning. This process does not simply involve a collection of facts; rather, the aesthetic nature of poetry invites one to find multiple points of entry and directions for interpretation. The value of poetry within research and education is that it moves beyond the concrete answers of positivism, toward praxis and dialogue. Through poetry, the reader and writer negotiate meaning across language to discover truths about self and experience. The meaning that is negotiated may include facts, but it also includes the imaginative qualities of living within experience. It is these imaginative qualities that create alternate spaces for movement and ways of seeing the world. Luce-Kapler (2009) highlights, "Poetry has a way of drawing us toward a phenomenon so that we feel the emotional reverberations of a shared moment" (p. 75). Through poetry, knowing moves toward a space of plurality, where emotion and intellect, self and other unite traveling beyond the confines of isolation and Truth, toward communion and recognition of the wonders of simply being within any experience.

Fragments of (Im)perfection

Imperfection is at the root of teaching, of being human—yet many of us, especially pre-service teachers, find ourselves seeking some image, presentation of perfection. One only has to reference various curriculum materials or teacher education textbooks to see that there is a

level of expectation, a socially accepted perception of the act of teaching that separates the teacher from the curriculum, the teacher from the student and instead transform the teacher into a mythic, all-knowing perfectionist who knows and performs best practice (Sameshima, 2008). As Davis and Sumara (2007) note “... almost all our formal educational experiences have been oriented by the question ‘How do you make people learn what you want them to learn?’” (p. 56). Student teachers have been familiarized with these normalized, effective practices of teaching from the time they first enter the classroom as a child—and for some even earlier. It is these defined discourses of teaching that create a single faceted image of the experience of teaching or perhaps what might otherwise be thought of as the doing of teaching. However, as Ayers (1993) so eloquently reminds us:

A life in teaching is a stitched-together affair, a crazy quilt of odd pieces and scrounged materials, equal parts invention and imposition. To make a life in teaching is largely to find your own way, to follow this or that thread, to work until your fingers ache, your mind feels as if it will unravel, and your eyes give out, and to make mistakes and then rework large pieces. It is sometimes tedious and demanding, confusing and uncertain, and yet it is as often creative and dazzling: Surprising splashes of color can suddenly appear at its center; unexpected patterns can emerge and lend the whole affair a sense of grace and purpose and possibility (p.1).

This quilt is a part of what Palmer (1998) refers to as the “inner landscape of the teaching self,” (p.4) a batting of sorts that connects the pieces, keeping them insulated and warm. But this batting or landscape serves no purpose without the threads and fabric of history, experience, interaction, and emotion.

When babies are born, they are immediately engaged in the process of making sense of their place in the world, their eyes begin to roam, fingers touch—they mimic and make sense of the moment by observation of self and others. This process is ongoing, however, as we grow, many of us fall into the trap of perceiving our worth through the acknowledgement and direction of others. This can be especially strong for teachers, who find themselves, working daily within a culture of evaluation. And it is this culture that often idealizes ritualistic performance of the rational, isolating many beginning teachers from the familial experience of love and acceptance (Grumet, 1988). However, like the quilt or mosaic, each of our unique facets does not exist in a vacuum, rather each piece of our being emerges through interaction. Being human is not rational rather it is relational. Far too often relationality is silenced as teachers are asked to engage in ritualized best practices; so intent on the perfect performance, a desire often arising from fear (Boler, 1999), that they lose sight of themselves as well as the others who are involved in that performance. And those others, that self do not simply exist

emotionless within the vacuum of the classroom, rather they bring with them every past experience, pain, love and desire when they step foot in the classroom. While these stories are always fluid and shifting, they lay themselves upon the (inner) landscape, silently playing a role as experience begins to take shape upon the canvas of the classroom. Leggo (2008) notes,

As a teacher, I do not leave my home and family experiences behind me when I drive to campus or when I enter the classroom. And I do not leave my past either. I am the person I am because of the experiences and people and places that comprise my life and my living (p. 91).

Teachers are thinking, feeling beings, who carry with them layers of stories that shape the person they are within a given movement. Teaching itself is a story or series built upon other stories, never ending and always unpredictable.

Burning embers
of yesterday
etch their yearning
upon
the landscapes interior
shifting
movement
toward the (un)predicable

A Mirrored Circle

The mandala can serve as a metaphor for the complex experience of teaching, in relationship to its patterns, order, and ambiguity; all of which work together to create a story or image often beautiful, but always with meaning. Trungpa (1991) describes the mandala as a "... space to create a situation that is based on a territory or boundary" (p. 6). The nature of this space is ambiguous and alive, even in its fixed shape shifting in meaning across time and depending on those interacting with the mandala. Teachers enter into a space as individuals shaped by past experiences yet their identity is simultaneously shifting within the space as a result of actions, expectations, and desire (their own and those of others). Trungpa (1991) highlights the idea of "orderly chaos" noting "It is orderly, because it comes in a pattern; it is chaos because it is confusing to work with that order" (p. 1). This orderly chaos exists within the classroom, especially when it comes to the experience of student teachers. Pre-service teachers are provided with neat outlines of best practices and lesson plans, hopefully informed by theory, and one could easily fall under the assumption then that the practice is simple, orderly and predictable. These assumptions can be powerful fictions (Rossiter, 1997) shaped not only by the often orderly nature of one's traditional education as a teacher, but also by

deeply embedded ideologies and popular culture (Robertson, 1997; Weber & Mitchell, 1995, 1999) that identify the teacher as one who is organized, always prepared with the right response. However, when the pre-service teacher arrives in the classroom despite plans and directions and the strong desire for success according to legend, the order is lost. As with any relationship, it is important to come prepared but also present, willing to learn, respond, accept, and reflect within the relational kaleidoscope otherwise known as the classroom.

My/Self as Student Teacher

As a teacher educator, my pedagogy has been significantly shaped by my experiences – those as a student, a teacher, a daughter - the list and roles are likely infinite. However, I think one of the most influential positions, was my own experience as a student teacher.

The picnic table
shrouds anxiety
Lines of individuals
appetites insatiable
Listening, stuff
their mouths
silenced
as they wait
for disconnected answers.

My own student teaching experience was an absolute disaster. I started off well enough, eager to learn and try new things as I got to know the students in my third grade classroom. My supervisor prepared us with lists and took us on tours of other schools so that we could see what the ideal classroom looked like. Dale (2004) remarks, “Learning to teach involves being attuned to particular narratives, learning to do what teachers (should) do, learning to see, think, feel, and talk as teachers (should)” (p. 72). This certainly reflects my own experience student teaching: we were inundated with the “shoulds” and even at times the “hows”. However, I forgot to see where I fell into the equation; when failure came, I was left not knowing what to do.

After my students had left the classroom for art, my cooperating teacher quickly shut the door and said “we need to talk”.

My body shakes
premonition strong
flight seems inevitable
I wait

In my waiting, she quickly told me she need to get something off her chest, for her own health and with this came the deluge of her frustrations with my performance. I am sure some of it may have been productive; however all I heard was:

Disconnected
Failure
Not one
of us
We don't want you
unless
you act
like
we act

My response was quick, and perhaps not what she expected as I rushed out of the room, without expression, holding back my tears until I could find a private space to be with my feelings. I believed at the time, to respond emotionally would have been further failure and I just could not do this. I remember feeling so alone and wanting desperately for my supervisor to come to my rescue. Yet she was not prepared, instead she suggested she come observe my teaching, give me some feedback/tips regarding that. This was not her fault, she had been a practicing teacher who was trying something “new” ; having taught for 20 + years within an institution that silences emotion in favor of production, she may very well have had no idea how to help me. In fact, I am sure that my emotionality during the experience scared her; it was not rational or fixable. I remember in those following two weeks before I finally decided to leave my student teaching placement - forgoing certification, I had felt so alone. I could not talk about my experience or my feelings, whether they be regarding failure, success, or confusion and thus I simply walked away, never stopping to fully reflect upon the experience.

After some time as a classroom teacher as well as a teacher educator, I have now had a great many opportunities to reflect on the experience. I know I was young, immature, and I responded rashly, but I also believe that perhaps if I had, had the opportunity to look deeply at myself, the events that were going on in my life both inside and outside the classroom—I might have been able see value in the work I was doing and possibility for growth. And it is

from this position -- that which seeks to honor the whole, fragmented, messy individual who exists across multiple planes, that I shape my practices as a teacher educator, especially when it comes to the ways I organize our weekly student teaching seminar.

What Happens in Community

Recognizing the feelings of isolation and discomfort that often arise for student teachers as they negotiate between the spaces of being a student and being a professional, I believe it is important to start the student teaching seminar from where they are -- drawing on the memories that shape them, the dreams they hold on to, the love they experience, the self they see in the mirror. Inviting them to first enter into a space of self reflection, then, into a dialogue of communal reflexivity—it is my intention to open space for growth and a sense of community.

The First Class (Seminar Meeting)

On Wednesday, August 26th, 8 eager young women gathered around a seminar table in the biology building. It was our first meeting and everyone was nervous. I had taught two of the girls the previous semester, but the other six were familiar only in name. I had no idea what to expect from them and they had no idea what to expect from me. What I did know was that the women that entered my classroom were complex individuals who wanted to know what they needed (should) to do in order to achieve success. After a day of reviewing the syllabus, identifying the qualities of a good teacher, reviewing what it means to understand, reflecting the “big ideas” they might draw on from previous courses, and discussing the concept of professionalism—students were ready to spend two days in the classroom, just observing. They arrived back on the fourth day of our seminar eager to share their observations and their thoughts about what they might bring to the classroom and I certainly gave them some time to do this. After some time for discussion, I stated the following,

You talked about what you will bring to the classroom and I am sure those of you who have had class with me, remember that as a teacher that you are never neutral. Not only will this experience be one of professional growth for you, but it will also be a time where you will bring in every aspect of who you are into the space of the classroom and you will grow. Who you are, who we are and the experiences that shape us are important to acknowledge and embrace.

At this moment, I shared my own “I AM” poem:

I am long hot evenings catching fireflies along the lakeside,
nights full of laughter and the shattering of plates in anger
I am daughter, caretaker, confident,
a little girl who knows too many secrets
white and privileged
becoming aware of truths
and letting go of longings
I am the wind whipping along the north sea of Scotland
imagining what might someday be
I am a teacher
mourning
the loss of a child
angry because no one could save him
committed to valuing independence and exploration
daughter of parents who no longer speak to each other
a one time church goer
who now spends Sunday mornings kayaking
along the river
with the man I love
I am a fighter
A writer
Artist
A want to be mother
Searching for what exists in a moment
Remembering the visions of a past
A woods walker journeying new paths
with my blue eyed brown eyed dog
I am a yogini
moving with breath across the mat
trying to let go
trying to be present
while sometimes watching too much television
I am a woman who sometimes forgets to lock her door at night
and wakes up to the imagined (or real) predatorial noise of a stalker
and can't fall back to sleep
I am the one who obsesses over the potential for failure and will take hours to prepare
for just a few minutes

I am Smithport and Catskill, Boonville and Mechanicville, Laconia and Concord
Private school and public school
always searching for something better
and at one time never satisfied
I am today and tomorrow and yesterday
Wheeling across my consciousness
always I am becoming
someone new
but slightly old

Upon the conclusion of reading the poem, I did not ask for a response, rather, I invited students to create their own “I AM” poems, providing no other direction except to write without judgment (Goldberg, 1990) and to focus more upon their own subjectivity/experience as opposed to form. After some time when the students had finished the writing, I invited them to switch their papers and read the poems created by their peers, circling or underlining those words or phrases that seemed to resonate for them. At first, the students were reluctant, anticipating evaluation; however I reminded them that they were simply reading the poems to find those elements that they felt a connection to. I then asked them to pass the marked pages of these poems to me, so that I might create a “We Are” found poem, created from the words/phrases that they identified.

We are
always the same person
inside change
a displaced circle
consistent and controlling
the pushover, softie
in a room full
of laughter and secrets
desperate to see
the good in people
leaving me
vulnerable
passionate with an open heart
The guilt ridden dreamer
A keeper of routines, traditions, and memories
sick of people telling me
teaching is easy
responsibilities, cliché

Anxious
dancer in a fairytale
scared of feeling
wanting change
A hopeful protector
trying to find calm in failed events
The sensitive one
independent and faithful
listening to struggles without judgement
someone that others can turn to
rely on
wishing I could change
decisions made in the past
The introverted extrovert
surrounded in the unknown
learning, deserving with appreciation
good, happiness, love
in relationship
with people who will make me better
The respected one
a perfectionist uncertain
trying to please everyone
patient and content
second guessing myself
my failure, my past
wondering how
experience, secrets, knowledge
might change
the person I have become
fortunate and understanding
wanting
A wishful creator
excited
about the unknown
I am
we are
Teacher

That same afternoon, upon the completion of the poem activity, I invited students to break into groups, to choose images that they felt answered (whether metaphorically or in a more concrete fashion) the following questions:

- What is teaching?
- How do you define yourself as a teacher?
- How do your experiences inside and outside the classroom shape you as a teacher?
What is important to keep in mind when you enter the classroom?
- What might be important to forget (are there things)?
- How are your actions as a teacher shaped by others?
- What is the value of “knowing yourself” and how can this be beneficial to your teaching identity and educational practices?

I then asked them to identify those ideas that were more central to their identity as teachers and those that seemed to play some role in informing their practice and understanding, but were perhaps not as important. My original intention was then to have them create a community mandala where they placed the most important concepts in the center and then branched out from there; however, students were deeply engaged in the process and we were running out of time and therefore, I asked them to label where they thought the images should go and from their direction, I pieced together our community mandala, interweaving the “We Are” poem created from the words they chose when they read one another’s “I Am” poems. While made up of images and words chosen by the students, ultimately the mandala that evolves is a poetic and visual interpretation of the choices made by my student teachers. I can identify with Cahnmann (2003) when she shares about her own interpretation of fieldnotes, remarking:

My identity as both a poet and researcher gave me license to adjust what is “true” (with a lower case *t*) in the original and the detailed accuracy to capture “Truth” (with a capital *T*), that is the depth of feeling and music in the original situation (p. 33).

As I pieced together the images of the mandala, once again I was engaging with poetic inquiry, this time in a visual sense.

The images in the mandala reflected the conflict that is articulated within their “We Are” poem. Through their choice of images, it was clear that there was a longing for comfort, love (both giving and receiving) that played a large role in relationship to shaping their perceptions



of practice and their desire to teach. However, also present was confusion as student teachers tried to find “realistic” images of what they believed. They cut out many smiling faces of beautiful children in an almost passive attempt to arrive at the desired outcome rather than to enter into the (im)perfect possibilities of the experience. They also struggled when it came to determining which images belonged in the center, as most important to their identity and practice. The images that were finally chosen for the center were more ambiguous, abstract and symbolic, offering more apparent points of entry for interpretation, allowing in a sense for no choice to be wrong. The presentation of the mandala is messy, as images and text overlap and intersect; something I believed was an important representation of my own experience as well as a reality that I felt was important for my students to acknowledge.

Messiness speaks
amidst anticipation
unconditional love
distant in this moment
we wait
excited
softly ambivalent
yearning for linearity
between abstract impatience

Irwin (2003) intimates that “... an aesthetic way of knowing appreciates the awkward spaces existing between chaos and order, complexity and simplicity, certainty and uncertainty, to name a few dialectical relationships” (p.63). Through the creation of and engagement with poetry, choosing the images for the mandala, and then responding to the image, the student teachers were able to see experience not through a binary lens, but rather through a dialogical lens that invited a new awareness, recognition of being as both chaotic and orderly. It is my belief that it was the initial aesthetic, reflexive experience where students (rather uncomfortably) worked together to piece desire, experience, knowledge and expectation in relation to self and practice, that allowed for a space of acceptance to be created. Throughout the semester, students were asked to share their joys, sorrows, challenges, questions, and insights and slowly they worked through the discomfort to emerge as critically aware and reflexive practitioners that valued themselves and one another, as well as the ambiguity of

their practice. While there were moments of embarrassed confessionals, the students accepted one another's "limitations" and began to reflect thoughtfully rather than dismiss or hide in shame over the messiness of practice. While our community developed early on, it continued to grow and by the end of the semester, it was clear that we were a community of learners who really cared about and loved one another. It was this same caring and awareness that moved beyond the boundaries of our seminar into each classroom where a student teacher taught.

The Final Class (Seminar Meeting)

On the last day of the student teaching seminar, I asked students to write down what they had learned from the experience - perhaps returning to the weekly insights we made note of following our sharing of joys, sorrows and challenges; I encouraged them to write their thoughts using a haiku format so that they might better focus on the big ideas. From their words, we pieced together a modified renga. A renga is a collaborative poem of sorts, usually starting with the traditional 5/7/5 pattern of haiku, as one stanza (haiku) is created, other individuals create their own stanzas to join the poem. I began the poem with the first stanza and then left the space open for students to post their own poetic responses summarizing their experience, building upon what I had begun in the first stanza.

Wrapped in emotion
we become the beginning
and the end, knowing

We are all learners
helping others learn with us
loving what we do

Meeting new children
watching them grow in learning
knowing we matter

Not every student will learn the lessons you teach
just try; don't give up

We will make mistakes,
but by learning from them we
will become better

We are capable
touch a life, support them always
time, tears, fear, love, strength

We will always be learning
growing with our students

Walking in nervous
days of endless learning
leaving a teacher

Children have power
to change and inspire you
they have touched our lives

The earth breathes the we
children and adults sharing,
learning, growing, wise

It was evident, that even within ambiguity and (im)perfection, they had found peace and a capacity to truly love their students, becoming present and open to learning.

Endings and Beginnings

Britzman (1991) notes, “Practice, time, dialogue, and creativity are the ingredients for becoming a teacher and the sources of revitalization” (p. 182). My student teachers are graduating today, with that diploma in hand they are heading out into the world, into the classroom as complex and knowledgeable individuals. However, this day is only a moment, a piece of the mosaic that will become their life as a teacher.

The arrival quick
unmistakable
(un)remarkable
becoming
Pardoned for our humanness
a body
organs succinctly speaking to one another
A song across (dis)cord and desire
Each moment an interaction
a messy possibility

Perhaps on this day, as in the future they will feel no need to "...wear the mask of all-knowing and perfection" (Sameshima, 2008, p. 8), but rather may they relish in their (im)perfection, aware that it is the chaos of the living being, the messiness of knowing and not knowing that allows them to love and learn in relationship, to be present to possibility.

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About the Author

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