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Rich Inheritances: Pedagogy and Playwrighting

by

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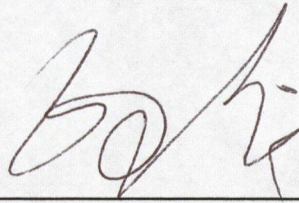
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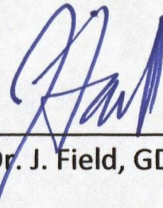
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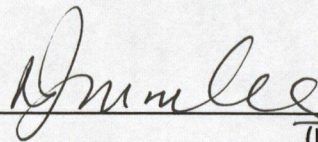
The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled "Rich Inheritances: Pedagogy and Playwrighting" submitted by Deanne Barrett in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts



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Abstract

This thesis is an exploration of the relationship between becoming experienced as a teaching professional and being entrusted with the rich inheritance of the discipline of Language Arts. A series of meditations trace through my complicity in a system of school which threatens to deaden and a rejection of that storyline, as I propel my search for life in school into an inquiry into playwrighting. *Schooled* is an original play about beginning teacher Sophia Hyde, and her struggle to respond pedagogically to her adolescent students' behaviour and life situations. Through drama, I outline the contestible, controversial richness of pedagogical life with adolescents, literature, drama, and images .

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When I trace back through the course of events which have brought me to the point of completion of this thesis, I am overwhelmed by the names and faces who come to mind. At every stage of my process, I have been grateful for the many people who have offered their encouragement, support and expertise.

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Kindred Spirits are not so scarce as I used to think. It's splendid to find out there are so many of them in the world. - Anne of Green Gables

I am blessed to have found kindred spirits in Jamie Ball, Maxx Lapthorne and Tim Skuce. Thank you for your scholarship and your friendship. I wouldn't have, in fact, couldn't have travelled this road without you. I am also grateful for the Pearson "Thursday conversation group" who make institutional life worth living.

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We have to become students of the logics we've inherited, makers of family trees, archaeologists, storytellers, archivists with meticulous footnotes and scholarly referentialities, writers whose poetry oozes up out of the Earth, meditators, wanderers on the way.

David Jardine, in Smith, *Trying to Teach in a Season of Great Untruth*

Introduction

I've written a play. *Schooled* by Deanne Barrett. When I started graduate studies, I had no idea this would happen. In some ways, I have lived with this play for so long that it no longer seems strange as a research pursuit in the field of education. It seems rather fitting, in these times when the craft of teaching is threatened by teaching methodology which requires teachers to stay in lock-step formation with their colleagues and use daily "scripts for instruction" (Popp 2009), that I have written my own script of classroom life. While a script for instruction might be an attempt to eliminate teacher judgment, this script offers its readers an experience, and hopefully, subsequent discussion around the many places where pedagogical judgment is most necessary and compelling. Madeleine Grumet reminds me that "storytellers, novelists, and literary critics use the language of narrative to talk about how they make sense of human relationships, and mortality. Their [...] stories do not capture the world and represent it to us. They point to it. They are an index pointing to its content (what we sometimes call objectivity) projected from human intentionality (what we sometimes call subjectivity)" (2005, p. 48). I am trying to point to the world of public education, knowing that the index I offer can never be complete or exhaustive. As a dramatist, I've selected particular characters and specific situations to craft a certain picture as a point of discussion and consideration. The craft of playwrighting and the craft of teaching share this commonality, to be done well there must be openings for thought.

Playwrighting has also provided a method for re-searching life in teaching language arts within a system of schooling which threatens to deaden. As English teachers, we often fall short of our vocation through a lifeless pedagogy of repetition; *Romeo and Juliet* is taught in grade ten, *Macbeth* in grade eleven, *Hamlet* in grade twelve. The texts don't change, and often neither do our teaching materials, nor our perspective. We come to the text expecting it to be static, and it is. And yet, I am always surprised at my students' enthusiasm for reading plays aloud; it is a relief for students to playfully engage with a text

in the face of an audience who provides immediate feedback of their reading. Similarly, The task of writing a play has allowed me to engage the sense of playfulness which appears only sometimes in my classroom, as I dig deeper into one area of the English Language Arts curriculum. The experience of becoming a student of a centuries-old discipline has helped me to understand the difference between what it means to take up a living inheritance, and what it means to “do school”. Playwrighting has allowed me to compose myself in the face of the demands of my profession.

What began as an intellectual exercise, became an emotional, and imaginative journey as I struggled to get out from underneath of the weight of self- censorship. Gadamer’s (1989) notion of *Bildung*, of becoming, and the ontological hope that I hold for the study of literature has become experiential through the act of writing. As I write, I am becoming cultivated in ways of thinking and writing. There is something at work compositionally, in the arrangement of ideas, in the lingering over text, and in the ability to come back, again and again in different ways at different times to develop understanding in a recursive fashion. This is a sift and sort to see what happens upon the arrival of ideas together. It is, in fact, the multiplicity of voices that have presented openings into my work, and filled it with a sense of vitality, a sense of play, a bit of room within which to work out my understandings. The process of playwrighting has, indeed allowed me to become open to possibilities; part of the joy of writing, but also the pain, indeed the passion of writing, is in not knowing where the work will end up, or what ideas might be unearthed, or developed, or uncovered.

What follows is a series of meditative prologues which establish the many questions I have about teaching English Language Arts in high school, followed by the play itself. The play does not offer an answer to the questions; instead, it provides an extended example of the shape and texture of these questions as they are embodied within the classroom. As the play concludes, it is not conclusive, nor is the conflict resolved, for, as Northrop Frye admits, “The kind of problem that literature raises is not the kind that you

ever “solve.” (1963, p. 2). This is my investigation into the perennial struggle of thoughtfully, professionally composing oneself in the face of institutionalized learning.

Prologue One: Teaching *for a living*

If it is as a teacher that I engage in inquiry into teaching, then I do not deny or disguise my relation to the object of that inquiry but make that relation the object of the inquiry itself. If teaching requires that we bring to consciousness our relation to the object both so that the relation may be extended to the student through mimesis and so that the relationship of both students and teacher to the object may be reconsidered and perhaps transformed, then research into teaching demands the most rigorous attention to these relations (Grumet 1990, 105).

As I inquire into how I can thoughtfully compose myself in the face of school, it is my situatedness as a teacher within institutional education that must first be explored. As Grumet states, it is this kind of exploration that leads to an opportunity for the relationship between my students and I to be transformed through our study of literature. It is this sense of consciousness which requires cultivation in the face of the taken-for-granted-ness of school. If our conversations and interactions are held in place by the constructs of school, we are limited to “doing school”. However, if we might somehow develop a sense of consciousness about these processes and procedures, we might move out into a much more complex and rewarding field.

Statistics have shown that fifty percent of North American teachers quit within their first five years (Smith 2006, p 30). I’m not interested in a statistical analysis, but I raise this number as one way to move my particular experience out into a larger reality of education today. I believe that, had I not started graduate work, I would have been one of the fifty percent who quits. Or, I would be an unhappy teacher and not know why.

When I first began teaching I was frustrated by the long hours and difficult working conditions; I had a class of 45 students, I had to teach six novels I’d never read, in four

months, to struggling readers. “I’m not a robot” was my lamenting refrain every time I found myself in the sanctuary of my parent’s home. While this metaphor indicates some subconscious understanding of the mechanical procedures of school, I thought that my inability to meet the demands of school with the inexhaustible energy expected of the young meant that there was something wrong with me. Older colleagues would reassure me and other young teachers that once we got a handle on our courses, we too could “have a life”, and leave the school at 4pm knowing that the next day’s lesson would already be prepared from the previous semester, the previous year, the previous decade. It appeared that experienced teachers no longer needed to think about what they were teaching. While I didn’t want to forfeit my after-school activities by constantly preparing lessons until 7 or 8pm, I also was unprepared to settle into a lifetime career of repeating the same lessons, the same ideas year after year.

What does it mean to teach *for a living*? Has this phrase “for a living” come to mean only something we do for a pay check? How have we come to understand that life is only what happens after school time? Am I naive to hope that I might find some vivifying quality within my workday? When students and educators spend most of their waking hours toiling in a place devoid of life, what will become of us? Is it possible to teach “for a living” in a way that might renew the vocational (<L *vocationem*, spiritual calling) qualities of a spiritually rewarding, and therefore a potentially spiritually taxing profession?

These questions plagued my first few years of teaching, as I struggled alongside a group of fellow beginning teachers. Lester B. Pearson High School was full of new teachers, which is why our principal hired a full-time teacher mentor, with the help of AISI (Alberta Initiative for School Improvement) funding. Tim Skuce’s invitation to beginning teachers into a conversation about our teaching praxis opened with John Dewey’s notion of experience, which described what I had seen in my colleagues,

The belief that all genuine education comes about through experience does not mean that all experiences are genuinely and equally educative. Experience and

education cannot be directly equated to each other. For some experiences are mis-educative. Any experience is mis-educative that has the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience. An experience may be such as to engender callousness; it may produce lack of sensitivity and of responsiveness. Then the possibilities of having richer experience in the future are restricted.

(Dewey 1938, p. 26)

I was shocked to read a description from 1938 of what I had experienced, that many teachers who have had a long career are closed to further growth; it is as if their school experiences have mis-educated them about how learning happens, in favour of a methodology of efficient management. In the face of these “experienced” teachers, beginning teachers are “inexperienced” in the managerial ways of school. In order to become more “experienced”, beginning teachers must submit to the processes and anti-intellectualism of school, and quell the growth of further experience in themselves, and in their students. As a group of beginning teachers, we were puzzled, and enthralled by the push and pull of this paradox in education, and our quest(ions) into the history of the system of schooling emerged. Dr. David Jardine was invited to our High School to teach a graduate course on the history of education in the evening, and we formed a weekly lunchtime discussion group for teachers. Our circle of colleagues extended beyond the walls of Pearson to include theorists like Illich, Dewey, Aoki, Grumet, and Smith, who helped us to re-member that “we have made this world of schooling, purposefully and through default, and that its making was also in the hands of our shared and contested ancestors who have handed it down to us in equally shared and contested ways and forms” (Smith 2006, p. xi). The field of interpretive studies in Education came as an alternative to the logic of singularity (Jardine, in Smith, 2006. p. x) which mistook our questions for problems, reaffirming our beginner status at every turn.

Graduate work and our “Thursday Conversation group” became a lifeline for me, as I struggled to understand my role as a teacher. I returned again and again to an article

by Madeleine Grumet entitled, *Where Does the World Go When Schooling Is about Schooling?* wherein Grumet asserts that schooling is “once again” about schooling, as she cites a return to the domination of social sciences in education that she pushed against in the 1970’s (2005, p. 47). I felt like I no longer fit into the system that I was trying to understand, but at the same time, I was reading writers and theorists who could explain what I was feeling in the face of this “frozen futurism” (Smith 2006, p. 25) where teachers and students are expected to live out a predetermined path that requires them only to follow a plan of implementation. I began to realise that within the mechanisation of school, there *was* something wrong with me: I am not a robot. I am an intellectual, emotional, spiritual, sexual, physical woman in the midst of a system which seems unable to account for, or acknowledge all these aspects of humanity. In fact, all of these qualities threaten the machinations of the systematics of school.

A few years into my graduate studies, at an opening address to the University of Calgary Master of Teaching Students, Hans Smits asserted that as educators we should allow our emotions to guide us. I was overwhelmed by that permission. I felt guilty because I was becoming resentful of the system which had provided my education, and my profession. I felt greedy and selfish because I wanted more from my profession than my colleagues or administration seem willing to allow. A few weeks later, I was relieved to hear an interview with novelist Elizabeth Gilbert who articulates the etymological difficulty which has led to our conception of selfishness,

...somebody told me this the other day, that in Mandarin, Chinese, they have two words for selfish. One means doing that which is beneficial to you, and the other means hoarding, greedy, and cruel, and I think it’s an etymological problem in English that we’ve taken those two entities and pushed them together into one so we automatically think that anything we do that is beneficial to ourselves is hoarding, greedy and cruel in some way, and I think it’s actually not the case...

(*The Oprah Show*, October 5, 2007)

I had been made to feel hoarding, greedy and cruel as if my intellectual pursuits threatened the educational system. I was resentful of my colleagues who seemed short-sighted and narrow-minded. I felt sad to see so many of my students who by high school had shut down any of their curiosity knowing that it would just get in the way of what they were supposed to learn in school. I was disappointed in myself for considering myself an intelligent person who had dedicated her life to teaching, and yet been so ignorant of the history of schools. Most of all, I felt the sting of betrayal at my complicity in “doing school” to my students. I felt vulnerable.

Who am I to seek life in this profession?

Why are some of my colleagues content in this system when I have so many questions?

Why can't I just be happy with things the way they are?

Rather than denying my emotions that led to these questions, I was able to take them up through the work of interpretive studies, particularly hermeneutics, which has released me from the self-enclosure of my emotional turmoil; I've come to apply meaning to my lived experiences in light of the historical lineage of teaching. I wanted to contest the ancestors, like Fredrick Winslow Taylor who left the legacy of the efficiency movement, and find a way to push back against a teacher-as-manager existence. Smith proposes that “The real work of the contemporary period is to recover a future that truly is a future; that is, a condition that is actually open (2006, p.26). I craved this open condition and feared it; to be open is to be vulnerable, susceptible, at risk, and in my mind, a teacher should be none of those things.

I wanted to understand this career I had chosen; I desperately wanted a future. I wanted a life, and not only the kind that happened after my day at school. I needed to move toward that which I feared, if I was to recover a sense of wholeness within my profession, as Gadamer describes:

For every profession has something about it of fate, of external necessity; it demands that one give oneself to tasks that one would not seek out as a private

aim. Practical Bildung is seen in one's fulfilling one's profession wholly, in all its aspects. But this includes overcoming the element in it that is alien to the particularity which is oneself, and making it wholly one's own. Thus to give oneself to the universality of a profession is at the same time "to know how to limit oneself- i.e., to make one's profession wholly one's concern. Then it is no longer a limitation." (1989, p. 12)

In short, I had to get over myself. I had to get over my understanding of what I thought a teacher ought to be, and step into my profession in a new way that acknowledged my humanity within this system. I looked to the work of the reconceptualist movement which began over thirty years ago, and wondered why I still had such a narrow view of curriculum. I was drawn to Aoki's phrase of "Curriculum-as-lived" (2005), and Pinar's idea of "curriculum as conversation" and *currere* (2004). These re-conceptions helped me to recognize that my students and I are a correlate¹ of our world which provides a source of vitality for my teaching practice. David Smith's proposition is helpful:

We may begin by asking a simple question: "What makes teaching a livable experience?" and then elaborate an answer through positive and negative examples. Through the negative examples we can identify the various ways that teaching can no longer be called such and teachers break down, finding themselves in circumstances that clearly are not liveable; that is, that cannot sustain life in any meaningful sense. Positive examples in turn identify the ways through which the teaching life is worth living, or better, life is discovered to be worth living through teaching. Most notably, teaching cannot be a living if there is no truth told in its enactment or, more accurately, if the classroom is not first and

¹ Max Scheler, as quoted in Grumet, "No matter which realms of object we may distinguish- the realm of objects of the inner world, or the outer world, of bodiliness...the realm of ideal objects, or the realm of values- they all have an abstract objectivity. They become fully concrete only as part of a world, the world of a person. But the *person* is never a "part" of a world: the person is always the *correlate* of a "world", namely, the world in which he experiences himself" (2005, p. 50).

foremost a place of truth seeking, truth discovering, and truth sharing. This is a difficult thing to say in a time when truth is usually claimed to be “relative” and a matter of “perspective,” terms that are themselves relative and perspectival, especially within the culture of science and rationalism that has been our legacy since the 18th century. But there may be a way of speaking about truth more hermeneutically so that in those moments when teachers and students find themselves together saying, “Wow, that was a good class!” they are saying that they have discovered a truth for Now, something that provides sustenance for Now precisely because of how coming into truth has its own energizing power. (Smith, 2006, p. 27-28)

At the same time, I wondered how the study of the history of education was going to help me to be a better English teacher. Within my classroom, I needed to develop my sense of judgement; I was trying to work out what was best for *these* students, at *this* school, in *this* grade. How can I articulate those moments of “truth for now” that come so infrequently, but which sustain my practice? Where is the life in teaching English Language Arts?

Prologue Two: Lifelong Learners

The study of literature allows students to experience, vicariously, persons, places, times and events that may be far removed from their day-to-day experiences. Literature invites students to reflect on the significance of cultural values and the fundamentals of human existence; to think about and discuss essential, universal themes; and to grapple with the intricacies of the human condition. The study of literature provides students with the opportunity to develop self-understanding. They imagine the worlds that literature presents and understand and empathize with the characters that literature creates. (Alberta Education, 2003, p. 1)

The Alberta program of studies for English Language Arts offers wonderful opportunities for students, and their teachers. I think I should read this paragraph each morning as a way to set the tone for my teaching day. Perhaps I should read it with my students every morning as a counterpoint to their lament “Do we *have* to read *this*?” Now, more than ever, we are in the marketplace of choice as text is infinitely available at Chapter’s bookstore, blogs, and text messages, and story is consumable through video bit torrented onto an MP3 player. If a text does not present itself as quickly understandable or entertaining, the novel study appears to students as a perversion of amusement, and a study of Shakespeare is an Elizabethan torture device. It would be easy to blame my students for their lack of interest, but I’d rather put my energies toward something more purposeful. How can I reclaim the study of literature “from a world of harsh limits into expanded possibility” (Edmundson, 2004 p.1) when the initial interplay between student and text is more about school than it is about literature?

With many examples of classroom work, no matter which aspect of which living discipline is under consideration, in schools, so often, the real topic is, as Ivan Illich told us over thirty years ago (1970), “school.” (Jardine, 2008)

“School” is synonymous with the efficiency and management processes which move students through the grade levels toward certification. I know that from my many experiences in school, which I now have learned to call “mis-educative”, in the way that Dewey proposes that they had “the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience” (Dewey, 1938, p. 26). In order to fit in with my colleagues as a competent professional accountable for my students’ learning, I assessed my student’s skills with multiple choice tests which could be reported numerically on each looming report card, in keeping with one part of the culminating diploma examination in grade twelve. I focused on the numerical certainty of reading comprehension exams, which filled my students with apprehension at having to align their understanding of a text with one right answer

on a multiple choice exam, but which relieved me of having to make a judgement about my students' reading skill level. I was blind to the possibility that reading comprehension (L. *comprehendere* "to take together, to unite"; *com-* "completely" + *prehendere* "to catch hold of, seize") cannot only be the process of decoding words or matching meanings to a menu of choices; comprehension calls us to seize literature, to have it in hand, or perhaps, to allow literature to seize us. But, I followed the example of teachers around me, and delivered the certain, reliable, testable elements of theme, character, tone, literary devices, and stylistic elements. I prescribed chapter questions, and lists of vocabulary words that I found in teacher's guides which appealed to the inefficiency of my inexperience, and the vulnerability of deficient learners.

I was caught in the "singular logic" (Jardine, in Smith, 2006, xi) of schooling students through Formalism. Once we broke literature down into its parts, I became anxious about being able to get through them all. While the breakdown of text into its elements of form is helpful, in coming to understand a text, they are a part of a whole that is often missed. Many high school graduates claim to not have read a book since school, and even English Majors claim that pursuing literature through critical analysis "ruins" the enjoyment they once gained from reading. And yet, I taught my students that themes are universal, timeless, and recurring, without asking them to consider the ways that the theme of *this* text can speak to *their* world, *their* time, and how it as occurred in *their* experience. I subsumed my student's ability to *read into* the text with their own questions that could compel them into the depths and history of the text. The very few times that I engaged my students in a reader's response, asking them to relate the experience of a character in the text to an experience they may have had, in a token gesture of coming to understand their experiences, I didn't know how to assess their answers, and was often frustrated by their literal responses. This, too, seemed to keep us on the surface of the text. In an attempt to have my students become more literate (Literate <L. *lit(t)eratus*

"one who knows the letters"), I had forfeited the possibility of my students becoming more literate (Literate <L "educated, learned").

I had begun to "engender callousness" and "produce a lack of sensitivity and of responsiveness" (Dewey, 1938, p. 26). I was training my students to be able to complete their grade level, their diploma exam, so they could move on to the next level, and the question about why they would learn to read or write was quickly answerable in light of their desire to get out of school. And yet, I had trained myself to remain in school in perpetuity.

Education seems like a preparation for something that never happens because, in the deepest sense, it has already happened, over and over. So built into the anticipations of teaching is a mask of the future that freezes teaching in a futuristic orientation such that, in real terms, there is no future because the future already is (Smith, 2006, p. 25-26.)

In the face of so many students, and so many new texts, I was just trying to manage, and yet I was disheartened at being a logistical manager, and not a teacher. Why would my students invest in reading a book that had already been read? Why would they answer questions that have already been answered? Why would they write essays that had already been written? I was unable to answer these emerging questions for myself. In retrospect, it appears that I, too was handed the legacy of a "schoolized" version of the humanities which bell hooks aptly describes in the university context:

Many of our students come to our classrooms believing that real brilliance is revealed by the will to disconnect and disassociate. They see this state as crucial to the maintenance of objectivism. They fear wholeness will lead them to be considered less "brilliant." Popular ideas of what constitutes academic brilliance continue to perpetuate the notion that the critical thinker is unfeeling, is hardhearted. The assumption seems to be that if the heart is closed, the mind will open even wider. In actuality, it is the failure to achieve harmony of mind, body,

and spirit that has furthered anti-intellectualism in our culture and made of our schools mere factories. (hooks 2003 p. 180-181)

How is it possible that we have become hardhearted within the field of literature which so often describes the beauty and suffering of the human heart? Mark Edmundson, a university professor and author of *Why Read?* posits that reading literature has been “surpassed by theory, or rendered obsolete with the passage of time” (2004, p. 2). He argues that:

Those few professors who still hold literature in high regard often treat it aesthetically. Following Kant, they’re prone to remove literary art from the push and toss of day-to-day life. They want to see poems and novels as autonomous artefacts that have earned the right to be disconnected from common experience. One admires great literary works as aesthetic achievements. But on actual experience, they should have no real bearing at all. (p. 2)

It seems that the version of literary study which I inherited is contestible. I had only seen one small part of the world of literary study, which asked me to disconnect from my own experiences. I may have been well schooled in the study of English, but I’ve been poorly educated. I’ve been taught a harsh lesson. In modern vernacular, ironically, I can say that I’ve been “schooled”. I’ve been “schooled” about school.

The study of literature has been manipulated to fit within a manageable, certain, reliable, valid, scientific model. I had learned to manipulate it in this way, and I, too, felt manipulated. I feel akin to Hamlet in the moment he realises that his friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, have been manipulating him on behalf of his murderous uncle:

Why, look you now, how unworthy a thing you make of me! You would play upon me; you would seem to know my stops; you would pluck out the heart of my mystery; you would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass[...]
 ‘Sblood, do you think that I am easier to be played upon than a pipe? (*Hamlet* Act 3, Sc. 2)

Like Hamlet, I feel as though I have been caught up in a web of half-truths. I resent being “played” by this system, but I have no-one to blame. I wonder how I can recover what David Smith (2006) calls an “open condition” when I am teaching literature that has already been done.

Where is the life in teaching English Language Arts?

That one word, LIFE, encapsulates a whole world of meaning; I am in search of life, in search of a sense of wholeness, a sense of integrity within my profession, a sense of authenticity in the tasks I ask of my students. I am in search of the “energizing power” of those moments of “coming into truth” which David Smith offers as a classroom possibility (2006, p. 28).

How, then, am I to interpret the program of studies which directs my classroom work?

An appreciation of literature and an ability to use language effectively enhances students’ opportunities to become responsible, contributing citizens and *lifelong learners* while experiencing success and fulfillment *in life* (Alberta Education, 2003, p. 1, emphasis added).

How do reading and writing offer an opportunity for “success and fulfillment *in life*” beyond an appreciation of the formal components of literature? Surely this is more than an epistemological hope that students will develop the technical skill necessary to complete an examination so they can go on to a post-secondary education and a career. Surely a sustained commitment to the study of literature and language over the course of twelve years points also to an ontological hope. What does it mean to be literate, educated, learned, in the ways that literature offers? What might we become in the face of the richness of literature?

Like many English majors, I had chosen to become a teacher believing that there were few careers which required literary training. Like many English majors, I study literature because I love it. I love to read fiction for escape and enjoyment; I relish the shapes and sounds of words particular to a certain time and place. I love to step into the

intimate, paradoxical, and controversial places of a life different from my own. I also enjoy the feeling of success that comes with a growing competence in critical analysis, and the pride at having achieved a degree in English literature. When I became a teacher, I focused on the disciplined tasks required to study literature, and never spoke of my compelling love.

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. (1 Corinthians 13:1-2)

What difference does it make if biblical and Shakespearean verses come to mind as I write? Is this what it means to be literate, educated, learned, in the ways that literature offers?

Northrop Frye asked similar questions in the midst of his long career teaching English Literature,

What good is the study of literature? Does it help us think more clearly, or feel more sensitively, or live a better life than we could without it? What is the function of the teacher and scholar, or of the person who calls himself, as I do, a literary critic? What difference does the study of literature make in our social or political or religious attitude? (1963, p.1)

Frye goes on to explore the way that literature “train(s) and improve(s) the imagination”, and it is the imagination, he argues, upon which our whole social life is built, from the dreams we create, to the careful use of the right words at the right time (1963, p. 82). While Frye seems to focus on the consumption of literature as the development of an inventory for the imagination, Gadamer speaks to the formational quality of the human sciences, which he encapsulates in the term *Bildung*, becoming (1989, p. 8-16). Similarly, Mark Edmundson calls for a rejuvenation of the humanist tradition as he argues that students “read to enjoy, but not to become other than as they are” (2004, p. 6). Gadamer,

Frye, and Edmundson all point to the study of literature as an opportunity for the perpetual cultivation of oneself. Who might we become in the face of literature?

“You must change your life,” says Rilke’s sculpture of Apollo to the beholder. So says every major work of intellect and imagination, but in the university now-as in the culture at large- almost no one hears. (Edmundson, 2004, p. 6)

If Shakespeare’s Hamlet, cries “you must change your life”, are we prepared to listen?

How can we cultivate the discipline required to even hear this life-changing call? Are we willing to undergo the vulnerability that will allow for transformation?

Prologue Three: Playwrighting as a Living Inheritance

I

In “On Field(ing) Knowledge” Sharon Friesen and David Jardine establish substantive examples of mathematics as a field of knowledge, stating, “We’ve become taken by the idea that mathematics is a living inheritance and must be treated as such to be properly understood”(2009). My work comes as an echo of that sentiment in support of the field of English Language Arts, particularly, the study of plays and playwrighting as a living discipline. Gadamer’s words from *Heidegger’s ways* are worth summoning once more:

[English language arts, specifically, the art of playwrighting does have] the character of an object that stands over and against us. We are no longer able to approach this like an object of knowledge, grasping, measuring and controlling. Rather than meeting us in our world, it is much more a world into which we ourselves are drawn. [It] possesses its own worldliness and, thus, the center of its own Being so long as it is not placed into the object-world of producing and marketing. The Being of this thing cannot be accessed by objectively measuring and estimating; rather, the totality of a lived context has entered into and is present in the thing. And we belong to it as well. Our orientation to it is always

something like our orientation to an inheritance that this thing belongs to, be it from a stranger's life or from our own. (Gadamer, 1994, as cited in Friesen, S. & Jardine, D. (2009)

To take up playwrighting as a living discipline, I can no longer pretend to hold all of the knowledge pertaining to this field. It is too vast, too wonderful, too complex and multifaceted. What, then, is the role of the pedagogue? Perhaps the teacher becomes more that of a field guide, who helps students to navigate the wealth of the field. Perhaps the initial gesture is an invitation into the field, What do you notice? What do you wonder? It is through these first questions that we begin to find our way around within the field, and begin to learn its ways. Perhaps we must begin by acknowledging our ancestors:

This world in which I undergo or suffer experiences is not just inhabited and formed and fashioned by myself and by and with my own(ed) experiences, but it is always and already experienced, articulated, and inhabited. It has always and already been formed and fashioned by shared and contested inheritances, voices, and ancestries, up out of which I must slowly and continually "find" myself becoming who I am. (Jardine and Batycky 2006, p. 217)

II

As a graduate student, I was doing a lot of writing as a way to understand my emerging frustration and resentment of what was happening to me in school. Sometimes, I wrote as a detached academic, avoiding the first person pronoun, making observations and connections from a safe distance which would not betray my disruption. Sometimes, I would copy lengthy passages of curriculum theorists as if my dedication to their words would save me from my anxiety. I wanted my writing to be *like* that, but *mine*. Sometimes, rather than outright quotations, I tried to mimic the critical reflective style of theorists within the reconceptualist movement. I wrote in defiance of the silences I felt at school, as

I tried to write my way into a clearing, an opening up of what has become commonplace. David Smith proposes that “The act of composition brings a new composure, if one can follow the discipline of it” (Smith 2006, p. 33). I didn’t know what to say, or how I should say it, but I was compelled to write a thesis (<L. *thesis*, originally “a setting down or placing”) as a way to find my voice, to cultivate a sense of judgment, and to compose myself around being an English Language Arts teacher.

As I struggled to develop my own academic, professional voice in my writing, I was also called upon to assess “voice” as an assessable category of student writing. What do we mean by the term “voice” as it pertains to writing? This aural quality of a written text seems to be a metaphor for writerly confidence. According to a standard Alberta Learning rubric, “voice” can be described as “convincing”, “distinct”, “apparent”, “indistinct”, or “obscure”. I have heard many English teachers profess that they want their students to “find their voice”, and yet it is this quality in writing that I struggled to understand. In *Me and My Shadow* Literary critic Jane Tompkins describes her desire to respond to her colleagues’ work in two different voices, one professional, who “uses words like ‘context’ and ‘intelligibility’” and the other who “talks on the telephone a lot to her friends, has seen psychiatrists, likes cappuccino, worries about the state of her soul” (cited in Leitch et al. p. 2130). I found Tompkins’ confused admission as an echo of my own struggle. Curriculum theorist Janet Miller’s insights on private and public dimensions of her life in *sounds of silence breaking* are another example of the many ways that we find ourselves wholly and completely within the discipline of writing, unwilling, and at times unable to voice only one aspect of ourselves. I was trying to compose myself through writing, but *which* self was I trying to compose through writing? Which voice can I use? To whom am I speaking? When I found myself in a field of knowledge, my struggle with voice was no longer my problem; instead it is a problem which is true of the craft of writing.

You must change your life

One day I found myself in David Jardine's office in need of direction. I had been trying to write about the nature of teaching English Language Arts through an allegorical exploration of Tom Stoppard's play, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. I was already within the field of drama, so David suggested that I write a play. My reaction was visceral. My stomach lurched. My mind clicked through all of the factors that had led up to this moment, which seemed to be pointing to this very obvious, insurmountable fact. My understanding of coming into a field of knowledge was no longer an intellectual exercise, it was a creative challenge. I was going to write a play.

This thesis is born out of my disruption, and so it is fitting that not only the ideas, but also the form of this work is a disruption of my expectation of how a thesis looks, sounds, and lives. I needed to disrupt the commonplace of school for myself, so that I am able to see it differently, to understand myself differently within it. The field of interpretive studies in education follows the legacy of the reconceptualist movement, which has ways of its own which I am called to honour. I am invigorated by the possibility that my work could, even *should* take shape in a different way.

What seems to be needed in curriculum inquiry, therefore, is general recognition of the epistemological limit-situation in which current curriculum research is encased, that is, a critical awareness that conventional research has not only a limiting effect but also to some degree a distorting effect on new possibilities in curriculum research. Accordingly, we need to seek out new orientations that allow us to free ourselves of the tunnel vision effect of monodimensionality. (Aoki 2005, p. 94)

Playwrighting has afforded me the multiple dimensions inherent in populating the contingency of our school experiences with multiple characters. In *Releasing the Imagination*, Maxine Greene proposes that multiple vantage points are also requisite for the imaginative capacity to look at how our existing life conditions could be otherwise:

To ask for intensified realization is to see that each person's reality must be understood to be interpreted experience- and that the mode of interpretation depends on his or her situation and location in the world. It depends as well on the number of vantage points a person is able or enabled to take- the number of perspectives that will disclose multiple aspects of a contingent (not a self-existent) world. (1995, p. 19)

Playwrighting became the primary way that I explored the questions which plagued me, and in that way, I could say that playwrighting has been my method.

"The ecological philosopher, Allan Drengson, once told a seminar on interpretive inquiry, "If you want to understand phenomenology, read novels. While a phenomenologist writes about lived experience, a novelist describes it" (Hasebe-Ludt et al. 2009, p. 24).

A playwright dramatises it. At the heart of this work is an understanding that the world is richly interpretable; even the curriculum and policy documents which hold us in place must be lived out in the face of *this* parent, *this* student, *this* teacher. In fact, my credibility as a playwright rests on the authority with which I craft the world my characters inhabit. Like phenomenology, "the theatre is based upon the idea that the world is knowable and that the information that one receives from one's senses is useful [...] That *someone* inhabits a body, and that this someone lives in a *real world* (Martini 2009, p. 68). To compound phenomenology with hermeneutics, Gadamer's "transformation into structure" section in *Truth and Method* is helpful in understanding how truth emerges from the experience of art, particularly, the way that these classroom voices emerge and begin to shape into a structure which begins to stand on its own.

For centuries, playwrights have hoped to provoke their audience and effect social change by crafting poignant moments of conflict so that we can understand ourselves and each other. Calgary playwright and university professor Clem Martini argues that, "The story of the evolution of the theatre is the story of a society striving to better understand

its citizens" (2009). Theatre, literature, and pedagogy are all compelled by the desire to better understand the human condition through re-presentation and interpretation.

Playwrighting, like any field of knowledge, is "a world into which we ourselves are drawn" (Gadamer 1994). Although playwrighting came as a new challenge, I already found myself drawn into the world of theatre. For a number of years, I have been a volunteer usher at Theatre Calgary, and I have read modern and Shakespearean plays with students. This excursion into writing, coupled with my graduate studies has provided me with the consciousness of what it means to be a student of living discipline which is populated with writers, dramaturges, historians, playwrights, novelists, and professors. I'm learning to be obedient "to the call of truth as it speaks out to me from the task at hand" (Smith 2006, p. 33). This obedience has caused suffering and joy, as I have tried to work out the simultaneous struggle of what I needed to say while learning the craft of how to say it. It was with a sense of trepidation and relief that I took up the challenge of writing through multiple perspectives; while I was relieved of the responsibility of choosing one voice, I continued to struggle with the voice of each character. Who is this person? What does she have to say? What am I trying to say through what she is saying?

After a few months of watching and reading drama, as I studied the interplay between the characters, setting, and plot structures which somehow accumulate to say something, I knew I needed to start writing. I submitted a proposal to present a few scenes at the Inaugural Canadian Hermeneutics Institute in the spring. However, I worried that this work was not worthy of an academic conference. I felt as if I'd regressed into a more playful, childish state of creative writing after a long sojourn into the elevated language of critical literary essays. I'd been schooled into believing that a critical-analytical voice is most important, perhaps because I only wrote critical analytical essays in university, and that form is "worth the most" on the diploma exam. I was nervous every time someone asked about my work, because they were excited and invigorated by the

idea that my academic work was taking a creative form, while I doubted my ability to say anything meaningful through drama.

I was terrified to hear my words read aloud. What if the scene didn't make sense? What if no-one laughed at the funny bits? Why would people read a play-in-progress at an academic conference? The conference goers were supportive, yet reluctant to agree to read from the script. With trepidation, I distributed copies of my work to a few willing souls, and for the first time, I heard my words coming out of other people's mouths; I was surrounded by the voices that had been locked in my head. It was then that I realised that this work was no longer my own. Gadamer's words are helpful here:

We have seen that play does not have its being in the player's consciousness or attitude, but on the contrary play draws him into its dominion and fills him with its spirit...But however much a religious or profane play represents a world wholly closed within itself, it is as if open toward the spectator, in whom it achieves its whole significance (1989, p. 109).

The readers used their own understanding of school, and the relationships between students, and teachers, and Hamlet to inform the work that became ours, together. My phenomenological transcription cum fictionalized account of a classroom experience became a hermeneutic moment. In his discussion of the transformation into structure, Gadamer proposes that the action of a drama "no longer permits of any comparison with reality as the secret measure of all verisimilitude. It is raised above all such comparisons- and hence also above the question of whether it is all real- because a superior truth speaks from it" (Gadamer 2004, p. 111-112). The readers and audience laughed at the moments that I hoped were funny. We laughed at the shared knowledge of those awkward and unexpected moments of understanding, and misunderstanding. Calgary playwright and university professor Clem Martini asks, "But if a play is about presenting a true vision, there must also be a mechanism that permits that vision to be tested for truth. If someone makes an artistic statement that life is a certain way, shouldn't one expect

proof?" (2006 Martini). The simple feedback of an audience laughing at the bits which I intended to be funny gave me confidence to keep writing. We were invigorated by the unexpected pleasure of encountering a work of participatory fiction and wondered at our own reluctance to give ourselves over to the unfamiliar. There was something true of my work.

By fall, I joined the Alberta Playwright's Network, and took playwrighting workshops until spring. Every week I met with dramaturge Gordon Pengilly and seven other playwrights as we read each other's work, and gave each other feedback. The first night I was nervous. Here, my work would not be novel. That first night, as I explained my piece, a fellow English teacher suggests that I watch *Mona Lisa Smile* starring Julia Roberts, for inspiration. I know she meant well. And yet, I was upset. When I was imagined that my work was a reconception of educational discourse, an attempt to make strange the familiar world of school, I did not want to hear that I was writing yet another teacher story, like *Dangerous Minds*, or *To Sir With Love*. I desperately wanted to write something different, and yet I can't outrun the comparisons between my work and these fictional based-on-a-true-story Hollywood films. Janet Miller warns that even autobiographical teacher stories are "unproblematized recountings of what is taken to be the transparent, linear, and authoritative "reality" of those teachers' "experiences" which "are used as evidence of "progress" or "success" in school reform" (Miller 2005, p. 51). I know that *Schooled* might appear to be the latest teacher story, whose major conflict centres around sexual orientation, instead of a mixed race community (*Dangerous Minds*), or a single-gendered school (*Mona Lisa Smile*).

This is the potentially pathetic character of "teacher narratives" when these are left as simple self-announcements of teachers who have been abandoned to the isolation of the classroom. Clearly, we must overcome the hegemonies that have silenced and isolated such teachers. However, when these "narratives" are left unread out into the world, teachers are re-abandoned and re-isolated into the

pathos of “my own story”, which can only be “shared” with others in equally pathetic situations. In this way, the re-invigoration that the young-the new case could have provided the world is forgone in favour of merely puerile self-annunciation. (Jardine 2003, p. 57)

I don’t want Sophia to be pathetic. I hope that her story can be “read out into the world” (Jardine 2003) of the political and social forces, the philosophies, and histories which are at play within the classroom. And yet, this story cannot outrun its relations, and so I turned to dramatic scripts, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, *Schoolhouse*, and *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* as possible origins which could guide the direction of my own original work.

After reading published, professional work, it was a relief to see other pieces of work in progress at the Alberta Playwright’s Network workshops. I was relieved to see that my struggles were also the struggles of more experienced writers, and to have models of other work; images for my imagination, as Gadamer says (1989, p. 21). There were no grades, only feedback. I was willing to risk my uncertainty as a writer in order to learn more about the craft of writing.

You must change your life

I could feel myself descending into the field of literature in a new way. I became emotional as I wrote. I laughed, I cried, I got angry, I started pacing through the house. I worried that I was becoming a stereotypical crazy artist, that I might start speaking in tongues. In fact, I already had, as characters emerged with accented English and vocabularies different from my own. Instead of hovering above writing with an overlay of critique, I was getting into the gritty, messy, working out of my ideas. I kept trying to get these voices to say what I needed to say about life in school, but they were resistant. More truthfully, I was resistant to the “open condition” (Smith 2006, p. 26) which I craved.

Newly in the field of playwrighting, I needed to reach out for others in the field, so I called my new friend Tarra, who has worked in the Calgary theatre as a producer,

director, actor, and dramaturge. My suspicions that this writing exercise had become a metaphysical journey were confirmed in one conversation:

Tarra: Let go of the structural elements, let go of what you think you have to say,
 and just listen to the voices. For two weeks, just listen to the voices.

Deanne: It's going to get ugly

Tarra: So let it

As I drafted and re-drafted Sophia's story, her caustic alter-ego named Vox (<L. *vocum*, voice) appeared to literally give voice to the places which I thought are often silenced by the mechanics of school. I tried to conceal my inexperience as a playwright with Vox's insulting tone. Vox could say anything I wanted, and I often used her to inject some of the theoretical, academic work into the play. I am both critical of school and complicit in school; I used Vox's sarcasm as protection against my own hypocrisy, as she didactically foiled Sophia's journey. It took months, and a number of dramaturgical suggestions for me to come to the realisation that Vox wasn't working dramatically. I needed to avoid the "talking heads" of Socratic dialogue which lacked dramatic tension. This was a difficult acknowledgement because, despite the fact that she wasn't working, Vox's powerful presence was the only thing about my work that I liked. Finally, I killed her. I hoped that Vox's deletion would allow something else to emerge.

III

I have been grateful for the unexpected pleasure of experiencing the pedagogical tact of those who ushered me into this ancient tradition. In early 2010 I was granted a leave from the Calgary Board of Education which allowed me to take a playwrighting class at the university with Clem Martini. As the class unfolded, Clem established the expectations for the activity; each student would pitch their idea for a play, and then everyone would have a chance to tell the playwright the elements that they find compelling. Next, the group had a chance to ask questions for clarification. Clem explained

that through the process of describing our work and answering questions about it, we will come to understand new possibilities for our work. He cautioned us against telling each other what to do with our work, because that implies that “I am a much smarter person, and here’s what I would do with this”. An hour earlier had I returned creative writing pieces to my grade 12 students with my edits all over their work. I was humbled. I have a lot to learn about respecting the integrity of my students’ ideas; I have much to learn about the process of developing ideas within a community. When my classmates described their own work, I could see the parallels to my own, and I would madly writing notes to consider later; I wonder how I have learned to make these parallels. I wonder how much I need to say to my 17 year old students to help them to be able to develop this ability. Clem reminded us that it is in our human nature to tell stories, and to listen to stories as a parallel to our own lives. I need to trust that my students “always already” (Gadamer) come to me with a deep understanding of story.

IV

Although Sophia began as a thin pseudonym for myself, her story gained momentum of its own as I began to imagine what can potentially be at stake in school. With Vox gone, I no longer had a literal “voice” to ensure that my message got across. In March, Clem Martini, the professor of Drama 471, asked to speak to me after class. “You overwrite”. He chided. I had heard that back in January from Gordon Pengilly, who led the fall playwrighting workshop. Maxine Greene’s words come as a reminder, “It is by writing that I often manage to name alternatives and to open myself to possibilities. This is what I think learning ought to be” (1995, p. 107). As I searched for clarity in my writing, I went back to reading; Janet Miller, David Smith, John Taylor Gatto each spoke volumes on the kinds of experiences that I was trying to use Sophia to describe. As I was trying to open up the world of an English teacher, to read Sophia’s story “out into the world” (Jardine, 2003, p. 57), I became paralysed by the possibilities. I knew that I needed to develop a sense of judgement if I were to stay the course. Not every door could remain open. I tried to come

back to David Smith's notion of "disciplined obedience to the task at hand" (2006, p. 33). "You need to trust the dramatic form" Clem encouraged. I had forgotten that the purpose of playwrighting was not to transmit a message, but to explore the question through dramatic action.

I was afraid. I was afraid of criticising the very system that had gifted me with a paid leave to finish my Master's Degree. I was afraid of writing stereotypical characters that would be insulting to students, or teachers, administrators, immigrants, women, men, homosexuals, Muslims, or any other identity marker that I assigned to the characters who populated my play. At the heart of it all, I was afraid that I would discover that there is no life in teaching. I was afraid that I was writing myself into the possibility that I needed to find a new profession. How could it be that my quest for life in school could lead to the death of my teaching career? I refuse to believe that this trouble is mine alone. If thoughtful, practical, writerly people like me evacuate themselves out of our public education system, will that lead to intensified univocal thinking in schools?

You must change your life

Shaken by the fear that my time away from teaching had led me to think the worst, and worried that my student characters were thin constructions of my interpretation of the student voice, I returned to high school in search of rejuvenation (<L. re- "again" + *juvenis* "young"). I met with a Drama teacher and his students, some of whom had been in my English class the semester before. As I was being introduced, the teacher told his students that I was writing for teen actors. For the first time, I wondered if this play could become an opening into which students might begin to read their own understanding of how they have been schooled. I was nervous to share my work, but I needed the students' help to flesh out my teen characters. In this act of collective dramaturgy, "as both students and teacher we shepherd each other into maturity, each contributing our respective gifts in the Now" (Smith 2006, p. 31). I distributed copies of

the script which were covered with my questions, and unlike all the other times I've given students a list of questions, this time, I was in desperate need of their response.

The students found my characters to be believable, even likable, and they made suggestions which added nuances I had not considered, as I wondered at the subterranean lives of the students who surface in my classroom. Together, we worked out the possibilities and limitations of the lives of these fictional characters as we understood them through our own experiences; I was reminded of the power of imagination to work through questions, and decisions which are outside of our lived reality.

To tap into imagination is to become able to break with what is supposedly fixed and finished, objectively and independently real. It is to see beyond what the imaginer has called normal or "common-sensible" and to carve out new orders in experience. Doing so, a person may become freed to glimpse what might be, to form notions of what should be and what is not yet. And the same person may, at the same time, remain in touch with what presumably is. (Greene 1995, p. 19)

Although this is an imaginative, and not an autobiographical account, the exploration which reveals Sophia's sense of self and her sense of self-as-teacher mirror my own disruption. In order to make this disruption show, I needed to "up the stakes" of Sophia's situation, which took her journey into realms far beyond my own experience. In this way, this piece is a bit ham-fisted, as the dramatic action and timing makes it appear as though the consequences of Sophia's actions are nearly immediate, and always intensifying. Perhaps a different playwright could find a way to reveal the psychic effect of imminent consequences which seldom appear, and the melancholia of realising that everyone is too busy "doing school" to notice the risks that result in a pedagogical breakthrough.

You must change your life

My inquiry into playwrighting has helped me to compose myself within my profession, as I investigate one of the English Language Arts. Getting back to the artfulness of my profession has been a relief from the wear of the managerial aspects of school.

Unlike a more conventional essay-style thesis, playwrighting forced me to step outside my own schoolized notions of writing and begin anew in a genre that was unfamiliar, and in that way, get back to what is most basic about writing.

When I respond in a way true to the thing itself, I find my estrangement from it slowly melt away, so that I become one with it and it with me, and something new is brought into the world from out of us both. (Smith 2006, p. 33)

After sixteen months of drafting with dramaturgical support, my friend, and most significant dramaturge, announced that I have “found my voice” as a playwright. Finding my voice was not an act of recovering what had been hidden, or giving permission to my own authenticity, or allowing raw emotion to be expressed. It was only through the disciplined study of playwrighting that I was able to craft a piece of drama that speaks.

If it was through disciplined study of writing that I was able to speak, then I imagine that it is only through a disciplined study of reading that we are able to hear Rilke’s sculpture of Apollo, or Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, or Deanne Barrett’s *Schooled* cry, “You must change your life” (as Edmundson proposes).

We must step into a field of knowledge prepared to discipline ourselves to its ways.

Prologue Four: Stories Worth Living

Part of my interest in drama is to make public the often private and silenced pressures and anxieties and contingencies of life which are *at play* within the walls of public school. Grumet uses a theatrical metaphor which has been my companion through this journey:

If we recognize that the disciplines are merely signs pointing us to the world, then we don’t want to settle for someone else’s version of the world and recognize that we always have the possibility to pull back the edge of the curtain to see what lies beyond” (Grumet 2006, p. 52)

I needed to pull back the edge of the curtain which has defined a schoolized version of the humanities and see what lies beyond. Like Hamlet, I became keenly aware that I was *being played* and in turn, and my response, ironically, was to “pull back the curtain” (Grumet 2006, p. 52) by representing school within the parameters of the stage. I offer this piece up to the world of theatre, with the hope that its enactment might “hold as ‘twere the mirror up to nature” (Hamlet, Act 3, Sc 2). Unlike Hamlet, who sought to incite his murderous uncle into a guilty rage, I do not intend to point a finger at any one individual, but I am hopeful that any number of readers, actors, or audience members might see their own complicity in the story of school.

My purpose is not to inscribe the way the classroom is, instead I seek to create an impression which might suggest that we must change our lives. Achebe speaks to this transformative, in fact, the formative nature of stories.

Education is a complex and creative process and the more rounded it is the more productive it will become. It is not a machine into which you feed raw materials at one end and pick up packaged products at the other. It is, indeed, like creativity itself, “a many-splendored thing [...] The universal creative rondo revolves on people and stories. *People create stories create people*; or rather, *stories create people create stories*. (Achebe 1988, p. 162)

As if in echo to this refrain, Edmundson asks,

How will we tell ourselves stories, collective and individual, about our time here that can make life worth living? (2004, p. 138).

If stories create people, then it is imperative that people create stories worth living. I struggled to write the end of the play, because I so badly wanted to resolve the conflict, but I knew I shouldn't. Unlike the situations in my own life, this time, I could control the outcome. I could write a happy ending. And yet, I wanted to write a conclusion which is true to the complexity of the issues I have raised, none of which are neatly solved. The kind of story worth living might not be an easy Pollyanna tale or the unequivocal triumph

of good over evil. Instead, stories that are worthwhile are “worth worthy of rest and repose, worthy of returning, worthy of tarrying and remembering, of taking time, of whiling away our lives in their presence” (Jardine 2008, p 1), worth the toil of emotional disruption and thoughtful scholarship.

Writing this play has required my composure, and repose through the many drafts which indeed took a while. My ideation reveals itself in this work, just as the ideation which led to the modern school system reveals itself in the daily goings-on of school life. Neither the work of school, nor the structure of this play is about me:

Play itself is a transformation of such a kind that the identity of the player does not continue to exist for anybody. Everybody asks instead what is supposed to be represented, what is “meant”. The players (or playwright) no longer exist, only what they are playing. (Gadamer 2004, p. 111)

This is one of many school stories which serve as a tool for discussion about what is “meant” by institutional education. What are our social, political, and purposes for school? What are we playing at in school? What stories do we tell about our time in school that might make it worthwhile?

Author Chinua Achebe outlines the necessity of worthwhile stories:

Literature, whether handed down by word of mouth or in print, gives us a second handle on reality; enabling us to encounter in the safe, manageable dimensions of make-believe the very same threats to integrity that may assail the psyche in real life; and at the same time providing through the self-discovery which it imparts a veritable weapon for coping with these threats whether they are found within problematic and incoherent selves or in the world around us. (Achebe 1988, p.170)

It is in this spirit of self-discovery that I hope you will read the play. **Read the play once without the footnotes.** Read silently or out loud, as you wish. Become familiar with the texture and shape of the piece. Gather a group of people who are willing to read together, or find actors who will lend their voices and bodies to the roles. Let yourself be swept up

into Sophia's struggle to understand who she is becoming in the face of her students and colleagues. Laugh with surprise. Cry if you feel an itch at the corner of your eyes. Pathos is at the heart of drama.

And yet I hope you will allow this story to me more than catharsis. **Read it again with the footnotes.** Allow Sophia's episodes to give particular shape and substance to the story of school, the *textus* of education into which many theorists, historians and philosophers insinuate (<L. *insinuatus*, "wind one's way into") themselves. The footnotes I've included trace the back and forth of my reading and writing through this process which is simulated as you, the reader, go back and forth between dramatic text and textual note. This is more than mimesis, it is an invitation. Hans George Gadamer proposes this:

...all reading involves application, so that a person reading a text is himself a part of the meaning he apprehends. He belongs to the text that he is reading. The line of meaning that the text manifests to him as he reads it always and necessarily breaks off in an open indeterminacy. He can, indeed he must, accept the fact that future generations will understand differently what he has read in the text.

(Gadamer, 1989, p. 335)

This is to say, that the footnotes are not, nor could they be exhaustive, but I hope they serve as an invitation for further interpretation, in the spirit that Van Manen describes, "The interpretive examination of lived experience has this methodical feature of relating the particular to the universal, part to whole, episode to totality" (pg 36). I hope that you will weave your particular lived experiences into this *textus*. You belong to this story.

Don't say in years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story. You've heard it now. (King 2003, p. 119)

Schooled

by

Deanne Barrett

an original drama

Education must become like *textus*, like a text, a story whose telling is not over
David Smith, *Trying to Teach in a Season of Great Untruth*

Plot Synopsis

Schooled is the story of a teacher's struggling to better understand her identity as a professional as she faces the challenges of teaching English Language Arts within the institutional educational system.

Setting

The action takes place over one semester in a modern day Alberta high school in a multicultural urban community, specifically, Principal Johnson's office, and Sophia Hyde's classroom.

Dramatis Personae

- | | |
|----------------------|--|
| Bill Johnson: | The school principal. He wears a shirt, tie, and suit jacket. |
| Ed Taylor: | Ed is a veteran teacher in his mid fifties. He wears a shirt and tie, which he often re-adjusts in an effort to assert his authority. |
| Nate Francis: | A "teacher- friend" of Sophia's, early thirties. Nate dresses casually, but professionally, to strike the balance between teaching Social Studies and coaching basketball. |
| Sophia Hyde: | A new teacher in her early twenties. Sophia wears "teacher clothes"- middle class, conservative, trendy. |
| Mr. Aziz: | Fortyish Arab Muslim man, smartly dressed in a business suit and a heavy watch. This is Mo's uncle. |

Mo Aziz:	Grade 12 Arab Muslim student who wears expensive blue jeans, white dress shoes or pumas, and a silver chain.
Abby Tran:	Grade 12 student who in appearance is very average, yet stands out because of her precocity. Abby's name can easily be changed to indicate a different ethnicity.
Gagan Chopra:	Grade 12 East Indian student who is interested in soccer. Gagan is a gender-neutral East-Indian name. This character could be played by either gender, under any number of names, provided the character speaks in accented English.
Brendan:	Grade 12 student. He wears gamer t-shirts.
Intercom:	The voice of the school secretary. Rushed. Authoritarian.
Student:	Grade 12 student with an air of hostility toward school.

Scene 1: The hallway and Sophia's classroom

Nate sits in Sophia's classroom reading the local newspaper. Sophia is in the hallway, juggling her keys and an armload of books as she opens the door to her classroom. Sophia enters then shuts her classroom door and leans against it to support her weary frame. She jumps with surprise, dropping her books as Nate folds up his newspaper.

Nate: There's been an incident, Soph.

Sophia: Oh, Jesus! Nate! You scared the life out of me!

Nate and Sophia pick up the load of scattered books.

Intercom: Teachers, please be advised that this is the last day for students to make changes to their timetable. Students, there will be no more timetable changes after today.

The phone rings. Sophia answers

Sophia: Hello, Miss Hyde. Hi Ed. Yes, I'm here, I just got in. *(listens)* I'll be here, come on up.

Sophia hangs up the phone and looks at Nate

Nate: A kid from Composite high school was attacked last night. He suffered a neck injury, and spinal cord damage.

Sophia: Oh, God! How did it happen?

Nate: *(reading the newspaper)* "Homosexual youth assaulted". I guess it was kids that he knew from school.

Sophia: Our school?

Nate: They didn't say. But some of our kids probably knew him. The kid's caseworker says he was being bullied at school. I don't think that Mr Johnson can hold out much longer on his position.

Sophia: You can see why he said no.

Nate: That was last year. Maybe this case will be the proof we need that this is a problem.

Sophia: It's a problem that our principal will have nothing to do with, especially now!

Nate: This incident might help prove our point.

Sophia: Johnson doesn't want to deal with angry parents who think that a couple of teachers are trying to promote a gay lifestyle.

Nate: A kid was violently attacked!

Sophia: That's exactly why he won't want to make any more kids into targets!
(pause) Look. Sometimes it's better just to shut the door, and say what you need to say in your classroom, and not get the whole school worked up about it.

Nate: Whose side are you on?

Sophia: I'm not taking sides, Nate; I'm just trying to manage.

Enter Ed, impatient.

Ed: Morning Nate. Sophia, there's been an incident.

Sophia: Nate was just telling me. Isn't it horrible?

Ed: I don't know how a teacher could be so careless to leave a secure exam lying around where a student could get his hands on it!¹

Sophia: What?

Ed: There's been a leak! The student's have the answer key! Have your students taken the baseline test?²

¹ "To be true means to be able to manage. If little color-coded developmental readers help us manage the development of reading skills in young children, then their use is in this sense true" (Jardine in Smith, 2006, p. xvi). Ed is determined that baseline reading comprehension tests help us manage the development of reading skills in high school students, and yet choosing one of four answers is not true to the discipline of reading.

² "I want to escape our sadomasochistic preoccupations with accountability in order to think about what kind of world needs to be the object of our educational aspirations and intentionality,

Sophia sighs.

Nate: Baseline test?

Ed: It's a reading comprehension test. Sophia, have your students taken the test?

Sophia: No, Ed, they haven't done it.

Ed: Well, that rules you out. But you still need to baseline them. It's your first time teaching English thirty dash two, and in my experience³, it's very helpful to know where the students are.

Nate: Won't they be in Sophia's classroom?⁴

and then less philosophically, what world might form a new ground for teaching and teacher education" (Grumet 2006, p. 49).

³ Ed may be experienced (experience <L. *ex-*, out of + *peri*, around, *experiri*, to try, to test) in the ways of school, but he offers little in experience of the field of literature in the sense which Gadamer proposes, "Experience stands in an ineluctable opposition to knowledge and to the kind of instruction that follows from general theoretical or technical knowledge. The truth of experience always implies an orientation toward new experience. That is why a person who is called experienced has become so not only *through* experiences but is also open *to* new experience" (Gadamer 1989, p. 350)

⁴ Nate's playfulness hints at a deeper argument about the place of scientific rationalism in assessing the humanities. The natural sciences have infiltrated the social sciences so that we perceive human interactions through a lense of scientific positivism, which confuses our understanding of what might be true of the discipline of humanities. Robert Bellah indicates that even scientific positivism is not irrefutable, "We do not know whether what we have created and so "understood" is the result of any natural necessity or is the product of our own moral imagination. We cannot be sure whether we have really observed something or whether we have persuaded, cajoled, or forced it into existence" (Bellah 1981).

Ed: If they're low readers, or if they have difficulty articulating themselves in writing. There are tests for that kind of thing.

Sophia: I was waiting until the timetables were settled. I don't even know all of their names yet.

Ed: Well, don't use the version I gave you, it's not secure. I have another test from a few years ago that we'll have to use now. It's a bit dated, but it's still a nationally approved resource. It's very efficient⁵.

Exit Ed

Sophia: I was trying to avoid stressing them out over it; they already know they're not great readers. I don't know what more this test will prove.

Nate: *(sarcastically)* But it's a nationally approved resource, Sophia!

Sophia: I don't know what you have against Ed he's just trying to help!

⁵ Janice Gross Stein argues that our penchant for efficiency has reached cult status, "The three English words "efficiency," "effectiveness," and "efficacy" all derive from the same Latin verb, *efficere*. It captures all the dimensions of efficiency, bringing together the whole rather than focusing on one part, separate from the larger context. *Efficere* translates from the Latin as "to bring about, to accomplish, to effect." Only in modern times do we separate effectiveness, efficacy, and efficiency, and our public conversation is consequently fractured- and impoverished." (Stein 2001, p. 17). Teachers choose baseline testing and multiple choice, machine assessed scantron tests because they are efficient, that is to say, they take little time to mark. However, these tests cannot be an effective measure nor can they engender efficacy in reading, as they have little relationship to reading itself.

Nate: Ed's a bully. He's looking for someone young and impressionable, so he can feel like he's in charge of his own little kingdom. He can tell poor peasants like us what's important.

Ed enters, thumbing through his binder and talking.

Ed: Sometimes this job is about crisis management! Here's my binder with the baseline test, it's important to do the test early, so you can see their development over the semester. If you do the test too late, you won't have any time to see them progress. Here are a few other multiple choice tests that I use throughout the year to keep the students on track. They're not nationally approved, mind you, but I've been using them for years. Have you chosen your first text?

Sophia: All we had left in the book room was Hamlet.

Ed: Hamlet? With the thirty dash two's? I'll get my binder⁶.

Exit Ed.

Nate: Don't let him brainwash you with all this binder stuff.

⁶ Ed's first interaction with Sophia is commonplace in schools, as one teacher passes off a binder of assignments to another teacher. This gesture is symbolic of the way that we consistently abandon beginning teachers to predetermined lessons as an "efficient" method of mentorship. Paolo Freire's work indicates that, "Any situation in which "A" objectively exploits "B" or hinders his and her pursuit of self-affirmation as a responsible person is one of oppression. Such a situation in itself constitutes violence, even when sweetened by a false generosity, because it interferes with the individual's ontological and historical vocation to be more fully human" (Freire 2005, p. 55). As teachers, we often believe that we are making things easier for our colleagues, instead of finding ways to help our colleagues cultivate their professional judgement.

Sophia: You're still reading those crazy conspiracy theories aren't you?

Nate: David Smith is a scholar Sophia! At least he's ballzy enough to admit that this...empire...is based on a massive campaign of misinformation!⁷

Sophia: Some of us are just here to work with kids⁸. Plain and simple.

Nate: Don't you remember Ed's little outburst last year?

Sophia: He just took on too many things, I think. Everyone gets overwhelmed by the end of the year. He seems fine now.

Nate: Yes, Ed thrives on crisis management! A kid was attacked, and he's worried about exam security!

Enter Ed, another binder in hand.

⁷ Nate has been reading David Smith's book, *Trying to Teach in a Season of Great Untruth*, and he is concerned about his complicity in the "enfrauding of the public sphere" (p. 3, p. 62).

⁸ Sophia's naiveté is representative of so many young men and women who join the teaching profession with vague notions of "helping society" and "loving kids" which are quickly challenged in the face of their particular teaching assignment. As David Smith proposes, "the true or final identity of the teacher does not rest with me and my self-understandings, but that somehow it must be worked out in relation to that which confronts me in the Now" (Smith 2006, p. 30). This present consciousness is at the heart of a *living* discipline. Sophia is faced with *this* historical text, with *these* students, and this is the space in which her pedagogical tact must be cultivated.

Ed: Ok. This binder has the tried and true Hamlet lessons I've been using for years, well, for thirty dash one. You'll probably have to dumb it down for dash two. There are worksheets to go with each section. It's all in here⁹.

Sophia: I thought I'd start with Hamlet's anxiety. Do you have anything on character development?

Ed thumbs through the binder, and shows one page to Sophia

Ed: Start with the basics¹⁰. Here we go. The five ways to get to know a character; what he says about himself, his appearance, what he says about others, what others say about him, and how he behaves. It's all in a nice little chart. You sometimes have to spoon-feed them, but they can find the answers to the ways that Hamlet's character develops. They can't find the answer to angst¹¹.

⁹ Ed's sense of generosity extends to Sophia insofar as he believes that he will save her trouble "[...] under the auspices of this analytic idea of "the basics," the aim is to improve it by more clearly, carefully, and meticulously marking off, isolating, and separating distinguishable knowledge, skills, and attitudes. With such improvements, a particular child's mastery of a specific knowledge, skills, and attitudes can be equally clearly, carefully, and meticulously tracked, tested, and assessed. (Jardine 2003, p. 4)

¹⁰ Through Ed, we begin to get a sense of how far the rich inheritance of English Language Arts has been subsumed by a schoolized version. "[...] educational theory and practice seems stuck when it comes to imagining that what this term basics might mean in the living work of teachers and learners, except in the taken-for-granted and exhausted ways that the profession has inherited" (Jardine, 2003, p. 3). Ed understands that "That which is most real or most basic to any discipline we might teach are its smallest, most clearly and distinctly isolatable, testable, and assessable bits and pieces" (Jardine 2003, p. 4)

¹¹ "The vivifying quality of teaching-as-truth-dwelling (as it may be called) gets blocked if teaching is understood primarily as an act of implementation, with the curriculum as a settled commodity emerging from a settled anterior logic heading for a posterior conclusion: Teaching itself is

Sophia: It sounds like it's all laid out for me, then¹²

Ed: By the end, they can pound out a really great five paragraph essay for the diploma. It took me a little while to get the whole thing together, but now I can plan out the whole unit and know what I'll be doing for a month, I don't even have to think about it!

Sophia: Wow!

Ed: This should save you a lot of time, there's no sense re-inventing the wheel! And this (*Ed pats the binder*) is an excellent wheel! It's about quality of life¹³!

reduced in the process to being nothing but a form of procedural manipulation in which the being of the teacher requires no true encounter with the being of the student, or with the curriculum as something open and interpretable, something that could show the way to a possible future" (Smith 2006, p. 28).

¹² In an effort to fit into the systematics of efficiency, the legacy of Fredrick Winslow Taylor and the efficiency movement, Sophia falls into what Jardine and Friesen call the "persistent and now pernicious story-line...now trumpeted often in schools as simply "the way things are," "the real world." Thus cast under the "sickness of literalism" (Hillman, 1989, p. 3), it is a story that has forgotten and fallen silent of its telling" (Friesen, S. & Jardine, D. 2009)

¹³ "The Good Life is problematic and vulnerable precisely because of its entrapment within a logic of self-sufficiency and its blindness to the suffering of global others, a blindness that make the delusion of self-sufficiency possible" (Smith 2006, p 74). Smith refers both to the macrocosm of Global economics, and the microcosm of the classroom. Teachers often understand the achievement of classroom management and the self-sufficiency of pre-planned lessons to be markers of "The Good Life". Our students suffer the illusion of meaningful work and we are all blind to the ways that our efforts could be a contribution to the world and not merely a mental exercise for possible future use.

Sophia: Ok, Ed, thanks.

Ed: Speaking of quality of life, let's look at your class list.

Sophia hands the list to Ed.

Hmmm. I hope you aren't letting these two sit together. Look out for this guy. Trouble. Oh, you'll like her. Very keen. The rest I don't know. Sorry. *(Ed takes a deep breath and sighs)* You know, I just love September. A fresh start.

Exit Ed. Sophia holds the two binders to her chest and looks at Nate.

Nate: Quality of life¹⁴? So he never has to think about it again? Wow.

Sophia: He's been marking the final exams for years, so there's gotta be something in here that can help me.

Scene 2: The hallway and Sophia's classroom

Brendan and Gagan are in the hallway outside Sophia's classroom. Sophia is inside her classroom, which contains her desk, a telephone, a whiteboard, and at least four student

¹⁴ "We may begin by asking a simple question: "What makes teaching a liveable experience?" and then elaborate an answer through positive and negative examples. Through the negative examples we can identify the various ways that teaching can no longer be called such and teachers break down, finding themselves in circumstances that clearly are not liveable; that is, that cannot sustain life in any meaningful sense. Positive examples in turn identify the ways through which the teaching life is worth living, or better, life is discovered to be worth living through teaching." (Smith 2006, p. 27-28)

desks which are positioned to indicate that the audience fills the remainder of the classroom seats. Sophia checks the freshness of her armpits and breath before the students arrive. She reaches into her desk for some gum, then begins to prepare for class, sorting through books and writing on the board.

Gagan: Yo, my brother says get out of Miss Hyde's class.

Enter Abby

Brendan: I checked her out on the internet last night, you know, "Rate my teacher".

Abby: Is that how geeks get girls? Checking them out on the internet?

Brendan: I was checking out the teacher.

Abby: Eew!

Brendan: To see if I should stay in her class, retard!

Gagan: Whaddit say?

Brendan: Wait, I printed it out. *(he finds the paper in his backpack)*. Um, ok "Miss Sophia Hyde. Not really clear with her descriptions, and not helpful. Isn't very clear with what she wants you to do."

Gagan: See what I tell you?

Abby: Did you look up Mr. Taylor? I heard he went crazy!

Brendan: Teachers burn out, they don't actually go crazy.¹⁵

Abby: My friend Jenny said he actually went crazy. Right in the middle of Romeo and Juliet he started throwing books 'n yelling about how lazy they all were, and then he stormed out of class! I don't know why he's a teacher if he hates kids so much.

Class change music begins. The beginning and end of each class period is punctuated by fast-paced music to usher students to class, as is the fashion in many high schools. The selection of music could reflect the interests of the students or teachers, while also supporting the themes and energy of the scene. Alternately, class change can be signalled by a harsh bell.

Brendan: Hey, did you hear about the kid who got curbstomped?

Abby: Curbstomped?

Brendan: Haven't you seen that movie? What's it called? You know, where they force the guy to lay down on the street and bite down on the curb, and then the guy stomps on the back of his neck. He gets curbstomped.

Abby: Oh, God! Where?

Brendan: The back of his neck! His whole face got smashed!

¹⁵ "Through the negative examples we can identify the various ways that teaching can no longer be called such and teachers break down, finding themselves in circumstances that clearly are not liveable; that is, that cannot sustain life in any meaningful sense." (Smith 2006, p. 27-28)

Abby: No, I mean where, like in the city?

Brendan: Yeah, at North Mall. I guess his jaw snapped when they stomped him.

Abby and Gagan cover their mouths and grimace in disgust. Gagan passes the soccer ball from one foot to the other throughout the scene. Mo is sitting in the audience (class sizes are indeed out of control). He begins a loud conversation on his cell phone that competes with Sophia's instructions.

Sophia: Ok, people! Let's get started. *(Sophia shuts the classroom door)* We're going to take up your Hamlet questions that are due today. Remember last week, when we read...

Mo: Yeah, three thirty. No, I don't think so. Why? Yo, Serious? Why? No, No I didn't say that, I...

Sophia glares at Mo. She waits.

Mo: I didn't. No! Ok, well, he says I did, I say I didn't, Wallah! So...there you...No...

Sophia: Gaggin, you need to move up here to the front.

Gagan: It's Gagan.

Sophia: Sorry. Gagan! *(She points to Mo)*

Mo ends his call and puts his phone in his pocket.

Mo: I'm Mo.

Sophia: Well Mo, you need to move up here to the front.

Mo: Yo, seriously?

Sophia: Yes, seriously. Apparently you need to be up here where I can keep an eye on you.

Mo: It's ok Lady, I'm fine back here.

Sophia: No, you're not. I'm going to wait while you move.

Mo gets out of his seat and drags his backpack up to the front. He drops his backpack and flops into his chair, and crosses his arms.

Sophia: Your booklets are due today. Get them out, and we'll review the answers.

Sophia scans the rows to see who has, and who has not completed their work. She stops at Brendan.

Brendan: Umm, about that...

Sophia: You didn't do it?

Brendan: Meh¹⁶

Sophia: You had all weekend to work on it!

Brendan: Meh.

Sophia: You need to submit your work tomorrow.

Gagan: Were we supposed to write the question as the first part of the answer?¹⁷

Sophia: That would help me understand what you're talking about.

Gagan: I wrote down the question number, and then my answer¹⁸

¹⁶ Mark Edmundson meditates upon his experience teaching literature in a university, and after receiving years of student feedback, has come to ascertain that,

The classroom atmosphere they most treasured was relaxed, laid-back, cool. The teacher should never get exercised about anything, on pain of being written off as a buffoon. Nor should she create an atmosphere of vital contention, where students lost their composure, spoke out, became passionate, expressed their deeper thoughts and fears, or did anything that might cause embarrassment. Embarrassment was the worst thing that could befall one; it must be avoided at whatever the cost. (2004, p. 11)

In this context, Edmundson suggests, "Enthusiasm quickly looks absurd". Students such as Mo and Brendan attempt to capitalise on an image of being laid back in lieu of intellectual engagement. This is yet another example of how the cultural norms of school have come to impede our ability to engage in the disciplines of study.

¹⁷ "When the language of schooling is not about the world, nor even about the disciplines, it collapses into language for processes of communication between teachers and students" (Grumet 2006).

¹⁸ "Many students...intuitively know what the schools do for them. They school them to confuse process and substance. Once these become blurred, a new logic is assumed: the more treatment there is, the better are the results; or, escalation leads to success. The pupil is thereby "schooled"

Sophia: I'm sure I'll make some sense of it, then. *(pause)* Gaggin, you are Gaggin, right? The ball?

Gagan: Gagan

Sophia: Gaggin

Gagan: Close enough

Gagan passes the ball to Sophia, who puts it under her desk.

Abby: Why do we have to do chapter questions anyways?

Sophia: I did them when I was in High School, and now it's your turn. And it's preparing you for the final exam. You'll have to be able to do a close reading of Shakespeare on your own by then.¹⁹

Gagan: What?

to confuse teaching with learning, grade advancement with education, a diploma with competence, and fluency with the ability to say something new" (Illich 1973).

¹⁹ Mark Edmundson relates a helpful anecdote,

The Harvard University scholar Walter Jackson Bate purportedly used a Marx Brothers style routine to capture what he thought of as New Critical close reading. "Close reading," he'd mutter, and push the book up near his nose. "Closer reading": with a laugh, digging his face down into the book. Then finally, "Very close reading," where nose and book kissed and not a word of print was legible. Bate's routine suggests that with a certain kind of exclusive attention to the page, life disappears. The connection between word and world goes dark (or becomes somewhat deviously implicit). The reader is left adrift, uncompassed, in a sea of sentences. (2004)

Abby: Oh, man!

Sophia: Ok, let's discuss the questions. *(she reads)* When Gertrude asks Hamlet why he seems to be so particularly troubled by his father's death in Act 1, Scene 2, line 75, why is he so troubled by her use of the word "seems?"

Sophia looks at her class. No-one answers.

Well?

Sophia stares the class down.

Page 16, come on- have a look back at the text. Gertrude asks Hamlet, "why seems it so particular with thee?" And then he responds, "Seems, madam! Nay it is; I know not 'seems.'" Abby stop texting and pay attention.

Abby: I am paying attention

Sophia: I can see you texting while I'm reading. It's rude. And it's distracting. To you, and everyone around you.

Abby: Miss, it's Hamlet. *(Abby holds up her phone for Sophia to see)*

Sophia: On your phone?

Abby: Yeah, I downloaded the complete works of Shakespeare last night for free.

Sophia: Oh. Really? *(Sophia strains toward Abby to have a look)* Wow. So then Hamlet says 'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother, nor customary suits of solemn black, nor windy suspiration of forced breath, no, nor the fruitful river in the eye, nor the dejected 'haviour of the visage, together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief, that can denote me truly: these indeed seem, For they are actions that a man might play²⁰: But I have that within which passeth show; These are but the trappings and the suits of woe."
(pause) Come on! You all wrote something last night- why was Hamlet so upset?

Sophia fetches Gagan's ball. As she turns her back, Mo whispers to Brendan, who sits near the phone.

Mo: Yo, what's the number on the phone?

Brendan leans out of his seat to see the number.

Brendan: 329. Why?

Sophia faces the class, as Mo enters the number into his cellphone.

²⁰ Hamlet's words articulate the interplay between dramatic art and life, which become richly layered in this scene. Through the text alone, Hamlet argues that unlike an actor who may only have the outer appearance of grief, Hamlet has grief within him. Sophia's students, and the audience, understand Sophia's frustration as she reads these lines, while the reader of the text, and perhaps an unengaged audience member, can comprehend that the actress who plays Sophia is putting on the outer appearance of frustration. In this way, the reading of a text is richly complicated by its context, and any question of what a text might mean, is highly situational.

Sophia: Ok, when I throw the ball you have to catch it, and then give your best answer. Then you can choose who gets the ball next. Why was Hamlet so upset?

She throws the ball to Gagan, he catches.

Gagan: He wears black?

Sophia: He's wearing black, yes. Why is he so upset?

Mo hides his cellphone under his desk. The classroom phone rings. Sophia answers

Sophia: Miss Hyde. Hello?...Hello?... *(She hangs up)* Sorry. Ok. Gagan. Why is Hamlet wearing black?

Gagan: Because his Dad just died

Sophia: Right, so why does his Mom want him to stop wearing black?

Gagan tosses the ball to Abby

Abby: Because she just got married

The phone rings again. Sophia answers.

Sophia: Miss Hyde. Hello? *(Sophia hangs up. She is frazzled. She mutters to herself)*
Outside line. *(Sophia peers at her students and carries on with the lesson)*

When Gertrude uses the word “seems” with Hamlet, why does it tick him off?

Silence

Sophia: Abby, why is he so upset by that word?

Abby: Because he feels like his Mom is picking on him?

The classroom phone rings. Sophia moves toward the phone, but it stops ringing by the time she gets there.

Sophia: How is he being picked on?

Abby: Well, it’s like she’s saying that he’s faking it- he’s just wearing black as if to show that he’s sad, when he’s really not

Sophia: Yes. Good. So this established the theme of seeming versus being. Write that in your notes.

The students groan. Abby throws the ball back to Sophia.

Sophia: Come on, get out a piece of paper and a pen, and write this down. (*Sophia waits, as the students slowly procure their supplies, after borrowing from each other, and her*) The theme is seeming versus being, and it is introduced here, in Act 1, Scene 2.

The classroom phone rings. Sophia ignores it. She is livid.

Abby: Aren't you going to get that?

Sophia: No.

Sophia glares at her students. The phone rings five times. Then stops.

Sophia: Seeming versus being.

Gagan: Seeing versus bean? What?

Sophia: Being. B-E-I-N-G. What seems to be versus what is. *(Sophia sighs wearily and checks her watch)* Ok, everyone. There are just a few minutes left in class, and I wanted to talk about something. I'm sure a number of you have heard about the student who was attacked over the weekend.

Mo: The fag kid

Sophia: The gay student

Abby: That's why he was attacked?

Brendan: They'd been harassing him for months.

Sophia: Yes. That's why I wanted to talk to you. School should be a safe place for everyone. In this classroom, you are expected to treat everyone with respect. If you feel you aren't being respected, you need to come and speak

to me, and together we can address the issue. And the guidance counsellors are always available as well.

Abby: *(to Brendan)* Like I'm going to talk to some stranger.

Class change music plays

Complete Scene 4 and 5 questions for tomorrow. And if I see anyone with a cellphone in class tomorrow, I'll send you to the office.

Abby: That's not fair!

Sophia: Not you, Abby, I know you have Shakespeare on your phone. It's fine.

Students exit as Sophia begins marking the assignments they have submitted. By the third paper, she flips back to the first paper, and then looks at both papers side by side, realising that the students have copied each other's work.

Sophia: The same spelling mistakes?

Enter Nate, furious.

Nate: Do you have extra chairs?

Sophia: In the corner. Help yourself. You're still getting new students?

Nate: Yup. This makes 45.

Sophia: Is that even legal?

Nate: I'd check the policy if I had time.

Sophia: That's crazy. What other profession has to put up with working conditions like this?

Sophia goes back to her marking as Nate drags the chair next to Sophia. Nate sits. He sighs, and picks up a booklet.

Sophia: I didn't go to university for six years for thousands of dollars of debt and a stack of marking. *(waving an assignment at Nate)* What's their problem? They can't even write in complete sentences?

Nate: What is this, Hamlet?

Sophia: Yeah, I thought giving them the questions would get them to read the text. You know? Give them something to consider in advance, and then they're prepared for discussion... They all copied off each other, and then they come to class and they're texting, and playing with soccer balls, and prank calling the classroom!

Nate: Do they have to do the questions?

Sophia: Yes!... No...I don't know! That's what you do when you study Shakespeare! You work through it, scene by scene, and you answer the questions²¹, to

²¹ Reading, writing, viewing, representing, listening, and speaking are the six strands of the English Language Arts Program of Studies in Alberta. Through asking her students to read and write about

make sure you understand the play, so you can write about it on the test. They don't know anything, I've never taught grade twelve before, and I don't want to screw them up on the exam. It's worth fifty percent of their grade!

Nate: Weren't you talking about angst or something?

Sophia: I didn't know how I was going to keep the kids talking about it, and I had Ed's binder²², so...

Nate: So?

Sophia: I don't know what else to do²³!

the questions *she* has for *them*, Sophia indicates that the most valuable questions about Hamlet are the ones asked by the teacher, who also holds the authorised answers. Were Sophia to ask her students to pose their own questions about Hamlet, she may have taken the work into the living discipline of English, rather than keeping Hamlet, and her students locked in the self-referentiality of school. "If we recognize that the disciplines are merely signs pointing us to the world, then we don't want to settle for someone else's version of the world and recognize that we always have the possibility to pull back the edge of the curtain to see what lies beyond" (Grumet 2006)

²² "While bemoaning students' lack of interest in school studies (designated as their lack of motivation), educators have resisted using the disciplines to understand the worlds students know and care about, the worlds close at hand, the worlds they could both think about and act in. (Grumet 2006)

²³ Sophia is suffering under the oppression of the inheritance of a schoolized version of her profession. "The oppressed suffer from the duality which has established itself in their innermost being. They discover that without freedom they cannot exist authentically. Yet, although they desire authentic existence, they fear it. They are at one and the same time themselves and the oppressor whose consciousness they have internalized. The conflict lies in the choice between being wholly themselves or being divided; between human solidarity or alienation; between following prescriptions or having choices; between being spectators or actors; between acting or

Sophia throws Ed's binder. She stands and paces, as Nate watches her tantrum.

You know what a mother told me at parent teacher interviews last year?
Everyone hates Shakespeare. Just like that. Everyone hates Shakespeare. It
was like she slapped me in the face.

Nate: Soph, are you ok? I've never seen you like this!

Sophia: I don't know. I don't know how to explain it all to them, there's just so
much! I mean... If Shakespeare only looks like THIS, I'd hate it too. Some kid
got attacked over the weekend, and I'm sitting here forcing kids to read
some dead old white guy! I want this to be interesting! I want my students
to understand!

Nate: Understand what?

Sophia: Shakespeare! Hamlet! Life! I don't know! I want to do this. There's gotta be
a better way than this. I just... I just need to think about it²⁴.

Scene 3: Sophia's classroom

Sophia enters her classroom with a Hamlet text and her huge bag of marking. She sits and marks. The class change music begins, Brendan, and Gagan enter the classroom.

having the illusion of acting through the action of the oppressors; between speaking out or being silent, castrated in their power to create and re-create, in their power to transform the world. This is the tragic dilemma of the oppressed which their education must take into account." (Friere 2005, p. 48)

²⁴ Sophia needs to engage in "the sort of thinking that is deliberately done in the face of the young, in the face of those who ask us to come out of the orbit of our singular logic and listen to what their arrival portends about them and us and this world of ours" (Jardine in Smith, 2006, xi)

Brendan: So I was playing WOW²⁵ last night, and we were in Violet Hold...

Gagan: Ok, wait, are you alliance or horde?

Brendan: Dude, I'm a forsaken warlock, what do *you* think? Ok, so were in this instance called Violet Hold it's a five man...you know what that is, right?

Gagan: Like, a whole bunch of you do it together

Sophia gets out of her desk, and begins writing her lesson plan on the board, where she can overhear the boys' conversation

Brendan: And this was no easy tank'n'spank. We were totally pwning this whole scene, and we were wailing on this dragon, Cyanigosa, I sent in my voidwalker demon, and unloaded all my D.O.T.'s. The priest was doing some phat heals, so the tank was holding threat, and my buddy, he's a death-knight, was totally wailing on him from the sides. I mean, Cyanigosa got schooled!

Sophia stops writing on the board and turns toward Brendan. Brendan watches Abby as she enters and sets her backpack on her desk, then bends over to tie her shoe, then Brendan returns to his story.

²⁵ World of Warcraft is just one of many online videogames that has captured the attention of teens and adults alike. The proliferation of online worlds in which people are engaging beg many questions about the nature of 20th century learners who are compelled by a level of interactivity and immediate feedback which is often absent in classroom life. The technology of the printing press, the computer printer, and now online publishing and gaming are all a part of the living inheritance of story.

Brendan: She dropped these epic azure cloth bindings, and I totally won the roll! 81!

Sophia: Schooled?

Brendan: You got owned, you got schooled, you got, like, taught a lesson.²⁶

Sophia: I've been schooled.

Brendan: No, like, you got schoooooled!

Sophia: No, I mean me. I'm the one. I've been schooled. Oh, God, I've been schooled!²⁷

Sophia laughs in astonishment and renewed hope. Her students are uncomfortable with her unusual behaviour.

Brendan: That guy who got curbstomped, now HE got schooled!

Enter Mo

Mo: He got what he deserved

²⁶ Brendan remains un-engaged in school to prevent his own embarrassment; if he were to engage in school he risks the entanglement of being pwned. Instead, Brendan positions himself as a videogame expert, where he can school others, and resist the embarrassment of opening himself up to a harsh lesson. In this way, Brendan is closed off to new experiences which offer growth.

²⁷ "Understanding begins [...] when something addresses us" (Gadamer 1989, p. 298). Sophia's frustration has just found an articulation.

Sophia moves to her desk and dons her black blazer, bolstering her sense of authority.

Sophia: Mo. I will not tolerate that kind of comment in my classroom. No-one deserves to be attacked.

Mo: Whatever happened to free speech?

Abby: Are we doing Hamlet today?

Brendan whispers to Gagan.

Mo: huh, huh, “doing” Hamlet. That sounds gay....huh huh

Sophia: Mo, you need to sit up at the front.

Mo: Why?

Sophia: Because. That’s your assigned seat.

Mo: Since when?

Sophia: Right now. Have a seat. Ok class. Everyone. Ladies and Gentlemen. *(To Brendan, who is still whispering)* Brendan. Remember, today your review of the Hamlet video from last week is due, so hand them in please.

The students groan, and grumble as they find their papers and pass them up to Sophia.

Gagan: When are we going to get back those chapter questions?

Sophia: Umm. *(Sophia shuts the classroom door)* I'm still...marking them. So. Today we're going to do something different. A character sketch.

Abby: Didn't we do that already? That chart thingy? What a character says, what a character does...

Brendan: Can I just get the worksheet for this and get it over with?

Sophia: *(erasing the plans on the board)* No, this is a different kind of character sketch

There is knock at the door. Enter Mr. Johnson, the principal.

Mr. Johnson: This is an ID card check everyone. Miss Hyde, good morning!

Sophia: Good morning, Mr Johnson. Come on everyone, you should already be wearing your ID!

The students search for their ID cards and struggle to pin them on their shirts quickly as Mr. Johnson moves efficiently up and down the rows, checking. Sophia frantically searches for her card under her blazer and clips it to her lapel.

Mr. Johnson: Mo, where's your ID? *(he looks at the I.D. card)* Hala Youssef? You don't look like Hala Youssef

Mo: Uh, yeah. We, uh, switched yesterday.

Mr. Johnson: Go to the office and put your name on the list

Mo: Are you going to call home?

Mr. Johnson: Yes. One more infraction and you're suspended for the day. And tell Hala that if she wants to be your girlfriend much longer, she'd better return your ID.

Mo pulls his cellphone out of his pocket and starts texting as he walks to the office. Mr. Johnson continues with his tour, and is satisfied.

Mr. Johnson: Well, Miss Hyde, you've been doing well to enforce our new policy. If we have 100% compliance next time I drop by, we'll enter your name in the teacher's draw.

Exit Mr. Johnson.

Abby: Miss, what will you win in the draw?

Sophia: A get out of jail²⁸ free card

²⁸ Like Hamlet, Sophia feels melancholic over being confined:

Hamlet: What have you, my good friends, deserved at the hands of Fortune, that she send you to prison hither?

Guildestern: Prison, my lord!

Hamlet: Denmark's a prison.

(Act 2, Sc.2)

Abby: Seriously?

Sophia: No, I think it's coffee or chocolate or something. Ok, we're going to talk about the start of the play.

Gagan: The start! It took us two weeks to read the first part and now we have to do it all over again? Why don't we just read Coles Notes?

Sophia: It's a cold, dark night, and two guards outside the castle think they've seen a ghost. What do the guards look like?

Students shuffle in their seats uncomfortably, trying to avoid contact with anyone else in class.

Brendan: Are we just going to be talking all class?

Sophia stares down the class, waiting for someone to respond to her question.

Uncomfortable silence. Feet shuffling. Mo shifts in his seat.

Abby: They're wearing clothes

Sophia: Ok, clothes. So what kind of clothes would the guards have?

Abby: I'm not sure, um...

Sophia: Ok, so let's think about the two Palace guards and Horatio, the scholar. What would they look like? Brendan. How do guards look?

Brendan: *(frustrated)* Chainmail. They'd probably have on chainmail, with spears in their hands.

Abby puts up her hand and waits.

Gagan: *(to Brendan)* Chain what?

Brendan: Chainmail. You know, chainmail? Like, little loops of metal to make like, a shirt. For protection. Like armour.

Sophia: Ok. I want you to imagine that you're a costume designer and draw a picture of these people in your notes.

Mo: Pictures? You brought me up to the front to draw pictures?

Mo gets out of his chair and moves toward the door with Sophia calling after him.

Sophia: Mo. Mo!

Mo: I'm outta here!

Exit Mo, with the class watching as Sophia rushes to the door after him. When she gets to the door, she calls out to Mo one last time, then with a sigh, Sophia drops her shoulders feebly, and turns to face the class, who all become suddenly busy finding paper and pens. She goes back to drawing stick people on the board, each one labelled. Marcellus-guard. Bernardo-guard. Horatio-scholar. Brendan and Gagan grumble as they search for notebooks and paper. Abby is already at work.

Abby: I suck at drawing, can I do stick people?

Sophia: Yes, do stick people.

Nate enters the classroom. He nods at Sophia and slinks back to sit next to her desk, they talk in whispers as the students work.

Sophia: You have a prep this period?

Nate: *(sarcastic)* Yeah, I'm going to register my complaint against the administration, they keep doing their random ID card checks when I don't have a class. At this rate, I'll never win the prize!

Sophia: Nate, I've had a realisation

Nate: I kinda got that when you threw that binder the other day.

Sophia: I was frustrated! Because I couldn't think of anything better to do than stupid questions!

Nate: Exactly, Soph, exactly! We need...

The class change music begins. Sophia calls over the music.

Sophia: I want to see your character sketches tomorrow!

Nate and Sophia watch as Gagan leaves the class quickly, while Abby methodically packs up her bag, while Brendan times his movements so he can leave the class right behind her.

Brendan: Hey, Abby...

Exit Abby and Brendan, chatting, as Nate and Sophia share a knowing glance at the budding relationship.

Sophia: *(Singing John Lennon)* Imagine all the people, dum dum, living life in peace, ah, ahhhh. Aren't they cute?

Nate: Yeah. What was your realisation?

Sophia: I've been schooled.

Nate: What do you mean?

Sophia: I've been trained to think about school one way, so that now I'm afraid of anything that seems outside of what's usually done.

Nate: Exactly, Soph! Remember when we were in the Education program? We swore that we wouldn't get sucked into doing things just because "that's the way things are". Things haven't always been this way! Public school as we know it is only, what, two hundred years old? All of this has come from somewhere, and I want to know what that's all about. They're offering a class on the History of Education at the university, I brought you an application form.

Sophia: *(Singing)* they may say you're a dreamer, bum, bum, bum, But you're not the only one.

Nate: So you're in?

Sophia looks at her watch.

Sophia: Shoot! I'm late!

Sophia busies herself with packing up her papers, Nate holds out the university application which Sophia tries to ignore.

Sophia: I have to figure out my kids IPP's, and how to enter them on the computer thingy. Program. Prep my lessons for tomorrow. Write a note in Mo's file about leaving class. Figure out what I'm going to say to Mo about coming back to class. Maybe get some of my marking done.

Nate: Sophia, that's the point!

Sophia: What is?

Nate: We're so busy doing all these school things that we forget about what's really important!

Sophia: Nate, I'm barely treading water figuring out what to do every day with these kids, I just need more time to figure out what I can do differently. I don't have time to go back to school.

Nate: So I've been studying residential schools with my grade ten class. Do you know that in one church's apology they said that "the roots of the harm they have done are found in the attitudes and values of western European colonialism"? Western European Colonialism, Soph! That's what schools were built on.

Intercom: Miss Hyde, please call the office. Miss Hyde, call the office.

Nate: You said the other day that you just needed to think about what the hell we're doing here every day. Here's your chance.

Nate waves the application form at Sophia. Sophia walks to the phone and rests her hand on the receiver, about to make a call as she finishes up with Nate.

Sophia: I need to figure out what I'm doing here by being here, Nate! Not up in some Ivory Tower learning about theories!

Sophia's phone rings, and she answers, startled, as Nate flops the application form onto the desk nearest Sophia and exits.

Sophia: Hi Amanda, sorry, I was talking to Nate, oh, Hello Mr. Johnson. Sorry. Yes, I can come down to your office. Ok. *(Sophia hangs up, and then picks up the application form and dumps it in the recycling bin on her way out the door)*

Scene 4: Mr. Johnson's office

Mr. Johnson sits deep in his generous chair behind his desk. Sophia teeters on the edge of her chair.

Mr. Johnson: I have heard nothing but good things about you until today, Sophia. I don't take racism lightly, and I am particularly sensitive to this charge because of the multicultural nature of the school. I'm very sorry that this has happened. Very sorry indeed. As you may not know, Mohammed's family is quite prominent in this community, and I've already spoken to his uncle. Mohammed is also quite prominent, but unlike his uncle's business acumen, Mohammed prefers the prestige of arrogance and belligerence, of which his uncle is well aware. Mr Aziz will speak to his nephew.

Sophia is struggling to decode what Mr. Johnson has said. The length of Mr. Johnson's silence indicates to Sophia that she has a chance to speak.

Sophia: Sorry, someone is calling me a racist?

Mr. Johnson: Mohammed came down to the office this afternoon. I thought you were aware.

Sophia: He stormed out of my classroom because he was upset that I asked the class to draw pictures.

Mr Johnson: He claims that you dismissed his religious beliefs.

Sophia: Religious beliefs?

Mr Johnson: His beliefs about homosexuality. Sophia, if you are going to be discussing a controversial issue, it's best to give the students, and parents, advanced

notice. Send a letter home, so that parents and students know what's coming up, so they're not blindsided.

Sophia: Don't you think that this might be part of a larger issue?

Mr. Johnson: Don't overthink this, Miss Hyde. And don't let Mohammed get to you. A student like him is always looking for a weak link in the chain. Be fair but firm. I don't want to make mountains out of molehills, Sophia, but it is true that some students, those who come from certain cultural groups, respond better to men than women.

Sophia: I meant the gay student who was attacked

Mr. Johnson: It was discussed at the principal's meeting yesterday. I will let our staff know that a policy is being developed through the school board to address the issue. You're dismissed.

Scene 5: The Library

Sophia and Nate are sorting through a few cartloads of books.

Sophia: Don't overthink this! That's actually what he said to me! And then he said that the principals were developing a policy. Why can't we actually talk about the things that affect all of us every day, instead of pretending that someone higher up the food chain is handling it? *(Sophia holds up a book)* Is this one Social or English?

Nate: Social. So are you going to sign up for the university class?

Sophia: No. I don't have time, Nate.

Nate: You'll never have the time, Sophia. You have to take the time.

Sophia: Did you have a good weekend?

Nate: Sure did. I read *Tuesdays with Morrie*. Have you read it?

Sophia: No. I don't have time to read anymore.

Nate: Oh, it's beautiful. I think some of the English teachers use it for grade ten. Here, there's a copy right here. Listen. "The last class of my old professor's life took place once a week in his house, by a window in the study where he could watch a small hibiscus plant shed its pink leaves. The class met on Tuesdays. It began after breakfast. The subject was The Meaning of Life. It was taught from experience. No grades were given, but there were oral exams each week. You were expected to respond to questions, and you were expected to pose questions of your own. You were also required to perform physical tasks now and then, such as lifting the professor's head to a comfortable spot on the pillow or placing his glasses on the bridge of his nose. Kissing him good-bye earned you extra credit. No books were required, yet many topics were covered, including love, work, community, family, aging, forgiveness, and finally, death. The last lecture was brief, only a few words. A funeral was held in lieu of graduation."²⁹

²⁹ What possibility does Mitch Albom's text open up for Sophia as she considers the relationship between the meaning of life, experience, and her own complicity in the field of education?

Sophia: I like the “meaning of life”, “taught from experience” part. I wish school were more like that.

Nate hands the book to Sophia, who re-shelves it. Enter Ed with a stack of posters. He hands one each to Sophia and Nate.

Ed: Hang these in your classroom, and we’ll be able to fight the plague of cellphones

Nate: *(reading the poster)* I see ‘em, I hear ‘em, I take ‘em? Is this the new policy?

Ed: I had the Com Tech kids print up the posters. If everyone starts confiscating the phones, in a few weeks, we shouldn’t see them at all.

Sophia: So, what, we take the phone away, and then give it back at the end of class?

Nate: I don’t remember hearing anything about a new cellphone policy, Ed.

Ed: Sometimes wisdom comes from experience, not a unanimous decision. We just need to stop these kids from the distraction of texting each other every five seconds so their train of thought isn’t constantly interrupted! You know, back in my day...

Intercom: Attention teachers, a limited number of hot lunches will be served in the staff cafeteria today, after that only cold lunches will be served.

Ed: Well, I’d better beat the lunch rush!

Exit Ed, in a flurry of posters.

Sophia: I have a kid who reads Shakespeare on her phone, how am I supposed to take someone else's phone away?³⁰

Nate: You don't have to post this.

Sophia: But, Ed said...

Nate: This is Ed's solution to Ed's problem. I think you have bigger things to worry about.

Nate rips his poster and puts it in the recycling bin. Sophia leaves her poster intact, but places it in the bin.

³⁰ Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* provides a challenging framework within which to consider the interplay between the personal and political. Nafisi is a literature professor who describes walking down a hallway lined with posters reminding women how to dress properly under Ayatollah Khomeini's regime.

It is said that the personal is political. That is not true, of course. At the core of the fight for political rights is the desire to protect ourselves, to prevent the political from intruding on our individual lives. Personal and political are interdependent but not one and the same thing. The realm of imagination is a bridge between them, constantly refashioning one in terms of the other. Plato's philosopher-king knew this and so did the blind censor, so it was perhaps not surprising that the Islamic Republic's first task had been to blur the lines and boundaries between the personal and the political, thereby destroying both (Nafisi 2004, p. 273-4). The institution of school policy and its enforcement seems to take the issue of student safety (in the case of ID badges) and technological devices and their use (in the case of cell phones) and put them outside the purview of individual thought, and place them firmly within school policy. The interpretation and implementation of the policy is taken out of public discourse and placed firmly in the hands of the authorities. What does this do to our sense of efficacy?

Sophia: God, Nate, that's reassuring!

Nate: I didn't mean it like that. It's just that, your concerns have gone beyond cellphone policy. *(Nate stacks a few more books)* What did you do this weekend?

Sophia: I marked. I drove my bag of marking around in my car all last week thinking I'd be struck with the time and energy to mark the damn things, until I finally just had to give up a weekend to get it done. The work was pretty horrible. I keep thinking that if my classroom management was better, or if I'd made my expectations clearer, or if I'd walked them through the process just one more time, their work would be better. I don't know what the answer is.

Nate: Well, what's the question?

Sophia: What do you mean?

Nate: You said you don't know what the answer is, but what's the question?

Sophia: I don't know. How I'm supposed to do this my whole life, I guess. I mean, am I going to spend every day for the rest of my life dragging around a bag of marking that just makes me feel guilty for not being a better teacher? I can just hear what my kids are telling their parents. What did you do in school today, honey? Nothing. How am I supposed to make nothing turn into something?

Nate: Maybe you need to stop beating yourself up, for starters. Something will come up.

Scene 6: Sophia's classroom

Sophia is sitting in her classroom drinking coffee as she marks papers. Enter Abby.

Abby: Hey Miss Hyde. I heard that Hamlet is showing at the University, can we go?

Sophia: Um... When is it?

Abby: This week. Wednesday.

Sophia: We don't have time to send letters home to everyone.

Abby: It's at seven. We could just meet there.

Sophia nods, to show Abby that she's listening, but her attention is diverted to Mo, who enters.

Sophia: Mo. We need to have a conversation.

Mo: Uh, yeah.

Mo approaches Sophia's desk. Sophia stands opposite Mo, who also stands; the desk is between them.

Sophia: If you have a problem with what's happening in this class, you need to come and speak to me, first. I want you to graduate, you want you to graduate, and so you need to come to class and do the work. Go sit down.

Mo sits. Class change music begins. Enter Gagan and Brendan wearing a t-shirt that says "Bored of Education".

Abby: We're going to see Hamlet!

Gagan: Field trip!

Brendan: Keeners.

Abby: Brendan, maybe you could get a girlfriend if you got out of the house once in a while.

Sophia: No, I never said that we were going. We have to fill out some forms, and I don't think there's enough time. *(she sees Abby's dejected look)* Well... We can talk about it at the end of class. *(pause)* So your latest assignment was to write a script for a scene in Hamlet. Gagan, you're up first.

Gagan offers the script to Sophia , who holds the end that is offered, while Gagan still holds on. Sophia looks at the script, then Gagan, then the script again.

Gagan: *(sheepishly)* You said to put the scene into modern English

Sophia: This isn't quite what I had in mind.³¹

Sophia sighs, and shuts the classroom door as Gagan distributes copies of the script to Abby and Brendan. Gagan's hand shoots up eagerly

Gagan: Miss, can I be Hamlet?

Sophia: sure

Abby: I'll be Gertrude

Sophia: Ok, then, I'll read the stage directions . Here we go *(reading)* Hamlet, Act 3 Scene 4 *(she addresses the class)*. Remember, at this point, Hamlet is mad at his mother for how quickly she has married, and he goes to her room to confront her. Polonius is hiding behind a curtain in the room, oh, we need a Polonius. Mo, be Polonius.

Gagan hands Mo a script.

Abby: *(as Gertrude)* Polonius, I don't understand it. Why is Hamlet all like, What the...oh. *(turning to Sophia)* Can I say this?

Sophia nods

³¹ "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in our philosophy" (Hamlet, Act 1, Sc 5, 167-168). Both Hamlet and Sophia are haunted by an old order. Just as Hamlet is terrified by the spectre of his beloved father, Sophia is also haunted by her role of teacher-as-judge. In both cases, Hamlet and Sophia are called to respond in the face of the familiar made strange, as they recognise that the old order can no longer hold.

Abby: Why is Hamlet all like, what the fuck?

The class laughs uncomfortably, and looks at Sophia who says nothing, so the students continue, hesitantly at first, with growing momentum.

Mo: *(as Polonius)* I'm not sure man, maybe he's fucking pissed about life? That's why he's all fucked up right now...with his Father's death and all.

Abby: I really do wish I knew what the fuck was going through his head right now.

Mo: Me too. Shit! I hear him coming!

Abby: That's not good, Fuck! Go hide behind the curtains!

Sophia: *(reading the stage directions)* Polonius hides between the curtain while Hamlet enters the room.

Gagan: Mom, just what the Fuck were you thinking?

Abby: Excuse me? I fucking gave birth to you! How dare you raise your fucking spaz out on me!

Gagan: What the fuck you thinking? Marrying my uncle so quick after your husband, my fadder is killed!

Abby: Hamlet, you fucking bastard baby, I'm just trying to do what's best!

Gagan: What's best for Denmark, or what's best for you, hoe!

Abby: Hamlet, you shut the Fuck up!

Sophia: The ghost appears, but only to Hamlet

Gagan: Holy shit, do you see that?

Abby: See what, Hamlet? You must be on some serious shit! Hamlet, quit fucking with me, I get it, you're really pissed at me, but don't do this, don't try to freak me out like this!

There is a knock at the door. The students are silent. Sophia answers the door. It's Ed.

Ed: Oh, Miss Hyde! Is everything ok in here?

Ed tries to peek his head into the classroom, but Sophia stands her ground in the doorway.

Sophia: We're fine, thank you Mr Taylor

Mo gets out of his seat and stands behind the open door, pretending to stab at Ed through the door. The students stifle their laughter, as Mo then plays the role of the stabbed and dying Polonius.

Ed: I was just passing in the hallway, and the walls aren't very thick. I wondered if ...

Sophia: *(smiling sweetly)* We're just reading Hamlet.

Ed moves down the hallway as Sophia shuts the door, as Mo moves back to his desk, unseen by Sophia.

Sophia: Ok, where were we? Hamlet was just seeing the ghost. Gertrude says, "don't try to freak me out like this!" and then

Gagan: I'm not....I'm not trying to..... Father, forgive me for doubting, I know, I know that I have to..I...

Abby: Hamlet, don't fuck with me like this, you're scaring me!

Mo: Oh! Oh! Gertrude!

Gagan: The dirty rat, it's him! Vengeance is mine! Die mother fucker!

Gagan makes a stabbing motion, mimicking Hamlet stabbing Polonius. The students laugh, somewhat nervously and cast glances at Sophia, who tries to maintain a serious facade.

Sophia: This is a very modern translation

Gagan: Honestly, miss, I didn't think you'd let us read the whole thing out loud

Sophia: Why was it so funny?

Mo: *(laughing)* Because we were like, F'n this, and F'n that

Sophia: Would Gertrude, a Danish Royal, say Fuck?

More snickering

Gagan: Can you imagine if the principal walked in right now, with Miss Hyde swearing and stuff?

Sophia: We've just been talking about the power of language. That's part of the curriculum. Actually, I think that we should call Mr Johnson right now, and invite him to come up and sit in on this conversation

Sophia gets half out of her seat, moving toward the phone. Abby, Brendan, Gagan, in unison, as Mo shakes his head.

Gagan: No, no, no Miss, don't do that!

Brendan: Dude, He'd shut this down!

Mo: Taylor probably already snitched

Abby: No! Don't call him!

Sophia: Why not? We've been talking about how language contributes to character development! (*Sophia sits*) Why do people swear?

Brendan: Because they're really pissed

Sophia: Ok, so where is the part in the scene when Hamlet is really frustrated?

- Gagan: When he's yelling at his Mom for marrying Claudius
- Sophia: Ok, so keep the f-bomb there. Where is Gertrude the most upset?
- Abby: When Hamlet sees the ghost. She's scared because he's acting out of control
- Sophia: You've just identified the climax. If the characters swear consistently throughout the whole scene, there isn't much development. This way, we get a better sense of how Hamlet and Gertrude are becoming more agitated when we save the most shocking, powerful language for the climax. Ok, Gagan, you have to edit this scene based on today's work. Did you mark down the climax?
- Gagan: Yup, got it *[he makes a final note on his page before shoving his work in his backpack]*
- Sophia: Ok. Submit a revised copy to me tomorrow.
- Abby: We're going to see Hamlet, right?
- Sophia: We'll talk about it tomorrow.
- Class change music.*
- Gagan: *(to Brendan)* That was such a great class!
- Brendan: I can't believe she let us get away with that! Fuck!

Abby: Yeah, but we actually learned something³²

Exit Gagan, Abby, Brendan. Sophia paces during her Shakespeare- inspired soliloquy.

Sophia: That was so good, I couldn't have planned it!³³ *(pause)* I wish I could take them to see Hamlet *(pause)* To go, or not to go: that is the question: Whether 'tis better for my career To suffer the slings and arrows of the Principal, And meet these kids after hours without a sea of forms, Or live in heartache, knowing that I've been too Cowardly to offer them a great chance: To live, To learn. To see, that Shakespeare is meant to be performed! To live! To risk being held responsible, For, death, injury, missed curfew, poor behaviour, Kids talking, or falling asleep in the theatre? To sleep, perhaps to... Fuck!

³² "...in those moments when teachers and students find themselves together saying, "Wow, that was a good class!" they are saying that they have discovered a truth for Now, something that provides sustenance for Now precisely because of how coming into truth has its own energizing power" (Smith 2006, p. 27-28). This class has been energised by their trespass against the usual decorum required in school. As her student's enthusiasm for titillation cools, Sophia is able to reflect on the risk she took in trying to "take up" her student's work with more generosity than they deserve. Although the lesson may have been more about the power structures of school than about literature, which provides little "sustenance for Now", Sophia and her students have nevertheless had their first taste of the energising power of engaging classroom work.

³³ "[Sophia] realizes the challenges and difficulties that living within the Zone of Between entails, but she learns, too, that, living as a teacher in tensionality is indeed living teaching as a mode of being that with all its ever-present risks, beckons the teacher to struggle to be true to what teaching essentially is" (Aoki 2005, p. 163).

Did I really just teach a lesson on fuck? Should I go talk to Johnson now, or should I wait for him to call me into his office? *(she regains her rhythm)*
For in that office of death, which parents might come?³⁴

Scene 7: Sophia's classroom

Class change music. Enter Abby and Brendan together, with slurpees.

Abby: Miss Hyde, is Shakespeare gay?

Sophia: *(hesitantly)* Some people think so.

Enter Gagan

Gagan: Who's gay?

Sophia: Shakespeare. Maybe.

Abby: Maybe he has a secret gay message in his stuff or something.

Sophia: *(wryly amused)* A secret gay message.

Abby: Or like, some of the characters are gay or something?

³⁴ Sophia's situation highlights the danger of being an experienced person in the way that Gadamer describes as "someone who is radically undogmatic; who, because of the many experiences he has had and the knowledge he has drawn from them, is particularly well equipped to have new experiences and to learn from them" (1989, p. 350).

Sophia: Do you think it makes a difference?

Abby: Kinda.

Abby sees Mo enter, and she sits down at her desk.

Sophia: Ok, class. Let's re-cap what happened yesterday. We were talking about the power of language. We talked about how to use language to characterise different people, and to show their heightened emotion as we reach the climax of a scene. Gagan, do you have the revised copy to hand in?

Gagan hands in the script.

Abby: Oh, Miss Hyde! Last night I was reading this book, and it totally sounded like Hamlet! *(Abby fishes through her backpack)* Can I read this part of the book? It's really short!

Sophia: What is it?

Abby: Ok, the book is by Stephen Chboskys, it's called "the perks of being a wallflower"
(reading) I finished the book and then started immediately reading it again. Anything not to feel like crying. Because I made the promise to Aunt Helen. And because I don't want to start thinking again. Not like I have this last week. I can't think again. Not ever again. I don't know if you've ever felt like that. That you wanted to sleep for a thousand years. Or just not exist. Or just not be aware that you do exist. Or something like that. I think wanting

that is very morbid, but I want it when I get like this. That's why I'm trying not to think. I just want it all to stop spinning. If this gets any worse, I might have to go back to the doctor. It's getting that bad again. Love always, Charlie.

Brendan: That's totally emo!

Gagan: That guy is suicidal!

Abby: No, he's just thinking about it, he's not actually going to do it.

Sophia: Remember his soliloquy "To Be, or not to Be". Hamlet wonders if it's worth suffering his existing condition, trying to fight back, or ending his life?

Gagan: So he's going to suicide himself to solve his problems?

Mo: That'll lead him straight to hell

Sophia: Which he knows, but so far it's just an idea in his head

Mo: Hell is not an idea, it's a horrible place, worse than anyone can imagine.

Sophia: That's just it! We don't know about the afterlife because we've never been there.

Mo: Are you saying my religion is wrong?

Sophia: I'm just saying that all we have is what we can imagine. Except Hamlet has seen his father's ghost, and that's some kind of proof that there is something beyond his experience. Remember, he tells Horatio, "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than is dreamt of in your philosophy".

Abby: Yeah, 'cause there's a whole side of things that influence people that no-one ever sees

Brendan: Are you talking ghosts 'n shit?

Sophia glares at Brendan.

Brendan: Sorry. Ghosts 'n stuff?

Sophia: One new way to think about something can shift all the other pieces of our perception.

Abby: What about the field trip to see Hamlet?

Sophia: We can't go, we haven't done any paperwork

Abby: But it's at seven. We could meet you.

Brendan: You want us to go to the theatre with you?

Abby: Brendan, you're going.

Gagan: Tonight?

Abby: Come on, it'll be fun!

Sophia: Well. Is there anyone who would like to come? Put up your hands, so I can count. *(Abby, Brendan and Gagan put up their hands)* Really? That many! That's excellent! The tickets are fifteen dollars, and you can buy them ahead of time over the phone, with a credit card.

Abby: Miss, I don't have a credit card!

Brendan: Me neither

Gagan: Why can't you just get the tickets and we'll pay you back?

Sophia: If I buy the tickets, how do I know you'll show up?

Mo: Don't you trust us, Miss?

Scene 8: Sophia's classroom

Sophia is on the phone with Nate.

Sophia: Nate, tell me if I'm crazy to do this. I mean, I know I was flying under the radar with that Fuck lesson, I just closed the door and hoped for the best, you know? I mean it's better to ask forgiveness than permission sometimes, right? I just need to get my kids to see that Shakespeare is really alive in the world, it's not just some stuff we force them to read in

school³⁵. Am I crazy to tell them that they can meet me there? I mean, it's at seven o'clock at night, is that a field trip? (*Sophia listens*) What if they have to lie to their parents to get out of the house? What if they say it's a school trip? Oh, God am I going to lose my job over this? (*Sophia listens*) What? (*She listens*) Ok. This is not a school trip, it's a coincidence. Is it still a coincidence if I wrote the time and location on the board? (*Sophia listens*) I know, they drive cars and have jobs but they also have parents who can complain to the principal. (*Sophia listens*) Could I be charged with professional misconduct for this? (*Sophia listens*) What if they gave me money for the tickets because I had to pay for them in advance on my credit card?

Scene 9: Sophia's classroom

Enter Brendan and Gagan

Sophia: Good morning! It was an early morning, eh? What did you think of the performance last night?

Brendan: The fight scene was way better than I expected.

³⁵ "In addition to film and television, gaming technology has gained tremendous popularity...Still theatre persists. It persists because it is such an alive and elemental form. An argument can be made that it is the most human and humanising form of literature, in that it is meant for humans to express and consume, and ultimately when it is fully realised a live audience will watch other live humans walk, talk, fight, love, get hurt, get healed and receive comfort within the same room as themselves. If you attend the theatre you must give of your time, your attention, and your imagination. You must sit among other breathing, sweating humans and you must apply yourself. There is a sense of vitality and energy and authenticity that accompanies this form that cannot be duplicated by any other." (Martini 2006, p. 188)

Sophia: Really?

Brendan: In the movie, they could have blood and stuff, but in the theatre, we just had to imagine the blood. But the footwork, like, the...

Sophia: Choreography?

Brendan: Yeah, the choreography made it really good. It would've taken a lot of practice to get it right, and they only had one shot, no out-takes, I mean, it's live! The sound of their rapiers, and their grunts, and the expressions on their faces. It was really realistic!

Enter Abby

Sophia: Other things you noticed?

Abby: I was shocked! An all-woman cast!?

Gagan: That really screwed with my brain. When Claudius and Gertrude, like, the two... queens? When they kissed, it was, like-

Brendan: It was hot.

Abby grins. Mo saunters in late, an energy drink in hand.

Mo: I heard about the chicks. That is NOT ok.

Abby's face drops. She sits.

Sophia: Mo. Have a seat. Have a seat everybody.

Mo, Brendan and Gagan banter (ad lib disruptive talking) as they sit.

Let's back up a minute. Ok. Stop talking all at once. Ok. So, clearly we were all a little surprised at what we saw in the performance last night. When we're talking about two women kissing, we need to remember that everyone will understand that differently, but it's not up to us to make a judgement on whether we think that is right or wrong.

Mo: My religion says it's wrong.

Gagan: Hamlet didn't take it too happy!

Abby: That's because he was disgusted that his mother remarried so quickly! He was disgusted by that kiss in the movie, too, remember? And that wasn't two women.

Mo: He was disgusted, because there were two fuckin' Lesbos kissing each...

Abby: You weren't even there!

Sophia: Mo. That's enough. Go out to the hallway.

Mo: Fuck! Whatever!

No storms out of the room. Everyone is silent. The students watch Sophia. She takes a deep breath.

Sophia: I'm not sure how we were supposed to interpret their gender.

Gagan: What do you mean you're not sure? You're the teacher!

Sophia: In Shakespeare's day, women weren't allowed to act, so every part was played by a man. Boys who still had high voices would have played Gertrude and Ophelia.

Gagan: So, like, even though we saw two girls kiss, we were supposed to pretend that it was a guy and a girl?

Abby: So that kiss would've been two guys?

Brendan: Guys kissing?

Sophia: The theatre is built on illusion. It's a story that we all buy into for a few hours. We're asked to suspend our own reality, and give in to the possibility.

Brendan: But you're saying that you don't know what they were trying to say with an all-girl cast?

Sophia: I'm saying that there could be a number of readings. Maybe this was some sort of all-female society, where there were two queens, or maybe we were supposed to read some of the characters as male. *(She checks her*

watch). Make a list of the possible things the director was trying to say by casting only women while I go talk to Mo.

The students begin to work as Sophia steps into the hallway. She is ferocious.

Sophia: Mo. You are free to hold your religious beliefs, but you cannot use derogatory language in my class, and you know it. You are a smart guy, and you know how to push people's buttons, and so you come in here and just look for ways to stir everybody up. *(pause)* You need to ask yourself what you get out of being an ass³⁶. *(pause)* When you've worked that out, you can come back in.

Sophia turns and walks back into the classroom and takes a deep breath. Her voice is still tense from the confrontation.

Sophia: Ok. You made your list? See how there is more than just one way to think about this? Ok. This fits perfectly with today's topic, actually. We're uncertain about how to read the all female cast, just like Hamlet is unsure about what to think about his situation. Everything Hamlet thought he could rely on has been turned upside down, and he is just trying to think his way through it. Remember the uncertainty in the emo piece that Abby read to us the other day? So, today, I want you to give some thought to an area in your own life where you feel uncertain, and relate it to Hamlet's. Write it out to give it a voice.

³⁶ Mo's behaviour has likely escalated from early days on the elementary school playground. By grade twelve, Mo's role of antagonist to teachers and fellow students is sedimented. Smith argues that by naming students as a "problem", teachers are "depriving themselves of an opportunity for their own practices to be creatively refracted through a lens of failure" (2006 p. 29). To again use Smith's language, Mo is the *nemesis* to Sophia's *hubris* (2006 p. 40).

Brendan: Is this some identity crap again? We did identity last year.

Gagan: How long does it have to be?

Sophia: Write about it until you have nothing more to say on the subject, then edit it down to a paragraph. Ok. That's your homework.

Gagan: Are we going to have to read it out loud to the class?

Sophia: That's a great idea.

Brendan: I'm not doing it.³⁷

Sophia: What do you mean?

Brendan: Miss, I'm not into this sharing thing. I just... I don't think that what I have to say is anybody else's business.

Sophia: Well, you still need to do the assignment, Brendan.

Class change music begins

³⁷ Brendan knows that he is at risk of being pwned. "In the simplest terms, while we can understand that, on the one hand, there are immense dangers in writing about personal experiences, we also know that, on the other hand, there are immense dangers in not writing about personal experiences. The word danger still resonates with centuries-old etymological connections to "the power of a lord or master." (2009 Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, Leggo. pp. 175-176)

Brendan: Whatever.

Exit students. Sophia's phone rings. She answers.

Sophia: Hi Nate. Yeah, the play was good. Nope, no phone calls. Not yet, anyway. The kids are totally freaking out right now, it was an all-female cast, and there was a kiss. How am I supposed to teach my students anything about Shakespeare if they're constantly freaking out about the possibility that something might be gay? *(Sophia listens)* I know, they're young. *(Sophia listens)* Yeah. Ok. Thanks for checking up on me.

Scene 10: Sophia's classroom

Sophia: I was thinking about what Brendan said yesterday about having to share your work. I thought if I'm asking you to reveal your uncertainty, that I should share mine, too³⁸.

Sophia clears her throat nervously and begins to read. Mo enters quietly and sits in his desk.

I'm afraid of sharing this piece of writing, because I'm worried that my body will betray me, that my voice will tremble, and that you will know that I'm afraid to share my ideas. This year, when we studied Hamlet, I realised that

³⁸ By taking up the same task as her students, Sophia does more than model an assignment exemplar, she engages in the living discipline of language arts along with her students. Sophia's authority is no longer a result of her position within the structure of school, her authority also comes from being an author.

I am overwhelmed like him. Literally everything I believed about school has been flipped upside down, and I just need time to think. Every morning, I get up, and come to school, and I feel like I have to pretend that I have all the answers because I'm a teacher. Every day, I sit in a room full of people who have each suffered loss and confusion and love, but it is so hard to talk about those things. What right do I have to ask about my student's lives? But the more I think about studying literature, the more I wonder why we'd read anything, unless we can see how it can help us understand ourselves in our world³⁹.

The students are silent. A clock can be heard ticking. Finally, Mo speaks.

Mo: Yo, who wrote that?

Brendan: Pay attention, man! She did!

Abby: Miss Hyde. Why do you do it?

Sophia: Do what?

Abby: Keep teaching.

³⁹ "The narratives we shape out of the materials of our lived lives must somehow take account of our original landscapes" where there is "a sense of consciousness being opened to the common" and where we might "recognize each other" (Miller 1998, p. 148). The commonplace, "no place" of school has a rich topography of shared uncertainty.

Sophia: Because... sometimes... the other day when we were working on your scripts...I felt like we were doing something worthwhile⁴⁰. Everyone was right there in that moment, right in the middle of Hamlet, working out which words are the best, just like Shakespeare did.⁴¹

Abby: Is that enough? Sometimes?

Sophia: Sometimes. *(pause)* Who's next?

Silence

Sophia: Ok, Gagan, you're up.

Gagan: What? No! I can't go after you! Mine's gonna look stupid.

Sophia: No it won't. Come on, I just told you that I was nervous to share what I wrote, now it's your turn. Just get it over with!

⁴⁰ Sophia is nervous about vulnerability, but she is trying to indicate the sense of purpose that comes in worthwhile activity. "What makes some experiences worthy of rest and repose, worthy of returning, worthy of tarrying and remembering, of taking time, of whiling away our lives in their presence? These questions are framed, for me, as a way to think through some of the classroom work I have witnessed over several decades of attention to a specific phenomenon: how, in vigorous and intellectually challenging and pleasurable classrooms, time and memory gather together, both things and thinking accrue and return, and there is a sense of plenitude wherein the panics of schooling are cooled in favour of good, worth while work" (Jardine 2008)

⁴¹ Sophia still points to her first energising classroom experience as if it holds the place for a time in the future when she might find "sustenance for Now" (Smith 2006). Upon reflection, Sophia might realise that this moment of vulnerability with her students has offered its own "truth for now" (Smith 2006) as she articulates the infrequency of these moments.

Gagan: *(Gagan sighs, then begins to read)* I used to think that I was... wait, do I have to stand at the front of the class?

Sophia: Sure

Gagan moves to the front of the room.

Gagan: Before, I was really good at school, because grades were high for me, and I passed tests. Back in my country, I never got beat, and that happened a lot to my friends in school because they talked so so much. My uncle was like the mayor of town, and people listened to him, and my family. My parents came to Canada to give me and my brother good opportunity for education. Since five months I am here, my English is much better, but people don't listen to what I say, because they hear my accent and not what I say. My Dad drives taxi and he tells of people who are so rude. He work so hard for us. He does these things for my brother and me. I know my English will get better faster than will fix other people being rude.

Gagan passes his paper to Sophia and sits, hanging his head.

Sophia: What's the connection to Hamlet?

Gagan: We were supposed to talk about Hamlet?

Sophia: Yeah. How is your uncertainty somehow similar to Hamlet's experience?

Gagan: Well. Uh. 'Cuz people thought that Hamlet was all crazy, like they think I'm stupid, but it's not true. And. And because my dad, like Hamlet's dad

wanted for him to be able to grab the opportunity, but there are things in the way.

Sophia: Thank you. Brendan? You can go next.

Brendan: I had to work.

Sophia: You need to come prepared to share tomorrow. If not, I'll call home.

Class change music. Gagan and Mo exit, Brendan waits for Abby, who takes a long time to put her things in her backpack.

Abby: I just need to talk to Miss Hyde for a minute.

Brendan: ok

Intercom: Boy's Basketball tryouts begin today at four o'clock in the main gym. Boys basketball tryouts begin in thirty minutes.

Abby: I mean by myself.

Brendan: oh

Exit Brendan. Abby zips up her bag. Sighs. Then unzips her bag and pulls out a piece of paper.

Abby: Miss Hyde? I really want to read my assignment to you now instead of to the whole class. I mean, if that's ok.

Sophia: Um...Sure. Do I need to close the door?

Abby: I think I'm gonna be sick.

Abby runs toward the door. Sophia picks up the garbage can and hands it to Abby as she rushes out the door. Abby vomits loudly. She comes into the room with the garbage can in hand. She gives it to Sophia, who places the can outside the classroom.

Sophia: Abby, are you ok? Do you need me to call home?

Abby grabs her paper from her desk and shakes her head. Sophia closes the door and sits in a student seat. Abby spreads her paper nervously before her. She stands in front of Sophia and her paper shakes in her hands. Abby clears her throat.

Sophia: Abby, you can sit down

Abby sits. She reads. Nervously.

Abby: To be, or not to be, that was Hamlet's question, and its mine, too.
I know what it's like to be stuck in my head, trying to think things through all the time. I try to read people and listen to what they say to see if they will accept me or not.

Abby stops reading

Miss Hyde, that's why I couldn't read this in front of the class. I knew that I could tell you, but I don't want other people in class to know. It's not

always safe, you know? I mean, not that your classroom isn't safe, I'm just not comfortable with everyone knowing, you know?

Sophia nods. Abby continues reading.

I have always felt different from other people, and I didn't know why, until Junior High, when I figured it out. Now, when other people are dating in high school, everyone thinks that I'm just a nerd and I'd rather study, and I'm ok with that. The truth is, I have a girlfriend at another school. Our parents just think we're really good friends. We have a few other friends that we can trust, and so we hang out together, and they're really accepting of us, but it's harder on everybody now that that kid got beat up.

Abby begins to cry, and her voice breaks as she reads.

I don't think I'm suicidal, but I don't think it's safe to let myself be the person that I really am inside, I just have to pretend that I'm not that person. In the end, Hamlet couldn't think through his life the way he wanted, and he separated himself from the woman he loved in order to protect her, and they both ended up dead. I don't want that to happen. I don't want someone else to tell my story for me. I want to tell it myself.

Sophia wipes the tears from her eyes, stands up, and places her hand on Abby's shoulder, and then walks to her desk for a box of tissues. She returns to Abby and offers her a tissue. Sophia and Abby dab at their eyes⁴².

⁴² "Most notably, teaching cannot be a living if there is no truth told in its enactment or, more accurately, if the classroom is not first and foremost a place of truth seeking, truth discovering, and truth sharing." (Smith 2006, p. 27-28)

Sophia: I thought you and Brendan were...?

Abby: We're just friends

Sophia: Did writing this....I mean...did it help you to figure things out?

Abby nods, and gets up to throw her tissue in the garbage can, which is missing, so she shoves the tissue in her pocket and walks slowly around the room, touching the desks and chalkboard as if to re-orient herself to her surroundings.

Sophia: I...I think it's really important that you've found your voice in this. You're always welcome to come and talk with me. And you know that the guidance office is always available, too.

Abby: Yeah, I know. It's just that, well, they're strangers, you know? (*Abby stops to pick up a poster that is laying on Sophia's desk*) Wow. This is a poster of two guys kissing!⁴³

⁴³ Abby's gaze is captured by the "show" of the poster. In an age when we are bombarded with images on billboards, televisions, and even handheld electronics, it is difficult to penetrate the surface of an image that might capture our attention. Illich proposes that "The show weans the gaze from the image" (2001, p. 22); the spectacle of men kissing removes our viewing of this spectacle from a space or context in which we might see this gesture in the world. Although the poster's text reads "International Day Against Homophobia", the spectacle of men kissing during a sporting event seems contrived. Do opposite sex couples kiss when they're engaged in sports? Many images are intentionally shocking (shock <M. Fr. *choc*, violent attack) because they exist as glossy snapshots severed from their context. Illich proposes that "Since the sixteenth century, the gaze seems incapable of neglecting the image. Etymologically, to neglect means "not read" (2001, p. 7). Can images such as this be read in a thoughtful, scholarly way?

Sophia nods

Abby: Are you allowed to have it in here?⁴⁴

Sophia: It's from the Alberta Teacher's Association. I'm using it for a lesson next week.

Abby: Wow. I wish there were more teachers like you.

Abby zips up her backpack and offers her paper to Sophia.

Abby: Aren't you going to mark it?

Sophia shakes her head.

Abby: Not even for spelling or something?

Sophia: 100 percent

Abby: You didn't even look at it

Sophia: Abby, how can I mark this?

⁴⁴ The Senior High School English Language Arts Guide to Implementation states that "Teachers must be free to select and use literature and other texts that genuinely address the hopes, fears, frustrations and experiences of adolescents. At the same time, teachers must use care in selecting texts that respect their students both morally and intellectually [...] teachers must also use their knowledge of their own students and communities to select resources from authorized resource lists or to select other resources that are appropriate for their particular situation" (Alberta Learning, 2003)

Abby: I guess. Wow. All that and no marks.

Sophia: You clearly understand Hamlet. But I think this assignment marked you.

Abby: That's deep, Miss H.

Abby smiles. Sophia stands and moves to her own desk, where she sits soberly. Exit Abby. Sophia sits at her desk. Sophia paces. She pulls at her lip. She posts the poster of two men kissing. She dials the phone.

Sophia: Nate. We need to talk to Johnson again about having a gay-straight alliance⁴⁵. *(Listens)* I know, I think I was just scared, but if we don't advocate for these kids, no-one will do it. I'll book a meeting with Johnson. Is next week ok for you? *(She listens)* Ok. Thanks Nate.

Scene 11: Mr. Johnson's office

Mr. Johnson sits deep in his chair, with Nate and Sophia seated on the other side of his imposing desk. Nate remains composed while Sophia is perched on the edge of her seat.

⁴⁵ What is a teacher's responsibility? In asking this question I wonder, what ability does a teacher have to respond to the "truth for Now" (Smith 2006) that is shared within her classroom? Which resources, structures, processes and policies enable teachers to respond to their students? Which resources, structures, processes and policies disable teachers from responding?

Mr. Johnson: Teachers should send a letter home in advance when they know that a controversial topic will be coming up in their classroom⁴⁶. The issue of sexuality is already addressed in the health curriculum where parents have the choice to opt their children out of discussions of a sexual nature.

Sophia: *(frustrated)* So we send a letter home to every kid in the school at the start of the year.

Mr. Johnson: *(waving his hand to silence Sophia)* I don't have time to be fielding calls from parents who don't want their children to be exposed to adult content. A gay-straight club is an overlap of an issue that is already covered by our curriculum. We are a school, not a forum for identity politics.

Sophia: *(increasing agitation)* Mr Johnson, I'm sure...

Intercom: The Muslim Student's Association will be meeting today at 3:45pm. The Muslim Student's Association will meet at 3:45pm.

Mr. Johnson: *(clearing his throat)* We are responsible for letting parents know when and under what context we will be discussing things of a controversial nature.

Nate moves forward in his seat and places his hand on Sophia's arm to silence her.

Nate: So let us talk to the parent council, then.

⁴⁶ "Controversial issues that have been anticipated by the teacher, and those that may arise incidentally during instruction, should be used by the teacher to promote critical inquiry and/or to teach thinking skills" (Alberta Education, 2006, p. 98).

Mr. Johnson: I'm afraid we don't meet for another few weeks. (*He stares at Nate and Sophia as if he's answered their question*)

Nate: When?

Mr Johnson: (*checking his calendar*) January 15th, after the break.

Nate: Fine. Add us to the agenda.

Nate and Sophia leave Mr Johnson's office.

Sophia: So, what, I'm supposed to send home a letter every time I need to talk about something "controversial"⁴⁷? These are high school kids, they live in a world of sex and drugs and religion⁴⁸! Do I have to spell out for every parent the kind of adult thoughts their kid is having? What am I supposed to do, wave a form in their face every time they want to talk about something important? Does he even know what I teach? I mean, if you pick up any high school book, there's something controversial. *Hamlet*: suicide and religion, *Macbeth*: witches and murder, *Romeo and Juliet* opens with

⁴⁷ According to an Instructional Delivery document from Alberta Education, "Controversial issues are those topics that are publicly sensitive and upon which there is no consensus of values or beliefs. They include topics on which reasonable people may sincerely disagree. Opportunities to deal with these issues are an integral part of students learning in Alberta." (2006, p. 97)

⁴⁸ The Freedom of Expression Committee monitors censorship issues in Canada, and tracks challenges to publications that some members of the public deem controversial. For example in 2007, "A patron of the Edmonton Public Library complained about this local news and entertainment magazine, *Gay Calgary and Edmonton*, because the magazine carries pictures of the naked backsides of men and men in sexual postures." No action was taken, as the challenged book list cites, "Current copies are available for free at the library." (Freedom of Expression Committee, 2009) Clearly, the debate about which images and literature should be available, and to whom, is a part of the world within and beyond school. Is it possible to include parents, administrators, and students into this debate as a part of the public life of public school?

sex jokes⁴⁹, and *The Wars* has a gay rape scene⁵⁰! (pause) The English Department already sends home the course outline. If a parent was really worried about it, they could talk to their kids about the books they're reading.

Scene 12: Sophia's classroom

A black paper covers a poster which hangs front and centre in Sophia's classroom. She's written on the board, SHOCKING? FOR WHO?

Sophia: Today we're going to talk about the life and times of William Shakespeare, which is on the course outline that your parents all saw at the beginning of the year. I'm going to show you a series of images, and I just want you to

⁴⁹ Shakespeare is the only author who is required reading in the Alberta English Language Arts curriculum. *Romeo and Juliet* is commonly taught in grade ten; when reading the opening scene of the play with 14 and 15 year old students, teachers can quickly gauge how much of the bawdy humour their students understand, and must make a decision about how much interpretation they will offer. However, a few lines remain explicit:

Samson: 'Tis all one, I will show myself a tyrant: when I have fought with the men, I will be cruel with the maids, and cut off their heads.

Gregory: The heads of the maids?

Samson: Ay, the heads of the maids, or their maidenheads; take it in what sense though wilt.

Controversial topics are a part of the inheritance of literature, both classical and contemporary. Teachers must use their professional judgement each day in determining how much focus they will place on these aspects of a text.

⁵⁰ 1991, Lambton County, Ontario, a high school student asked that Timothy Findley's *The Wars* be removed from the English curriculum because a passage describes the rape of a Canadian soldier by his fellow officers during World War I. The book was said to pressure students to accept homosexuality. The school board upheld use of the book at the OAC (formerly Grade 13) level." Other books which were challenged in Canada since 1991 which are commonly taught in Alberta High Schools include: *Snow Falling on Cedars*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Of Mice and Men*, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, *The Golden Compass*, *The Giver*, and *The Bible* (Freedom of Expression Committee, 2009). How can we understand challenging content in literature? How are educators supported in their work of responding to the challenging content in literature?

write down what you're thinking, and not say anything out loud, ok? Get out a paper and pencil.

Gagan: But what if I have a question?

Sophia: Write them down, ok? We'll talk about it all at the end. Ok. Is this image shocking? *(Sophia pulls away the black paper to reveal a woman in Shakespearean dress on a stage)*

Abby: That's not...

Sophia: Abby! No talking! Only writing! So. A woman onstage. Shocking? For Who? *(Sophia waits as the students write)* Ok. Here's another one. *(Sophia posts an image of a man and woman kissing)* A man and a woman kissing. Shocking? For Who? *(A few students scribble a note, then Sophia posts the picture of two men kissing, the students shift uncomfortably in their chairs, Mo looks away in disgust, Brendan gives a low whistle)* Brendan, no noises. Ok. I can feel the tension in the room. I want you to pay attention to what you're feeling right now. Feel it. Write it down. *(Sophia waits for a few moments as the students write madly)* Why do you feel that way? What beliefs do you hold that allow you to feel that? *(Sophia waits for a few moments as the students write)* The poster asks, Shocking? For Who? Maybe it's shocking for you. Maybe you've never seen two men kissing. Maybe because it's illegal in many places. Maybe it's because you believe that two men kissing is wrong.

Brendan's hand shoots up.

Maybe you're shocked that I'm showing you this poster in school. Brendan, put your hand down.

Brendan: But, Miss...

Sophia: Now look back at the first one. A woman on stage would be shocking for Puritans. The Puritans were a group of Christians who held a lot of political power in Shakespeare's day. It was because of them that the Globe theatre was on the edge of London, and it was because of them that women were not allowed to be on stage. It was considered unseemly for a woman to parade herself in front of a crowd, let alone kiss someone onstage! But, the show must go on, and so it was standard practice for young men to play female roles. Have another look at the hockey players. Instead of jerseys, picture one man in a dress, and the other in a doublet, and you have Hamlet and Ophelia, Othello and Desdemona, Romeo and Juliet. Shocking? For Who? *(pause)* We all read this image differently. It depends upon our experiences and understanding, culture, religion, and all the factors of life that we've lived.

Gagan: What do you mean, we read differently?

Sophia: When you look at this poster, what do you see?

Gagan: Two guys kissing

Sophia: Ok. I would say that when I look at that poster, I see the creativity of Shakespearean theatre. Someone else might see a lifestyle choice, someone else sees sinful behaviour. There isn't just one answer. The way

we see the picture depends on our previous understandings and experiences.

Gagan: There isn't just one answer.

Brendan: So you're saying THAT (*He points to the male kiss*) would be normal?

Sophia: For the audiences of Shakespearean theatre, yes.

Mo: And THAT (*Mo points to the man and woman kissing*) would be a problem?

Sophia: If it was on stage in Shakespeare's time, yes.

Mo: (*realising*) 'Cuz it's against someone's religion⁵¹

Sophia: (*nodding in agreement*) Because it's against someone's religion.

Brendan: (*to Abby*) Those kissing guys aren't normal. That kind of thing doesn't belong in sports. I don't care who you are. You don't kiss somebody when they're all sweaty.

⁵¹ Teachers have a two-fold responsibility: (a) to heal their own estrangements as the necessary qualification of leading others home [...] The kind of reconciliation that is being suggested here arises from an appreciation that the differences between us do not need to be arbitrated or overcome because they are reflective of the very condition by which any identity might be possible in the first place[...] there is nothing to fight *against*, only a deeper truth to be shown. (Smith 2006, p.33)

Scene 13: Mr. Johnson's office

Mr. Johnson sits behind his desk, and Sophia and Mr Aziz sit across from him.

Sophia: Mr. Aziz, I can understand your concerns, but I used the poster to show how our beliefs shape our understanding. It was part of a broader discussion about Shakespearean Theatre⁵².

Mr. Johnson: You studied Shakespeare at the beginning of the semester. Why were you going back to something that you already covered⁵³?

Sophia: They're preparing for a reading comprehension exam. I was building on their prior knowledge about reading in context. I used the image to show them how our religious beliefs contribute to the way that we might read an image.

Mr. Aziz: Reading pornography?⁵⁴

⁵² The Alberta Education Instructional delivery document suggests that "Studying controversial issues is important in preparing students to participate responsibly in a democratic and pluralistic society. Such study provides opportunities to develop the ability to think clearly, to reason logically, to open-mindedly and respectfully examine different points of view, and to make sound judgements" (Alberta Learning 2006).

⁵³ "In Canada, classrooms are increasingly inhabited by children who come to school traumatised by war, malnutrition, family disruption, language dissonance, and culture shock; yet teachers find themselves pressured to instruct only in terms of measurable achievement results, and this places them in a situation of conflict when their deepest desire is to stand pedagogically with the young, as their vocation beckons them" (Smith 2006, p. xxxvi).

⁵⁴ Who should see this image, and under what conditions? Images have been contested throughout history. Ivan Illich takes a comprehensive look at this in Guarding the Eye in the Age of Show, as does David Jardine in "On the While of Things" (2008). Viewing and representing, as two strands of the ELA curriculum, are highly contested and contestible areas.

Sophia: Mr. Aziz. I got the poster from the diversity office of the Alberta Teacher's Association. This is a provincial resource. I am trying to help my students to see that we live in a world where there is more than one view. While Mo understands that his religion and culture say that the image of two men kissing is wrong, he can also understand that the Puritans understood women onstage to be wrong. Both viewpoints exist.

Mr Aziz: What about this field trip, this... lesbian theatre?

Mr. Johnson: Field trip?

Sophia: It wasn't a field trip. Some interested students just happened to meet me at a production of Hamlet at the University. It was after school hours. Mo didn't attend.

Mr. Johnson: Miss Hyde, we have school protocol and policies in place to handle any off-site activities. Although they may be inconvenient to you, they are in place to protect you from liability.

Mr. Aziz: I understood that Bill 44⁵⁵ was put in place so that parents could be more in control of the content of their child's education. Do I need to take this up with a human rights commission?

⁵⁵ Bill 44 is in itself a controversial topic. Bill 44 is an amendment to Alberta's Human Rights legislation which includes a clause requiring school boards to give parents written notice when a controversial topic (such as religion, sexuality, or sexual orientation) will be discussed, so that parents can choose to remove their student from the conversation. This amendment came with the official "writing in" of sexual orientation as a protected ground against discrimination in Alberta's human rights legislation. Teachers who follow the existing provincial curriculum through

Mr. Johnson: No, no, I'm sure this matter can be handled here, Mr. Aziz. It's in cases such as these that we're working out the implications of Bill 44, and Mr. Aziz, you've been very helpful in this regard⁵⁶.

Mr. Johnson stands. Sophia stands, eager to have the meeting over. Mr. Johnson extends his hand to Mr. Aziz who crosses his arms and remains seated. Mr. Aziz looks at Sophia.

Mr. Aziz: I'd like an apology.

Sophia is humiliated.

Sophia: Ahh... An apology?

Mr. Aziz: You have been careless with the education of my nephew! You have not respected our religion! You have been responsible for showing Mohammed indecent images! You have put thoughts into Mohammed's head that he should not have!

Sophia: I am sorry. I... I'm sorry that my efforts with Mohammed haven't been more successful⁵⁷.

the policies of the School Act are now vulnerable to human rights charges (CBC News, 2009). Further, this legislation serves to "inhibit or curtail a teacher's ability to provide accurate, age-appropriate information to students on a variety of current and emerging social topics" and "threaten teachers' professional autonomy to teach in a pluralistic manner for the benefit of all students" (Chamberlain & Wells, 2009).

⁵⁶ "The School plays a supportive role to parents in the areas of values and moral development and shall handle parental decisions in regard to controversial issues with respect and sensitivity" (Alberta Education 2006).

Sophia extends her hand to Mr. Aziz, who refuses to shake, and brushes past. Exit Mr. Aziz.

Mr. Johnson: I'm not sure your actions have been wise, Sophia, but I appreciate your youthful idealism, I really do. I remember a time when I would do anything to feel like I'd made a difference in my student's lives. But my enthusiasm has been tempered with serious consideration of what it means to be a professional. It is our job to deliver the curriculum with an understanding that public education serves the common good⁵⁷. *(Pause)* We're responsible to our parents, Sophia.

Scene 14: Sophia's classroom

Sophia's classroom. Mo, Gagan, Brendan, and Abby are already in their seats. Sophia is showing the class an image of Plato's Allegory of the Cave on her overhead projector. The lights are low, the door is closed, and there is an air of conspiracy.

⁵⁷ What kind of success Sophia is hoping to accomplish? The living nature of studying Hamlet has led into the unexpected terrain of gender and sexual orientation. While this connection might seem incidental, Sophia has taken up her student's interest and fear in this topic when she could easily have foreclosed on that possibility.

⁵⁸ Janet Gross Stein argues that as a public good, school in the post-industrial age is part of a public market in our global knowledge economy, "Not without irony, public markets create the opportunity for a new agenda of public accountability. They also engage a broader discussion between proponents of a growing culture of choice that simultaneously joins and challenges the culture of rights" (Stein 2001, p. 44). Is Sophia being held accountable for her pedagogy, or for the tensionality between Human Rights, and a parent/guardian's right to choose the topics from which their child will be excluded? Bill 44 heightens the anxiety of teachers who negotiate this space every day in their classrooms. "Indeed, the times seem precipitous. A central aspect of such precipitousness has been the virtual silencing of the academy from speaking out against those forms of politics that in fact jeopardize the very future of the academy, not just as a place of free thinking, but also as a place that might serve the common good" (Smith 2006, p. 2).

- Brendan: So it's like when Hamlet had those actors do the whole play showing the guy killing the king, to trap his uncle. We're like, a captive audience.
- Sophia: Right. Plato used the Allegory of the Cave to talk about the way politics worked. He was trying to explain how people are controlled. So, the puppeteers are the ones who decide what the people in chains will see⁵⁹, and what they won't see. The puppeteers control the slaves' reality.
- Abby: And school is just like that. We're a captive audience now, I mean look at us, Miss Hyde is actually showing us shadows!
- Sophia: Right. I'm the puppeteer, and you are the slaves in the structure of school.
- Abby: And we've been slaves for like, thirteen years, if you count kindergarten. We've been brainwashed to think whatever people tell us.
- Brendan: We can still think for ourselves, I mean, it's not like I believe everything that every teacher has ever said. I can think for myself.
- Abby: But just think about how your thinking has been, like, shaped over thirteen years. The things we have to think about crowds out the space in our brains to think about something else.
- Gagan: Ok, but Miss Hyde, if you're the puppeteer, then who's the puppetmaster?

⁵⁹ "For Plato, the gaze never reaches reality; it fuses with the color from the thing somewhere halfway, between the glimmering eye of the cave dweller and the blazing light of the idea" (Illich 2001, p. 11).

Brendan: Johnson. We're all getting fucked by the big Johnson!

Abby: Brendan!

*The class looks from Sophia to Brendan to see what will happen next.*⁶⁰

Sophia: Ok, so if...

Mo: What, he's going to get away with that? Why doesn't he get kicked out!

Sophia is caught.

Mo: That's bullshit!

The class watches Mo and Sophia.

Sophia: Brendan. Watch your language.

Abby: But Mr Johnson is like the puppetmaster, right?

Sophia nods, embarrassed.

⁶⁰ Instead of students being the silent spectators, and consumers, of a teacher's work at the front of the classroom, students must be invited into the action. Indeed, some seemingly impertinent students often ask to be in on this action, but we resist their questions and dismiss them, convinced, as are detractors of Paulo Freire's work, "that critical consciousness may lead to disorder" (Freire 2005, preface).

Sophia: But remember, beyond the puppetmaster is the philosopher King. So Mr Johnson is just doing his job, because he's subject to the school board, and the provincial government.

Gagan: But in a coupla months, we're outta here.

Abby: More than a couple of months, it's only December, that's six months to graduation! If we ever make it to graduation.

Brendan: Yeah, and then it's welcome to the real world! Just to get fuck...

Sophia: Brendan!

Brendan: To get shoved into a position like Johnson's where you have to do what you're told, and tell other people to do as they're told! Or it could end like Hamlet with everyone dead on the floor.

Abby: *(frustrated)* So what are we supposed to do?⁶¹

Abby looks to Sophia for an answer, and finding none, she turns to her classmates. There is a long, awkward silence as the gravity of the question hits. Finally, Brendan breaks the silence.

Brendan: Grade twelve is depressing.

⁶¹ Abby's question breaks through the old story-line of the efficient management of the classroom, "If a student has a question, that means that they have a problem, and that problem needs to be fixed so that there will no longer be any questions but simply obedience and compliance and its resultant productivities" (Friesen & Jardine 2009)

Sophia: *(Sophia nods)* Ok, we still need to wrap up the sharing part of our writing assignments, before we go for winter break. I know you're sick of them at this point in the semester, but I want you to give your full attention to the final presenters. Brendan, you go first.

Brendan: Why me?

Sophia: Because you've been so inappropriately enthusiastic this class.

Brendan: *(smiling, then hiding it)* I'm not into this sharing thing, but Miss Hyde told me that I had to do it, or she wouldn't give me a grade for this class. So. Whatever. Uncertainty. I like to play video games, right? It's a good way to just, like, check out for awhile. And there's lots of games now where you sign up to be a part of a whole world that keeps growing, 'cause the game builders are constantly adding on, and there's always somebody playing, a new place to explore, and the game never stops. I can chat with my friends online while I play, I can buy stuff, and conquer demons. I love it because I never know what's going to happen next.

Sophia: Thank you, Brendan. How is that like Hamlet?

Brendan: I dunno. It's not.

Abby: It's like Hamlet spent a lot of time thinking about his situation instead of doing something about it. So nowadays, we play videogames instead of having to deal with parents and homework and stuff.

Brendan: Yeah. That's it.

Abby: But Hamlet kind of plays games, I mean, he sets up that whole thing with the actors to trap Claudius, that's like a game to him.

Sophia: Yeah, but he also knows he's being played, and he gets mad at Rosencrantz and Guildenstern for manipulating him, he accuses them of trying to play him like a pipe, you know, like a flute or a recorder. So it goes both ways, Hamlet was a player, but he was also being played.

Abby: So the fact that he figured that out didn't really help him, did it?

Sophia: No, I guess not.

Brendan passes his assignment to Sophia.

Brendan: Grade twelve is depressing

Sophia: Ok. Mo, last but not least.

Mo stands and talks, no sign of a written assignment in sight.

Mo: Ok, so my Uncle is this big business guy, I guess like Claudius, except I like my uncle. So, everybody in the family has been telling me since I was a kid that I'd take over the business. I really want to be successful, and go on trips back home, and buy nice stuff, and have a great car. But I'm tired of people telling me what I'm supposed to be like. I guess I just wanna figure it out myself.

Sophia: Thank you Mo. Where's your written piece?

Mo: There isn't one. That's it.

Sophia: You need to hand something in.

Mo grabs a piece of paper and writes his name on it. He hands it to Sophia.

Mo: Here

Sophia: What am I supposed to do with this?

Mo: Mark it. Whatever. I don't care.

Sophia: You don't care if you graduate?

Mo: The test is worth 50% of my grade, right? I can pass it, easy.

Class change music begins.

Sophia: Ok, everyone, remember to study your literary terms over the winter break, we'll have a week of review when you get back, and then you'll write your diploma!

Exit Mo, Gagan and Brendan

Abby: Merry Christmas, Miss Hyde.

Abby offers a present to Sophia.

Sophia: Abby, what's this? You didn't have to do this!

Sophia unwraps the box of chocolates. Sophia opens the box and offers one to Abby who declines.

Abby: They're for you. I just wanted to say goodbye. You know, before the break.

Sophia: What are you up to? Do you have family in town?

Abby: No, it's just me and my Mom, and she works, so I have to stay home and look after my little brother.

Sophia: Will you be able to get together with...um, friends?

Abby: No, my brother's kind of a full time job. And my Mom's too cheap to get the internet at home, so that's it for my social life. Anyways, I just wanted to say. You know. Merry Christmas.

Sophia: Merry Christmas Abby. I'll see you in a couple weeks.

Abby: Bye.

Exit Abby

Scene 15: Sophia's classroom

Sophia sits behind a stack of marking on her desk as Nate perches on a desktop. They are casually sipping coffee.

Sophia: I'm glad they scheduled an organisational day before the students come back.

Nate: Did you get caught up on your marking over the break?

Sophia: I have this stack left. How's the reading going for your university class?

Nate: Oh, Soph, you should've taken this class. I can't stop thinking about this one article by Grumet, the title says it all, "Where Does the World Go When Schooling Is about Schooling?"⁶²

Sophia: What do you mean, where does the world go?

Nate: It's like how you got fed up with Ed's binder stuff because it didn't help the students work out what was happening in Hamlet that might mean something to them. It's like how we get busy talking about how to write an essay because it's on the exam, and it's safe. There are so many theorists, Soph, who have spent decades talking about how school could be so much more than just managing students, it could actually be about learning something interesting and worthwhile! William Pinar, Janet Miller, David Jardine, David Smith, Maxine Greene, it's this whole reconceptualist movement that started in, like, the 70's! That was decades ago, and it's

⁶² Grumet, M. (2006, Fall). Where Does the World Go When Schooling Is about Schooling? Journal of Curriculum Theorizing. P. 52-53

only now that I'm hearing about it! That's crazy! It's crazy that in a country with human rights legislation that upholds gay rights that we have to convince the Parent Council to let us have a Gay-Straight Alliance, because it's too controversial.

Sophia: I guess that's part of the game. It's hard to figure out how much room we have to push back on the system. Last year we played it safe. I just wanted to make a good impression when I was being evaluated. But I haven't exactly made a good impression on our principal now that I have my permanent certification. At least he can't fire me.

Nate: You could get surplussed, though.

Sophia: Thanks, Nate. And Happy New Year to you too! *(pause)* Hey, did you get ahold of your two Muslim girls?

Nate: Which Muslim girls?

Sophia: You know, the ones who always came to your Justice club to talk about Gay rights.

Nate: Oh, yeah, Saleena went to UBC, so she's not in town, and Maria went to Edmonton, and she said she'd come talk to the parent council, but she has a unit exam that day. She said she'd write a letter for us to read, though.

Sophia: That's great! if the parents can see that two conservative Muslim girls are willing to talk about gay rights...

Nate: Our students are pretty open-minded...I think we probably imagine the worst about the parents.

Sophia: Sometimes our imagination comes true, Nate

Nate: Yeah, you've just had a bad time with a particularly squeaky wheel.

There is a knock at the door.

Sophia: Come in!

Enter Mr. Johnson with a ghastly look on his face, accompanied by a somber Ed. Nate and Sophia lose all their mirth.

Nate: Bill, what's the matter?

Mr. Johnson: There's been an incident.

Sophia: What do you mean?

Mr. Johnson: A student. Sophia. I'm so sorry to have to tell you this. It's Abby Tran. She was found over the break.

Sophia: Abby? What's happened?

Mr. Johnson: She...took her own life.

Sophia: Oh, God. Abby?

Nate puts his arm around Sophia.

Nate: When did it happen?

Mr. Johnson: Four days ago. Her aunt called the office this morning. Sophia, I'm so sorry. This is a difficult time for us all. The guidance counsellors have been informed. One of them will come up tomorrow when you tell your class. You can send any of your students down to the guidance office as you see fit. The family is making funeral arrangements for next week. I'm so sorry Sophia.

Sophia: The funeral. *(crying)* Can I tell them about the funeral? Is that ok?

Mr. Johnson nods and touches Sophia on the arm in consolation.

Mr. Johnson: Of course

Sophia: Can I go to the funeral...with my class?

Mr. Johnson: Of course

Exit Mr. Johnson.

Sophia: Do I need to do any paperwork to take my class to a funeral? *(pause)* Oh, God. I should have seen it. She wasn't looking forward to the break. The chocolates. She was saying goodbye. *(emotional)*

Nate: Sophia, what are you saying?

Sophia: Abby. She was gay. She said her Mom didn't know. She said she wouldn't be able to get out of the house over the break because she had to look after her little brother. She had a girlfriend. Nate, what if her girlfriend doesn't know? I should find some of Abby's friends and see if someone let her know. And Brendan. What if he doesn't know yet? How am I going to tell him?

Nate: It'll be ok, Soph.

Sophia: No, Nate, it's not ok! I knew! I knew and all I could tell her was that she should go to the guidance office! As if being gay is some kind of problem, when it's us! It's us Nate! We're so fucking worried about defining what's normal! *(pause)* I should have done something. Said something! Maybe I could've done something to save her.

Nate: It's not your job to save them, Soph.

Scene 16: Sophia's bedroom

Sophia is alone. She kneels on the floor.

Sophia: *(fighting her emotions as she struggles to get through)* Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us ...Oh, God, forgive me. She was trying to reach out to me, and I couldn't see it. I couldn't see it. Why didn't I know that she was so close to giving up? Forgive me for all the times that I could've made a

difference, but didn't. Forgive me for not being enough. Listening to her story wasn't enough. Why didn't I know that? Why couldn't I save her? Oh, God, she must have been so afraid. So alone. How could you let someone feel so hopeless? So hopeless that she'd take her own life. Because she loved someone? *(pause)* How could you make people like this? How could you fill us with such hate? *(pause)* You knew her sorrow. You knew she was alone. Why didn't you save her? *(pause)* I thought you called me to be a teacher. Did you call me into this? Now what am I supposed to do? *(pause)* Is this some kind of test?

Scene 17: The Library

Nate stands at a podium as he reads to the Parent Council from his prepared statement.

Nate: I'm Nate Francis, and I've been teaching Social Studies here for the past three years. You may have read in the local paper a few months ago, about a student who was violently attacked by a group of students from his school. This student had been bullied for months because he was gay. This incident is just one reason that it is imperative that this school starts a Gay-Straight Alliance. A GSA is conversation group for students and staff, on the topic of human rights for LGBTQ people; those who label themselves gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual and queer. My colleague, Sophia Hyde and I have asked to be put on the docket this evening because we need your support.

Nate steps down as he helps a shaking Sophia up to the podium.

Sophia: *(struggling to keep her emotions under control)* This school *(pause)* is a testament to multiculturalism, and one glance at the cafeteria might lead you to believe that we have embraced our diversity. We haven't. We've spent thousands of dollars on ID badges to make this a safe school, but I'm here to tell you that this school is not a safe place for everyone. *(deep breath)* Some of our students are gay. Some of our teachers are lesbian. Some of our parents are bi sexual. Some of our friends are transgendered. Some of our employers are queer. Earlier this year, a student in this city was assaulted and hospitalised because he was gay. The kind of attitude that led to that attack is what we need to address. This issue truly is life or death. That's why we need to start a Gay-Straight alliance. It will be a group of students and staff who are gay or straight, that will come together at lunchtime to talk about the resources and laws that are in place to keep people safe. It's a place where students will learn how to stand up for what they believe in. *(pause)* I'm not asking you to change your beliefs, I'm asking you for the opportunity to be compassionate *(Deep breath. Regaining composure)*. By High School, students have heard about bullying so many times that it's become a joke, and they've learned that it's ok to make fun of queers. Every day, I hear someone shout "That's so gay!" It's not ok. *(gaining strength)* It's not ok for kids to have panic attacks every morning before they come to school. It's not ok for kids to skip class because they know that other kids are going to harass them. It's not ok for kids to drop out of school because they've been kicked out of their house and they're living on the streets. It's not ok *(breaking down)* It's not ok for kids to feel so alone that they commit suicide. *(pause, whispering)* It's not ok.

Slow fade as Sophia steps away from the podium, sobbing and coughing loudly.

Nate's voice: Soph, Sophia? Are you ok? Here. Take a sip of water.

In black the sound of Sophia coughing and Mr Johnson calling for a glass of water to ease Sophia's episode. Soft music grows louder, it is Susan Picard's "She Sleeps Uneasy"⁶³.

Scene 18: Ed's classroom and the hallway

The desks are in rows. Nate flops scantron sheets sloppily on each desk as Ed meticulously places one test on each desk. Ed is focused on his task as Sophia enters, with her attendance list in hand.

Ed: Are you helping me invigilate the exam?

Sophia: *(distracted by her grief)* No, I came to take attendance.

Ed: How are you, Sophia?

⁶³ She sleeps uneasy, her thoughts they will not rest
 Even though she reminds them that she's done her best
 Still they play out scenarios, and they fabricate plots
 Until she doubts who she is, only knows what she's not
 They say she's good cause she cares to the depths of her soul
 She sees all of the picture including the holes
 These she fills with herself and the dreams that she's held
 Since that first call to teach caught her up in its spell

Was it 'To Sir with Love' maybe 'Dangerous Minds'
 That led me to believe I could lay it all on the line
 'Til you start to see, maybe with the rest of the world
 You simply are what you are... (Picard 2003)

Sophia: I'm happy to be breathing again.

Ed returns to laying out exams, frustrated that Nate has abandoned the task.

Nate: You really created an impression on the parent council, I mean, that was one hell of a memorable exit, Soph. You should have seen that mother flapping around. "She's dying, this girl is dying!" If you were a gonner, she'd have guilted those parents into carrying the flaming torch of gay rights!

Sophia: I've laid in bed long enough. I haven't seen the kids since the funeral. The least I can do is see them through to the end of the class.

Nate: What did the doctor say?

Sophia: stress exhaustion

Nate: Is that really a thing?

Sophia: I have the doctor's note to prove it.

Nate: Johnson asked you for a note?

Sophia: He has to, Nate, I was off for a whole week.

Nate and Sophia continue their conversation silently as Ed checks his watch. He sits. Waits. He checks his watch again. Mo and Brendan wait in the hallway outside the door. Enter Gagan, bouncing up and down nervously.

Gagan: Hey. So, what do we need for this test? Pencil and eraser, right?

Brendan: And your ID.

Gagan: What? Shit!

Brendan shakes his head as Gagan searches for his ID card.

Gagan: So, did you study?

Brendan: No

Gagan: You could study your literary terms

Brendan: Whatever.

Gagan: Whatever? You wanna graduate, don't you?

Mo: So what if you don't graduate? You work for a few years and then apply to college as an adult student. This test is worth shit.

Gagan: I don't have any I.D. Are they going to let me write the test?

Brendan: Just chill. Walk in, and sit down. They might not even notice.

Ed walks to the door of the classroom where Gagan, Mo, and Brendan wait. His hand is on the doorknob. He checks his watch, waits, then swings the door open. He greets the students at the door.

Ed: Leave your coats, bags, and purses at the back of the room. If you have a cellphone or IPOD, go put it in your locker, quickly. You need an HB pencil, and eraser, and your school ID. Ok, once you enter the room, there will be no talking! The exam booklets are arranged alphabetically, so find yours and sit down. Place your ID on the top corner of your test, and do not touch any of the materials until I tell you it's time to begin.

Brendan: Hi Miss Hyde

Ed: No talking!

Sophia: Good to see you, Brendan.

Ed scowls at Sophia as he walks down each row, picks up each student's ID card, and compares it to each student's face. Sophia consults her class list, and ticks off the names. Ed approaches Gagan.

Ed: Where is your ID card?

Gagan: I think I forgot it at home.

Ed: You need to go to the office to get a printout of your ID.

Gagan gets up, and heads toward the door.

Sophia: Gagan, where are you going?

Gagan: I forgot my ID, Miss. He says I need a printout from the office.

Sophia: Go sit down.

Gagan returns to the desk and sits. Ed and Sophia converge at Gagan's desk. Ed checks his watch.

Ed: This student doesn't have proper ID

Sophia: Gagan Chopra is writing this exam, as you can see by the name on the examination booklet, and on my attendance list.

Ed checks his watch. He glares at Sophia and Gagan.

Ed: *(To the students)* And, you may begin. You have exactly two hours and thirty minutes, with an additional thirty minutes, should you need it. *(To Gagan)* You need to get a printout from the office to verify your identity.

Gagan stands

Sophia: I am right here, identifying this kid!

Ed: *(To Gagan)* Go to the office.

Sophia: *(To Gagan)* Sit down and start writing. Ed, are you telling me that we're going to waste Gagan's time in walking down to the main office to stand in line, and get a printout of an ID card, when I am right here telling you that this student is supposed to be writing this exam?

Ed: That's the policy.

Gagan: It's alright, Miss. I'll go.

Exit Gagan. Ed turns away, and continues checking ID cards. Sophia makes three violent checks on her attendance list. Sophia's heels click sharply as she heads for the door. Ed comes to an empty desk and reads the name on the exam.

Ed: Abby Tran. Is Abby Tran here?

Sophia stops dead at the door.

Brendan: No.

Ed: Well she's not setting herself up for success, being late for an exam. This test will unlock doors to the future, for all of you! But not for Miss Tran, who can't even be bothered to get to her diploma exam. Without this test she won't even make it to graduation!

Brendan: Mr Taylor, she's the one. She's...she...

Sophia: She's dead.

Scene 19: Mr Johnson's office

Mr. Johnson sits back in his chair as Sophia stands and blasts him.

Sophia: This is bullshit. One of my students died, and all Ed's worried about is the fucking I.D. badges at an exam!

Mr. Johnson: We need to remember the big picture, here, Sophia. The ID badges help keep kids safe.

Sophia: Safe? This school isn't safe, Bill. That's what you don't understand. We're locking these kids into a box. A very straight, narrow box.

Mr Johnson: I know the ID policy isn't convenient...

Sophia: Abby killed herself, and we're responsible! You, me, Ed, and every teacher who is afraid of being too controversial!

Mr. Johnson: I'm sorry, Sophia. I know this whole ordeal has been a terrible strain on all of us.

Sophia: A strain! That's such administrative bullshit, Bill. You sit up here in this office like some...puppetmaster completely oblivious to what is happening in our classrooms! Have you ever talked to a teenager? Do you even know what their lives are like?

Mr Johnson stands, and points an accusing finger at Sophia.

Mr. Johnson: I work very hard to take care of our students. Just because I don't have the advantage of getting to know these kids doesn't mean that I don't care about them, Sophia. *(He adjusts his tie as he gains composure. He sits)* I miss being in the classroom, getting to know the kids, and seeing them progress over the semester. I miss those moments when the kids' eyes light up with sudden understanding. I didn't become principal so I could yank people around, I did it to serve the common good, to have some positive effect.

Sophia: Abby Tran deserved more than a positive effect

Mr. Johnson: Of course I'm saddened by the death of one of our own, but there are hundreds of other kids out there who we need to consider. Now I don't know why you have it in your head that we're somehow responsible for this one girl's death, but...

Sophia: Abby was gay. That's why she killed herself. If she didn't do it, it was just a matter of time until someone else did!

Mr. Johnson: There's nothing we could have done to prevent her death.

Sophia: What? What? Of course there are things we could have done! Why do you think Nate and I have been working so hard to convince you that we need a Gay-Straight Alliance, Bill? Why do you think I had a panic attack last week when we presented to the parent council? If you want to be effective, here's your chance. Instead of hiding behind all the policies, use them to show these kids that you're willing to talk about the hard issues. Show them that their lives are that important!

Sophia stares at Mr Johnson, unwilling to leave his office until she is satisfied.

Mr. Johnson: What are you asking of me?

Sophia: I need to know that I can talk about the issues that affect my kids. I need to know that you'll use the controversial issues policies to support my work, not to hang me out to dry like you did with Mr. Aziz.

Mr. Johnson: *(sigh, he nods)* I admire your libertarian passion Sophia. I just hope that you don't burn yourself out like this. If you're committed to this kind of work, you're going to ruffle a lot of feathers. *(sliding a piece of paper across the desk to Sophia)* Here's your timetable for next semester, Amanda can give you the list of your kids.

Scene 20: Sophia's classroom

It is the first day of a new semester. The poster of two men kissing hangs prominently on the wall. A new group of students enters the classroom.

Sophia: Hi. Welcome to English thirty dash two. I'm Miss Hyde. *(pause)* Most of you want to just get through this class to graduation, because the real world seems more interesting than the world of school. I hope that in this class, those two worlds won't be so far apart. *(pause)* Um... yes. The poster. One of my students last semester really liked that poster, and she passed away, *(emotional)* so I'm keeping it up as a reminder of her. *(She distributes forms to the students)* To get into class tomorrow, you need to take this course outline home, and get it signed. This outline tells your parent, or

guardian, or whoever is responsible for signing forms for you, that in this class, we're going to be talking about religion, politics, death, sexual orientation, and all those uncomfortable topics that people say you shouldn't talk about in public. (*pointing again to the poster*) Sometimes, when we're feeling uncomfortable, it's actually a sign to us that we're learning how to fit something new into what we already know, and it's sometimes a painful process⁶⁴. That's one reason why people write, to work through what they're learning, to make some sense of it. I want this room to be a safe place for us to see what we thought we knew through different eyes.

Student: Is this like some Freedom Writer's diary shit?

Sophia: Kind of, I guess. Except you'll have to live through all the work periods that got edited out of the movie. This is real life, people. And it's all yours.

⁶⁴ "One apperceives and apprehends the world in a certain way precisely because this way has been normatized in oneself as an individual. The very fact that the world appears this way or that rather than one sees the world as this or that is evidence of normatization. Yet we are not completely locked into normatization. As soon as we see different possibilities of normatization, the spell of normatization is broken. This is precisely what happens when people of different norms of perception and comprehension come together and open-mindedly and open-heartedly explore and compare their differences. Now, this process does not come easily or naturally and achieving it should be a critically important educational effort."
(Bai 2003)

Epilogue

It's nearly September, and the thought of going back to school, to teaching, is both thrilling and daunting. There is a certain comfort in knowing that the days ahead are taking shape with a new staff handbook outlining a calendar of important dates. I am grateful that the processing of fees and textbooks, and the scheduling of student and teacher timetables are already taken care of, so that I have time and space to work with students. Processes and procedures is what the institution does well, but I worry that institutional life has taught us to treat each other poorly.

I've spent the last few days of August in the hospital with my 90 year old Grandma. She is the only grandparent I have known, and it is through her stories and pictures that I have come to understand my pioneering ancestors. Grandma's stories and recipes have been my richest inheritance. Like schools, hospitals are operated under a system of efficiency and management which is critical for quick diagnosis and medical treatment, but which can be detrimental to the treatment of human integrity. After a 90 minute ambulance transport, Grandma was treated as if she was a misdirected delivery. Six or seven nattering nurses fussed over where she should go before a nurse finally bothered to ask how she was. Grandma read the question as perfunctory, and saved the nurse some time by downplaying her emotional state. She said she was "fine", but I knew that she was scared to undergo a procedure that no one had bothered to explain. I'm sure we can all recall situations where we were not treated well, but I wonder how we have learned to accept, "that's just the way it is". How, in schools, in hospitals, have we learned to accept such meagre human interaction?

When I go back to school, I imagine that a few of my colleagues will walk past me in the hallway, then turn back as they remember to ask, "How did that play thingy go?" and "Did you finish your thesis?" and, "So, when are you going to apply for admin?" I'm already saddened by these perfunctory questions which are not meant to be answered with integrity. These two examples illustrate the ways that this work makes me feel *more*

certain of my ability to thoughtfully, professionally compose myself in response to institutionalized education, *and less*. I feel vulnerable, I feel susceptible to being swept into the processes of school; there is no protection against my own complicity within this system as I participate in the creation of school each day.

I hope that I can gather with colleagues for a weekday conversation group. I'd like to connect with a few teachers at Lord Beaverbrook High School, who I know teach creative writing, and have their own publishing company out of the school; a few of their students are in the process of translating a book, written by a student, into a play. I'm looking forward to setting up some creative writing circles with my students, and not being stuck in my office to work through my ideas by myself. I've become too serious as I sit at my computer typing away each day. I miss the playfulness of living with young people, the element of surprise; I never know what my students will say next that might open out onto a new discovery. I've missed that.

I've submitted *Schooled* to the Uprising National Playwrighting Competition with the hope that this play will see the stage, and be a tool for discussion among students and educators. I'm interested to learn about the role of the playwright post-script. In the meantime, I'm quite taken with the writing part. What started out as disciplining myself to the requirements of writing has turned into an enlivening practice which I know I'll continue. I return to the classroom as a teacher, and a writer engaged in the perennial struggle of this question,

How I can invite my students to step into the rich inheritances to which our English Language Arts curriculum points?

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