WRITING CO-RESPONDENTS:
Teacher-educators reflect on 'orienting' new students[1]

C.O.R.E.[2]
Mount St. Vincent University

Overview

In this piece, we present 11 mesostics (poems) that represent our experiences as 'co-respondents' to a curriculum initiative in our faculty of education. We have taken our own documentation in the form of e-mails, including all of our free-wheeling conversations as friends, colleagues and scholar/researchers and subjected them to a number of aleatory operations[3] [L. *alea* die, *aleator* dice-player]. We have imposed

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[1] A version of this paper (entitled *Working toward an ethos of social justice: An orientation initiative for pre-service teachers at the Mount*) was presented at the Canadian Association for Teacher Education (CATE), a special interest group within the Canadian Society for the Study of Education (CSSE), May 30, 2006 at York University, Toronto, Canada.

[2] C.O.R.E. stands for Collaborating on Research in Education and consists of the following, named in alphabetical order: Susan Brigham, Michelle Forrest, Valda Leighteizer, and Susan Walsh. Each contributor's work is equally valued; no one person in the group is the 'first' or 'lead' author.

[3] Using aleatory operations is a practice brought to prominence in artistic circles by John Cage, composer, writer, philosopher and mycologist (specialist in mushrooms). Cage used chance or indeterminacy because he was interested in freeing his work from the boundaries of his own intentions and allowing it to evolve in the manner in which [he believed] nature operates; that is, by chance. See Marjorie Perloff and Charles Junkerman (Eds.), 1994, for a volume of essays on the work of John Cage following a week-long Cage residency and conference at the Stanford Humanities Center. For the application of aleatory operations in educational research, see Forrest (1997).

chance upon our reflection process as an editing and an inventing process. As a working and writing method for collaboration, aleatory or chance operations help free us from our usual subject positions as scholars and researchers. By imposing chance upon our research process and its artifacts, findings and insights emerge collaboratively. In this introduction to the poems, we discuss the writing process through which the poems emerged and also contextualize our collaborative writing as part of a committee that planned and produced a series of professional seminars for first-year teacher education students at our university in the fall of 2005.

Context of our work together

The 2002 Academic Review Committee of Mount Saint Vincent University recommended that "serious attention be paid to encouraging African Nova Scotian and Mi K'Maw students (and faculty) to apply for the teacher education program and graduate program and that support for those who are admitted (and hired) be a concurrent part of such initiatives" (ARC, 2002, p. 7). In response, the faculty formed a Recruitment and Retention Committee for the Bachelor of Education program in the fall of 2004. The mandate of this committee was and is to develop a recruitment and retention plan aimed at facilitating a sustainable increase in student enrolment and retention of students from indigenous Nova Scotian communities.[4]

Within a few weeks, the discussion of committee members had shifted from recruitment to issues of retention; many of us had recognized the ways in which students from these marginalized communities were further marginalized within the program. We believed (and still believe) that it would be unethical to recruit these students without addressing first, or at least simultaneously, such experiences within the program. To that end, by January 2005, we had decided to shift our focus toward the existing program and the 140 Elementary and Secondary first year students who would arrive in September 2005. The committee thus concentrated some of its efforts on the initial experiences of the new Bachelor of Education students.

In previous years, faculty and staff members had organized an orientation for new

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[4] At Mount Saint Vincent University, Halifax, N.S., Canada, a combined total of approximately 130-140 Bachelor of Education students are admitted each year to the elementary and secondary teacher education programs. All have earned previous undergraduate degrees. The majority of our teacher education candidates are female and white. In the 2005-2006 academic year, 6% (15/250) of our students identified as African Nova Scotian or First Nations students and 17.6 % (44/250) were male students (numbers indicate first and second years, elementary and secondary programs combined). The homogeneity of our student population is not particular to our program. Current figures indicate that approximately 90 per cent of the teaching population in Canada and the United States is White—even though the ethnoracial diversity of the student population in North American schools continues to increase (Delpit, 2002, p. 163; Mujawamariya & Mahrouse, 2004, p. 338).

Bachelor of Education students. Traditionally, it had been a one-day event during which students and faculty met through various activities, and students learned more about the two–year program. As committee members, we questioned the very use of the term 'orientation.' The implication that students lack orientation and faculty are 'orientors' was not in keeping with our mandate. We envisioned a process in which students would be somewhat 'disoriented' as their pre-conceived notions about teaching and teachers were challenged. The committee recommended, and the faculty agreed, that we refer to the event as a 'professional seminar week,' extend it to three days, develop a theme, and incorporate concerns discussed by the Recruitment and Retention Committee. One of the Committee's main concerns was the fact that B.Ed. students who are racially visible have spoken of the silences around issues of race and racism, even in classes where these issues are a part of the formal curriculum. They have described encountering spaces where they feel they cannot share their experiences of being non-white in a white-dominant society.[5] Such difficulties are not specific to our institution; however, considering Mount Saint Vincent's long-standing focus on educating women and mature students, the Committee was particularly troubled by the implication that our mission to traditionally marginalized and non-traditional students has not generalized significantly to Nova Scotia's aboriginal and black populations.[6]

The professional seminar week

The theme of the professional seminars became *A Journey into Diverse Ways of Knowing.* Over the three days, students attended a number of sessions and worked together in centres. One such session was a Readers' Theatre performance and follow-up workshop that involved women who had immigrated to Nova Scotia and who had been teachers in their countries of origin (Walsh & Brigham, 2006). The readers' theatre workshop provided insights about the immigration and integration of the women and also their perceptions of their children's and partner's experiences, particularly in relation to Canadian educational contexts. The performance and subsequent workshops were intended to unsettle taken-for-granted beliefs and understandings about immigrant women in particular—and to initiate discussions about diversity and teaching in general.

Another session involved a tour of the MSVU Art Gallery's exhibition, *Moral Fibres*

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[5] This information is anecdotal, emerging from our own experiences talking to individual students and hearing other faculty (in B.Ed. committee meetings) discuss students 'at risk.'

[6] For information on MSVU's history and mission statement, see **www.msvu.ca**.

(Jenkner & Bissonnette, 2005), in which five textile artists use the so-called 'domestic arts' to challenge institutional assumptions on subjects such as war, medicine and agriculture. The themes of the exhibition fit well with our purposes. It takes moral fibre to acknowledge and resist one's own biases and those of the group or groups to which one belongs. The subject matter of the works on display is described as "bodies in trouble,"[7] a phrase that resonates for teachers in their daily work with students at risk of hunger, abuse, disease and further marginalization in the very context of schooling. Since we would be offering students paint, fabric and other multi-use materials with which to respond in seminars, we considered the work of these professional artists as provocation and inspiration for pre-service teachers. In order that students not assume we expected the high production values of professional artists, we also gathered together a collection of handwork—quilts, needlepoint, knitted goods and raw materials—and arranged them in a large display case beside the Education offices.[8] Students were then invited to begin articulating the intersecting aspects of their own identities. They designed visual representations in the form of paper quilt squares that they then combined with others in their small groups. These small groups then came together to share the meanings and representations in their collaborative quilts.

Other sessions brought students together around notable quotes, picture books, posters, and a promotional video about Nova Scotia—artifacts that provided an impetus for them to discuss and critique ways in which diversity is or is not represented and the implications for teaching, teachers, learning, and learners. At all junctures, students were encouraged to think about how the ideas that arose through the discussions fit with or conflicted with their own personal understandings and experiences. We were working with our shared belief, supported by the literature,[9] that one of the integral components of 'teaching well' involves knowing oneself. Recognizing the systemic nature of social privilege and social marginalization is insufficient on its own to provide a foundation for social justice teaching. It is also imperative to recognize our own social placements, how these influence our lives, and how we are perceived by others within or outside of our social categories of identity.

Writing collaboratively

Six faculty members associated with the planning and production of the professional

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[7] Jenkner, 2005, p. 5. For more information and visuals regarding this and current exhibitions, see www.msvuart.ca.

[8] Our thanks in particular to Paula Mayich, graduate education secretary, whose handwork was featured in our display.

[9] See, for instance, Adams & Griffin, 1997.

seminar week decided to continue discussions together as the year progressed, so that we could share with one another what we thought was happening with our students as a result of the professional seminar week. We wanted to continue our conversation about the ways marginalized students were further marginalized within our program. To this end, we met together several times and also exchanged articles related to issues of diversity and identity in teacher education programs. Before long, we agreed to collect our thoughts and concerns in the form of a paper presentation present a paper at the Canadian Association for Teacher Education conference (CATE) in May 2006. Finding the time to meet was challenging amidst our teaching, committee, and research commitments, and two of the original six members of the group dropped out for personal and professional reasons.

The four remaining members decided to proceed via a rolling e-mail conversation in which we named our concerns and explored our thoughts about our teacher education program, the professional seminar sessions, and the tensions of our work within the program. This process yielded twenty single-spaced pages of print text. Many issues and questions emerged, and we faced the daunting task of sifting through these and working further with the text. Given our concerns in terms of the normalizing structures of our teacher education program, and given that the theoretical investments of some of the group members are primarily poststructuralist,[10] we were cognizant that the language and the text that we were creating was simultaneously constructing and positioning us. We acknowledged too the illusion of the coherent and 'rational' author in traditional academic expository writing and therefore wanted to disrupt such an illusion through foregrounding subjectivities that are obviously fragmented, shifting, and complex. Drawing partially on a practice outlined by Luce-Kapler & Walsh (1996) whereby the authors cut apart and rearranged text, each of us chose a colour, coded passages she wished to retain and then physically cut apart the colour-coded sections. We then rearranged all of the pieces on large tables, doing so mainly by color, ensuring that not too many pieces of one colour were placed together in the final 'whole' text, and noting the insights and interruptions that emerged from the new arrangement. Thus began our work with aleatory operations.

Our efforts had still resulted in far more text than could be presented within our assigned time at the CATE conference, so we imposed another chance operation on the data by 'writing through' it in the manner of John Cage's 'mesostics.' Cage used a

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[10] In the course of their own research and writing, members of the group have worked with poststructuralist theorists such as Cixous (1981, 1986, 1993), Derrida (1976, 1978), Irigaray (1985a, 1985b, 1992, 1996), Ulmer (1983, 1985, 1989), and Weedon (1997).

process he called 'writing through' another text, using its words and phrases in new arrangements.[11] The choices or excerpts from an original text are determined by using a repeated word or name as the organizing element which runs vertically down through the middle of the text. The result is like an acrostic [Gk *akron* end + *stikhos* row] but with the vertical writing appearing in the middle [Gk *meso*] rather than at the margin edge of the poem.   Cage describes his poetic invention:

> What makes a mesostic as far as I'm concerned is that the first letter of a word or name is on the first line and following it on the first line the second letter of the word or name is *not* to be found. (The second letter is on the second line.)[12]

This process continues, letter by letter, through the primary text being used. The word we chose and which runs down through the middle of the following mesostics is 'co-respondents' which 1) refers specifically to us four colleagues as those who respond and 2) alludes homonymically to the form our writing takes; i.e., our e-mail correspondence. Our process of 'writing through' created the following eleven mesostics—with the eleventh ending on a return to the first page of our e-mail document. For us, the process of writing the mesostics has provoked new insights, unsettled our own positions as teacher educators, and also crystallized crucial aspects of our discussions together—all of which provide further impetus for our work together. We invite the reader to 'write' in the spaces of our poems.

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[11] One of the texts Cage 'wrote through' is James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake.* See the special supplement to volume 15 of the *James Joyce Quarterly* and Number 16 in the University of Tulsa's Monograph Series, 1978. See also, Perloff & Junkerman, 1994.

[12] As cited in the Editorial Notes, *James Joyce Quarterly*, 1978.

CO-RESPONDENTS

I

            Cate performance:

     several c**O**lleagues,

        real **-** life experiences. Don't put them behind desks

      counte**R** the complex web

      of pow**E**r

      relation**S**.

       in the s**P**ring

          Of '05 it was

     determi**N**ed to attract a wide range

   of backgroun**D**s into

the programm**E**, our

     educatio**N** faculty,

          To do something more,

          Sensitizing students.

II

a sho**C**k to discover most students

are n**O**t the 'good' student

who gets into university. Teacher **–** as –

delivere**R**: the point of view

of the teach**E**r. We generally

era**S**e issues of sexuality, class, gender, age, able-bodiedness,

body size, citizenshi**P**, religion and so on?

what counts in the d**O**minant culture? What is valued

vis à vis promotio**N**? performance entails

fin**D**ings and data intertwined. That's all for now.

I can r**E**member 15 years ago,

a**N** illusion of localized power

and au**T**hority; I write

again**S**t such ideas.

III

Cbc English? *1984*[13] where

permissible v**O**cabulary was being reduced.

in and out of patois (pronounced 'pat **–** twa'), always with

an apology in a 'unive**R**sity setting. (" Ya man,

e**E** haffa place, but it nut hare").

note**S** from *Moral Fibre* exhibition:[14] Do teachers 'stand up',

are they **P**eace-keepers?

hope you're on the mend s**O**on, sacrificing

one's ow**N** safety,

me**D**iating between

institutional d**E**mands

a**N**d

al**T**ernate

plan**S**.

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[13] Orwell, 1949.

[14] Jenkner & Bissonnette, 2005.

IV

honour this perspe**C**tive:

hell**O** everyone

- four of us were able

to connect on f**R**iday afternoon;

our me**E**ting making photocopies,

Sw is unavailable from noon

until 1:30 **P**.m. Caught in a

parad**O**x: recruit students from

margi**N**alized spaces, students in my office in tears,

boiling with rage. i **D**oubt disrupting, deconstructing

h**E**aring one another. The realm of research:

cha**N**ce as means of detaching designed

To provoke our thinking as

re**S**earchers.

V

distinguish our voi**C**es, genres used

by the silent v**O**ices – I can meet

wherever works **–** one of our

class**R**ooms, if that's okay

with ev**E**ryone? Articulate

my own **S**elf-doubts, worries. I was told 'not to scare'

the students **P**lease. Not to feel isolated, not to internalize;

permissi**O**n to make a mess,

work thi**N**gs out, 'see again'

Differently. Hello all! Apparently

I miss**E**d a meeting. Overwhelmed but not

pa**N**icking. I'll keep you

pos**T**ed just in

ca**S**e.

VI

tea**C**her candidates, mostly middle-class

white w**O**men, extension of social

mandate **–** "what do you lose when you lose your language?"[15]

nar**R**ative? Who is due to go for what

wh**E**n?

let'**S** make a commitment.

only acce**P**t students of African ancestry and

first nati**O**ns people. Imagine what that would look like!

ca**N** someone let me know?

"cloth-based art can engage the min**D** through the senses".

"Id**E**ologies

and institutio**N**s . . . place life in jeopardy."[16] If I belong

in the communi**T**y,

to **S**ee how and where.

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[15] Fishman, 1997.

[16] Jenkner & Bissonnette, 2005, p. 7.

VII

critique of the dominant **C**ultural forms; formats

that disrupted the assumpti**O**ns. Sorry to slow this process down.

"Without making hidden demands – . . . the world

must not be sealed al**R**eady . . . future

not determin**E**d by the past."[17]

concern**S** for social justice;

the same **P**erson reflected

over and **O**ver in the faces

a**N**d bodies of their teachers.

Do they see teaching

related to th**E**ir own possibilities? Formal

curriculum, **N**on-representation – practices

predica**T**ed

upon diver**S**e student populations?

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[17] Irigaray, 1996, p. 117.

VIII

beyond toleran**C**e, different

and unsp**O**ken

understandings – and then we all discussed the discomfort,

feeling conscpicuous, being close to no**R**mal,

"the g**E**ometry of the plane: *usual,*

*repre**S**entative, fashionable, right, average, generic."*[18]

sha**P**e the possible subject positions.

what d**O**es it mean to bear witness? Carrying

the most poigna**N**t stories: what 'lifelong learning' is all about.

widen our students in**D**ividual 'ecosystems.'[19] It seems

a sham**E** to start over. Can we salvage some of this? The same

co**N**versational tone?

the iden**T**ity quilts, the readers' theatre, the art gallery tour –

Sorry to be a pain.

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[18] From the Counternormativity Discourse Group, 2005, pp. 173-214.

[19] Zabel & Zabel (1996, p. 26-27) refer to the classroom, home, neighbourhood and school as "ecosystems", acknowledging that these ecosystems have "indistinct boundaries and overlap with other interaction systems" (p. 26). Moreover, there are "internal ecosytems" which are fluid and constantly changing.

IX

meChanisms like our gate-keeping methods: 'good grammar',

'pOise', 'confidence' exclude and reproduce. "the facts of class,

of race, ethnicity, sexual preference **-** . . . the neat divisions,"[20] the realities of conflict,"[21]

the differences in student-teacheR relationships, inform

the evEryday lives. "Uniformity draws attention

to a diSturbance

in the work's overall Pattern."[22] How can we create, stretched

tO the limit? The floor

of my apartmeNt is full of paper and files and books

and 'to Do' lists. We had all kinds

of matErials for students to work with

to locate themselves. We coNtinually hire 'others' to do the serious work,

talking and working with sTudents'

concernS.

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[20] Culley & Portuges, 1985, p. 12.

[21] Weiler, 1998, p. 132.

[22] Jenkner, 2005, p. 6.

X

how **C**an this be construed?

keep your **O**ffice door closed to get your research done!

people are uncomfortable **–** me included? I talked with V

about the incident. **R**aise the issues, go into them,

th**E**n what?

what method**S** will we be using

to re**P**resent our experiences?

to**O** late now to study the bizarre

ide**N**tity thingies. Our efforts

stoo**D** in relation. What is

social justic**E** teaching? A sense of belonging.

place o**N**e's self into that space.

Wri**T**e on! Immerse them

in need**S** other than their own.

XI

the recruitment and retention **C**ommittee's current concerns:

homogeneity **O**f the . . . teaching population,

taken **-** for - granted social systems,

preservice teache**R**s who self-identified as 'not fitting'

into th**E** program, *Changing the Educational*

*Land****S****cape*,[23] the double reading of 'security'.

is the school a safe s**P**ace? "Is the pedagogy we construct

in the name of liberati**O**n intrusive, invasive, pressured?"[24]

subject positio**N**s can be taken up. Dearie, we must have

our June bri**D**e looking her best!! In the everyday

we legitimat**E**, produce and reproduce, represent,

struggle with and cou**N**ter. All of us are learners

and **T**each

er**S**.

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[23] Martin, 1994.

[24] Lather, 1991, p. 143.

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