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# UNTANGLING A TEACHER'S STORY THROUGH HEURISTIC INQUIRY: A LIFE PROJECT

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UNTANGLING A TEACHER'S STORY
THROUGH HEURISTIC INQUIRY: A LIFE PROJECT

A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP AND ACADEMIC CURRICULUM

BY

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DEDICATION

Joys and laughter fill our home.

Smiles,

unconditionally appear.

"I love you, Daddy,"

and every turn in life is new.

"Thank you, Bonner" and

"This is my 'other' dad,"

seal the bond we share.

Kaleb and Ashlyn,

you are tangles I don't regret.

I love you.

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from listening to him lecture. The hours of coffees, lunches, conferences, trips, phone calls, and emails are as valuable as they are immense. One of the greatest times in my life is when we visited the Alamo together. Dr. A., I appreciate you. I would never be where I am today if it were not for your kindness and time. Dr. Courtney Vaughn's "counseling" sessions and patience inside and outside of class have had a huge impact on my life, and I thank you so much. Dr. John Chiodo has been the perfect example of professionalism and what a college professor should be. I appreciate him very much. Dr. Priscilla Griffith has always offered a different view and opinion that has allowed me to stop, think, and grow. I appreciate her service on this committee and my thesis committee as well. Dr. Neil Houser showed me kindness and compassion during one of the darkest times of my life, and for that I will always be thankful. I have such dedicated and caring professional individuals on my committee who have held me to the highest standards while providing the highest help. Thank you.

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# ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the professional and personal growth of a teacher after he became frustrated and burned out after a successful career in education and in ministry. By looking through 15 years of data (notebooks, journals, lesson plans, books, etc.), I examine the professional pressures that I have faced working in the field of education. I also examine some of personal pressures that I faced. The impact of these pressures on my professional and personal life is discussed. In explaining "How I grow professionally and personally as an English/Language Arts professional," I use storytelling and personal narrative. As a qualitative study, the six stages of heuristic inquiry are used to explore my professional and personal growth: initial engagement, immersion, incubation, illumination, explication, and creative synthesis. This dissertation explores how I use the themes of reflecting, wondering, building relationships, writing, and teaching in order to grow professionally and personally. While the research of this inquiry is unique to me and my story, other teachers and professionals may be able to extrapolate ideas for their own lives based on this research.

## Prologue
## Before the Tangles and Untangles

"I wonder if it's that simple?"
-Langston Hughes, *Theme for English B*

"We can survive the journey of knowing ourselves."
*-Adult Children of Alcoholics Handbook*

This is the story of a highly successful teacher who was burned out and wanted to quit the teaching profession. It is the story of a teacher who gave and gave everything he had to those around him: his administration, his colleagues, his students, his children, his family, and his community. But it is also the story of a teacher who decided that he needed to grow in order to stay effective and relevant in both his professional life and his personal life. It discusses some steps that he took in order to find this growth so he could stay in the classroom and find success.

This story is told through the lens of heuristic inquiry. While I could have chosen several research methods in which to organize this story, I chose heuristic inquiry because it best fits what I was trying to discover. I should note that I actually walked through each and every stage of heuristic inquiry (initial engagement, immersion, incubation, illumination, explication, and creative synthesis) in my research and in my life while writing. I believe that this is one reason why it took me so long to finish. I should also note that I experienced each stage alone and in unison with the others.

Because I physically, mentally, and emotionally walked through each stage, I organized this dissertation as such; therefore, it does not follow the traditional, five chapter approach of many, if not most, dissertations. Each chapter here is devoted to one of the six stages. The only exception to this is chapter six, the chapter dealing with

creative synthesis. While I do attempt to tie the other stages together in this chapter, I do incorporate much of the creativity that is traditionally found in this chapter throughout the dissertation in the form of quotes, personal poetry, free writes, free paints, stories, photographs, and graphic organizers. Each was chosen because it, in some way, creatively synthesizes the conceptualizations of how I grow professionally and personally. Each also represents an area that is taught in the arena of English/Language Arts instruction. For example, while I use poetry here as a way to creatively synthesize my findings, I also use it as a concept that I teach in my curriculum. In this document I am not only utilizing these to synthesize my findings, I am also utilizing them because I am expected to know them while teaching. In other words, I aim to model many of the English/Language Arts skills that I am expected to know.

This is the story of a teacher who "had enough" after being highly successful for many years. It is the story of how he grew to meet the challenges and the daily grind of teaching in the 21st Century. It is the story of how he found five areas of growth that caused him to stay when he really wanted to leave.

I know this story well.

"Why?" you ask.

"I should," is my reply. "Because I lived it."

## Chapter One
## Initial Engagement: The Tangle Begins

"We commonly do not remember that it is, after all,
always the first person that is speaking."
Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

"A rut is a grave where the ends have been kicked out."
Dr. Coy Barker, Childhood Pastor

I never really meant to make my career in education. After a successful career in ministry, I went to college with the idea of preparing for law school. I decided to pick up my teaching certificate "just in case" plan A didn't work. While completing my first internship, "just in case" drastically changed into "this is what I am called to do." Plan B immediately replaced Plan A.

As I delved into my teaching career, I discovered a place to make a difference and was happy with the choices I had made. Finding ways to mesh my love of helping people and English, I was excited about my newfound passion. Enjoying my new career, I knew that I could see myself being in the classroom for a very long time. Yet, as the years waned, I became a statistic. After 5 years of teaching in the public school system and after 15 years of working with students in a religious setting (and for a time working in both), I was exhausted, burned out, and ready to quit. In my heart I knew the truth: it's not that I had completely fallen out of love with teaching; I felt teaching had completely fallen out of love with me.

This caused me to start asking some very difficult questions like who I was and where I was headed in my career and in my life. I wanted to understand what I could to make sure that I stayed in the classroom. In addition, I wanted to know how I could continue for the long haul in the teaching profession.

This took me on a journey to understand what was happening and how I could overcome the obstacles I faced in my life. As I tussled to find ways to answer the question **"How do I grow professionally and personally as an English/Language Arts professional?"** I felt the need to understand why I was struggling to stay in the classroom in the first place. I knew I had frustrations, but I needed to understand the intensity of what I was experiencing. Randy Bomer (1995) expresses what I was feeling when he asked a group of forty English/Language Arts teachers to articulate the "hundreds of different things we are always trying to juggle in our teaching." When he asked a group of teachers to discuss what they faced on a daily basis, he noted that a "pall of hopelessness" fell over the room (p. 1). While I didn't feel hopeless like the teachers in Bomer's study, I did feel frustrated beyond belief. I was experiencing what Clark Moustakas (1990) says is the initial engagement stage of heuristic inquiry: it is one where the researcher encounters a question (p. 24). I was beginning to understand that I had a question, or group of questions, that needed to be answered.

The reasons for my lethargy seemed clear. My teaching career began in an inner city, 100% poverty-stricken school with a vast majority of minority students. (I applied for 42 teaching jobs that year. The last school had 6 English openings. I figured I could get one of them, and I did.) I worked the long hours, navigated the cultural differences, and developed the relationships with students that were needed in order for me to survive. I did everything my administration asked of me professionally, and I worked hard to academically "do no harm" in my classroom. While I loved the school and the students, things were so tough there that my college professor evaluating me for my Entry Year

Teaching certificate asked me emphatically, “Is there anything else you would rather do with your life, besides teach?”

Although I was struggling, I was determined to stay in the field. I tried moving to a suburban school my second year that had a little more influence and money, yet I plunged into the same routine. The backgrounds of my students were different, but many of the pressures were the same. By the time I completed my fifth year in the classroom, I was in danger of becoming one of the statistics that I vowed I would never become: I wanted to drop out of the career of education within the first five years because of the pressures I was facing (Wilson, 2011; Simos, 2013). In the words of a friend, I was “beyond fatigue.”

Like Jonah, the Biblical hero who ran from his calling and was punished by being swallowed by a whale, I wasn’t completely willing to give up on my calling. I just wanted to hide (and I wouldn’t have even minded holding out in the belly of a big fish). Looking back, I realize I thoroughly enjoyed many of the aspects of teaching: the planning of the curriculum, the thrill of standing in front of the class, the intensity of dealing with a difficult student, and the collegiality of working with other professionals. But, like Jonah, I was having difficulty staying relevant. Ironically, as I reflect back on that time, I realize that I spent a lot of time focusing on my professional growth, but I was neglecting the growth in my personal life. This might be one reason that I faced uncertainty in the classroom. Instead of working on improving myself, I put everything I had into my students, my school, and my classroom.

What I do know is that what started as a spark and a passion was waning. My idealized view of teaching was over. Dead. Deceased. It seemed that I needed something,

anything, to keep me in the profession. Many times during this period I opened my desk drawer and pulled out the law school application that I kept partially completed. It was as if I had tripped and "fell up" like the character in Shel Silverstein's poem *Falling Up* (1996) and was having an out-of-body experience where I was focusing on everything that was going wrong in my life. I wavered until I had no choice but to make the decision to stay where I was or move on. At this time, I was unable to find a defined direction in my life, and I knew that I needed something different.

I looked for some answers, but more importantly, I started asking some tough questions. Tough questions like "Why am I doing what I am doing?" and "How am I doing it?" I looked, searched, and spoke with mentors. I scanned books, developed a support system, prayed like hell, and enrolled in some graduate courses in English Education. While I still loved teaching, I was missing the spark that kept me happy. After much soul-searching, I decided that there were many positives in my career and that I needed to stay. But in order to do so, I felt I needed to intensify my ability to learn inside and outside of the classroom. In short, I had to teach myself how to grow as an English/Language Arts professional.

If I felt like Jonah professionally, then I was beginning to feel like another biblical character, Job, personally. Job, a person in the Old Testament who loses everything of value in his life, deals with the agonizing decision of whether to be strong and stay the course or just give up altogether. A divorce, diagnosis with a possibly debilitating, life-long illness (Crohn's disease), and difficulties within my family life were beginning to surface. If I was struggling in my professional life, my personal life was crashing. For years (one could almost say decades), I hid some personal inadequacies

and struggles by throwing myself into helping others. In doing so, I was just putting off the inevitable: a personal breakdown where I would no longer be able to serve my students, my family, or myself. Instead of confronting and working through these tough personal issues, I buried myself in my teaching, putting on a positive face and a tough outer shell.

Although I'm sure some of my colleagues, parents, and students knew what was happening, they weren't, for whatever reason, willing to stand in my face and tell me that I needed help. And why should they? My classroom discipline was some of the best in the building, my professional reputation was stellar, my test scores were high, my students' parents loved me, and my students enjoyed my class. There was not much going on to let others know that I was completely falling apart professionally and personally. But since my personal and professional lives were so meshed, I was sinking. I was sinking fast.

This inquiry aims to answer the question of how I grow. It is an inquiry of how I grow professionally and personally. I'm not asking the question, "Did I or did I not grow as a teacher?" Nor am I asking the question of "Did I or did I not grow personally?" I know that I have grown professionally over the course of my teaching career. I know that I have grown personally as well. The question that I am asking is "How do I grow?" For the purpose of this inquiry, I prefer to use the definition of growth from the *Oxford English Dictionary (*1989), which defines growth as "The action, process or manner of growing; both in material and immaterial senses; vegetative development; increase" (p. 714). For this inquiry, I tend to focus on the ideas of the actions and processes that increase my professional and personal life. To me, the term *professional* relates here in

how I interact within the world of education (teaching, mentoring, school culture, committee work, school leadership, etc.), academia (learning, research, articles), and outreach (religious work, parent consultations, presentations). For the purpose of this inquiry, I use the term *personal* to define other areas of my life, including my relations with my family, colleagues, and friends.

For a variety of reasons, it could be said that I would have grown professionally and personally if I had not done anything differently in my life. Yet I look to discover *how* I grow, and more specifically, how I grow in a positive way. This research aims to answer the question, **How do I grow professionally and personally as an English/Language Arts professional?**

I searched for ways to understand what I was experiencing. After looking at different methods, I came upon Clark Moustakas (1990) and the concept of heuristic inquiry. According to Moustakas (1990), "the heuristic process is a way of being informed, a way of knowing" (p. 10.). I found that heuristic inquiry would be best for me to understand more of how I grow because it "casts a light that enables one to come to know more fully what something is and means" (p. 10). Moustakas (1990) states that when he was conducting his own heuristic inquiry, he analyzed his "personal notes and spontaneous self-reflective writings for study and analysis," and "lyric poetry, autobiography, and biography" (p. 10). Since I had found so much data like this in my own teaching and personal life, I decided that using heuristic inquiry would best help me understand the phenomenon of how I grow professionally and personally.

When I discovered that I could walk through the six stages of heuristic inquiry (Initial Engagement, Immersion, Incubation, Illumination, Explication, and Creative

Synthesis), I became excited knowing that I had found a way to explore outwardly the struggles I was feeling inwardly. And I did walk through these stages mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and physically. Ironically, while I was studying how I grow in a professional and personal manner, little did I know that walking through this heuristic inquiry would cause me to grow. Moustakas (1990) states this concept this way:

> The heuristic process challenges me to rely on my own resources, and to gather within myself the full scope of my observations, thoughts, feelings, senses, and intuitions; to accept as authentic and valid whatever will open new channels for clarifying a topic, question, problem, or puzzlement. (p. 13)

In other words, while I was studying how I grow, I was growing. This was a powerful incentive for me because I wanted to understand how to grow. Moustakas (1990) states that "self-understanding and self-growth occur simultaneously in heuristic discovery (p. 13). And it did occur with me.

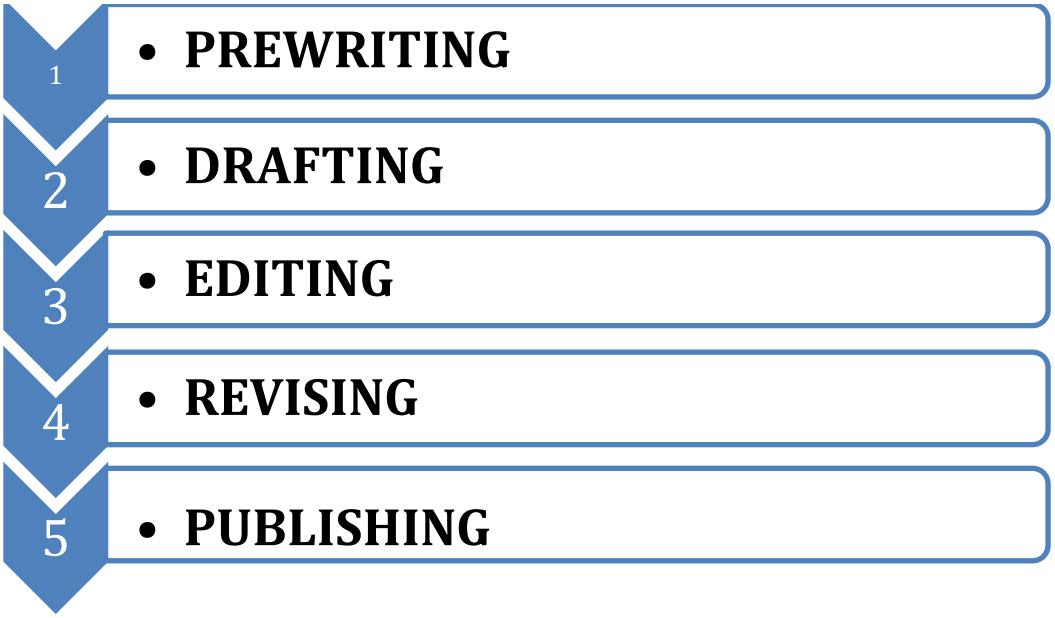
In order to analyze how I grow professionally and personally, I found and gathered journals and notebooks from my 15 years of teaching, graduate courses, and religious work. Second, I quickly glanced through every notebook to determine if they contained information, notes, or other data that pertained to professional or personal growth. Third, I labeled the notebooks in the order that I found them. This undertaking was a journey: I spent countless hours collecting general data before I narrowed it down to 20 notebooks. I decided against placing the notebooks in chronological order; although I was tempted many times do so. Instead, I decided that I would continue the idea of looking at things in recursive manner, much like I do the writing process, the six stages of heuristic inquiry, and have throughout this inquiry.

<u>Developing a Schema</u>

As I gathered and analyzed this data and worked through this inquiry, it is important to note that I noticed a correlation between how I view the five stages of the writing process: prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing (Thompson, 2011; Kapka & Oberman, 2001; Goldstein & Carr, 1996; Reimer, 2001) and the six stages of Moustakas's (1990) heuristic inquiry: initial engagement, immersion, incubation, illumination, explication, and creative synthesis. As a teacher of writing, it became very clear to me that I was able to make connections between the two areas. While they may seem separate at first, in my mind, the scaffolding and the processes to them have similarities.

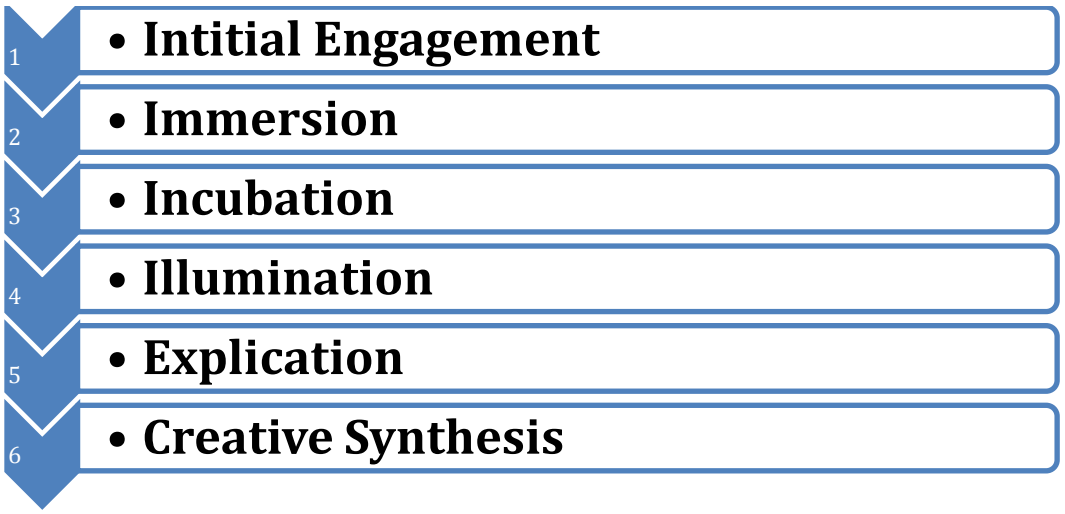
For years, I viewed the writing process in a linear fashion, with one step following after another. I approached it, like many teachers, with the idea that one had to complete the prewriting first, the drafting second, the editing third, and so on. I then thought, and taught, that the revision and the publishing stages were to come next. In my mind these stages were fixed.

**Illustration 1. My Traditional Views of the Writing Process**



When I discovered heuristic inquiry, I viewed the six stages of Moustakas in the same manner. At first, I tried to make sense of the stages by expecting my thinking process to follow each one, right after the other.

**Illustration 2. My Traditional Views of the Six Stages of Heuristic Inquiry**




When reflecting on how I write, I discovered that very few times in my personal writing process did I follow the traditional format of the writing process. The linear process of thinking helped me at first in my own writing, but as I grew as a writer, I soon discovered that writing was more recursive in nature (Thompson, 2011; Kapka & Oberman, 2001; Goldstein & Carr, 1996; Reimer, 2001). I specifically remember sitting in a class with Dr. Angelotti when he explained how people really write, and it is not in a linear fashion. Upon hearing this, I learned that I could walk through the writing steps in a way that made more sense to me. This change made a huge impact on my writing, as I felt that I could more freely express myself. It also made a huge impact on how I teach writing to my students.

**Illustration 3. My Recursive View of the Writing Process**

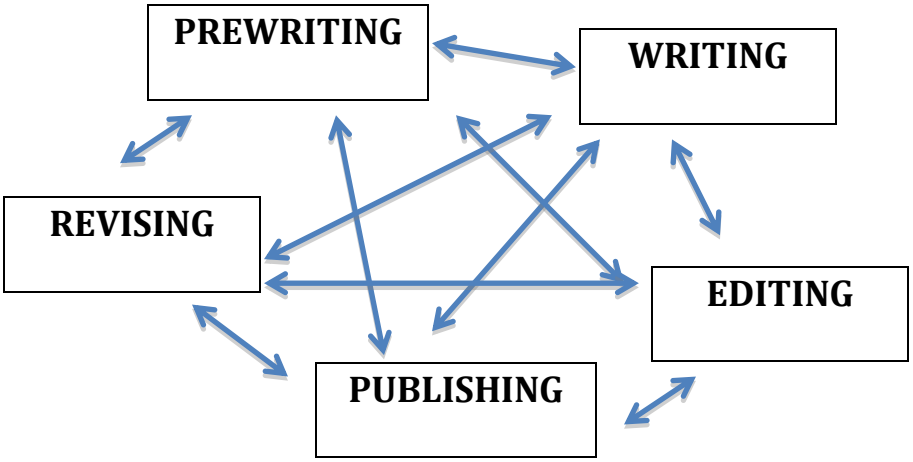
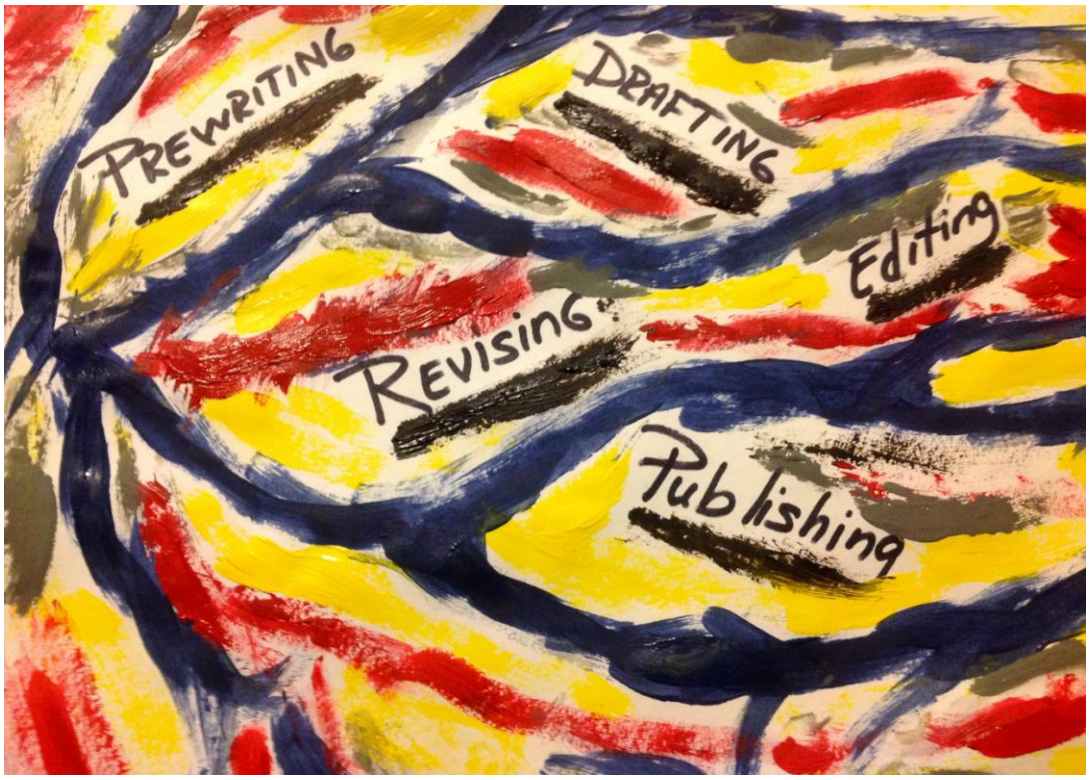



**Illustration 4. Free Paint on My Recursive View of the Writing Process**




While preparing the data to analyze for this inquiry, I found myself becoming frustrated while walking through Moustakas's six stages, just as I used to become frustrated while working through the writing process. Every time I sat down to process

the heuristic process, I had trouble doing so in a linear way. I eventually wanted to give up because I just couldn't seem to make Moustakas's stages fit what I was experiencing. I began pondering the questions "Why do I have to walk through the stages in a linear fashion?" and "What would happen if I applied the same technique as I did to the writing process?" What I discovered was that the same thinking that I had of the writing process could apply to my view of Moustakas's heuristic inquiry.

**Illustration 5. My Recursive View of Moustakas's Heuristic Inquiry.**

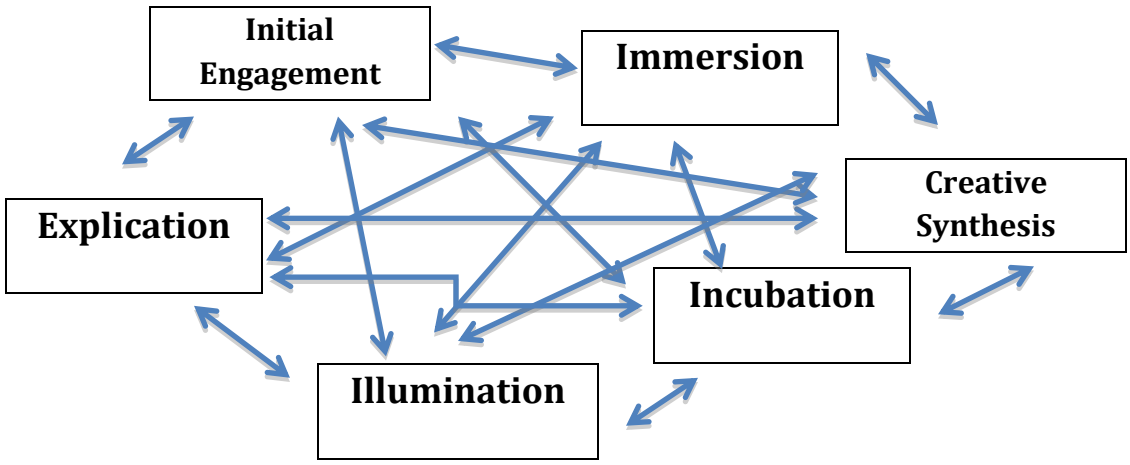


**Illustration 6. Free Paint on My Recursive View of Moustakas's Heuristic Inquiry**




By adopting a recursive view of Moustakas's heuristic inquiry, I was able to move from being robotic, following one stage right after the next. Instead, I was able to step back and allow myself to work through the six stages in a way that makes sense to me. This freed an amazing amount of mental energy. While this may seem strange to some, I feel that I gained much freedom and creativity from taking this approach.

As I work through this process to answer the question, **"How do I grow professionally and personally as an English/Language Arts professional?"** I realize that I am the one who has experienced this growth. Moustakas (1990) states, "Only the experiencing persons—by looking at their own experiences in perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and sense—can validly provide portrayals of the experience" (p. 26). This is not to say that others have not experienced what I have. Indeed, it is safe to say that all teachers will grow professionally and personally in their field in some way. But this

research is targeted to the concept of how I specifically grow professionally and personally as an English/Language Arts professional.

## Chapter Two
## The Tangle with the Tangle: Immersion

"Teaching middle school is like slowly being pecked to death by a duck."
- Author Unknown

"Teaching is sometimes like cleaning fish.
At the end of the day, no matter how hard you scrub,
no matter how hard you try,
for good or for bad,
the smell just won't go away."
-Bonner Slayton, 2006

As I tangled with the question "**How do I grow professionally and personally as an English/Language Arts professional?"** I grappled to understand all aspects of the question. Moustakas (1990) states that once a researcher discovers a question in the initial engagement stage and then defines and clarifies it in the immersion stage, he or she then lives the "question in waking, sleeping, and even dream states" (p. 28). It is during this stage that, in the words of Moustakas, everything in my life became "crystallized around the question" so that I could "be on intimate terms with the question" (p. 28). During this time of *immersion*, I lived with the question constantly and consistently.

Professional Tangles

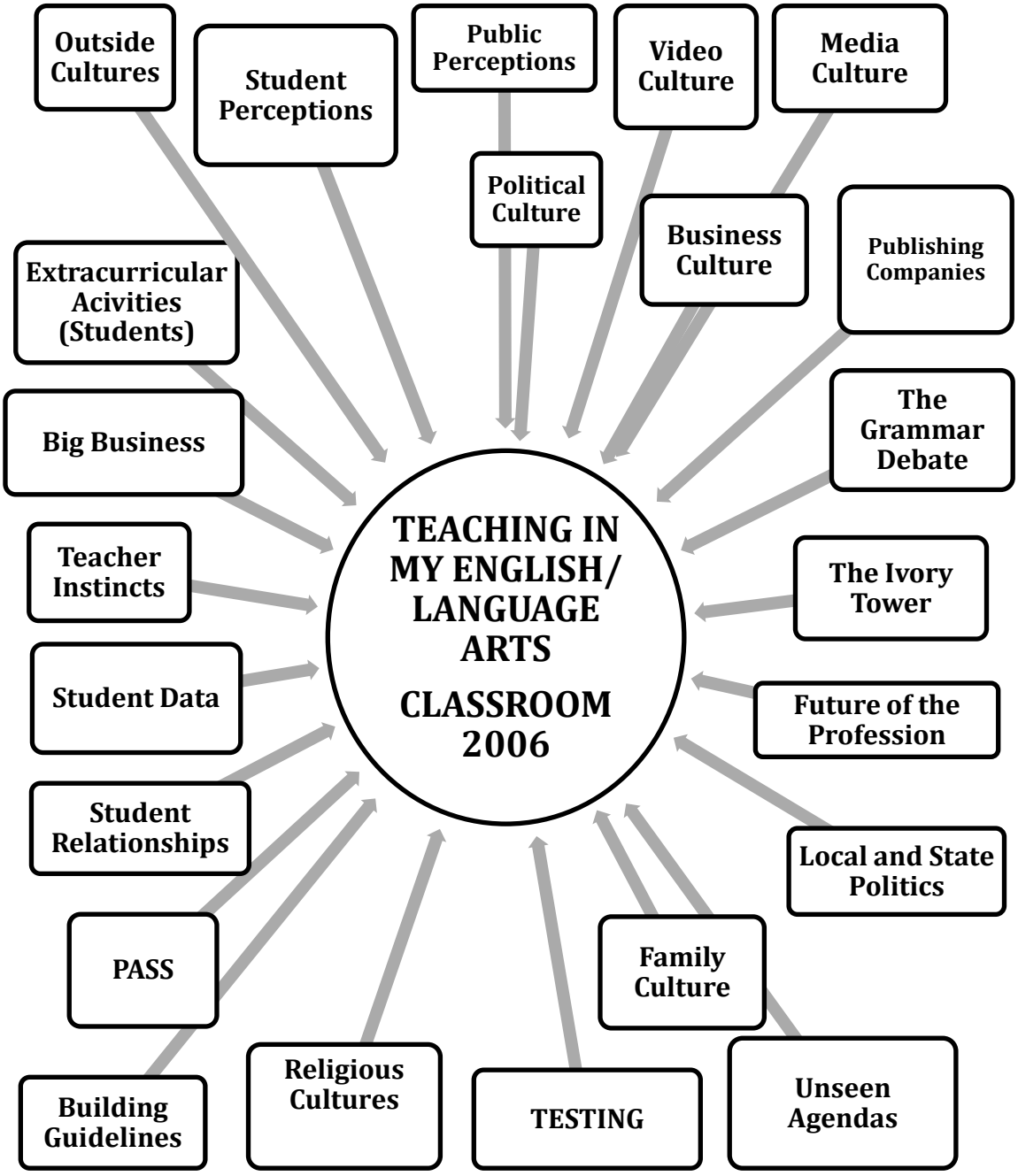
It has always been my belief, and even more so now, that good teachers struggle. We struggle to find solutions for the needs of our students. We struggle as we find ways to impact the school around us. We struggle with others as we serve as advocates for the very children under our care. We struggle to find ways to balance what the politicians think students need and what we know students need. We struggle to untangle the webs of the so many things that keep us in knots. And finally, we struggle to understand the larger picture: the struggle to make sure our students survive and thrive in today's ever-changing world.

After five years of teaching, I knew my struggle was moving to a deeper level, and I really don't think I understood the full impact of the struggles that surrounded me. After years of pouring myself into my career and students, I felt emotionally and mentally drained. It is as if I was tangled in a web that would not let go. The tangle included the struggles I was facing with my teaching, with my personal life, and with the meshing of the professional and personal perceptions I faced while teaching.

What I was experiencing was what Moustakas (1990) calls the *immersion* stage in heuristic inquiry: it is a time when the researcher turns away from the research question to discuss the reasons why they feel they need to study the question in the first place. I began immersing myself more in the understanding of **"How do I grow professionally and personally as an English/Language Arts professional?"**

In the fall of 2006, as I worked to understand these tangles that I faced teaching literacy to my students, I found 23 major professional struggles or pressures that impacted my teaching. Based on an idea from Randy Bomer (1995), I placed these into a chart. These pressures included everything from teaching to standardized tests to pressure from legislators wanting to dictate new curriculum to parents wanting to hold parties in my classroom to having to schedule tests around the community's soccer schedule. These pressures caused stress in my professional life, in the lives of my students, and in my personal life. After a time of reflection, which, according to Cummings (2001) "is the beginning of our own professional growth," (p. 97) I discovered that little, if any, of these pressures were caused by my direct involvement with my students in helping them learn the English/Language Arts.

**Illustration 7. The Pressures I Felt I Faced in 2006.**




After some more reflection, I realized that helping students to learn wasn't at the center of what I was doing day in and day out. Didn't I go into teaching to impact the lives of students? I remember writing my essay for admission into the college of education. I used the statement, as cliché as it was, "All children can learn." Yet very

little of what I was doing was actually helping students to learn, and if learning was taking place, I didn't feel it was helping them learn the English/Language Arts or much about being successful in life.

The one thing that I absolutely love about teaching is having direct contact with students. Put me in front of a classroom for 55 minutes 6 times daily, and I am at ease. The hardest part of my day in teaching was, and still is, doing all the things that consist of getting to work. Like many educators, I experience a sense of euphoria when I walk into my classroom, shut my door, and spend time with my students. When I do, I feel my students and I have the sense of safety, responsibility, and security that Todd Whitaker says is needed for a positive classroom environment (2004). Yet, during this time, I didn't feel that I was using a positive environment to better help my students learn.

While I pondered the answers to the question of "Why is it that teaching a student is not the most important part of teaching?", I realized that this seemed to be a trend in many areas of education. For example, I was recently at an education conference in Tulsa, Oklahoma. As I sat through two full days of workshops, meetings, keynote speakers, and a 1/2-hour long speech from the Lieutenant Governor, I noticed that very few sessions actually put the student at the real forefront of what we were discussing.

What I was feeling at this time made me question, "If the stress I felt didn't come from my students, then from where did it come?" It seemed that I had allowed so many things to interfere with what I was doing for students. I was drowning in needless paperwork, unending meetings, and relentless frustration. In addition, I felt that I had never been fully prepared to meet, understand, or confront these tangles in the teacher preparation classes that I took as in undergraduate classes, in my field experiences, or in

the course of my internship. A common joke that I would tell would go something like this, "I attend meetings and complete paperwork for a living. Teaching is something I do in the cracks and when I have some time."

These pressures were not and are not exhaustive. Instead, they show what was at the forefront of what I was experiencing in my classroom *at the time*. It should also be noted that each one of these pressures could be (and many have been) written and researched exhaustively. These issues were particular to my classroom, but I do feel that they might be indicative of pressures that other teachers face.

This is exactly one reason that it might be so hard to grapple with the tangles that take place in our lives as educators: the issues that I face are relevant to my classroom and are specific to my teaching context. Another teacher's challenges may be completely different. In addition, the pressures from one year are not the same as the pressures that I, or another teacher, may face the next year; moreover, the tangles may be different from one hour to the next! This is one reason that I do not believe in a "one size fits all" prescription for teaching: the teacher must have some sense of fluidity in the classroom to make adjustments to meet the needs of their students. Why? Because students change, that's why. And, students are different across geographic, social-economic, time, and philosophical arenas.

As I asked more and more questions, I was experiencing what Howard Gardner (2000) explains is important in his personal "educational landscape." Gardner (2000) states that "questions are more important than answers; knowledge and, more important, understanding should evolve from the constant probing of such questions" (p. 24). Instead of looking and thinking that I had the answers, I was beginning to ask hard

questions that didn't seem to have answers. If I did seem to find the answers in my educational setting, they didn't seem to be the "right" answers that so many people wanted me to find. It might have been a natural evolution on my part, or it may have been just by accident. During this time, I moved from a place of where I arrogantly knew all of the answers to a place that Nancie Atwell (1998) describes as "Today, I learn in my classroom" (p. 3).

One reason many good teachers may struggle to teach in today's educational environment is because they feel that many of the policy issues that they face are beyond their control (Reich & Bally, 2010). This certainly was the case for me. These issues can manifest themselves in a variety of ways: from the pressure of teaching to standardized tests to the lack of health care among students to the lack of teaching to standards that are not aligned with what teachers know is needed in the "real" world. And while there are a great number of teachers who are able to balance these forces with good teaching practices, it seems that the struggle between what are good teaching practices and outside influences is an ever-increasing battle that is being lost. I have watched for years as my colleagues have struggled, as I have personally struggled, to balance what is good for my students with the tangles and pressures that are placed on the educational establishment.

Some policy makers, and the general public, might think that to acknowledge or address the situations that teachers face on a daily basis is a way of making an excuse as to why students cannot achieve high educational standards. (The concept of "high educational standards" is one that is highly contested, but that is a completely different research inquiry.) This is simply not true. English teachers, and others, are faced with an increasing number of issues that have little to do with reading, writing, or other specific

subject skills. It seems that instead of working to ensure that teachers can focus on the academic skills that they need to teach, society places more and more non-academic pressures on teachers.

Ironically, as I look back over my college transcripts and class notes, I find very few instances where I studied about the social issues that I faced in the classroom. And I can find no evidence that I ever took one class or training in my undergraduate or graduate studies that gave me guidance in how to handle the societal and political issues that I faced in my classroom and in my life on a daily basis. I did take some general classes on psychology and sociology, and I remember a few courses on studying the issues that I would face, but there was very little guidance on what to do when I actually faced these issues.

In addition to the issues that I felt were specifically related to my classroom, I realized that there were other, political pressures. During my first years of teaching, the political pressures on teaching, especially on the teaching of English, heightened with the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act (Bush, 2001) and other standardized tests (Hoffman, Paris, Salas, & et al., 2003). Although much of the impact of this legislation has been researched, the impact on how it has caused teachers to teach in the classroom is still being explored (Assaf, 2008; Reich & Bally, 2010). One thing is for sure, standardized testing is not always positive and in the best interest of students. Some teachers feel compelled to "teach to the test." Many times students become bored and are asked to complete tasks that have nothing to do with the real world (Brimi, 2010; Scot, Callahan, & Urquhart, 2009; Nichols & Berliner, 2008). There is building evidence that the rush towards standardized testing is actually causing harm in helping students to

become creative individuals. These tests may actually cause students to have lower paying jobs when they leave high school (Ghysels, 2009; Bronson & Merryman, 2010; Zhao, 2006; Moon et al., 2007). The pressure to teach to the test is real (Lagana-Riordan & Aguilar, 2009), and it consumes a large part of an English teacher's time. This is not to say that all accountability measures and testing are necessarily evil, but there should be balance between testing and teaching what students need in order to be successful (Ghysels, 2009). In addition to the pressures of federal legislation, there are state and district mandates (many times in response to federal mandates) that impact classroom teaching (Ediger, 2001; Anagnostopoulos, 2005). State standards, local blueprints, test scores from previous years, and building directives all require English teachers (and other teachers) to modify what they teach (Ediger, 2001).

There are other pressures on teachers that curb their ability to teach, and I felt them in my classroom. Increasingly, teachers are asked to know an array of rules, laws, and procedures that fall outside of their normal teaching subject. In addition to implementing programs to stop bullying, develop community service, build cultural diversity, stomp out drug and alcohol abuse, respect cultural diversity, develop sex education programs, prevent child abuse, and teach financial literacy, it has been suggested at the local and national levels that classroom teachers enforce immigration policies, promote health and physical fitness, and teach values/character education. Teachers have even found themselves on the forefront of the "English" only debate (Jong, 2008) and have even been asked to carry guns to school.

In addition to the pressures that I knew were real, there were stories that helped me realize that I needed to grow. These stories, of course, came from my students. For

example, one afternoon I remember sitting with my class in an assembly with several hundred students. As I looked over my left shoulder, I noticed a portly student quietly move behind some construction material in the assembly hall. As I moved to redirect the child back to his seat, I found myself in a situation. He had taken a garden hose and wrapped it around a tank and had positioned it around his neck. Within 30 seconds I found myself on the floor, wrestling with him as he was choking himself. The more I tried, the harder he pulled. Since he was much larger than me, I found myself in a struggle. Luckily, another teacher found us, and we both wrestled him to the ground, removing the garden hose. No one was the wiser as we put him in an ambulance. After filling out paperwork, I found myself sitting outside my principal's office in tears, knowing that I just helped save a student's life. Not one class or training I had had prepared me for this, yet a scene like this unfolded many times over the next few years. Sadly, I had no time to reflect on this experience as I had 25 students who needed to refine their ability to write descriptive paragraphs.

This research aims to explore how a teacher can grow to teach successfully with and to the policies and other pressures that he faces day-to-day. It also explores the idea of growing while providing students with a safe place where they can experience, explore, and learn how to learn what they need in order to be successful. In this exploration, it is not intended to downplay or demonize some of the policy issues (i.e. standardized testing, Common Core Standards, etc.) that teachers face, nor is it intended to downplay the social issues that students face and how these issues impact the classroom. Instead, it aims to grapple with the concept of how one English/Language

Arts teacher came to terms with infusing growth into his personal and professional life as a way to help meet the social, academic, and career needs of his students and himself.

In addition to gaining personal knowledge, more understanding, better clarification, and positive growth, I believe that this research allows others to see how one teacher was/is able to move beyond the struggles that almost every teacher faces in the profession and the day-to-day mental mine fields that confront us. This inquiry looks at the times in my life and my career when things were quiet and I came face-to-face with my life, my craft, and my profession. While this research *does not* aim to solve the struggles in teaching, it does aim to explore some concepts that have allowed me to come to terms with these struggles.

It seemed during this time that political and social tangles were marring my ability to stay effective in the classroom, and I felt that my classroom instruction was suffering. My idealized view of teaching was over. While my test scores were good, my students were bored, and I felt they were in need of someone who could creatively reach them, someone who was able to mesh the real world—their world—with English in a creative manner. I was in danger of becoming paralyzed in a world of "drill and kill" worksheets and bubble sheets while students sat bored out of their minds. I was lacking the "originality, openness, and freshness" that Csikszentmihalyi (1997) states is necessary in order to be creative. As I contemplated what was happening in my life, I examined my perceptions of myself as an English/Language Arts professional and as a person. I realized that I was in great need of an infusion of something, but I had no idea what that something was.

I realize now that many of the pressures I faced were viable and honest pressures that English/Language Arts teachers must explore and understand as they teach. What I was facing was a disconnect in the perceived pressures that I felt had nothing to do with teaching and the reality of the students and pressures that did have an impact on what I was doing. This started me on a journey of using these pressures creatively while teaching English. What I learned later was that part of being a growing educator is the ability to embrace a mentality that does away with "either/or" thinking. Instead of rejecting these challenges and tangles, I feel that I discovered true success in how to embrace these issues and blend them with what I knew was good for my students.

*The Roles I Felt I Played as an English Teacher*

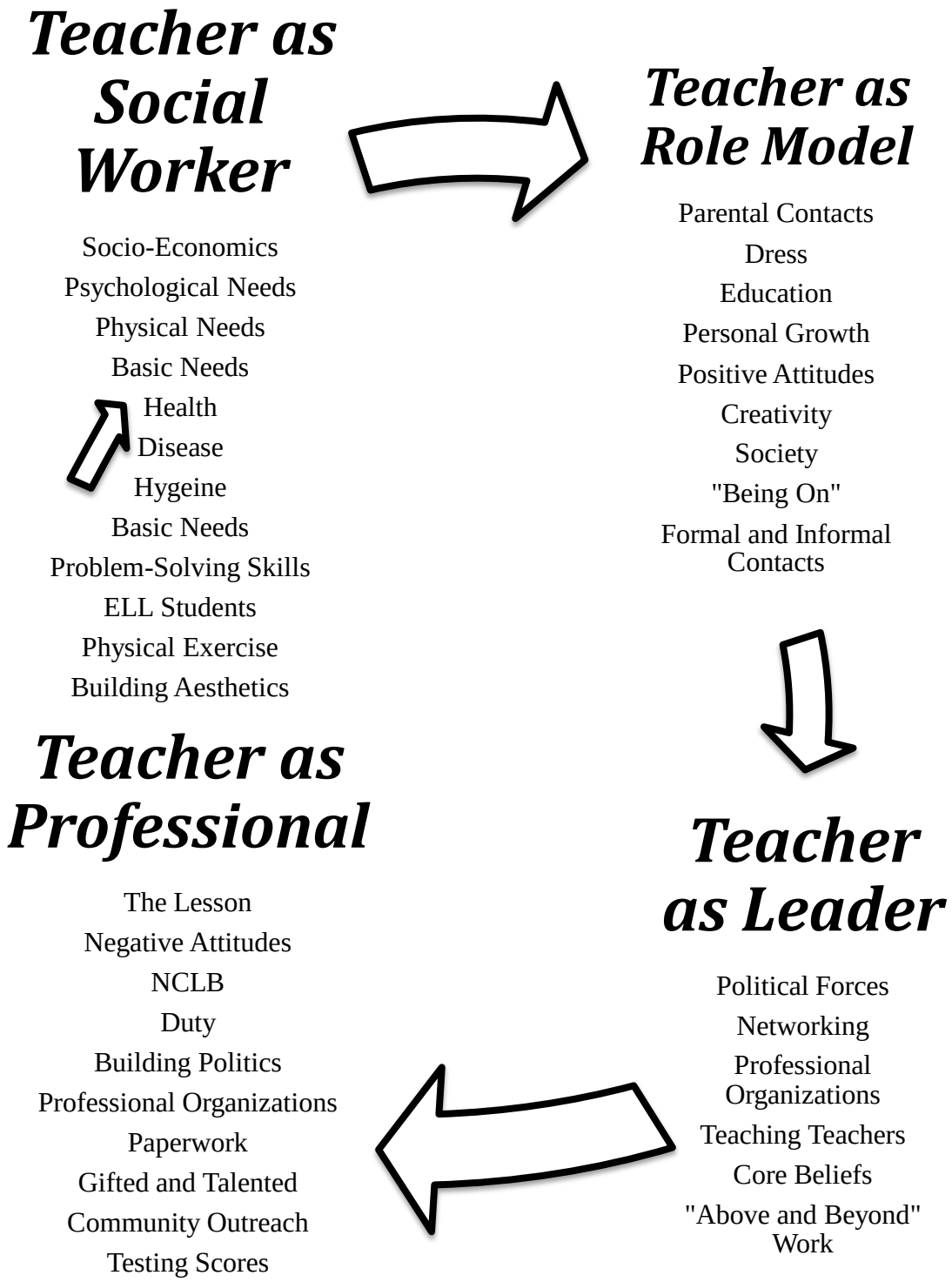
In addition to the pressures mentioned above, I discovered that my position as an English/Language Arts professional required that I play different roles in my life. These roles may have come from that fact that, according to Helterbran (2008):

> teachers are also held to a higher standard of conduct and image because they do work with children—parents' and communities' most precious resources. In addition, because almost everyone has experienced some degree of formal education, many believe themselves to be experts on teaching and the learning process. (p. 123)

Each role was determined by how I spent each day and greatly influenced by how I planned my calendar. Yet, once again, I saw very little time or effort spent on teaching students the "hard skills" of the English/Language Arts. These roles were instrumental in my understanding the different hats that teachers must wear. They were real to me at the time, and I felt that they placed me in an endless cycle of the "cog and wheel" where there never seemed to be a way to alleviate the pressures that I was facing. The more I worked and the more I tried to work within the "profession," the less I felt I was doing

with students. The more and more I struggled, the more and more I felt like I was losing the creativity that I needed to help students. The next figure shows the roles that I felt that I played at the time.

**Illustration 8. The Roles I Felt I Played as a Teacher in 2006**




My feelings at this time can be characterized in the following free write that I wrote for a graduate class:

> Big business complains that students are not ready for the work place; religious organizations complain that they do not have access to the classroom; colleges and universities complain that students are not ready for their curriculum. National politicians cry that our schools are failing while they seem to forget that schools are run mostly at the local level. State politicians usually have some sort of plea to "strengthen our failing schools" in order to get elected. Charter schools yell that they can teach students better and cheaper, and private schools lament that they do not receive the same funding as public schools. In addition, publishing companies bombard administrators and teachers with pre-packaged programs they say will cause all students to succeed. It seems that there is eternal tug-of-war from so many different places and good, creative classroom teachers are in the middle.

Amazingly, I didn't include the concept of "Teacher as Teacher." This was despite the fact that Wright, Horn, and Sanders state that the teacher is the most important factor in the classroom (1997). The fact that the main role that I played as *teacher* is not the one that I made central to my thinking is odd, since I am a professional educator by trade. Yet this was exactly my thinking at this time in my career. I felt so overwhelmed by the roles that I was asked to take that I did not give myself enough room and time to actually teach the very students that I was supposed to be teaching. Later, I revisited this figure and reworked it to show some adjustments.

In this time of immersion, I published poems that expressed the feelings that I had about some of the issues that I had while working with students. The following is from *English Journal*:

> *Because I'm So Different?*
>
> *Through the prisms of my confusion*
> *you cut my soul*
> *Your words—*
> *"Smear the queer"*
> *"No! You can't sit at this table!"*
> *streak havoc*
> *through the colors*
> *of my adolescent*
> *dreams*

*I hear my inner voice*
*"I know this isn't my fault"*
*"There has to be others like me"*
*I fight for release*
*long to pass, finally,*
*beyond the pain*
*then*
*I smell death*
*an instrument*
*of change.* (Slayton, 2008)

During this time, I published another poem in *Scissor Tale Review* over the death of one of my students because of gang violence:

*Stealing Coors*

*Jason Haines was shot by a Vietnamese store clerk*
*last week*
*walking out the door with a six pack of Coors,*
*and a smirk.*
*Hitting the pavement, dead at*
*SW 29th and May Ave.*
*as he opened the car door of the old Buick.*
Over beer?

*As 15 year-old, tear-laced girls in too short of skirts*
*place roses into the close-to-pauper's coffin,*
*grab his young Mexican face and*
*kiss the lips of their peer,*
*I steady the casket.*
A six pack?

*His mom cries in Spanish,*
*Holding a rosary, looking to Mary for solace.*
*There is none, and little to come.*
*Part of an inner city falters, catching her breath.*
*Is there justice anymore*
Over Coors? (Slayton, 2011)

Both of these poems express the difficulties that I faced in other areas of students' lives *besides* teaching them English/Language Arts skills.

A story that happened during this time is a perfect example of the pressures I faced and the roles I played when the assistant principal came to my classroom with a roll of toilet paper.

"Hey, Bonner. I need your help," Jason, the assistant principal, stopped by during my fourth hour.

"Anything you need," was my usual reply. Especially since Jason never asked for many favors.

"Since your classroom is next to the boys restroom…"

"Yes," I hesitated.

"And you are the only male on this end of the building." I was growing suspicious by the moment.

"Uh huh."

"And since they are tearing up the bathroom with toilet paper and paper towels on a daily basis, I need you to hand out the toilet paper."

"I'm sorry. What did you say?"

"Our students need to know how to be responsible. I need you to check out the toilet paper to kids when they come down to use the restroom."

I was a little less than enthused, "How in the hell am I supposed to teach students to pass the state reading test while checking out rolls of toilet paper to students?"

This system lasted two hours.

These are just a few of the many instances that caused me stress. And I understand how stories like this play out a thousand times a day in the world of teaching for all teachers. What I do know was that at this time in my career, I was looking for an

infusion, an infusion that would allow me to be seen as a professional, while making a stronger impact on the lives of my students. Moreover, I needed to find something that allowed me to know that I was right in following this calling for my life: I needed something that would give me personal fulfillment. Checking out toilet paper just wasn't doing it for me.

Personal Tangles

It is almost impossible for me to separate the concepts of a professional and a personal life. This is not to say that this is a healthy way to live. As a matter of fact, I have been counseled by many to put separation between these two areas. Counselor and mentor alike have encouraged me to put distance between my professional life and my personal life. I have tried. Yet I have felt conflicted as I tried to distance the two. What I discovered in Parker Palmer (2010) and his book, *The Courage to Teach*, helped me to reconcile the two worlds. Palmer states how difficult it is for teachers, especially good ones, to change the habit of not keeping their professional and personal lives apart. Palmer's ideas relate to how I was feeling when he states, "we must enter, not evade, the tangles of teaching so we understand them better and negotiate them with more grace, not only to guard our own spirits but also to serve all our students well" (p. 2). To me, teaching is part of my spirit, a part of my soul. The tangles that have too many times had a direct impact on how I reach my students and practice my craft have also impacted my personal life. At one time, these tangles seemed to control me and seemed to point me toward a downward spiral professionally and personally. Looking for ways to professionally and personally grow helped me untangle the messes of both my personal and professional life.

There are three poems that I have published that might give some insight into my personal life. The first relates to my childhood growing up in the country:

*Childhood*

*Tumbling among Granddaddy long-legs*
*Playing underneath the black-jack trees*
*Walking sticks with little orbs*
*Reaching upward through life's breeze.* (Slayton, 1998)

This was the most idyllic time in my childhood. It was a time when there seemed to be no worries and concerns.

This next poem also discusses growing up in the country, but gives a little insight into some of the interpersonal family relationships I had growing up,

*Cousins*

*"Betcha!"*
*he bullied.*

*"Down*
*the*
*hill*

*Off*
*the*
*path*

*Through the*
*sticker-patch."*

*"Yeah,*
*But this time*
*Bare foot*
*I cried,*

*Crossing*
*the*
*finish line."* (Slayton, 1998)

Here, I am trying to defend myself, without much help from others.

This last poem gives insight into some of the difficulties with my family relations:

*Visiting My Aunt*

*Jeeter sat wringing her hands on the couch:*
*Burnt were cigarettes woven into the carpet.*
*A glass of beer filled half way—*
*she never did get sobered.*
*Jean was married seven times.*
*Each passed, it seemed,*
*like her, with time. (Slayton, 2004).*

Fecho and Allen (2003) state that "the world outside the classroom transacts daily with the world inside the classroom and each reflects, shapes, and is shaped by the other. Such has always been the case" (p. 233). I have always believed this true with my students, although some of my colleagues have believed differently. The worlds of my students outside the classroom have had a direct impact on their lives inside the classroom. Yet I never really took the time to understand what it meant for *me* as a teacher and as a human when the world outside the classroom and the world inside of my classroom transacted with my life. What I realized was that teachers, even "good" teachers, allow their worlds outside the classroom to impact what happens inside their classrooms.

I was experiencing Palmer's concepts of vocation and self, while trying to figure out my true self. After years of giving, and giving, and giving, I completely forgot who *Bonner Slayton* was. In all actuality, I don't think I ever knew who I was. Facing years of denying myself the ability to grow personally, I was officially exhausted. Having been a caretaker for my family during my childhood and then moving right into part-time, and then full-time, ministry at one of the largest churches in America at the age of

17, caused me to put some very small bandages/Band-Aids on some very large issues that I was hiding in my personal life.

This is not to say that my personal experiences were completely negative. The church taught me how to develop good business practices, to reach students in all socio-economic situations, and to develop structure in my life. But being thrust into a leadership position in one of the largest churches in America as a teenager had its drawbacks. I was so busy working and learning my career on the job that I didn't grow personally and develop my sense of who I was. In addition, since very few of the people with whom I served with were formally educated in an academic sense, I didn't have examples of going to college and being part of the academic world.

I was very successful in ministry, despite the lack of formal training or education. At the time, I was managing a youth group of over 400 students, after starting with just 13. I had a paid staff and a full-time secretary with an annual budget of over $40,000.00. This was impressive for someone who was in his late teens: most churches at the time in Oklahoma had an average attendance of 100 parishioners. For five years, I worked at breakneck speed: speaking 7 times a week; working as our private, Christian school's counselor; teaching a daily Bible class; training an unpaid staff of 20; traveling across the country to conferences; developing an outreach to inner city kids; having weekly lunches with my students; and fulfilling a host of other duties as an associate pastor at a mega church. What was my salary for working over 90 hours a week in 1990? I made the grand sum of $13,000.00 per year.

Starting this routine at a very young age caused a pattern to develop both in my personal and professional lives. For the next 17 years, I was "the sage on the stage,"

moving from project to project, speaking engagement to speaking engagement, and leadership position to leadership position. Sometimes I was working in churches, and sometimes I was in the public school classroom. Many times I was in both. Along the way, I earned ordination as a minister, an Associate's degree, Bachelor's degree, National Board Certification, and a Master's degree. I worked hard to mesh my religious world and my public education world. Sometimes I was successful, but many times I wasn't. In the end, personally I was spent. I felt like I had nothing else to give.

While in the public education classroom, as I had become accustomed in my religious work, I volunteered for every opportunity to reach students. I worked hard to reach every student I could. Here I was working, trying to be the best teacher I could be, but I wasn't able to distance myself from what I did for a living and who I am as a person. This definitely caused issues in my personal life.

Although I knew it wasn't healthy, more and more of my identity became not who I was but in what I was doing. It was like I was addicted to being at the front and in the middle of all the attention. It was becoming embarrassing. I couldn't walk across campus without kids yelling my name from classrooms, hallways, or offices. As department chair, when I walked into another teacher's class, students would literally jump out of their seats to come and talk to me. Although I was constantly trying to calm students down, I received many evil looks from teachers.

This is not to say that I was completely innocent in all of this. It was as if the more attention I received from students and parents, the more attention I wanted and needed. I was developing a teacher-persona, a false self that was not unlike Peter Parker when he becomes Spiderman.

All along the way, I was worried that I couldn't sustain what I was doing. It was as if I had developed a huge Ponzi scheme in my life: I knew that the more I shifted energy and resources from one area of my life to another, the more I felt that I would be considered a fraud. In the back of my mind, I knew I couldn't do it forever.

As part of my trying to understand what was happening in my personal life and my career at the time, I kept small tidbits in journals. The following is an example:

> God is so funny. I have spent my life trying to get others to stay out of Lucifer's harm, and yet God seems to have made Hell my destination. I have desperately tried to live the ideal that Rodney Atkins talks of in his song, "If You're Going through Hell." (The idea is that one needs to walk THROUGH Hell, not stop and sit awhile.) The problem is that I have had no trouble finding the entrance to the place, but it seems that when I found it God slammed shut the door and covered up the damn exit signs.

My thoughts during this time of immersion seemed to vacillate from one extreme to the other as I attempted to figure things out. An example of this is the following:

> Have I traveled the road less traveled by, the one that Frost ponders in his poem? When I close the classroom door and I am confronted with my education, my abilities, my attitudes, and my plans for that day, that class, that moment, what is really taking place? I feel alone with my thoughts. All alone. In moments, in the split seconds before the first student bounces in the door, or when I get up from my desk and start towards the teaching platform, I freeze. I am confronted with the idea that—like Palmer discusses—that I could be a fraud. I could be one of those teachers that I knew so well were frauds—faking it and never really making it.

During this time, I remember a sermon that I heard Bill Hybels give on leadership. As the senior pastor of one of America's largest and most innovative churches, Hybels likened what I was going through as a juggler who is juggling glass plates. Hybels used the analogy to show that while our tendency is to add more and more plates to our already packed repertoire of juggling, eventually we will get to the point

where we can't handle all the plates. Instead of just losing one or two, we will eventually see all of them come crashing to the ground (Hybels, 1991). As I pondered the question, **"How do I grow professionally and personally as an English/Language Arts professional?"** my professional and personal plates were crashing on the floor.

## Chapter Three
## The Tangle with the Tangle: Incubation

"and I—I took the one less traveled by,
and that has made all the difference."
-Robert Frost, *The Road Less Travelled*

"We spend millions upon millions to educate people around the globe while we have so much ignorance right here at home."
-Tilla Slayton, My "Nanny"

While walking through the third phase Moustakas's heuristic inquiry, I allowed the research question of **"How do I grow professionally and personally as an English/Language Arts professional?"** to ruminate. Moustakas (1990) states that, during the incubation stage, it is important to withdraw from the research question and allow the information to sit so that one may just reflect and think. Ideally, during this incubation time, information comes and thoughts are allowed to come to the surface since "the researcher retreats from the intense, concentrated focus on the question" (p. 28). At first, this might seem to be an easy process. And, for some, it might be. For me, it was extremely difficult, very time consuming, and unbelievably confusing.

It is during this stage that I truly followed Moustakas's (1990) ideas and became not only "intimately and autobiographically related to the question," but I also learned "to love the question" (p. 43). It is during the *incubation* stage where I "retreated from the intense, concentrated focus on the question" (p. 43) and allowed it to process within me. As I did, I worried that I would not see any progress in my quest to understand how I grow professionally and personally. Yet Moustakas (1990) is explicit in stating that growth still takes place within the researcher (p. 28) because the period of incubation allows "the inner workings of the tacit dimension and intuition to continue to clarify and

extend understanding on levels outside the immediate awareness" (p. 29). During the incubation stage, the research is giving "birth to a new understanding or perspective that reveals additional qualities of the phenomenon, or vision of its unity" (p. 29). While I absolutely hated this stage when I first entered it, I learned to love it.

When I started on this journey, it was obvious that I was seeking something new in my life. Many times, I felt as though I *was* the landscape that Father Latour discovers in Willa Cather's *Death Comes to the Archbishop*:

> This mesa plain had an appearance of great antiquity, and of incompleteness; as if, with all the materials for world-making assembled, the Creator had desisted, gone away and left everything on the point of being brought together, on the eve of being arranged into mountain, plain, plateau. The country was still waiting to be made into a landscape. (Cather 1955, p. 94-95)

Here, in the Southwest, Latour finds incompleteness with all the pieces left strewn across the landscape waiting for the Creator to make them into something. While I would argue that there is much beauty in the "pieces" that the narrator describes, I believe that the landscape eventually needs to be made whole. In the novel, as in my life, I felt that complacency had taken over, and the Creator was either unable or unwilling to complete the task at hand. I have never wanted to be complacent in my life—either professionally or personally. Yet that is exactly where I was, and I was longing for that "incompleteness" to disappear.

What I found was the opposite of what I thought I was going to find. In a strange way, I discovered that there was beauty in the *incompleteness* that I was facing. I found my completeness in the fact that I was incomplete. I began to realize that I didn't need to have all the answers and that I would be fine without being the "sage on the stage," pretending that I was all-knowing. I took the advice of my mentor and professor,

Dr. Angelotti, and began to "let things emerge." Not only did I see the value of living my professional life this way, I began to see value in allowing myself to live this way in my personal life as well.

As I was trying to pull it all together in my professional life and my personal life, it eventually made sense to me to find a time to pull away and to reflect. Barry Lane (1993) states, "Now more than any time in history, imagination and self-reflection are survival skills of the highest priority" (p. 3). So, during this *incubation* time, I pulled away, used my imagination, and took the time to self-reflect. It was difficult to find a way to take this thinking and imagination and turn it into a *product* (especially for this inquiry). After a time of sitting, thinking, and reflecting, I eventually pulled out my pen and paper, traveled, wrote poetry, completed paint-writes, spent more time with my children, completed some business adventures, served as a mentor to people who weren't in education, rediscovered my grandparents, reached out to new friends, presented at conferences, published poetry and articles, rebuilt relationships, spent quality time with myself, and a host of other activities. All of these allowed me to focus on other areas of my life. As part of this incubation period, I pulled away to discover just who *Bonner Slayton* was in many areas but especially in the areas of professional and personal growth.

One activity that I did to pull immediately away from the research question was to travel. Within this period, I traveled to Pensacola, Dallas, Indianapolis, Nashville, Philadelphia, Las Vegas, New Orleans, San Antonio, and Gulf Shores, Alabama. I went boulder hopping in the Wichita Mountains, dancing on Bourbon Street, "boot scooting" in downtown Nashville, floating down rivers by myself, and exploring in the subways of

New York. I made a conscious effort to meet new people, go to new places, and try new things. As I left my office and the hustles and tussles of teaching, I explored. I took long walks and visited the sanctuaries of Catholic churches in Mackinaw Island, New York City, Philadelphia, San Antonio, Atlanta, Nashville, Louisville, Mobile, and Las Vegas. Although I am not Catholic, these houses of worship became places where I could sit and think. Traveling became a way for me to get away and think in a way that never seemed possible by staying home. This is important to note here because these travels became a way to physically connect externally what I was experiencing internally—much like the physical travels did for Father Latour while he was exploring the American Southwest.

The following is a free paint that I completed during this time about a reflective visit that I completed after visiting the Catholic church on Mackinaw Island in Michigan.

**Illustration 9. Free Paint after Visiting the Church on Mackinaw Island**



In addition to the free paint, I completed a free write over my feelings at the time. From this free write emerged the following poem:

*Visiting the Church on Mackinaw Island*

*Angels tread quietly*
*among the worship of statues*
*as sinners and saints*
*cadence*
*their breath*
*into filtering smoke.*

*Mystery returns majesty*
*while children father*
*the robes*
*of Cherubim,*
*quieting*
*the loudest noise heard.*

At first glance and to some, this time of incubation might seem easy. In actuality, it was, and still is, extremely difficult for me. I was so accustomed to being "on" that it became increasingly difficult for me to turn the switch to "off." There were times that I felt isolated, much like Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter when they were forced out of the White House in 1981 (Carter, 2007), and they had very little direction or heading of what they wanted to do for the rest of their lives. After I became engaged with my question and in this incubation time, I began to feel the same way: I really didn't know the direction that I was taking. I was lost in a fog, not unlike the fog at Whitefish Point, Michigan, on Lake Superior. I wrote the following personal narrative explaining the power of the fog as it related to my own life:

> The only thing visible was a dark hazy mist which engulfed the lake, the broken-down pier on which I was standing, and even the sky above. I could only see about 15 feet into Whitefish Bay and the only thing that did not seem to be submerged in the haze was the lighthouse behind me. I admired its ability to hold its own on the small, sandy, pebble-covered beach against the mist. It stood tall and graceful, constantly

> warning passing ships to beware of the shallow water which had
> already taken far too many lives. There were no rocks and no cliffs, not even
> crashing waves to destroy the passing vessels. No, the lighthouse stood to warn
> ships against the cold, frigid, mysterious water and the even
> scarier dark haze just about it. As I stood on the pier trying to gaze
> into Lake Superior, I realized that I was looking at something deeper.
> I was gazing deep into my own life—my own soul. My inability to see
> across the lake through the mist gave me the uncanny feeling that I was
> gazing deep into my own future. I suddenly realized that if my future
> could be measured by distance, my future only consisted of about 15
> feet.

The fact is that during this time, I felt I could only see about 15 feet in front of me. The ability during this time of incubation to step back and focus on other things actually caused me to realize exactly where I was and where I needed to go.

While it was difficult, this time of reflection was important to me because I was able to remove myself completely from the teaching process and focus on other areas of my life. This is not to say that within my subconscious I wasn't thinking about my research question and how I grow. Actually, at times, I was seriously thinking about it. Overall, I felt this time was very productive as I developed questions to ponder. They included the following: What is my understanding of myself as an English teacher? How do I know when I have grown professionally and personally? What are some ways that actually help me grow? Why is it important for me to grow? It seemed that with each question, more questions appeared. At times I felt like Alice chasing the White Rabbit in *Alice in Wonderland*: the more I discovered, the more I questioned.

It would be easy to say that during this time I looked in an organized fashion for a way to answer these questions. This was not the case. Instead, I gave myself permission to ramble, wonder, and wander. After reading how Jimmy Carter (2007) wrote poetry throughout his political career, I decided to follow his lead and write poetry about what I

was thinking (p. 8-9). For example, in a quest to answer the question of my conceptualization of myself as an English teacher and as a person who works with students, I wrote the following poem:

*Some Things Mr. Slayton Learned Teaching Sixth Grade English*

*Passing in papers is a big ordeal,*
*Ink pens can actually be eaten whole and without salt,*
*Elephants don't have the world's greatest memory.*

*September is a time to teach opening lockers, not conjugating verbs,*
*Sixth graders run wherever they go.*
*My classroom is always placed as far from the office as possible.*

*The entire wisdom of the world sits in my class,*
*Happiness is when no one laughs at the autistic child,*
*Sometimes the only goal for a kid is for them to be able to sit with the others*
*Many teachers don't like children.*
*Many teachers do.*
*My students immediately know the difference.*

*Some children come to school only to get a meal.*
*Others act out because it hurts so much.*
*Much more is needed than an English teacher to get them through life.*

*Everyday MUST start brand new,*
*My students aren't afraid to tell me they love me,*
*Throwing magic markers at a kid is a great way to get to know them.*

*Above all, I have learned that I love my work,*
*My rewards will be seen years down the road,*
*My sixth graders teach me much more than I teach them.*

During this time, I also thought of what influences were in my life when dealing with literacy and teaching. While the list below is not exhaustive, it does provide a snapshot of the literacy influences that shaped my life. There are many, many people, concepts, and ideas that are missing, but I do believe that the basic ones which influenced me in my literacy are included.

By focusing on what influenced me in my literate life, I was and am able to help students focus on their own literacy histories to help them understand more about their abilities to read and write. I notice that in the following graphic organizer, I list personal influences (Mom, Dad, Nanny, Nana); music stars (Dolly Parton, Bon Jovi); actors, actresses, and journalists (Alan Alda, Katherine Hepburn, Buster Keaton, Keith Morrison); and other areas (*Axis and Allies*, the Bible, church). Each has had an impact on my life as a literate person.

**Illustration 10. Some of the Major Literacy Influences on My Life**



I also explored my interpersonal and professional relationships since I felt that this was one issue with which I was having difficulty. While I feel comfortable in front of a class or a crowd, I have never felt comfortable in one-on-one conversations. I worked on this concept by forcing myself to go to dinner parties where I really didn't know many people. I also made a conscious effort of going out with new people for lunch and dinner. This allowed me to explore other sides in my life in which I was not accustomed. The pay off was that I was able to meet new people and explore new areas of my life. In addition, I reconnected with some people in past relationships.

The following graphic organizer shows some of the activities that I undertook while walking through the incubation stage of heuristic inquiry. Ironically, I grew professionally and personally while trying not to think about how I grow professionally and personally.

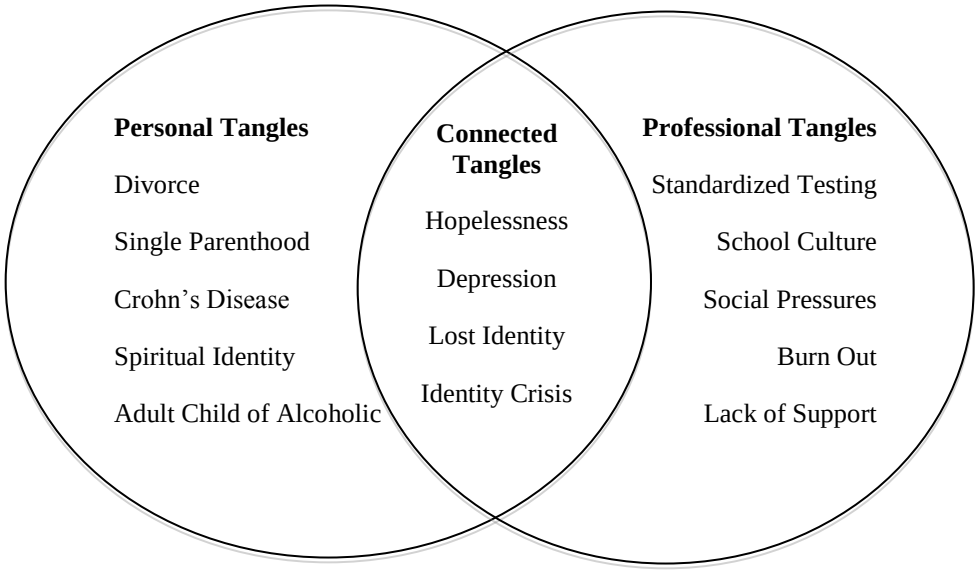
**Illustration 11. My Main Activities During the Incubation Stage.**



The more and more I worked through the incubation period, the more and more I realized that I was at a "tipping" point in my professional life and in my personal life, and I realized that something had to change. Parker Palmer (2000), in his book *Let Your Life Speak*, discusses how he came to terms with something similar as he was working with his concept of "vocation." Palmer (2000) states that before we can answer questions like I was pondering, "we must travel in the dark" (p. 18). I liken the travels through the incubation stage as just that, traveling in the dark. It was a time when I needed some serious reflection, although I didn't feel that I was well versed in reflecting on this practice. Myers (2003) argues my case, stating, "very few teacher preparation programs actually include teacher research and reflection as part of their programs although this reflection is now considered 'necessary'" (p. 469). I started looking into areas of my life that I knew I could change to make positive differences in my life. Each activity that I pursued during this stage allowed me to see how those changes would take place. I should note that as I walked through these activities, each one of them, in some fashion or form, made a positive impact on how I taught/teach in my classroom and how I work with students.

Part of this time I focused on the meshing of my personal and professional life at the time and why I needed to reflect. The Venn diagram below shows some of the tangles that I faced in my professional life and my personal life. This was important to me at the time because I definitely wanted to be successful in both areas.

**Illustration 12. Some Major Tangles in My Personal and Professional Lives.**




In addition to pulling away and focusing on other activities, as I allowed the question of **"How do I grow professionally and personally as an English/Language Arts professional?"** to incubate in my life, I realized that I needed to study some specific areas. This included answering the following questions: "What is the importance of teachers growing professionally?" and "What is the importance of teachers growing personally?"

<u>On Teachers Growing Professionally</u>

It has always amazed me that so many of my colleagues and future colleagues do not see themselves as professionals. Yet an attitude of professionalism is what I believe will keep teachers knowledgeable of the skills they need in order to succeed. I have continuously asked myself the question, "If I require high standards of my students, why should I not require high standards of myself?" Many times we ask our students to be leaders inside and outside of the classroom; it is important that we ask the same of

ourselves as education professionals. Amazingly, far too many times we ask our students to handle an ever increasing maze of standards, standardized tests, extra curriculum, social learning, service learning, and other areas of "playing" school all within a packed schedule that most adults could not handle. Cris Tovani (2004) states it more directly: "It's funny that we don't ask of ourselves what we ask of our students" (p. 58).

Applebee (2003) states that, "The image of teacher as professional carries with it a clear set of responsibilities for planning and decision making, as well as a clear set of obligations in terms of knowledge and competence in structuring teaching and learning in the language arts classroom" (p. 676). Moreover, the National Staff Development Council states "Quality teaching in all classrooms necessitates skillful leadership at the community, district, school, and classroom levels" (2009). If teachers are to move to a place where the old adage, "If you can't, you teach" is not true, then we must see ourselves as complete professionals who know how to help every student succeed and who know how to be successful themselves.

Growing as a professional in the field is one way I felt that I could stay relevant and stay in the classroom. During my process of obtaining National Board Certification, I learned that the National Board of Professional Teachers Standards (NBPTS) Proposition #2 states "Teachers know the subjects they teach and how to teach those subjects to students" (2009). Many times teachers are drawn to teach subjects that they enjoy, and it is important to allow them to understand that they can focus on the subject they enjoy the most. Confidence among teachers starts when they know and understand their subject matter and how to teach it.

Joyce, Weil, and Calhoun (2000) believe that "it is plain from the research on training that teachers can be wonderful learners" if "the appropriate conditions are provided" (p. 433). Yet many teachers, for a variety of reasons, feel that they are not professionals (Whitaker & Whitaker, p. 63). Moreover, it is important for teachers to understand that they are an important part of an important profession. Wong (1995) states, "Teachers are not in private practice. We are in the helping and caring profession, a service profession to help people enhance the quality of their lives" (p. 21). Yet too many times, it is left to the teachers themselves to understand that they are professionals (Whitaker & Whitaker, p. 63) and their overall role in school culture (Fiore, 2001). Furthermore, many times "organizational constraints" make it difficult for teachers to apply their professional growth in their classrooms (Sparks & Hirsh, 1997, p. 17). A teacher choosing not to grow professionally is not viable in today's world of No Child Left Behind, Achieving Classroom Excellence, and Common Core Standards (Fiore & Whitaker, 2005, p. 5; NBPTS, 2009). Today's world demands teachers who have the highest professional standards, credentials, and conduct; today's students deserve it.

Douglas Fiore (2005) directs a message to principals and school leaders that "school leadership in its broadest sense must include some variation of the use of teachers as leaders" (p. 72). And being a leader requires that teachers see themselves as professionals. Asking teachers to view themselves as professionals must start in the pre-service area of teacher education and should continue throughout a teacher's career. While pre-service education and methods courses are many times excellent in helping teachers understand the curriculum of their content area, it is also important that they help students understand the importance of personal and professional development (Whitaker

& Whitaker 2002, p. 15, 63). Fiore and Whitaker (2006) discuss that the "best teachers in our schools, the ones we want to retain at all costs, are also the teachers who are most likely to be concerned with continuous improvement (p. 49). For an English/Language Arts professional, growth is essential.

One of the best stories that I have that helped me to understand that I was a professional happened early in my teaching career. My principal walked into my classroom and noticed that I didn't have any of my degrees posted on my walls. She made the comment that has stayed with me for a very long time, "When one walks into their doctor's office or their lawyer's office, they expect to see the advanced degrees on the wall. They also expect to see professional journals and literature. I expect the same of you." What Dr. Thomas was saying is that I needed to act more like a professional. Since that first year of teaching, I have understood the importance of considering myself a professional.

Too many times the teachers I meet do not understand the ability that they have to impact the school culture at large. In the words of Fiore and Joseph (2005), they are "the most important adults in the school" (p. 66). As such, all teachers should understand the importance that professional development plays in their growth as professionals and that professional growth thus plays a part in the growth of their students. Moreover, Sparks and Hirsh (1997) state, "high-quality staff development is essential if all students are to achieve at high levels" (p. 1). It is best if this understanding of teacher as professional is intrinsic and that teachers can help themselves to become learners. Harry Wong (1998) believes that "the professional educator is always learning and growing"

and is constantly on an endless journey of looking for new and better ideas, new information, and improved skills to succeed with students (p. 296).

Palmer (2010) speaks of not developing a teacher-centered classroom where "getting caught in a contradiction feels like a failure" (p. 120), or a student-centered classroom where "there is sometimes a tendency toward mindless relativism" (p. 122), but a subject-centered classroom which "honors one of the most vital needs our students have: to be introduced to a world larger than their own experiences and egos…" (p. 122). Students today live in a very complex world that is different than when I was in junior high or high school, and it is different than when I was completing my undergraduate and graduate studies. I sincerely believe that English/Language Arts teacher should be at the "top of their game" in order for their students to be successful.

This world for which we are preparing students is changing at a very fast pace. Therefore, I have to wonder about the concept of how can we teach this life skill (the skill of professionalism and learning) to our students and how can we help students figure out how to apply what they learn in school to the world outside of it (McNulty, 2009, p. 3). In order to do this, all teachers need to understand the world in which their students live (Fiore 2003) and how they can help relate what students learn in the classroom to their world (Tovani, 2004, p. 65). McNulty simply puts it this way, "Learning is not a game, it's a life skill" (2009, p. xi).

Modeling content with direct teaching pedagogy is important because many times teachers do not understand that they need to teach students how to learn. DiPardo (2003) calls this the "perceived split" of "knowing a field of study and knowing how to teach" and states that it "is as enduring as it is unfortunate…" (p. 144). The struggle of

understanding curriculum and content and how to mesh this with quality teaching can seem daunting. DiPardo (2003) explains that some English teachers "recount a generic tale of struggling to explain their work to strangers" (p. 145). And, I have been here myself. Yet, as Fiore and Whitaker (2005) explain, "No longer can we accept "average" from any of our teachers…we can no longer accept a poor teacher—nor should we" (p. 5). All teachers have to know their content while understanding the instructional techniques that will allow all students to be successful learners. Anything less than this, in my view, constitutes a rank of "average."

Helping English/Language Arts teachers understand how to maneuver from our content to the profession of teaching at large and being a professional is no easy task. I found that it has not been an easy task for me. DiPardo (2003) explains this concept best:

> As students of literature, English educators are uncommonly skilled at holding competing points of view simultaneously in mind, finding places to stand among an array of possibilities. Practiced in complex thinking in a word with a generally low tolerance for ambiguity, most of us have not fully realized ways to convert this turn of mind to political advantage. (p. 149)

This "holding competing points of view simultaneously in mind" is what may cause many English/Language Arts teachers difficulty. I know that it is what has caused me difficulties. I was trained in college to hold different views in my mind: views about my profession, my life, and my career. Yet when I got into the "real" world of teaching, I faced situations where those around me thought in one way: how to better the school, the district, or the administration. Very little was discussed about helping individual students succeed or helping teachers grow professionally. This is why I believe that, while school districts may help teachers with professional growth on how to achieve school goals, they don't help teachers grow themselves professionally. While there are some positives for

schools and districts to help teachers grow professionally, Helterbran (2008) states that teachers must look beyond schools and districts to grow professionally throughout their careers (p. 125).

In short, I feel that it is important that teachers be willing to grow professionally. Dr. Debra Thomas was correct: when I enter my doctor's office, my lawyer's office, or my even my minister's office, I expect professionalism. It should be the same for educators at every level. And, I have learned that I should hold myself to a high standard of professional growth. We should look for ways to grow professionally, in the words of Helterbran (2008), because

> In this age of the three A's (achievement, assessment, and accountability), it is increasingly important that educators renew interest in their existing level of professionalism and refocus attention on strengthening those characteristics considered important over which they have appreciable control." (p. 124)

While most teachers, and I include myself in this group, do not have much control over the many aspects of teaching, we do have the ability to control how we can grow professionally.

<u>On Teachers Growing Personally</u>

Annie Simpson (2010) believes that "Teaching is a spiritual activity. It is both a direct reflection of who we are and a way to uncover who we are" (p. 64). In addition, she states, "It is apparent to me that teaching and learning are reciprocal processes. The teacher and the learner foster each other's growth" (p. 65). Eckert (2012) echoes this by stating, "I see teaching as a calling and a vocation, and I continue to teach because of the joy and satisfaction I receive from seeing students become who they were created to be" (p. 21). It is this concept of a "calling" and of a "spiritual vocation" that has helped me

stay in my field. For me, it allowed me to understand an organizational method that has allowed me to have concrete outcomes in my classroom (Eckert, 2012, p. 21). It was my understanding of this concept that has helped me mesh my spiritual beliefs and my teaching practices. It was easy for me to understand the concept of being "called" in a religious sense, but when I realized that I could also be "called" in an educational sense, my internal life became much easier.

There has been a downside to this way of thinking in my life. Since I viewed teaching as a spiritual vocation, I felt that I needed to be available to the profession 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. This didn't allow me to have time to focus on my personal life. One of the negatives that come from not spending time replenishing one's self in the teaching profession is that teachers can end up like I like I did: burned out and confused. Teachers who devote time outside of their classrooms to projects or "extra-role activities" can cause themselves to have stress in their lives. Spending too much time outside of the classroom can "encroach on the teacher's time to replenish lost resources or invest in others such as time with family and friends, sleep, household chores, and exercise" (Brown & Roloff, 2011, p. 453). Palmer (2007) discusses how many times teachers will "disconnect from students, from subjects, and even from ourselves" (p. 18). In the end, this is not healthy, and it caused me to have difficulty in my relationships, my health, and my mental being. While I was able to hold it together in the classroom, I was having major difficulty holding it together in my personal life.

I had been spending too much of my time at school and at church. Spending so much of my free time working with students made it to where I was not able, or willing, to spend time to replenish myself. It seemed that if I wasn't physically spending time

within the world of education, I was mentally spending time within the world of education. This was not, and is not, a healthy way to live. There can be negative consequences for this type of behavior:

> Logically, investing time in work will exhaust one's time resources that would otherwise be available to invest elsewhere. Reasonably, rewards received from work time can sometimes compensate for this loss, and time off can be used to replenish lost physical and psychological resources. (Brown & Roloff, 2011, p. 451)

At this time, I was not spending enough time replenishing myself so I could be a benefit to others. It is possible that when a teacher works so hard in teaching, "the teacher is emotionally exhausted and just does not have the energy to invest fully in people any longer" (Brown & Roloff, 2011, p. 454). Rshaid (2009) makes a statement that I often have wondered about myself, "It is somewhat surprising that education, being in the life-giving business has so systematically overlooked teachers' inner selves and personal growth as a target for professional development" (p. 74). Brown and Roloff (2011) discuss this idea of a "balance." They state that it takes a "balance of resources invested to resources gained, balance of promises made to promises kept, and balance of high and noble expectations and the capacity of one's body and mind to meet them" (p. 470). I did not have a healthy balance in my life. While I was receiving all kinds of professional development for *Bonner Slayton* as teacher, I was receiving no training on how to grow *Bonner Slayton* as a person.

As I look back through my journals at this time, I notice a pattern of being completely unhappy and unfulfilled in my personal life:

> Am I happy where I am in my personal life? No, I don't think so. Am I going through the motions? Yes, I do believe that I am. Just going through the motions. Money, security, safety. These seem to be important now. I HAVE TO

> MOVE OUT OF THE SAFETY ZONE. QUICKLY. I feel that must get back into Grad school, QUICKLY.

I notice here that I feel that I had become complacent, lost in the ups and downs of my career, concerned that I was growing irrelevant and unable to pay my bills. And it seemed that I was looking for a way to grow personally. I felt that I was in a holding pattern personally and spiritually. The following is half reflection, half poetry from the same journal:

> *Broken, hindered, holding time.*
> *How does one actually hold time? Time should not be held.*
> *The opposite is true—one should spend it—*
> *And spend it wisely, I believe, like money.*
> *We all have the same amount of time*
> *(Money is a different issue)*
> *How do I gain more time and money?*
> *Two things I need, desperately.*
> *Very desperately.*

Parker Palmer (2007) expresses how the lives of teachers, unlike many other professions, intersect at the corner of the personal and the private (p. 18), just like I do in the poem above. I have always felt that that is what makes teaching such an incredibly difficult profession: very few professions require that the participant "connect" their personal and professional lives. Moreover, Palmer (2007) states "As we try to connect ourselves with our students, we make ourselves, as well as our subjects, vulnerable to indifference, judgment, ridicule" (p. 18). I believe this is one reason why teachers have to grow personally: it is almost impossible to separate oneself from the subject and the students they teach. Or, at least, it is difficult for me. Personal growth is essential if we are to survive the "vulnerability" that Palmer discusses.

Knowing how to grow *Bonner Slayton* as a person was more than a chance to be egotistical. Helterbran (2008) explains that teachers need to grow in areas where they

have “appreciable control” (p. 124). Since I felt so much was out of my professional control, I felt that it was important for me to gain control over what I could in my life. In other words, I had to decide *who* I was and *how* I wanted to be perceived inside and outside of the English classroom (Helterbran, 2008, p. 126). I honestly felt that it was important for me to do so, and to continue to do so, for the craft of teaching, for the students under my care, for the society around me, and for my personal well-being (Helterbran, 2008).

In today’s education culture, standardized tests, school report cards, Common Core Standards, and the other pressures that teachers face require us to be “adequately prepared for the job” (Simo, 2013). But, where is there talk about growth for teachers personally? Rhshaid states, “Today, educators face the challenge of helping students connect with the ever-expanding, seemingly unlimited knowledge made possible by 21st Century technology. Meijer, et al. (2009) relate how this tension of growing professionally and personally started in the 1970’s, “Paradoxically, at a time when this challenge draws educators out of the school building into an interconnected world of infinite possibilities, the key to revitalizing schools may be found in nurturing the inner development of each educator” (p. 74). Although the idea of “inner” development is so important, it is in this area that I had difficulty finding my way.

The importance that I place on growing personally can be summarized in a poem that I wrote during this time of incubation:

*Elusive*

*"Far, too far."*

*"It's okay. Just snatch one."*

*Behind dusky clouds, dawn arrives.*

*"Wait, You know they are still there."*

*Oh. "Never mind.*

*I'll just wait*

*for one to fall."*

I wrote this one morning while watching the stars disappear as the sun rose. I believe this is a perfect metaphor what was happening as I explored this idea of growth in my professional and personal life. It shows that I was exhausted in searching "above the clouds" for what I needed: I was just willing to wait for what I needed to fall in my lap. And, it is an excellent example of how one can use the incubation time of Moustakas's heuristic inquiry to explore new areas or renew old ones in one's life.

Meister and Ahrens discuss the concept that when a teacher has reached a place where I was, they could be considered in a stage of "plateauing." One reason that they give for this is that teaching is a "low-growth" career (2011). I found this to be definitely true in my case. Many times, in my career, I have felt that I have reached a plateau in my professional life and in my personal life. But, this is not an excuse as to why I, or any teacher, should find a plateau and stay there. This is why I agree with Meijer et al. that there are "strengths in both perspectives of both professional and personal growth of teachers" (2009). Walking through the incubation time allowed me to discover just

exactly what I needed to find: it is imperative that I don't find a plateau and just stay there.

While this time of incubation was very difficult for me to experience, it was one stage of Moustakas's (1990) heuristic inquiry that caused me to probably grow the most. While looking to answer the question **"How do I grow professionally and personally as an English/Language Arts professional?"** I found a way to separate from the research question and focus on other areas of my life. Helterbran (2008) believes that "Developing elements of professionalism is a matter of awareness, commitment, and practice" (p. 124). Moreover, Meijer et al. state that it is good to look at "both sides of the coin" when it comes to professional and personal growth (2009). The problem, in my experience, is that when one looks at both sides and they begin to dig deeper into why they need to grow and what helps them grow, it becomes very difficult. I have wondered many times why more and more people aren't willing to go through the process of changing their lives. My short answer? It is because the process of growing professionally and personally is hard. I know it has been for me.

## Chapter Four
## Illumination: Beginning the Untangle

"I am learning that I should strive for optimism. The problem—
I feel trapped by pessimism."

-Bonner Slayton, 1998

"Mr. Slayton, I talked with my priest about you this week," Sam interrupted class.
"Really, and what was the advice?" I asked with a grin.
"She told me to get over it; you were right; get the work done." Sam was grumpy.
"Remind me to send her a donation," I smiled. "And what time does service start?"

-Classroom Experience, Summer 2010

As I worked to understand the question of **"How do I grow professionally and personally as an English/Language Arts professional?"** I walked through Moustakas's stages of heuristic inquiry: *Initial Engagement, Immersion, Incubation, Illumination, Explication,* and *Creative Synthesis* (1990). Each stage presented challenges for me, but during each stage, I found some amazing insights. For example, after starting my journey in the *Initial Engagement* stage, I became interested in several areas to study. But, in the end, I realized that I needed to explore how I grow professionally and personally. In the *Immersion* stage, I focused intently on why I was experiencing the difficulties in my professional and personal life and what options were available for me to grow. Then, during the *Incubation* stage, I tried to completely separate from the question and the concepts of growth and decided to reexamine different areas of my life. Now, in the fourth stage of *Illumination*, according to Moustakas (1990), I became "open and receptive to tacit knowledge and intuition" (p. 29). During this stage, parts of the research question came together and started to make sense to me.

Moustakas (1990) states that it is during this time that "Illumination opens the door to a new awareness, a modification of an old understanding, a synthesis of fragmented knowledge, or an altogether new discovery of something that has been present for some time yet beyond immediate awareness" (p. 30). And, it is here that I began to find some understandings that I had missed through this entire process. Things that I thought I'd find; I didn't. Things that I wanted to find; I couldn't. Moreover, concepts eluded me that I felt were important. Instead, I discovered "missed, misunderstood, or distorted realities" that can "make their appearance and add something essential to the truth of an experience" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 30). I found some very life-changing truths that allowed me to understand more about myself. In short, during the Illumination stage, lights began to shine and I began to understand more of how I grow as a person and as a professional English/Language Arts teacher.

Around this time, I decided that a new direction was needed in my professional life. After teaching middle school for over 8 years, I started teaching adjunct at the college level. In addition, I had the opportunity to become a literacy/writing specialist at a local career technology school. With this change came opportunities to grow professionally and personally at an accelerated rate. I went from teaching 4-5 sections of $6^{th}$ grade language arts each day to helping teachers, administrators, and students in fields from auto service to sonography to graphic design classes. The expectation was that I would become an expert on writing and be expected to know everything I could about literacy. This change of venue within my profession allowed me an opportunity to shed more light on my professional practices and personal life and to focus more on my growth in both arenas.

During the illumination state, I analyzed the data found in my notebooks and journals that I collected over the years. While doing so, I discovered many areas of my life that contributed to my growth; despite the fact that the information I gathered was so multi-faceted that it would be almost encyclopedic to include all of it here. As I looked closer at my notebooks, searched for themes, reflected on what each piece of data meant, and analyzed that data, I was reminded of how Todd Whittaker states, "One challenge in any profession is the ability to self-reflect—accurately" (2004, p. 5). In addition, while reflecting on my data, I realized that this reflective process was part of my growth (Fiore & Joseph, 2005).

Like many, it is easy for me to reflect on areas in others' lives, but it has been difficult to put that spotlight on my own. To use a biblical reference, Jesus said that it is important to self-reflect and self-examine our own lives before we are willing to look into the lives of others. He states emphatically that it is important to makes sure that we are willing to look into our own lives before we can help others (Matthew 7:1-5). But, this self-reflection was not easy for me.

## Methodology

I use a qualitative approach (Patten, 2002) in this inquiry. A qualitative approach, which "produces findings not arrived by statistical procedures or other means of quantification" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Patten, 2002), is appropriate in this inquiry since I "aim at understanding the meaning of human action" (Schwandt, 2007). Moreover, I have discovered that qualitative research can include "research about persons' lives, lived experiences, behaviors, emotions, and feelings…" (Schwandt, 2007). This is appropriate here since I explore as many areas as possible of my teaching and

professional life: experiences, behaviors, emotions, feelings, and others. In doing so, I hoped to discover approaches in my professional and personal growth which have influenced my teaching career and my personal life. A qualitative approach, in the words of Glazer and Stein (2010), helps a researcher understand experience because "The meaning of an experience resides in the person rather than in the numbers or the level of statistical significance" (p. 56). These experiences are the ones that have led me to a place where I feel that I have grown and have developed the tools and abilities to continue to grow both professionally and personally.

It is not that I search for a place of finality in this inquiry. Instead, I search the past in my teaching career and my personal life to help me understand where I am now and where I will go in the future. Since my teaching career and my personal life are so intertwined and cannot be "divorced" from one another (Palmer, 2007, p. xi; Palmer, 2000, p. 10), I feel that I must, in the words of Parker Palmer (2007), live a life that is "examined" and try to determine what my actions have been in my growth "for better or for worse" (p. ix). Qualitative inquiry, and in particular, heuristic inquiry, for me, are the best possible avenues in which to examine this life.

Qualitative inquiry allows me to have more flexibility and openness in discovering more about my professional and personal growth. According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), "flexibility and openness are linked with having learned to sustain a fair amount of ambiguity" (p. 5), and it is through this ambiguity that I believe understanding will take place. This flexibility and openness is essential in my qualitative research. According to Bogdan and Biklen, qualitative researchers "tend to collect their data through sustained contact with people in settings where subjects normally spend their

time—classrooms, cafeterias, teachers' lounges, dormitories, street corners" (1998). In this qualitative inquiry, I walk through my inner and outer life as an English/Language Arts teacher as I seek to understand the role that professional and personal growth play in my teaching of English. I have investigated my journals, college classrooms, mentoring sessions, teaching times, books, thinking times, and other areas where I have thought about growth and teaching and my personal life. The time spent living this examined life has greatly helped me understand the concept of growth and how I grow professionally and personally.

This study uses primarily heuristic inquiry because my goal is to be informed and know about myself (Moustakas, 1990; Harris, 2006; Erwin, 2002; Baker, 2006; Pane & Salmon, 2009; Klasek, 2010) since I have "had a direct, personal encounter with the phenomenon being investigated" (Moustakas, 1990). This personal encounter allows the researcher to have an inside look into the data in which they are studying. In the words of Etherington (2004), the data collected in a heuristic inquiry is "filtered through the researcher's own experience of the topic under inquiry" (p. 50). Moreover, according to Pane and Salmon (2009), heuristic inquiry "involves an introspective, meditative, and reflective search for the essence of a universally important experience" (p. 284). Heuristic inquiry can allow the "researcher to incorporate the creative self-processes and self-discoveries into the research process" (Carroll, 2001). For these reasons, I believe that heuristic inquiry works best in this study for my experience and my personality.

This study partly uses a personal narrative inquiry approach in that it studies a "single individual" and that it looks at "documents and archival material" (Cresswell, 2007, p. 120—121). In this inquiry, I use parts of the personal narrative process (Leitch,

2006) because I want to tell a story and because narratives are "an appropriate way to capture and understand educational experiences" (p. 549).

Narrative inquirers look to understand "experience narratively" (Clandinn & Huber, 2002, p. 161), and personal narrative allows me, as a teacher, to explore both the personal and the social "milieus" in which I live (p. 161). Moreover, Connelly and Clandinin (1990) state that, "the main claim for the use of narrative in educational research is that humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives. The study of narrative, therefore, is the study of the ways humans experience the world" (p, 2). These stories are what I explore, and since I am a "storytelling" organism, personal narrative seems to be a natural fit for me.

There are some examples for this type of inquiry. For example, this inquiry reminds me of when I read Paulo Freire and how he explored the world around him. Freire and Macedo (1987) summarize what I am experiencing as he recounted learning literacy as a child:

> As I began writing about the importance of the act of reading, I felt myself drawn enthusiastically to rereading essential moments in my own practice of reading, the memory of which I retained from the most remote experiences of childhood, from adolescence, from young manhood, when a critical understanding of the act of reading took shape in me." (p. 29)

Looking back, I can see how exploring the experiences of my teaching life and my personal life have shaped who I am today. While I am not solely looking at my personal reading history, it is possible to draw a correlation between what Freire experienced and what I am experiencing as I complete this inquiry. As part of this inquiry, I have taken a concept from Connelly and Clandinin (1990) and spent much time searching my past realizing that a "person might, for example, simply search their memory for important

life events with no particular interpretive agenda in mind. As events emerge, their date of occurrence is recorded and the event described" (p. 9).

Narrative inquiry allows me to "become part of the process" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 5; see Gade, 2011) as I research field notes, papers, and collections of stories (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 5) from events, characters, and plots in my life (Kvernbenkk, 2003). During this process, it is important for me to remember that the stories that I explore "live in actions, in relationships with others, in language, including silence, in gaps and vacancies, in continuities and discontinuities" (Clandinin & Hubur, 2002, pp. 161-162). It is also "a way of characterizing the phenomena of human experience and its study which is appropriate to many social science fields" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2). I search for "empowerment" through making connections and context with "the meaning of school situations." (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990. p. 3, 4). While doing so, I am searching the past for connections and context while at the same time living and working in the same field. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) explain this concept this way, "The central task is evident when it is grasped that people are both living their stories in an ongoing experiential text and telling their stories in words as they reflect upon life and explain themselves to others" (p. 4). This is exactly what I attempt to do in this inquiry.

This inquiry is autobiographical in that it is "a means of self-expression as well as a way to grow" (Hobbs, 2005, p. xi.). It is also ethnographic, since it is partly studying "the art and science of describing a group or culture" and that I begin "with a problem, a theory or model, a research design, specific data collection techniques, tools for analysis, and a specific writing style" (Fetterman, 1998, p. 1).

According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), ethnographies "attempt to depict the perspectives and actions of the portrayed actors, combined with an explicit ordering of those into plausible nonfictional accounts" (p. 21). This study is phenomenological in nature, since it proposes to research the phenomenon of the growth of an English/Language Arts professional (Creswell, 2007; Priest, 2002; Creswell, Hanson, et al., 2007). While Giorgi (2006) would argue differently, it is more specifically geared towards Moustakas's view of transcendental phenomenology since it is "focused less on the interpretations of the researchers and more on a description of the experiences of the participants" (Creswell, 2007, p. 59).

Why do I feel that I have a story to tell about my professional and personal growth in a personal narrative? And why do I feel that this story should be done through writing? In the book, *The Sacred Romance*, Curtis and Eldredge (1997) state, "The deepest convictions of our heart are formed by stories and reside there in the images and emotions of story" (p. 45). And I could not agree more. My story of growth is one that I feel is worth telling (Allende, 1997). I also feel that I can positively answer the questions, "Do I have something to say?" and "Do people want to hear it?" (Littauer & Litttauer, 2006, p. 14-15). I feel that my story of being a teacher comes from my heart (Palmer, 2007; Curtis & Elderidge, 1997; Palmer, 2000), and this comes from the fact that "Our souls speak not in the naked facts of mathematics or the abstract propositions of systematic theology; they speak the images and emotions of story" (Curtis & Elderidge, 1997, p. 39). While my story is mine alone, I do believe that other teachers can listen and extrapolate concepts and relate them to their professional and personal lives.

The images and emotions of my story are a teacher's story. Moustakas (1990) states how this teacher's story shapes my research: "From the beginning and throughout an investigation, heuristic research involves self-search, self-dialogue, and self-discovery; the research question and the methodology flow out of inner awareness, meaning, and inspiration" (p. 10). This personal narrative is indicative of me, and while it might emulate or be similar to others, it is mine alone. This makes this study limited and is almost impossible to replicate and get the same results (Erwin, 2002; Harris, 2006; Moustakas, 1990).

I am not the only teacher who has a story to tell. All teachers have a story, and throughout the years, I have heard many of them. Kelchtermans (2009) discusses how teachers tell their story. He states that teachers who talk about their professional lives and practices often spontaneously frame them in narrative form. While this story is heuristic in nature, it blends many of the concepts of personal narrative. Many times teachers use anecdotes, metaphors, images, and other types of storytelling to recall, share, exchange, or account for their experiences in classrooms and schools. Storytelling is the natural way through which people make sense of the events, situations and encounter in which they find themselves (Keltchermans, 2008, p. 260). I use this research, in the words of Telle (2000), as a "search for a beginning in my own past stories, as a way for my own self-understanding" (p. 252).

In the foreward to Freire and Macedo's (1987) book, *Literacy, Reading the Word and the World*, Ann Berthoff states, "Nothing in the field of literacy theory is more important than looking and looking again at the role of an awareness of awareness, of thinking about thinking, of interpreting our interpretations" (p. xi). The argument might

be made that I am just researching the "stories" of my personal professional teaching life of past years looking for answers. It seems this way because that's actually what I'm doing. I am looking, thinking, and interpreting these stories so that I can become more aware of myself as a teacher of English and English Education. At first glance, it may seem that these personal narratives are without substance, but they do have substance. In the words of Curtis and Eldredge (1997), "Through baseball and politics and music and sex and even church, we are searching desperately for a larger story in which to live and find our role" (p. 43). It is through these small narratives that I look to find my larger, personal narrative, and the roles that I have found as I have grown professionally and personally as an English/Language Arts professional.

In blending these personal narratives with heuristic inquiry, I feel like Djuraskovic and Arthur (2010) when they state that heuristic inquiry will best help me find "peace" (p. 1569) as I study myself and my professional and personal growth. I was excited when I realized that I could be a researcher "fully engaged with the research topic and also utilize one's experience in the process" (Djuraskovic & Arthur, 2010, p. 1570). In addition, I feel that since I am able to explore my growth as a teacher and a person, a blending of heuristic inquiry (see Scott & Brown, 2008) and personal narrative is best.

It should be noted that I am seeking a reasonable balance between the conflicts that happen in my professional life and my personal life. I understand that this, as in all relationships, is fluid.

Validity in Heuristic Research.

One area that has concerned me throughout this process is the concept of validity. Moustakas (1990) states, "validity in heuristics is not a quantitative

measurement that can be determined by correlations or statics" (p. 32). And Patten (2002) explains how *perfect validity* is elusive. She states that first, "almost all tests tap only a *sample* of the behavior we are trying to measure" (p. 53). This is definitely true as I have tried to research how I grow. Patten (2002) also explains how validity "eludes us because some traits that we wish to measure are inherently elusive" (p. 53). While it is possible to obtain some aspects of the concept of growth (Patten uses the example of *cheerfulness*), it is impossible to understand all aspects of the concept. Patten (2002) believes that one way for qualitative researchers to correct this is for them to "describe results in enough detail so that readers can picture the meanings that have been attached to the constructs" (p. 53). Moustakas (1990) comments on the validity in heuristic research this way:

> The question of validity is one of meaning: Does the ultimate depiction of the experience derived from one's own rigorous, exhaustive self-searching, and from the explications of others present comprehensively, vividly, and accurately the meanings and essences of the experience? (p. 32)

Moreover, it's important to note that as the heuristic researcher, I have returned "again and again to the data to check the depictions of the experience to determine whether the qualities or constituents that have been derived from the data embrace the necessary and sufficient meanings" that allows me to "achieve repeated verification" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 33). In order to validate my research, I asked a colleague to theme my notebooks. While her methods of looking were naturally different than mine, she basically found the same themes that I did.

*Data Collection*. I collected over 15 years worth of undergraduate papers, graduate projects, free-writes, lesson plans, National Board and Teacher-of the Year portfolios, self-studies, sticky notes, photographs, cards, pictures, diagrams, doodles, and other pieces of data from my career. In addition, I collected the same kind of data from

my personal life. While this may seem to be odd sources of data, Bogdan and Biklen (1998) state that this type of data (along with other forms) can be included in qualitative research (p. 133). Bonnie Meekums (2008) adds to this list by stating that when she was conducting research, "I had intended to keep a journal, but in fact, my recordings have been on pieces of paper, snatched from my dreams and from odd moments of waking" (p. 289). As Kelchtermans (2008) states, "teaching is done by somebody," and my data includes the artifacts, journals, and file folders from my life. These notebooks were chosen on the amount of information that they contained as it pertained to me and my life, and in particular in how I grow. While I explored the data, 6 of these notebooks did not contain information that related to my professional or personal growth; therefore, these six were deleted from my list. This is not to say that there is not information in these six notebooks that is useful, I just didn't feel that they fit into this inquiry. This left 20 notebooks that stood out because of the information that they contained. I should note that I did not have a preconceived idea about what I was looking for when I started choosing these notebooks. Instead, I chose to wander through them and chose the ones that I felt had an impact on my professional and personal growth as an English/Language Arts professional.

Moustakas (1990) is explicit in stating that in heuristic inquiry, "Every method or procedure, however, must relate back to the question and facilitate collection of data that will disclose the nature, meaning, and essence of the phenomenon being investigated" (p. 44). I have done just that: although there is much information covering a variety of topics, I have ensured that the data I collected related back to the research question. The data I collected included the following: situations, events, relationships,

places, times, episodes, conversations, issues, feelings, thoughts, perceptions, sense qualities, understandings, and judgments (Moustakas, 1990, p. 44). In short, I have found data from all of these sources in order to explore my research question. While it has not been easy, much time was given to "weed" through the data that is not relevant to my research question by focusing on themes that pertained to my professional and personal growth.

**Table 1. Professional and Personal Notebooks Analyzed**

| | YEAR | NOTEBOOK |
|---|---|---|
| **A.** | 2005 | Site Teacher of the Year Portfolio |
| **B.** | 2006 | District Finalist Teacher of the Year |
| **C.** | 2005-2006 | National Board Standards |
| **D.** | 2006-2007 | National Board Standards – RETAKE |
| **E.** | 2006 | Spring Creativity Class |
| **F.** | 2003 | Research Class |
| **G.** | 2002 | Special Topics in Literacy |
| **H.** | 2004 | History of English Education |
| **J.** | 2007 | Pro Seminar |
| **K.** | 2001- | Oklahoma Writing Project |
| **L.** | 1999- | Personal Journals-Slayton |
| **M.** | 2002 | Teaching Literature |
| **N.** | 2005 | Teaching Language Theory/Practice |
| **Q.** | 2008 | Theoretical Issues |
| **T.** | 1999- | Personal Journal – Slayton |
| **U.** | 2002 | Special Topics in Literacy |
| **V.** | 2002-2013 | Personal/Paint Write Notebook |
| **W.** | 2001 | Personal Journal –Slayton |
| **X.** | 2009 | Personal Journal-Slayton |
| **Y.** | 2002-10 | General Book of Free writes, etc. |

*Data Analysis*. Moustakas (1990) states that "heuristic research is an extremely demanding process" and mentions the idea of "continuous questioning" (p. 37). It has always been my practice to constantly question and check what I am doing and why I am doing it. (Through this research, I discovered that this is one way that I grow.) In this heuristic inquiry, I found myself checking and questioning things at a deeper level. In addition, Moustakas (1990) states that the "organizing and analyzing heuristic data during the immersion and incubation process may take many forms" (p. 49). The way that I analyze this data in itself took many different forms: from reading each notebook thoroughly to coding each artifact for themes.

This inquiry doesn't look to find a definitive *answer* of whether professional or personal growth has had a positive impact on my teaching; instead, it looks to explore the general *idea* that it has had a positive impact. The challenges of thinking and reflecting on my teaching life and my personal life meet the "requirements of authentic self-dialogue, self-honest, and unwavering diligence" that is needed in heuristic research (Moustakas, 1990). It is through personal narrative that I tell this story of self-dialogue.

In order to analyze the information I collected, I organized a system to see how this growth has taken place. Bogdan and Biklen (1998) state that data "analysis involves working with data, organizing them, breaking them into manageable units, synthesizing them, searching for patterns, discovering what is important and what is to be learned..." (p. 157). First, I organized and color-coded (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 171) my data into the six areas of Moustakas's heuristic inquiry: *Initial Engagement, Immersion, Incubation, Illumination, Explication, Creative Synthesis* (Moustakas, 1990; Harris, 2006; Erwin, 2002; Baker, 2006; Pane & Salmon, 2009). Second, I looked for themes

that might emerge from my data for my topic and for other topics that I might find useful to research in the future (Bogdan & Bilken 1998, p. 171). Last of all, I examined this data to understand what it means to me as a search to see how I grow both professionally and personally.

I looked through my notebooks objectively, noticing the notes taken, the free writes written, the papers produced, and the comments made in the margins. I searched for information that I could show that I was growing professionally and personally. I read each page of each notebook, searching for information that would help me discover how I grow. During this second reading, I started coding information from my notebooks. These were placed into an Excel worksheet. Last of all, I reread my notebooks, looking for any information I missed. During this time, I added more quotes, notes, and other pieces into my worksheet. I found 365 lines from my 20 notebooks and journals that pertained to how I grow professionally and personally.

As I analyzed the themes from my notebooks, five main themes emerged. Some of these were surprising to me. Others were not. The five themes that emerged from my data show that I use *reflecting, wondering, building relationships, teaching, and writing* to grow in my professional life and in my personal life.

Moustakas (1990) believes that I would find some surprises as I analyzed my data (p. 31). When I started this inquiry, my assumption was that I would discover that I grow through the concepts of leadership, creativity, and relationships. While these three concepts are definetly part of how I grow, I realized that they are just part, a small part, of the process. I was surprised to see that these were part of some larger themes in my professional and personal life.

**Illustration 13. My Preconcieved Notions of My Growth versus Actual Growth**




The following table shows the ways that I grow, the number of lines that I found for each theme, and the overall percentage for each theme.

**Table 2. Five Areas of My Professional and Personal Growth**

| Themes | # of Lines | % of Lines |
|---|---|---|
| Reflecting | 218 | 59.72% |
| Wondering | 53 | 14.52% |
| Building Relationships | 48 | 13.15% |
| Teaching | 25 | 6.8% |
| Writing | 21 | 5.7% |
| | n=365 | |

As I discovered some ways in **"How do I grow professionally and personally as an English/language arts professional?"** I was becoming more and more excited. This time of illumination helped me to understand more of how I grow. During this time, I realized the themes of *reflecting*, *wondering*, *building relationships*, *teaching*, and *writing* are ones that helped me, and help me, stay in the English/language arts classroom.

## Chapter Five
## Explication: The Untangle at a Deeper Level

"This is my story. This is my song."
-Fanny Jane Crosby (1820-1915)

"Now I look in the mirror and what do I see?
A lone wolf there starin back at me
Long in the tooth but harmless as can be
Lord I guess he's doin alright"
-Travis Tritt

"God uses trials so your character will catch up with your calling."
-Clark Mitchell, Journey Church

After discovering the five main ways that I grow in the illumination stage, I moved to the next stage in heuristic inquiry: explication. According to Moustakas (1990), "the purpose of the explication phase is to fully examine what has awakened in consciousness, in order to understand its various layers of meaning" and includes "focusing, indwelling, self-searching, and self-disclosure" (p. 31). According to the Oxford English Dictionary, *explication* is defined as "The action or process of removing difficulty or obscurity from, or making clear the meaning of (a word, statement, symbol, etc.). Also, that which effects this; an explanation, interpretation" (1989, p. 572). Moustakas (1990) believes that the ideas of focusing and indwelling are important during this stage because "concentrated attention is given to creating an inward space and discovering nuances, textures, and constituents of the phenomenon" (p. 31). In other words, during the *illumination* I discovered five themes of how I grow, but now, during the *explication* stage, I explain **"How do I grow professionally and personally as an English/Language Arts professional?"** at a deeper level.

One of the difficulties that I faced during this stage was staying focused on the research question. This was difficult because as I began to explain the different ways that I grow, I realized that each could become a research topic in and of itself. Time and time again, I had to pull out the research question and look at it to maintain my focus.

**Five Themes that Impact My Growth.** While analyzing my notebooks and data, I discovered that part of my growth has stemmed from my understanding of five main themes. I liken the concept of "themes" to the idea of "conceptualization." I like this idea of conceptualization because I chose not to have a definitive definition for each; rather, I prefer to understand each one as an emerging concept in my life. I encountered this idea during a graduate class in 2005. In a journal from this time, I wrote the following about this idea:

> The word "conceptualization" denotes looking for a way beyond the traditional, "you have to know it for the test" concept that I am so used to. Instead of looking for an ending, the word, to me, seems like the journey is of more importance. This journey is a journey of understanding a "concept," not something that is concrete. I don't know how this plays out in the real world, but it does sound interesting. This is a term I have heard Dr. Angelotti use many, many times, and the more I use it, the more I like it.

While searching in this quest for clarity, I have found that this word, conceptualization, helps to determine how I view my growth.

The following is a graphic organizer that I developed that best shows the themes and sub-themes in my findings. Afterwards, I explain each theme and most sub-themes (some sub-themes like professional-growth and personal-growth have been explained elsewhere in the inquiry in great detail, these are marked with an asterisk).

**Illustration 14. Themes/Sub-Themes of How I Grow Professionally/Personally.**




***Theme #1: Reflecting.*** The main way that I grow is through the concept of reflecting. Within the arena of reflection, I discovered four sub-themes: professional growth,

personal growth, goals, and spirituality. This concept of reflection has a long history in the world of education (Dewey, 1933). For the purpose of my teaching life, I define reflection as a tool that

> enables teachers and student teachers to diagnose and understand their classroom contexts and students' learning better, put their students' learning at the heart of the teaching-learning process, develop a rationale for their teaching and take informed specific actions and make sound decisions in the classroom. (Al-Issa, 2002)

Reflecting appeared 173 times out of 365 times (or 59.72% of the time) in my professional and personal data. Many times this reflection took the form of writing papers and other times it took place as I was taking a class and I wrote in the margins of my lesson plans. Still other times it manifested itself in focused free writes where I specifically decided, or was asked, to reflect on specific issues or concerns. There were times this reflection would take place while I was speaking to colleagues or while I was teaching in the middle of a lesson. I even found pieces of reflection on napkins, tickets stubs, and in the margin of my text books! This reflection "is complex" and "takes different shapes and forms, and has different levels" (Al-Issa & Al-Bulshi, 2010, p. 41). And one of the problems that I faced was difficulty in categorizing the different ways that my reflection took place.

Al-Issa and Al-Bulshi (2010) state, "The scholarship of teaching involves constant reflection on the process and outcomes of teaching and learning and acknowledges the contextual nature of teaching" (p. 44). An example of this "constant reflection" can be found when I explored the concept of "going deeper" in my professional life. I disovered this concept after one of my professors encouraged our graudate class to go "deeper, deeper, deeper, deeper, and deeper" in most areas of our

lives. This concept of “going deeper” was a theme that I have used many times over my professional career as I have looked to grow. Reflections like this might explain why I feel I am constantly looking for ways to improve what I am doing in my professional life and my personal life.

This reflection wasn’t just tied to my professional life. For example, at one time in 1999 I wrote, "I feel lost between two times, my own and that of my past.” I was trying to differentiate between where I had been in my life and where I was going. Sometime later, I expressed feelings of the loss of direction that I was facing by stating, "I am wondering why I am so lost.” Keeping a healthy balance in my personal life has always been difficult for me. Reflecting seems to be a way to help me come to terms with finding ways to keep this balance.

Many of these entries express frustrations that I had during my career. Reflecting gave me an opportunity to express my feelings, but more importantly, it gave me the opportunity to develop ideas to grow by changing what I was doing. In the following I wrote specifically about the tension that I felt in my work:

> Hubbard and Powers state, “Questions are born from frustrations.” This is good, since I am very, very, very frustrated right now. Especially with myself and my curriculum and how I fit into the middle of it. They also define *tension* and how it applies to teacher research. I can feel the tension in my life, and I am hoping that this tension will allow me to discover a 'good' research question.

Reflections like this allowed me to be honest about what I was experiencing. According to Al-Issa and Al-Bulshi (2010), learning to ask questions is the beginning of scholarly teaching (p. 45). John Dewey (1933) states, “one can think reflectively only when one is willing to endure suspense and to undergo the trouble of searching” (p. 124). What I noticed is that in this reflection and others, I did not stop at the point of expressing

frustration or problems. Instead, like Dewey espouses, I used the reflection process as a tool to look for better ways to improve my professional life and my personal life (Dewey, 1933; Al-Issa & Al-Bulshi, 2010, p. 57).

As a professional, my reflections seemed honest, like when I emphatically state, "Sometimes young adults drive me crazy." At other times, I felt a need to work harder in helping these students succeed: "My job is teaching standards; my calling is to ensure that every child leaves my class knowing that there is a teacher who cares for them, regardless of their gender, race, religion, attitude, or handicap." And there are times where I combined both the personal and professional in my reflection:

> I believe the concepts of deep thinking, reading, writing, listening, and seeing have allowed me to become a better person. I believe that each of these have to be perfected individually while integrating them as a whole in my life. This semester I have tried to integrate all of these in my life. I have done this successfully. The integration part is what will take a lifetime.

The idea that I believed integration "will take a lifetime" is one that I have found to be very, very true. And it is a concept that I hope I will keep working towards until I'm in the grave. A former pastor of mine used to say, "When you stop growing, you stop going. When you stop going, you die" (Barker, 1990). In other words, I need to keep growing.

Integrating reflection into part of my teaching life (and my personal life) is important, although Myers (2003) argues "very few teacher preparation programs actually include teacher research and reflection as part of their programs (p. 469) although this reflection in now considered "necessary" (p. 469). Cummings (2001) states, "reflection is the beginning of our own professional growth" (p. 97). Nancie Atwell (1998) explains how she reflects this way, "Today, I learn in my classroom" (p. 3). Thankfully, I feel that personal reflection is one skill that has followed me through my

undergraduate and graduate work and has helped me become a teacher leader/professional, although teaching teachers how to be reflective is a complicated process (Carlo, Hinkhouse & Isbell, 2009, p. 58; Ostorga, 2006, p. 6).

Reflective teaching is more than just analyzing myself and my teaching: it has an impact on helping my students grow academically and personally (Kennedy & Smith, 2013; Dixon, 1969). When I reflect, I become an active practitioner looking how to meet the needs of my students (Darling-Hammond, 2006). And I realize there is even a correlation between how teachers think reflectively and student critical thinking skills (Choy & Oo, 2012, p. 170). One caution is that there is a threat that the reflection process can become standardized to the point that it is not productive (Galea, 2012, p. 249). There are many times that I have tried to standardize this reflection in my life, but I have come to believe that reflection shouldn't be considered as an end to itself. Galea (2012) explains this this way:

> The lesson that teachers need to be taught is that teaching itself is a process of inquiry, an uncertain one, that has no ends, at least not ones that are established out of context and out of time of the learning situation. (p. 247)

Yet Al-Issa and Al-Bulshi (2010) are adamant that reflection is not just a process to understand our scholarship or teaching well. They argue, "It is thinking hard about the frameworks we have constructed and how we move within them" (p. 44). The importance of understanding reflection as it pertains to student success is very important (Kennedy & Smith, 2013). It is one area that has helped me to grow.

***Theme #2: Wondering.*** The second area in which I grow professionally and personally is through the conceptualization of wonder. This theme appeared in 53 times or 14.52% of the time in my research. I wrote an example of wondering in a notebook on March 4, 2003, after listening to a lecture by Dr. Michael Angelotti:

> Finally, a justification for the things I love to do over and over…I love to wander (and wonder) aimlessly through the stacks and pick and search for things as I find them. Making connections with things that I have never found before.

According to Yannis Petros Hadzigeorgiou (2012), “The nature of wonder is no doubt both complex and elusive” (p. 985). And this is one reason why I feel it is difficult to define in my life. Yet Hadzigeorgiou (2012) also states that wonder is, “as a state of mind, can be associated with mystery, awe, perplexity, astonishment, surprise, amazement, admiration, and bewilderment” (p. 985). Mystery, awe, perplexity, astonishment, surprise, amazement, admiration, bewilderment are things that I try to look for in my life and are attributes and attitudes that I try to live. In short, I try to live a life of wonder.

Wondering has opened a huge door in my personal life. As far back as spring 2004 I was questioning and wondering how to understand and reflect, "I am wondering how I will put the ideas I have learned into my place into my classroom and in my life.” During a later time, I realized that "I am back to back, all the time with nowhere to run and nowhere to turn. And I am already wondering, being scared about next semester.” This conceptualization has opened a way for me to view the world in a way that I never have before.

***Questioning***. In understanding the idea of wonder, I realize that I grow through questioning. This concept starts with a broad statement like, “The more I learn, the more questions I have” and then seems to move to a specific question, “Does professional development in language arts transform itself in the classroom?” Other questions that I have asked in my professional life include the following: "How do I discover what is important to my students?" In my personal life, at one point I state, "Questioning it all

seems justified—of course. Why? Because, that's why. It never seems enough. Why, I wonder, when it comes down to it?" Each question provides me an opportunity to explore more areas and arenas as I grow.

As I explored my notebooks, I found one where I sat and asked 100 questions. This came from an exercise from a book that I read for a graduate class in Creativity in Teaching Composition. In his book, *How to Think Like Leonardo da Vinci* (1998), Michael Gelb asks his readers to make a list of 100 questions (p. 59). In this exercise, I ask 100 questions. Some of these were rhetorical questions, like, "Why are some people successful?" and "Why aren't more people happy?" Yet others allowed me to make some changes in what I did in my life and my classroom. For example, by asking the question of "Why is it hard for me to stay organized?" I started to make changes in how I organized my life. Another time, I asked the question "Why can't my class explore the setting of a story or novel like they explore the biography of the characters?" This led me to turn my entire classroom into the Village of Treegap as my class read *Tuck Everlasting*. This concept of questioning not only allowed me to take my thinking to a deeper level, but it also allowed me to make immediate changes in my classroom and my life.

Antoher example of how I use wonder occurred in 2003. During this time I was reading an article which asked readers to focus on improving themselves. I asked the simple question in relationship to an article I had read. In my reflective writing I asked, "What would happen if I gave 5% more in my life? In my relationships? In my parenting? In way that I view my health? What about in my teaching craft?" I would later

develop an entire system of goals to improve in my professional and personal life by growing by 5%.

According to Anna McEwan (2008), "child-like wonder is a precursor to growth" (p. 108). Wonder can be a noun, as in "it will be a wonder if I survive this dissertation" or it can be a verb "conveying the idea of marveling, admiring, doubting, and questioning" (McEwan, 2008, p. 108). Dillon (2009) and McEwan (2008) both discuss the Socratic method when it comes to the concept of wonder, but Dillon (2009) states that the basis of wonder is that it "begins with a question, with something that we are curious and care about." (p. 40). Dillon (2009) believes that the opposite of beginning with a question is taking an "I-know-it-all" where one does not have to ask "real questions" (p. 44). Moreover, Maxine Greene (1988) believes that "Teachers, like their students, have to learn to love the questions, as they come to realize that there can be no final agreements or answers, no final commensurability (p. 135). While McEwan (2013) believes that it is somewhat easier for children to wonder than adults, she does state that adult wonder is "deeper" and more "complex" and is "naturally more informed by experience and prior knowledge" (p. 109).

It is important to note that wonder and curiosity are not the same (Schmitt & Lahroodi, 2008; Hadzigeorgiou, 2012; Dewey, 1910). While there seems to be a bit of wonder in curiosity and there seems to some curiosity in the idea of wonder, the two are not necessarily equal. When explaining wonder, Schmitt and Lohroodi state,

> Wonder is not an appetite. It does not demand to be satisfied.
> Indeed, it does not seem to be the sort of thing that can be satisfied.
> Wonder is more easily suppressed than curiosity. We do not indulge
> wonder against our better judgment, it does not become obsessive. (2008)

Wonder, to me, is easier manifested in an English/Language Arts classroom than curiosity because of the nature of the subject matter. In my experience, wonder leads me to ask questions and many times these questions allow me to immediately implement new concepts in my classroom and in my life. As I've stated, simple wonder has led me to a path of finding solutions to some very powerful problems. For example, the way that I teach writing by focusing on the process instead of the final product started with me asking the question, "I wonder why so many students don't feel comfortable in completing their writing assignments?" I found much success in helping students write for other courses because I asked the question of "I wonder why am I just preparing students for my class? What would happen if I prepared them for all classes they take?" I would dare say that the concept of wonder has increased my ability to reach many different students at many different levels. And it has started because I have learned to "love the question" (Greene, 1988).

***Creativity.*** Although I have never really considered myself a "creative" person in the broad sense, it did emerge as a sub-theme under the theme of wonder. I have felt that I have had to learn to use creativity in order to survive and grow in not only a professional sense, but in all areas of my life. In learning about creativity, I have found that the very concept of creativity is subjective to me and my experiences, since the definitions of creativity are different depending on the type of work individuals do (Gluck, Ernst, & Unger, 2002; Treffinger et al, 2002; Batey & Furnhan, 2006; Feldman & Benjamin, 2006). There are many studies that have tried to find different frameworks and conceptualizations of creativity (El-Murad & West, 2004), yet it becomes difficult to narrowly define creativity in one context. And this is definitely true for me. For example,

there is a difference between "scientific and artistic" creativity (Gluck, Ernst, & Unger, 2002). Even in the world of education, the idea of creativity occupies "a somewhat paradoxical position" in discussions of defining creativity (Simmons & Thompson, 2008). McWilliam and Haukka (2008) are direct when summarizing their views of creativity in education, "Creativity continues to be regarded by many both within and outside education as so mysterious and serendipitous that it defies definition (p. 652). In the end, I use Csikszenthmihalyi's (1997) definition of creativity for my life. Creativity, to me, is a "personal experience that a person has in the way they approach life, in the way you experience life, with originality, openness, freshness" (124). This definition seems to fit my experiences because my professional and personal lives are so meshed together.

Csikszenthmihalyi's definition plays into my creative approaches to teaching by giving me permission to look at new ways of doing things that I have traditionally asked students to do. One example of this occurred while I was teaching 8$^{th}$ grade English. I needed to help prepare my students for the state writing test. Yet my students seemed to have difficulty in developing writing ideas. This class was very kinesthetic, and they became bored very easily. In taking a creative approach to this problem, I decided to take them outside and ask them to write down writing ideas from playing in their shadows. The students thoroughly enjoyed the activity, and I received some of the best writing I have ever seen. I have used this same activity in helping elementary, middle school, high school, and college students develop ideas for essays and poems.

Utilizing this concept of creative play opened some avenues that I had never seen. Since that time, I have used creativity in an artistic way to teach the parts of speech

in shaving cream, listening skills through using markers, figurative language through country music, the writing process through art, and poetry through writing on objects. Each of these lessons (and more) have allowed me to explore (with my students) unique and different ways to learn.

**Illustration 15. Shadow Play Personal Free Paint**



This idea that I can "experience life, with originality, openness, freshness" through creativity has had an impact in defining myself as a teacher of literacy and language. Instead of feeling the stress of having all the right answers in the classroom, I have developed the mindset that my students and I will learn together. In *The Dynamics of English Instruction: Grades 7-12*, the authors restate it this way:

> It is not the responsibility of the English teacher to impose ideas and values but to help his students understand how language works, cognitively, affectively, and aesthetically so that they can examine the values that are conveyed and

> shaped by language and can use language to formulate, synthesize, and evaluate their own values. (Hillocks, McCabe, & McCampbells, 1971, p. 11)

Through the years I have found this concept to be the most useful in my quest to help students understand the importance of language. It is important for me to understand that my place is not to impose my ideas on reading, writing, listening, and how students view the world, but instead I must help my students learn how to learn language so they can develop their own values. Instead of forcing my beliefs and ideas on my students, I have learned to take a creative approach to teaching. For example, when teaching students about literature, this creative approach has allowed me to understand that teachers need to realize that a student's history and experience bring much to his or her understanding of the reading of a text (Rosenblatt, 1995; Beach & Marshall, 1990; Freire & Macedo, 1987). Beach and Marshall (1990) explain that, "literary meaning is constructed by readers in interaction with the text (p. 239). I appreciate Beach and Marshall's concept that readers understand literature through one of four lenses or perspectives: a textual perspective, a social perspective, a cultural perspective, or a topical perspective (p. 247). Understanding how my students view through these lenses and developing ways for them to do so in my classroom has taken creativity.

Starting with questioning concepts (wonder), and then moving to finding more creativity in my life in how I teach literacy, has had a huge impact on how I grow and keeping me in the teaching profession. I have always believed that understanding literacy and understanding how literacy functions in one's life is essential for the survival of my students (Flower, 2008; Brandt, 2001; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Meeder & Hebert-Giffen, 2009). By taking a creative approach, I have been able to be more successful than I had

been. This is one area that I am just now learning, and I feel that I am willing to learn it now because of my ability to embrace a willingness to look at it through creativity.

I believe that it is important to teach students a creative process so they can use it to learn for themselves. Freire and Macedo (1987) state that the teacher cannot put concepts together for the student; that is the student's "creative task" (p. 35). Moreover, they believe that it is important for students to understand the "knowledge of the world" when learning to read. This can take place through a creative lens since, "Language and reality are dynamically interconnected (Freire & Macdeo, 1987, p. 29). In order to help teach students how to be creative, I spend many hours providing activities (analyzing songs, movies, shows, commercials), giving examples from my experiences and how I use the creative process (parenting, learning, goal-setting), and opportunities (life projects, goal-setting).

In my personal life, this idea of creativity has taken many forms. This has included exploring new ways of painting and writing. It also entails how I look at things spiritually and how I relate to people. It also has had an impact on how I solve problems. This allows my life to be full and exciting. Csikszentmihalyi (1996) states that when it comes to creativity, when "we are involved in it, we feel that we are living more fully than during the rest of life" (p. 2). And this is exactly what creativity allows in my life. While my creativity may be different than others, one thing that I have in common with other creative individuals is that we "love what we do." (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, p. 107). The following is a free paint that I did over personal creativity in my life.

**Illustration 16. Personal, Creative Free Paint.**

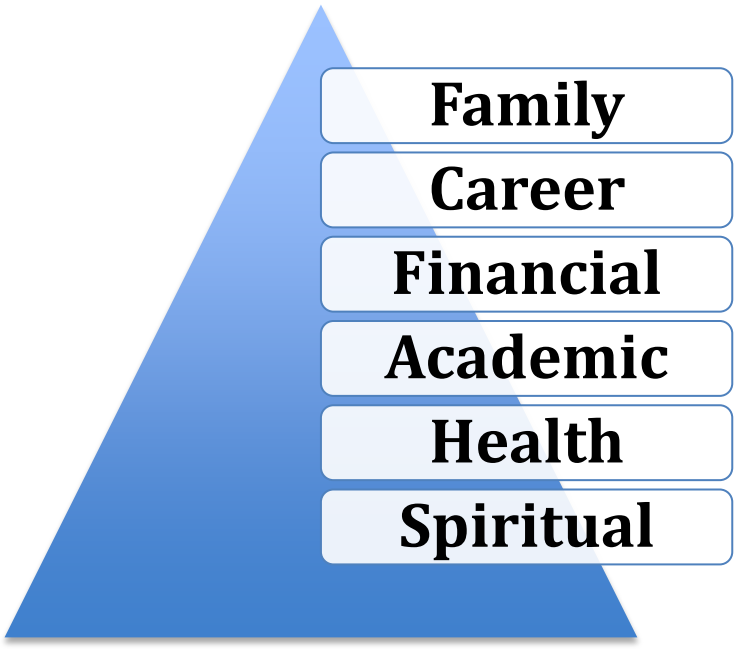


**Wandering.** One sub-theme of growth that I found under the theme of wondering is the concept of *wandering*. If *wondering* is considering options, or looking at something differently, then *wandering* according to Mrazek, Smallwoood, Franklin, et al. (2012) serves as "a fluctuation of attention away from a task to unrelated concerns" (p. 788). Mooneyham and Schooler (2013) state, "Mind-wandering is one of the most ubiquitous of all mental activities" (p. 11). While I found that wandering does help me grow, it should be noted that there are many negative sides to allowing one's mind to wander. This can include the inability to complete tasks, stay focused, and manage time (Mooneyham & Schooler, 2013; Mrazek, Smallwood, et al., 2012). Yet Monneyham and Schooler (2013) state that there are some things that can be seen as positives for allowing one's mind to wander (p. 13-14). For me, these positives include the ability to create goals, develop plans, and find solutions.

As it relates to my professional and personal life, I have found that wandering can help me in "coming up with novel solutions to previously presented problems" (Mooneyham & Schooler, 2013) and with developing creativity. More importantly, it helps me develop future goals (Mooneyham & Schooler, 2013; Baird, Smallwood, & Schooler, 2011; Smallwood, Schooler, Turk, & et al., 2011). While wandering does distract me from the task at hand, it is almost impossible for me not to do it. Throughout my notebooks, margins, and papers, I found goal statements, financial notations, dates for degree completions, activities that I want to accomplish with my children, and a host of other comments, drawings, diagrams, and figures. What is amazing is that many of these small bits of information have been realized in my professional and personal life as class projects, presentations, papers, dates, trips, and more. In short, while I understand the drawbacks to wandering, it seems that it has helped me immensely as I have grown.

As part of my wandering, I have found six areas of goals that I have developed. Each of these is an area that I try to focus on as I live my life. I attempt to break these goals into short term (six months or less), mid-term (1-3 years), and long term (3-10 years) goals. This concept of goals has impacted my short term and long term growth.

**Illustration 17. Main Goals I Focus on in My Wanderings.**




Over the last 15 years, I have found that many of my students do not have an idea of how to develop goals in their lives. Now, as part of all of my classes, students are expected to develop a set of goals for the short term and the long term. I do not read their goals (so they can be honest about where they want to go in their lives). Yet I do check to make sure that almost every student I teach leaves my class with a set of goals.

***Theme #3: Building Relationships.*** The third theme that has allowed me to grow is in the area of building professional and personal relationships. Building relationships appears 48 times or 13.15% of the time in my data. At first, this theme might seem easy. The very fact that I am a teacher requires me to understand the concepts of building effective relationships. Doesn't it? Yet I have found that this is not necessarily true. Instead, I have found that it is one area in which I have had difficulty since I have always struggled to maintain positive, personal relationships in my life. Yet, as I analyzed the data, I realized

that have grown in how I approach and maintain my professional and personal relationships.

I have always believed that it is important that English/Language Arts teachers understand and relate to their students and to the world in which these students live (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 29; Flower, 2008, p. 7; Brandt, 2008, p, 1), yet it has been somewhat difficult to maintain these. Blankstein states that building strong relationships with students, parents, and the community at large is essential for teachers to be successful (2004). McNulty (2009) agrees when he states that "the most essential ingredient" in any discussion about educations "is relationships" (p. 19). I have always realized that building strong, professional relationships with students and teachers ensures that students are successful (Fiore, 2001, p. 68). But I also understand that professional relationships with students must move beyond the concept of "friendship." Rick Wormeli (2003) states, "When we interact with students in a manner designed to get them to like us, we end up alienating them and teaching poorly" (p. 169). One of the worse mistakes teachers can make is to try to be friends with their students.

I learned this the hard way during my fourth year of teaching. That year I decided to change how I approached my classroom management. Instead of being the leader in the classroom, I made the effort to build friendships with my students. While this method and plan worked well in the beginning, by March I was ready to quit, "At this point I will do anything, anything to get out of this class! Especially my fifth hour!" What I didn't understand was that I could build long-term, sustainable, positive relationships with students that will help bring students success in the classroom and the

world without being their friend (Wormeli, 2003, p. 169; Blankstein, 2004, p. 58-59; Fiore, 2001, p. 70; Slayton & Meadows, 2012).

What I have learned is that when I, and other English/Language Arts teachers, build relationships with students, students understand that they "matter." Wormeli (2003) discusses that it is impossible to separate this teacher-student relationship since "Teachers' and students' humanity are present in every lesson" being taught (Wormeli, p. 170; Fiore, 2001, p. 68; Slayton & Meadows, 2012). When an English/Language Arts teacher understands the dynamics of these relationships, they can support a more constructivist view of teaching in literacy and language, a view where students "create their own knowledge structures rather than merely receive" information by having a teacher who helps the learner "construct" their own knowledge in their mind (Sparks & Hirsh, 1997, p. 9; Schallert & Martin, 2003, p. 33).

I believe that English/Language Arts teachers, specifically, can use strong relationships with students to help construct this knowledge by "guiding" them (Applebee, 2003, p. 682). Flower (2008), explaining the importance of relationships between a literacy teacher in community partnerships, states that identities or relationships with students is "not something you bring with you; it is not who or what you are. Identity is defined by the relationship you create" (p. 122). One way that I have learned to grow in relationships is creating strong relationships with students by serving as a mentor (Payne 1998, p. 146) and building interventions before and when they fail (Payne, p. 145; Jackson 2009, p. 104; Schmoker, 2001; Slayton & Meadows, 2012). As I look at my teaching, I see how important these relationships have become. Just today I was walking through the hallways and a student approached me.

"Mr. Slayton!" Shiane (an African American 18 year-old female) ran towards me.

"Hey, what's up?" I had known her from working with her over a four-week period to write and revise college entrance/college scholarship essays.

"I just want you to know that I received scholarships to both Oklahoma Baptist University and the University of Central Oklahoma based on those essays! I couldn't have done it without your help."

In helping students in writing tasks like this, I have found that it is impossible to remove elements of relevant relationships from the process of teaching because it is who I am. Shiane and I developed a student-teacher relationship that allowed her to explore other areas of her literate life than what she first drafted on her essay. After almost seven meetings and eight revisions, she was ready to turn in her essay. Stories like this have played out it seems like a thousand times in my career.

During the incubation stage of the research, a colleague and I developed a presentation and wrote an article on building relationships with students. After many years in teaching, we realized that very little attention was being given to building relevant professional/personal relationships with students (Slayton & Meadows, 2012, p. 45). Through the research, we developed nine areas that help build relevant and meaningful, professional relationships with students: excellence, simplicity, consistency, humility, fairness, openness, security, kindness, and desisting.

**Figure 18. Building Relationships with Students (Slayton & Meadows, 2012).**




One way that helps me to understand how I grow from having professional, relevant relationships with students is in analyzing the poem, *Theme from English B* by Langston Hughes. In the third stanza of the poem, the narrator discusses the relationship between the student and the teacher:

> So will my page be colored that I write?
> Being me, it will not be white.
> But it will be a part of you, instructor.
> You are white---
> yet a part of me, as I am a part of you.
> That's American.
> Sometimes perhaps you don't want to be a part of me.
> Nor do I often want to be a part of you.
> But we are, that's true!
> As I learn from you,
> I guess you learn from me---
> although you're older---and white---
> and somewhat more free. (Hughes, 1951)

In this poem, the narrator expresses part of the learning process that happens between teacher and student and student and teacher. The honesty of the poem shines because of the reluctance on part of both the teacher and the student to learn from one another, yet it is impossible for learning not to take place. This is how I feel many, many times in my professional, personal relationships with students: although I am sometimes reluctant, I inevitably learn more from them than I feel they could ever possibly learn from me.

***Theme #4: Teaching*.** There is irony in the fact that some of my growth as a teacher comes from…teaching. Yet the theme of teaching appears 25 times or 6.8% of the time in my notebooks and journals. This doesn't seem to be much, but it should be noted that much of the data found in the theme of reflecting deals with the direct teaching of my students. Actually, this entire inquiry is about me as a teacher, both professionally and personally. While I write much about the art of teaching throughout this inquiry, one reason why I explore it here as a separate theme is because the nuance of "teacher as teacher" carries with it some very complex ideas that I feel need to be explored a little closer. Dixon (1967) states what I am saying this way:

> The English teacher's work, therefore, has to be on two fronts. First he has to learn for himself and develop with his pupils the full potential of discussion methods, with their emphasis on interplay of ideas, dialectical exchange, shared experience, group learning and understanding. And, second, from the very start of reading and writing he has to look beyond the minimum possibilities of literacy to the profounder possibilities of a considered and extended exploration of experience, permitting slower realizations and more individual, personal growth. (Dixon, 1969, p. 112)

The very fact that I am placed daily in front students requires that I learn to grow my skills as a teacher (Whitaker & Whitaker 2002, p. 15, 63). Fiore and Whitaker (2006) discuss that the "best teachers in our schools, the ones we want to retain at all costs, are also the teachers who are most likely to be concerned with continuous improvement" (p.

49). This continuous improvement can be developed through high-quality staff development and is essential if we are to see our students succeed (Sparks & Hirsh, 1997, p. 1). Cris Tovani (2004) states, "It's funny that we don't ask of ourselves what we ask of our students" (p. 58). In other words, we ask our students to grow while we refuse to grow.

My growth as a teacher becomes even more important when I look into the eyes of the very students who come to me for learning. It is an experience that is very humbling, as I relate in the following story:

> A student came by my office today. A shy kid, not more than 17 or 18. He came by my office to explain that he had passed the test to get into English Comp I at the community college because of me. He stutters, won't look me in the eye, and hangs around because he doesn't have many social skills. I know he is really wanting attention. And he is proud: he should be. After he and I sat down for a second tutoring session he raised his score by 15 points. Amazing. It's these stories that keep me in the classroom—these stories that keep me doing what I'm doing.

When I realize that a part, whether that part be large or small, of a student's future depends on what happens during my lecture, my class time, and my interactions with students, it puts things in complete perspective. Throughout the years, I have worked hard to improve my teaching craft: sometimes I have done this on purpose and other times I have done it because of the need to survive. But regardless of the motives behind my growth in my teaching practices, I have worked hard to stay relevant in my field.

In 1967, John Dixon wrote about the Dartmouth Conference in *Growth Through English.* He observed the following about the need for English/Language Arts Teachers to stay abreast of current trends in the education:

> At any time, continuing, or "in-service" education should be a normal part of a teacher's work, we believe; in an era of change like the present there is a double need for discussion, continuing education, and curriculum development work. (Dixon, 1967, p. 109)

This “continuing” education must occur so I can keep abreast of what is happening in teaching. This has been a large factor in how I grow. The following is a list of my “in-services” or professional development hours since first started teaching:

**Table 3. Professional Development throughout My Years of Teaching**

**My Professional Development Training (1999-2013)**

| Teaching Year | Year | Total Hours |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | 1999-2000 | 80* |
| 2 | 2000-2001 | 64.08 |
| 3 | 2001-2002 | 36.75 |
| 4 | 2002-2003 | 114.25 |
| 5 | 2003-2004 | 68.8 |
| 6 | 2004-2005 | 97.5 |
| 7 | 2005-2006 | 132.25 |
| 8 | 2006-2007 | 90.25 |
| 9 | 2007-2008 | 91 |
| 10 | 2008-2009 | 72 |
| 11 | 2009-2010 | 47 |
| 12 | 2010-2011 | 46 |
| 13 | 2011-2012 | 47 |
| 14 | 2012-2013 | 80 |
| **Total Hours of Professional Development** | | **1066.66** |
| **Average Hours of Professional Development per Year** | | **76.19** |

*Year 1999-2000 is an estimate based on memory, notebooks, and beginning year teaching requirements.

I have discovered that since my first year of teaching to now (14 years), I have participated in 1066.66 hours of professional development, for an average of 76.19 hours per year. This does not count graduate school. The above chart includes everything from sexual harassment training to safety training. It also includes personally experiencing many notable influences that have helped my growth in teaching. These hours include

learning from Marcia Tate (2003) on the importance of developing a classroom that promotes brain growth; Larry Bell on why we must not forget "at-promise" students; Mark Forget on how to integrate strategies to better help students learn material; Ian Jukes on how to integrate technology in the classroom; Todd Whitaker on how to build better student/teacher relationships, and Douglas Fiore on how to improve school climate. As I look back on my professional development opportunities, I see very few times when I didn't learn something to add to my classroom.

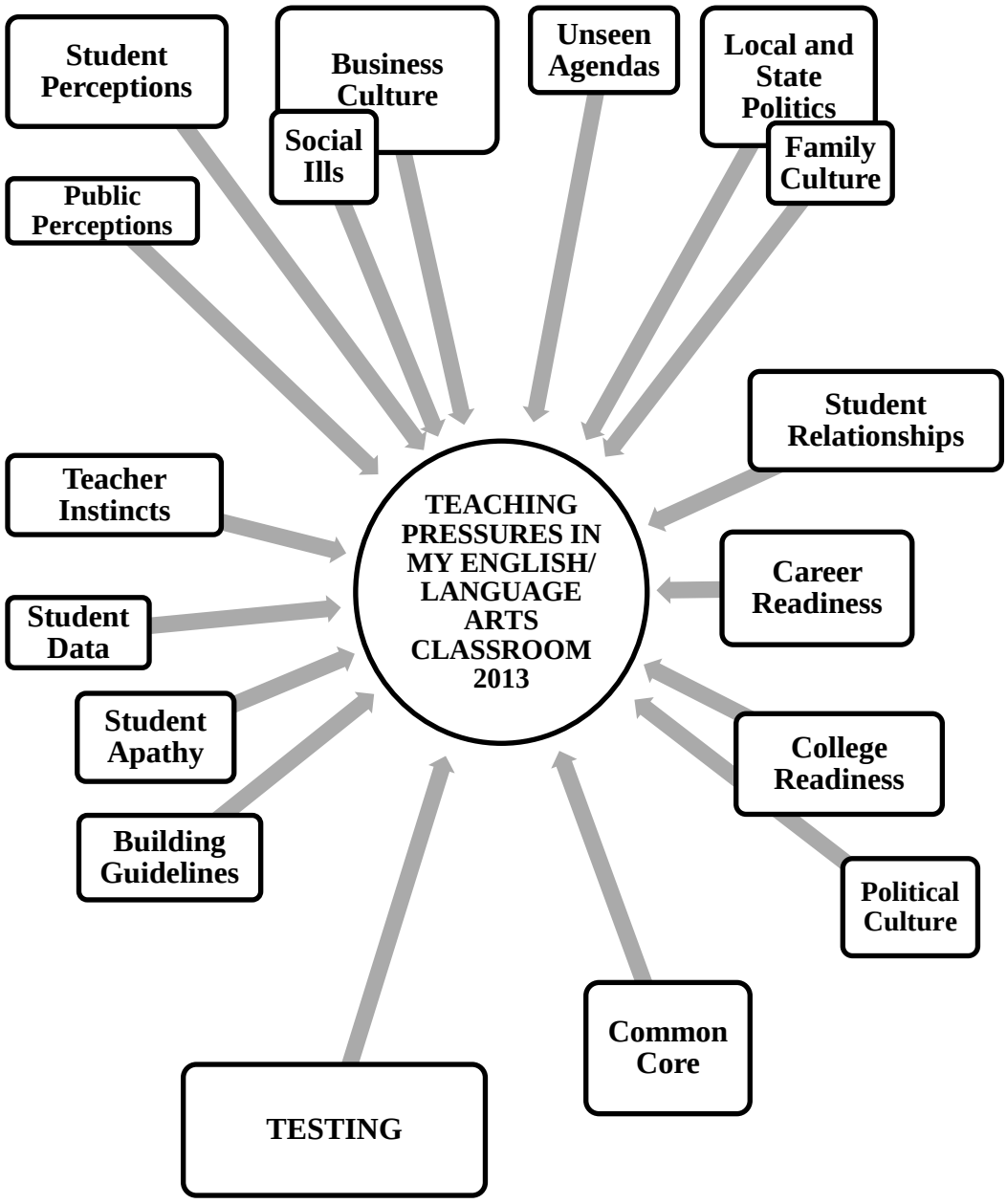
***Leadership.*** One way that I found that I stay relevant professionally as an English/Language Arts teacher is to be a *teacher leader*. As a leader, I work hard to influence the students, administrators, and others around me to help them understand the importance of embracing literacy. Douglas Fiore (2003) states "school leadership in its broadest sense must include some variation of the use of teachers as leaders" (p. 72). Wilhelm (2007) is specific in saying that teaching is not a profession because "people outside the profession police us" (p. 16). Yet he does state that teachers need to "be proactive instead of reactive" (p. 16) to the policies that politics places on us. He also suggests that teachers "become part of the conversation around policy" (p. 16). Rosenblatt (1995) explains how education, and especially literacy, has become a political issue (p. 71). As I work as a teacher leader, I strive to become part of this conversation while helping to support colleagues around me as we navigate the policies and politics that surround us. I believe it is important to help teachers, especially pre-service teachers, to see themselves as "teacher-leaders" and to develop their leadership qualities. In order to do this, I work very hard to include teachers around me, especially young teachers, in

developing lessons, presentations, publications, committee work, and leadership positions.

Asking teachers to view themselves as professionals must start in the pre-service area of teacher education and continue throughout one's career. Too many times, teachers do not understand the importance that they have in the school culture at large and that they are "the most important adults in the school" (Fiore & Joseph, 2005, p. 66). Moreover, it is best if this understanding of teacher as professional is intrinsic and that teachers can help themselves to become learners like Harry Wong (1998) states, "the professional educator is always learning and growing" and is constantly on an endless journey of looking for new and better ideas, new information, and improved skills to succeed with students (p. 296). In my own teaching practice and craft, I have found that, in order to be successful, this constant journey must be, constant.

As part of trying to understand how I grow and the impact that this has on my teaching, I reworked the graphic organizer in chapter two that discusses the pressures that I felt in 2006. This new list was made in 2013:

**Illustration 19. The Pressures I Feel as an English/Language Arts Professional 2013.**




As I reworked the pressures I feel today and compared it to the pressures that I faced in 2006, I realized that 12 of them are the same, 2 of them were the same but I named differently, 9 of them I were no longer considered pressures, and 3 were new

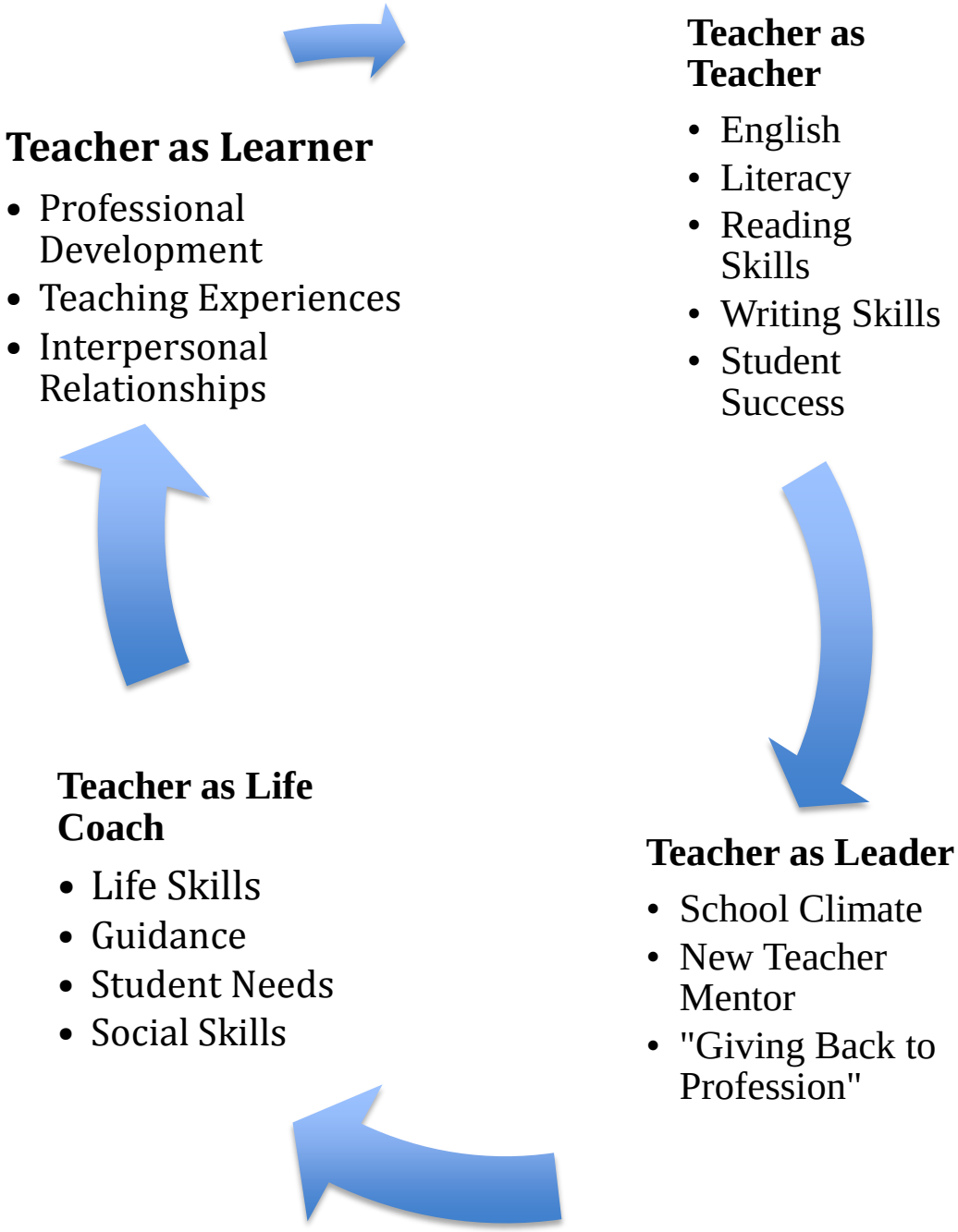
pressures. The question that I feel needs to be asked is, "Why did this change?" I feel it is partly because I have grown professionally and know how to handle these pressures more effectively. I feel that I have also grown personally and no longer take so many of them personally. I think I have found a balance in how I handle these pressures.

**Table 4. The Differences between the Pressures I Faced in 2006 and 2013.**

| 2013 Pressures | 2006 Pressures |
|---|---|
| Building guidelines | Big Business |
| Business Cluture | Building Guidelines |
| Career Readiness | Business Culture |
| College Readiness | Extra |
| Common Core | Family Culture |
| Family Culture | Future of Profession |
| Local/State Politics | Local/State Politics |
| Political Culture | Media Culture |
| Public Perceptions | Outside Cultures |
| Reaching all students | PASS |
| Social Ills | Political Culture |
| Student Apathy | Public Perceptions |
| Student Data | Publishing Companies |
| Student Perceptions | Religious Cultures |
| Student Relationships | Student Data |
| Teacher Instincts | Student Perceptions |
| Testing | Student Relationships |
| Unseen Agendas | Teacher Instincts |
| KEY | Testing |
| SAME PRESSURES | The Grammar Debate |
| MODIFIED PRESSURES | The Ivory Tower |
| REMOVED PRESSURES | Unseen Agendas |
| NEW PRESSURES | Video Culture |

In addition to reworking the pressures I faced, I also reworked the roles that I feel that I play in teaching. See Figure 9 below.

**Illustration 20. The Roles I Play as an English/Language Arts Professional 2013.**

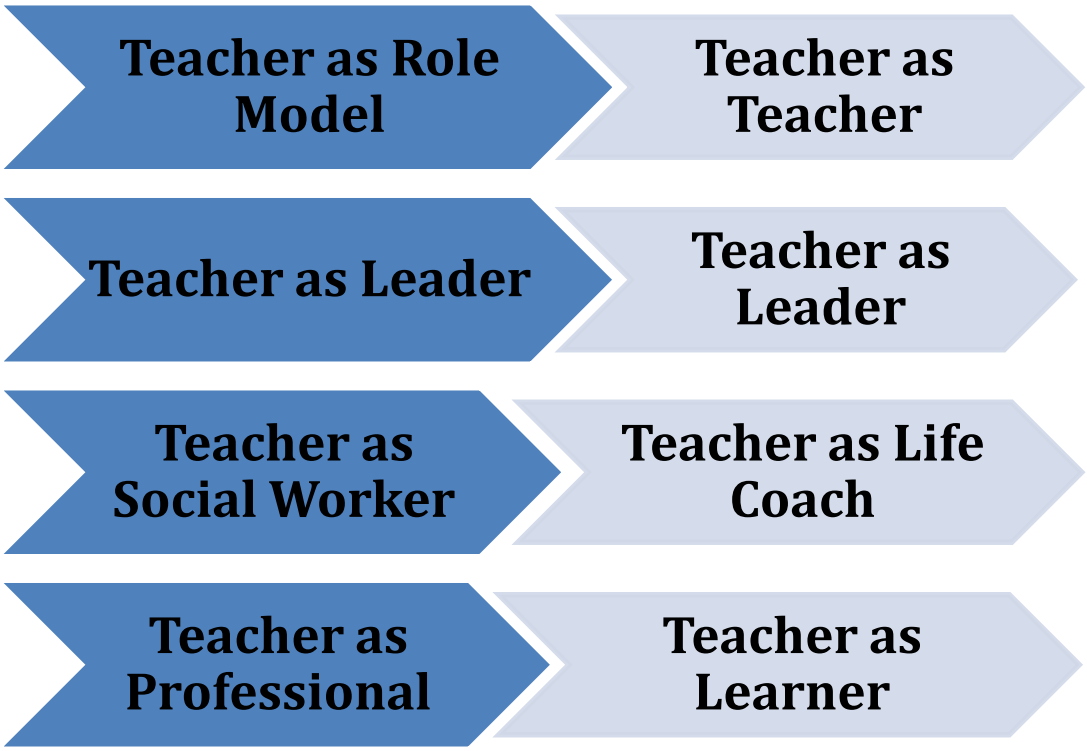



Just as the pressures that I faced changed from when I first wrote about them in 2006, so did the roles that I feel that I played as an English/Lanuage Arts professional.

The only role that stayed the same was the idea of "Teacher as Leader." The role of "Teachers as Role Model" changed to where I veiwed myself as a "Teacher as Teacher" of the English/Language Arts and other areas. I believe that is because I have made a more concerted effort to improve my teaching in the classroom. The role I played as "Social Worker" also changed to the role of "Teacher as Life Coach." I believe that this maybe because I take a more proactive view in my work. I strive to teach my students how to effectively solve many of the issues that they face. It may also have to do with the fact that I now teach older students, and although these students still have problems and issues, most of them are in a better place to deal with them. Last of all, the role of "Teacher as Professional" changed to "Teacher as Learner." This might just be a small nuance, but it does relfect the idea that I try no longer try to be the "sage on the stage" and I am more interested in learning than I am being the center of attention.

While this list of pressures and challenges are real, they are geared specifically to me and my life, although many other teachers may feel the same way.

**Illustration 21: Changes of Roles I Played from 2006 to 2013**




As I look back at the last 14 years of my teaching, I have learned that I also grow through developing personal leadership in my life. This personal leadership has developed over a serious of ups and downs and difficulties. Through the years, like everyone else, I have had to face my share of trials and concerns. These included growing up in a dysfunctional family, working through the pain and loneliness of divorce, fighting daily with a possible debilitating disease, and grappling as a full-time single parent. Yet I can honestly say that walking through each of these situations and more taught me a lot about myself. In the process, I am able to better help my students.

Several years ago I fell in love. And while doing so, like so many of us, I had my heart broken. During the process I decided that I would not get bitter and I would not

place blame. Instead, I spent a journey, a personal journey that coincided with what was happening in my professional life. I spent time reading books, attending seminars, refreshing my spiritual life, and working through my personal issues. All of this helped me become a better leader in my personal life.

Personal leadership, to me, is when I take charge of my life and disengage from others who try to control my life. This concept of personal leadership is one that has come from working through ACoA (Adults Children of Alcoholics). What I found was that much of what I was facing in my personal life was what I call, "spinning." Instead of taking charge and looking at areas in which I could do better, I felt that I had allowed others to dictate my life. While I always felt confident in how I dealt with others in my professional world, I was not so confident in my personal world. One way that I worked through this was by utilizing the concept of a free paint.

**Illustration 22: Personal Paint Write on Personal Leadership.**



What I notice about this piece are the connecting lines, which bleed through the different areas of my life. I notice that the areas that are connected are not very defined. Instead, each area runs through the other. There is not much definition in each area, yet each area is connected. I love the bright colors, but I also notice how I use dark colors to show the difficulties I have in different areas.

As part of this process, I determined to read a book a week on personal leadership and growth. The topics that I covered included books on self-esteem, communication skills, different aspects of spirituality, exercise, goals, relationships, and others. I searched for books that moved beyond the concept of "self-help." The books I read were ones that were researched-based. I also reached out and met with individuals who I could mentor and who would be willing to mentor me. As I became more confident in myself and in my own skin, I became more confident in front of my students.

***Theme #5: Writing.*** The fact that I feel I grow through the use of writing would seem common sense, since I am an English teacher, college composition instructor, and writing specialist! But until I walked through this inquiry, I never saw writing as a way for me to grow. Although the majority of my reflection pieces were conducted through writing, mainly free writing, I never thought of the power of writing to help me grow professionally and personally. I found that writing in the forms of personal narrative, free writing, and poetry have contributed to my growth.

One surprising way that I found that I grow is through my use of poetry. While analyzing my data, I was astonished about my use of poetry in professional and personal life. Ironically, I have never considered myself to be a poet. While I have always ascribed to *be* a poet, and while I have had several pieces of poetry published, I never thought of

myself as *a* poet. There seemed to be no systematic way in which I wrote. This poetry, or bits of poetry, was written in the margins of my notebooks, in the back covers of my books, and on napkins folded in the pages. For example, one example includes this piece from one of my book jackets for a graduate class, "Broken, hindered, holding time." Here, as I pondered on what was going on in my life during this, I realized that it was when I was at a slow place in my life and was beginning to find complacency.

Another poem that I wrote during this time was about working with a student who was struggling both academically and personally. It is partially biography on his part and part autobiographical on mine:

*In Loving Memory of Jason Haines*

*They say true love is the ultimate quest*
*life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.*
*They believe in gods who can change lives and*
*argue that mom, dad, and baby is best*
*not knowing where I live today, there*
*is no such thing as life, liberty,*
*and dad.*

*My existence they map,*
*with games they play*
*hoping, waiting till I go away*
*Never knowing that I'm*
*Goin' to my grave,*
*Reaching towards sixteen,*
*knowing,*
*there's no such thing.*

This poem shows the intense sensitivity that I had towards my students. It also sheds light into my personal life as I work with these students. While I remember writing this about one particular student who had just passed away, I found that it was indicative of how I view many of the students with whom I work.

While I wrote full poems regarding my professional life, I also found that I wrote tidbits of poetry on small pieces of paper throughout my research. For example, I wrote the following line while sitting at a Denny's restaurant contemplating my future, "Sipping Coffee through a straw at 1:00 A.M." and another time after staying at a casino in Tunica, Mississippi, "Red chip on the outside, the dealer barked to the shift leader." During another time of writing, I wrote the following in regards to my professional life, "The train leaves the station and I am on board, or am I?" In another effort that shows how frustrated I was with my professional life, I made the following statement while writing with a colleague and friend, "I just want to write poetry, damn it."

As I reflect on how and why writing poetry has helped me grow, I realize that it is not just the act of the finished product that has helped me grow, but it is the act of the process of writing poetry that has helped me.

While writing, it has become clear to me that my English/Language Arts classroom setting seems to be a perfect fit for helping me to enhance my growth through thinking skills (Elbow, 1973; Hammond, 1991). Marzano argues "language and thinking are inextricably linked," and that "many of the current practices designed to enhance thinking have strong roots or corollaries within the language arts" (2003, p. 687). Moreover, Marzano (2003) is more specific about the ability of writing in this process, "It is the robust and complex nature of the writing task that renders it a powerful tool for enhancing thinking. By definition the composing process is highly difficulty (p. 691). Ironically, I have always felt that I was an average writer, but have been, am always ready to improve my craft.

Through the use of focused free writes (Golberg, 1986; Forget 2000, Hammond, 1991) I have been able to find many successes in my classroom and in my life. I have noticed that they "can help prepare students for classroom literacy, focus on the topic we are discussing, reinforce concepts and ideas, provide a quick overview of concepts, give instantaneous feedback on difficult concepts, and help level the field between students with different achievement gaps.

The majority of the data that I have analyzed in this research process manifests itself in the form of free writes. A free write is defined as writing for a full ten minutes or for one full-page. While there are many ways to approach teaching and implementing the free write process, I prefer to use Goldberg's from her book, *Writing Down the Bones.* She lists the following guidelines:

1. Keep your hand moving.
2. Don't stop when you cross out.
3. Don't worry about spelling, punctuation, or grammar.
4. Lose control.
5. Don't think. Don't get logical.
6. Go for the jugular. (1986, p. 8)

Goldberg states that the object of a free write is to "burn through first thoughts, to the place where energy is unobstructed by social politeness of the internal censor, to the place where you are writing what your mind actually sees and feels, not what it thinks it should see or feel" (1986, p. 8). The idea is that rules, guidelines, or writing prompts do not inhibit the writer or student. Free writing works perfectly for me because it allows me to process my thinking through the writing process without the fear of being judged or being looked down upon because of my work.

While it might seem common sense that a writing specialist would grow through writing, I feel that this category was a surprise to me.

As I have walked through this stage of explication looking to discover "**How do I grow as an English/Language Arts Professional?"** I have looked deeper into the five main ways that I grow. Each one of these themes could be a research inquiry in its own right, but here I was able to explore these areas a little better. As with most topics, the more questions I ask, the more answers I find and the more questions I have.

## Chapter Six
## Creative Synthesis: Tying the Untangle Together

"I just want to write poetry, damn it."
-Bonner Slayton, 2011

"I don't wanna be another wave in the ocean
I am a rock, not just another grain of sand (that's right)
I wanna be the one you run to when you need a shoulder
I ain't a soldier but I'm here to take a stand because we can"
-*Because We Can,* Bon Jovi, 2013

I never really meant to make my career in education. After a successful career in ministry, I went to college with the idea of preparing for law school. I decided to pick up my teaching certificate "just in case" plan A didn't work. While completing my first internship, "just in case" drastically changed into "this is what I am called to do." Plan B immediately replaced Plan A. Yet along the way, I found myself becoming a statistic: I wanted to leave the calling that I had grown to love.

Through a combination of hard work, others who love me, fortunate luck, and a willingness to understand, I have learned some of the ways that I grow. This process has not been easy, and many times it has not been fun. But it has been very productive and I can honestly say that years later I am living my dreams as an English/Language Arts professional. I still face some of the same challenges, along with some new ones. And I still play some roles that have evolved and are continuing to evolve. Yet I am content and fulfilled. One of the main reasons that I feel this way is because I have learned to grow.

By the time the researcher gets to the final stage of the heuristic process, Creative Synthesis, he has "mastered knowledge of the material that illuminates and explicates the question" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 31). It is in this stage that I put the

"components and core themes into a creative synthesis" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 32), working to make sure that I have "mastered knowledge of the material that illuminates and explicates the question" (p. 31) of **"How do I grow professionally and personally as an English/Language Arts professional?"** It is during this stage that the researcher, according to Moustakas (1990), must look and permit "an inward life on the question to grow." (p. 32). This is exactly what I did.

There are several areas of this inquiry that I would like to explore in this chapter. First, I will explain my experience of walking through the heuristic research processes. Second, I will explore some of the findings from this process. Third, I will explain how I creatively synthesized my findings. Each of these arenas provides more insight into my growth and also provides opportunities for more growth in the future.

**On the Heuristic Process.** There are several areas within this process that have made it very difficult to complete. First, I believe it is because the very nature of heuristic inquiry is that it is the study of one's "self" and one's relation to a phenomenon. I believe this made it very difficult for me. I was not expecting the professional and personal arenas and nuances that this inquiry opened in my life and in my heart. I literally pulled back 15 years of layers (and sometimes more). These layers included areas of my professional life: teaching, mentoring, ministry, business adventures, academics, publishing, presenting, leadership, relationships, failures, successes, and other areas. These layers also included areas of my personal life, including: spirituality, parenting, relationships, academics, insecurities, romantic relationships, family history, health, failures, successes, dreams, goals, and others. I relived successes in both areas, and I

lamented on failures in both areas. Not all of these were easy to explore. In the words of my little brother, David, "Some things need to remain hidden."

I was not expecting to find so much of myself as I started this project, and yet I did. It was as if at each turn of the notebook, the page, the correspondence, or the napkin I found more about my life. Ironically, this is one reason that I asked to do this research project in the first place. In the Bible, Jesus warns us that one should be willing to understand what all it takes (resources, emotional energy, physical attributes, etc.) before one starts to build something. But in the words of Jesus, "I did not count the cost" before I started building this house. It was like opening a Christmas present every day. The problem is I didn't like each present. Because of this, some of what is left out here is because it was just too difficult to walk through.

This isn't to say that this process was negative. I was expecting to find some things that I didn't know about myself, and I did. In the end, the overall experience was positive. If I were to use heuristic inquiry again, I would understand more of the emotional and physical toll that it takes. But I'm not really sure one can understand this until *after* they have walked through the process. Keeping with one of the themes of reflecting, during each stage, I developed questions that I feel would make excellent research projects in the future.

I started with the *Initial Engagement* stage, and I had difficulty deciding exactly what it was that I needed to study. At first, I tried exploring creativity. Then, after I conducted some serious research, I realized that creativity wasn't exactly what I was looking for. Then, I thought I needed to explore how I fit as a teacher-leader. Both of these are excellent concepts, and they are both areas in which I strive to excel, but as I

began to look at what was happening in my life, it became apparent that I needed to explore how I grow professionally and personally. This research allowed me to understand much about myself and my teaching craft, but it also allowed me to discover some more areas to research in the future. Each of these relate to the teaching profession at large. These include the following:

A. What is the role of creativity in teaching?
B. What choices do teachers really have when it comes to exploring creativity with their students?
C. What is the impact of being a teacher-leader on classroom instruction?
D. What is the impact of being a teacher-leader on school climate? And how is this different than that of being an administrator?
E. What are the choices that teachers have when it comes to being a teacher-leader? And who decides these choices?
F. What is the role of professionalism in a teacher's career and life?
G. What are the concepts of professionalism in education? Why do so many in the public sphere not understand exactly what teachers do on a daily basis?

Each of these questions is one that I would like explore in greater detail.

The *Immersion* stage seemed to be the easiest stage. I had no difficulty in exploring the reasons I needed to grow. These seem to be everywhere I turned. Teachers face an enormous amount of pressure, and many of them have nothing to do with the physical act of classroom teaching. While it took much time to collect and sift through over 15 years of data (notebooks, journals, lesson plans, etc.), it was actually enjoyable. This process actually took over a year just to gather the material and then organize it. It took me another year to analyze it. The amount of information filled three filing cabinets, six file boxes, and so many computer files that it crashed the hard drive on my computer. Questions that I developed during this stage include the following:

A. Why are there so many pressures on teachers?
B. What resources can schools/districts provide that can help teachers work through these pressures?
C. What is the actual toll that these pressures take on testing, etc.?

D. What can be done to help politicians and the public realize these pressures?

The hardest stage for me was the *Incubation* stage. And I have wondered why. I had much difficulty in pulling away from the research question and focus on other areas. During this process, I told a colleague that if I had to do this over again, I would write a dissertation on completing the incubation stage of a heuristic dissertation! While difficult at first, I eventually learned to enjoy the incubation stage. For future research, I would like to explore how each activity helps me to grow. The questions that I would like to explore in the future include the following:

A. What is the impact of conferences and travel on teacher growth?
B. How can working on projects like presentations and publishing help faculty members grow?
C. How do interpersonal relationships among faculty members impact school climate and student learning?
D. Do other professionals have difficulty pulling away from their work and focusing on other areas of their lives?
E. What is the impact on personal paint/writes on English/Language Arts instruction?

Each question, I believe would allow insight into how I can grow in the future.

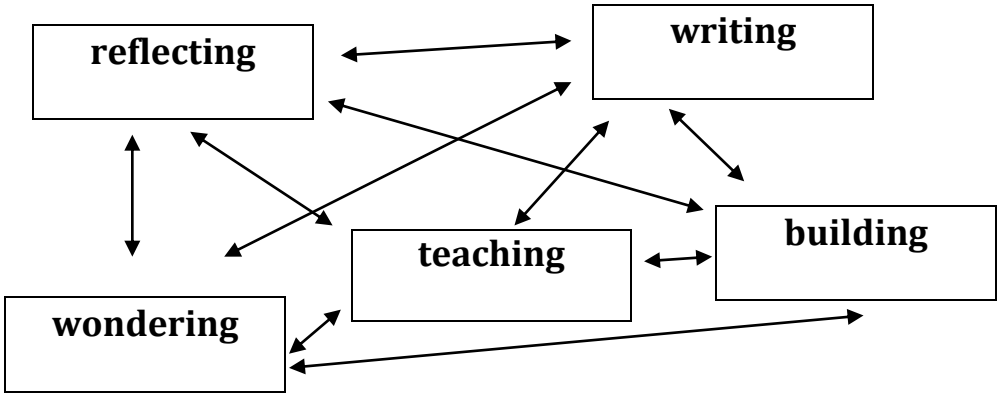
During the *Illumination* stage, I enjoyed looking for ways that I grow. Researching my notebooks and data allowed me to reminisce and see patterns that I had not noticed. This process allowed me the rare opportunity to review areas of my professional life and my personal life that I had forgotten. Because of this project, I will review my progress and my notes more often. One area of concern that came to light during this stage was that I do not really have an organized way in which to keep my journals, notes, and such. This organization is a work in progress. Questions that I have for further research include the following:

A. How can teachers use their time to reflect more often?

B. What is a system to keep learning organized? How can I teach this to my students? How can I use this in my life?
C. In what ways can I better mesh the concepts of spirituality and education in my life?
D. What is the turn-around time in professional development? In other words, how effective is professional development in the school culture, etc.? What is the impact of professional development on student growth?

The *Explication* stage caused me to find some interesting things that I was not expecting. I was surprised as to the depth that I grew. I was expecting only three areas (creativity, relationships, and leadership), but I actually discovered five: reflecting, wondering, building relationships, teaching, and writing. This was not what I was expecting. During this stage, the theme of recursiveness came to mind. I had explored this idea when it came to the writing process and the stages of heuristic inquiry. But I also saw it in the way that I grew:

**Illustration 23: The Recursive Nature of How I Grow**




I had never thought of how this concept of things working in a recursive nature had been part of my life. Questions that I have thought about during this stage include the following:

A. What is the roll of "recursive" teaching in my teaching?
B. How can I use each of these in a way to better help my professional and personal life?

C. What is the best way to help students with developing goals?
D. How do I keep those "wandering" students on track? What are some ways to help them be productive?
E. What is the best way to explain this concept of recursiveness to students? What impact does this have on their learning and growth?

During the *Creative Synthesis* stage, I had fun. It was exciting to see how I could use free paints, quotes, poetry, personal narrative, graphic organizers, free writes, and photographs to explain my findings. Throughout this research process, these have been invaluable tools that I feel have helped me tell the story of how I grow. Instead of including these in this last chapter, I decided to sprinkle them throughout this document. Questions that I have during this stage include the following:

A. How can I incorporate free paints into my classroom?
B. What are some better ways to showcase with my students?
C. How can I incorporate more poetry writing into my curriculum?
D. What are the best uses for graphic organizers? When is it best for students to use these?

I understand that each of these questions, of course, will lead to more questions.

**On the Findings.** There were several areas that surprised me. First, I expected to see only three categories, but instead that I actually grew through five. While each one of the areas that I expected to see before this inquiry did end up in my findings, only one was its own theme (building relationships). In addition, there was one area that I didn't find. This was the concept of passion. This was surprising because many colleagues comment on my passion for teaching and for my students. Recently, one of my colleagues recently made the following observation about me:

"Bonner, if there is one person I don't want on my team, it's you. You seem to speak your mind and can go off at any minute."

"Really?" I didn't know if I needed to be offended, cautious, or thankful.

"But I don't think I wouldn't want you not on my team. You have a passion that is hard to find anywhere else."

"Thanks, I guess." I really didn't know what else to say.

While I'm not sure that one can actually grow from passion, it is safe to say that it can be a motivation for wanting to know how to grow. While the word passion doesn't show itself in my data, I have always considered myself to be passionate about working in education. I have always considered myself passionate about working with my students. Yet I didn't find an area of passion within my research. I wonder if it is because the very fact that I have passion for my career, my students, and my craft has impacted how I grow? I also wonder what the role of passion is in determining whether or not a teacher is successful in his or her career? These are two questions that I might wish to explore at a later date.

In addition, I was surprised of how much the theme of reflecting appeared. When I first started this research, the concept really wasn't even a thought. Yet as I have worked through this heuristic inquiry, I notice that reflection was always there from the very beginning. I just never realized it before now.

Another theme that surprised me was the conceptualization of wondering. I had never realized the importance of wondering in my life. This is especially true when it comes to asking questions. Questions seem to appear everywhere in my research. They appear in my notebooks, in my journals, and in this inquiry. I am learning to ask questions that don't have answers. And this is one skill that I'm attempting to teach to my students.

**On Creativity Synthesis.**

One reason the heuristic process appealed to me was because I knew that I would be able to use creativity during the creative synthesis stage. Creativity has always been something I have explored, and I realize that it takes many forms. The ability to use different mediums to bring together the entire heuristic process was new to me. I enjoyed finding ways to incorporate free paints, poetry, and graphic organizers throughout this inquiry.

Corrado Costa (1996) in the book, *The Hundred Languages of Children*, believes that colors "cannot represent a beginning" (p. 64). In other words, colors do not have a time line. Costa gives the example of dating the "foundation of a city" or the "discovery of a world," but we cannot say, "200 years after the foundation of Green" or the "year 1983 after the birth of Yellow (p. 64). In this view, color is timeless. This is exactly one reason why I believe in the power and the beauty of utilizing paint-writes. When I add color, it becomes timeless. When I add color with words, in my mind, magic happens. This is why I chose to use free paints and paint writes as part of the creative synthesis of this project.

While Costa discusses how children use color and paint to explore and explain their world, I believe it is also possible to use color and paint to explore and explain my world. Costa believes that use of color causes children's work to be "timeless" and "outside of time" (p. 64-65). Costa (1996) explains it this way:

> And because color has no "date stamp", and thus the word of art always seems "just finished" or "almost alive"—thanks to the timeless virtue of colors which bewitches common sense—children, too, entrust their artistic works to the joy of a god outside of time. (p. 65)

It is the view that color and paint can "bewitch common sense" that seems so powerful to me as an English/Language Arts teacher. Moreover, in the same book, Yury Lijubimov

(1996) states that "We adults are often amazed by children's unexpected perceptions of the world" (p. 67) and this is so true when it comes to seeing my students use color and paint. Lijubimov (1996) continues, stating, "Sometimes, looking at children's drawings and painting, it is very sad to have to confess that for us this sharpness of observation has disappeared and that we still have a lot to learn from children" (p. 67). In my conceptualization of paint-write, this is the foundation: I still have a lot to learn from children about the "sharpness of observation." I have attempted to do that here. I have attempted to bring some sharpness to my observations.

Using paint and writing and studying both come from the concept of ekphrasis. According to Kathleen Walsh-Piper (2002), "The history of ekphrasitc writing is long, rich, and diverse, and for good reason…" (p. xiii). She goes on to explain about the "confluences and parallels in the two art forms" of painting and writing (p. xiii). Mason (2007) believes that ekphrasis "temporally expands visual images beyond the spatial restrictions imposed by canvas and frame" (p.13). Moreover, Bartsch and Elsner (2007) state that "Once skimmed over as superfluous, or derided as rhetorical showmanship, ekphrasis now seems to present countless opportunities for the discovery of meaning" (p. i). To me, utilizing paint-writes in my life is a way to look at themes and conceptualizations through timeless color and writing (Foster & Prevallet, 2002). This is another reason why I have included them here.

According to Keohane and Dublin (2010), ekphrasis is "primarily understood as a verbal description of a visual work of art" (p. 265). In this inquiry, as in other times in my life, I use verbal descriptions in poetry and free writes to describe my own "works of art." While using an approach similar to that of writing free writes (Goldberg, 1996;

Glatthorn, 2002) where I allow whatever to come to mind about a particular topic, many times the paint write process helps me by freeing energy and allowing me to put whatever is on my mind on paper by seeing it visually (Berger, 1977). I believe that one reason the free paints work for me is because the English/Language Arts seems to be a natural fit for the arts and the use of imagination (Egan, 1992; Chancer & Rester-Zodrow, 1997; Gallas, 2003).

All of the poems that I use in the creative synthesis part of this project come from a visual: either a free paint or some sort of visual representation. I should note that all of the poems that I use here have either been published elsewhere or will be submitted for publication soon.

Another way to use the visual to help understand the written word is through graphic organizers (Bromley, Irwin-DeVitis et. al, 1995). According to Lee and Tan (2010), graphic organizers can show "promise" in helping students learn (p. 137). Gallavan and Kottler (2007) state that graphic organizers "provide teachers and students with tools, concepts, and language to organize, understand, and apply information to achieve a variety of purposes and outcomes" (p. 117). I have put much thought and work into the graphic organizers that I use. Their purpose is to provide a creative way to synthesize information.

As I reflect on my professional and personal growth, I realize that I have traveled a long way since I felt walking out of my classroom door several years ago. I feel that walking through this heuristic inquiry has given me insights in my life and my abilities. Before I began this journey, I really didn't have a plan that allowed me to understand where I came from or where I was going. Now, I feel that I do. I recently

wrote a poem about an experience in my classroom. I think that it sums up what I have experienced and what I have learned nicely:

*Joshua R.*

*He walks into my classroom,*
*and I'm not sure how he will do*
*today (just like I'm unsure every day).*
*Josh usually bounces in with a smile, a joke,*
*a shit-bearing grin. Not today.*
*"My dad just home from prison," he informs me*
*and I can tell by the look he gives me that he's really not that happy*
*although he really should be.*

*And I start writing in white chalk*
*on the green board and I wander:*
*watching children splash out and in*
*of our swimming pool on an August day,*
*a horse trough—the aluminum hot so that*
*we burn our feet on the bottom and our*
*hands on the sides.*

*Next to the old, burnt red, wooden picnic table*
*Where Mom had half thrown watermelon, with seeds,*
*for us to eat. Of course, the knife*
*was not left for the four of us kids,*
*she knew my little brother couldn't resist it.*

*I finish writing the assignments for the next week on the board*
*as Josh asks me if he can sleep.*
*The answer, for this student and others like him*
*is always the same:*

*go ahead and lie down behind my desk,*
*No one can see you there.*

As I work hard to understand, **"How do I grow professionally and personally as an English/Language Arts teacher?"** I have learned that growth is a never-ending process that I must continue in order to stay productive and alive in my classroom.

## Epilogue

"It's always best to start at the beginning."
-Glenda, the Good Witch of the North, *Wizard of Oz*

"All who wander are not lost."
-Bumper Sticker

My life has changed, for the better, since I started my teaching journey. I no longer hide the law school application in my desk. While I still have difficult days, I receive my energy from my students; the pressures that I face no longer zap me when I walk into my school building. Reflecting has become even more part of my daily life since I now know that it is how I grow, and I am even working on developing a project to help other teachers do the same. I strive to live a life of wondering. I do so by asking questions, living creatively, and pursuing wander. Building relationships is at the forefront of what I do every day and I work hard to reach the students that no one else does. Teaching is not just something I do for a living; it is now, more than ever, who I am. Last of all, I have come to accept that writing is who I am, and if I am going to grow, I must be willing to write.

Since I started researching my professional and personal growth, it seems that teachers and students who need help in finding ways to grow have sought me like never before. One teacher, now five years into his career, came to me last week with tears in his eyes and wanted to know what he could do to make his professional and personal life better. I have students, grown men, come to me every semester who are recently home from the wars in Iraq or Afghanistan and ask for ways to better themselves. There are women who will email me or talk to me after class, asking what they can do to grow where they want to be. I've noticed a difference between the men who ask for guidance

on growth and the women who ask. The difference is that the men usually break down and cry. Sometimes after class; sometimes while I'm teaching. All of this has been very humbling to me.

A colleague and I recently conducted a presentation at a national conference on how teachers can us their professional, relevant relationships to better themselves and their students. This presentation was so successful that over 110 teachers and administrators packed into a small conference room. Teachers sat in every chair, stood against the wall, sat on the floor up and down the aisle and all around the speaking area, and sat in the doorway out into the hall. We have conducted this presentation over eight times in the last year and the response is always the same: "Wow. I really needed to hear that. Can I give this presentation to our faculty?"

This process has caused me to grow and to grow immensely. This is the story of a teacher who was burned out and wanted to quit. It is the story of a highly successful teacher who was so stressed that he wanted to hide. Instead, he decided to dig deep into how he grows as an English/Language Arts professional. This is the story of a teacher whose story, after 14 years in the profession, is just beginning.

"Why?" you may ask.

"Because it has to," is the reply. "I'm not finished writing it."

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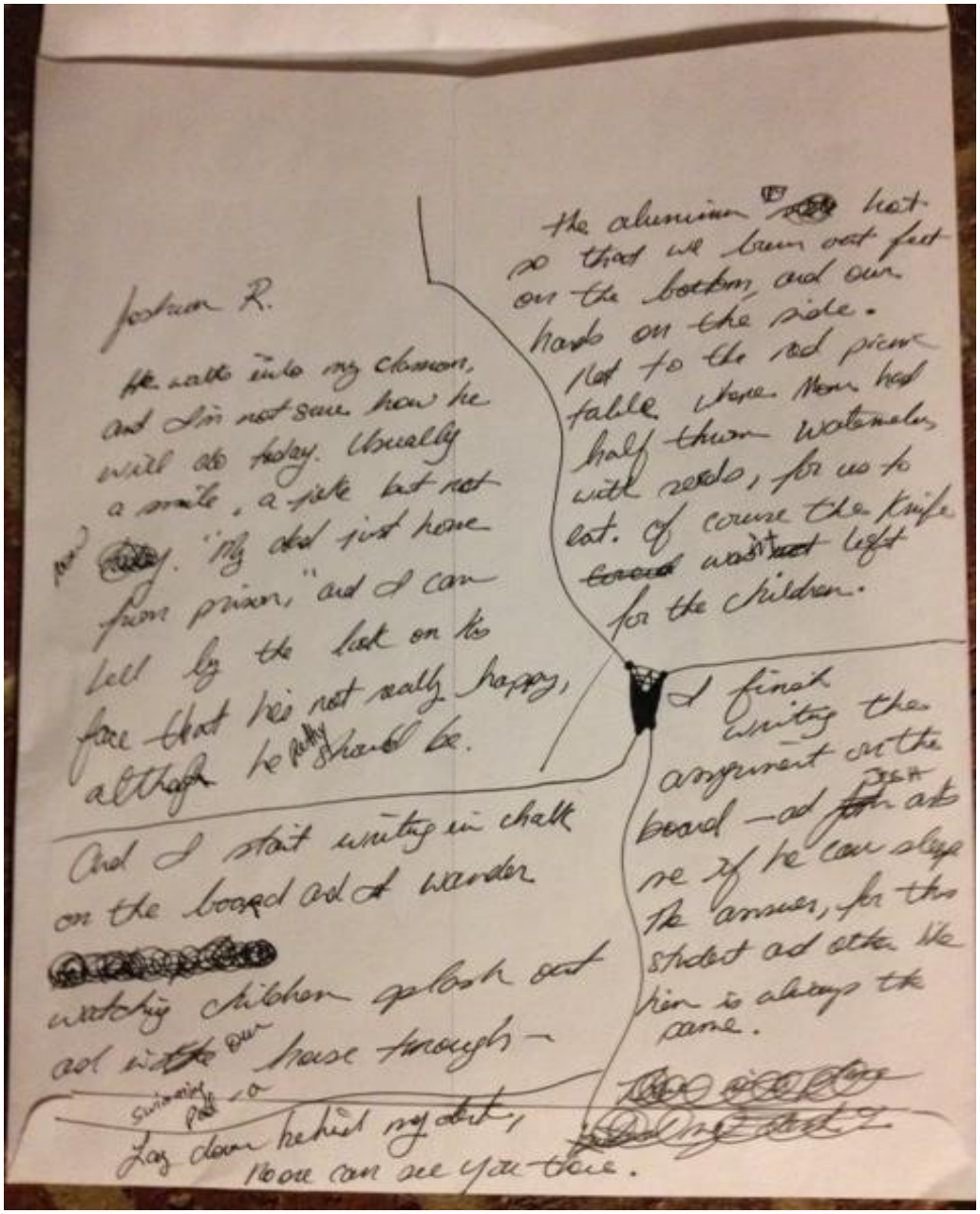
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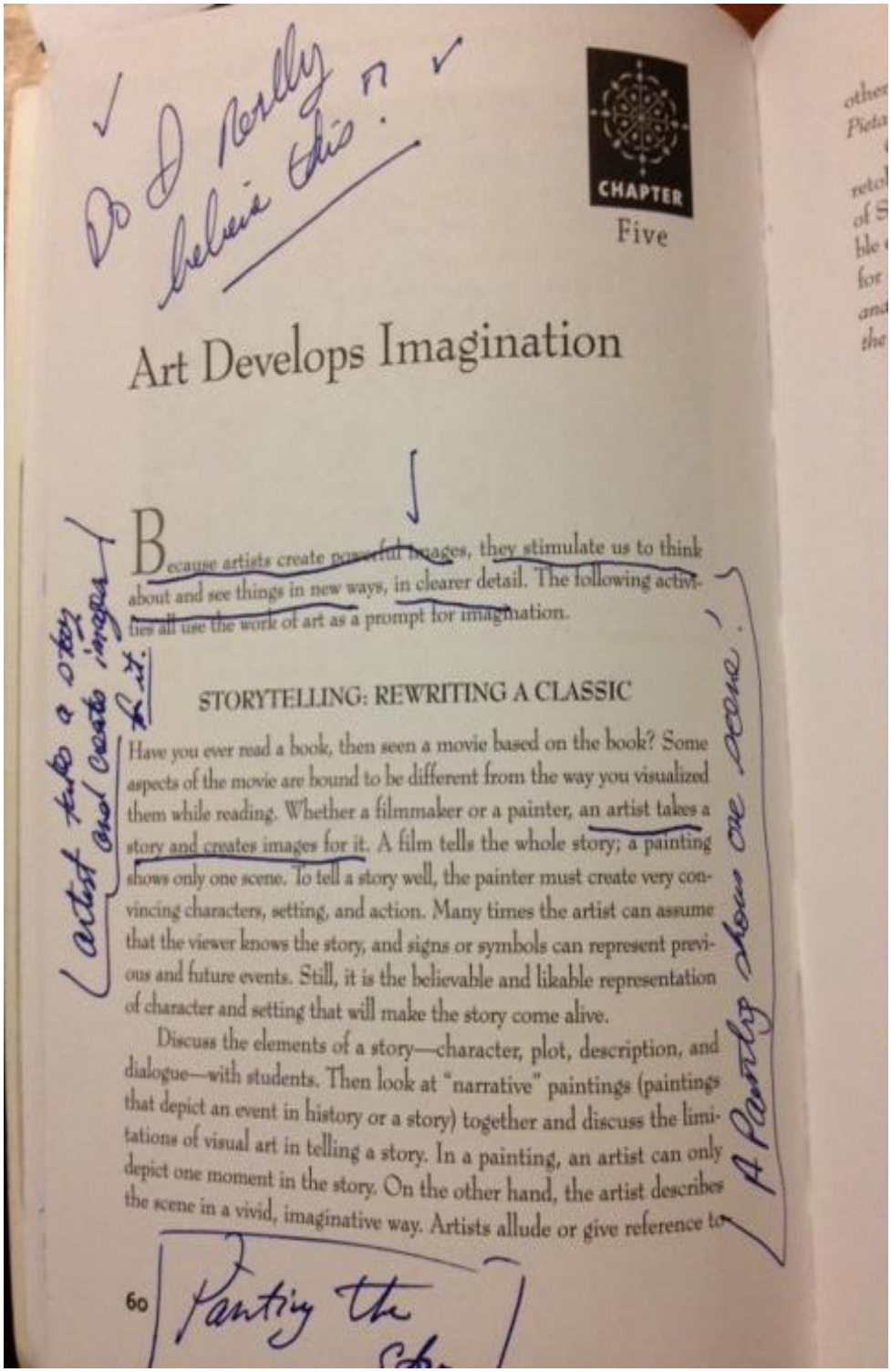
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APPENDIX I

These are examples from where I gathered my data.




The envelope on which I wrote the poem, *Joshua R.*



CHAPTER
Five

# Art Develops Imagination

Because artists create powerful images, they stimulate us to think about and see things in new ways, in clearer detail. The following activities all use the work of art as a prompt for imagination.

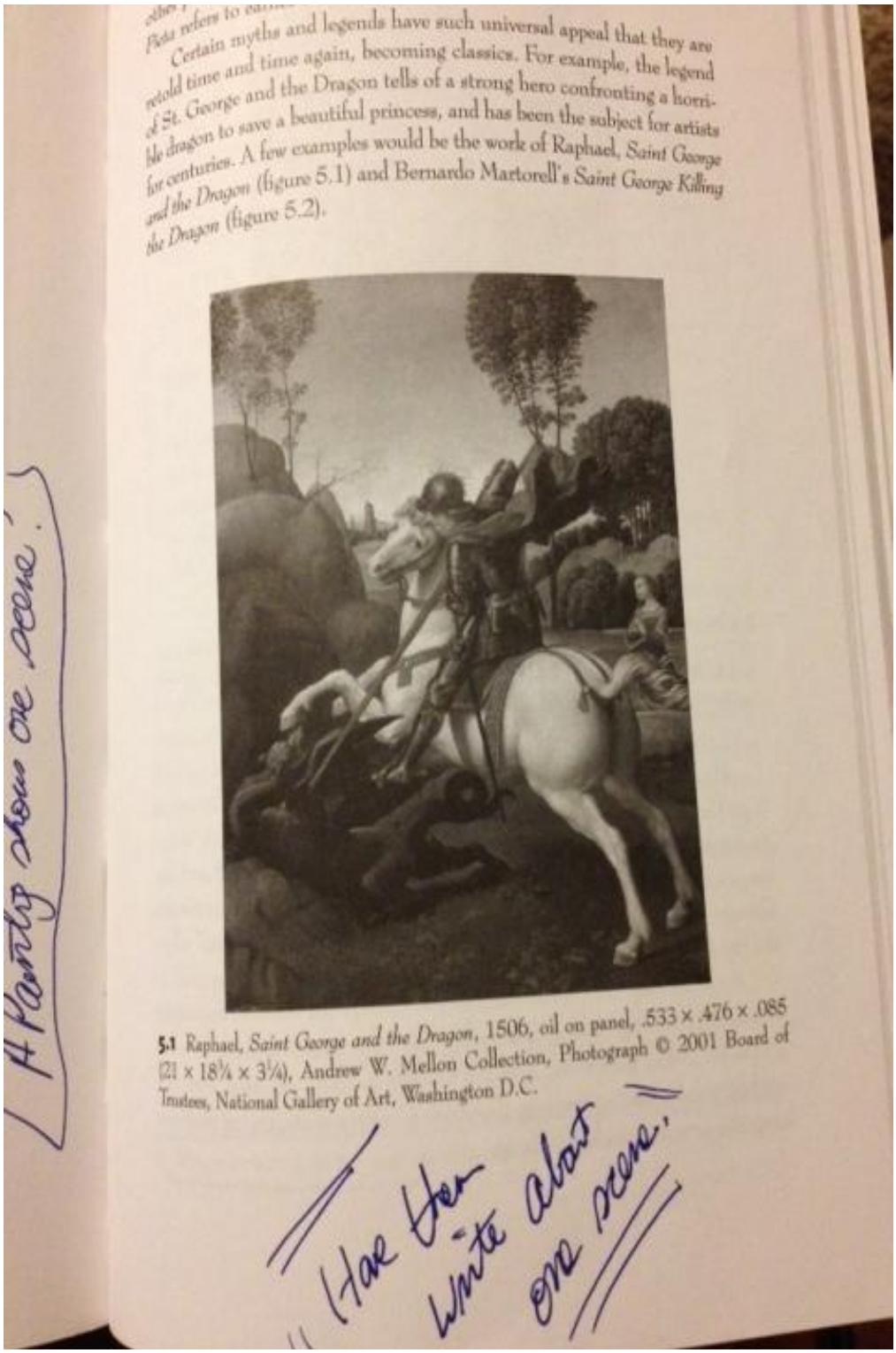
## STORYTELLING: REWRITING A CLASSIC

Have you ever read a book, then seen a movie based on the book? Some aspects of the movie are bound to be different from the way you visualized them while reading. Whether a filmmaker or a painter, an artist takes a story and creates images for it. A film tells the whole story; a painting shows only one scene. To tell a story well, the painter must create very convincing characters, setting, and action. Many times the artist can assume that the viewer knows the story, and signs or symbols can represent previous and future events. Still, it is the believable and likable representation of character and setting that will make the story come alive.

Discuss the elements of a story—character, plot, description, and dialogue—with students. Then look at "narrative" paintings (paintings that depict an event in history or a story) together and discuss the limitations of visual art in telling a story. In a painting, an artist can only depict one moment in the story. On the other hand, the artist describes the scene in a vivid, imaginative way. Artists allude or give reference to



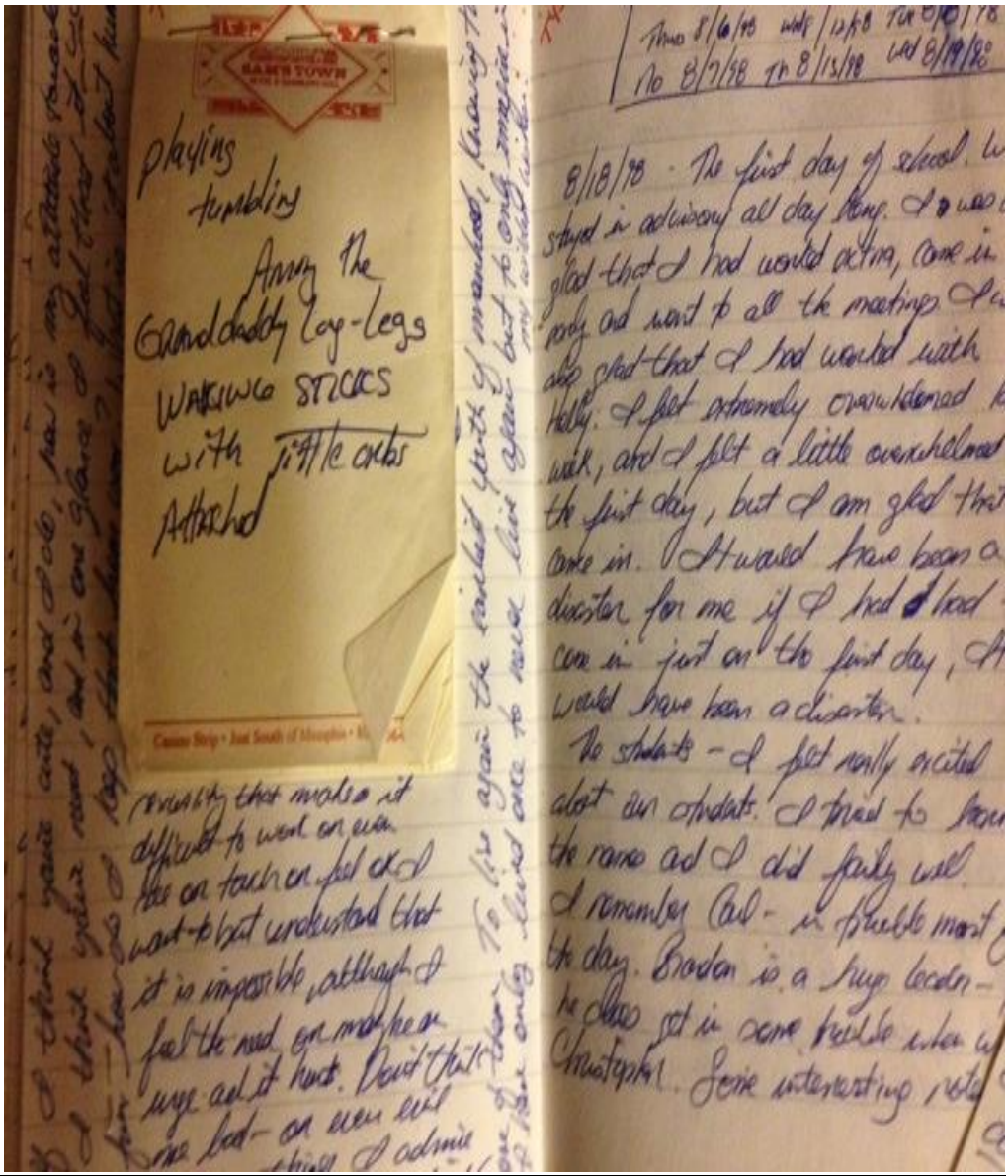
The wondering I did while reading a college text book. Notice the questions I asked at the top of the page.



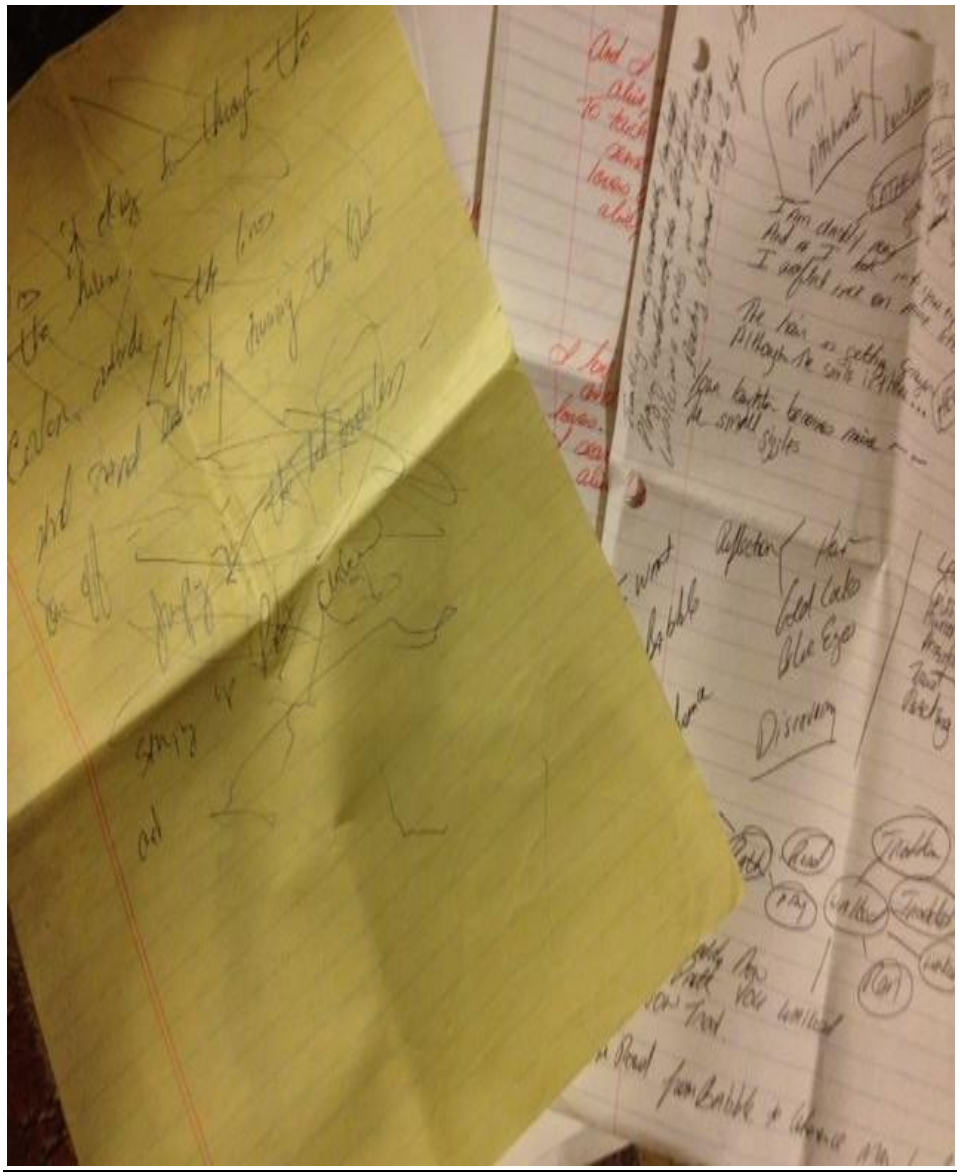
Certain myths and legends have such universal appeal that they are retold time and time again, becoming classics. For example, the legend of St. George and the Dragon tells of a strong hero confronting a horrible dragon to save a beautiful princess, and has been the subject for artists for centuries. A few examples would be the work of Raphael, *Saint George and the Dragon* (figure 5.1) and Bernardo Martorell's *Saint George Killing the Dragon* (figure 5.2).

**5.1** Raphael, *Saint George and the Dragon*, 1506, oil on panel, .533 × .476 × .085 (21 × 18¾ × 3¼), Andrew W. Mellon Collection, Photograph © 2001 Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

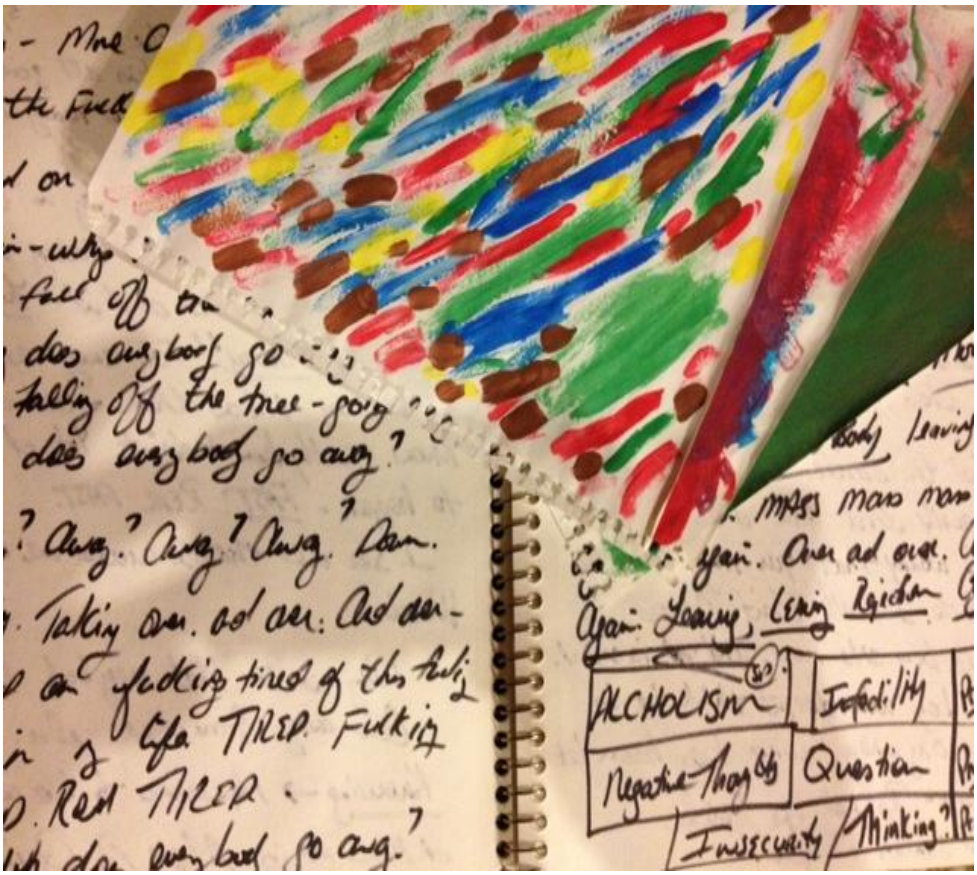
An example of finding teaching in my data. I actually utilized this idea in my classroom.




This is an example of poetry pieces and journal writing from one of my trips. Notice the wanderings in the upper right corner. The notepad is stapled inside the journal. It is from a casino in Tunica, Mississippi.



These are pieces of poetry written in different forms. Notice the graphic organizers and the scribbling. The graphic organizers are mine. This scribbling is from my son.

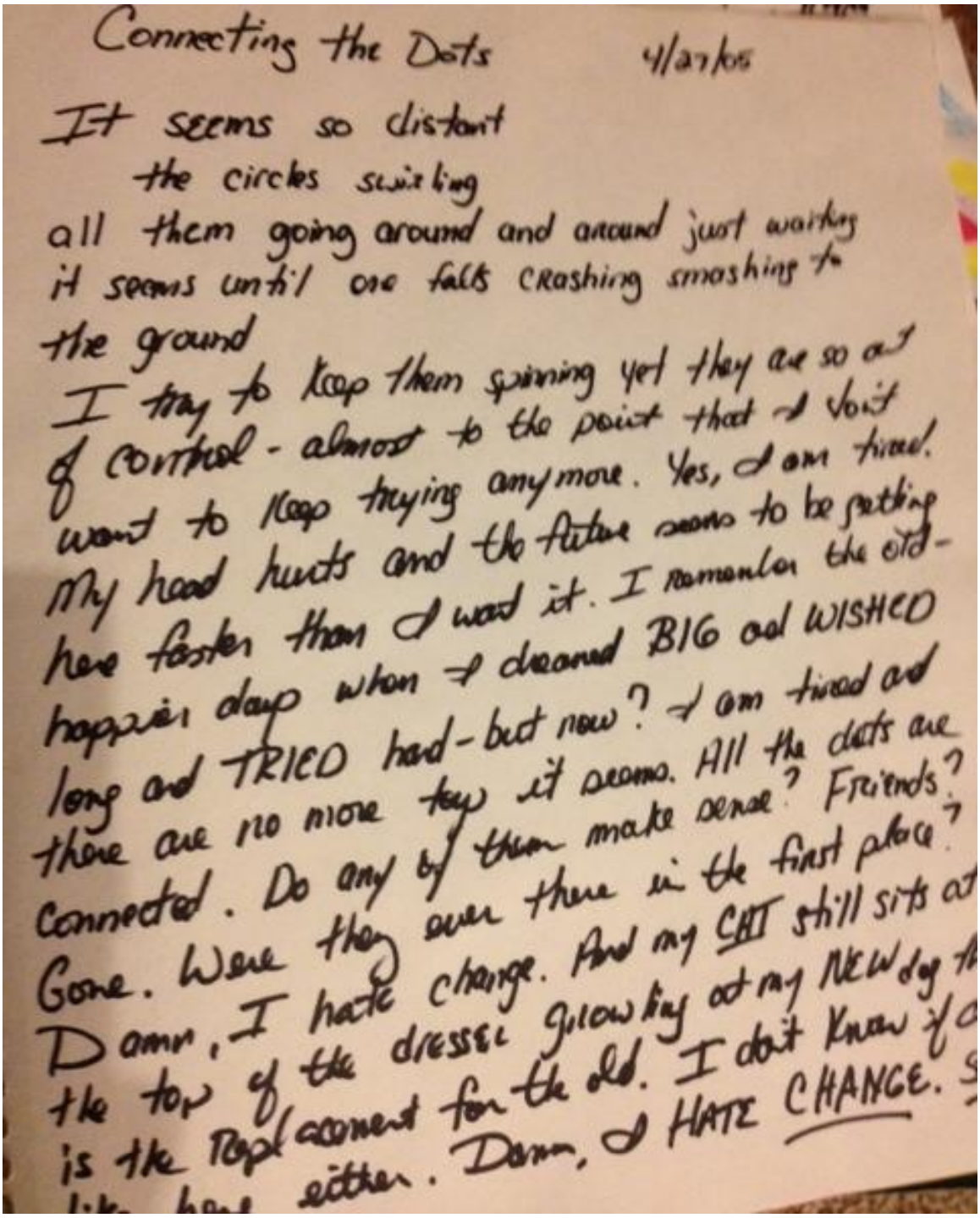



This is an example of free paintings and free writes from one of my journals. The free paints were just placed inside the journal. I love to write in Sharpie pens.

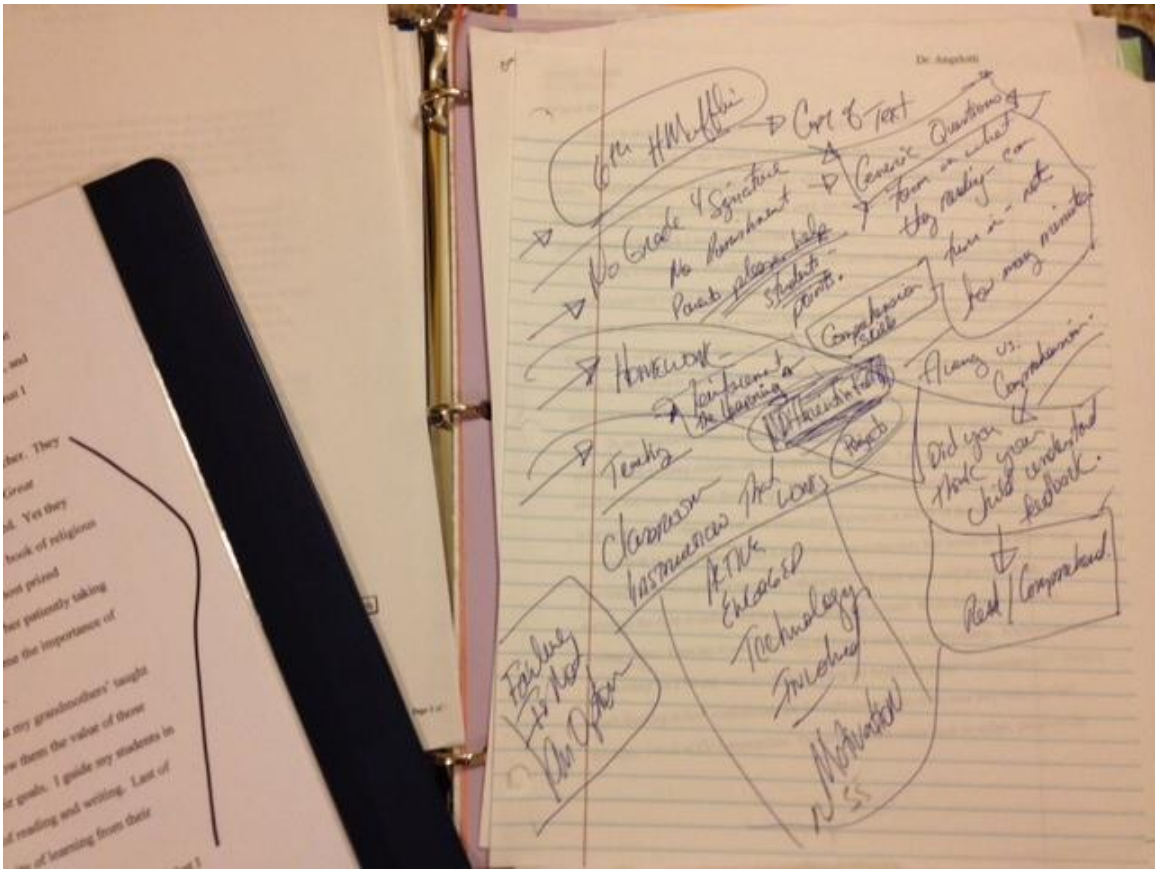
.




This is a reflective free paint I did during the Incubation stage.




This the freewrite over the previous free paint during the Incubation stage.




These are two notebooks where I found data.




This is just a few of the journals, etc. I analyzed.

# APPENDIX II

The following is a snapshot of the data that I collected from my notebooks and journals.

| Notebook | Raw Data |
|---|---|
| **A.15** | Professional growth |
| **A.20** | "I endeavor to be a professional." |
| **B.23** | "I believe that strong, positive professional development is essential for me stay relevant in my field." |
| **C.171** | Master's Degree in English Education |
| **F.1** | "Where do our questions come from?" |
| **F.1** | "Teachers with a research frame of mind are open, too, to exploring the surprises that pop up in our teaching lives."—Hubbard and Powers, p. 23. |
| **F.1** | "Questions are born from frustrations."—Hubbard and Powers. This is good, since I am very, very, very frustrated right now. Especially with myself as my curriculum and how I fit into the middle of it. They also define "tension" and how it applies to teacher research. I can feel the tension in my life, and I am hoping that this tension will allow me to discover a "good" research question. |
| **F.1** | "No questions are simple."—Slayton, 2/4/2003 |
| **H.1-2** | List of English Education history combined with my history |
| **H.3** | Rosenblatt |
| **H.3** | "And the even more important question is that how do I stop making literature a spectator sport and turn it into something that is meaningful to my students."—Slayton, Spring 2004 |
| **H.3** | "Certainly an impassioned response…don't lose it."—MA |
| **H.4** | As far back as spring 2004 I was questioning and wondering how to understand and reflect where I had come from in my professional and personal career. |
| **H.5** | "Finally, a justification for the things I love to do…I love to wander (and wonder) aimlessly through the stacks and pick and search for things as I find them. Making connections with things that I have never found before."—Slayton, 3/4/2003 |
| **M.1-24** | How do you engage students? |
| **q.11** | "Not philosophy versus practice, but Practice to Philosophy."—NH, 1/15/08 |
| **Q.28** | Social Learning Theory |
| **A.14** | "While teaching standards is my job, building relationships with children is our calling." |
| **A.14** | "children are partners" |

| | |
|---|---|
| **A.15** | "Teachers today can no longer stand in front of the class and expect children to absorb knowledge; in order for learning to occur, teachers must reach students by building boundaries through one-on-one relationships. |
| **E.10-11** | Students are not "empty vessels." When we look at it, they are practically full. 9/20/04 |
| **C.2** | Creativity class has helped me grow. "I am a completely different person because of it." |
| **Q.12** | "Mindless growth. The assumption that more is always better"—Dr. Neil Houser, 1/22/08 |
| **Q.28** | "We are connected to others…."—NH 1/22/08 |
| **A.20** | Professional Organizations |
| **C.167** | Professional Organizations |
| **A.21** | Mentor New Teachers |
| **G.35** | Discuss with colleagues about critical thinking. |
| **A.10** | "I feel that I am a successful educator because I model in the classroom the examples that the teachers in my life have given me." |
| **A.10** | Grandmothers |
| **A.10** | My own children have taught me that "it is difficult to be empathic towards children in a school setting unless you are being taught on a daily basis by your own children." |
| **H.6** | Having a strong background in English |
| **H.6** | Teachers |
| **B.17** | "I struggle with giving individual instruction and attention through a whole-class medium on a daily basis." |
| **B.22** | "No Child Left Behind Act." |
| **B.22** | Sixth Grade - Making sure students are successful all the way through |
| **Q.7** | some issues: disrespect, low pay, frustrated parents, administrators, NCLB, politics |
| **Q.9** | List of Issues from Groups in class. |
| **A** | Reflection |
| **B** | Reflection |
| **C** | Reflection |
| **C.175** | Reflection |
| **C.176** | Reflection |

| | |
|---|---|
| **E.13** | "I believe the concepts of deep thinking, reading, writing, listening, and seeing have allowed me to become a better person. I believe that each of these have to be perfected individually while integrating them as a whole in my life. This semester I have tried to integrate all of these in my life. I have done this successfully. The integration part is what will take a lifetime." |
| **E.16** | Deepness |
| **E.17** | Self-Actualization—"You mean to tell me it is okay to look at my life and work on it in a way to make it better? I have learned, again, that it is okay to be me and that I have the freedom to move in and out of the circles and areas of my life in any rate that I wish. I have relearned that it is okay that I don't make sense to others. In other words, I am me and that is okay." |
| **G.6** | "Be careful not to put too much into Pre-thinking. I do not want to taint the results."—MA 9/20/04 |
| **G.7** | "The beginning place is the pure act of free writing to see if it is improving the expression of thinking." MA 9/20/04 |
| **G.8** | "Demonstrating proven results of thinking. Free to express analytical ideas."—MA9/20/04 |
| **G.8** | "Other ways free writing can get them (you) to connect without being rigid."—MA 9/20/04 |
| **G.12** | "Can I encourage thinking by asking a question?"—MA 9/20/04 |
| **G.26-29** | Excellent example of growth in my teaching.—Slayton 10/8/04 |
| **G.31** | "Deeper in literacy? How are my students learning, what I am finding out. Stress how do my students see themselves as literate persons. What can I do to move beyond. What I am finding?" - Slayton 10/2004 – undated |
| **G.40** | "Think with your pencil."—Slayton 11/2004 |
| **G.44** | "Engagements with the Paper."—Slayton 11/2004 |
| **H.4** | Proposal for understanding who I was and where I was going in my professional and personal career. |
| **Q.12** | "Turning to yourself…looking at yourself. The problem can't be 'them.' Maybe I was not at the top of my game. Self-reflection gives moral authority. Authority is granted, it is not gained."—NH, 1/22/08 |
| **C159** | Teacher Leader/Language Arts Department Chair |
| **C163** | Climate Leadership Chair |
| **G.9** | Literacy |
| **G.31-43** | Thoughts on getting students to think and how do I get them to think. |

| | |
|---|---|
| **G.19** | My own literacy as a teacher |
| **G.31-33** | Literacy |
| **M. 1** | Literacy |
| **M. 1** | Build a professional network |
| **M.2** | Connecting to others |
| **M.3** | Mentors |
| **M.4** | Need time in processing/reflection |
| **M.5** | Patience |
| **M.6** | Develop Goals |
| **M.7** | Long Range Plan for Students |
| **M.8** | Creativity |
| **M.9** | The Idea of "Wander and Wonder" |
| **M.10** | Constructivist Approach |
| **M. 25** | "There is no limit to creativity."—Slayton, 9/30/02 |
| **M.30** | "Creativity, to me, is one of the most important things that we can impart to students in this world."—Slayton |
| **Q.32** | "Give along the way. Not going out with the purpose of getting. Your purpose is to give…to share…to give away. Your motive should be to give."—Dr. Neil Houser, 1/29/2008 |
| **Q.52** | "We are always becoming. The search is a life-search. Critical Understanding. To decide who you are and who you want to be." - Neil Houser, 2/23/2008 |
| **Q.55** | "Beliefs influence approaches."—NH, 2/19/2008 |
| **Q.59** | "What is philosophical thinking? It is deeper thinking." |
| **Q.59** | "Seeing through others eyes."—NH, 2/19/2008 |
| **Q.64** | Thinking—Transactional Analysis |
| **Q.66** | Transactional Theory—Hagel, Dewey, Rosenblatt |
| **Q** | Greene |
| **Q.91** | "What we teach isn't always what students learn."—NH, 3/11/2008 |
| **Q.92** | "Deep speaks to deep." |
| **Q.93** | "Students need to be on to something. How can we help students to be onto something?"—NH, 3/25/2008 |

| | |
|---|---|
| **Q.94** | Issues that we face according to Greene. |
| **Q.95** | "Finding our spiritual space." How? Where? Why? When?"—NH, 3/25/2008 |
| **U.18** | "Thinking about thinking." |
| **U.18** | "Teacher as intellectual, how foreign is this to popular thinking?"—MA, 9/11/02 |
| **U.18** | "Theory and practice are sometimes opposite." MA, 9/11/2002 |
| **U.20** | Myself as a literate person. 9/28/2002 |
| **U.21** | World and the Word |
| **U.26** | Critical thinking implies the possibility that you are open to another thought. |
| **U.31** | "You have to work out of your world."—MA, 9/25/2002 |
| **U.33** | "The concept is exciting, but the fact still remains that I must find a way to help my students grow into literacy. Personally, I must find a way to grow also."—Slayton, 10/9/2002 |
| **U.34** | Literacy Paper |
| **U.35** | "How am I thinking about my thinking? How I am thinking about my knowing?"—Slayton, 2002 |
| **U.35** | "Freire makes me ask more questions than I know to answer."—Slayton, 2002 |
| **U.36** | "I am so concerned that we don't allow our kids to be kids." – Slayton, Fall 2002 |
| **U.36** | "How do I discover what is important to my students?"—Slayton, Fall 2002 |
| **U.36** | "The question, then, is how do I allow my students the opportunity to take risks in an environment that makes it possible for them to carry on their reading and writing skills?"—Slayton, Fall 2002 |
| **U.37** | Nancie Atwell, "When teachers in school are allowed and encouraged to be thoughtful practitioners. When teachers ask questions about students' learning, observe in their classrooms, and make sense of their observations, schools become more thoughtful places."—Slayton, Fall 2002 |
| **U.37** | I have questions of how I would add excitement and passion to my classroom. |
| **U.38** | "Reading and writing should be learned at the same time."—Freire—Slayton Free write, Fall 2002 |
| **U.39** | I am trying to understand Freire—Slayton, Fall 2002 |
| **U.40** | "The field of literacy theory is more important than looking and looking again at the role of an awareness, of thinking about thinking, of interpreting our interpretations."—Anne Bethoff |

| | |
|---|---|
| **U.40** | "This statement moves literacy for me from being a study to the study of looking deep within. It is a very hard thing to be aware, or even be very aware of oneself."—Slayton, Fall 2002 |
| **U.40** | Learning from students. |
| **U.40** | "A deep mingling between their ideas and mine."—Slayton, Fall 2002 |
| **U.41** | Freire, "To shape history is to be present in it, not merely represented in it."—Slayton, Fall 2002 |
| **U.42** | "I struggle being literate." –Slayton, Fall 2002 |
| **U. 42** | "I am fascinated by the idea of creativity."—Slayton, Fall 2002 |
| **U.42** | Freire's idea of changing myself to changing the environment. —I want to change. Slayton, Fall 2002 |
| **U. 42** | "I have always struggled with being a literate person. But the key word, I believe, is that I do struggle."—Slayton, Fall 2002 |
| **U.44** | "I feel that I struggle as a literate person."—Slayton, Fall 2002 |
| **U.44** | "As an educator, I am looking for new ways to teach literacy to my middle school students."—Slayton, Fall 2002 |
| **U.44** | "I am wondering how I will put the ideas I have learned into my place into my classroom."—Slayton, Fall, 2002 |
| **U. 44** | "As our country moves more standardized testing, it is becoming more and more important to teach literacy."—Slayton, Fall 2002 |

| THEME | IDEA | BOOK/PAGE |
|---|---|---|
| Direct Teaching | Inclusion of All Students | A.17 |
| Direct Teaching | Meeting the Individual Needs of Students | A.18 |
| Direct Teaching | Professional Reflection/Student Relationships | B.17 |
| Direct Teaching | Pressing Need -- Individualization of Instruction | B.6 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Direct Teaching | Pressing Need -- Individualization of Instruction | B.6 |
| Direct Teaching | My Struggle with Meeting the Needs of Children | B.7 |
| Direct Teaching | Growing through Improving Teaching | B.7 |
| Direct Teaching | Students Become Partners in the Educational Experience | B.19 |
| Direct Teaching | Setting Boundaries with Students | B.19 |
| Direct Teaching | Implementation of Help for In The GAP Students | B.21-B.22 |
| Direct Teaching | Students as Empty Vessels | E.10-11 |
| Direct Teaching | Not Being a Bystander | J. 5 |
| Direct Teaching | Direct Teaching Instruction Planning | L.56 |
| Direct Teaching | Direct Teaching Instruction Planning | L.58 |
| Direct Teaching | Direct Teaching | L.78 |
| Direct Teaching | Direct Teaching | N.35 |
| Direct Teaching | Understanding my students | Q.38 |
| Direct Teaching | Teaching | Q.89 |
| Direct Teaching | Social Influences | U.12 |
| Direct Teaching | Life Project | X.30 |
| Direct Teaching | Utilizing What I've Learned | Y.106 |
| Direct Teaching | Teaching Students to Reflect | Y. 225 |
| Direct Teaching | High Expectations for Students | Y.230 |
| Direct Teaching-25 | Teaching v. Learning | Q.89 |

# APPENDIX III

ABC's of Influential People Who Have Shaped My Practices of Literacy

by Bonner Slayton on Wednesday, April 29, 2009 at 2:02pm

For this exercise, think about the people who have influenced your writing, reading, thinking, and speaking practices. Think of those who are writers, singers, authors, philosophers, politicians, academics, etc. who have help to shape who you are as a person who practices literacy every day. Be sure to include WHY you have added them to the list. This list is off the top of your head. You may add more later.

A-Alan Alda – growing up watching *MASH*, I was amazed at Alda's talent as an actor, writer, and director. What a great command of the English language.

B- Jon Bon Jovi – after so many years, he reinvents himself constantly as a writer and performer.

C- Jimmy Carter – for one who is considered one of our "worst" presidents, he has become my hero for picking himself up from failure. He writes daily. And he writes his own books. His collection of poetry is pretty good. His books on theology have helped me in my relationship with God.

D- Dolly Parton – a writer, a singer, a performer, a businesswomen, an actor. She does things with words in her own way, stays true to herself, and she has been successful for decades.

F- Paulo Freire – the fact that we should know the "world before the word" changed how I look at literacy and life.

G- Natalie Goldberg – the first time I had to do a free write I cried. Now, I teach how to use them to enhance learning.

J- Jesse Jackson – have you ever heard him give a sermon? He is unbelievable.

K- Katherine Hepburn – In the *African Queen* and *Bringing Up Baby*, she has a way of speaking the English language. I could listen to her read a grocery list and be amazed.

L- Gary Larson – *The Far Side* helped me see how words can make people actually think.

M- Anna Myers – her book, *Tulsa Burning*, is one that changed my life.

R- Rosalyn Carter – a book she co-authored with her husband changed my life and I still quote her today.

S- Sir Arthur Conan Doyle – the first real book that took me awhile to read. *The Hound of the Baskervilles* is still my favorite.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge – "In Xanadu did Kubla Khan/A stately pleasure-dome decree" Does poetry get any better?

T- Jessica Tandy – her performance in *Driving Miss Daisy* still brings fond memories.

W- Willa Cather – when I read Death Comes for the Archbishop, I actually felt like I was in the book, riding a horse looking at the landscape.

APPENDIX IV

# THE LIFE PORTFOLIO PROJECT

The reason why many people go nowhere in life is because they choose not to sit down and develop goals. This project is about SELF-EVALUATION. It is designed to help you determine where you are in your life, where you want to go, and how you will get there.

This project is messy. It is messy because our lives are messy. Understand that we will never get anywhere without taking the first step. You are to complete the following assignments and place them in a portfolio. This is a portfolio for you to keep, for you to reference as you determine the next steps in your life. It is due the FINAL DAY OF CLASS! And it will be graded in CLASS!
Here is what this will entail:

A. Cover Sheet
B. Table of Contents
C. Letter of Introduction (see my letter from first of year)
D. Resume'
E. List of GOALS that is broken down into long term goals (five + years) and short term goals. Your short term goals should help you meet your long term goals. The following areas must be included in your goals:
    a. HEALTH
    b. ACADEMIC
    c. CAREER
    d. FAMILY
    e. SPIRITUAL/ETHICS
    f. FINANCIAL
F. Your 16 Journal Entries
G. DREAM IDEAS—100 Separate Ideas that encompasses your dreams
H. Explanation of what you will do to meet your goals—in other words, how will you evaluate your progress.

# GOOD LUCK AND HAVE FUN!

*The Life Project*

Through the process of untangling my teaching career, I have found that A) choosing to grow professionally and personally has actually kept me in the teaching profession, B) my growth has taken shape in a variety of forms, from becoming a teacher-leader to attending national conferences to volunteering to serve on committees to developing personal mentors, and C) I have been able to modify what I have learned and have been able to teach them to my students to help them grow professionally and personally.

As I pondered how I could relate this concept to the teaching of English/Language Arts, I realized that many of my students were in the same place that I had been. There were looking for a way to grow in their lives. And since my professional and personal lives are so intertwined, it seemed to be a natural progression for me to share with my students my experience of growing and to find a way to help my students to grow professionally and personally too on a deeper level.

I had followed the same routine in teaching my middle school, high school, and college classes: I assigned a repertoire of paragraphs, papers, novels, non-fiction readings, and poetry. While I felt that these were appropriate, and that through them I made sure they were meeting state and national standards, I felt that my students were missing something. They needed a writing project that would improve their writing fluency while allowing them

an opportunity to develop short term and long term goals while exposing them to a genre that were not accustomed to.

I have always believed that building professional relationships with students was important. One thing that I noticed that was a large stress on my teaching life was that I saw so many students leave my classes with little or no direction in their lives. While I was seeing improvement in their academics and in their writing, I was overwhelmed with the number of students who were seeking direction in their lives—looking for direction. What I found was that I was spending more and more time in class and out of class working with students to help them develop a personal plan. What I developed based on my research and from this project was that my students needed a way to develop personal goals, improve their writing skills, and ways to express themselves.

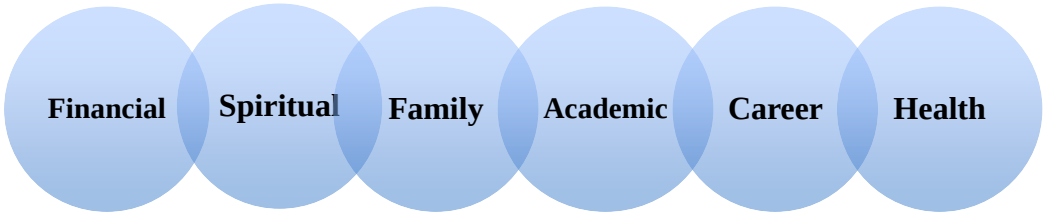
Students in my college classes (it is modified for middle school and high school classes) are given an assignment for the Life Project the first day of class. It is considered their final and it due the last day of class. Students are told they will not be able to complete the class without completing the project. It includes the following components:

**Illustration 24: Components of the LIFE Project**



The heart of the project is the idea that students are expected to develop goals in six areas. A GOAL statement for each of the following that is broken down into long term goals (five + years) and short term goals:

**Illustration 25. Six Goal Areas for the Life Project**




The responses that students have included in their life projects when it pertains to their goals vary. A middle aged woman might write about her health goals like this, “In the short term, I would like to start exercising and in the long term, I would like lose 30 lbs.” A 21 year old Black man might write about his academic goals by stating, “Since I am the first person in my family to go to college, I know how important it is to go to school. I want more for my children; therefore, I want to work hard and finish my degree.” A 50 year old African American woman might write about her career goals, “I have owed my own daycare for 20 years, and now that my children are raised, I feel like I need to go back to college and finish my education.”

When asked to write about his family goals, an 18 year-old white student might write the following statement, “Although I’m not married, and I don’t have a girlfriend, I know that I have a lot of things to do before I find the right girl and get married. I want to be the best man I can be for my wife. Family to me is everything.” “I was raised in a strict religious house and it was hard growing up gay in a church where it wasn’t acceptable. I am a Christian, but I want to find a church that will accepts gays.” When writing about financial goals, a 28 year Mexican-American in the United States Navy wrote the following: “The reason most people don’t meet their financial goals is because they don’t write their financial goals down. The first thing me and my wife will do is to open a savings account and promise to never go into debt.”

In the years that I have been asking students to complete a Life Project as their final, I have had students ask me to recommend a church home, given three women numbers to a woman’s resource center, and suggested students make appointments with contacts I have in the business community.

In addition to the developing goals, I ask students to free write over 16 different poems. They include the following:

**Illustration 26. List of Poems/Works for Life Project.**




The responses that I receive from students on these poems are varied. I have had several students who have never really written about their thoughts on poems before they receive this project. Semester after semester I hear students complain about how much they do not like poetry, and semester after semester I

hear these same students tell me and write to me that they enjoyed poetry after completing this project. I recall one conversation that went something like this:

"Mr. Slayton, I hate this project."

"Really, Sam? Hate is such a strong word"

"I spoke to my priest about you this past weekend."

"Really? What did the priest have to say?"

"She told me to get over it, get it done, and that it was good for me."

"I really, really like your priest, Sam! I think you should continue to go to church every Sunday!"

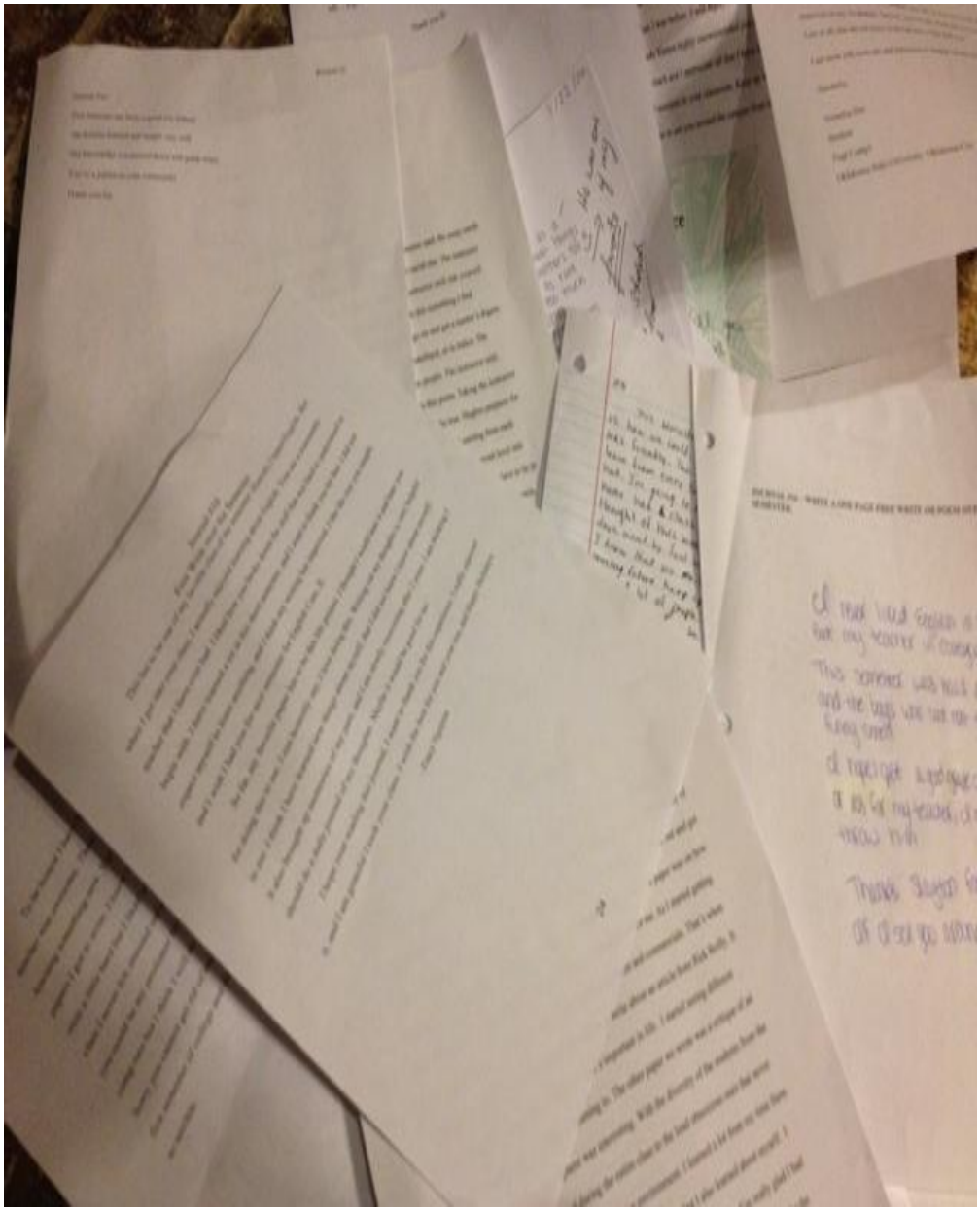
Sam complained throughout the entire semester about how he hated poetry, didn't want to write about poetry, couldn't stand poetry, etc. When he met for his final interview and handed in the Life Project, he informed me that while he had complained the entire time, he really enjoyed it and he had learned much from the process. In addition, he had written several poems himself for the process. Every semester when I have students turn in their projects, I have students who cry, who give me a hug, who explain that the project was the hardest thing they had every completed. In the years that I have been completing this project with my students, I have had only one student who didn't complete the project in some form or fashion.

I have tried to select poems that would help students do three things. First, I want them to improve the fluency in their writing skills. I have found that too many of my students have difficulty in keep their pens moving during the writing process. Second, I have found that many of them do not have much

experience in reading, working, and analyzing poetry. The poems were chosen to give students a variety of poems from which to work. Included in the mix of poems are British poets, American poets, country song lyrics, a poem from a Native American, and even a former United States president.

At the beginning of the semester I spend much time explaining the concepts of Rosenblatt's transactional analysis and Beach and Marshall's ideas of understanding a text. Students seem less intimidated when they are given permission from a teacher to put what they are actually thinking about a piece of literature on paper.

Throughout the years, I have so many students tell me how much they appreciate the fact that they were given time to develop goals and to respond to poetry in this format.



These are just a few of the unsolicited letters, notes, and pages I've received stating how the Life Project has helped students grow in their writing and their life.