Unfolding the Unexpectedness of Uncertainty
Creative Nonfiction and the Lives of Becoming Teachers
Anita Sinner

Unfolding the Unexpectedness of Uncertainty invites readers to share in the stories of Ruth, Ann and Nathalie as they transition from students to teachers. Rendering their experiences as short stories from the field of teacher education brings a dimension of social biography to scholarship. As creative nonfiction, these stories act as catalysts to understand teacher culture from first-person accounts. Their stories may be described as openings: Ruth’s unfolding; Ann’s unexpectedness; and Nathalie’s uncertainty. Such narratives are exemplars of arts research, extending the purpose, intent, outcomes and dissemination of research by making scholarly study a more intimate and personal experience through the lives of student-teachers. Entering research practices with a perspective that stories are effective teaching tools that represent cultural artefacts, these stories help make sense of practices in public schools and in postsecondary teacher training, and help students, teachers and teacher educators to better understand the operations of the educational system. Unfolding the Unexpectedness of Uncertainty can be used as case studies for undergraduate and graduate students and academic researchers in fields of study involving creative nonfiction and life writing, such as Education, Creative Writing, English, Women’s Studies, Social and Cultural Geography, Sociology and Integrated Studies.

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Cover art by Ruth, Ann and Nathalie.
The *Social Fictions* series emerges out of the arts-based research movement. The series includes full-length fiction books that are informed by social research but written in a literary/artistic form (novels, plays, and short story collections). Believing there is much to learn through fiction, the series only includes works written entirely in the literary medium adapted. Each book includes an academic introduction that explains the research and teaching that informs the book as well as how the book can be used in college courses. The books are underscored with social science or other scholarly perspectives and intended to be relevant to the lives of college students—to tap into important issues in the unique ways that artistic or literary forms can.

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Unfolding the Unexpectedness of Uncertainty

*Creative Nonfiction and the Lives of Becoming Teachers*

By

Anita Sinner
*Concordia University, Montreal, Canada*
DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to the storytellers in my life:

To Mike, for all the years of laughter;
To Renate and Joseph, for making the past real;
To Chris, for always crafting a good tale;
To Sylvia, for the imaginative possibilities.

Thank you for inspiring my journey.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements....................................................................................... ix  
Foreword, Carl Leggo.................................................................................... xi  
Introduction: Creative Nonfiction as a Method of Inquiry......................... 1  
  Creative nonfiction as arts research......................................................... 2  
Chapter 1: Unfolding – Ruth’s Story.......................................................... 13  
  I’m going to build a bridge................................................................. 13  
  If you fail to plan, you plan to fail....................................................... 18  
  Walking over the bridge................................................................. 20  
  I am the paintbrush................................................................. 27  
  The long practicum went really well.................................................... 29  
  There’s a new bridge to cross......................................................... 33  
Chapter 2: Unexpectedness – Ann’s Story.................................................. 39  
  It runs in my blood................................................................. 39  
  I just felt like I was going to a residential school or something..... 45  
  I’ve always been an activist-type person........................................ 50  
  I found myself in a place I visited often.......................................... 52  
  I just swallow hard................................................................. 55  
  I want to try new things and experiment....................................... 58  
  I had to be a root of care to the tree of unhappiness that lived in the classroom................................................................. 60  
  I hope to open their eyes................................................................. 63  
Chapter 3: Uncertainty – Nathalie’s Story...................................................... 65  
  I have no real expectations of this program.................................... 65  
  She wants to be the ‘cool teacher’.................................................... 68  
  I was so invisible................................................................. 71  
  I felt like I was overreacting a little bit............................................. 77  
  I have to be a good role model....................................................... 81  
  It feels good so far........................................................................... 84
CONTENTS

A game of dramatic hats ................................................................. 85
My challenge was to focus on the positive ................................. 90
Becoming a good teacher ........................................................... 94

Afterword, Erika Hasebe-Ludt .................................................. 99

Biography .................................................................................. 103
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To Ruth, Ann and Nathalie, our teachers of tomorrow, I salute you.

I would like to extend my heartfelt appreciation to Carl Leggo and Erika Hasebe-Ludt, dear mentors and friends, for their commitment to the importance of stories, and to Patricia Leavy for her vision to make this book series possible.

I wish to express my gratitude to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for support of this research.

Some of this book has been reprinted with permission from previously published articles in the following peer-reviewed journals:


While reading Anita Sinner’s *Unfolding the Unexpectedness of Uncertainty*, I often felt like I was viewing a documentary of beginning teachers’ stories that were familiar, even haunting. I have been in school all my life. At fifty-nine years old, I definitely feel old (practically worn out), but with age I also feel a measure of sagacity. My wife Lana (who has loved me a very long time) gladly notes my sage age. Perhaps I am like an aged whiskey or a leather jacket that has worn into a supple, sturdy comfort. The stories of Ruth, Ann and Nathalie remind me that I was once young, once at the beginning of a teaching career. Reading their stories, I resonate with each of them, with their joys, hopes, fears, and frustrations. And, above all, I remember my stories. When we tell stories, we learn to lean on one another, learn to lean into the lines that support, even suspend us like braided ropes that help us walk in the heart’s light.

Like all her artistic and scholarly and pedagogical convictions, Anita is committed to creative nonfiction as a way of inquiring and knowing because creative nonfiction is located in the stories of daily experience, rendered with thoughtful care for aesthetics and ethics. I have known Anita a long time. She is a constant blessing in my life, a companion who has walked with me in many journeys. The lovely word *companion* is etymologically connected to the Latin *cum pane*
or *with bread*. We have enjoyed bread together (never more than in Montreal with a legendary smoked meat sandwich). Actually, we have worked so closely together, it is like we have made bread together, kneaded the dough, sprinkled in the yeast, waited for it to bake. And how appropriate it is to reflect on the action of *making* and *kneading*. The word *fiction* is derived from a Latin word *fingere*, *to make or to form*, even like kneading and shaping clay or dough to create something new. Anita is an extraordinary artist and researcher and teacher who calls together stories and renders them with careful creativity so others can hear the lyrical rhythms of the heart in all our stories.

In some ways creative nonfiction might seem like an oxymoron or a redundant phrase. Isn’t all writing creative? Isn’t all writing fiction? Isn’t nonfiction really another fiction clinging to contested claims of reality? These are questions I have lingered with a long time, and I anticipate that I will continue to linger much longer. Anita promotes creative nonfiction because she loves people. Integral to all Anita’s research is inviting, encouraging, and sustaining the voices of others, especially the voices of others who can be too easily forgotten or ignored, others who have been silenced. So, while I can argue about the etymology and experience of fiction, I happily acknowledge how Anita uses creative nonfiction in order to promote research and writing that are rooted in the earth, the humus that connects all of us in an inextricable tangle of stories that know no beginning and ending. Our stories begin with etcetera, and they end with etcetera.

Anita lives in the fecund possibilities of prefixes. She does not attempt to fix anything. In *Unfolding the Unexpectedness of Uncertainty*, Anita lingers with the prefix *un*, the most prolific prefix in English, because *un* does not only denote negation—it also connotes otherness and difference. To add *un* to a word is to turn the
original word with a sharp twist that compels us to see the original word anew, with startled eyes, with possibilities for wonder.

5

Anita, Nathalie, Ann, and Ruth remind us that story is a way (if I were bolder, I might write the way; but I am always concerned about fundamentalist claims that leave no room for fun) for understanding our world, for standing in words in the world, for standing in relationship to one another with prepositional possibilities beyond counting. As human beings we are human be-com-ings. By wondering and wandering in stories, we become, uniquely and idiosyncratically, communally and corporately.

6

What I enjoy most in the stories of Ann, Ruth, and Nathalie is how they acknowledge, even embrace, uncertainty. So much curriculum and pedagogy has been constructed and constrained in a relentlessly rigorous march to the place of certainty where discernment is no longer needed because everything we need to know is already known. If we can just determine how the brain functions and how learners learn, then we can determine how to organize effective and efficient education. If we can determine how to manage both rule-constrained and unruly students and how to evaluate their learning and how to decide what is important to know and what is less important, then we can organize schooling and teacher education and art education. Of course, in the course of all that efficient organization, we will have missed how education is wandering and wondering in uncertainty, in mystery, in the volcanic and vorticular heart of the whirling world we hardly know.

7

As Ruth, Ann and Nathalie unfold their experiences, they compose other folds. Like a North Atlantic wind in January will shape snow in an always mutable chaos with only a tentative cosmos, Ann, Ruth,
and Nathalie know their stories are always changing, always wandering full of wonder. Nathalie, Ann, and Ruth are negotiating emergent identities as teachers, holding fast to the past identities of artists, wondering if these identities, named separately, will find interstices of dynamic connection or will find the chasm that renders chaos so chronically fearful. And, happily, by navigating the twists and turns, the detours and diversions, of their year in teacher education, they find their stories constructed in the crosswise arrangement of chiasmus where every step forward is repeated in reverse order, so teacher education is about teaching teachers as well as teachers teaching, always becoming.

8

Art is prophetic and passionate. Art infuses the art educator’s spirit with a precarious poise and a capacious conviction for living into the pedagogy of (im)possibility. Art educators learn to live their curriculum. They learn to become their curriculum.

9

*Unfolding the Unexpectedness of Uncertainty* folds and unfolds the unexpectedness of uncertainty, the expectedness of uncertainty, the unexpectedness of certainty, and the expectedness of certainty, so the only certainty is uncertainty, and the only expectedness is unexpectedness. In the end, as in the beginning, the teacher wanders and wonders, creating stories with attention and intention. And with those stories, teacher initiation, teacher identity, and teacher inquiry are all expanded and transformed as experiences are narrated from inside the classrooms, the imaginations, the hearts of artists who are becoming teachers, fired by the arts to create new possibilities for teaching and learning.

10

As a poet I like to leave poems, seldom sure anyone will want to attend to them. I offer the poems in a kind of silent benediction, an offering that expects no reciprocity, an offering of hope for words
and creativity and stories and communication, invitations for communion, love notes because the heart is called to the art of pedagogy, filled with love. So, I conclude these gestures toward a foreword with a poem about growing old, recognizing joy, and becoming ….

Smiley

at fifty-nine
I have finally
  caught up
with the smiling face
of the 70s iconic,
    perhaps ironic,
certainly ubiquitous
wide-eyed Greek
comic mask, once
long ago, pinned
to my bedroom wall

the mask first born
in 1953, my year too

*I am happy
  I am having a nice day*

when young,
Lana asked me
  often
if I would ever
be happy

  after years
of grumpy responses
she stopped asking
now I am old
with enough aches
& brokenness

to remind me
constantly
my biological
& chronological
sixty is just
around the corner

& knowing so
many who had
no chance
to turn the corner

I am happy
I am having a nice day

like a tightrope walk
on the braided threads
of the heart’s light
I walk the curriculum
of delight
with a precarious poise
between emotions
& emoticons
Forrest Gump’s muddy face
& Wal-Mart’s sales job

conscious
conscientious
even conscientized

still unfolding
the unexpectedness
of uncertainty
in stories shaped
in the lines of lives
becoming teachers

Thank you, Ruth, Ann and Nathalie, for your stories, full of hope and conviction, and thank you, Anita, for your commitment to hearing the heart of others’ stories and rendering the stories with artful care so we know ourselves in relationship and in process.
INTRODUCTION

CREATIVE NONFICTION AS A METHOD OF INQUIRY

As an expression of arts research, this book explores the lived experiences of three women, Ruth, Ann and Nathalie (pseudonyms), as they became art teachers over the course of their certification year. Rendering their experiences as short stories from the field of teacher education brings a social research dimension to scholarship through the literary form of creative nonfiction, in which stories act as catalysts to understand teacher culture from first-person accounts (Ellis, 2002; Richardson, 1994).

I engage Ruth, Ann and Nathalie as research partners, not participants, during this journey. Their stories may be described as openings: Ruth’s unfolding; Ann’s unexpectedness; and Nathalie’s uncertainty. It is my intention that their stories stand as exemplars of arts research, and as an invitation to readers to consider multiple readings, understandings and writings of these narratives rather than closing stories to static interpretations. By attending to social biography in ways that extend the purpose, intent, outcomes and dissemination of research, these stories serve as a means to express and make accessible scholarly study that invites a more intimate connectivity to students becoming teachers and to teacher educators. This scholarly work also expands Genette’s (1997) conceptualisation of the ébauche, or underpainting of research, by demonstrating two core commitments to readers of this book. Firstly, these stories bring forward transdisciplinary openings (Leavy, 2011) for undergraduate and graduate students and academic researchers in fields of study involving creative nonfiction and life writing, with primary interest in Education, Creative Writing, English, Women’s Studies, Social and Cultural Geography, Sociology and Integrated Studies. Secondly, these stories are collectively offered as exemplars of customary methodological practices that are part of shifting post-post paradigms already underway, making the medium of stories a resource for scholars interested in exploring arts research methods in the academy today.
CREATIVE NONFICTION

Written in accessible language, this book invites a broad readership by documenting and describing the lived experiences of students entering a professional practice. In this way, this book offers educative value to schools and community-based educators, policymakers, curriculum designers and researchers as well as audiences beyond the academy.

Creative nonfiction as arts research

Creative nonfiction is a hybrid approach that is somewhat controversial in the academy, blurring traditional methods of dissemination in an effort to better communicate the educational significance of research. The application of the literary form of creative nonfiction, which renders facts and events (content) with the conventions of fiction writing (form) – including narrative voice, persona, authentic characterisation of place and settings, and pursuit of an idea or goal – is an emerging genre of life writing in both qualitative and arts research discourses (Hasebe-Ludt, 2010). Creative nonfiction begins with transdisciplinary perspectives on the constructs and practices of expressing self in a broader social community, and it is within this conversation that I enter each story. According to Leggo (2008), through the “principal dynamics” of storying (what happened), discourse (the form and construction of the story) and interpretation (how the story is understood), “fragments of experience” are shaped in ways that “remind us that there is significance in the moment, in the particular, in the mundane” (pp. 3, 7). In this case, the narrative development was, as Britzman (2007) suggests, “uneven” and at times “out of joint,” which was “made stranger by the postmodern university where teacher education occurs” (p. 1). Storying experience focuses on layers within the social geography of teacher education that attend to “moral” dimensions of teaching, and make becoming a teacher more “visible” (Estola, 2003, p. 182). Creative nonfiction thus provides a medium and method through which to reveal practices within the current situation of teacher education, and at the same time provides a means to push the boundaries of the profession. For Ruth, Ann and
Nathalie, the transformative process of becoming a teacher required a continual reinterpreting of self in relation to teacher culture, and through the development of narratives, their stories open spaces that may have otherwise remained hidden or unrecognised. According to Tilden (2004), creative nonfiction is “grounded in the profusion of everyday life” and it is always “written against loss” where stories are “eccentric and centric...in the sense of deviation from the expected, the idealised master-story – and also in the sense of generation from and reference to a common cultural place” (pp. 708, 709). My approach echoes distinctive perspectives (Richardson, 2000), critical storytelling (Barone, 2000), and narrative experiments (Gough, 2003), all innovative modes of inquiry that bring creative forms of writing to educational studies, extending life writing as both a literary genre and a method of inquiry (Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers & Leggo, 2009).

Creative nonfiction invites debate about how becoming teachers write their own life stories as a means to actively inform professional development and program delivery. Entering research practices with a perspective that stories are effective teaching tools that represent cultural artefacts, I regard creative nonfiction as an artful way of knowing, moving understandings from identifying research partners objectively as students to more caring and subjective identification as individuals experiencing a series of momentous, life-changing events (Witherell & Noddings, 1991). Stories begin with personal experiences, where emotions are entry points to discerning the meaning of encounters reported by Ruth, Ann and Nathalie. Such storytelling requires trustworthy characters establishing distinct points of view that appeal to the reader’s emotions in an effort to make sense of experiences in public schools as student-teachers and in postsecondary teacher training. By engaging with their lived experiences, I considered how their stories rupture research in ways that traditional approaches might not, and how through such expression, social research illuminates aspects of becoming a teacher that generate the power of that moment in their lives. Because pre-service teachers move through multiple learning communities during teacher education programs, they emerged as authentic insiders, sharing situated knowledge to guide the future of
teacher education by drawing attention to internal shifts underway in professional practice. It is incumbent on researchers concerned with the nature of teaching to listen to and respond to those who are living the experience to ensure the profession and the field of study remain robust. Although pre-service teacher education is a well-established area of study with a host of themes defining inquiry, creative nonfiction draws attention to the tensions, challenges and in-betweeness that emerge when negotiating new definitions of self within the constructs in teacher education.

Establishing storytelling as a method of inquiry that does not conform to dominant theories or genres creates conditions to reconsider, rethink and redefine how information is understood and what knowing should be at the forefront in scholarship as a means to move toward greater social, political and intellectual consciousness. It may be argued too that employing creative nonfiction as a researcher involves risk-taking, for as Sachs (2010) suggests, when “writing against the formula” of the academic “fetishization” of objectivity, there is often a “wait until tenure” approach “to write the way we want to” (p. 7). I appreciate alternate methodologies and methods like creative nonfiction attract advocates and critics, and I am left reflecting on the importance of disseminating such work as research, given entrenched locations of power within the academy. I am reminded of Lynn Raphael Reed’s writing: “I can feel the gaze of authoritative discourse on my shoulder in disapproval of the venture, and I am reminded to be cautious about revelation” (Reed in Francis & Skelton, 2001, p. 79). In turn, Gallagher (2011) argues that “storytelling is centrally important to educational research,” bringing “a partial and intersubjective critical experience” forward as students seek a sense of belonging to the teaching profession (p. 49). Mindful of these considerations, I realized early on that this study required my engagement in literary arts to understand the lived experiences of visual art students. At the outset it was clear Ruth, Ann and Nathalie were actively storying experience through a variety of artful mediums available to them. So extensive was the act of storying, I felt remiss to impose my research leanings onto this study, and instead followed the lead of my partners to customize my approach accordingly. Adopting a literary perspective, I immersed myself in
the practices of writing, experimenting with different modes of expression. Yet in creating narratives of becoming, I followed a process similar to visual composition: selecting a series of elements in particular ways to convey meaning-making to an audience. Stories were composed collaboratively by blending elements of conversations, emails, reflections, as well as hundreds of pages of transcripts from over fifty interviews and a significant archive of artworks they had produced during their teacher education program. From multiple sources, words were copied verbatim to retain each partner’s voice in a process of selecting experiences that resonated most strongly for them. By investigating and documenting creative nonfiction as life writing, and exploring the significance of this approach for teacher educators, teacher stories double as a pedagogic act and as intertexts of identity and place (Barthes, 1977; Gough, 1994; Chambers, Hasebe-Ludt, Leggo & Sinner, 2012). In this way, I recognize creative nonfiction is a responsive and fluid literary genre where the contexts of everyday stories are not singular events but a form of relational interactivity, thereby affirming that storying has a critical role to perform in conveying intimate understandings of the lived experiences of teachers and at the same time serves as a forum for learning about becoming a teacher. This research framework extends to how creative nonfiction emerges as a medium that renders stories and accommodates and inspires diverse ways of thinking about experience.

By mapping convergences between expressive language, research and the educational landscape, knowledge construction through creative nonfiction was a collective process between me and Ruth, Ann and Nathalie. As an arts researcher, my goal is to embrace the particularities of lived experiences that are evident through storying self, and our one-to-one meetings that began in early September set the tone for our evolving research relationships. I encouraged free interaction as a practice during the interviews, which generated what I describe as synergistic bonding in our conversations. I invited collaboration on every aspect, including selecting questions, transcript reviews and member checks of the written report. As partners they were encouraged to take control of segments of the writing, to remove any passages they felt were too
revealing or too personal. As a researcher, I sought to “avoid control” and to develop “a sense of connectedness” with partners in an “atmosphere in which women felt knowledgeable” (Reinharz, 1992, pp. 20, 25). I wanted partners to tell their stories their own way, so we met frequently in person, engaged in extensive dialogue and built solid working research relationships that sustained the project over a year, resulting in the quality, type and scope of information that informs this study.

In practice this was reinforced in everyday actions, for example, we routinely met in an available office, sometimes a classroom or a café. We shared tea, coffee and snacks, attending to our comfort during our conversations. Our meetings were social encounters, planned for an hour, but frequently extending to two or three hours. We spoke with great ease, and as an active listener I reciprocated, sharing my personal experiences in self-disclosure. Yet sometimes during our conversations I wondered, could I really gauge how they felt in a particular moment in time?

I was equally conscious that my decisions and actions in the course of our meetings were consequential. From the outset I transcribed our audio-recorded conversations, and sent transcripts to the individual partners for review in a process which continued until the completion of the study. Transcribing our conversations was exhaustive but vital in analysing data while collecting data. The experience of transcribing allowed me to relive the conversations, to hear specificities in life stories and segues of experiences that were emerging in varied forms but linking together across conversational time. The more I listened while writing out their words, the more linkages were lifting out of the transcripts and registering in my understanding of their becoming, both as particular and general themes within their evolving stories. Such revelations would not have happened for me if I had relinquished transcriptions to a third party. I learn by doing, and the hands-on laborious task of transcription was central in my coming to know.

It was clear throughout the year that the women were most interested in talking about issues relating to the experience of becoming an art teacher. They were already teaching me about becoming from an expert position, disclosing meaning-making
regarding their journey in ways I could not have anticipated or been sensitive to had I undertaken another research design. It was my duty as a researcher to discover what they knew to be of value. My partners were active agents in shaping how their stories operated as sites of negotiation for their emerging teacher identities. I quickly became absorbed in the stories, and I continued to think with and in their stories of becoming, a process through which I unveiled my own subjectivity (Pillow, 2003). With this holistic approach to research, we came to operate on multiple levels: as friends, peers, mentors and learners. The unfolding of research is a story of success and frustration, of hopes and dreams, for participants as partners and for me as researcher.

I came to adopt the axiological position that these textual expressions were gestures (Genette, 1997, p. 143). As gestures, such expressions primarily represent a way to communicate experience through storytelling. Making space for stories in research enlarges notions of arts research in constructive and educational ways, and shifts the focus of discussion from what (types of artistic function) to when (how art operates within research) (Genette 1997). This process places less emphasis on the art genre and more on the aesthetic function and effects of doing research through the arts. In this way, the literary arts provide a framework for an organic approach to research that is concerned with when is art, and implies that works of creative nonfiction in research are part of the larger arts paradigm that requires a conceptual understanding of artistic and aesthetic characteristics (Genette 1999). For as Spindler (2008) advocates, “informed criticism as an alternative to pre-determined criteria” is a means to rigorously and vigorously judge stories “that open writerly texts” in academic contexts and transform professional practice, something Ruth, Ann and Nathalie were keenly aware of doing through storying critical events (p. 19).

These research decisions and realizations incur ethical responsibilities, and as an arts researcher, I have an obligation to engage in research in ways that best enriches educational discourse. From a perspective that all research is partial, the challenge then is to take up data collection through interviews from a methodological disposition of deep listening, making the writing of the story a
process, practice and product of rhetorical and metaphorical knowing that brings Ruth, Ann and Nathalie into research with a subjective presence. In this book, research partners each offer their stories as a means to deliver detailed and often evocative information about becoming a teacher, resulting in compelling stories with rich, creative and intellectual qualities required of academic scholarship. The stories that follow demonstrate pedagogic understandings and have curricular implications for teaching a new generation of learners from experiential and aesthetic perspectives. In each case, the scene is framed with theoretical and methodological stances that remain implicit in the background, revealing the power of story in research and the potential to locate self in stories to provoke more questions, focus attention on the gaps within teacher education, and grant insight to moments of conjunction, disjunction and even trauma that informs identity construction for students becoming teachers. Much like Santos (2012), through storytelling I do not seek consensus, but look to engage the audience to think about the scope of teacher education “while visiting different perspectives” in which “making public is its validation,” for “the more perspectives I consider when I tell a story, the more impartial my story can become” (pp. 113, 116).

Despite extensive inquiry into dimensions of teacher education, there remains surprisingly little research that examines teacher culture from first-person accounts. To date, this lack of research addressing how the stories of teaching and teachers are conceptualized, created, distributed and assessed suggests a gap exists within the field of study. There are no extensive resources about the impact of working in a profession that fails to situate the lives of teachers in the history of education; nor are there general practices within education institutions to integrate the lived experiences of students becoming teachers as a means to improve practices. Recognising the pedagogic role of a teacher is always evolving, this book initiates a discussion of dispositions by adopting creative nonfiction to attend to an area of study that has not been adequately documented or problematised in the research literature. Through creative nonfiction, I suggest that teacher education becomes an expansive educational space that further shifts our understandings of knowledge creation. Stories encourage teachers to
express a creative and critical voice to contribute to the changing socio-cultural fabric of the profession. With respect to our increasingly transdisciplinary practices, it is our responsibility as researchers to initiate, negotiate and actively participate in the development of institutional structures that recognize the value of real life accounts of teachers. In so doing, teacher education will become a more responsive practice with narratives about teachers, for teachers, by teachers.

Stories told by student-teachers serve as a means to create relationships within research that offer portrayals of experience which move beyond traditional data analysis of telling research to showing research. I propose that employing technical devices of tone, plotlines, tension, setting the scene, as well as adopting colloquial expressions, reflective commentary and more, generates a more authentic rendering of teacher education, resonating with audiences through persuasive testimonies. Stories represented through creative nonfiction offer an alternate perspective to envision changing relationships between pre-service teachers and teaching culture. Creative nonfiction draws attention to the deeply intimate moments of becoming a teacher in an effort to better understand how to educate future teachers, and in this case, how to teach art and how to make art a means to enhance understandings of self. Such standpoints begin with a mindset of embracing an insider’s point of view in relation to social constructions of individual narratives. Within this book, stories demonstrate aspects of convergence, as well as messy texts, to reveal the ethics of the spoken and written word at the heart of life writing (Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers & Leggo, 2009). As the researcher, I remain keenly aware of my own social influence in the course of developing these stories, and how my encounters with Ruth, Ann and Nathalie and their vulnerabilities as student-teachers were an ongoing negotiation of “beliefs, values and their inevitable conflicts in the classroom,” while I strove to bring transparency to the research processes, practices and resulting products by asking, “what and how do we know?” (Allen, 2008, pp. 889, 897).

Creative nonfiction has the potential to change structures of learning and teaching, and in the process, provide a suitable method to write contemporary teacher stories. In this way, creative nonfiction
as life writing represents a cornerstone of how parameters are changing for students becoming teachers, and how as researchers, we may conduct research and represent the impact of research through stories in the academy today.

REFERENCES


CHAPTER 1

UNFOLDING:
RUTH’S STORY

I’m going to build a bridge

I always wanted to be an art teacher. It started off because my mom wanted to be a teacher. She was a teacher’s assistant and she worked with a lot of special needs kids. I have always been the one in my family to pick up the pencil and paper and draw, whether it be my favourite image, *Ariel the Little Mermaid*, or anything else. That was always me, and I think loving drawing, and watching my mom at work and hearing her stories came together and became a goal for me. It just always made sense to me that teaching is what I wanted to do. So I’ve never really looked away from this goal. I would never doubt that I’m supposed to be here.

I went from high school right into university and completed my arts degree with a major in fine arts and a minor in French. I don’t really have any outside experience in terms of teaching a class. I’ve observed in classrooms of my own accord. I had a tough time deciding what grade level I wanted to teach, elementary or high school. In the end, I decided that high school is really where I wanted to be because that’s where I can teach the kids the kinds of things I love to do. It is one thing to colour with crayons and have kids make abstract stuff and say “that’s so cute” or “tell me about that,” but I really want to go a lot deeper and work through difficult issues with teenagers. It’s not that you’re not influencing kids when you’re in an elementary school, because you are a huge influence, but just in a different way. Being able to express yourself and everything that comes along with being a teenager and experiencing everything is where I want to be. Kids need good teachers to help them through their years of high school and that’s what has brought me here.

Now I’m taking teacher education and I’m quite young still, so that is one concern of mine about teaching high school. I don’t want to fit in too well with the high school kids. I will be teaching kids that are only five years younger. Other students in the cohort
have had experience in different jobs, they’ve done some traveling, they’ve done different things and now they’re coming back and they have the life experience. I don’t have that kind of life experience so to speak, outside of school. So what if I teach Grade 8 and they are sassy, and what about those Grade 12’s, they’ll tower over me! How am I going to be able to keep the peace, have the classroom management and just be able to teach them what they need to know about art, and why art is relevant these days. I thought back to my high school years and the way my teachers taught me, and do I want to be that kind of teacher? How might I do that? What would I want to change? A lot of questions started to fill up and although I know that they will be answered, what do I do in the meantime? Even though there’s still that deeper fear, it looks more realistic now. I can feel comfortable knowing I will be taught how to deal with everything that comes along, and how to deal with changes. So even if there is something I’m not sure of now, I will know how to do it by the end of this program.

Our first day was really great. There were so many readings in the first week. You’ve got to read article, article, article, chapter, chapter, reading response, reading response, and then visual journal. I want to do all the readings and I want to retain everything I can in the readings, but they are telling us, skim and scan. It isn’t about understanding everything; it is just about having those ideas. You just want your brain to hold everything in, but then there’s that point of saturation, in one ear out the other, so by the time we got to the end of the first week I just wanted to do it again, to start over.

In high school, I tried to fit in and not to be noticed. In Grade 11, I started dating my husband. He was involved in everything: student council, student action, Counter Attack, everything. It was good for his resume, and it was good for scholarships. He has a real ‘get those marks’ attitude, and I’ve always had a good grade average, so he was the one who really got me into being a part of organizations, and in turn made me realize it was really good to put yourself out there and that brought me out of my shell. When I was in high school, I didn’t miss class unless I absolutely had to. I wasn’t necessarily the most energetic student, like ‘I know this, pick me, pick me,’ but I was very attentive. I’m a real people pleaser so I don’t
want to ruffle any feathers. I don’t like to give my own opinions a lot of the time, especially if they differ from somebody else. I usually change my opinions, and say, ‘Well that makes sense too, maybe I’m wrong.’ In high school, I did an art piece at graduation about me starting off to university, looking into the sunset with my arms extended. In it, I’m outside and I’m going to build a bridge, so that is my metaphor for becoming a teacher.

I am a very personal artist. During my undergrad, we had to think of the concepts. I like to paint things that make sense to me, but it might not make a lot of sense to my audience, so at this point I would not be a good gallery artist. I don’t think people understood what I was trying to say in my undergrad years. I tried my hardest to fit the ‘whole family personal thing’ into conceptual art but it didn’t work out well. I remember making one project which was about my father, he’s a policeman, and I loved this project. I wanted to portray my dad as more than a policeman. It is not just the suit. So I painted a series of three and it was my dad in the police uniform on the job, he’s a highway patrolman; there was another one with me and my sister and my mom in an intimate setting; and then there’s a third one. It was a very personal piece for me because I see my dad as so much more than a policeman. We had our critique in the classroom and I saw how much an audience can dismantle and turn around what you want to say. There was one student who apparently did not see policemen as useful assets of society and interpreted it in such a negative way. Really, how can I say it, it really hit me personally, because my work is so personal. I realized I don’t like critique. At that point, even though I wanted my art to be personal, I had a hard time describing my art. It’s all about my own experiences, my imagination, how my life is. I think my perception is really going to change this year in terms of how my art looks, and as I think about the students and what I want them to do. It’s really pushing my own boundaries of what art is and how you can express yourself.

As a teacher, I’m a little bit unsure of myself, mostly because I have such a smattering of knowledge in a lot of places and I don’t realize that the students I’m teaching are not going to have any. In the future, once I know a little more about students and about being a facilitator or guide, I will help students come down the same path
that I did, in whatever way they are going. I’ll have a lot to offer them, a lot of energy to impart to them, to give them the reins and say, “Let’s go, let’s just have fun!”

I really do feel like a seed, being opened up and putting roots down and waiting to find the sun, and just grow up. I’m really excited about everything. Right now I’m going everywhere, my brain isn’t stopping. Last night I dreamt I was teaching. Everything in my life is teaching, teaching, teaching, but the fear of failing is always there, like when you do something for the first time that other people do professionally. I think, ‘Oh, did I get it? Will I get it?’ We’re doing lesson plans right now and I went to talk to the instructor today because I’m really confused. There’s so many different lesson plans, all these different templates, and all the words are different but they all mean the same thing. I don’t get it. Other people are writing within the hour allotted and I’ve written down ten things but I’ve completely missed the process. That was a real eye opener. I had question after question. I don’t get it, why don’t I get it. I know I’m going to succeed because everyone is there to help, so it is unnecessary fear.

I might teach things differently than how I was taught in school. So much of art class is about identity and trying to figure out who you are. Anything from body image to self-image to gender issues, then there’s the social justice classroom and teaching diversity and I could do so much with that. It isn’t about the process necessarily. It can be about context and personal issues, and it can be anything you want it to be. I want to further that goal. I want to be able to make art about anything that the students want to do. I want to help them get where they want to go because whatever they have in their mind to do is art to them. It doesn’t have to be open to critics, so I think that’s my biggest goal for this year.

We went on a field trip with the cohort where we were in the role of observers. I wasn’t a student anymore and it was very weird, because you’re very familiar with the role of a high school student and a university student. I’m used to listening to a lecture for an hour, but going in the classroom I wasn’t made to sit, I was just listening. It wasn’t about a lecture anymore. It was about getting the kids involved and then letting them do their own thing. I really felt
between worlds almost. I wasn’t quite a teacher, so I wasn’t in charge and I certainly wasn’t the student, but at the same time, I was young enough still that a lot of things they are interested in are interesting to me too. It was very easy, and surprising that I could go up to a table of Grade 8 boys and ask them how they’re doing, and we got into a whole discussion about Nintendo. As a teacher, I was wondering, is this allowed? As a teacher, do kids talk to them about their everyday stuff? But I still wasn’t one of the group. I was an outsider. I was like a teacher, an incoming source, so they were careful about what they said. We talked a little bit about hockey starting in a couple of weeks and they were excited about that. It was a very out of body experience because I was so many things at once. I actually found it easier to talk to the guys, who have always intimidated me, than the girls, especially the Grade 9’s, oh, they’re snotty! I figured, I’m a girl, so sisterhood, but it was just after lunch and they were chatting rather than doing their art. The funny thing was, the other student-teachers were able to talk to other groups that I wasn’t able to talk to, so it was weird, the people who I felt more comfortable with and less comfortable with. I think back to my high school, the art room was always open and kids would eat in there, and I think that is what made our room such a great place because we could sit together and talk. It created a sense of community.

In our cohort, we are practicing dressing as an artist or art teacher at the moment and it is amazing how some people look so much like art teachers. Totally teacherish! I just love it. What should I wear? What’s artsy? What does an art teacher look like? You can’t wear your best dress. I braided my hair, but that made me look 15, so I would never braid my hair again. I wore some big dangling earrings and a wrap that my mom got from the Caribbean with tassels on it. I wore some blue dress slacks. I’m really concerned about how to dress. You are an art teacher but an art teacher dresses differently than a regular teacher. I don’t remember my art teachers ever wearing suits. You don’t do that because you are going to get messy. So my mom and me went shopping and found six blazers for the price of one, which is fabulous. They were all different colors and they are all artsy. One of them is an empire waist, it’s my favourite. I’ve got to look young and fun, but I have to look professional, and
there’s a difference between old professional and stylish young professional. I can see what people wear, but I can’t necessarily put it together. I get ideas from other people in the class, like one girl she wears the coolest necklaces, I just love them. I want them so badly! She wears them every day and so having a little bit of funky jewellery can mix up a more professional outfit. This is as important as lesson plans.

If you fail to plan, you plan to fail

I’m at a point now that I’ve gotten to so many other times in my life, and I’ve never actually taken the next step. There is a threshold between the really wanting to, and actually doing it, the thought and the action. I have a lot of thresholds with learning language, even though I have a French minor. Learning and speaking a language are two very different things. I can understand French very well. In my classes, I never spoke a word because it was the threshold. I was scared to be wrong. I was scared to have my grammar in the wrong positions or forgetting words or pronouncing things incorrectly. I got into French as an English student. I never went to Immersion. I love languages and I love French; it is a beautiful language. I wish I could speak it. I can speak in my head perfectly, so someone says something to me, I know exactly what to say in my head, but in class I rarely spoke. There was that fear. I had the opportunity to go to Québec, but in the end, because my husband and I got engaged and then the marriage thing, the whole planning, I had to say no. So there was another threshold that I really wanted to cross, but at the same time, it was kind of comforting that I could say no, because I didn’t have to cross that bridge. So I’m at that point right now again. I really want to be a teacher. I’m really excited about being a teacher and I want to do it. I want to teach what I have been learning, but there’s still that fear, the whole bridge thing that I have to walk over. You can’t walk over it in steps almost, you are either doing it, or you’re not. I mean, we teach one lesson at a time, but you’re either the teacher or you are not. We’ll be observed in the first week of the practicum, which is really good, and then we will teach one lesson a day. It is like I have to jump to the whole other side, which is really scary for me, so I’m excited and at the same time scared out of my
RUTH’S STORY

mind. I thought countless times of my dad saying, ‘If you fail to plan, you plan to fail.’ This is a big one, now I hear his words in the back of my head.

I really want to go on Monday to my practicum and get over the initial fear. I want to be in the back of that classroom to document everything that happens and every single thing the teacher does. I want to model action for action, word for word. Then really what I’m doing is putting everything that I’ve learned so far into perspective which I want so badly but that fear is kind of right there. I know how to write things down. I know how to write the lesson plan. I know how to do the research because I learned that from my undergrad. I could have all of the information but it is the presentation of the information that’s hard, that I’m not used to, because I’ve always felt, well up until this year, I would probably never do presentations in my life! I never liked getting up in front of people, so getting up in front of a class of who knows how many kids because of class sizes, let’s say, 35 maybe, that I don’t know, will be hard. I have to teach them something that they may or may not know about. At least in art there’s much broadness and there’s always new things happening and old things that are being found, new interpretations, but I still feel like I don’t know a lot, you can’t do the whole thing and say, ‘I know everything!’

I don’t even know what grade I’m going to get yet. I would love to have a Grade 8 class. I used to think I would want to teach Grade 10, 11, 12 and in this moment now, Grade 8’s would be really good because they are still scared! Then I could work my way up. So even that perspective has changed in the last month and a half, of where I’d rather be. This is going to sound really bad, but I’d rather feel a little older than the kids, because Grade 8’s, that’s manageable for me. I’m nine, ten years older than them. I have a good chunk of time, and I’d have a little more control obviously because they’re new. Control doesn’t have to be in the sense of you do this, you do that, but having classroom management. I never thought my favourites would be the Grade 8’s. I always thought that Grade 6, 7, 8, 9’s were really snotty, and didn’t want to pay attention and didn’t want to work, but when I observed a Grade 8 class on our field visit, they were the best. I couldn’t believe it!
CHAPTER 1

The more I talk about things, the better I feel. I’m one of those people that has to walk around the mountain quite a few times, but each time I feel little bit better. I find my steps each time around, and with each of those steps, I get little bit more wisdom, and every time I go around I get another piece of the puzzle, and finally after ten or fifteen times, I get it.

Walking over the bridge

There are a lot of words I would like to use, such as frustrated, stressful, but I figure in the spirit of being positive, there was just so much happening and it was just such a whirlwind, it is hard to explain it all. There were moments when really inspiring things happened, and moments of real encouragement. There were moments of tension, and fear, and my first teaching was eighty minutes of fear because my teacher left! The students had berries that they were throwing. So anyways, other than that, I guess it was very surreal in a lot of ways and the biggest thing I learned was that teaching is not a pedestal job. I’ve always seen teaching as a category that takes a long time to obtain. The “teacher” was a huge heading and the teachers who do teach, they are so noble, they do such great things and they inspire kids, they encourage kids, they are monuments in kids’ lives really. Now that I’m there, the job has totally been taken off the pedestal. I’m experiencing it from a low-end up, so I’m in an awkward position where I have to learn just like in any job and it’s not, from where I’m seeing right now, it’s not as noble as I thought it would be. I don’t mean that in a negative way, but I have obtained it, it’s not an unattainable position, and that really surprised me. That took me aback. Now to be able to say that I am the teacher, it is something that I guess, I never saw myself taking the step.

Teaching can happen in such different ways than I expected. I needed to see where the kids were going and what they were doing so when I was teaching them in the next week, I would know as much as I could. With my teacher I didn’t feel a lot of context happening, and I didn’t see the same creativity that I expected, I guess going to that pedestal ideal now, something that has taken its place is the perfect lesson. Because I have all these things I want to do and I want to teach, I would like to get the kids to be so involved,
and I’m kind of reaching for that now and I saw bits and pieces of
those things happening but not to the extent that I want them to
happen. I want that idolized position now because I will always be
trying to attain it, but as our professors have said, they never teach a
perfect lesson or perfect day or perfect week or perfect month, things
always happen that you don’t expect.

I thought I would teach and the kids would be pumping out
this great stuff. I come in with a hook, role assignment, and we are
going to do teacher action plans, we’re going to talk about what we
are going to do, we are going to include context and image
development, and elements and principles. The kids are going to be
excited and discuss things, then we are going to work, and cleanup
and that’s how it is all going to work! There aren’t going to be any
tables where kids aren’t working and they’re all going to be excited
because they are going to be able to do their own projects. In reality,
the kids that are self-motivated were that and the kids that didn’t care
just sat there.

It was a shock, right there. One kid brought his basketball to
class and he just bounced it the whole class. And then there’s those
certain kids who may have been ESL, there were quite a few ESL
kids in the class, and I didn’t know if they understood or not, or if
they just didn’t want to do the work. There were so many different
things. They would sit there and during one lesson I taught, I had
directions up on an overhead, I talked about what we were going to
do, and then I went over to their table and said, “OK, we’ve already
talked about it twice, how are you guys doing?” And they hadn’t
taken their sketchbooks out yet! So how can you then motivate those
sorts of kids? I found that was something I really focused on. I call
them the kids at risk. Then I got the Grade 8’s to work in groups of
four or five and that was really hard for them because some of the
groups worked well, other groups didn’t know what to do and they
would sit there and shrug. I think good teachers make it look easy.

I did some marking for my teacher, but I didn’t ever see the
criteria. I’m assuming there must’ve been some criteria. Some kids
just had their name and decorated the letters. Some kids went all out
and did a whole full-blown picture and included their names, so
when I was asked to mark based on which one I liked best, it was
very, very hard because there obviously were some kids that had put a lot of effort into the execution of their work. The colors were great, they were really deep, things were outlined that needed to be outlined, and if you held it up from far away you’d be able to see the right things and the composition was great. And then there were the kids that probably did the criteria, put down their name, coloured it in and they’re done. How can you give the person who did all the extra effort an A or A+, and the other person who did what they were supposed to, how can you not give them an A+ too? I need to have criteria, out of 10, out of 10, out of 10. And I’m a woman so there are things that look more aesthetically pleasing to me than to a man. There was one folder in particular that had a race car, the RPMs, and the boy’s name in letters that implied movement. It was a great piece for him but it didn’t inspire me in any way. So how can you really level that in terms of marking? I would mark much differently. I think it would be important at the beginning of the year to give the kid the syllabus, and say this is what we’re going to be doing. I would have an overall marking scheme for every single thing they do. We’d go over it so they always know what is expected.

I often stayed until 6 o’clock like some of the teachers at the school. It would be much more advantageous for me to be there until maybe 4:30, help cleanup and then say, “I’m going to go home to work on my lesson plans.” I didn’t really want to stay late all the time, but I felt I had to. My teacher helps with a number of clubs, but I’ve never been big on dancing, so staying for the salsa club, I’m doing it because she does it. She asked, “Can you make a poster for me for the salsa club?” So I made a poster, and it became assumed that I was going to stay. I left early because my feet hurt so bad from all day, and I felt so bad after, I felt so awful. The whole way back on the bus I thought, ‘Oh I should have just stayed, why, what propelled me to go home?’ In the moment it was the selfishness of my feet, my feet hurt. It made me grumpy so I just went home without really thinking about what I was doing. And I really wanted to have my own space. I didn’t want to show anybody my frown. I felt I would’ve snapped at anybody if they had talked to me. I wanted to go see my husband. I didn’t want to make any tensions or any uncomfortableness at the school.
I was surprised at how tired I was every day. I know that sounds a little bit negative, but teaching is a very wearing job. You need to have enough of yourself to go home and still be yourself. It was pretty easy for me to go home, take off my shoes and get in my pyjamas. I think taking your clothes off and putting on your home self is very important. Every day I would have an hour to watch TV or I would play on the computer a little bit, or I would do something that was not work related at all, and that really helped me get into it. I don’t know how people go about having a private life after being in school and being so busy all day. My sister visited us during the first week. She helped me pick out my clothes for the next day. She ironed for me once or twice. Teaching the second week and not having her there was hard. I think we ordered pizza almost every night because I didn’t have time, and I was too tired making my lessons every night and doing a PowerPoint. It took three or four hours, so you take an hour of rest time, make dinner, and I wanted to be in bed by 11 p.m., but I wouldn’t get to bed until 12 a.m. or 12:30 a.m. every night.

Before we went on practicum, it was drilled into our heads, Code 5, Code 5, Code 5 – don’t speak ill about anybody. Be as positive as you can out there, if not too positive. Make every effort to smile at anybody you see, you say hi to everyone, you butter them up, you make yourself look the best you can. Sometimes on the practicum, things said to me were very surprising. I couldn’t believe it. Teachers break Code 5 and you automatically become part of a private space. I didn’t like that. I don’t want to make any assumptions about anybody, and as student-teachers, we need to be extra careful about all the codes. So how we answer that is by keeping it to ourselves. If we make that public, it will create a certain atmosphere around us, around the teacher who told us in the first place, and then it could take any direction. I didn’t like that at all. I’m a person who can keep secrets but I don’t like keeping secrets especially between me and my husband. I don’t think there should be any behind-the-scenes talk in an institution where you are working with everybody so closely together all the time. There is a real, oh, what is the word, hierarchy of people, and there’s a lot of animosity from the people who don’t have the positions they want in schools.
One of the teachers talked to me because he wasn’t sure if he was going to take me on or not. I said, “I’ll do anything just let me stay!” He recognized right away that I wasn’t really putting my opinions out there. I was saying, “I’ll do whatever you like, where can I fit in?” That’s how I perceived myself to be most useful, because then they can say just go here or go there and what he wanted to hear was, I can do this, let me do this part at this time in this class. He wanted straight up answers rather than agreement.

He said to me, “You have to be really careful because you can give of yourself until there is nothing left to give because there are always people who will want your help.”

When I’m in a public role I always try to watch what I say, I try to be very politically correct, which is hard. I’m nervous to put out my opinions because I’m a harmonious person so when I’m in public, I’m the most people pleasing I possibly can be, and that really showed during the practicum. When I was out during the practicum, my teacher would ask whatever, I had no boundaries really and that is something I have to work on. Life as a teacher really depends on the reference letter your sponsor teacher writes for you, and as bad as that may sound, you have to make sure everything you do is in line with what they think and I don’t want to ruffle any feathers. I always ask my sponsor teacher, “What do you think about this?”

I think I gave the impression to the kids that I’m a very serious person. I have to smile more, even though I’m trying to distance myself, I still need to be very approachable and I don’t think I showed that very well. I even wrote that on my lesson plan – smile – so that I would remember. Going back to the whole idea of the bridge, I recognize in myself that I’m a real perfectionist and that came out in my teaching skills because I wanted my first lesson to be perfect and I wanted every lesson after that to be perfect too. So when my faculty advisor came to watch me, I felt very pressured to be perfect and I don’t even know what perfect is. Even in other instances in my life, earlier on the bridge, or walking over the bridge, I’ve always been scared because it’s not perfect and that’s usually why I don’t go forward. So in teaching a lot of things go wrong and learning from them is needed to get better, but it was a painful period of learning. I would’ve rather walked around the pond, taken the long
way, but really I know that theory doesn’t help after a certain point. You have to practice using it. The short practicum didn’t change me, it fortified the idea of identity, that you need to have a public time and then there’s time when you have to go home. You have to let go for the day and then go fresh in the morning. I was really nervous those two weeks, really tense. My faculty advisor said I need to relax more and have fun.

I had a kind of out of body experience in that first lesson I taught. My mind wasn’t thinking about the lesson, it was completely thinking about when the lesson was done. It was the time factor, there were forty minutes left and these kids weren’t listening to me. It was really hard. My brain was racing and the body was kind of there, my mind was totally in the moment. I just wanted time to be up so bad. I wanted the teacher to come back and take control so I could go sit down and watch some more. So that first experience with the Grade 8’s, it was very scary. I did not want to be there in that moment! But by the second day, it was almost the opposite. We made masks. They couldn’t finish the lesson because they were rowdy, but they had so much fun and I almost felt like a big sister. You have to be careful about that line, but I felt really comfortable with them and I was able to walk around and say, “How are you doing?” It was fun. I was surprised the first day took so long, and the second day was so fast. Having the time go by fast is much better.

I learned I’m very interested in assessment. I did my own marking for the two-day project that I did. I had a criteria that was ten marks for creativity, ten marks for group work, ten for use of material because it was earth art, and ten for a written paragraph that each student had to write. We did a self-assessment and most of them graded themselves quite honestly, which was very exciting. I really enjoyed that. Most of the paragraphs were very good. I had them answer whether it was 2-dimensional or 3-dimensional, what they did, why it was earth art, what materials they used and I got them to explain what the work was because that’s how they were going to document their work. And I took pictures. It was really great.

I also had an experience that fortified the idea that I can just be who I am as a teacher. I saw some students in the library doing a project on war and peace, and one student was drawing a picture of
an apple and a sword, and I saw the apple and I thought, ‘Oh, I wonder if that’s what I think it is,’ and I went and asked her. Now looking back right at this moment, that could’ve been putting the student on the spot because it was about her faith. Had a teacher asked me, I would have shied away.

She said, “I was thinking about the original sin and how that’s the idea of war and peace.”

For me, to hear that from a student, because she obviously holds the same beliefs as I do, that really encouraged me that kids will, what’s the word, they will allow themselves to express that in art. I did that when I was in high school and I worked through some very difficult issues. For her to be working through that in a similar way really inspired me; you are free to express yourself if you want to in schools. I would really encourage that if students want to try. It was really cool for me.

When we came back from our short practicum, we talked about all the positive stuff, and I was really appreciative of that, for me it was really really helpful to pull out all those positive things. It made me feel better about what I had done. It was good to be back at university. Hearing from other people was really what I needed so that was just great in reinforcing that yes, I still want to be a teacher. From what I heard, I had a better experience than a lot of people. There were some things that people probably needed to talk about and they didn’t think they were allowed, so everyone was getting a little antsy. It is also the end of the term and everybody’s stressed. For others it would have been helpful to hear some encouraging words like “It’s okay, this is the hardest part, we’ll work through it together, and we’re all here to support you and keep going, keep trying.”

Coming back to the cohort and being able to wear jeans and sweats, it feels nice, but I’m starting to notice there is a professional me and then there’s the comfortable me. I think I took a lot more time thinking about what I was going to wear than anybody else, and it wasn’t because I’m a vain person, but because fashion is not me. I like comfortableness, but I really felt I had to look professional and I had to just make myself stand out. Every night I had at least a twenty minute stare in my closet trying to figure out what was going to
match. How could I wear my blazer? I couldn’t wear jeans and I couldn’t wear khakis, so what was I going to do. I want to have fun jewellery, which I don’t have, so every morning I would wear some earrings, or make sure my hair looks nice, and that in itself stressed me out because I wanted to look different. I had this amazing revelation just yesterday because we went observing to an independent school and again, I wore black slacks, a pink sweater, and a gray blazer. So I dressed for the part, perfectly. I went to the bathroom at one point and I caught myself in a full-length mirror in the school and I kind of stood there for a second and I thought, ‘I really do look exactly how I want.’ It made me realize that I was really successful in this goal and I got comments throughout the two weeks on practicum like “You know, you look really nice today.” Let’s say it gave me a little sense of peace.

I am the paintbrush

As a spiritual person I want to imitate Christ in my life and the way I’m living my life, so I want my spirit to embody Jesus, which means I’m humble, very humble, very wanting to learn along with students, being a learner with them. The biggest thing I want is to love the kids. I want to make sure that I’m someone they feel comfortable with. Since the short practicum, how I approach my work as a student is different. As a student, it is easy to procrastinate, which is a bad thing. This is still part of my mindset. With a job like teaching, you might be at the end of the year, your kids are finished, but you’ve got so much still to do.

I wonder how much time I’m going to actually have during the winter break to do art. I haven’t been doing a lot of art, just a lot of writing in my visual journal. My mother-in-law and father-in law bought me a movable easel for my birthday so I’m very excited about that. I have a sense that I’m going to be helping kids in their learning now and they can be the canvas, and I’m the paintbrush. I want to do art, but there’s so much other stuff happening. There’s work that needs to be done so I’m ready for the long practicum. It is hard to make sure that I’m the wife and have all the qualities, how do I say this, the ten most important things that a wife and husband need. I always want to make sure that I’m loving him, taking care of him and
he would do the same with me. I’m very preoccupied because I’m a
new wife too. I want to make sure I’m doing things for us, and
making time for each other. I really feel it is important because I’m
busy and he’s busy. During my two-week practicum it was really
difficult. He had a really difficult week because he’s taking courses,
his electives, and he experienced the all-night paper, along with a
presentation and his thesis presentation the same weekend, and
another paper, so that was a hard week. At a certain point you don’t
really know how to help anymore and I’m sure he probably felt the
same way with me and my practicum. We’re learning those ins and
outs.

I want to embody the pedagogical practices of a teacher so
I’m working towards that and it is taking time. I think I take on too
much sometimes. Our professors pump us up so much, saying, “You
can do this.” And I wonder, ‘How am I going to do it?’ Schools
aren’t always going to have the supplies you want to use, and if you
want to have intense discussions with your students, you need to
know them first before you can have those discussions. Say for
instance, we were talking about Disney movies. Are they good for
your kids? I was a Disney kid so that was really hard for me! I don’t
step on people’s toes, so even though I might think otherwise I really
don’t say. I have my own opinions in class but I don’t share them
because there was a very ‘for’ side and a very ‘against’ side and
either way, if I said something, I was going to have to pick a side. So
I kept quiet. I mean I have my own points and people were already
commenting on that so I just stayed neutral. It could be great to talk
about this in your classroom, why something is good to watch, or
why it is bad, but you can’t just go in there and put on a movie and
say, “What do you think?” Their minds aren’t as developed as mine
so they’re going to have a different debate than in my university
classroom, which was very heated. Sometimes kids don’t want to talk
about public things, they want to keep to themselves, so how do you
have a discussion then? A teacher has to be really careful about the
debates you are going to have, or the art projects you are going to do.

I’m also thinking about what my classroom would look like
in the future. I’m doing a unit on spaces right now. We talked about
this briefly in class and someone said they would like to have a
couch in their classroom. So I was thinking about that all day and I think it is such a great idea to have a couch in the art room. Could I have a Nintendo there to make it a more comfortable space? Does that cross the line? I know I’d be right there playing!

*The long practicum went really well*

For the first week of my long practicum, I was quite timid.

Then one of my sponsor teachers said, “Even if you don’t feel confident, you need to give off the impression of being so, because the kids pick up on it and don’t behave.”

Boy is that true! The next lesson I was much stricter, and ended up having a wonderful discussion with my kids about colours and emotions. We moved into how the classroom feels with certain colours, what bedroom colours usually are, and we did colour theory, which is like the periodic table, where perspective and tone and value are equations that students need. I asked everyone to participate, everyone paid attention, and there were some who had a great time! It was really neat to see immediate results. Students were thinking about concepts and then participating.

I learned a few things about myself as a teacher. I can get very stressed out if I create unrealistic expectations but still expect to get them done. I’m not ready to improvise as of yet. And when kids don’t listen and wait time doesn’t work, what do I do? I really want my class to be organized, none of this papers everywhere or students not being able to find stuff. There were times I had to be quite strict with some of my students. All the teachers and advisors told me that they have to know who the boss is.

One sponsor teacher said, “If a male teacher is strict or mean, the students respect him. If a woman is strict or mean, she is automatically a bitch.”

You need to be able to find a balance, so your students know when you mean business and when you are being a friend or confidante. During my practicum, I did see this strategy play out successfully. I also found that if I have a constructive criticism for a student’s work, if it is given on a more private level, with positive points to sandwich it, they are usually very receptive to change. I had a student or two who didn’t want to be at school. Therefore they
didn’t have anything to say to me, and constructive words, or encouragement seemed to fall on deaf ears. I believe a couple of times I received a smile, or a short ‘thanks,’ which was by far most rewarding. Because I’m young, I find it particularly easy to relate to students. For example, one group of students was talking about Nintendo and DDR, Dance Dance Revolution, and how it was so much fun. Well, my husband and I still play Nintendo and recently we bought “DDR.” I felt however, that I should not engage in that conversation with students. I don’t know yet what constitutes boundaries or not, that would have been more friendship and less teacher. The other major difference was the amount of responsibility I had all of a sudden.

I did a ‘concept of the day’ where I gave a small demo and answered questions, something I’ve just learned how to do. For the first half of the week I forgot to ask if there were any questions, and the kids just got right to work! My students had a passion for art, and their imaginations got to work very promptly. I did student self-evaluations every class so they told me what they liked and didn’t like about the lesson, and rating the class on a 1 to 5 scale, with 1 being worst and 5 being best. I got a lot of comments saying they just wanted to make art; however, I also got a lot of comments saying they really enjoyed the lessons. I find that those self-evaluations are one of the best ways to see if the students have engaged in learning, because their comments, short or lengthy, really gave me a sense of what they thought the lesson was about, and whether they liked it or not.

I learned that attendance isn’t important to do right away. I like doing attendance once they’ve started work. Sometimes it’s good to do as a classroom management skill. In my own classroom, I think it would be nice to have sketchbook time every class for fifteen minutes. My teachers in high school did that for my Grade 11/12 years, and it always worked to get my creative juices going. They would give us a topic for the week, and we had to work on it all week long. My sponsor teachers don’t do this for their own reasons. Sometimes, I’m finding that it’s okay to just make an announcement about what the day is for, catch up, work period, etcetera, and then
after half the class, do a short demo, so if the students are finished, or need some new thoughts, that shakes things up so to speak.

I try very hard to shape my questions so that I encourage upper level thinking. I’m not sure how successful I am at that yet, but it is usually in the back of my mind. I know that in the objectives for each day, in terms of creating/communicating or perceiving/responding, they are working towards upper level thinking activities such as creating their own ideas. I also encourage upper level thinking through my self-evaluations. I usually encourage students as I walk around, but if I see a problem, I ask them if I can give them a suggestion. Really, if they don’t want to accept what I have to say, I’m wasting my time as well as theirs. Many of the students will ask me what I think, which is an open door for me to then ask them, “Well, what do you think? Are you happy with your current outcome? Where do you think some trouble areas might be?” Now that I know most of the kids by name, I can have a bit of a conversation with them, and that makes a world of difference. My comments now have some validity to them. They know I know what I’m talking about and they produce amazing work!

I think getting into a routine is also a big part of this job. You have to know where you’re at, what you’re marking, what you’re teaching next, and you need to be organized. I’ve tried really hard to be organized, but there are always things you can do better. With my faculty advisor, we often talk about classroom management, since that is one area I’m having trouble with. In one class, I barely had control of the students the whole time, but it was a GREAT learning experience for me. It gave me the opportunity to talk over classroom management with all three of my sponsor teachers, and think about it myself. The next lesson I implemented their suggestions and the results were amazing. It felt good to be in control, not like a dictator, but authoritatively, and to have the students listen when I talked, and vice versa. The tone and the atmosphere of the class changed for the better. I think a good teacher evaluates fairly, relates well with kids, turns kids on to learning, is flexible, provides ways for success and management, knows there is more than one learning style, doesn’t show stage fright, and has compassion and cares.
I’m just starting a new unit plan with my Grade 8’s, and I did a small lecture on art history using classical, renaissance, ready-made and cubist references, showing the students the idea of shape, how it works in a composition, how shapes are used to build bodies and how the master painters have done this. *The Last Supper* is so wonderful for this! Anyways, the students were all very engrossed in the lesson, and I think they all really enjoyed it. I think it’s important to fix the concept or technique within them, so that they can ‘break the rules’ so to speak. After they have mastered the technique they are learning, the final project is their time to shine. Although there are guidelines such as use two of the four techniques we’ve been learning about, or neatness, or whatever, they can still create their own project, and I get the opportunity to watch them work. I find it very helpful to have students write an artist statement after large projects. My Grade 8’s just wrote an artist statement on shoe transformations, but they had to write a story about how their shoe was transformed, where it was born, what did it do, almost as if the shoe was magic. They loved it! I think that developing the students’ skills in art is one of the most important things an art teacher teaches.

My private life affected my practicum in positive ways. My husband keeps me upbeat more than I realize. My husband is extremely positive and supportive about my experiences and often offered helpful suggestions or read over my ideas. When I stayed late, or had homework prep for the next day, he understood and helped where he could. He asked me to be finished by 9 p.m. every night so we could have time together. Although hard to do at first, this helped me learn how to time manage quite effectively. I was motivated to finish before that time. It helped me stay on task, to get done what was necessary for the next day, not necessarily the next week. Weekends were a good time for me to prep a bit extra for the coming week. If I was diligent, I could plan up to Wednesday, which then helped free up time during the week. I wouldn’t say that there weren’t stressful nights. My sleep patterns changed, thus my husband’s sleeping patterns changed. We were up at 7 a.m. He had to
deal with a tired and sometimes grumpy wife if I didn’t get to bed on time.

I would have to argue that my practicum was probably one of the best experiences I’ve had. I had a fantastic time. The long practicum went really well. The weeks went by so fast and it was so much fun. I had great sponsor teachers, a wonderful, helpful faculty advisor and great kids, not to mention a supportive husband, family and God! My practicum was a very caring experience. My sponsor teachers were there to help me and encouragement was given far more often than criticism, and we were often in collaboration. I wasn’t kept sitting on a problem. Of course, I tried very hard to make this atmosphere work as well. I tried to be as flexible as possible. I asked opinions and advice of my teachers rather than going on my own opinions, and part of my final evaluation took this into account. I participated a great deal in the life of the school, in clubs, attending meetings and more. I got along well with the school staff and I thoroughly enjoyed the kids and my classes. I liked feeling that I was the facilitator, that students were learning things I was teaching, and seeing process and product. Each day was different and exciting. One of my teachers wanted to team-teach with me through the entirety of my time there, which helped with the rough patches since she did most of the disciplining. The other two left me to my own devices, which allowed me to expand on my understanding of teaching. It was a lot of work being the teacher! Just recently, my sponsor teacher who is retiring allowed me to go through all her lesson plans and take what I wanted, and she sold some of her art books to me at a fantastic price. I was really excited. As well, she and I have kept in touch by email and she has let me know that if I ever need ideas or help or advice, or just someone to talk to, she’d love to keep in touch. I’m very lucky. Now my husband is looking into education as a profession.

There’s a new bridge to cross

I’m feeling very happy to be done for lots of reasons. It has been such a long year and not having a summer has been really hard especially seeing everyone else do whatever they like. Now it feels as though there’s a new bridge to cross. I’m finished the program and I
have a long-term job, something I’ve never had before, something I’ve always wanted. But between the end of school and starting a job, there is no time. I have my week of holidays and then I have two weeks to get ready for a job. Two weeks is not a lot of time. I’m feeling a bit burned out. I’m looking forward to doing nothing for a day or two.

I have new fears arising, as fast as the excitement! I do know however that I have much more confidence and it won’t be so hard as beginning the first practicum. I now have resources and contacts and I have learned how to be flexible with what comes my way. I feel as though I have grown significantly in this moment of being a student, versus now being a teacher. It is a very new feeling. Thinking back to the actual job interview, I did feel comfortable in the space, and I felt that I was a qualified individual for the job at hand.

As a teacher of art I hope to inspire creativity and a love of learning during my lessons. I will encourage student participation as much as possible and set reachable objectives that hopefully will be interesting to my students. I feel very passionate about what I teach. With a new class, sometimes it is important to be a bit strict, but encouraging students to ask questions is good. I love to walk around and compliment students on their work. I find it gives me a bit of a personal connection with them. They like to talk about what they are doing, and the majority of the time, conversations lead to life outside of the classroom. Once I have my own classroom, I would hope to do more group assignments to encourage student relationships. I would move kids periodically to also help relationships develop and I believe more importantly, I would like to develop a sense of respect for everyone and every artwork produced. One of my sponsor teachers did ‘walk abouts’ which I believe was good for students, to see each other’s work as well as learn different styles. Organizing the classroom as a gallery space would also help create a community of practice.

I talked to the director of the school and the art teacher that I will be working with, and they are both lovely people. I’m really excited. It is going to be a great working atmosphere. I feel there are a lot of expectations. I think the expectations are coming in little increments, and I’m only beginning to understand what sort of a
school it is. It’s not just a practicum anymore. I really have to be good at what I’m doing now. When I talked to the director, we talked about parents a little bit. I had read in their magazine about students who were in major productions internationally, and their parents are CEOs.

The director said, “Well you have to remember that when the parents come to the school, they are the mom or the dad.”

But it is still pretty intimidating. One of the reasons I want to go into the independent school system is because I want the parent involvement. I find that so important and lacking in public schools. So I’m excited about this!

The other teacher is also really friendly and they are going to buddy-me-up so that I have a mentor. The first day of school is a big Pro-D day for us to get to know each other and figure out how the school works, and the more I thought about it, the better off I am having a smaller position because I get to learn it. I’m looking forward to concentrating on four classes a week, doing them well, and building on what I know. I’m pretty excited but at the same time I don’t want this to go to my head either. It’s great to have a position in that school but I don’t want it to become, ‘I work here,’ you know? I think that could be so detrimental. I went into an independent school for certain reasons, but it wasn’t to become better than people, and stereotypes get pushed onto people all the time, so I don’t want people to look at me that way. I told two people in the cohort about the job, just out of pure excitement, but I found out later, one of them had failed and the other person hasn’t been hired at all. So then I felt bad afterwards but they were excited for me that I had a job. I realize I’m pretty lucky. After coming back to the cohort for the final term, I found that I had been particularly fortunate in my experience on the practicum too. Many of my classmates had horrible experiences far beyond what I think is fair or professional. I had it really good and I consequently felt bad talking about my experiences.

This reminds me of my friend who has been a teacher for about five years now.
I have talked to her and it was so funny, she said, “Doesn’t it feel great when you know you’re supposed to be a teacher? It’s exactly where you want to be and every day is a great day.”

I mean, obviously there are mistakes, but you learn, and it’s exactly where you’re supposed to be. It is just fantastic! I remember when she went through her education program and some of the things she said then have really resonated with me since, about the idea that not everyone is going to make it, and hearing about people in her program that were just not cut out for it. It is funny now to start thinking about that and to see the parallels.

On my practicum I was removed from the rest because I didn’t have an art specialist, I had a generalist faculty advisor. When everyone got back, no one wanted to talk about anything. It was just, ‘How was your practicum? Good. And how was yours? Good.’ It is only in this last term that people have started coming out and saying, actually it wasn’t that good, or they didn’t do so well. Somehow we talk. I know that support and sympathy is needed, and I think I do sometimes exhibit those traits and people see that.

Our final day in the program was anticlimactic. We were done and that was it. Because we were a cohort for so long, it felt weird that the actual last day was last term. This term we weren’t all in the same class, so it wasn’t a good-bye. There was no final ‘See you around!’ Certain people had parties and some people were left out of that too, and me being one of the people. I never really made really good friends with anybody. I was on good terms with everybody. So I was a floater. We are now all doing our own thing and people are going to get jobs and people are going to move. Some people are going to have kids. So I don’t feel a particular landmark I guess, it is not ‘The End.’ There are these group emails, ‘Oh it’s all over, it is so sad.’ And I think, ‘Oh great, another sappy email to read!’ I’m more focused on jobs. The end for me was more at the end of the practicum. I became much better friends with the group that was at my school and I think because it was such a different way of learning than in the university classroom, we were all learning to be teachers together. There were a couple of people there that I will keep in contact with and see how they’re doing and I know they’ve got jobs. What you have done this year, and how hard you have
worked is now showing and I guess it depends on how much you wanted it.

How does my dad say it, “If you fail to plan then you plan to fail.”

In the last term of this program, I discovered even further that I hate conceptual art. It is so academic and it is so exclusive. No one can understand it. I really don’t like it. And if I want to make an art piece during one of my courses, it had to be conceptual, and that was a second frustration for me. I can’t make art and I’m in the art program! Conceptual ideas do not come easily to me. I like a painting because it looks nice! When I think about art, my motto should come from that movie, You’ve Got Mail. It has to start by being personal. I make art for myself but if I want to make it for a viewer or an audience, I will make it for a viewer or an audience. It also creates a conflict for me because it’s one thing to teach identity and whatever you like in high school but how does that prepare students for university art? I find that really frustrating. I will be teaching Grades 6 and 7, so I don’t have to be worried about that until next year, but if I’m going to teach those grades later on, in order to keep students in the loop and help them move forward, I’ll have to teach conceptual art, but that is not why people go into art usually. It’s not to be part of this elite group. It’s because they enjoy expressing themselves in a different way. I don’t think there’s anything wrong with art being narrative.

I’m asking myself some life questions now. I’m really happy the program is done but I’m not coming back to university unless I choose to do so later on. If I were to do a Master’s, I would do it in art evaluation. I’m starting what I want to do for the rest of my life. I hope it is going to be everything that I wanted it to be. I know one of my friends and I have often talked about how you grow up a lot when you start your job. So I wonder how much I’m going to change now. I love art and I believe this comes through in my teaching and I’ll benefit from teaching this subject as will my students. I will learn new things every day. I teach to the kid’s freedom of expression. The teacher education program has stretched and moulded me in ways I could not have imagined. I have walked, crawled, and run over many bridges in the process of learning what it means to be a teacher. As a
teacher, I am building my own bridge of student and personal success. Every student cannot be reached, but it is my responsibility as a teacher to try. My experiences on practicum have already started this bridge. I am often frightened by bridges, and this one I am about to build is no different. I believe though that I will build self-confidence with each experience. One of the greatest things about becoming a teacher is the fact that I will be a lifelong learner and that is exciting to me. My bridge will never finish, so mistakes and experiences will only make my journey more interesting. I accept this opportunity with vigour and excitement. Let the building begin!