Stories of Teaching and Learning:
A Memoir

by

Elizabeth Helen Heimbecker

A thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Education

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University of Manitoba
Winnipeg, Manitoba

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A Thesis/Practicum submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of The University of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Education

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Acknowledgements

I would like to express my thanks to Dr. Wayne Serebrin, the chair of my committee, as well as my other committee members, Dr. Joan Walters and Dr. Judith Newman. Your ongoing feedback throughout this process has been valuable and much appreciated.

To my parents, Ron and Irene Heimbecker, your love and support have been immeasurable. I cannot express my thanks enough.

To my sisters, Jane Heimbecker and Tracy Heimbecker, I thank you for listening with your hearts as well as your intellects. I have been blessed.

To my friends and colleagues, in Seven Oaks School Division I can only say that our ongoing conversations, both past and present, continue to provide me with new perspectives, ideas and challenges.

Abstract

I am going to tell you a story in this document. It is my story. Some of these stories are about my experiences as a learner while others are from my perspective as teacher. Both are really stories about learning because I am a learner in my own classroom. I'm often learning different things from my students but I am learning with them and from them.

In this way, I understand teaching and learning as opposite sides of the same coin: only the perspective is different. Most of what I know about teaching I either know through reflection on myself as a learner or from placing myself in the shoes of the learners in my classroom and attempting to understand their perspectives.

This story spans many years. In many instances I understand the events differently as years of lived experience and numerous discussions have informed how I make sense. I believe, however, that it would be a narrow and self-indulgent focus if these stories were only about me. They are also about you in the sense that these stories may provide a window through which you can see aspects of your own experience and self. To this end, I hope that this document is both a window and a contribution to the ongoing conversation around education.

Beth Heimbecker

March, 2001

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Chapter One:

Beginnings

I'm standing at the back of the kindergarten line. I'm in the morning class and that first day of school has come and gone and I know that my mom will be waiting for me on the corner. It's the 1969-1970 school year. I don't remember much of that first day, except the home time part, but I remember going for an interview with my mom a week before school started in September to meet my new teacher. We sat on chairs in the hall between the two kindergarten rooms and I peeked into both rooms. I was a little disappointed by the furniture. They had carpeting on the floors and small round tables. Around each table were six or eight little chairs with padded seats and backs. One room had blue chairs and the other yellow. This was not how school was supposed to look. I wanted to sit in real desks, like the older kids, in nice orderly rows. I wanted to keep my stuff inside my own desk and put my hand up when I knew the answer to a question. To my relief, when it was our turn the younger of the two teachers invited us into her room. I was pleased because, given a choice, I wanted the room with the younger teacher and the little blue chairs.

Anyway, its home time on that first day and I am at the very back of the line. We get to leave fifteen minutes earlier than the rest of the school and the patrols are getting us organized to walk us part of the way home. One class will walk east on Allard Avenue and the other class will walk west. As I'm standing there patiently waiting, the old teacher with the yellow chairs comes and stands in front of her class which is lined up behind mine. Seeing me at the end of the line and thinking I belong to her she pushes me back so that I am in the very front of the line in the other class. She says a few things to the long line of children in front of her and I want to tell her that I'm in the wrong line but I don't know how to interrupt her and before I know it the patrols are taking us out the door and I am walking in the opposite direction from where I am supposed to be going. What am I going to do? I know that I am going the wrong way and I know that my mom will be wondering where I am because she is waiting for me at the corner but I don't think I'm allowed to just get out of line and do what I know is right so I just keep walking and following along and cry quietly to myself. By the time I hear my name and look up into the pleasant face of the woman who obviously knows me I can no longer articulate what my problem is. "You don't live this way," she says to me, "Come on and I'll take you home." Now, at least I am walking in the right direction, but I am wondering who this lady is and whether or not I should be following someone whom I don't know. A little way up the road I see my mom at the corner. She's walking towards us holding my sister Jane's hand. She is clearly uncomfortable what with the heat and the worry of what had happened to me and it can't be easy because, although I don't realize it then, in another month I will have another little sister Tracy. This friend of my mother's explains how she found me and when my mom asks me why I was walking in that direction when I knew my way home I can't say because it's all about authority and doing what you are told to do but I don't know it to say it. I only know the feel of it.

* * *

I completed the first rung on the educational ladder and was

promoted. On the first day of grade one my mom walks me to school. I don't use the kindergarten door anymore but the grade one door. The principal stands in front of the door and when we try and pass he stops us and tells my mom that parents are not allowed beyond this point. I know all about principals. I know that they are the bosses and that they are always men. I know that they strap you if you are bad and what they say goes. I know that when they come to visit the classroom that you need to be extra quiet so they don't notice you. I know that you never want to be sent to the principal's office and that ultimately he decides if you pass or fail. Blend in and you'll never get yelled at. Blend in and you'll never get the strap. Blend in and there will never be any phone calls home. Do what you are supposed to do. Blend in and educators will like you. Blend in and you'll never have to take any risks because you'll be so darn average that no one will ever expect anything out of the ordinary from you.

I will have to go in by myself. I'm a big girl now, big enough to sit in real desks and learn how to read and write. No painting houses on the easel or make believe in the play area this year. I'm big enough for all this but I still start to cry, hug my mom good-bye and make my way through the big doors, down the long hall and into my new room. I select a desk midway down the middle row and that remains my psychological place in the classroom for the next twenty some odd years.

* * *

I'm in grade four. I've been reading a really good book and have been so engaged that I haven't noticed that reading period is over and we are half way through math. What will I do? I'd best get my math booklet from the side of the room. Putting away my chapter book I get up making my way towards the far side of the room. That's when she starts yelling at me. It's not registering what she is saying to me and as an adult it makes me think of the distorted megaphone voice of Charlie Brown's teacher because it drones on and on devoid of any meaning. My face is hot and I can feel the eyes of everyone else in the room on my back. I don't stop or meet her eyes. I just keep walking, get what I need and head back to my seat where she continues scolding me for another few seconds. I open my math and look down.

When I get my report card the column is checked Needs Improvement where it says "shows originality in thought and action." It also says that I am a "reserved" little girl. Of course I'm reserved. I'm scared stiff of my teacher and I don't take one breath or make one move in that room without checking with myself first. I'm so busy monitoring myself that I don't have time to worry about being creative or having original thoughts. I won't be humiliated again by her or anybody else.

* * *

By the time I've got my first teaching assignment I know the game or at least I know the game from my perspective.

Teachers are the all encompassing authority in the classroom. They are the ones who make the rules, dispense information, and decide whether you know enough to pass. Students sit in rows or some other creative seating configuration designed to be more democratic and promote discussion. Regardless of the message the seating arrangement gives, students take in information and put up their hands when they have a question or want to contribute something to the discussion. I know that good teachers don't have any discipline problems because they are the authority and they know it and the students know it. I know this because my cooperating teachers last year didn't have any problems. What I don't know is that teachers often give their most well behaved classes to teacher candidates because these groups help make the experience successful for the beginning teacher.

* * *

So now the shoe is on the other foot so to speak.

"What do you mean you don't have a pen? How hard is it to remember to bring your supplies to class? Does someone have to remind you every day? Who has a pen they can lend Ben? Really, this is getting to be ridiculous!"

"And why are you late? This is the third time this week! I don't think it's a lot to ask that you get here on time."

"Homework not done again? I'm telling you Tyler if this happens once more I am phoning home about this. Your job at school is to do your work. What don't you understand about that?"

"Blah....blah....blah...." Like Charlie Brown's teacher I drone on and on and on. In retrospect I wonder how many children sitting in the middle row did not demonstrate originality in thought and action that year because of their teacher.

Years later, I am embarrassed by my narrow hierarchical model of education where the teacher is the all encompassing authority and holds all power in the classroom, but I am learning to cut myself a little slack. This model is all

that I had known and I had accepted it as status quo. As a result, I assumed that all my students would buy in as I had. Jane Tompkins' (1998) comment about teachers being products of the system in which they were educated is applicable in my circumstance. She says:

> It's the people who are most susceptible to authority who suffer the most from their schooling, and who must liberate themselves later on from its effects. Many of those who do not wake up to their condition remain in school as teachers, pleased with the rewards of having performed well, so the codes of the classroom are passed on. (pp. 211-212)

Being a product of the system I was trying to set myself up as the supreme authority in my classroom in the eyes of my students. Ironically, being a product of the system also meant that I didn't recognize any authority within myself and as a result I felt like a complete impostor in my classroom. In fact, I was scared stiff. Surrounded by experienced teachers who seemed to know what they were doing I was afraid someone would find me out and expose me for the impostor I was. Of course this underscores the alienation of classroom life since we all, as teachers, look competent to someone walking by our closed classroom doors and peeking through the window.

Competent or not, I was at a stage of knowing which Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1997) term as "received knowledge." In this stage of knowing, learners take in information and adopt it as their own but do not

recognize their own abilities to manipulate this information to create their own understandings (p. 39). As a result, like knowledge, authority lies outside of the self, since knowledge makers are the experts. Because I believed authority lay outside of myself I chose to look for answers within the realm of experts. When something wasn't working for me in the classroom it was because I wasn't good enough to pull it off. It wasn't a case of modifying it to fit my own situation. If it didn't work in its entirety it was my fault. This dependence on authority, according to Judith Newman, (1998) is systemic.

> Teachers are socialized to be dependent on external authority. They are taught to consume knowledge fashioned by others, instead of creating understanding for themselves. As undergraduates they are often expected to memorize and regurgitate what experts have to say. As teachers they are inundated with textbooks accompanied by manuals containing elaborate lesson plans. They are buried beneath governmental curriculum guidelines that lay out prepackaged courses of study....It's no wonder, then, teachers rely heavily on others for making instructional decisions. (p. 190)

This reliance on the experts caused me to perpetuate any problems I was having in the classroom. Teaching basic French is a case in point.

> "Bonjour classe. Je m'appelle Mme B. Je suis votre professeur de français pour cette année. Je vais vous parler en français la plupart du temps cette année. Alors, commençons."
>
> "I don't understand a word you just said," mumbles Brent from the back.
>
> "French is stupid," snorts Tanya.
>
> "My parents don't know why we need to take this," says Mike.

My middle row students are just looking at me with panic-stricken eyes. They're wondering how they are going to survive this year and get a good mark.

Sadly, I should have known that this approach would throw them into a panic. It would throw me into a panic. But...the authorities said that you had to speak French to students as much as possible and you had to do it from day one. In retrospect, speaking as much French in class as possible is a good idea, but on that first day when students are unsure of what comes next in terms of routines, for instance, what they need to know is that their teacher will not abandon them leaving them helpless and unable to comprehend anything. I should have built slowly towards using French in the daily classroom routines at the same time as I was fostering trust, risk-taking and other supportive structures which would help them to speak the language. Instead, I caused my students in panic to shut down before we had even started the year, and it didn't stop there because having made the mistake once I continued on the following year blindly following the experts.

In another case, the authorities told me that most of the class should be oral and that activities should be changed frequently. I am not saying that this approach doesn't work for everybody, because there are probably some who do make it work but it didn't work for me. In a forty minute period I would try and get students settled, ask a few oral questions, play an oral game, teach a short lesson and then give an assignment. It was too much in one period. Too much change and commotion from one activity to another.

Still, I persisted, because someone who taught me a course at the university told me that this was how to do it. So, I did it that way and persisted even though it wasn't working for me. I remained rigid unable to listen to myself or value what I knew about the context of my teaching activities.

* * *

But that is only half the story. While it is true that I saw myself as the all-encompassing authority, the one who dispenses information, grades, evaluates students and orchestrates the learning environment, I was not immune to discussions of a democratic education. I remembered the occasional year in my education where I had felt valued and was not afraid of being humiliated or ridiculed by my teacher. Those years held positive memories for me. I wanted to be that kind of teacher in the classroom and so, at the same time that I had set myself up as The Authority in the classroom I was also trying to connect with students, to give them a lot of choice in both their assignments and their daily activities in the classroom. I was giving my students a very mixed message. To compound the problem I couldn't escape the underlying fear that I wasn't doing a good enough job and so I would panic if things went badly, and take back the control which I hadn't really given to my students in the first place. My classroom wasn't exactly a predictable place for my students. With no clearly defined boundaries, the climate would ultimately go from bad to worse. It was about control and not about learning. "How," I would ask myself, "did you manage to complete a four year teaching degree and

not know how to teach when you were finished?"

In retrospect my question was naive and I have to smile to myself when I think back on that. Its not that teacher candidates don't learn anything in university but that so much of good teaching is not about techniques or insightful presentation of information. Good teaching, like good living, is an evolutionary process. It is about the kind and quality of relationships that we cultivate in our lives. It is about understanding the complex relationships that exist between learners, teachers, the institution, the formal and informal curriculum and policy makers. It is about watching human behavior and gaining insight into why a learner is acting or reacting in a certain way. It is about understanding when, as a teacher, you are shutting someone down, or when you are not challenging someone enough. Its about knowing when your own behavior is a result of insecurities and is not in the best interest of your students. I don't want to say that beginning teachers aren't good teachers because I don't believe this to be the case. What I do want to say is that one grows into a better teacher as one grows through life. Those years of life experience and our reflection on those experiences shape our understandings both in and out of the classroom.

It became clear to me that my struggle divided me in two. On the one hand my job is to teach. I am an agent of society. At the same time, so much of what I believe about teaching and learning is contrary to institutional guidelines. I realized early on that there was more to good

teaching than being a classroom technician who kept things orderly. I needed to find out what teaching and learning were really all about for me; to sort through my own experience as a learner to discover how my own experience had informed my assumptions and later on, how my experience as an adult learner and more experienced teacher continued to inform my practice.

Chapter Two:

Two Theories of Teaching and Learning

I've always been in the middle reading group but I've been "moved up." I'm pleased in an apprehensive kind of way. I've been comfortable in the middle able to handle tasks fairly easily. I know that the reading groups are leveled by skill because there have always been three groups and the same people are always together; the really skillful people, the average people like me, and then the kids who have difficulty. What I have been thankful for is that I'm not in the low group because everybody knows that the low group people are not as smart as the rest of us. I've always been with the average people but suddenly I'm in the top group and I'm wondering what I did to get there. I must have gotten smarter but I don't feel any differently.

So, I'm in the smart reading group and Miss Cook is my grade six Language Arts teacher. She is an old lady even then. She is a thin spry woman with short gray hair, the kind that is permed and set once a week in little pink rollers. We spend a lot of time with our reader Open Highways. I don't remember much about this reader but I remember feeling out of my comfort zone in Language Arts particularly when it came to learning how to write outlines. We would read a passage in our workbook, usually not a fictional one, but rather one which was supposed to give us information. Then Miss Cook would get us to look in each paragraph for the topic sentence and then we would write down the supporting sentences in point form underneath what we identified as the main idea of each paragraph.

In retrospect, I suspect these exercises were supposed to teach us about writing compositions, in that if we could select main idea and supporting details from a piece of writing then we would know how to organize our ideas when we had to plan our own compositions. The pedagogical assumption is that a writer thoroughly understands where she is going with a piece of writing and has all points logically filed in her brain.

I believe that children, as well as teachers, carry assumptions, personal theories if you like, about learning. They are assumptions which are learned when we are students and they are often an unintentional by-product of the formal curriculum. Sadly, those lessons often have a far deeper and longer lasting effect on us than the intended lesson ever could. When I think about Miss Cook and deconstructing

paragraphs into its organizational pieces I realize that I formed a lot of assumptions about myself as a learner and about what constituted learning and knowledge. These exercises were a good example of how mysterious a teacher's agenda can be to students. Our outlining unit was certainly mysterious to me. I had a hard time filling in all of the lines, usually three, underneath the topic sentence line on the worksheet. Sometimes I could find only two supporting ideas, sometimes I had more details than there were lines. I knew, however, that if there were three lines then there were only three correct answers; no more and no less. There were also no gray areas because answers were all black and white. They were either correct or incorrect. Furthermore, the teacher was never wrong and I, more often than not, was wrong. I also knew that I couldn't possibly be very smart because if I was smart I wouldn't be having so much difficulty. Miss Cook was a kind and dear lady and all she was trying to do was teach me how to be a good writer. She taught me everything but what she intended.

* * *

"I cannot stress enough how important it is to study your principle and subordinate clauses for next week's grammar test," says my grade nine teacher. We've been doing this clause thing forever; exercise upon exercise and I cannot seem to get it. Even when I do get a question right I have no idea why it is correct. I am mystified.

On Saturday I go to my friend Karen's house. We sit in her rec room paneled in knotty pine. The linoleum is cream colored with strands of gold marbling running through it. It is always ice cold on the feet, summer and winter. The study lamp casts a harsh white light across the arborite table and the old chairs with the chrome legs are starting to get uncomfortable. Karen does better in school than I. Whereas I have a pretty consistent mixture of A's and B's Karen gets pretty much straight A's. My perception is that she is a lot smarter than I am, because she is really good at this kind of learning.

We've done at least twelve sentences. I'm supposed to underline the principle clause and circle the subordinate clause. I read the

sentence out loud. "We did not go to the show because we didn't have any money."

"Remember," says Karen, "the principle clause stands alone but the subordinate clause doesn't."

"But I don't get what that means.... stands alone."

"We did not go to the show," is a complete sentence all on its own. " '...because we didn't have any money' needs something more added to it. Can you see how it needs something more?"

No, I can't. I can't see how one sentence is complete and the other isn't." I am looking for patterns, grammatical rules to follow, but understanding whether a clause is principle or subordinate rests in the meaning of the sentence and I haven't connected "stands alone" to mean a complete thought. Even if I made the connection I probably wouldn't understand the notion of a sentence being a complete thought anyway because it never makes any sense to me when I see it scrawled on the side of an assignment in the hand of my teacher. I am assuming anyway that grammar isn't about the meaning of the sentence because I know a complex set of symbols that I use when I dissect a sentence. I underline the action. I ask myself "Who or what did?" and circle that word because that is the subject. Then I ask myself "Who did "what?" and the answer to that question is the the direct object. I also know that "a" and "the" are articles and that a lot of little words like "in", "on" and "of" are prepositions. I ask the questions and go through the steps and I don't need to worry about meaning and I don't want to because the sentences are so incredibly dull anyway.

I look at Karen and sigh as we continue on in this vein. I finally did "get it," and I have to hand it to my friend because her patience and dedication to my plight of principle and subordinate clauses was above and beyond the call of a grade nine friendship. To my growing understanding of learning I can add that learning is about following and applying rules. I also know that I am not very good at it. I can't be very smart.

* * *

"How long every day do you practice?" my piano teacher asks me. I can tell by her tone that she is implying that I don't make much of an effort.

"Oh, half an hour a day," I say. It's true that I spend that time every day but if she knew how I was spending that time she wouldn't think I was practising smartly. I'm in an interesting dilemma. My mom told me that I should learn a piece bar by bar.

"Play the first bar and then when you know that then play the second bar and then play the two together. That's the way you progress through the piece." She's probably right, I think to myself, but I hate doing it this way because it is so darn boring and I cannot get a sense of the whole song and that's what I want to do. I want to play music and it doesn't sound like music to me when I play bar by bar by bar.

I have a need to see the whole so I practice the piece as a whole. I play it through over and over again. When there is a particularly difficult section I just flub over it and keep going. I have no idea how to figure out whether I've got the right timing. I listen to my teacher play the new piece at the lesson and then I play it that way from memory. As a result sometimes there are places that aren't timed properly or places where I have to slow down because it is hard for me to play them. In the end I learn those phrases incorrectly. This method doesn't even particularly bother me too much because I still enjoy the practising part and the piece as a whole when I play it. I just fill in the parts in my head that don't actually come out of my fingers.

This method serves my purposes until recital time. I hate recitals with a passion, partly because, I can never get a piece polished enough to play for an audience. Of course, I panic a couple of weeks before the actual performance and buckle down trying to figure out some of those trouble spots in the piece but in the end I don't play well for an audience partly because I feel ill prepared and I get jittery and partly because at the heart of it I don't want to perform for an audience. I just want to play and enjoy myself.

I would think to myself after these disastrous recitals that I should get more methodical about my practice habits, that I should try and break down my pieces into smaller more manageable sections, and that most of all, if I could learn one piece and know it like the back of my hand before I started learning another one I would make real progress; step by step and skill by skill. More than any other learning I was engaged in, piano lessons taught me that a person "did" learning and if one "did" it the "right" way one needed

discipline so that one could build skills in an orderly and systematic fashion. I saw this as part of my problem. I was moving ahead before I had mastered the previous skills and it was affecting whatever I was currently attempting. My process was flawed but this was because I was flawed; I didn't have the drive or discipline to "do" it "right."

"You just practise this once more while I take the laundry out of the drier," my teacher says to me. I do, and feel useless, like she's got better things to do than listen to me. When the piece gets to the passable point we move on because we both know, that given my deplorable habits, I am not likely to get any better at any single piece. Believing that I lacked discipline there seemed little point in really trying since I had such a fatal flaw in my character.

I generalized these experiences to learning in school. Believing that learning was sequential skill development I believed, as Frank Smith (1998, p.4) points out, that one was only learning when one was trying to learn and that learning was inherently boring and difficult. I believed I needed to buckle down but it was such a painful process that I just didn't want to engage in anything partly to avoid pain and partly because it required a huge amount of time and effort to do it "properly." This attitude put me in an "if you aren't going to do it right then you may as well not do it at all," mentality. As a result, I worked hard while I was at school, probably because of my misplaced reverence for authority, but I missed a lot of incidental learning while growing up outside of the formal setting because time away from school meant time away from learning. Any curiosity I had about the world I either didn't recognize or ignored since it required effort and learning and I was on my own time.

I began to think about this notion of skill development differently as an adult learning to cross country ski. I had been skiing since I was an adolescent but when I began teaching at Ken Seaford Junior High early in my career I became involved in the cross country ski program. I had never really thought much about technique when it came to skiing until that time. In the past I just strapped on my skiis and away I would go. Now, however, as a assistant coach I had to think about technique and so I began to practise with our students as our head coach began to work with us on skill development. We would begin basically enough. It is not a matter of just walking on skis but rather of shifting your weight from one side to another, gliding and getting the right amount of kick to propel you forward. This kick and glide exercise is something that we do without poles. I know that the hope in removing the poles is to get students to propel themselves with their legs only and not rely on their arms as another source of power. I had a great deal of difficulty performing this drill. For a beginning skier, which I considered myself at that time, there is also an issue of balance and ski poles help stabilize the novice skier. Finally, one day when we were out skiing around the school ground the whole thing clicked for me. It just felt right and I knew that I had the kind of kick and glide and weight shift that were required to cover optimum distance.

The funny thing is that as soon as I was able to do the whole thing I was also able to go back and perform the drill

without the poles. I believe that this experience is indicative of many skills teachers attempt to develop in children. As adults who already posses a complex set of skills it is easy to go back and work on one isolated skill in the sequence. I don't believe that this is the case for the learner. Often what informs our practice as teachers is our ability to break down our own skills into smaller pieces which we can perform. We are approaching the learning from our own perspective, the teaching perspective, rather than from the perspective of the learner. John Mayher (Peters, 1998) refers to this perspective as the "common sense view" of teaching.

> ...in the commonsense view...complex processes and abilities are to be understood as consisting of a set of simple skills which can be separately mastered. This idea in turn gives rise to the notion that some skills are basic, and to the belief that the way to acquire the complex wholes is to master the simpler parts and then put the whole thing together. (p. 29)

The other point of interest regarding skill development is that students may not put various pieces together and form a coherent understanding of a concept. I have always considered myself to have difficulty in math even as an adult. Part of this difficulty is the result of an early self perception that I wasn't very mathematically adept. As a result I grew to dislike it very quickly. The other reason I think is linked to this notion of sequential skills being like pieces of a puzzle. When the last skill is learned, so

the theory says, the student has a comprehension of the whole picture or concept. When I was in junior high I learned all about fractions. I learned how to make equivalent fractions, mixed fractions and improper fractions. I could add, subtract, multiply and divide fractions and I could put them in lowest terms. I also knew about decimals and I could perform various operations with them as well. I also understood about percentages. I could use all three of these in real life situations quite well but there was one startling connection that I didn't make until I taught math to my own grade seven class. Never, had it ever occurred to me, that fractions, decimals and percentages were different ways of expressing the same idea and that I could use them interchangeably if I chose. It's not that I didn't know this either, because on some level I did, but I didn't make a conscious connection until I became an adult. This may seem unbelievable, but I am not the first teacher who has come to understand something differently by teaching it. This emphasizes the fact that one can perform isolated skills without understanding the connection of the skills to the larger concept.

Learning was never something that I did as a process but something given to me by others. Looking back on my own experience as a learner, I believe that learning was done more "to" me than "by" me and it reflects a view of knowledge as fixed and absolute existing outside of the self. As a result, it is objective and unchanging something which we can metaphorically turn around and look at from a detached

perspective because it exists out there somewhere. This view of knowledge finds its expression in a transmission model of teaching and learning or what Freire (1997) termed the "banking" model of education (p. 53). In this model knowledge is a possession which someone knowledgeable gives someone else. Serebrin (1995) cites Margaret Donaldson who says:

> One common but mostly unexamined way of talking about knowledge is as a *thing* which we receive-an abstract kind of thing,certainly, but having none the less the thing-like property of being able to be handed over. We often speak of 'getting' knowledge as we might talk of getting a refrigerator or a new car-or perhaps of getting praise from someone. (p. 70-71)

This notion of knowledge as a possession, is what often drives teaching practice to be one of sequential skill development. If knowledge is a "thing" then it is also assumed that you can give it to someone else who will benefit from receiving it. If you're going to pass it on then you need to do it in a systematic way, because knowledge is most often multi-faceted. Breaking knowledge down into its component skills makes it a manageable and concrete task. It also makes it easier to be accountable to those in authority. These assumptions, therefore, drive practice.

The alternative to a transmission view of knowledge is a meaning making or constructivist view of learning. Constructivism posits that human beings engage in a constant process of making sense of their lived experience both with

the inanimate world and in interactions with others. Generally there are two schools of thought: cognitive constructivism and social constructivism. Rather than being competing models, these two processes are the sides of the same coin; in that, although alternate perspectives, they are closely connected, influencing one another in an inseparable way.

Piaget's cognitive constructivism (Fosnot,1996,p.13) is concerned with what goes on inside an individual mind. Learning is seen as a process of assimilation and accommodation wherein the mind interacts with the external world. Assimilation refers to the taking of experiences and integrating them with one's own existing cognitive structures or how one sees the world. Sometimes experiences cannot be assimilated into the preexisting structures in which case the individual engages in a process of accommodation whereby our existing cognitive structures are modified in order to accommodate the new information. (Fosnot, 1996, p. 13)

People do not, however, operate as isolated entities. We are social beings, and so as the world provides us with material to both assimilate and accommodate into our preexisting structures, much of that material originates from others who are engaged in their own processes of making sense through cognitive constructivism. Essentially, social constructivism is the collective result of individuals making sense of their worlds. The process becomes a cyclical one because as individuals bring their personal perspectives into the public domain, these meanings must be negotiated.

"Truth" becomes what we agree is true and it occurs through dialogue between members of the group. Negotiation and dialogue are ongoing and knowledge construction is in a constant state of evolution. As individuals negotiate a shared perspective, the common ground they establish further informs and shapes the individual, which, in turn, shapes the ideas of the larger discourse community. Fosnot (1996) puts it this way:

> We cannot understand an individual's cognitive structure without observing it interacting in a context, within a culture. But neither can we understand culture as an isolated entity affecting the structure, since all knowledge within the culture is only, to use Cobb's terminology, "taken-as-shared" (Cobb, Yackel, & Wood, 1992). Since the process of construction is adaptive in nature and requires self-reorganization, cultural knowledge that is assumed to be held by members of the culture is in reality only a dynamically evolving, negotiated interaction of individual interpretations, transformations, and constructions. At most, cultural knowledge can only be assumed, or "taken-as-shared," by its members. Yet cultural knowledge is a whole larger than the sum of the individual cognitions. It has a structure of its own that interacts with the individuals who also are constructing it. (p.24)

Thinking about a meaning making model is much more difficult than thinking about what is traditionally thought of as learning and teaching in schools. This is because

understanding, and therefore learning, occurs internally. We can try to get students to demonstrate what is going on inside through tests, discussions etc. but ultimately this will always be an imperfect picture of what is actually occurring. Even this discussion about cognitive structures is a way of describing the process of what we think happens, but cognitive structures are no more a "fact" than that which we attempt to acquire through skill development. A model of cognitive structures just helps us to think about the process more easily. Furthermore, we can also discuss about how the brain actually functions, break it down into its component parts, but that too does not explain how we come to know. This is why thinking about a meaning making model of learning is so difficult. It is much easier to think about what it isn't, in comparison to skill development, than it is to think about what it actually is.

Like most children, and my parents before me, I was indoctrinated early in my education to embrace what Frank Smith (1998,p.5) terms "the official theory" of learning which says that learning only occurs when one is trying to learn, and that it is a slow, painful and deliberate process. The "classic view" of learning is Smith's alternative to this official theory and is informed by a constructivist perspective. The classic view sees learning as a natural product of living. Smith (1998) states:

> It is classic because it is archetypal, universal, deeply rooted, and uncontaminated. It says, very simply, that we learn from people around us with whom we

identify. We can't help learning from them, and we learn without knowing that we are learning. (p. 3) Smith (1998)lists some characteristics of both models which are interesting to compare.

The classic view says that says learning is	*The official theory says that learning is*
continual	occasional
effortless	hard work
inconspicuous	obvious
boundless	limited
unpremeditated	intentional
independent of rewards and punishment	dependent on rewards and punishment
based on self-image	based on effort
vicarious	individualistic
never forgotten	easily forgotten
inhibited by testing	assured by testing
a social activity	an intellectual activity
growth	memorization

In contrast to a modernist perspective which sees knowledge as fixed and unchanging and existing outside of the individual, a postmodern, constructivist view sees knowledge as determined and defined by its time and social context and through multiple perspectives. Knowledge is negotiated

within a community and requires of its participants a continual reexamination of old models of understanding and a building of new theories and ideas based on what has come before. This is precisely why Frank Smith (1998, p.9) says that we learn from the people with whom we identify. We don't learn from everyone, but only from those people with whom we have shared interests, commitments and conversations. Our shared knowing is inseparable from our existence as a "text"- generating community. As Bruner (1996) puts it:

> Knowledge is what is shared within discourse, within a 'textual' community. Truths are the product of evidence, argument, and construction rather than authority, textual or pedagogic. This model of education is mutualist and dialectical, more concerned with interpretation and understanding than with the achievement of factual knowledge or skilled performance. (p. 57)

Take small steps and you will get the big picture. By the time I was in university, I knew I lacked the initiative for some kinds of learning. Nowhere is this more apparent than in my psychology courses. I am in my second year of university and I know that if I apply myself I can get A's in psych. Last year I got a C and although I started off quite strongly I lost momentum as the course progressed. This course is the psychology of education. Our first test comes around. It is early in the year and I study like crazy. I make notes on my notes and I sit in empty seminar rooms at the university and talk to myself and explain to myself what I know. I get an A on the test. In fact, it is one of the highest marks in the room. I am dumbfounded but very proud of myself. I had finally buckled down and it has paid off! I am on my way! By the second test I cannot quite bring myself to study quite so hard. It is torture for me to sit in isolation and go over and over things like this. By the end of the course I am scoring a consistent C on my tests. Same old routine, but this time I know that I am making a choice. I settle for a C.

As an adult I have a much better understanding of why I settled for a C. In her book <u>The Person I Want to be -</u>

Restitution Self Discipline, Diane Gossen (1995, p.2) cites James Q. Wilson who believes that human beings act for one of three reasons: to avoid pain,(including social discomfort),to gain respect from others or to gain respect of self. (I will discuss Gossen's Restitution model in more detail later in this thesis.) Firstly, I settled for a C in psychology because the benefits of getting an A did not outweigh the pain of the study process. Given this, I could only sustain my behaviour until my stamina wore out. Secondly, I was not acting from a position of self respect. According to Gossen, (1995, p.3) respect of self asks the question "Who will I be if I do it?" Nothing in my education ever required this perspective of me. I did it for the grade, for my parents, for my teachers, to pass a course, so others wouldn't think I was stupid, but I never acted from a position of intrinsic motivation. I never did it because it would enrich me as a human being. Given Frank Smith's (1998 p.5) "official view" of learning this is not surprising because the "official view" is all about fulfilling institutional requirements. Knowledge is something with which you fill students. The self is a passive recipient and not actively engaged because meaning is acquired by the individual not created by her.

Because I was so indoctrinated into the "official theory" of learning," which stated that learning should be methodical and purposeful, I formed study habits which worked against my own learning rather than towards it. As a result, I determined that when I couldn't sustain what I was trying to do, it wasn't because the system was flawed, but because I

was. For instance, I wasn't used to the quantity of reading in university, but my public school training told me that one had to proceed in small steps. If you didn't understand something there was no point in going on. I would read an article. I'd read the first paragraph. I'd read it again. I'd write down a few notes to myself. At last, I was starting to understand it. I read the second paragraph. I read it again. I went back to the first. Took a few notes. On to the third and so on and so on. This process was not only depressingly slow, but it was also impossible given the volume of reading to be done. It was also very difficult for me to get the global picture of a text because I couldn't stand back from the individual details to see the larger argument which was emerging. That's the crux of it. The "commonsense" view of teaching (Peters, 1998, p.29) says that the small pieces will fit into a whole if you learn them bit by bit but if you are so close to the picture that you can only see the individual pieces, then you will never be able to grasp the whole picture.

I don't believe anymore that I was alone in opting out of a painful process or that there was something wrong with me because I didn't have enough drive or stamina. The "official theory" of learning has us believing that learning is hard work and drudgery because "...learning is taking place only if there is difficulty..." (Smith, 1998, p.27). Some of us are perceived as willing to make this sacrifice and others perceived as just too lazy or unmotivated. Learning in the "official theory" is "...simply a matter of

effort and desire" (Smith, 1998, p.43). Many of us, rather than being high achievers or dismal failures, end up in the middle, willing to live a life of mediocrity in fulfilling minimum requirements.

It took me a long time and lots of mistakes to figure this out in a teaching context. As a beginning teacher I assumed that students would know nothing except what I gave them. They were the tabula rasa on which I imprinted information that I thought they needed to know. My agenda was the only one that mattered. I am reminded of one of my student teaching experiences in the final year of my B.Ed.

> I am trying to teach a poem to a "low functioning" grade ten English class. The night before, I write down on a piece of paper all of the questions I will ask the class about this poem. I will proceed from one question get the answer I am looking for and then move to the next one. By the time I come to the last question all of my students will understand the poem in its entirety because I will have followed the steps. If I asked a question and get a response which is not what I am looking for then I will say "okay," and repeat the question again until I get the answer I want. After the lesson, my cooperating teacher tells me that I need to be more flexible and that I need to deviate from where I am wanting to go. She says that I am losing students by sticking too closely to my agenda. This doesn't make sense to me. It doesn't occur to me that students might make sense in a different way than I am making sense. Surely, if they are listening they will follow my line of reasoning and adopt my conclusion because I will have brought them along so nicely. Of course, because my practice is informed by my assumptions about what these students are capable of doing, I don't know how else to do it. Besides Socrates was an authority on these things wasn't he? Who am I to argue?

Years later I understand what my cooperating teacher was trying to tell me. I now believe that learning does not precede from details to a global picture but rather from a global picture to smaller details. This was not immediately obvious to me early on in my career. Every time I would teach something like a short story we would get to the end of

the story and I would proceed with a line of questioning which would develop the "what happened" of the story. My practice of small steps to understanding the global picture was informed by my assumptions about what John Mayher (Peters, 1998, p. 29) refers to as "the commonsense view..." of learning that I mentioned earlier, where small pieces of information build together to form a comprehensible whole. Consequently, one couldn't possibly talk about the theme of a story until one was sure to understand what had happened. Invariably, as I was about to ask my first question someone, would enthusiastically, either blurt out a question which was further down my list (because it was a higher level thinking question), or blurt out the "answer" to what the story was really about - that being the deeper meaning. They'd get to the end before I would even ask a question. I quickly began to ask myself how I was to keep all twenty-five of them in the same developmental place if some were being impatient and skipping ahead of me?

Now, I understand that the reason students were jumping ahead was because learners see the whole picture first. You'll never see the whole picture by focusing in on details but one can go back and explore the details and how a piece is crafted after one has thought about the big picture. Today, I do it differently. Rather than doing the talking I wait after finishing a story and usually, fairly quickly, someone asks the question that most of the class is pondering. That becomes our starting point of discussion and the details that I once laboured over become natural points

in the discussion as it unfolds.

The other assumption I made as a beginning teacher was that if I presented a line of thinking in a clear manner that my students understood, they would adopt my line of reasoning. It was years before I understood my teaching of *The Day of the Triffids* from a different perspective.

It is 1987 and I am teaching in a small town in southern Manitoba. It is my first teaching experience and my grade nine language arts class is reading The Day of the Triffids. We read the book together, sometimes I assign chapters to be read at home and we do questions. At this point I feel that I must make sure the "basic" content is covered because I feel that any meaningful discussion of the novel cannot happen until students have a good understanding of the plot. Of course, they will not know unless I make it explicit for them. I also want to go beyond the content. I want students to make connections between the environmental and survival issues in this book and their own lives. I collect a variety of science fiction stories, each addressing a particular perspective in the novel. We read one story together, and then I discuss with them how it relates to The Day of the Triffids. I think things are going along quite well until I say to the class one day "We've talked about a lot of themes in this novel. On Monday I am going to give you a test on the various themes." The innocent response from one of my students shocks me:

"Are we still reading The Day of the Triffids? I thought we were done that novel a long time ago."

I had wanted my students to make connections between our novel, other pieces of literature and their own lives but I had neglected an essential piece; it was they who had to make the connections. Instead, I had assumed that what was clear to me would also be clear to them if I told them what the connections were. Once I had delivered the information they would be able to reproduce my brilliance on a test. I was still functioning as the teacher expert and this was very much a transmission model of teaching, where I was filling up my students with valuable information as if they were empty "receptacles", to use Freire's (1997, p.53) term.

The other really disturbing part of this story was my internal response to the question posed by my student. Although I didn't say it I arrogantly believed that the failure of my students to get my meaning was their fault. I was doing my job but clearly they were not doing theirs. My perspective was anything but humble. As Freire (1997, p.53) puts it, I was communicating information as "...a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing." Luckily, I didn't articulate this sentiment, but I'm sure I communicated it anyway. Students are quick to pick up what we as teachers really believe in spite of what we may or may not say.

Regardless of the outcome of my early attempts at meaning making when teaching literature, I was attempting to do things differently. As a learner in high school and university I had glimmers of learning as easy, engaging and enjoyable. These experiences were usually in English classes. This is not surprising given my early school experience. As I said earlier I missed a lot of incidental learning outside of school because I was not willing to put any effort into learning if I didn't have to. Reading was the exception and, I believe, it is what saved me because I was a voracious reader in my spare time. It may seem odd given my attitude towards learning but I didn't see reading as learning; I saw it as entertainment. As a result, I was developing my literacy abilities outside of the school environment and wasn't aware that I was doing so.

Mrs. Schultz was my grade eleven English teacher. I don't have specific memories of what I learned from Mrs. Schultz. Memories would be too strong. I have, rather, an overall impression of engaging class

discussions and collaborative group work. If we did any formal grammar in grade eleven it was very little and this was a departure I suspect from my previous English/Language Arts experience. Grammar always coloured the vision I had of myself as a learner because I perceived myself to be completely incompetent in this domain. Once it wasn't standing in my way I was able to see myself as a learner and user of language differently.

The other difference was that this experience was the first time I remember going beyond the content and facts to explore what lay behind the story. Thinking about various characters, how they saw their worlds and exploring their underlying motivations were real life discussions for me because they were about human nature. I was also engaged for the first time in making my own sense of stories because our discussions involved the whole story and the character motivations as a part of that story rather than the basic who, what, when, where and why of the plot. I don't want to say that none of my previous teachers tried to do this, because I think they did, but I didn't connect to it until I had Mrs. Schultz.

I continued on as an English major in university, largely, I believe, because I found a way into the subject which was personally meaningful to me. I think I connected because it was about people, ideas and the big questions of existence - at least it was for me. Years, later I suspect some of the science disciplines could hold connected meaning for me as well, but they didn't at the time so English is where I ended up.

The first time I became consciously aware of this meaning making process was in an adolescent literature course. We are reading <u>I am the Cheese</u> by Robert Cormier. *We read the first chapter together as a class and then take some time to respond individually in our journals. I write:*

> *The speaker has not yet identified himself by name in the first chapter but he is taking a trip to Vermont to see his father. At least, I think it is his father because he takes a gift with him on the trip. Then again, I am not really sure because he says he looks in the mirror in his parent's bedroom which would indicate to me that he lives with both parents. I have questions. Why does he dump his pills down the sink? What are the pills for? Why does he need to take this trip "raw" without the pills? Why does he need to travel by his own power?*
>
> *Then the next day we read the second chapter and I respond:*
>
> *This is a taped interview and we know this is one of a series because it is numbered. It is clearly the boy and his doctor*

> *[sic]. One gets the sense that he is in an institution of some kind and that he really doesn't trust his doctor? What happened to the road trip? Has it already happened? Is he in the institution as a result of the trip? Why would his parents pack him up and move him to another area? Why this air or secrecy?*

This is the kind of learning that engages me. Thinking where I am able to postulate. I am fascinated with Reader Response Theory. I love monitoring my thoughts and reactions as it relates to my understanding of the story in *I Am the Cheese*. The author is forever playing with my perceptions as a reader by manipulating how and when I receive details of the story. He is exploiting my meaning making or how I construct the story, often turning the tables on me and keeping me off balance.

If you want students to make their own meanings, as the above story illustrates, you must as a teacher allow that meaning making to happen. In order to foster the conditions for this the teacher must approach the situation from a learning rather than a teaching perspective. It is what John Mayher (Peters, 1998) refers to as the "uncommon sense" side of the looking glass, which is

> ...learners going beyond the information given; language being learned in use; the power of narrative in learning, in memory, and in development; the normally creative use of language; and a focus on learning not teaching. (p. 33)

It's the difference between teaching the parts of a well constructed paragraph written by someone else, usually an "expert," and allowing students to write their own paragraphs. It is the difference between teaching grammar and

allowing students to learn to write by writing. It's the difference between telling students what a story means and allowing students to discuss and struggle with the meaning themselves. Try as I might as a beginning teacher, I wasn't able to give control over to my students because my philosophical underpinnings did not allow me to trust that my students could make their own sense. A big part of being a constructivist teacher is approaching the situation from the perspective of the learner. I couldn't be the kind of teacher I wanted to be because I had never experienced a meaning making model from the perspective of a learner. All I had were glimmers until I joined a group of teachers from Seven Oaks School Division to pursue a masters degree in teacher research. The Seven Oaks cohort allowed me a different experience of learning. Understanding what it was like to be a learner in control allowed me to eventually trust the meaning making of my own students.

Chapter Three:

Experiencing a Meaning-Making Model:

A Catalyst for Change

Seven Oaks School Division is sponsoring a master's program in teacher research. There are about twenty-five of my colleagues from the division in our cohort. The fact that this group will take a number of courses together and operate as a unit intrigues me because I am looking for new interpersonal connections. I am also looking for avenues of reinvention.

In 1995, my marriage of ten years ended and I was left wondering who I had become during that time. Luckily, I didn't have a view of self as immutable but rather a view of self as contextually defined, changeable and self determined. I couldn't have described it as such back then. At that time, I just didn't know who I was anymore and my only two options were to stay where I was or move forward and redefine myself. I had heard the term "reinvention" somewhere and knew that this was what I needed to do. Not knowing where to begin I did what many people do who are going through divorces; I began working on my outward appearance. As for my inner workings, I didn't think about it as changing negative things about myself but rather, as becoming "who I wanted to be," to use Diane Gossen's (Gossen, 1995, p. 31) Restitution term. Part of becoming a better version of myself was feeling intellectually strong, as well as physically strong. The Master's Cohort seemed a viable avenue for this reinvention.

That's how I come to be sitting one Friday evening in a classroom at Maples Collegiate in the spring of 1996. I haven't been a student for many years and I am wondering if I've made the right decision. I had attempted a few years previously to finish my B.A. reasoning that completing another degree and the resulting pay increase were good enough reasons on their own to finish. Given that these were the only motivating factors it is not surprising that when I had trouble juggling my term teaching jobs, my course work and my home life, I had let it

fall by the wayside.

Our group has decided to meet Friday evenings after school and Saturday mornings. I look around the room and think to myself that this feels like a good space to be in. This room lacks the sterility of many high school classrooms with their rows of desks, tiled floors and bare walls. This room is carpeted,the walls are covered with posters and the tables and chairs are easily movable. The back wall is all windows and it looks out into another area filled with couches and tables.

I'm wondering what to expect during these first few meetings together but I have a fairly high expectation that it will be more of the same old. The same old grading system, the same old trying to fit myself into someone else's way of thinking about something, the same old give the professor what she wants, the same old lack of engagement, the same old stress over writing term papers. At this point, however, I don't know any other way of doing things, given my previous school experience. My real worry is that I am going to lose three or four years of my life immersed in work that is difficult and inherently boring.

I'm working within two models. On the one hand, I am looking for avenues of reinvention and so I see the responsibility and authority to change as resting within myself. At the same time, I'm operating from the assumption that my course work will not hold any personal meaning for me. I don't know about Smith's (1998, p.5) "classic" and "official" views of learning yet. I see my own personal experience in everyday life from a classic perspective, in the sense that I am learning from my previous experiences. School learning is still disconnected from my real life. Regardless of this disparity, I must have had an inkling of this connection because it is reflected in my first journal entry.

When we come to class we always bring a response that we've written. It might have something to do with our readings for the week or an experience in the classroom or a discussion with a colleague, but usually the response is a combination, a fusing together of our experiences, both professionally and personally with the readings and discussions we are doing. This is very much about making connections and it suits me because in response to my fear of losing a huge chunk of my life engaged in an effort I don't value, I promise myself that I will maintain a balanced life and not put all my focus into one area. My first journal entry, dated April 14, 1996 explains my need even early on

to live an integrated life.

> *To begin with, I spent Friday evening and Saturday morning at my first course for my master's degree in teacher research. One of the requirements for the course is to keep a personal journal. I decided when I began this course of study that the only way I could be successful was if I incorporated my research/studies into who I was as person. I couldn't keep up with the workload if it was something I put a few hours into every week because I had to.*

This line of thought is a huge departure from my understandings and assumptions about learning in my undergraduate degree. First of all I am recognizing the connectedness of knowing and that I am the person making the connections as opposed to receiving information and storing it. I am taking what I learned in reader response a step further in that those connections between reader and text happen outside of literature as well.

I wanted to reinvent myself and I wanted my course work to be personally meaningful. I couldn't have anticipated how well action research would fit into my agenda because I didn't realize that in engaging in action research I would be researching myself. I was my own agenda.

Action research is a means of uncovering one's assumptions about learning and teaching and is intimately connected to one's lived experience in the classroom, in a way that an "outsider's" research is not. A positivist research paradigm begins with a hypothesis which one wishes to test. One designs a study to test the hypothesis which one implements and then writes about the findings. (Newman, 1998,p.2) It is a linear process which proceeds from beginning to end and never involves the researcher as subject. Action research, on the other hand, is a much more

cyclical process. "The research activity begins in the middle of whatever it is you're doing-..." (Newman,1998,p.3) It begins by making note of what Judith Newman (1998,p.5) describes as, "critical incidents," which are those events in the classroom which surprise, shock or cause discomfort in the teacher. In recognizing the surprise, one is able to step back from the incident and ask what questions are raised. In stepping back from the incident one is able to examine one's underlying beliefs which are guiding the action around the event. Newman (1987) describes critical incidents in this way:

> We began using critical incidents as a way of finding out more about our current beliefs and about the assumptions underlying what we were doing in the classroom. We collected and shared stories which contributed to our understanding about language and learning and about our role as teachers. Sometimes the incidents confirmed what we believed; more often, however, we were forced to reappraise our assumptions. What these critical incidents often revealed, was a surprising gap between what we said we believed about learning and teaching (our "espoused" beliefs) and what our actions were conveying. (p.727-728)

Action research requires that we collect many critical incidents and search for common themes or patterns in these incidents. The themes do not emerge from the incidents themselves since the incidents are just events. It is the meaning which we assign to these events which imbues them

with meaning and it is through an interpretive narrativizing process that we tie experience and understanding together. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) believe that human beings "lead storied lives" (p.2). We have our lived experience, but it is our story about those events wherein our meaning resides. Although an initial experience only happens once, our story of that experience lives over and over again, allowing us over time to construct its meaning within our lives, at the same time that new experiences inform our thinking. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) put it this way:

> ...people are both living their stories in an ongoing experiential text and telling their stories in words as they reflect upon life and explain themselves to others. For the researcher, this is a portion of the complexity of narrative, because a life is also a matter of growth toward an imagined future and, therefore, involves retelling stories and attempts at reliving stories. A person is, at once, engaged in living, telling, retelling, and reliving stories. (p.4)

It was in the very nature of action research that I found engagement. This is because the themes I assigned to my stories as a learner or teacher were my own creation. The critical incidents were allowing me to make visible my assumptions, which,in turn, informed my actions. I was weaving these incidents into a larger story which made sense to me. Gloria Steinem, (1993) when speaking about writing gets at this issue as well: " I began to understand with a terrible sureness that we teach what we need to learn and

write what we need to know." (p. 6)

What did I need to know? As a teacher I needed to understand issues of voice, self and power as they relate to curriculum and meaning making. As a human being I needed to understand them for myself. As a result, this "need to know" extended beyond the artificial boundaries of the classroom walls; blurring my usual professional and personal boundaries. Consequently, many of the critical incidents that caused me discomfort were not drawn from my classroom life as a teacher but from my experiences as a learner both past and present because my learning situation in the cohort was designed around pedagogical underpinnings which were vastly different from my previous experiences. The cohort experience provided a new background on which I could contrast my previous experiences as a learner. Against this backdrop critical incidents were readily visible.

* * *

I realize fairly quickly that this learning situation isn't going to be the same old thing when on the Saturday morning of our first weekend together Judith, our instructor, asks us how we are feeling so far.

"I'm worried that it will be difficult to juggle work, home and studies," says someone in the circle.

" I had a hard time reading one of those articles last night," comments someone else.

"It's been so long since I've done this that I'm afraid I'm out of practice or maybe can't do it anymore," says another.

Judith knows what all good teachers know. If a student cannot get beyond fears and misgivings then productive learning, the kind that goes beyond the absorption of information from teacher to student is not likely to occur or will only occur in a limited way. Judith does with us what I didn't know to do with my own French students early in my career. At that time I didn't understand that their negative comments were a reaction to fear and uncertainty. In voicing those fears students are able to move beyond them and providing a forum for that discussion allows those feelings to be dealt with in a positive way.

Thankfully Judith does it differently and in listening to others air their concerns I am feeling relieved and I begin to let my breath

out slowly. The lesson for me is one I learn in this group more than once and that is I am not the only one. I am not the only person who struggles to balance many areas in my life and I am not the only one who is uncertain about my abilities after all these years outside of the university. In this discussion I see others, like myself, with uncertainties and vulnerabilities and I know that I'll be able to take some risks as a learner because I'm no different from anyone else. I realize that I've bought into a lie that permeates many of our institutions including education. This lie is the big cover up that so many of us live with and perpetuate. It's the lie that serves to alienate us from one another. That lie says "I am okay. I am handling things. I don't have any fears or misgivings and in this context no one will ever know because I don't have to show myself in a genuine way. In recognizing this I am a little more free.

I'm not only a little more free in knowing that I'm not the only one with uncertainties. I'm also liberated in my thinking because I've found out that I don't have to have all the right answers, neatly packaged for my teacher to read and grade. I've found out that my grade is based on the process itself; through my professional readings, the questions I ask and reflections I write. All I have to do is try my best to figure things out. In the "just try approach" I am able to see where my thinking takes me and make discoveries that I might otherwise not make. This is a long way from my experience with Mrs. Cook in grade six where I'm reading to pull out information from a text; main idea and supporting details. I'm not reading anymore to absorb information. I'm reading to make connections. Newman (1998) obviously understood this as well:

> It never ceases to surprise me that graduate students, by and large, have no idea how to look for connections; their predominant learning strategy is to read and memorize. So we spend a great deal of time looking for connections in articles, chapters, and books,

> learning how to think with the authors, using these accounts as mirrors for reflecting on our own experiences. (p.4)

I discover this idea of making connections because Judith gives us a couple of free writes. I know all about free writes and I find them valuable because I know that I write to learn. This technique is timed and the only rule is that within the time limit you don't stop writing. I always discover gems in these free writes; ideas which I have always held but that I understand in a different way once I have committed them to paper. Writing gives my thoughts a physicality that I can't find orally. It allows me to make connections about what I know and it changes what and how I know it. The thick grey soup of my inner thoughts begins to take a physical form on paper - a form with a defined shape, framed by the public borders of the page. It allows others, as well, to see the shape I have given something and allows me to share myself in this way.

As time goes on I find myself looking forward to reading articles and writing in my journal at night when I get home from work. Things merge together. A trip to the theater provides me with a jumping off point for my journal the following Saturday. Things I am doing in the classroom are beginning to connect with some of the professional literature and sometimes this literature or other discussions are provoking me to ask myself if I could be doing something in a different way. The connections I am making in my learning are not just school based but are based rather on my lived

life of which my course work and profession are components. I feel that my life is taking on a textual richness and there is a blending of perspectives and voices. Although I don't realize it at the time, I am experiencing Frank Smith's (1998, p.5) "classic view" of learning. I am engaged in what I am reading, writing and thinking about and I am excited about the connections I am making. Most importantly, I think, I have made the leap from learning as happening in school, where I have always occupied the positions of what Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1997, p.39) refer to as received and procedural knowledge, (where knowledge exists outside of myself in the form of an expert), to someone who approaches life from a constructivist perspective. From this perspective, the construction of knowledge and truth is located within each person and is "...not simply an 'objective' procedure but a way of weaving their passions and intellectual life into some recognizable whole." (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, Tarule, 1997,p.141) Learning has become the product of the lived life.

No one is more surprised about my changed behaviour than I am given my previous history as a learner. I am engaged and making sense for myself. I am not wanting to be the invisible learner of my past, hidden in the middle row and choosing not to contribute. It is the fact that I am not silent which is allowing me to make my own meaning. In voicing my thoughts I am thinking with others and entering into a dialogic relationship very different from my past learning experiences. My first experience of hearing myself

is gratifying.

> On our second Saturday together Judith hands out a typed sheet of paper to each of us as we drift into class. I can see my classmates pointing at the paper and saying "Look, she quoted me." I scan down the paper looking for my name. Sure enough about half way down the page I find a couple of sentences pulled from the reflection I had handed in the previous evening. "If it was quotable it must have been worth sharing," I think to myself, and I am feeling rather delighted on the inside.
>
> I am delighted because I valued those words I had written, I am delighted because someone else thinks they are valuable enough to share with the class, and most of all I am delighted because this simple technique has brought me into the conversation. In sharing my idea I am also sharing myself. Allowing myself to be known through writing feels really good.

Judith creates a variety of avenues for expression of voice within the learning environment. Aside from publishing a list of student quotes on that first Saturday together, we write biweekly responses which are copied and shared amongst the group. We respond back to one another on these reflections, often scribbling in the margins as we respond to one idea and then the next. Of course, we also have both small and large group discussions.

We converse back and forth and Judith reflects with us through her own writing and responds to what we have written. She doesn't set herself up as the omnipotent expert by controlling the class discussion in order to fill us up with information. In fact, she doesn't say much at all aside from asking a pointed question or reframing the discussion. Rather, she steps back, and in doing so, the construction of a shared meaning and the responsibility for that meaning making lies primarily with us as a group. I believe our discussions both written and oral were the best of what dialogue towards a shared understanding can be. We

constructed our own understandings around pedagogical questions, supported by our learning experiences in the cohort, the professional literature, and the events in our own classrooms.

I'm in charge of my own learning but the responsibility is causing me stress because although I have a written voice I don't contribute to the oral class discussion. I know my classmates value my writing and it is a good venue for my new emerging voice because unlike speaking I can edit my words before they enter the public domain, taking risks, albeit calculated ones, in my thinking. Unlike the invisible, pliant self encouraged in public school however, I am no longer content to be silent and unseen. This group values risk taking and participation and I want to be a more valued member of the group. I also realize that it is I, along with Judith and my classmates, who is responsible for our collective learning and shared understandings of the group. If I don't speak I am abdicating my responsibility as a member of the learning community. I have a need to contribute and I want to contribute - but I just can't.

I can't because I learned the skill of blending in during my elementary and junior high years. I've been halfway down the middle row for too long. It is a strategy which has long since outlived its usefulness but one that took a lot longer to shed. This strategy said "Be a part of the wood work, blend into the learning fabric by never behaving in a way which would cause you to draw attention to yourself. Always follow directions so you don't get yelled

at and make sure you don't become so engaged that you miss the directions all together. If a teacher asks a question be sure and avoid eye contact at all costs." In the wasteland of my junior high I learned quickly not to put myself at risk. In terms of peer relations I was certainly not a scapegoat but I saw what happened to those people who were different. In the underground culture of junior high conformity is everything and those people who don't conform are punished for it. Intuitively I kept silent and although it protected me from ridicule it also became my prison because when you spend long enough not saying what you want to say, eventually you become unable to say it. You over monitor yourself into silence.

In my current learning experience I do not act differently. I follow my usual pattern in a large group setting. I try to blend myself into the contextual wall paper and because I do it so well my peers will not even consider that I would want to contribute. Although I occupy a physical space in the discussion circle I match the wall paper against which I'm sitting, so although I'm spiritually in the circle no one can see me. It's like they've closed ranks and left me on the outside except that it is not their doing; it's my own. I occupy an invisible space which is very safe and unthreatening but I don't want to be invisible any more. I want to get into the conversation. But, it is very difficult to wiggle back into the circle not because the group members are trying to exclude me but because they just don't expect participation from me. It becomes hard to get a

word in edgewise and if I do everyone is so surprised at my attempt that it's incredibly uncomfortable and I don't want to do it again any time soon.

At the time, however, if you had asked me why I didn't speak in a large group I would have told you that it was because it made me anxious. What I didn't realize at the time was that my anxiety was the symptom of my unwillingness to speak. It was not the cause. The cause lay elsewhere.

* * *

I'm in Mr. Jamieson's grade nine language arts class. We are doing impromptu speeches. We have a list of of about thirty-five epigrams, given to us by our teacher and we have gone over them as a class and know what they all mean. For our impromptu speeches Mr. Jamieson will draw our name out of the bag and then draw one of these sayings out of the bag. He will give us thirty seconds to think about what we are going to say and then we will have to give our speech. I can't remember how long it is supposed to be but I suspect about a minute. I sit and sweat in language arts for days. My heart races, I perspire and every time he draws a name I can hear the beat of my own heart in my ears. Then when it isn't my turn my heart doesn't hammer at my insides quite so violently, but as soon as the next name is to be drawn it slams back into high gear. Finally, on the last day he calls my name. I get up and walk to the podium feeling wobbly and unsteady. I grasp the podium on either side and then he gives me my epigram. "If you build a better mouse trap the world will beat a path to your door."

"...I have 30 seconds..okay focus ...what does this mean... I think it means that if you make a better invention than someone else then people will be wanting your product... okay, I'll need an example... Times up? I'll have to begin...

"If you build a better mousetrap the world will beat a path to your door" means that if you invent something better than what has come before then people will want your invention more than the old one..." My face is burning bright and my voice is shaking. If only I could control that shake I would feel so much better. My chin is trembling as well..keep grasping that podium... This silence is getting too long...think of an example..... THINK! THINK! THINK! "An example of this would be if you build a better car...that was maybe faster...then the world would want your car instead of the older model." That example is so lame I think to myself. "In conclusion I would just like to say that if you build a better mousetrap the world will beat a path to your door. Thank-You. I go back to my seat and I look down and I try to think of something else because I feel like I have a golf ball stuck in my throat and I am so relieved that I am going to cry. I want to cry for another reason as well, and that is, if I could somehow cover up my nervousness then I could stand doing these things. It's the fact that

everyone can see how rattled I am that bothers me.

* * *

More speeches in every grade. By grade eleven I dread them with a passion. I can't even remember what this one was about. All I remember is how it felt. It was more of the same old thing. Standing at the front of the room, thinking my voice might break. I'm trying my best to fake it, to look like I am not scared stiff. At the end I go and sit down and feel a wave of relief. Then I get an evaluation. My speech is well constructed but I lose a lot of marks for "nervousness." I think to myself how grossly unfair this is. "I gave this my absolutely best effort," I say to myself, "and at least I did it. My impulse was to avoid the whole experience." The nervousness is something which, in my mind, is totally outside of my control. I believe that I just don't cover it up as well as other people. Once I realize how pathetic I must look and that I will be judged harshly on that-that it won't be so much what I say but how I deliver it - I become almost phobic of public speaking. This is a prime example of teachers not teaching what they are intending according to Frank Smith's (1998, p. 10) classic view of learning. What I learned over and over again during our "speech units" was that public speaking was about controlling your emotions. Clearly, a good public speaker can be nervous and there is some skill involved in rising above that, but what I learned was that people would judge me harshly based not on what I had to say but on how I said it. My teachers didn't teach me what they thought they were teaching me. Instead of getting better at speaking I get worse and the littlest presentation will cause me anxiety for weeks in advance.

* * *

I've decided to be a hall leader. Because our school is a large building, at it's beginning containing over nine hundred students, the building is broken down into smaller sections called halls. Each hall has approximately eight teachers, and for the most part, the same students circulate between those eight teachers for their subjects. Being a hall leader means that I am the liaison person between the staff and the administration. I bring issues of concern to the group and reflect their responses, concerns and suggestions back to the administration. I'm operating from the assumption that if I just do more public speaking by putting myself in situations where I have to do it, then I will

develop more skill. Practise makes perfect.

I may have believed that "practising" would make me a better speaker but I don't believe that it did aside from nudging me to take more risks and speak outside of my comfort zone. In retrospect, the value of this role was that it created a space for my voice in the institution through a formalized role; a space that I didn't feel I had as a teacher on staff. Consequently, it empowered me to speak when I couldn't find the authorization within myself. By the time I was hall leader I had a long history in the building. I knew what structures were in place, what had worked in the past and what hadn't. I was empowered at a critical time; at a time when I was struggling personally with issues of voice but also when I was revisiting everything I believed about education through my course work. The position was the practical application of all my thinking, reading and writing. It was the avenue through which I could give voice to the concerns of others, but it also allowed me to voice my own concerns and fuse discussions of school structure and pedagogy with what I believed about education.

* * *

Finally, an "a-hah". I've been at a three day Restitution workshop in Minneapolis and now I have to give a joint presentation to the staff. We stand in front of the staff, about forty people on this day, and we each say our piece. I cannot remember what I said but it wasn't what I said but how I said it which is significant. I was a little nervous but I was able to concentrate on what I had to say. I had a message to tell someone else and I could rise above the physical anxiety in order to say it. My voice didn't shake and my face maintained its composure. I never lost my train of thought once and I made sense.

At the time I couldn't figure out what had changed for me but in retrospect this was a pivotal moment because

everything came together. Through my university courses I had come to understand my beliefs about education in a way that I could articulate them. I had a voice in a large school which previously had left me feeling that I had no control over my own destiny. I had managed to shift my understanding of authority from outside to inside myself, and, in so doing, I discovered that the issue wasn't about anxiety at all. Part of my concern in public speaking was that I looked so uncomfortable and that people saw me as pitiable. As long as I wasn't able to get beyond what other people thought of me I couldn't get beyond the problem of speaking in public. In being hall leader, in developing a sustained voice I gained a sense of power and as I began to feel more powerful within the institution, I also began to feel a stronger "self" emerging. It was this stronger self which allowed me to control my anxiety to a better degree because as I became a stronger person I didn't care so much what people thought of me or what I was saying. I was operating from the basis of my own beliefs and I was authorizing myself so I didn't need other people's approval. Whether people agreed with me or not was incidental because I valued what I believed. Because I was able to find the authority within myself instead of outside myself, I was also able to speak with more confidence. I was defining myself rather than allowing others to define me. As I began to take on a new shape - a shape of my own choosing - it was an authentic shape of self informed by listening to my own voice and pursuing my own questions; my own curriculum.

I no longer needed to be silent.

It was a long hard road and I'd like to say that I've reached the end but I know I haven't. I haven't because we all continue to change and redefine ourselves as we travel through life. Reaching the end of the road and believing that we've got it all figured out only signifies a stoppage in growth. My experience in the cohort allowed me to know issues of voice, self and how those impact on curriculum from the inside out. It's this inside out knowing that changes knowledge we accumulate into understanding and connected knowing. At its heart it is deeply personal for each of us and knowing this I could begin to change my practice in the classroom because I understood my students differently. Before I could really change my classroom practice though, some institutional structures had to change as well. Luckily, the traditional junior high was transforming itself.

Chapter Four:

Rethinking the Public School Model

My first few years teaching in a large suburban junior high are a blur. My classroom should have had a revolving door because that's how fast students cycled through my room. I taught grades seven to nine basic French and grade seven language arts. Every forty minutes one group would hastily depart, thoroughly processed for the day. Another group would come through the revolving door, usually reluctant to learn French because they "didn't need it in real life." I thought it was all my fault. Surely if I was a good teacher I could inspire my students to engage in learning a second language. Of course, I was not particularly passionate about the French language myself, having dropped it after grade ten, I suspect, because, it was the same kind of detail skill- based learning that was such a struggle for me. As usual, I made the pragmatic decision in university. I dropped my history minor and changed to French because it made me more marketable in a profession where jobs were scarce. The system needed basic French teachers and so I changed to be what the system needed. Sometimes pragmatism pays off in the nuts and bolts of earning a living, but it didn't pay off on my personal happiness scale. Aside from whether teaching French made me happy, I managed to make a living as a junior high French substitute until I landed a term job of my own. The endless parade of students throughout the eight period day blurred into the six day cycle which blurred into first, second and third terms which blurred into years. I had so many students that I initially remembered them by seat rather than face. As long as they

didn't change seating arrangements in the first two weeks I was fine. If they did switch seats I would be confusing students for weeks. I made mistakes in teaching like we all do but it wasn't all me. Part of the problem was systemic.

If it is true that the metaphors we live by reflect our beliefs and values then the metaphor for the junior high model is that of an assembly plant or factory. This metaphor aptly reflects a modernist or classic notion of knowledge. There are two doors to this plant, an input door and an output door. A big conveyor belt runs through this building, weaving in and out of various curricular compartments called classrooms. We input grade six students at one end of the conveyor belt. Once inside they spend three years traveling through the system moving along from one level and compartment to the next, propelled by the machine rather than by their will. The machine hums, sputters, lets go steam, grumbles, wheezes, coughs, snorts and finally belches out grade nine students at the other end. It is the ultimate doing of education "to" someone. Students travel through a system designed for optimal efficiency that works extremely well on paper if you are dealing with things instead of human beings; which is exactly the point. The junior high model objectifies people and acts upon them.

In this modernist model, although not in the hearts of most teachers and administrators, there is no place for the individual self in the learning equation. The metaphor is mechanistic and knowledge is considered to be objective, an

entity unto itself, which is delivered to students. In fact, the self gets in the way in the modernist perspective because it influences the data and biases interpretations. Expository prose is a good example of this distancing between knowledge and self according to Harold Rosen (1984?) In his view, knowledge expressed in expository prose often has the goal of objectivity - existing apart from the writer. Rosen points out:

> It soars into the high intellectual realm because, so it is said, it is 'decontextualised' (as if that could be true of any kind of discourse). It is so autonomous that, if you interrogate it, it will speak for itself: Speech without the imprint of the speaker! (p.26)

Schooling as a machine operates as if it is able to separate the selves of students from knowledge - "decontextualizing" knowledge in the process. As we have seen, the splitting of self from subject matter is impossible in a meaning making model of learning. However, in this mechanistic model, it is believed that if the system works at optimum efficiency, then we can implant what our children need to know and one day they will emerge fully processed and just like us. And, hence, this model is also described as the social reproduction theory of education.

Herein lies the paradox. On the one hand our culture has a need to reproduce itself. In the past, as Dewey (1966) pointed out, the movements of people in and out of a particular culture through birth and death necessitated an educating or passing on of cultural information to the young.

As we have progressed to more technologically advanced societies we have formalized the transmission process from one of kinship and extended families to an institutionalized approach (p.3).

The problem is that as soon as one starts to institutionalize the process, something relatively new in human history, the system frequently becomes inflexible and rigidly promotes the same goals for all, regardless of ability, interest, talents, and perhaps most important, individual desires and goals. This is a one size fits all system. Those who don't fit, for whatever reason, are considered deficient in some manner and in need of fixing so that they can function within the system. Few ever stop to question whether we can look at this problem differently, and, consequently, given our need to fix these students, they become objectified and placed on the outside, removed from the group and regarded as different.

Teachers too become objectified in this model. Having successfully graduated from the system, they do not consider any other way of being, and often don't question. In fact, they are not encouraged to question, since this is the way that schooling has always been done. Teachers become a cog in the machine, delivering their small piece of expertise as students travel in and out of their classrooms on a conveyor belt. Time becomes a motivating factor for teachers, since students pass quickly through their individual compartments. Failure by one teacher to deliver information means that the students will experience difficulty on the next rung of the

informational ladder. The previous teacher will look bad in the eyes of fellow colleagues and become a perceived liability to the system. As a result, fear often drives teachers to perpetuate a system which doesn't work in the first place. Fear of looking bad, of not doing one's job or of being a poor educator, drives teachers to be the best cog they can be. But, even the best cogs are not necessarily doing things in the most effective ways. I am not the only teacher who has accepted half-heartedly completed assignments on the day the marks were due in the office, just so I would have some kind of grade for that particular student. In doing so, I function to support the schooling machinery, but not learning.

In the pressure cooker of time constraints,the agenda is to deliver the curriculum, and since time is at such a premium there is no opportunity for relationships between colleagues or between teachers and students to develop. A student who disrupts the flow of delivery is interfering with the teaching agenda and either needs to be disposed of or fixed. Luckily, there are controls and discipline strategies at the ready. I am reminded of Dennis.

Dennis is in grade eight. He is a polite and quiet boy, but he doesn't get a lot done during a day. He habitually, however, does not arrive at school until midway through the second period in the morning. This irritates me because Dennis is behind on my agenda before he even starts his day, because he has missed a lesson or a discussion which would be valuable. In frustration, I say to him one day "Dennis, I have talked with you about the importance of being on time for school. I have phoned and discussed things with your mother, but she leaves the house early for work and can't be there to make sure that you get out of bed. This is your responsibility. You leave me no choice. From now on when you come late in the morning or after lunch I will keep you for a half-hour detention, at the end of the day. If you want to avoid this detention then you will have to be here on time." To my amazement the following morning Dennis arrives just as O Canada is beginning to play

over the P.A. and I pat myself mentally on the back and think to myself that I am truly a good teacher. The second day, however, Dennis does not show up until the afternoon and the same thing happens the following day. I realize that I've made things worse, because now when Dennis knows he is going to be late he just skips the whole morning. Instead of him consistently missing the first period in the day, he is now missing the entire morning on a fairly regular basis. On the one hand, I told Dennis being on time was his responsibility and then I effectively absolved him of that responsibility by trying to control his behaviour through a consequence.

The other aspect of this dilemma lies in trying to fix a problem through a systems approach to management. There was a glitch in the system which was Dennis's being late in the morning. I tried to fix the glitch by imposing a mechanism to correct the undesirable behaviour. The result was a worse problem than when I had started. The problem is that I didn't have a difficulty with a system, I had a difficulty with a human being who couldn't get out of bed in the morning. Systems are predictable, but human beings with their myriad of competing needs and agendas, are not. If I want to solve the problem, then I need to deal with the person, which the old systems-based model, the junior high model, won't allow me to do, because it does not allow time in the day for building relationships and talking about problems. According to Diane Gossen (1995), all behaviour is purposeful (I will discuss her Restitution model of behaviour management later on in this chapter). Dennis's staying in bed was a need-fulfilling behaviour for him. Perhaps sleep was deemed more necessary than being in school on time or perhaps sleep was a way of avoiding a painful learning process. Trying to deal with Dennis as a glitch in the system and introducing a corrective measure is akin to trying to cure a headache by

repeatedly hitting someone in the head. The system's response does not fulfill the need of the student. Ironically, when the corrective measure doesn't work, we, as educators, up the ante by imposing a more severe consequence, which, in turn, may work for a while, but eventually loses its effectiveness.

James G. Henderson (1999) cites Sergiovanni (1992 p.2) who refers to the end result of these corrective measures within the system as the "managerial mystique." In essence, the corrective measures, cease to support their original intent and become indicators for success so much so that the system begins to support them as "ends in themselves" (Henderson, 1999 p.2).

> So strongly does the mystique adhere to belief in the right methods that the methods themselves become surrogates for results: It also holds so firmly to the belief in management controls, as the way to overcome human shortcomings and enhance productivity, that the controls become ends in themselves.
>
> The result is an emphasis on doing things right, at the expense of doing the right things. In schools, improvement plans become substitutes for improvement outcomes. Scores on teacher-appraisal systems become substitutes for good teaching. Accumulation of credits in courses and in service workshops becomes a substitute for changes in practice. Discipline plans become substitutes for student control. Leadership styles become substitutes for purpose and substance....
> (Henderson, 1999, p.2)

Nowhere does this notion of "managerial mystique" show itself more clearly than in the issue of standards and assessment. In the junior high model where transmission of knowledge reins supreme, it is important to make sure that students have ingested the important material, and since we want the best for our children and don't want to be lackadaisical about it all, we decide to have a minimum standard of achievement. This devolves, however, into being about numbers and institutionalized guidelines and not about learning at all. Is the child who scores a final grade of 52% in math 100 any more prepared to continue on to the next level than the child who scores a 45%? Or, is this admitting to the subjective nature of grading in the first place? What if I am accepting work from students at report card deadline just so I can give them something? Is this an accurate reflection? What does an "accurate reflection" mean? Should we be ranking kids?

In ranking our children, we take the focus from learning and give it institutional parameters. Parents become concerned not with the learning of their child but how their child compares in relation to other students in the class. This, in turn, is a predictor for some parents of success in later adult life, where productivity and competition are routinely used as indicators of success. Parents wonder: "Is my child doing well enough to eventually get a good job and have the material possessions that he or she desires?" Parents also want to know where their child fits in relation to others and so this becomes an important question. In

response, I would have to ask "What about educating moral people? What about mentoring them through the process of becoming both contributing and moral citizens who will one day shape the future of their world?"

Even if grades were an objective reflection of what students knew, which I don't believe they are, most often they tend to reflect student's knowledge of content, more than the processes of meaning making. In striving to know specific content for a test, the "managerial mystique," referred to earlier by Henderson (1999), also shows up in student behaviours. Students end up not working for understanding, but, rather, for grades, since it is the grades which are rewarded with a "pass" rather than their actual understanding. Over time, students learn with a great deal of precision the amount of effort required to receive a desired grade. Often times a sixty percent is good enough in the eyes of a student. It was certainly good enough for me when studying psychology. In switching our focus from grades to understanding, I believe, the absurdity of the situation becomes clear. What if adults could only do basic mathematical calculations correctly sixty percent of the time? What if surgeons only had a 70% success rate for the most elementary of operations? From this vantage point the issue becomes quite silly.

Where is the solution? If the junior high metaphor is that of a machine, and this is reflective of the modernist notion of understanding, (where knowledge is transmitted from teacher expert to the carte blanche students), then what

might be a metaphor for an opposite view of learning? Perhaps that answer might be found in a postmodern perspective, a perspective which views truth not existing outside the individual, but rather, existing in its own right as a perspective within and among knowers. In this respect, social constructivist notions of meaning making are cast within a postmodern perspective, wherein individuals negotiate meaning in a social context informed by individual perspectives and the collective meaning making of all members. Truth becomes a melding of particular perspectives which members of a community can agree upon. Bruner (1996) puts it so aptly, that at the risk of being repetitive I will include his comment again:

> Knowledge is what is shared within discourse, within a 'textual' community. Truths are the product of evidence, argument, and construction rather than authority, textual or pedagogic. This model of education is mutualist and dialectical, more concerned with interpretation and understanding than with the achievement of factual or skilled performance. (p. 57)

Given this connection between postmodernism and social constructivist notions of meaning making, an overriding metaphor for schools might be that of a web of interconnectedness. Given the place of the internet in our postmodern consciousness this is perhaps a good metaphor for schools. In this model, communication is not one-way from teacher to student, but rather can travel in multiple paths simultaneously. Connecting points along the web are

individual learners, teachers, administrators, parents, custodians, textual and multi-media resources, and anyone or anything which brings a perspective to the learning environment.

Using this metaphor, the hierarchy of the factory model is flattened out since each person's perspective in the web is a lateral rather than a vertical one. Teacher and student roles are still valued, but the role each plays is profoundly changed. It is not anymore telling by the teacher and receiving by the students, but rather a collaborative process of mutual meaning making. Rather than a telling, Freire (1997) points out:

> Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other. (p. 53)

What might an institution look like that supports a meaning-making perspective? Everything in the junior high model operates from the assumption that knowledge is transmitted from teacher-expert to student and the structures in the system reflect and support that hierarchy. What would the metaphor of the web of interconnectedness look like in an educational institution? The answer, I believe, lies in the shift in perspective and organization from subject-centered to student-centered teaching. Below, is a comparative list of junior high and middle years structures. Although I will not discuss all of these aspects, this list is a good overview of the differences within each system (Forte and

Schurr,(1993) p.31).

	Middle School	Junior High School
1.	Is student-centered	Is subject-centered
2.	Fosters collaboration and empowerment of teachers and students	Fosters competition and empowerment of administrators
3.	Focuses on creative exploreation and experimentation of subject matter	Focuses on mastery of concepts and skills in seperate disciplines
4.	Allows for flexible scheduling with large blocks of time	Requires a regular six-period day of 50 to 55-minute periods
5.	Varies length of time students are in courses	Offers subjects for one semester of one year
6.	Encourages multi-materials approach to instruction	Depends on textbook-oriented instruction
7.	Organizes teachers on interdisciplinary teams with common planning period	Organizes teachers in departments with no common planning period
8.	Arranges work spaces of teamed teachers adjacent to one another	Arranges work spaces of teachers according to disciplines taught
9.	Emphasizes both affective and cognitive development of student	Emphasizes only cognitive development of student
10.	Offers advisor/advisee teacher-oriented guidance program	Offers study hall and access to counselor upon request
11.	Provides high-interest "mini-courses" during school day	Provides highly-structured activity program after school
12.	Uses varied delivery systems with high level of interaction among students and teachers	Uses lecture styles a majority of the time with high percentage of teacher talk time
13.	Organizes athletics around intramural concept	Organizes athletics around interscholastic concept

Middle school philosophy is still played out within an institutional framework, but the focus is different from that of the traditional junior high. Rather than being a system designed to deliver knowledge to a passive audience, it is a system designed to foster the meaning-making process within each individual. As a result, its focus is on the learning community rather than on individual achievement, because, as we have seen, meaning making is a negotiation between members of a learning community within a larger "textual community"(Bruner, 1996 p.57). As a result, many structures change to support this. Block timetabling allows for larger spaces of time for exploration of a theme, concept or idea and there is much less telling by the teacher and much more exploration and discussion on the part of learners. Methods too, are more varied, as are materials. Team teaching and thematic units, an impossibility without block timetabling, allow for less compartmentalization of knowledge, thus enabling learners to make connections between subject areas. In this way, hopefully, learners begin to see meaning-making as not being confined to artificially bounded subject areas. Block timetabling also allows more contact time with fewer adults, thus, allowing relationships to develop.

In shifting to a more student-centered approach, a renegotiation of the relationship between teacher and learners may result. I will explore this relationship more fully in the next chapter but part of this renegotiation occurs in the shift from discipline as a means to punish and control misbehaviour to management techniques aimed at

encouraging internal control. The ensuing power shift affects the meaning making of those in the web.

Discipline is a holdover from the junior high. As I mentioned earlier on in this chapter, the junior high, being subject-centered, values the transmission of information from teacher to student. If a student's behaviour is getting in the way of this transmission, then the undesirable behaviour needs to be dealt with. It is very much a systems approach.

The middle school, with its focus on learners and meaning- making, requires a different system of management. I say management because discipline is incongruent with the metaphor of a web of interconnectedness. This is because one disciplines those lower on the hierarchy, but not those on the same level. In the junior high, I, as the teacher, am the expert and so when students "misbehave" I discipline them because they are interfering with what I am trying to do. I hold all of the authority and power. In the middle school, on the other hand, I am valuing other voices and perspectives within my classroom. In trying to foster meaning-making and valuing, the community becomes the vehicle for making this happen. I cannot use discipline because one doesn't discipline equal voices. I am using the word equal in the sense of the right to be heard (which does not exclude guidance and direction from another who has more experience). A different approach is required, therefore, one which works at negotiating and maintaining the relationships which exist among all community members. Rather than silencing difficulties through discipline and punishment when they get

in the way of the learning, one must negotiate these difficulties, since meaning-making is dependent on relationships remaining civil and intact. Restitution provides such a model.

In the mid 90's our school began an ongoing initiative titled Restitution. It finds its roots in the work of William Glasser and Reality therapy. Diane Gossen (1995, p. 42) developed Restitution while working in corrections, but she is quick to point out that the term Restitution is not being used here in the criminal justice sense of when someone pays restitution to a victim or victims. Rather, Restitution, is concerned with unacceptable behaviour and difficulties between individuals. It is essentially to restitute the self first (Gossen, 1995, p. 14).

* * *

Frank never brings a pen or his French textbook to class. A behaviorist model, often found in the junior high, would seek compliance.

"Frank when are you going to start remembering to bring your supplies for French? Surely it cannot be that hard to remember to bring a pen and your text. I'm going to start keeping you for detentions when you forget."

Frank may still not remember his pen. In this case, a behaviorist teacher would up the ante in an effort to secure compliance. Does the teacher in this case wonder why a child would rather have a detention than bring a pen?

Restitution answers this query by asserting that all behaviour is purposeful and that each person has a picture in his or her head about his or her ideal life. This picture includes who the person is and what he or she does. Glasser (1992) calls this someone's "quality world" and defines it in this way:

It is called the quality world because it contains our

> best or highest-quality pictures or perceptions of the people, things, and situations that we have learned feel especially good in the real world. As we live, this special world grows, and eventually we have a collection of wonderfully satisfying pictures or perceptions in our head. If we were able to live in a real world that was exactly like this Shangri-la of our memory, life would be perfect. (p. 60)

Frank may not have a picture in his head of himself as a French speaker or even a picture of himself as a successful learner. It is not part of his quality world.

Restitution also asserts that all behaviour is purposeful and that we are always trying to get one of our needs met. These four needs, aside from physical survival, are love (belonging), power, fun and freedom. A learner who resists bringing supplies to class may well be fulfilling his or her power need by refusing the teacher's request that he or she come prepared. Or alternately, a learner who sees herself as a poor student may be trying to preserve what little power of self she has by resisting. She may reason that it is better to fail French and say it's because I didn't try than say I failed French because I'm not smart enough. This is why dealing with those fears early on is so important.

Regardless of the need or quality world, a teacher who believes that students are internally motivated does not punish, use guilt or coercion to get a desired behaviour from a child, because he or she recognizes that control comes from

within the child. That does not mean that the teacher throws up her hands and quits trying, but there is an acceptance that if a child resists bringing supplies, to return to this example, then that behaviour is meeting a need for the child on some level.

A teacher using Restitution may attempt to expand a child's quality world to include speaking French, or being a successful learner. She may try numerous ways and means of bringing that child into the learning situation, but she is respectful of the child's decision to remain on the outside if he or she chooses.

* * *

"I kicked his ass on the way to school this morning," says Daryl as he shifts his weight from side to side and makes the occasional punching motion with his arms.

"I can see you are angry Daryl. You need to tell me what made you so angry. Would you like to tell me now or would you like to take a few minutes by yourself and write it down?" I inquire.

"I'll just tell you," he replies. "He's making fun of my family in the halls. Saying 'Daryl lives in a dumpster,' or 'Daryl buys clothes from Valu Village.' He had it coming."

"Daryl we need to handle this in a way that is in line with our values." I'm pleased that you are able to stick up for yourself and that you are not someone else's doormat. It tells me that you care about your family. These are important traits in someone's character but what do we believe at this school about fighting?"

"We believe that we should work it out without fighting. But I was so mad. He shouldn't have said those things."

"Am I telling you that you shouldn't stand up for yourself? Am I telling you that people can make unkind remarks about your family?"

"No."

"So, hang onto those values but add to them. Do you think we should use violence to solve our problems?"

"No."

"How could you have handled it differently?"

"I could have asked him to stop it, I guess."

"Is this something you want to fix with Jason?" I ask.

"Yeah."

"What do you need to do to fix this?"

"I need to say sorry for beating him up but he needs to say sorry to me too."

"If you do this, will you be the person you want to be?"

"Yes."

"Fighting is a pretty big issue at this school. We need to talk to the administration about this as well as Jason.

* * *

"Jason, Daryl was pretty angry this morning when he hit you."

"Yeah."

"He didn't react for no reason. What caused him to become so angry?"

"I was making fun of his family, saying he's been living in a dumpster. Stuff like that."

"Jason, it's okay to make a mistake. You didn't do it for no reason. What was your need behind the teasing?"

"Fun I think. I was just fooling around."

"But it went too far."

"Yeah."

Well, give yourself some credit. You might have said some things that you shouldn't have but you weren't doing them to be intentionally malicious. What do we believe in this school about how to treat others?"

"That, we should be respectful and not say things to people that may hurt their feelings."

"Is this a value that you hold as well?"

"Yeah."

"Do you want to fix this?"

"Yeah."

"What can you do to fix this?"

"I can tell Daryl that I'm sorry."

"If you do this, will you be the person you want to be?"

"Yeah."

"We'll meet then. You have an apology for Daryl but he should also have handled things differently. He also needs to fix things with you.

* * *

In my conversations with both Daryl and Jason the first step I took was to acknowledge that all behaviour is purposeful and I attempted to stabilize both boys' identities. I acknowledged to Daryl that I understood the feelings which caused the violent behaviour to erupt. I didn't condone the behaviour but I let him know that I understood where his feelings came from and I validated them. I let him know that it is a good thing to love your family

and stand up for them when someone is making fun of them. I did the same with Jason. Conflicts in junior high are frequently not about someone deliberately being mean, but rather, they are about things getting carried away. We talked in class about the four basic needs and that when someone acts they are generally trying to get one of those needs met. Jason was trying to get his fun need, met but he also realized that he carried it too far and ended up hurting someone's feelings. I let Jason know that there was nothing wrong with fulfilling his fun need but that he needed to be cognizant of the effect he might be having on others.

Restitution values the "self" of each learner. It is not about blaming the learner and it does not seek to punish. After a successful restitution a child should leave with a confident body posture and his or her head held high. Restitution seeks to value the individual and his or her feelings and seeks to help that person find a more appropriate form of expression if his or her behaviour is inappropriate. It says that it's okay to make a mistake and it seeks to help the learner restitute him or herself back to a "state of grace" with the community. Although the term "state of grace" may have religious overtones, I don't mean it in a religious sense. The dictionary (1988) defines grace as "...unconstrained and undeserved divine favor or goodwill" (p. 414). In any community, I believe, we must live in a state of grace with one another, in the sense that we are all fallible human beings. As a result, we forgive others because we see our own human frailty reflected in others.

There is a part of us which acknowledges that, "This time it was her but next time it may be me who makes the mistake." Recognizing that we all make mistakes and that none of us is perfect allows all of us to make reparations and accept the reparations of others in order to reconnect once again with our community.

In the classroom community, learners and teachers work together to find a solution to a problem and make a plan of action. The learner makes the mistake, but he or she also fixes it, and, in so doing, becomes the person he or she wants to be. By acting in accordance with one's ideal self, one's esteem is restored or heightened. Whereas punishment separates the individual from the community, Restitution seeks to restore a healthy relationship with the group. Punishment serves to "dis" the "wrongdoer:" disconnecting him or her from the group. Restitution seeks to "re" that person so that he or she re-connects. Below is a list which is helpful (Gossen, 1995 p. 11).

"DIS" THEM	**"RE" THEM**
Disjoin	Rejoin
Disown	Reown
Disengage	Reengage
Disrespect	Respect
Disappoint	Reappoint
Disalign	Realign
Disapprove	Reapprove
Destroy	Restore
Desensitize	Resensitize
Destruction	Restructure
Disarm	Rearm (morally)
Dismember	Remember
Disconnect	Reconnect
Disappear	Reappear
Disaffirm	Reaffirm
Disassemble	Reassemble

Disclaim	Reclaim
Dismantle	Remantle
Disorientation	Reorientation
Discourage	Re-encourage
Devalue	Revalue
Disuse	Reuse
Distract	Retract
Dissolve	Resolve
Displace	Replace

Jason and Daryl are a textbook example of how Restitution fosters community and solves interpersonal difficulties in a way which values and does not silence either party. This scenario, however, is overly simplified in order to illustrate how Restitution works. Real life is not that simple when one factors in the emotional state of each individual. Sometimes, a learner is unable to accept responsibility for his or her actions or he or she doesn't have a quality picture in his or her head of how to solve problems where everybody wins. Sometimes their picture is "I win at all costs." If a learner does not value what the rest of the community values, then a genuine restitution is impossible. In these situations, a teacher does not restitute but manages undesirable behaviour through a variety of consequences.

With any group of learners, it is always my hope that over time they will develop an understanding of what a value such as respect for others looks and feels like. One cannot, for example, force someone to value respect for others, if he or she has never been respected him or herself. He or she may not even know what that means. Once that value is experienced on a personal level, however, perhaps it can be

integrated into a value system. Otherwise these values are just empty words.

When I first started with Restitution, I would have numerous discussions with my class in the fall about what our class values should be and how these values would find expression in day to day classroom life. The lists would be almost interchangeable from year to year. Trust, respect, etc. were standard fare. After awhile, however, it became clear to me that students knew what I wanted to hear and knew what to say. Restitution became not about solving a problem but about getting it over with so that we could carry on. In many cases, this was precisely because these values hadn't been internalized. So, although I needed to keep talking about values I also needed to live them as a means for students to experience them. I don't spend a lot of time anymore talking about values at the beginning of the year. After an initial discussion, we get on to the business of learning. As difficulties arise I live those values in my responses to students. It's more than just modeling although that is what I am doing. It's modeling which comes from a genuine way of being. When you live your values you are not going to slip back onto past behaviour patterns in stressful situations. It is important, however, to note that this kind of value change takes place slowly and students are quick to see inconsistencies between what is stated and what is enacted. This is why walking your talk is so important.

Of course, nobody is one hundred percent consistent, especially under stress. Part of living these values is

standing back from yourself and realizing when you have not acted with integrity. Then it becomes necessary to fix it with the kids. It's a two way street and I don't believe that kids will restitute and value others unless they see you valuing others and restituting as well. Valuing means more than just talking. About twice a year I have to eat crow with my class. While I hate doing it, I know in the long run that this act strengthens both the classroom culture I am trying to foster and the relationship I am cultivating with each of them.

* * *

From the front of the room I smell what I think must be sulfur. I look to my row of boys in the back and I snap before I even think. "Which one of you guys lit the match back there?" I am tired, it is Thursday afternoon in early February and only ten minutes until dismissal. Both students and teachers are suffering from cabin fever and I don't want to deal with this, but lighting matches in class is a safety issue and not something I am prepared to let slide. Nobody will own up and then to my horror I hear myself say "Well nobody is leaving here at 3:30 until I know who did it." Blank stares. I don't want to sit here. It's been a long day. "Well," I say, "if you don't want to own up publicly then I will pass out some papers and you can write down whether it was you who did it." From the back I can hear Tim:

"Why did she look back here right away? Like we're the bad boys."

It begins to dawn on me that given the class's reaction that maybe no one lit a match at all. Usually a teacher can tell when students are trying to cover something up and this group is looking genuinely perplexed. For all I know, someone passed wind in the back of the class which caused a bit of snickering and this is starting to look like a better possibility than the match explanation.

I read through the papers and every single one says "I didn't do it." Oh, have I set myself up, I think to myself. "Well," I say to the class, "I know what I need to know. We'll talk more about this tomorrow." As they file out every single one of them is carrying a tangible black cloud above his or her head. They are angry. One of my students stops and says "Did you figure out who did it?"

"I know what I need to know," I say trying to save face. "We'll talk about it tomorrow."

I stew for a couple of hours when I get home. I stew because I've got myself into a power struggle that I don't want to be in. To compound the problem, I'm not even sure that anyone lit a match. I also stew because I jumped to conclusions about my back row boys and I've lost credibility in their eyes. I know what I need to know. I know I'm

going to have to come clean. Once I've made the decision I feel better. I'll be the person I want to be with this class.

The next day after O Canada I say "Before you run off to band I need to say a couple of things about yesterday. I want to explain first of all why I reacted the way I did. You see, as your teacher, I am responsible for your safety while you are with me. To be honest, I'm not even sure anymore whether I smelled sulfur yesterday but I want you to know that I overreacted because it is a safety issue. I need to do everything in my power to make sure this is a safe place for all of us, not only because I owe it to your parents, but because I would have difficulty living with myself if anything happened to one of you. That's where my reaction came from yesterday. I can't change that, but I can explain to you why I reacted the way I did."

"I also spoke to Tim and Christian this morning before class and apologized to them and you need to know that. It was wrong of me to automatically assume that they did something wrong and it was not respectful of me to do that." My face is set and I feel like I am going to cry and I'm sure they can see that I am struggling to maintain my composure. "That's all I have to say. I'll see you after band." With that I walk to the back of the room and turn and look out the window as they file out. I have tears running down my face because I should know better by now but I also know that its okay to make a mistake and I've been the person I wanted to be. The rest of the day is a good day.

* * *

In terms of learning, Restitution is an integral part of what I do. One can't try and flatten out the hierarchy and then punish students for misbehaviour. The two are incongruent. When I say "flatten out" I don't mean completely flat. There was a time when in trying to make room for other voices that I stepped too far back. I gave too much freedom and not enough direction. I didn't value my self and my needs enough in the learning environment. These were needs which had to be there given the parameters of the institution. I now think I've found a good balance. I have a need for a dynamic, interesting learning environment which is orderly and respectful. That is the tone I try to set.

Restitution supports and values the self. A strong self, I believe, is absolutely critical in a meaning-making

model. In a meaning-making model social difficulties are negotiated in a way that builds self esteem rather than disenfranchising learners by making them feel powerless, worthless or without control. In a meaning-making model each learner must wrestle with ideas, try things out, make mistakes and revise his or her theories. It is an active and creative process where learning is non-linear and often quite a messy business. Perhaps most importantly, learners are not receiving information from an authority, but,instead, they are becoming their own authorities and creators of meaning. In fact, this authority is both a result of the creative process and a necessary element in the process. On the one hand, authority emerges as a byproduct of the meaning-making process itself, but a creative act cannot occur unless the learner possesses a sense of power, authority and confidence in him or herself in the first place. If these conditions do not exist to some degree within the learner then necessary risks in the meaning making process often cannot occur because it becomes a threat to the student's sense of personhood. In supporting the self, Restitution helps create the kind of community which fosters meaning-making.

Restititution is not about rules. One may be able to operate by rules in a junior high model, but it is next to impossible in a more student-centered approach because the individual is valued above the formal curriculum. Individuals are diverse. They have differing needs and motivations and agendas. Restitution operates from some basic principles of respect, but each situation is recognized

as different. This is because, if all behaviour is purposeful then two children can exhibit the same behaviour but be operating from two different needs. To use the example of not bringing supplies, Frank may not bring a pen because his need is to preserve his power: it is better to fail French because he didn't try than to fail because he isn't smart enough. Janice, on the other hand, may also not bring her supplies, but she may neglect to bring them from a different power need. Perhaps she does not like to feel less powerful than her teacher. Perhaps her resisting is a way of showing her teacher that she needn't comply. Two students, the same behaviour, but very different motivations. If you attempt the one-rule-fits-all system then students become objects to manipulate to further your own teaching agenda. The institution becomes dehumanizing. Restitution requires time and relationship, two things which are impossible without a middle years philosophy, where teacher contact time is increased.

It is this objectification of students which occurs in a rule based reward and punishment system that links Restitution with some of the literature on caring. Nel Noddings (1984) points out that in any caring relationship (parent-child or teacher-child for our purposes here) between two people there is the "one caring" and the "cared-for." The caring relationship is complete only when the "cared-for" perceives that caring (p. 65). Often times in institutional settings "caring for" becomes a set of rules for employees to follow to make sure that all the bases are covered. This is

not really caring for someone, although it is often meeting physical needs and the person cared for begins to feel like an object acted upon. Nel Noddings (1984) goes on to say "When this attitude is missed, the one who is the object of care taking feels like an object. He is being treated, handled by formula" (p. 65).

Restitution and middle years structures support the meaning making of the learner by ceasing to objectify the learner and valuing the self. The relationship between teachers and students changes in ways beyond Restitution. Chapter five is a look at the renegotiation of that change with respect to curriculum.

Chapter Five:

A Meaning-Making Approach

to Teaching Poetry

My classroom no longer has a revolving door, which is a lucky thing, because I don't believe that I would have survived in teaching. Thankfully, the last few years I feel like I've found my niche. I teach grade seven and for the most part I have one group of children who spend the majority of their school day with me. The structures still won't allow me total integration. I can't teach band because I don't have the expertise and someone else does phys-ed. I exchange science for French with another teacher because French is always a sticking point in the timetable in terms of finding teachers who are able to teach it. Regardless, I have "my kids" for a good portion of each day. There are even days where we are together from 8:30 - 3:00. I learn to know them well: their strengths and weaknesses academically, their frustration levels, and their home situations. I learn where I can challenge them and where I need to back off and give them some space. I learn where I need to make program modifications. I learn to diffuse conflicts between two students before they become big issues. I try to make connections with parents. I let kids get to know me.

I've spoken in previous chapters about meaning-making, how I came to know about this from the inside out through my own experience as an adult learner. In the last chapter I spoke about how school structures either support or hinder a meaning-making process. I haven't said much about what this actually looks like in a classroom. This is the objective of this chapter but I need to be up front about something. I'm not there yet. I'm not there but I've come to know that it's

okay. It's okay because none of us attains perfection and that's a good message for our kids to get too. It's also okay because I am doing the best I can.

It's also okay because I come from a very departmentalized system myself. I don't have the benefit of discovery learning in math when it comes to my own understanding. As I teach something new, I am making sense for myself as I go. Every time I teach fractions, a topic reasonably difficult for many children, I understand a little more about how my students are engaging with various activities and the connections they are making.

I try to integrate the subjects as much as I can so that there is crossover and I like to do thematic units where I can see the subjects fitting together naturally. Not everything I do, however, is bounded by a constructivist framework. Sometimes, because my students are becoming unfocused, it is easiest to directly teach something. Sometimes late in the week we need to do questions from our textbook, because if I have to deal with one more issue or one more cranky child, I will go over the edge. There is an ebb and flow to the energy of classroom life and it's important to recognize this and to go with it.

I'm getting better throughout the years with math. Social studies is fine and I try and do what I can with French, but due to time constraints and the general overall feeling from parents and students, I don't do it justice. French ends up being delivered through a transmission approach. I fit it in wherever I can find time, which is

completely contradictory to meaning-making and how one learns to speak a language. I'm going to share what we do with poetry because I feel I do an adequate, although not perfect job with it. What has become clear to me as I have continued to teach grade seven, is that it is important for me as a teacher to teach the same level and same curriculum year after year. Surprisingly, perhaps, I don't become stale. As I revisit topics in following years, I modify my approach based on my ongoing reflections. Sometimes these reflections take the form of journal entries, as I write my way through an issue. Often, they are informal reflections, which don't amount to more than mental notes to myself. Year after year I continue to make new connections between subject areas and how my students understand their worlds. Knowing that there is always next year, and that I don't have to be perfect my first time through, has freed me up to take my own risks in teaching and learning.

* * *

"We've discussed how we're going to proceed in our poetry unit, but I just want to make sure that we are all clear on the process. Every day we will read a new poem. I will read it aloud to you and we'll clarify any vocabulary about which you are not certain. Once we've done that the leader in each group will read the poem again and then you will discuss it as you go. It might not hurt to make a few notes on the side of the sheet to remind yourselves of key points as you proceed. I will give you a five minute warning before we finish so that you can help the recorder formulate what your group wants to tell the class about the poem. Any questions? Here is your first poem. It's called The Lake (McGough, 1988).

The Lake

For years there have been no fish in the lake.
People hurrying through the park avoid it
like the plague. Birds steer clear
and the sedge of course has withered.
Trees lean away from it,

and at night it reflects, not the moon,
but the blackness of its own depths.
There are no fish in the lake.
But there is life there. There is life...

Underwater pigs glide between reefs of coral debris.
They love it here. They breed and multiply
in sties hollowed out of the mud
and lined with mattresses and bedsprings.
They live on dead fish and rotting things,
drowned pets, plastic and assorted excreta.
Rusty cans they like the best.
Holding them in webbed trotters
their teeth tear easily through the tin,
and poking in a snout, they noisily suck out
the putrid matter within.

There are no fish in the lake.
But there is life there. There is life...

For on certain evenings after dark
shoals of pigs surface
and look out at those houses near the park.
Where, in the bathrooms,
children feed stale bread to plastic ducks,
and in attics,
toy yachts have long since runaground.

Where, in livingrooms,
anglers dangle their lines on patterned carpets,
and bemoan the fate of the ones that got away.

Down on the lake, piggy eyes glisten.
They have acquired a taste for flesh.
They are licking their lips. Listen...

Roger McGough

Groups break off and begin rereading the poem. There are always some procedural difficulties the first few times, although I've done everything in my power to get group roles ironed out before we actually begin. On this first day I approach a group of two boys and two girls. David is having a hard time being focused and Samantha complains as I sit down at the table, saying: "David won't focus so we can start." I redirect them.

"Who is the leader today?"

"Alex is," responds Anne.

"Have you read the poem yet"?

"No," replies Alex. "but I'll do it now."

"I don't really get it," whines Samantha.

"Read the first few lines again Alex."

"For years there have been no fish in the lake.

People hurrying through the park avoid it
like the plague. Birds steer clear
and the sedge of course has withered.
Trees lean away from it,
and at night it reflects, not the moon,
but the blackness of its own depths.
There are no fish in the lake.
But there is life there. There is life..."

"Tell me what you know about this lake from the first stanza,"

"Well," says Samantha, "this lake has no fish in it and people are avoiding it."

"Do you know what a plague is"?

"Oh yeah," says Alex. "It's like a sickness that kills a lot of people."

"Maybe the lake will make people sick," says Anne

"I don't get the moon part," says David.

"Me neither", says Anne.

"Perhaps it will be more clear later on. Let's keep going."

"Underwater pigs!!?" says Anne. "What kind of poem is this? Pigs don't live underwater!"

"You're right they don't. At least not normal pigs. I'm going to move on now. Keep going."

I am always torn because sometimes students need a way in and yet I don't want them to see me as the supplier of answers. This is particularly true of groups who are struggling with the process. They are used to the teacher telling them everything.

Sometimes, as in the case of David and Alex, small group discussion time is not seen as real work time, but, rather, free time because it is not teacher directed. The shift in focus and responsibility is different and often it is not in the students' frame of reference that they are the ones in control of the meaning-making. It takes time for the new patterns to emerge and establish themselves. It's hard on students like Alex and David, because I am asking them to take responsibility for their learning in a new way and they are not sure how to do it.

It's hard on Samantha in a different way. Learners are

often insecure with this approach and react as Samantha does, whining that she doesn't know what to do or how to get started or that others are not doing their jobs. She wants to do things the "right way" and she's had years of training which tells her that the right way is the teacher's way, because that's how you get good grades. She plays the game well and it is working for her, so she is not inclined to change easily. In fact, it is uncomfortable for her and I remember how I felt in the cohort sometimes when I wanted Judith to just tell me what to do so that I could fulfill the requirements and get a good grade. It's a good thing that Judith let me struggle because in that struggle I understood the issues from a personal perspective - from the inside out - rather than the outside in; from a meaning-making rather than a transmission perspective. To that end I often silence my own voice so that student voices can emerge.

This silencing of my own voice is difficult for me and somewhat ironic given the length of time it has taken me to find it in the first place. Every instinct in me wants to give the right answer because I care about my students and I don't like to see them struggle and feel uncertain, and so often I just want to fix it for them. So I try to hold my tongue. Sometimes I am successful and sometimes I am mentally kicking myself later because I just couldn't help it. It's about trusting students to figure a poem out and make the connections that they need to make. It's a position which is respectful of them as individuals.

It's important that this poetry process is well grounded

in my values and not just a method I use. These values include trust that students will make sense, within a learning community where students' voices are heard and when I see myself as a part of the community rather than as an expert. It's a way of being rather than a blueprint to follow, and this is an important distinction to make, because if our values are not in line with what we are professing our students pick up on this quickly. If, for instance, the method says that I as a teacher should value students' voices and encourage their participation, but at the same time I do all the talking and make all the connections, then student voice is not really valued. It sends a mixed message to students, and ultimately it is what you do, not what you say, that communicates what you really value to students. In not being grounded in my own values, the actions I take are not visible demonstrations for my students, and encouraging their voices becomes nothing more than a surface structure designed to facilitate my agenda and my way of thinking about a topic. In the end, it falls flat.

This discussion reminds me of my use of talking chips. Years ago, I tried a structure with poetry where each member of the group got two round pieces of cardboard which we called talking chips. The idea was that you went around the circle and had to say two things about the poem when it was your turn. After you said your piece you put your chip in the middle. Everyone had to speak twice. In retrospect, this was too artificial a structure for my purposes. Although its intent was to facilitate discussion, it was

disconnected from the meaning-making, and like the notion of managerial mystique (Henderson, 1999, p.2), this structure became an end unto itself. Students were mostly concerned about saying their two things. They liked the novelty of the talking chips but the structure wasn't connected to meaning-making. Rather, it functioned as a means of getting rid of their chips. In this model, the comments, as we went around the circle, were often disconnected. Learners would say something because it was required, not because they had something meaningful to say. It also put artificial limits on the conversation, because when the chips were gone then the discussion was over regardless of whether there was still more to say.

* * *

I sit down with the second group. All conversation stops and all eyes turn to me. They too are looking for direction and are seeing me as the giver of information. I want them to do this without me, but, at the same time, they are just learning the process and are looking for direction. "Tell me what you know so far," I ask Jennifer.

"Well we know that this is a polluted lake and that people don't want to go near it.

"How do you know it is polluted"?

"Well, its filled with mattresses and bedsprings, dead fish, drowned pets... Its really gross.

"It's a weird poem," says Jaclyn. I don't get the pig thing. It doesn't make sense.

"Think symbolically. Jennifer you're good at this. Why does the poet pick pigs instead of ...say...cows? Why not underwater cows"?

"Oh! because we associate pigs with dirt and garbage!"

"O-h-h," says Riley.

"They're mutated pigs", says Jennifer, "That's why they live underwater. All the pollution has caused them to mutate."

"Keep going," I tell them.

I am trying to take their lead. I am trying to validate what they bring to the poem by asking them what they understand so far, not beginning with where I think they

should start. I am using their question to help them develop their own line of thinking, rather than posing my own questions and expecting them to follow along behind me like a gaggle of geese. I am hoping that they will lead me, and, then, every once in awhile, I can reframe or refocus what they are thinking.

Part of it is silencing my voice so that I am not dominating the discussion. As soon as I do that their voices move from lateral relationship with one another to a vertical relationship with me at the top. Part of it is timing as well. I cannot remove my voice altogether, because the bottom line is that I am the teacher and designer of the learning activity. I have an agenda, otherwise, none of us would be talking in the first place. There are times when I need to speak so that our community of learners has a direction

* * *

"We don't get this at all," says the third group.

"Okay, tell me specifically what you don't get. Who is the recorder?" Randy? Okay Randy, write down our questions as we go.

"I don't get why there are pigs in the lake," says Rick.

"I don't get why the people avoid the lake," states Shauna.

"I don't get why children are feeding plastic ducks," pipes up Randy.

Now, speculate on your questions. What might be possible answers. You'll have an opportunity to sort this out even more when we talk about it as a group. "

This group is really struggling. It's difficult for me to follow their lead when they cannot articulate what they do not understand. That's why I want them to write down questions that are in their minds. They don't believe that they know anything, but if they can articulate what

specifically they don't understand then they are already constructing meaning. They know already what doesn't make sense for them. I know that once they have some questions I can encourage them to speculate on possibilities. I'm not concerned at this point as to whether their interpretations are good ones or not. I just want them to feel free to speculate and to take a risk in their thinking. It is imperative because if they don't take the risk they'll never make the leap to seeing themselves with the creative capacity to make sense.

It may turn out that this group will not have a good reading of this poem, but they may begin to build strategies that over time will help them with their discussion of a poem a week down the road. I see my role as providing them with a safe forum of discussion, a forum where they are encouraged to speculate and share together rather than coming up with an interpretation of a poem which is a perfectly packaged product. You can't blame them for thinking this way. In their past experience it has been their teacher leading the discussion: the teacher with all the right answers who leads them along in a sequential manner. Surely, they think, the teacher never struggled with poetry. Certainly, if I were good at understanding poetry I would see the whole meaning clearly from the start.

I am fighting the urge to have twenty-five students in the same place at once. I fight it because I know that it is impossible and that this is a hold-over from my old way of doing things. I understand from where this impulse comes.

It is a desire for all of my students to really "get" poetry. I want them to love it like I love it and I want them to be challenged and moved by the ideas and language we experience. Then I have to stop myself. I think it's natural for me to want to share what I value with those I care about, but when I start to feel pressure I know I am too deep into my own agenda and that I need to step back and let the kids do the meaning-making.

It's at this point that I need to switch gears because I've slipped back into the position of the expert who delivers information. When I reframe this for myself, I think about my role as both facilitator and mentor. I am a facilitator in the sense that I am making the learning easier by creating situations where students are able to make their own connections. But being a facilitator does not speak to the relationship between teacher and student. The dictionary (1988) defines a mentor as "an experienced and trusted friend and adviser" (p.625). A mentor does not exclude the voices of students. He or she has experience with certain things which may be useful to the student, and he or she exists in an advising capacity, but does not control the learning relationship. That control is left with the advisees who trust the advisor to speak in their best interests. The term mentor defines the relationship between student and teacher as involving both trust and advising. It is learning done *with* another not *to* another.

I need to remember that it's not only about me. There are some kids who will develop a love of poetry and there are

others who will find other areas of interest. I don't need to mold them in my own image and although I have the inclination sometimes, I think it's rather an egocentric impulse on my part. Regardless, this back-and-forth movement between what I think is good for them and what they may believe is good for them, is a dance that drives me crazy!

* * *

When we enter into a large group discussion the dynamics change somewhat. "Do you remember talking about discussion groups yesterday"? I ask.

"Yes."

"What kinds of things do we need to remember"?

"Well, we need to disagree respectfully. Which means we say things like "I understand where you're coming from but I see it differently. We don't say stuff like 'you're an idiot for thinking that," says Jaclyn.

"Anything else?"

"We need to look at the person talking and not be fiddling with things in front of us or nudging the person next to us because that tells the speaker that we aren't interested in what he or she is saying," comments Randy.

I'm laying the ground rules. Kids operate with a winner/loser mentality, partly because of their previous school experience. I don't want them to compete to prove which group has the best interpretation. It's easy for kids to fall into that, and then before you know it, some voices are not heard because they don't want to go against the grain or they don't feel respected. I mention the bit about not fiddling with other things, because listening and simulating what each group is saying is hard work and very difficult for many grade seven students who often have never been asked to do this before. I frame it as a sign of respect not to be playing with things because it sets a tone and I think it's true, but I also don't want them fiddling with things because

before you know it there will be pockets of distracted people within our circle.

"Okay. Anything else? Let's get started. The reporter should have his or her paper ready. You know the routine. The reporter speaks first and then if you have a question about something that group said you can ask the reporter. Group members can certainly help out their reporter. Any volunteers to go first? Randy, thanks.

"We had a very hard time getting organized and it took us awhile to really get this poem. We had lots of questions. 'Why were the pigs living underwater?' 'Why were toy yachts run aground in attics?' 'Why were the pigs licking their lips?' We thought this poem was good but that it was a little weird."

"Thank-you Randy." I'm not going to put them on the spot. Hopefully something another group said will connect with them. They can't say why it was good or weird and are still talking in generalities that are safe "Any questions or comments? Let's continue. Yes Jennifer, you can go next if you like."

"Our group thought this poem was really weird at first but after awhile it started to make sense. This lake is very polluted. We know it is polluted because of the junk in it. It's so dirty that even the trees lean away from it like they'll get contaminated if they get too close. At first we thought that pigs in the lake was just stupid because pigs aren't normally in lakes, but then we thought it made sense because pigs live in pig sties and this lake is very dirty. We thought they were underwater pigs because all the pollution mutated them. We didn't get why the pigs are staring at the houses or why they are licking their lips. That's all we have."

I'm hoping another group will touch on some of their questions, but I am not going to jump in and answer them. I don't want them to see me in that role, because they will depend on me to bail them out. I will probably ask a few pointed questions at the end of the group presentations and hope that stimulates more speculation. If not, then I'll have to be content knowing that they have built the meaning as far as they are able to take it for the moment. At this point, according to Vygotsky,(Wells, 1995) they will be out of the "zone of proximal development" (p.23). This is the area "...with respect to any task that lies between what the learner can manage alone and what he or she can achieve with

the assistance of an adult or more knowledgeable peer" (Wells,1995, p.23). If I ask a few questions to reframe their thinking and they look at me with blank stares I am probably better off to remain quiet. Telling them more will only erode what I am trying to do in terms of encouraging their own voices and it won't mean much to them anyway.

There are always five or six students who really like the class discussion portion of the process, but for most of my students it is new and has its logistical problems. Some students don't talk loudly enough for their classmates to engage with what they are saying. Many grade seven students have difficulty sitting in a discussion of this nature and sorting through what is said, allowing it to inform what they are thinking. I suspect this also reflects a lack of experience more than it does an inability on their part.

Many students have problems dealing with silence as well. Because they've been trained throughout elementary not to talk when I am talking this is what they do. But, in trying to diffuse their seeing me as the only one who knows anything, I am trying to get them to listen to one another as well. Sometimes, though, no one is talking. I don't want to jump in and I wait for someone else. Some kids are thinking but others see this as non- structured time. I am still struggling with this restlessness because it is such a delicate balance at this age. It's a balance between giving them control over the discussion and at the same time having expectations that they will sit still and participate.

Regardless, we've talked a lot about small and large

group discussions and how they can help us think together so that twenty three people are not thinking separately, but, rather, together. Pam is a good example of someone who participates well in the discussion. After someone has spoken she will always add to what they have said, either to validate or to challenge the ideas. She is someone who verbalizes the meaning she is making as she does it. It is a very active process for her. There may well be others, who say nothing, but who are still making connections in their heads. Are they wanting to jump into the conversation? Are they content to remain silent? Are they afraid to show themselves?

I'm trying to get them to build on their interpretations and see themselves as authorities who bring knowledge and skills to the situation, but I also recognize that there are more and less plausible interpretations of a poem. I don't want to give them the message that any interpretation goes, because then we devolve into the postmodern relativism where nothing has value anymore. This is why a community of learners is so important. In the post- modern world truth lies not in individual perspectives, but among multiple perspectives that come together or interrupt the meanings being negotiated within a group. I'm trying to create this kind of web of interconnectedness in our classroom. In the classroom, we can become a group, as opposed to a collection of individuals.

Students also have other partners in learning, who are not physically sitting in their circle but with whom they can

think. These others may be found in resources (in a variety of media) and I am a potential as well. The essential issue is not who is around this large metaphorical table, but, rather, who gets to speak. In the past it was only the experts who spoke and the students who complied and parroted. I want the students to speak with the experts. I have to be careful though, because I want to encourage this vision and it is very easy to sabotage it without even knowing it. I feel I did it right with Riley but I've often not been so lucky.

When we are discussing "The Lake" together Riley says: "I think it was the fish that polluted the lake to get back at the pigs." Clearly, in my mind, this is a misinterpretation of the poem, but I am not willing to say anything. Usually someone in the class will challenge a statement which is that far off, but on this day, no one does so I just leave it. I want to encourage this speculating behavior, and I know that if I jump in now and tell Riley that he is wrong, he might not speculate out loud again. I'm trying to trust the process. In the big picture it doesn't matter whether Riley has an accurate understanding of this poem. Instead, what matters, is that over time he develop the tools and understanding to generate more grounded interpretations of poetry in general. Riley may have said something that wasn't supported in the poem, but the following day he is still willing to take the risks and generate further interpretations, because I haven't told him that he is wrong.

On another day we are reading a poem called Anne and the Field

Mouse.

Anne and the Field-Mouse

We found a mouse in the chalk quarry today
In a circle of stones and empty oil drums
By the fag ends of a fire. There had been
A picnic there; he must have been after the crumbs.

Jane saw him first, a flicker of brown fur
In and out of the charred wood and chalk-white.
I saw him last, but not till we'd turned up
Every stone and surprised him into flight,

Though not far - little zigzags spurts from stone
To stone. Once, as he lurked in his hiding-place,
I saw his beady eyes uplifted to mine.
I'd never seen such terror in so small a face.

I watched, amazed and guilty. Beside us suddenly
A heavy pheasant whirred up from the ground,
Scaring us all; and, before we knew it, the mouse
Had broken cover, skimming away without a sound,

Melting into the nettles. We didn't go
Till I'd chalked in capitals on a rusty can:
THERE'S A MOUSE IN THOSE NETTLES. LEAVE
HIM ALONE. NOVEMBER 15TH. ANNE.

Ian Serraillier

We've followed our regular routine and now we are talking about the poem as a large group. We talk about why Anne felt compelled to write a message on a tin can and we come to the conclusion that she feels guilty about chasing the little mouse. Then I ask the question "Why does she put the date on the message"? The "answer" is clear in my mind. The date indicates the length of time the message has been there. It tells anyone happening upon the scene whether or not they should heed the message. Riley pipes up and surprises me.

"The date on the can reminds me of...oh...you know the things in cemeteries."

"The gravestones"? I ask.

"Yes. "

"What's the connection"?

"They mark where someone has been....."

"Like a monument"?

"Yeah, to remember them by."

Riley has surprised me. Given all the years I have been talking about this poem, it has never once occurred to me

that the tin can is like a monument to the mouse. A marker of its having been there. I tell Riley this because I want our class to understand that meanings don't emerge as a completed package but, rather, that they emerge over time, sometimes spanning years. I make an effort regularly, during our discussions, to say to students "I hadn't thought of it quite that way."

In fact, although I try to be a facilitator/mentor I am also a learner in the community. Sometimes I make new connections with the poem or novel that we are reading, sometimes I understand a concept in mathematics in a slightly different way, sometimes I gain insight into what motivates a particular student. Or, at other times, I learn something about myself as a human being and my role in the classroom by reflecting on an incident and my role in the situation. Being a learner in the community, however, cannot happen unless I am willing to let go of my position as expert who tells others what to think. As an expert I cannot be a mentor who participates in a dialogue. Bleich (1988) cites Freire, to make this point:

> Through dialogue, the teacher of the students and the students of the teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself [or her-] self taught in the dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow. In this process, arguments based on

> "authority" are no longer valid...Here, no one teaches another, nor is anyone self-taught. Men [people] teach each other, mediated by the world, by the cognizable objects which in banking education are "owned" by the teacher. (p. 160)

* * *

When we have finished our discussion students sit down and write a letter to me about their understandings of the poem. I want this to be a forum for their voices, but I also want the writing to be a vehicle for further thinking. It is my hope, and my own personal experience, that attempting to articulate what one understands about a piece of poetry in writing often results in a clarity of understanding for the writer. I want them to engage in some meaningful thinking and I too want to enter into conversation with them. I'm about fifty percent there. Some students write long letters making numerous connections. Other students have written some good things but they are not expanding the connections. Over the course of the unit the general trend is for entries to become shorter. As much as I've tried to establish the writing/thinking connection I don't think that they've made it. They see the writing as showing me what they know. In showing me what they know, the process becomes an assignment: a group of requirements which they must fill, and in so doing there is little that is different from my opting for a C in psychology all those years ago. I need to think about how I can make this connecting process more viable. Perhaps next year I will try what Judith did with us. I'll have students

exchange their letters and respond to one another's. I don't want to take myself completely out of the process, because I want to be a part of that conversation as well, but maybe if they are writing to one another instead of to me it will make a difference in why they are writing in the first place. Perhaps it is the letter format itself that causes them to feel that they need to show me rather than make sense for themselves. Soon, however, it will be next year and I can try it again and see what happens.

When we are able to step back from the daily grind it seems absurd to me that I can get so worked up about accountability, marks, and knowledge of content, because this is an institutional agenda that has little to do with learning. What I need to continually remind myself is that what I do everyday is not about specific content, but part of a much larger learning process. What I try to do everyday, with varying success, is to see the bigger picture. What are we really trying to accomplish anyway?

Chapter Six:

Education as Spiritual Endeavor

"There are no quick fixes" is what I want to tell him as I lean over the table for more popcorn. The Friday happy hour crowd is beginning to fill up the place and the atmosphere really isn't conducive to the kind of conversation I'd like to have about education. My friend is not a teacher but he is a concerned parent with a young son in elementary school.

"That's life," he says to me. "There are winners and losers and kids may as well get to learn that quickly. I don't have much time for bleeding heart liberals who can't see the reality and do the practical thing. It's a tough world out there and education needs to prepare our kids for that reality."

According to my friend, education should be preparation for the dog-eat-dog world of adult life. A few days later I came across a piece in the Winnipeg Free Press (May 6, 2000) written by Anne Landers that still makes me angry every time I read it. It's called Rules Kids Won't Learn in School.

Life is not fair. Get used to it. The average teenager uses the phrase "It's not fair" 86 times a day.

The real world won't care as much about your self-esteem as your school does. This may come as a shock.

Sorry, you won't make $40,000 a year as soon as you get out of high school. And you won't be a vice-president and have a car phone, either. You may even have to wear a uniform that doesn't have a designer label.

If you think your teacher is tough, wait until you get a boss.

Flipping burgers is not beneath your dignity.

Your grandparents had a different word for burger flipping. They called it "opportunity."

It's not your parents' fault if you mess up. You're responsible. This is the mirror image of "It's

my life" and "You're not my boss."

Before you were born, your parents weren't boring. They got that way by paying bills and listening to you.

Life is not divided into semesters. And you don't get summers off. Not even spring break. You are expected to show up every day for eight hours, and you don't get a new life every 10 weeks.

Smoking does not make you look cool. Watch an 11-year-old with a butt in his mouth. That's what you look like to anyone over 20.

Your school may be "outcome-based," but life isn't. In some schools, you are given as many chances as you want to get the answer right. Standards are set low enough so nearly everyone can meet them. This, of course, bears not the slightest resemblance to anything in real life-as you will soon find out.

Good luck. You are going to need it. And the harder you work, the luckier you will get.

I get angry when I read this article because the tone is resentful and angry, spoken by adults who plod along, resigned to the drudgery of everyday life. It's a world filled with winners and losers, where hard work is rewarded in the long run but not before one pays his or her dues. Nothing comes easily in this adult world and its tone is patronizing and disrespectful of young people who "have it easy." It was reminiscent of the conversation I had with my friend a few days previously. What I wanted to tell him, but chose not to, is that our world is our own creation.

Unfortunately, we all too often lose sight of this. We spend so much of our time wandering around half asleep, content to go through the motions of our everyday lives and deal with the practical aspects of living: cooking dinner, bathing the dog, taking our kids to their lessons, doing our jobs and dealing with their associated stresses.

In fact, we get so caught up in the nuts and bolts of living that we feel tossed about by forces external to us rather than stopping and examining those forces and then making our choices. We get so busy that we never stand outside of ourselves and ask the why of our thoughts and actions. In not slowing down and stopping to reflect, we feel we have no choice but to forge ahead and the routine events in our lives quickly devolve into an unending treadmill of duties. In our single-minded pursuit along this treadmill the others we encounter on a daily basis are viewed as less than what they are, and often our reactions to these others manifest themselves in atrocities that we don't even recognize. As a result, the old woman ahead of us in the grocery line, fumbling for change, becomes an irritation in our lives, rather than a source of admiration for her independent spirit. Likewise, the children in our classrooms who always need instructions explained, yet again, become a source of frustration. In seeing people as less than what they are, they become objects to be manipulated in attainment of our personal agenda. We become locked in a pattern of acting on others to fulfill our own needs rather than loving others for who they are at a particular moment in time.

When we can step out of habit and take time to reflect, then our lives are truly our own creation, and we can view the world as not just "the way it is" but as changeable. As Maxine Greene (1995) points out:

> Only when the given or the taken-for-granted is subject to questioning, only when we take various, sometimes unfamiliar perspectives on it, does it show itself as what it is - contingent on many interpretations, many vantage points, unified (if at all) by conformity or by unexamined common sense. (Greene, p. 23)

I want to tell my friend that we can change what is, and that we are well on our way to doing things differently when we are able to imagine things differently. I want to tell him all of this, but I don't. I don't because his ideological framework is different from mine. Whereas I see reality through a postmodern lense of multiple perspectives, my friend sees the world through a modernist lens. Modernism and scientific empiricism go hand-in-hand because the only reality and the only valid way of knowing which they recognize is that which is seen, according to Ken Wilbur (1999), with the "eye of flesh" (p. 18). Reality is measurable and quantifiable: it exists as an absolute and what is true is fixed and unchanging. In describing empirical ways of knowing Ken Wilbur (1996) states:

> This is the idea that you have the self or the subject, on the one hand, and the empirical or sensory world, on the other, and all valid knowledge consists in making *maps* of the empirical world, the single and simple

> "pregiven" world. And if the map is accurate, if it correctly represents, or corresponds, with the empirical world, then that is "truth." (p. 59)

I don't mean to imply that scientific empiricism isn't valuable, because as a species we have learned much about ourselves and our world through science, and we have made many discoveries that have enhanced our lives. The problem, Ken Wilbur (1996) goes on to say, is that there is no place for the self in our understandings about our world:

> ...the problem with maps is: *they leave out the mapmaker*. What was being utterly ignored was the fact that the mapmaker might itself bring something to the picture! (p. 59)

It is this inclusion of the "mapmaker" or the self as a piece of the meaning-making that is at the center of the shift from modernism to postmodernism, because it is in the inclusion of the self in knowing that diversity of perspectives originate. Postmodernism acknowledges what modernism does not: the self is an integral part of knowing and cannot be separated from it. The self, rather than being a biasing influence on knowledge is integral to it, since knowledge is in part an internal construction within the individual rather than the outward, fixed measure of reality dictated by modernism.

To go back to my friend, given his modernist framework, it is not surprising that he approaches education from a knowledge transmission perspective: a perspective completely external to the individual. Frank Smith (1998) named this

perspective the "official view" of learning, mentioned in an earlier chapter. It is a modernist perspective. We can talk about my friend's view of education from the perspective of standards and accountability. The premises are linear and seem so well grounded in "facts." Unfortunately, this conversation diminishes the humanity of learners in the system, since it treats them as numbers to be manipulated rather than as self-determined individuals.

The conversation I want to have with him is not so tidy. It's not a conversation I want to have with him, though, because it doesn't take just an hour on a Friday afternoon. It takes many conversations, and as I look across the table, I'm thinking to myself that what I really need to do is write a thesis because that's how big this conversation is, and I need to be able to articulate, for myself, more clearly what I believe.

In the short conversation we do have, I realize my friend isn't hearing me, because he is not patient enough to listen to my perspective. He isn't patient because he is trapped in a modernist framework which doesn't recognize other perspectives besides its own. When I try to develop my argument and give him some background in what I believe, it comes across to him as academic rhetoric. I can almost hear him say to himself "just cut to the chase; what is the point?" But the point is the perspective. There are a multitude of truths; as many as there are individuals, because the meanings we make are not separate from who we are. We may negotiate our individual truths in community and

come to a place of common ground, but because a community is made up of numerous selves, that truth will be a little different for each of us.

It is this inability to see the perspectives of others which is the tragedy of modernity: in valuing only an empirical way of knowing, we have often made decisions which appear pragmatic from our own perspective, but by recognizing no other point of view, our decisions have had damaging consequences to others. This inability, in my mind, has resulted in North American culture losing its way. The education institution is not separate from our society, but, rather, it is a reflection of a society that is broken. In the day-to-day routines of living, we come to expect that this is the way the world works and we don't see it as anything but normal. Kathleen Kesson (1999) believes that we are living in a "crisis of modernity" (p. 87). There is actually more than one crisis:

> Environmental critics express concern for the damage to our natural world wrought by the purely technical and instrumental applications of scientific thought and invention. Feminist critics decry the patriarchal paradigm that has devalued emotion, sensuality, and intuition in favor of cold logic. Indigenous people and their supporters have challenged the racist, colonialist mentality that has conquered, subordinated, and exploited "non modern" people all over the planet, and destroyed their cultures, land, livelihood, and languages. Social theorists note the cultural

> fragmentation, loss of community and social alienation common to the people of modern, capitalist, industrial cultures. Religious leaders talk about the "crisis of faith." Even without the discourses of theorists to inform us about these interlocking crises, our everyday awareness of the problems of violence, poverty, war, economic instability, alienation, and environmental damage inform us all that there is something deeply amiss in modern culture. (p.87)

Parker Palmer (1993) believes that because we are all products of our time and therefore products of modernism, we are all to some degree culpable in the ills of our world. This is because the aim of science has been to name our physical reality, and in doing so, we have gained mastery over much of it. In the naming, however, we have seen ourselves as separate from the natural world, rather than as an integral piece of it, and, thus, we have erroneously believed that it is ours to use in whatever way meets our needs. In comparing himself to scientists Parker Palmer (1993) states:

> We are well-educated people who have been schooled in a way of knowing that treats the world as an object to be dissected and manipulated, a way of knowing that gives us power over the world. With those scientists I have succumbed to the arrogance that comes when we see what our minds can do. The outcomes of my arrogance have been less than world-shaking because my powers are small. But in my own way I have used my knowledge to

> rearrange the world to satisfy my drive for power, distorting and deranging life rather than loving it for the gift it is. (p. 2)

It is, I believe, this dissecting which is at the heart of so many of the ills of modernity. In breaking our understanding into smaller and smaller pieces and dividing it into smaller and smaller areas of expertise, not unlike the way in which we have traditionally viewed curriculum, we cease to be able to see the big picture. As we become increasingly fragmented, we each seek to preserve our own understandings without recognizing how we unconsciously interact with other perspectives and how, at other times, we fail to even recognize other perspectives. Knowledge becomes only a process of furthering our own agendas. In the end, we are left with fragmentation and alienation, which, leaves us unresponsive to one another in a spiritual wasteland.

It is this rejection of compartmentalization and dissection of our world which is at the heart of a renewed spirituality, and this is where I break company with postmodernism. On the one hand its contribution to my understanding, has been the recognition of diversity of perspectives, but it is limited in that it deconstructs everything. Postmodernism can take everything apart, but it is unable to put it back together again, with the end result being utter hopelessness. I don't believe that we understand our world in pieces - we understand it as a whole and it is in this recognition where one finds the seeds of a renewed spirituality. James Moffett (1994) defines what it means to

be spiritual in this way:

> To be spiritual is to perceive our oneness with everybody and everything and to act on this perception. It is to be whole within oneself and with the world. Morality ensues. From this feeling of unity proceed all positive things, just as from *whole* proceed all the words for these things-*wholesome, hale, healthy, and holy*. (p. xix)

If postmodernism deconstructs, then perhaps one can find reconstruction and wholeness through the function of narrative: Barbara Hardy (Rosen, 1984?) believes that:

> ... narrative ... is not to be regarded as an aesthetic invention used by artists to control, manipulate, and order experience, but as a primary act of mind transferred to art from life ... For we dream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticise, construct, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative. In order really to live, we make up stories about ourselves and others, about the personal as well as the social past and future. (p. 13)

On a fundamental level, our stories are about our making sense: connecting the pieces of our lives together in a meaningful way. If Hardy is correct, then we are hard wired to story our own lives and through these stories we make sense of our experiences. Narrative is one way of making sense-of fusing our outer world with our inner reality. Learning defined as meaning-making is an attempt to do the

same, and I would argue that spirituality is another dimension of this same desire. All three are a joining of the inner and outer, of making sense of the world out there and the world in here. It's about finding areas of common ground and the places where each of us fits into the bigger picture.

We need to "think the world together" (Palmer,1998 p.62). This is impossible through a modernist/empirical perspective of knowing, because knowing in this model is borne of a need to understand and control our environment to meet our own needs. It is a vision of knowing which is "out there." Parker Palmer (1993) points out:

> We are inquisitive creatures, forever wanting to get inside of things and discover their hidden secrets. Our curiosity is piqued by the closed and wrapped box. We want to know its contents, and when the contents are out we want to open them too - down to the tiniest particle of their construction. We are also creatures attracted by power; we want knowledge to control our environment, each other, ourselves. Since many of the boxes we have opened contained secrets that have given us more mastery over life, curiosity and control are joined as the passion behind our knowing. (p.7)

Parker Palmer (1993) goes on to say that another knowledge exists, but it is borne of a different passion. Rather than borne of power and control existing outside of self as fixed, knowledge borne of compassion or love leads us towards relationships of wholeness rather than fragmentation.

Reality exists as an internal creation rather than outside ourselves. To know is to understand not only how we make sense of the material world but also to understand the perspectives of others. Knowing is relational and communal and it requires that we be open to others. Parker Palmer (1993) states:

> The goal of a knowledge arising from love is reunification and reconstruction of broken selves and worlds. A knowledge born of compassion aims not at exploiting and manipulating creation but at reconciling the world to itself. The mind motivated by compassion reaches out to know as the heart reaches out to love. Here, the act of knowing *is* an act of love, the act of entering and embracing the reality of other, of allowing the other to enter and embrace our own. In such knowing we know and are known as members of one community, and our knowing becomes a way of reweaving that community's bonds. (p.8)

This receiving of another is found in the literature of Nel Noddings' (1984) work on caring, where to care means more than the carrying out of duties necessary to meet the physical needs of another. Caring means the receiving of another and recognizing his or her situation as a possibility for ourselves.

> When I look at and think about how I am when I care, I realize that there is invariably this displacement of interest from my own reality to the reality of the other. To be touched, to have aroused in me something

> that will disturb my own ethical reality, I must see the other's reality as a possibility of my own. (p. 14)

Having said all of this, education itself can be a spiritual endeavor if it is borne out of understanding oneself and others, rather than as an endeavor that seeks to control and manipulate the external world. A meaning-making model values the selves of all learners. Each are on their own road of making sense. Learners may be at different places along that road, but we do not see anyone as deficient because we recognize that we are not trying to impose learning on them, but, rather, that we are trying to help them make their own sense. To really care means to meet the other, not to impose our agenda. As Nel Noddings (1984) points out:

> It is no use saying that the teacher who "really cares" wants her students to learn the basic skills which are necessary to a comfortable life; I am not denying that, but the notion is impoverished on both ends. On the one extreme, it is not enough to want one's students to master basic skills. I would not want to choose, but if I had to choose whether my child would be a reader or a loving human being, I would choose the latter with alacrity. On the other extreme, it is by itself too much, for it suggests that I as a caring teacher should be willing to do almost anything to bring my students to mastery of the basic skills. And I am not. Among the intangibles that I would have my students carry away is the feeling that the subject we have

> struggled with is both fascinating and boring, significant and silly, fraught with meaning and nonsense, challenging and tedious, and that whatever attitude we take toward it, it will not diminish our regard for each other. The student is infinitely more important than the subject. (p.20)

Kesson (1999) views the relationship between teacher, student and curriculum as a spiritual endeavor in the following way:

> A spiritual approach to education is not so much about *what* should be taught but *how* we should teach. This raises the question, of course, of whether curriculum is "object" or "method." I believe that it broadens our thinking to include the notion of "method" in our curriculum deliberations, not in the sense of technique," which is how method has come to be understood, but in the sense of *who one is* as a teacher, what parts of oneself are brought to the teaching and learning encounter. Teaching for meaning making requires that we see below the surface of our students into the subjective depths of their personality. It asks that we see our students in all their potential fullness of being, not as flawed parts on an academic assembly line. It asks us, as Macdonald (1995) suggests, to encounter the "indwelling spirit" of the people we teach. It asks us to be open and vulnerable ourselves in the presence of those we teach. It asks us to focus on the development of habits

> of mind that many consider central to a spiritual presence in the world: reverence, respect, awe, wonder, reflection, vision, commitment, and purpose. (p. 98)

So, the tables turn. It is not about making our children competitive in a dog-eat-dog world as my friend would have me believe. As Moffett (1994) points out:

> Suppose we don't so much learn to live as live to learn. Once understood this way, knowing becomes a different matter-and a much more important one. Making a living and making a life become part of making sense of life, so that everything in it has meaning. (p.332)

Viewing our young people as each on their own journey of making sense is a very different stance for parents and teachers than viewing them as individuals who need to be taught to live (Moffett,1994,p.332). The former is respectful of the young as individuals each with their own needs, desires and goals. It is a stance which requires adults to help the young find their own way in a complicated world rather than requiring them to replicate themselves in the image of adults, parroting verbatim what they have been taught.

Helping the young find their own way is the larger vision of meaning-making. Traditionally, education has not done this well. In breaking learning down into its component parts of mathematics, science and the arts we have impoverished each by isolating it from the other. This larger vision requires us, as educators, to help learners see the big picture; the various ways of knowing and the inherent

interconnections, as well as, their role as creators of these understandings. The more literate learners are in a variety of ways of knowing the more readily they are able to see the depth of the layers within their own realities. In exploring this depth of experience - our common humanity - we are able to see beyond the day-to-day concerns and find our place in this world as a piece of something larger than ourselves. It is a vision which asks us, teacher and student, to discover who we are and what our place is in a larger community. In this respect, education becomes a spiritual endeavor.

Chapter Seven:

What I Learned in School

Most of what I know about teaching I've learned through reflection on my experience as a learner. I've come a long way from the "reserved little girl" halfway down the middle row; silent and invisible, believing that she had to bend and twist herself into someone else's vision of who she should be.

It was in experiencing a different vision of education - one where I discovered that it was I who made sense for myself rather than something I acquired from others that allowed me to move forward. What I learned, in a very powerful way, was that no one defines me or knows what is best for me; not my family, not my friends, not the various institutions intertwined with my life, not the media, or my country. Paradoxically, I also learned in an equally powerful way, the importance of being connected in community with others. Through communities, such as the Seven Oaks cohort, I have connected to other people and other perspectives. It has been a reciprocal relationship. These communities have fortified me as an individual, but I have also enriched these same groups by engaging in dialogue. Parker Palmer (1998) considers our need for both solitude and community a paradox of our existence as human beings(p.65). We need both but when we become unbalanced and lean more to one than another our situation becomes harmful. How many of us in our postmodern world cannot relate to the struggle Palmer (1998) describes:

> Our equal and opposite needs for solitude and community constitute a great paradox. When it is torn apart, both

> of these life-giving states of being degenerate into deathly specters of themselves. Solitude split off from community is no longer a rich and fulfilling experience of inwardness; now it becomes loneliness, a terrible isolation. Community split off from solitude is no longer a nurturing network of relationships; now it becomes a crowd, an alienating buzz of too many people and too much noise. (p.65)

Like most others, I have always had a need for both aspects of this paradox; a need to be in solitude with my own thoughts as a distinct individual and a need to exist in community with others. I believe, however, that I have always leaned slightly toward the solitary end of the spectrum. Perhaps, this is personal preference, resulting from the day to day hubbub of classroom existence and requiring me to take frequent breaks from the commotion of modern life. But, I don't think this is the only reason. Having spent many years believing that forces external to myself defined me, I had only two options. Either I had to buy in and stop questioning altogether, or, I had to pull myself slightly away and preserve what power of self I had left. I chose the latter, even though I understood that it alienated me from others with whom I needed to be connected. As I've shifted my understanding of self-determination from external to internal, I have moved more toward centre. I recognize more fully my need to belong and contribute meaningfully, but I also understand community as no longer defining who I am but rather providing me with nourishment to

support, and often challenge, my own growth. My family, my groups of friends, and the various institutions intertwined with my life provide me with differing perspectives, challenges and supports, but I get to choose what I adopt and what I reject.

It is this understanding of myself as one who acts rather than one who is acted upon which has allowed me to move from the authoritarian teacher-expert of my early career to a vision of learning as meaning-making negotiated within a community of learners. It has allowed me to remember that I must act with the learners in our classroom rather than act upon them, imposing my agenda and leaving them powerless and without control of their own learning. It requires me to trust that learners will make sense of their own lives and enable them to do so.

In removing myself as the teacher-expert I am able to get myself out of the learners' way. In doing so, students begin to see themselves as makers of their own understanding who contribute meaningfully to classroom life. I know that this stance develops stronger selves. I also know that stronger selves become better learners because they are able to take more risks in their thinking; build meaning as they sift through concepts, discuss, postulate and reevaluate various ideas. I also know that these stronger selves develop stronger voices which further enables the learning process because strong voices mean stronger and more numerous connections in the meaning-making process as it is negotiated amongst community members. Secondly, a strong voice not only

means a strong contribution to the collective understanding but also to each individual's understanding as he or she articulates and clarifies what he or she knows.

This cycle of self, voice, and power spiral upward, each causing the other to grow, and in the process creates the conditions necessary for meaning-making to flourish. What I try to do in our classroom is foster these three aspects, not only in terms of pedagogy, but also in terms of how I deal with learners as individuals, the opportunities I provide for their voices, and the way I view each learner as being capable. Sometimes its difficult because the individual/community paradox is always present. On the one hand, I'm trying to create a learning community, which I believe is essential to meaning-making, but often times I have a partial community comprised of selves broken or deformed in varying degrees by the very communities to which they belong.

Most of all, I think I've learned that my kids need to know me-not the surface information like whether I'm married or have a cat, but what I value and is visible to them not only through my words but also my actions. These include whether I value others, and what I believe about justice, equality, love, loss, belonging and alienation. These aspects of our lives are the human lessons that are important and will be long remembered after they've forgotten how to change a mixed number into an improper fraction or how to conjugate "er" verbs in French. As I've already pointed out, Frank Smith (1998) believes that you learn "...from the

company you keep" (p.9). I need to be good company for the learners in my classroom.

Lastly, I've learned that reflection and action are ongoing and cyclical. I make numerous errors in judgment every day and often I need to stand back from myself and think about something differently. I know it and my kids know it. In understanding in my heart as well as my head that it's okay to make a mistake, it is much easier to reflect on what I see as my shortcomings. But it's more than accepting my faults. To look oneself squarely in the mirror and assess honestly what is reflected back requires a strong self and this is one of the important qualities of a good reflective practitioner. I'm not there yet - no one ever is - but I'm there some of the time, and as long as I'm doing the best I can then I'm headed in the right direction. Parker Palmer (1998) articulates this sentiment well:

> The entanglements I experience in the classroom are often no more or less than the convolutions of my inner life. Viewed from this angle, teaching holds a mirror to the soul. If I am willing to look in that mirror and not run from what I see, I have a chance to gain self-knowledge - and knowing myself is as crucial to good teaching as knowing my students and my subject. (p.2)

The sun is low in the sky on this late January afternoon. It's been a long week and we're winding down. Students are working at their tables and it feels like we could take one collective yawn, stretch ourselves out in front of the window, and sun ourselves like a bunch of old cats.

I look over at my geraniums that I rescued from the frost in late September. Although blooming they have become quite spindly and cutting them back seems a good way to spend ten minutes. I get my scissors out of the drawer and begin cutting the flowers off first. A wave of distress ripples through the room and although only three or four people

verbalize their concern they do it for everyone. "Why are you cutting your flowers off?"

"They're so beautiful."

" Awe, don't do that." I toss the first flower into the trash explaining that cutting the plant back now will allow the plant to grow back fuller and stronger in spring. In an instant, Trent is at my desk picking the geranium out of the trash. Before I know it, my desk is surrounded by students each with an outstretched hand. Everyone is there: my really keen kids, my kids who like to become part of the wallpaper, my really rambuncous ones, and the one who has no friends.

"Can I have one too Ms. Heimbecker?"

"Don't forget me!"

"I haven't got one yet."

I realize that I've got twenty-four kids and only four flowers but the flowers on a geranium are made up of smaller petals each with a stem. Taking a flower I begin breaking off these smaller sections, and as I give each child a piece I feel like I'm giving each of them a gift, perhaps a piece of whatever has been growing here since September, to which the flowers have been witness. The process, to me anyway, is ritualized and solemn as if I am giving them a piece of myself, something perhaps of our time together and our experiences, that I want them to hold in their hearts. These are the experiences in classroom life that count.

That's what I learned in school. But then again...

i Know it Differently Now

i know things, and then i know them differently.
like layers of understanding
i know - i can articulate what i know -
and then something happens
and i know it differently.

It's like talking about voicelessness and powerlessness
knowing the issues and the intricacies
but not knowing that you are powerless yourself
until you are out of that -
and can look back
and know that you know it differently now.

It's like thinking about your spiritual stories
and seeing them as childlike
and going on a long search for your own meaning
where you reject everything and tear yourself up inside
only to arrive back where you started
able to rejoice at the simplicity of the message.
These stories too - I know them differently now.

And I wish that it hadn't taken me so long to figure it out
because I could be so much farther ahead
...but it isn't about that really...
and tomorrow I might figure the whole thing differently anyway

spin an alternate tale -
construct a different narrative -
author a new self -
let the universe unfold as it should -
make different choices -
find truth and wisdom within myself -
read the Bible -
let my Karmic reality unfold -
eat, drink and be merry -
And for God's sake....

Have a good time!

Beth Heimbecker
October 22, 1998

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