

# *When Is the Teacher?* *Reflections on Life Writing, Social Fiction, and Film*

*Adrian McKerracher, Columbia University*  
*Anita Sinner, Concordia University*  
*Erika Hasebe-Ludt, University of Lethbridge*  
*Carl Leggo, University of British Columbia*  
*Shauna Rak, McGill University*  
*Claire Ahn, University of British Columbia*  
*Jana Boschee, University of Lethbridge*

## **Abstract:**

In this paper, seven Canadian curriculum researchers investigate and discuss life writing as a mode of educational inquiry and curricular theorizing through which educators can attend to the tensions and complexities of teaching and learning in a variety of curricular and pedagogical contexts. Drawing from their individual and collective research in creative methods of arts-based inquiry, they explore how life writing, with its multiple modalities between creative nonfiction, fiction, poetry, theatre arts, fine arts, and multimedia, can open up possibilities for researchers, teachers, and students to rethink and re-enact education as an inspiring, heart-full, and empathetic endeavour.

**Keywords:** arts-based inquiry, empathetic inquiry, multimodal methods, life writing, pedagogical thoughtfulness

## Opening

And now I am drawn into the fold of a discursive imaginary that can entertain “both this and that,” “neither this nor that”—a space of paradox, ambiguity and ambivalence. (Aoki, 1996/2005, p. 317)

Our research engages with the nature, representation, and temporality of the complicated conversation that is curriculum studies (Pinar, 2011). Drawing on artistic practices of life writing and works of narrative art such as film, we discuss the culmination of years of research among a group of seven curriculum scholars. In our title, “When is the teacher?,” we reflect on the contemporary pedagogical landscape and ask, “What have we learned since we started this work?” We celebrate potential, challenge the present, and urge contemplation of curricular practice that engages people’s lived experience, family history, and luminous hope. After all, this complicated conversation in this place called Canada, at a time of heightened global tensions that affect teachers and children in schools, is infused with evermore impassioned cosmopolitan encounters and indigenous movements (McKerracher & Hasebe-Ludt, 2014; Ng-A-Fook, 2014; Pinar, 2009). More than ever before it is a time and place for teachers to become *worldly* players in the movement for social, political, and cultural renewal. More than ever, Canadian curriculum is a place for a radical rethinking toward a more humane and just education while “living in a dissonant world” (Todd, 2010). David Smith (2014), curriculum scholar and wise teacher, reminds us:

There is a need to reimagine new, wiser, human possibilities given the deep damage suffered at local domestic levels, both at home and abroad. If education and teaching basically concern the stories we tell the young about life, what are the stories that need to be told today? (p. 1)

Heeding Canadian curriculum scholar Ted Aoki’s (1991/2005) call, as a research collective we have been “led to ask the place of stories and narratives in understanding curriculum or doing curriculum research” (p. 250). Working together for more than a decade in a variety of arts-based contexts (Hasebe-Ludt, et al., 2010; McKerracher & Hasebe-Ludt, 2014), we have attended to this question and practiced our own kind of radical and radiant thinking through the praxis of narrative inquiry and life writing (Chambers, Hasebe-Ludt, Leggo, & Sinner, 2012) with each other and with/in our academic and professional communities. Our intent with this practice is to contribute to a movement toward a new kind of relational literacy, a *literacy of one another* (Buchanan, 2015; Morden, 2012).

Part of that literacy involves reflecting on our own experiences and examining interactions with the storied landscape of our surroundings—learning to *read* the world and our place in it. Through travel, pedagogy, and witnessing, we engage a praxis of living and learning. Here, we offer five invitations to the complicated conversation of curriculum studies: in “One Good Day” Adrian McKerracher explores the dissonance of returning to what once was home, proposing a pedagogical activity that draws on life writing and changes in the temporal frame to transform uncertainty into a plan; in “Vulnerable Life Worlds in and out of School” Jana Boschee reflects on memory and artistic practice, both lyrical and visual, as she grieves her father’s loss of speech; in “Bubby’s Story: Intergenerational Life Writing,” Anita Sinner and Shauna Rak draw on family history and Holocaust survival to examine the way lived experiences become curriculum; in “Questioning the Lives of Teachers in Film,” Carl Leggo and Claire Ahn use two Hollywood films to examine popular portrayals of pedagogy and how they influence understandings of what it means to be a teacher; and in “A Renewed Call/ing for a Curriculum of Common Ground,” Erika Hasebe-Ludt invites care, compassion, and commitment to the legacies of

Ted Aoki and Narcisse Blood as we continue to work towards meaningful meeting places in the world.

### Adrian: One Good Day

When I came back to Canada after working for six months in Sierra Leone, I was lost. I didn't know what to do next—things I had once thought were important had been altered by time in one of the most creative, hopeful, complex places I had ever visited. I became bitter that I was spending fifteen dollars on a meal when a dollar a day had been enough, that time with friends now seemed so fraught with busy-ness, that I could do anything I wanted and wanted none of it. I had no plan, no clear goal. When it seemed that I was doing no more than waiting for change, my dad suggested that I try the following exercise: write down what you do in one really good day. Don't try to plan your whole life. Just think one hour at a time from when you get up to when you go to bed. What time do you wake? What's outside your window? What do you have for breakfast? Do you work at home or do you leave the house? Who is with you? By thinking one step at a time, with the unit of a single day instead of trying to envision all of the things I would have to do to reach some distant future, I found that I knew more about how I wanted to spend my time than I thought. My version of *the good life* wasn't as elusive as I had assumed.

When I began teaching, I started doing this same activity on the first day of class. I invite students to write down what they do in a really good day five years from now. Use today's date, plus five years, and write in the present tense. The present tense is critical, I believe, for creating the feeling that this really good day is somehow already happening, that it is not just a distant and impossible dream. I remind them that it is most useful if it is still realistic: one must imagine earning a living, having responsibilities, along with meaningful relationships, housing, diet, surroundings. Inevitably more far-fetched scenarios surface (usually involving millions of dollars made from a single idea generated sometime off-page) and these are entertaining to read for their own reasons. At its most basic level, the activity serves as a diagnostic tool, presenting a sample of students' writing ability, and it gives me a glimpse of what is important to them, how they see their hopes unfolding for the future. More importantly, though, it is a chance to imagine the future as though it were the present. This invitation to consider how one might spend one's time in the world is a chance to "work generatively with the tensions between the global and local influences that are part of [students'] daily lives" (Hasebe-Ludt & Sinner, 2010, p. 22)—global because students are calibrating the circumstances of their experience-to-date with the local, even personal, means they have for situating themselves in a reality beyond what is given. This activity is richest when engaged more than once, over time, since each dive into future's present seems to reveal changes in what constitutes a really good day. And why shouldn't it? A new experience can configure new value into the imagined future; it makes sense that the good life would demand revisions that reflect one's growing insight. Returning repeatedly to the practice of writing while revisiting the form of a day well spent reinforces the notion that writing is not "a way to display what [one] know[s], or [has] learned" but is "a form of inquiry" (Chambers, 2004, p. 9). The really good day may materialize—although in my experience it is more often "achieved...in installments," to borrow from Ernst Bloch (1989, p. 11) appearing here and there in the form of a really good breakfast, a really good morning, or a really good jog after work—or it may not. Either way, the activity's utility is that it brings possibilities for the future closer to the present, similar to what José Esteban Muñoz (2009) calls "the utopian function," straining towards potentiality, and in writing one's way into a future that could be, one strives beyond the here and now in pursuit of something more than what is. Failing to achieve that image is not really failure at all: it invites further striving or further revision. In both cases one is engaged with questions of self, circumstance, relation, time, and hope.

In my experience it is this hope that declares itself most radiantly. Every time I conduct this activity in a class I am impressed by just how hopeful students are, not naively hopeful, not uninformed. At its best I get to share in what feels like earnest hope for a better world, a world where these students and their goals play a part. This activity works because the future is overwhelming when considered all at once. But one really good day? It could even be today.

### **Jana: Vulnerable Life Worlds in and out of School**

Revisiting moments in purposeful ways exposes patterns in our relationships—sculpts and shapes our identities. Knowing the self is done in the spaces of connecting with others and through texts (Sumara, 1995). I was shoved firmly into a space of understanding my own call to return to memory as I watched the film *About Time* (Bevan, Fellner, Kentish Barnes, & Curtis, 2013), in which characters use time travel to relive events. The motive is not to alter history, as one might expect from such a plot, rather, to more fully absorb lived experiences. As the fictional family members in the film return to seemingly ordinary moments, they savour the tension and bliss of communing with their relations. As viewers, we work alongside the characters to uncover glimpses of who they are, and inevitably of who we are. The film reinforced for me how definitions and borders of our identity manifest in a physical and visual sense, as well as in memory and experience (van Manen & Levering, 1996). The act of writing and rewriting our memories sharpens those perimeters. Our texts, in all their modalities, become a part of us, as we (be)come through their creation.

*About Time* both hurt and heartened me with its notion that I could go back to a time with my dad when he still had words to encourage, guide, or even argue and complain. He has lost his ability to communicate because of the effects of Primary Progressive Aphasia. Now, what I know of his identity and how it connects to my own story must be composed from gathering his non-verbal expressions and going back to texts from when he had language—his writings and my memories of verbal communication. This heartbreaking truth seeps into my work as a teacher, steering me toward inquiry about how literacy is defined and how it defines identity. I have been addressing these questions in the close attention compelled within a/r/tography, as the work of artist/researcher/teacher are fused (Irwin, 2004). Trying to understand identity beyond words, I have explored the nuances of communication through narrative, comics, and poetry. In the honesty of art making, my experiences with language have been pried open and displayed.

Creating a multi-modal text has provided a dwelling place where I can sit with the tensions and uncertainty surrounding my personal and professional queries. Being vulnerable to the process of arts-based inquiry accepts that I will go in uncertain directions. Rather than exclusively exploring the writings of others, I seek meaning with(in) the creation of art developed from revisiting moments of verbal and visual communing with others. Despite initial insecurities concerning my facility to articulate through poetry and drawing, I began to appreciate the truth in Patricia Leavy's (2015) assertion that the authentic is aesthetic. In doing a *close-writing* (Luce-Kapler, 2009) of my memories, I objectively and honestly examine and analyze sights, sounds, and feelings, and choose a textual form that best relates to the phenomenon.

When I share my pieces, listeners, readers, and viewers relate the ways they connect with my story. Writing the vulnerable and personal strands of our lives invites others into meaningful conversation of the same (Chambers, et al., 2012). Being mindful of the power and responsibility life-writing carries, I reverently tread toward deeper knowing. In my classroom of nine and ten year-olds, a recent and bizarre incident of self-expression

inspired this poem—a consideration of what it means to present the inside of oneself—the danger and excitement of proving one’s existence through text.

### What I Hold in My Hand

What I hold in my hand  
Yellow obvious,  
A message to the skeptics.  
A whisper of existence,  
An experiment of truth-telling.  
Of me, through me, translucent.

Behold my offering,  
Like I do.  
Peer at it from all angles;  
Question its authenticity,  
Its purpose.

It cannot be put back.  
It is here and now,  
Hot and here.

I read that you can use this to start a fire –  
Start a fire in a crisis;  
Directing the sun’s energy right through  
The magnifying glass,  
Igniting.

Blazingly, blaringly here now.  
Irrevocably out now.  
What was mine is ours.  
For a minute before I toss it over the fence,  
Chain linked,  
Imagined distance,  
Breachable frontier,  
We gaze.

Until a short while ago, I believed art was on the periphery of education—an option or extra-curricular interest. Now I recognize how sharing art contributes to a collective wisdom. Where do invitations for sharing texts need to originate? How do we teach children to be safely vulnerable in their life worlds so they might authentically commune and live fully therein? From the vulnerable place of concern for personal subsistence and an enlightened understanding of the value of self-care, I am reminded to first attend to my own stories so I may better assist those I teach.

### Shauna and Anita: Intergenerational Life Writing

Life writing as a pedagogic practice is the backbone of my (Anita’s) graduate course focusing on the history of art education where students are invited to consider their stories of becoming, that is, why their lived experiences hold meaning for our field of study and how their stories are in effect, the curriculum. It was in this context that Shauna brought forward what was to become her area of research—the Holocaust and art education—through the story of her grandmother, Bubby. Bubby’s story is an example of creative

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nonfiction, a story of facts and events told creatively that unfolds in this case as an opening to consider the vitality of intergenerational life writing, and demonstrates the many ways we all live with, in and through stories we share.

When we take up the power of stories in education we begin to cultivate a presence that allows us to consider what lies beyond our preconceptions, with a greater mindfulness, and with a purpose to witness the performance of story as a kind of aesthetic and ethical act and action. As researchers, we interrogate stories as starting points for inquiry, making the relationships within stories a forum in which the staging of the event of knowledge, as Irit Rogoff (2011) suggests, is the historical moment. And, it is through stories that we seek a means to advance discourses such as the complexity of Holocaust education to embrace more broadly stories as interactive encounters, demonstrating how creative non-fiction can operate as provocative inquiry when rendered as an academic text. Much as Norma Tilden (2010) suggests, creative non-fiction is grounded in the profusion of the everyday, and it is always written against loss, expressed through technical devices of tone, tensions, setting the scene, as well as colloquial expressions. In turn, Judith Butler (2005) argues that to tell our stories is not the same as giving an account of oneself. Because we all tell our stories in various ways, we are always dependent on the relationality that binds us in a given moment. Our accounts are not always consistent, and in turn, in the making of the story, we are creating ourselves in new forms, so there is no final or adequate narrative of Self. We must carefully consider the social conditions under which the account emerged. This also reminds us that all stories are partial; we never truly find a state of absolute transparency. Yet despite the limitations of life writing, we argue that the rendering of stories like Bubby's does bring us, as Butler (2005) advocates, to an ethic of vulnerability, humanity, and responsiveness.

### *Ethic of Practice: Writing Bubby's Story*

My grandmother, who I (Shauna) refer to as Bubby, is a Holocaust survivor. To set the scene, Bubby was born in the small town of Sokolow, Poland. Her parents were orthodox and she was the youngest of six, with five older brothers. During her childhood years her father worked in the garment industry. It was difficult to make a living in Sokolow, and so her family moved to Warsaw when Bubby was still a child. When the war began her family escaped Warsaw and continued to travel through Poland and the Ukraine until Bubby was captured and brought to Arkhangelsk, a Soviet occupied camp in Russia. Bubby survived the war in this camp and in 1945 continued her journey living in several Displaced Persons Camps with her husband and daughter, in Russia, Kazakhstan, and Germany. She finally moved to Montreal, Canada in 1951 where she raised two children, began a career in sales, and continues to live and inspire through her love, laughter, and passion. Her life stories have influenced my identity formation and moreover, the way I understand storytelling as a pedagogic practice. Bubby's story is informed by in-depth interviews, life writing, sustained reflection on my own life experiences, and a recent research trip to Poland where I visited key sites linked to my grandmother's story. During the research process, I also considered the ways my Bubby's story has shaped my identity as a third-generation survivor, as I have been deeply influenced by her perspective on life. Through my use of oral history, life writing, and visual rendering, I have gained greater understanding of the significance of storytelling and creative art initiatives and recognize these methods as meaningful tools for education.

As a researcher, I felt incredibly moved when my Bubby told me about her life. Each fragment she described was crucial to the greater whole of her story, and my own. After recording my Bubby's oral history account, I wrote her life story verbatim from transcripts, using my Bubby's dialect. The transcribing of my Bubby's story enabled me to connect with

her in new, deeper ways, which has informed my own identity as a third-generation survivor. Adrian McKerracher and Erika Hasebe-Ludt (2014) describe the connection between the writer and the life story in the following way: “[J]ust as reading the stories of other lives expands experience, so does writing about one’s life in different ways to expand understandings of that experience” (p. 126). The rich cultural tradition of oral history transmission and then restorying has been crucial to my experience with my Bubby. Through the rewriting of her account I have come to a deeper understanding of her narrative. I have exposed connections within her story, such as my Bubby’s experience of survival, to her many identities as survivor, mother, wife, caretaker, teacher and entrepreneur. These considerations have strongly influenced my feelings about my own life story as a third-generation survivor and have begun interpreting the significance in the roles we play and the choices we make.

In response to my Bubby’s life story, I created a visual art installation in order to represent her narrative and further inform the scope of my research. My art response provides a visual articulation of descriptions found in her story and offers the opportunity for multi-sensory engagement, enriching the depth and scope of the story. The visual renderings are multi-media works that include excerpts from my Bubby’s story, family photographs, archival images from The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, an image from the International Center of Photography, and soundscapes that I recorded during a recent trip to Poland where I visited key sites linked to my Bubby’s Story (<http://shaunarak.wix.com/bubbys-lifestories>).

### Making a Life Puzzle: My Bubby’s Story

My Bubby recounted her life in a series of short stories. At the frail age of 95, she was unable to recall a proper timeline of where and when these stories took place, so I weaved her story to the best of my abilities based on her words and the chronology I was able to piece together derived from the interviews conducted over one year. My Bubby’s story reads in her dialect. Her primary language is Yiddish and true to her modes of expression, her story is written verbatim from the transcripts, with some incorporation of my own words for continuity. In hearing the story of my Bubby’s life I struggled making sense of her tales and descriptions. She jumped through stories of trauma and focused mostly on her abilities, passions, and courage. But, that is the kind of person my Bubby is, and so, the story honors her vision. The following are selected excerpts and photographs from Bubby’s story:

### Bubby’s First Interaction With Anti-Semitism, Warsaw, 1939

There was not allowed to go after six o’clock. And my mother was wearing a *sheitle*, a wig, she was religious. And the next day she had to go to the synagogue, so I had to get the wig. Short from the story, I went back after six and *stynn* [stand] the German. He said, “Where you going, *verfluchte, verfluchte Juden?*” I lost the speech. He said, “What do you want? A dozen dogs to bite you to death or a dozen cats to scratch you?” I lost the speech. Lost the speech, and there was standing a Polish man and the German asked the man, “What is she, Jewish or Polish?” He said, “She’s Polish,” and the German went away and the Polish man turn to me and said, “You’re too young to die.”



Shauna Rak (2015). *The Wall*. Digital assemblage.

### *Finding Shelter in Drohiczyn, 1940*

In Drohiczyn, they open a synagogue for us to stay. There was a Rabbi there. We stayed there until the Russians captured us. Hundreds of people stayed in the synagogue. We slept on the floor one after another. We had little things that we put around us to keep. There were no beds. People were allowed to sleep there cause the Germans hadn't come yet. I don't remember how we got food, I think we bought or maybe they give us. We still had money from Warsaw, so my parents, they were religious, they would pray during the day and I was working with the young people. You see, a lot of young people there they want me to go work with them, care for them.



Shauna Rak (2015). *Shelter*. Digital assemblage.

### Coming to Canada, 1951

And that is how we came to Canada. We got on the ship in Breminoff, Germany. Everybody was sick on the ship. From the sea. They give us the option to Toronto or Montreal. We chose Montreal. I brought four table things with crystal, silver I got, jewellery and other things you know. And it was not damaged when we got off the ship. Oh, one time on the ship a man came to me.

"Would you like to dance?" he said.

I see how they are dancing and I said, "I don't know that style."

He said, "Pass me the hand!" I put out mine hand and he took me and turn me around and around.



Shauna Rak (2015). *Displacement*. Digital assemblage.

This project brings new dimensions to Bubby's life story and has shifted my opinions and perception of teaching as a whole. I have come to see storytelling and experience as a new viable method for education; it is relational, personal, and communicative. From my perspective as a teacher, life writing has also given me a tool with which to understand my Bubby's experiences and the responsibility as *keeper* of her stories. This sense of shared understanding is invaluable as I learned about the history of the Holocaust through my Bubby's perceptions, relating to her personality and strength and empathizing with her heartaches, fears, love, and choices. Such insight cannot be conveyed by simply listing facts, dates, and descriptions of events alone. As my personal experience transformed me throughout this journey, so did my interpretation of that experience, and its effect on my teaching practice. Thus, storytelling has allowed me to rethink and re-imagine my position in teaching art and how I relate to others with a more inclusive pedagogical discipline.

### Reflecting on Life Writing

As Shauna's professor, I (Anita) see how Bubby's story offers insights to how life writing brings us closer to our responsibility of public scholarship by recognising socially constructed accounts and how our interpretation of those accounts operate in relation to pedagogic discourses. Returning to the curriculum of the graduate course where this began, the Self is formed in history, but the history of the individual Self is formed as a social occasion for self-transformation considered pedagogically. In other words, giving an account is also a kind of showing of oneself, a showing for the purpose of assessing if the story is understandable by the other who receives the account. As Butler (2005) suggests, we must recognise that ethics requires us to risk ourselves precisely at this moment of unknowingness when what forms us diverges from what lies before us, and when our willingness to become undone, in relation to others, constitutes our becoming. Life writing

as a mode of educational inquiry provides a method through which educators and learners may seek a *heart of wisdom* as they attend to the tensions and complexities of learning and teaching in a variety of curricular contexts (Chambers, et al., 2012). Whether expressed through the visual arts, literary arts, or education in general, the relationship of form and content is central to how life writing connects across the curriculum, and how in this case, stories serve to broaden the scope of art education research as a historic and yet contemporary encounter.

### Claire and Carl: Questioning the Lives of Teachers in Film

The lived experiences of teachers and learners are often represented in film. There are more than one thousand Hollywood films about schools and teachers and learners, but education scholars have paid little attention to the narrative depictions of educators in film. Informed by life writing, arts-based research, cultural studies, and critical pedagogy, we examine how two films focused on narratives of school experiences contribute to representations of teachers and students. We discuss the films *Dead Poets Society* (1989) and *Up the Down Staircase* (1967) with a focus on how the cinematic narratives of teachers' and students' lives resonate with our own lived and living stories.

### Carpe Diem: Seize the Day With Teaching Methods

I (Claire) have always been drawn to films centring on the theme of education, but it was not until I watched *Dead Poets Society* (DPS) (Weir, 1989) that I truly felt inspired to become a teacher. To this day, this film still has a profound affect on my beliefs about teaching. It is of considerable value to contemplate the impact Hollywood films can have on teachers. Adam Farhi (1999) does note typecasting teachers as characters like John Keating can produce unrealistic expectations for many young teachers and perhaps for all teachers in general. Yet, Keating reminds the viewer of what a good teacher should be.

As an educator, I greatly admire Keating's willingness to acknowledge the importance of his young students' opinions and responses to literature. He challenges other faculty and administration that young boys at seventeen can and should think for themselves. There is a scene near the beginning of the film when Keating asks his students to read the preface by Pritchard in their poetry anthology that deconstructs poetry in mathematical terms. The keen students are furiously following along and also taking notes, but to their surprise, Keating stops and instructs his students to rip out the dreadful pages. Thomas Newkirk (2010) notes this to be a warning because teachers today are "driven by [standardized] testing, teachers are being pulled toward prompt-and-rubric teaching that bypasses the human act of composing and the human gesture of response" (p. 171). And by grade twelve, many students have been programmed by this *mechanical instruction*.

While I do not believe teachers are able to avoid standardized tests, I do believe that approaching lessons in ways similar to Keating would result in greater success. Keating states at one point in the film: "when you read, don't just consider what the author thinks, but consider what you think." This is one belief I held firmly as an English teacher. I made the point of running student-driven discussions, but when I started teaching, my students were not used to this type of teaching and learning. There were times when everyone was waiting for me to lecture and no one would be willing to share his or her opinions. At first I was discouraged and would resort back to lecturing. Soon after I grew tired of this approach; I was interested in the students' points of view.

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Thus, I changed my methods and I would start the discussions with “What did you think?” Of course, students would provide responses that were expected, by throwing in literary terms. This demonstrated to me that the students already knew how to get the *right answers*, but they were not afforded opportunities to truly engage in the literature as it should be read and learned. Over time, after the opening question, my students just dove right in and they came to understand, and I hope, appreciate this type of learning. Like Keating, what I have found through this experience is if a teacher provides students with some degree of agency, then all will naturally fall into place. They will get the *right answer* and do well on standardized tests. But what is more, they will enjoy the process and remember what they have learned.

Some may view Keating’s methods to be exaggerated and unattainable, but I urge teachers to question: is it really? While his lessons and activities may seem *implausible* to some, I do not believe it is meant for teachers to emulate but not because they are *far-fetched*—the film encourages teachers to find their own methods to engage students. Keating represents something teachers tend to forget: that education is not just a part of life, it is life; it is not about consuming and regurgitating information, but feeling and understanding why, for example, literature is important (Townsend, 2014).

Keating states early in the film: “the powerful play goes on and you may contribute a verse. What will your verse be?” I think about these lines with regards to how I have taught and will continue to teach. I would hope my verse to be just as influential as Keating, that my verse is my own and not what others dictate, that I believe in and stand by my own verse. While teachers may not look to films such as *Dead Poets Society* consistently as a source of inspiration, I do believe, as Giroux (2001) notes, that it unconsciously impacts one’s own beliefs and methods with regards to teaching.

## *Up the Down Staircase: Is There Any Other Way?*

I (Carl) begin with a recurring question: Do Hollywood films (only) idealize, romanticize, sanitize, and sentimentalize the stories of teachers and students’ lives? *Up the Down Staircase* (Mulligan, 1967) is one more exemplar of the heroic teacher—generous, devoted, patient, affectionate. When I recently watched *Up the Down Staircase* again, I was ready to enjoy it as a dated, and likely clichéd, exemplar of a popular strain of Hollywood films about gallant teachers. What I was not expecting was the galvanic sense of identification I experienced with the characters and stories lived daily at Calvin Coolidge Secondary High. I began my teaching career in Robert’s Arm, Newfoundland, in 1976. Robert’s Arm with its thousand residents is a long way from New York City where Miss Sylvia Barrett taught her first class. Nevertheless, the students and stories and situations that Miss Barrett experienced resonate with my memories in countless ways.

*Up the Down Staircase* presents the story of Sylvia Barrett, a new and idealistic English teacher in an inner-city high school. Recently graduated with a Master of Arts on Chaucer, she hopes to enthuse her students with her love of literature. She quickly grows discouraged and frustrated with the pervasive bureaucratic demands, the ubiquitous rules, the pervasive fear-mongering, the toxic cynicism, the utter hopelessness of each day’s demands. Out of frustration, she decides to leave the school, but then changes her mind.

Two episodes from the film resonate with my experience as a schoolteacher. The first is Miss Sylvia Barrett’s initial words in the movie: “How do we get in?” After walking from the bus stop to the school, she stands with students outside the doors. The doors have no handles. A student says, “We wait till somebody comes out.” The second is when Miss Barrett enters the school alongside the vice-principal with a box labeled “Suggestions” with

the hopes of providing students with “a chance to speak freely without constant fear of punishment.” The vice-principal responds: “You try running a school with ideas and you’ll have riots. Fear, that’s all they understand.”

I began my first teaching job in 1976 at a high school in Robert’s Arm in the northwest corner of Newfoundland. At twenty-two years old, I was young and enthusiastic and committed to being the best teacher I could be. My first teaching assignment was as a classroom teacher for 48 Grade 7 students. On the first day of school when all my students squeezed into the tiny classroom, I was full of fear. Some of the young men were bigger than I was. Some of the young women had a brazen bravado that belied their 14 years. Designed for about 30 students, the room soon looked like a crowded subway train. I felt claustrophobic. The month of September was four weeks of sore throats and red faces from shouting, a panic-stricken confrontation with chaos, long nights of talking with my wife about the horror. Near the end of September, one of the boys brought me a big stick. He had carved it out of oak from an old bed frame with a handhold. He said, “I think you need this.” That day I grew so angry and frustrated that I banged the stick on the desk with a fury that broke the stick. The room was silent. I stared at the shard of oak in my hand, looked at the frightened faces of my students, and in that moment I knew that my current strategies for classroom management were never going to work. Then, I spoke quietly to my students. I said, “I’m sorry. From now on, we will have just one rule in this classroom. When a person is speaking, everyone else will be quiet and pay attention to the speaker.” With that one rule of respect everything changed. I spent a mostly joyful year with those 48 students, and I have continued to live the one rule in my classes ever since.

I identify readily with Miss Sylvia Barrett. Like her I was an idealistic English teacher who often offended the school principal and many of my colleagues. And like Miss Sylvia Barrett, I often planned to leave teaching. Indeed, I did leave a few times, but I always returned. *Up the Down Staircase* is another dated, stereotypical Hollywood movie about the teacher as hero. There is a whole genre of such film narratives. Nevertheless, all I know is that at the end of the film when Miss Sylvia Barrett decides to leave Calvin Coolidge Secondary High, but then changes her mind, I cheered Miss Sylvia Barrett’s commitment to the vocation of teaching.

All my life I have been a teacher or student, and the one theme that has been consistent in my life is hope, the anticipation that we can learn to live together well in the world. A few years ago I visited St. John’s, Newfoundland, and in a bookstore on Water Street I met Sandra, a former high school student who I taught in 1980. I had not seen her for well over two decades. She is now a pediatric psychologist. She said, “I am where I am now because of you. I was in big trouble then, but you cared about me, and I turned my life around.” I was surprised with her generous words. I wonder what I really did. I recall my participation in Sandra’s life only in glimpses and hints. Somehow I made a difference. *Up the Down Staircase*? Is there any other way?

### **Erika: A Renewed Call/ing for a Curriculum of Common Ground**

As we linger with passionate questions in our shared pedagogical praxis of life writing and arts-based approaches to curriculum and literacy and are provoked to a deep agency with/in these fields, we are once again inspired by the etymological resonances of and connections between the words and worlds we inhabit. Smith (1999) reminds us that this teaching work involves a provocation or *calling* (from Latin *provoco*, to call forth) from students:

Young people want to know if, under the cool and calm of efficient teaching and excellent time-on-task rations, life itself has a chance, or whether the surface is all

there is....For us as teachers it means that we must become increasingly skilled to read and understand our own childhoods, to understand our personal and collective pasts in a truly pedagogic way, that is, in a way that contributes positively and dialogically to a new understanding of and appreciation for the world. (p. 139)

In relation to this call/ing, curriculum understood as *currere* (from Latin, the running of the course) "incorporates questions of history, society, and culture as they are personified in individual lives, passionately expressed in public service" (Pinar, 2011, p. 149). When asking questions about where we are on this path or course and where we are going when we are running or walking it, we continue to attend to the stories that are an integral part of a curriculum of place. We call for strong and sustained support for teachers to do the work with "place and story as organic curriculum" (Blood, Chambers, Donald, Hasebe-Ludt, & Big Head, 2012, p. 47). We claim that when teachers and students come into a community of life writing, this movement can open up hermeneutic writerly spaces of lived/living relational curriculum filled with what Hans-Georg Gadamer (1986) has called *Lebensgefühl* (from German, a feeling of life). These feelings, both startling and freeing, can make us wide awake to the possibilities of forging "new solidarities" (Gadamer, as cited in Jardine, 2014, p. 2) when living in a dissonant world (Todd, 2010). Through collaborative praxis and agency, teachers and students together can create such spaces of learning and living, spaces filled with "both this and that," "neither this nor that" (Aoki, 1991/2005), spaces which might move us toward that Aokian discursive imaginary of transforming our pedagogical selves. Cynthia Chambers (2008) illuminates the spirit of "finding common ground in a curriculum of place" when remembering her travels with Elder Narcisse Blood and teachers and students from the University of Lethbridge across Blackfoot territory:

[T]raveling and visiting places in *kitaowahsinnon*...those of previous generations told stories about these places, sang the songs to be sung in each place. As the students visited the sites and each other at these places, new stories and songs were created and composed. At the sites, both teachers and students became apprentices to what was to be learned in those places. On our visits, we cooked and ate together; we prayed and meditated; we walked alone and together. And we practiced doing things that were appropriate to do in that particular location at that particular time. After visiting a place, the students drew pictures, created photo essays, wrote journals, and told stories. Most importantly, the students returned to the sites with their friends and their family, and, in some cases, with their own students. (p. 123)

On this path of organic relational curriculum and life writing, we may be able to restore and re-story our relations with each other, with our ancestors, and with the places we dwell in. Following Heather Menzies' (2014) challenge in her memoir and manifesto *Reclaiming the Commons for the Common Good*, we walk these paths so we may survive and live well—so we may infuse the alienated environments we inhabit with a new spirit of life.

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