

PRESUMED TEACHER:
AN AUTOBIOGRAPHIC ARTICULATION OF A PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL
EDUCATIONAL IDENTITY

by

Robert Hillis Williams, Jr.

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

Curriculum and Instruction
(Teaching and Learning)

R. Terry Graham, Chairman

Kathleen Carico

Darrel Clowes

Jimmie Fortune

Patricia Kelly

January 1999
Blacksburg, Virginia

Keywords: Autobiography, Composition, Curriculum, Education, English, Ethnography,
Identity, Learning, Narrative, Psycholinguistics, Reading, Secondary, Writing

PRESUMED TEACHER:
AN AUTOBIOGRAPHIC ARTICULATION OF A PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL
EDUCATIONAL IDENTITY

Robert Hillis Williams, Jr.

Abstract

The author reflects upon and examines his own educational memories, his personal and professional and historical relationship to public education, and his life as a learner. This reflection and examination - complete with connections to many strands of inquiry in broadly accepted educational, sociological, and psychological theory - culminates in both an enhanced self-awareness and in this document, this ethnographic and autobiographic statement of past experiences, present educational frustrations and celebrations, and future educational goals, hopes, and dreams. Likewise, the author argues that this autobiographic statement, this studied articulation, is both an artifact of and a necessary co-requisite to his educational identity. He further asserts the absolute necessity of just such autobiographical writing for his own sanity in the face of multiple institutional mores unrelated to authentic, student-centered learning in public education, for genuine self-awareness and ethical practice for all educational professionals, and for enhanced learning opportunities for all learners at various levels of maturity everywhere.

Acknowledgments

In completing not only this document, but also this doctorate, I must acknowledge the invaluable help and support and encouragement of many others both close in time to this accomplishment and more distant in my past. To begin, I offer my heartfelt and warmest thanks and love to all my family, both immediate and more distant. I must thank my wife, Kathy, especially, without whose unending patience and faith in me this document could never have been written, but I also must thank my parents, Robert Sr. and Ann Williams, and my sisters, Bobby Ann and Dixie Susan, along with my wife's parents, Charles and Alpha Sands, and her brothers, Joe, Doug, Chuck, Bill, and Kirk, all of whom have in one fashion or another supported my efforts.

Additionally, since my return to formal education in the summer of 1986, I have benefitted from the support and guidance of numerous faculty and staff at Wytheville Community College, especially Miss Bobby Wymer, Mr. Donald Craft, and Mr. Gary Laing; at the College of William and Mary, especially Drs. Mary Ann Melfi and Peter Herman; and finally at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, especially the members of my doctoral committee, Drs. Terry Graham, Darrel Clowes, Patricia Kelly, Jimmie Fortune, and Kathleen Carico. Likewise, Ms. Ernestine Dalton, who believed in my abilities as a learner in spite of my lackadaisical beginnings in high school algebra, but who eventually hired me to teach in the school at which she worked as principal some years later, and my co-worker and fellow student at Virginia Tech, Pat Garst, deserve my gratitude. No doubt, all these individuals deserve far more than this simple note of thanks for their efforts and support as I have worked formally to educate myself these last thirteen years. I hope the faith of all these individuals has been justified.

Finally, as an additional measure of my everlasting gratitude, I dedicate this work to Mr. and Mrs. Robert H. Williams, Sr., my father and mother; to Terry Graham, my mentor and friend; to my wife Kathy, always my soul-mate; and to our two daughters, Virginia Ann and Grace Katherine, that they may reach adulthood unscarred by intellectually and ethically bankrupt educational institutions.

Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgments	iii
Table of Contents	iv
Preface	1
Soliloquy	2
Today	5
January, 1999	51
References	58
Appendix A	60
Appendix B	62
Curriculum Vitae	68

PRESUMED TEACHER:
AN AUTOBIOGRAPHIC ARTICULATION OF A PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL
EDUCATIONAL IDENTITY

Preface

What follows may be construed by some as indictment. If this is so, then only readers may serve on this grand jury, only readers may serve as judge, only readers may pass sentence on this document.

What follows may be construed by some as celebration, or cause for celebration among some few readers as this document potentially exemplifies one end of the qualitative research spectrum as an academic dissertation about education, about public schools and an individual learner within those public schools but yet containing no report cards, no tests, no official curriculums or objectives or recommended learner outcomes, no criterion- or norm-referenced or performance-based evaluations other than within the minds of readers who once again must stand as jury and judge.

What follows may be construed by some as a survivalist manifesto which demonstrates the power of reflective writing to both temper the brittleness of experience within the writer and yet deliver new discoveries to both the writer and readers who still once again must jury and judge the product as that product connects to their own experiences, affects their own responses.

Lastly, what follows may be construed as diary and diatribe and egocentric sound and fury, signifying nothing to some readers but yet everything to me, the writer. Perhaps in the most optimistic analysis what follows will at one time or another suit all these constructions, all these purposes, all learners, all readers. I leave it then just so, with individual readers and learners. As doctoral student, as writer, as fellow learner, this document's purpose for me is done.

Soliloquy.

Choose True or False? Choose. Choose now.

Maybe I remember too much.

I remember childhood and laughing ... but never in institutions.

I remember running ... but never in institutions.

I remember watching laughing adults ... but never in institutions

I remember noisy trucks and far away airplanes ... but never in institutions.

I remember inspecting busy bugs and noteworthy strings and bits and pieces of the everyday, beneath adult feet ... but never in institutions.

Maybe I remember too much.

I tire of square rooms and straight lines and quiet marches to the quieter library, past quiet rooms, through quiet halls, learning quiet. I tire of letters and numbers that belong to no one, especially children.

What price a child's mind at the hands of alphabet drills, numbered anonymity? Ridiculous letters, ridiculous tests, ridiculous institutions to sort the smart from the dumb, the dumb from the almost dumb, the bright from the almost bright, the dull from the duller still? We all learn.

What do we learn?

That this one's not good enough? That this one's better than that one? Damn such learning. And damn those that regiment free spirits to hardened brick and linear tiles. Luminous minds do not travel straight lines. Neither do unfettered feet. Damn institutions that shutter chimeral identities into locked doors and gated playgrounds and never more than 25, 30, 35, 40, 50 ... 100 ...? To a room? What matter the number and size of the inmates? The exercise yard's walled and guarded before first bells, before first days.

Stop pretending this is for the children. I know the truth.

Stop pretending this is for the learning. I know the truth.

The institution remains a penance upon the smallest, the weakest, the most helpless, done for us, the biggest, the strongest, the most powerful, that we may have careers, have contentment, have complacency, have opportunities for our own, indulge our narcissism in every cell.

I know the truth.

Stop pretending that telling leads learning, that learning leads from smallest to largest, easiest to hardest, simple to most complex. I know a lie when I learn better.

I believe nothing. NOTHING ... except that limitations always harden into wrong answers.

I defy this institution to have a single child's best interests at heart. I know the truth.

I defy these experts to have a single child's best interests at heart. I know the truth.

Who do they serve?

Themselves?

So do we all. So do we all. I am no better.

Pretending otherwise, I darken to rage.

I should remain a hooded welder stooping over metal landscapes, blind to small flares. Too late, too late. Too late. I have learned too late the futile dream of one awakening.

I have wandered through the souls of white-papered libraries, full of small truths, and have resigned myself to knowing only a few, only a few.

I have practiced on the keyboards of black-lettered thoughts, full of small stories, and have resigned myself to telling only a few, only a few.

I have searched within the emptiness of red brick warehouses, full of small children, and have resigned myself to discovering only a few, only a few.

I have labored within those heartless warehouses, rebelled beneath their blackened bricks. I know their institutional desires, their ugly preconceptions, their horrible methods rooted in ignorance more horrible still. I have been at one with them.

“PHYSICIAN, HEAL THYSELF.” Author? Work? Who thundered that? “True or False?”

Incorrect response.

Incorrect Response. Incorrect Response. How do I heal a crucifixion of children? With my own? No hell is hot enough to temper this wrath, no institution pure enough to convince me otherwise. I await a cataclysm - or an apocalypse. Enlightenment escapes me. I believe nothing. NOTHING. I call myself ... cannot call myself, cannot bring myself to the word ... and am forever damned at that naming for I know not what it means.

Multiple Choice? Darken the appropriate circle. Darken the appropriate world.

Essay? The essay follows a predictable path, predictable path, predictable path.

Prompted writing. Easy reading. The dissertation follows The dissertation

APPROVED:

Sign on the line.

Sign on the line.

Sign on the line.

Sign on the line.

Sign on the line.

Approval?

Who approves?

Who disapproves?

Indeed, who disapproves?

RAW SCORE: _____. SCALED SCORE: _____. PERCENTILE RANKING: _____.

PASS?: ____ or FAIL?: ____.

Fail who? Myself?

If I only fail myself, then what of the children?

Today, Troy’s mother (who works in “Driver Education” in the Blue Hollar Public Schools¹) saw me, in passing in the hall, and after a moment's confusion asked if I was indeed the Robert Williams from the vocational school across the street, had been in the Machine Shop a few years ago.

I said, “Yes.”

She asked what I was doing at Blue Hollar High School.

I said, “English, mostly Composition.”

She seemed slightly confused but went on to tell me about Troy. He completes his senior year as a Math Education major at Wales and Scots College² this year even while he continues to work as a machinist at Emerald Manufacturing³. He began working at Emerald Manufacturing during his senior and second year at the vocational school, also my second year there, the year I started matching students with industries for three afternoons a week as a part of their learning in Machine Shop. Most interesting, indeed, far and away most interesting and very surprising to me, Troy’s mother went on to say that Troy still talks about me, about his two years in Machine Shop. She said that Troy still says he learned more about “life” from me than from anyone he has ever known. We studied precision machining. She said he still talks about pursuing opportunities and about “leaving doors open” as often as possible. We studied metal cutting tool speeds and feed rates and blueprint reading. I do recall conversations, however, related to the world beyond our Machine Shop doors along with dozens of other conversations and just as vividly as I recall Kevin and Daryl and James and Mark and yes, Troy.

I feel remarkably blessed that we, all of us, had such genuine conversations, nonetheless, even as I know that there was nothing magical about our conversations, any of them, except that such conversations seem rarely to occur in the schools of my experience. I did listen. I never

¹In order to protect the privacy of the individuals and institutions involved, I use the pseudonyms “Blue Holler Public Schools” and “Blue Holler High School” (BHHS) as names for the school system and school, respectively, in which I work.

²Another pseudonym.

³Still another pseudonym.

dismissed Kevin or Daryl or James or Mark or Troy with trite assurances or ready-made, institutional answers regarding the value of a good education or the importance of hard work. I was honest, not magically insightful, not wise, not even necessarily particularly well informed or prepared for the position in which I found myself. I at least was honest about my own opinions, my own ignorance. Perhaps there was something magical in the way Troy listened, in the sense he made of our conversations. Perhaps some ‘magic’ remains in honest conversations regardless of the contexts in which they occur. Of course I am truly thankful that Troy heard what he did regardless of what I or the other students may have said or done that year. Equally obviously, in two short years I also know Troy did not learn more about “life” from me than from anyone else. Two years out of eighteen is but a small component and Troy doesn’t yet understand perhaps that what he learned was more a crystallization of accumulated years and less the effect of any one person’s comments or thinking or instruction. I suppose I am most thankful that Troy achieved this, that I could be present for his achievement even as I did not interfere with that success. I suppose I should also be most thankful that with Troy, at least, my educational identity, my continuing status as a fellow learner if indeed a more experienced and more competent learner remains intact, complete, a positive force in his memory. For myself, well, I have my own doubts, my own uncertainties, my own questions, my own memories.

Autobiographically, my memories are a compilation of actual experience and family story, a dense mixture of events remembered, events retold, events witnessed, events captured, sedated, inoculated, domesticated to narrative. Indeed, Jerome Bruner (1986, 1996) and Theodore Sarbin (1986), among others, would have us believe that this same narrative, these events remembered and retold, even if only internally, form in large if not complete measure our actual identities, our sense of self and ultimately the sum of all our learning. And while the difference between “identity” and “self” and even “self-identity” may be academically and esoterically debated for years⁴, the reality remains that our identities and our sense of self within

⁴For example, see a very recent article published in September of 1998, Hoffman, D. M. (1998). A therapeutic moment? identity, self, and culture in the anthropology of education. *Anthropology & Education*, 29 (3), 324 - 346, in which the author argues that these very

our sociocultural milieu are absolutely available for narration and even negotiation. From the highly theoretical psycholinguistic hypotheses of Bakhtin (Morris, 1994) and the psychological constructs of *Voices of the Mind* (Wertsch, 1991) to Stanley Rothstein's Freudian and Lacanian hypotheses regarding the internal dialogue between our conscious and our unconscious selves (1993), this theoretical perspective carries broad academic support. Yet taken theoretically or pragmatically or otherwise, writing teachers and professional writers too numerous to cite agree, narrative should always show, not tell, and thus my dilemma: How best do I discover or negotiate and then articulate my own educational identity, my own narrative, my personal and professional ethnography? In the telling? Is this ironic contradiction? Or simply contradiction? More superficially, is this mere word play, albeit 'clever?'

Perhaps all of the above are implicated. Regardless, I will attempt to 'show.'

"Mama! Maaaaaama!" shrieks a thin urchin as his mother disengages him from her leg, prepares to leave the kindergarten.

"Robert! Robert," softer. "You have to stay. Look at all the other children. You'll have fun."

"No, mama! No! Maaaaaama!" He begins to sob in earnest. He is five, has been often sick with asthma, pneumonia, many nights in oxygen tents. He wheezes.

"I can stay for a little while," she hesitantly offers to the woman in charge. The mother is not yet 25 herself, a thin, shy decidedly Appalachian woman with little formal education and less self-confidence.

"Okay. Sometimes that helps," the other woman replies. "You can probably leave in a little while when he gets interested in what the others are doing."

This woman leads the other children in activities and drills and the typical routine of any kindergarten. The little boy does not join in despite his mother's repeated urging.

definitions - "identity" versus "self" - become reified, static labels which once again primarily serve the hegemony of traditional educational discourse. I hope, of course, to at least in part defy this hegemony by offering my own, non-traditional view of my own educational identity within this circulating discourse.

A day passes, then two. The little boy refuses to leave his mother's side, cries incessantly if she leaves even for a few minutes. He cries every morning, throws up anything he eats before they leave home. The mother and father debate, talk with the woman in charge of the kindergarten. They give up. The little boy will wait a year. The two week, preschool Kindergarten program is still optional in Blue Hollar, Virginia in 1964.

Yet I default, in proper academic fashion, to telling. Forgive me.

My first learning in first grade involved discovering that I could do the work, that I could follow the rules, do what I was told, obediently follow an institutional schedule, obediently remain quiet when quiet was so often demanded ... and that discovery must have flowed seamlessly and effortlessly into my earliest and most fundamental, existing educational identity. I say "existing" because widely accepted research such as that compiled in Volume 2: *Infancy and Developmental Psychobiology of the Handbook of Child Psychology* (Campos & Haith, 1983) and my own experience as a parent indicates that human learning begins before birth. Here, in the Appalachian mountains of western Virginia, I know too that learning resides archetypally in those same mountains, at least for me, and begins I believe for most natives of this region with some measure of quaint, Elizabethan phrasing heard through the walls of a womb. My oldest daughter clearly recognized my Appalachian drawl when I spoke in the delivery room, soothed her softly with that voice, quieted her post-birth cries. She had already learned my sound. She lives, of course, her own memories as each day passes.

Thus, more accurately, my own remembered learning, my basic confidence in my own competence actually began at home, not in an institution, as I learned to read, as I learned my "ABC's," as I learned to write my name. My first institutional learning, in first grade, did however turn successful according to institutional mores after that brief, disastrous kindergarten experience. I still threw up every morning - until about Christmas of first grade - but I rarely cried once I got to school.

Of course, this institutional learning of my own competence came very gradually and largely, at least to me, unconsciously during those early years in first and second and third grade

and beyond both inside and outside of Blue Hollar Elementary. Oh, I fumbled with some of the art work, the third-grade cursive versus the printed letters on the thin green paper with the faint red lines, the paper that tore almost every time I tried to erase, the paper we used because it was cheap. I struggled with cursive "Q's" and to this day cannot draw a "Q" in proper cursive form. I print them, quickly, and move on. No reader has ever complained. Cursive "Q's" look to me like "Z's;" and I can't draw cursive "Z's" either. But all in all, I learned that I could do the work relatively quickly, relatively easily, and I learned that I could make Mama and Daddy and Grandma Williams and Mrs. Robinson happy. Mama and Daddy and Grandma Williams' (who always lived with us⁵) happiness had, I suppose, always been a major component of my own happiness; Mrs. Robinson joined the list during first grade. She was followed by others as I moved from elementary grade to elementary grade and this list grew for at least three or four years. That derivative happiness too must form an intrinsic component of my educational identity, the identity that began long before I arrived in first grade. I simply can't remember the details of that identity and so must rely on family stories for my information, must rely on stories of bouncing on Daddy's knee the rare hours that he was home, of the hours spent with books and crayons and my older sister's dolls, of the routine reading with Mama and Grandma, always the routine reading with Mama and Grandma, with my older sister Bobby Ann and then alone. In my actual memory I've always been reading, and that reading in and of itself must constitute a bedrock in my educational identity. I don't remember writing, except my name and the "ABC's," until much, much later.

I do remember, in third grade, when Mrs. Wholfenden refused to believe that I'd read *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* in just one week. She said *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* was too big for a third grader to finish in one week. She said I could keep it out

⁵My grandfather died before my parents marriage and thus, as my father assumed responsibility for that household, for his own mother and sisters, my mother married into the household, into an existing family. I still marvel at her adaptability and at the harmonious environment in which I spent my early years despite the potential for friction between the two women. Of course, my mother was only fifteen at the time of her marriage and equally important, both my grandmother and my mother deferred to one another at all cost rather than engage in open conflict.

of the library for another week or even two so I could really finish the whole book - if I really wanted to. I didn't want to keep it longer; I'd already really read it, cover to cover. "No, I'll check out something new this week," my thirty-nine-year-old self is smugly sure I said. My thirty-nine-year-old self is equally sure she smiled knowingly and gave me a mental or even actual physical pat on the head in smiling condescension. My thirty-nine-year-old self wonders if Mrs. Wholfenden herself ever read *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, cover to cover. Cynically, bitterly, I doubt it. But I read more books and more importantly, Mrs. Wholfenden's betrayal must form a minor component in my educational identity even as I became addicted to stories, to other places available only in my imagination. Maybe both Mrs. Wholfenden and those other places contributed to my reaction when Mrs. James, in fifth grade, said I'd never have any friends if I didn't learn to get along better with others. I cried and was terrifically embarrassed at that display. Fifth grade boys don't cry unless they're sissies. I wasn't a damn (I learned that word in third grade) sissy. The heroes in my books, the books I kept right on reading, weren't sissies. I also continued to please even Mrs. James. I only stopped after I moved to another school, a school where we learned to move from room to room, adult to adult, if less often under the direct supervision of any adult, and no one adult could ever again depend upon my attention, my willingness to please. I drifted away from pleasing adults during those middle school years. My educational identity shifted, registered social forces, my peers, not adults. I continued to read, pleasing only myself. I still have no memory of authentic writing, only lettering and worksheets and book reports, even in sixth grade.

Another Day, just today, I note (perhaps ethnographically) that this week I'll be enduring the first of four official inspections ... I mean, "observations," by The Principal as a condition of my one year's "full evaluation" on the journey to "continuing contract" ... again. I was on "continuing contract" - what some euphemistically call "tenure" - when I began my leave of absence from the Blue Hollar Public Schools in 1996. In returning after two years of full time study at Virginia Tech, I must endure "full evaluation" once again. I have invited The Principal in for Wednesday and the fourth period tenth-graders as they remain my most challenging group - motivation seems to be an important issue - as they have no doubt been punished too many

years before for our short tenure to have had any real effect ... yet. Of course I want The Principal's inspection during that class since any later inspections during different classes will absolutely seem an improvement. Excuse my manipulative technique; I learned from the best of many different schools. The tenth-graders are writing and reading, though, which is more than I can say for far too many of the other adults in the school ... did I say "adults?" Perhaps I meant "students." Perhaps not.

Did I mention The Principal, with approval from The Superintendent, switched my assignments? Ah, yes, I am familiar with the vagaries of institutions. Of course I should definitely not complain since I now have a far, far better schedule than the previous three weeks of school - without the 'secretarial' assignment of "Attendance"⁶ every morning that effectively lengthened my morning by thirty minutes as I had to begin my class preparations at least thirty minutes before I began my 'secretarial' duties, before first bells. But enough of that. I remain bitter at both the secretarial job and at the indifference to thirty-eight eighth-graders with whom I'd already built something of a relationship. This dissertation proceeds apace.

As an adult, I still read voraciously and I do write, perhaps unfortunately and too often in reaction to the events of the day-to-day. According to this writing, my anger increases almost daily. Rebellion seems imminent. Or is that "emminent?" Whatever. I do not penalize minor and incidental spelling miscues in student writing if the students honestly struggle for expression, for authenticity. For myself and at least as of this writing moment less than three full months into a new school year, I feel stifled in that whatever true educational identity I may possess, whatever true learning I may wish to pursue for myself and these students suffocates

⁶In our system, "Attendance" involves, first, handing out early check-out passes to those souls so fortunate as to have a note to leave early, followed by a call to the parent(s) to confirm that the note was genuine, followed by the sorting of miniature scraps of paper upon which each class' absentees are recorded that morning, recording these indiscretions on students' permanent attendance cards, issuing tardy notes to those arriving after the first tardy bell, and finally calling the parent(s) of each and every absent student. The Code of Virginia requires this last step. We are allotted one block period in which to conduct this business, followed by two other instructional employees who routinely continue this charade for a second, assigned duty period. The latter two usually barely complete the task. Everyone agrees this duty ranks as less hateful than cafeteria duty, but only barely.

alternately under the weight of too many students cramped into a too small room, an inability to engage them actively and even physically except in limited ways, the rules and regulations that prohibit them actually choosing anything related to their own educations, and the myriad and variously engineered institutional mores that repeatedly assign them the same status as inanimate parts on an assembly line. Angry and surprised, I sense feelings similar to those I felt as a student in this same school, in these same rooms from 1972 to 1977. I had thought that that component of my educational identity was long buried, even outgrown. I did rebel then, too. I rebelled, barely graduated, completed the learning of four high school years in my first few years of college instead. I'll no doubt return to those college years again, later in this dissertation. The learning continues today.

But my current anger stems at least in part from my interactions of the past two years in a less restrictive environment, an undergraduate collegiate environment in which even the student interns seeking Virginia licensure in K-5 education, the interns who I supervised last year and the year before, were at least afforded some human dignity and choices as they navigated the Virginia Tech bureaucracy. Blue Hollar High School students are afforded very little beyond shelter, light, audiovisual materials, and textbooks. Oh, yes, we have one room with thirty computers connected to the Internet ... for our six hundred or so students. Indeed, every public school with which I've been involved, from elementary to high school, has treated its students similarly. In these institutions, we adults have the students' numbers and we are not afraid to use them. Nothing changes. Such was the case and more so, according to my father, when my grandfather rebelled against the family farm and attended Blue Hollar High School in the early nineteen hundreds. Such was the case and more so when my father himself attended Blue Hollar High School in the forties. Such was the case when I attended Blue Hollar High School in the seventies. The original Blue Hollar High School was demolished in the sixties but the institutional legacy continues regardless of physical facility, more's the pity. So too the legacy continues into my professional era, this, the late nineties. Welcome to the educational factory. Welcome to our second, institutional century. No wonder a popular rock band from my youth, Pink Floyd, titled a song on it's second album "Welcome to the Machine" in 1975 (Waters, 1975). And while that particular song may have been oriented more egocentrically for

the song writer toward the ‘machine’ of modern commercial music, a later album by the same artists with a similar, rebellious theme contained the lines, "We don't need no education./We don't need no thought control" (Waters, 1979). I digress. Do I perhaps agree? I wonder Surely the computer tires of these tirades. Hope is dead. Long live the Hope. Emily, Emily⁷, naively wise student intern, you should have said, "Schools are SUPPOSED to be about hope."

Interestingly enough, possibly truly ethnographically, as I further reflect on these feelings, my presumed professional, educational identity seems to wax and wane depending upon the degree of oxygen deprivation I endure each day. Some days, I seem too, too the official adult as I admonish the one remaining group of eighth-graders (after my switched assignments) to attend to their reading, their writing, to quiet down as their childish voices rise - chattering and chirping like caged birds - in small groups. The next period, I refuse to assign an essay topic for the twelfth graders as they'll soon enough be faced with potentially obtuse and/or adversarial professors demanding twelve pages minimum of scholarly (or what passes for it) prose, supposedly but rarely researched in depth on a topic pertaining to “Introduction to Biology” or “Organic Chemistry” or “Introduction to Psychology.” Those seniors will need their topic-choosing wits about them, then, most likely. Far better that I play at being open-minded, even free-spirited as I demand they choose their own poisons now such that they be prepared to make such choices more intelligently (more cynically?) later. In my experience and with occasional rare exceptions, even the most student-friendly undergraduate collegiate faculty also remain woefully committed to what is at best an artificial, content-based standard having very little to do with the interests of most students⁸. The students study, regurgitate for the test or the essay, move on. Faculty remain mired in their own content, their own context of specialization and discipline-specific study. Even in high schools, English faculty prepare all students for

⁷I supervised Emily as a student intern last year. She wrote in an e-mail “reflection” about her belief that schools should be about hope for children with little or no hope at home.

⁸A cursory review of virtually any undergraduate program of study at any school, including the attendant syllabi for the courses therein required, demonstrates the accuracy of this assertion. Too often, these programs of study and syllabi involve two years of career exploration along with some training in correct correspondence techniques and generally sensible writing followed by two years of career-specific disciplinary training.

further study in English literature, mathematics faculty prepare all students for further study in mathematics, and so on and so on for virtually every discipline. Students endure, assured that this institutional path will ensure them a good job, a reasonable standard of living. Informally, many if not most of the students with whom I talk express confusion and at minimum frustration at this approach even as they contemplate no alternative for themselves or their future children. Some few of the more alert resent my decidedly different approach as I seek to provide them opportunities for genuine discovery, opportunities to tailor their study of literature and writing to their own interests and goals. These few come close to demanding that I give them content to memorize, ‘canned’ assignments to complete. They are comfortable, successful within this system, this institution. They trust that this success will translate to success in the future; I do not. I have always questioned this model and contemplated alternatives, at first only in my own selfish if immature interests but now both for myself and my children, my two daughters. As a more mature adult, a supposed expert in certain educational fields (specifically reading and writing), I question this model for these same students I encounter each day, students interested in limited independence, in social mores within peer groups, in future jobs and families and what are usually perceived as non-academic areas of study. I could cite virtually every student in every class in which I work, by personal interests, and none of them would express the interest in literature, in educational theory, in literacy which I enjoy. Blue Hollar’s co-valedictorian tells me she wishes to simply complete this process, with her perfect transcript complete, in order to study and practice her trumpet-playing at a musical conservancy. She remains intensely frustrated that I will not participate in endless rounds of memorization and regurgitation, activities at which she has become inordinately proficient. Yet the Blue Hollar English Department creates and promulgates a list of required readings for every student, at every grade level (See Appendix A) even to the point of becoming quite irate when each year’s eighth graders come to Blue Hollar having already read one of the novels on that reading list because that same novel is used, year after year, in one seventh grade classroom at Blue Hollar Middle School. In any event, I have likewise yet to encounter a tenth-grader who honestly enjoys reading the text version of Shakespeare’s “Julius Caesar.” This seems nonsensical, definitely counter-productive if I wish to truly engage each and every student in his or her own learning.

No less a celebrated literacy spokesman than Paulo Freire spoke and wrote broadly of this issue in promoting what he called “critical literacy” for the indigenous populations of Brazil (1973). Later, and with reference to American education in particular and in conversation with Donaldo Macedo, Freire says (1987):

In this [American] curriculum, then, there is a quality that is hidden and that gradually incites rebelliousness on the part of children and adolescents. Their defiance corresponds to the aggressive elements in the curriculum that work against the students and their interests. ... In fact, students are reacting to a curriculum and other material conditions in schools that negate their histories, cultures, and day-to-day experiences. School values work counter to the interests of these students and tend to precipitate their expulsion from school. It is as if the system were put in place to ensure that these students pass through school and leave it as illiterates. (p. 121)

My own expulsion was almost precipitated in the years from 1972 to 1977. I survived probably primarily because I read all the time in a home filled with books and other readers and was thus well prepared to negotiate an institutional system that assumed my failure would naturally follow upon my rebellious attitude or at least my inattention. The failure never followed. I survived (if barely with all “C’s” and “D’s” on my report cards), graduated, learned nothing of content, much of institutional negotiation and manipulation, of walking fine lines between outright, sanctionable rebellion and petty incendiary offenses committed purely for my own entertainment and satisfaction. More importantly, these minor offenses served to warn both faculty and administrative staff to leave me alone. I ceased even those petty retaliations long before I received a diploma; I marked time, served time sullenly and without hope except of eventual emancipation ... and graduated. My less rebellious classmates, much like this year’s co-valedictorian, toed the line, completed the assignments, memorized, regurgitated on cue. They chose the path of least resistance. My less fortunate classmates failed, dropped out, moved on as many of their own parents had in their own schooling. The cycle continues today as I watch too many of this year’s tenth graders sullenly contemplate their next few years of compulsory attendance in a system they neither understand, accept, appreciate, or learn in. Perhaps the system works culturally efficiently as it ensures that these students become individual reproductions of their parents - cultural dropouts, I call them - within the dominant culture. Of

course, an occasional exception slips through the net. I represent one such exception, in my reading all the time, in my pursuit of advanced degrees, in my educational identity. I even write nowadays, another exception indeed.

Autobiographically, of course, I know from family stories that I come from a heritage of educational exceptions albeit the particulars naturally differ by historical and generational circumstances. For instance, as I mentioned earlier, my grandfather Williams received a high school diploma in 1916 and even against his own father's wishes, an event truly exceptional in rural Appalachia for that era. Of four boys in a family of eight children, he was the only boy to attend school beyond sixth grade. He further compounded the insult by leaving the family farm and then moving a young family to Norfolk, Virginia where he learned to weld as an apprentice in the shipbuilding industry. My own father - equally exceptionally - independently learned precision machining and metallurgy - largely through reading and hands-on experimentation and phone conversations with various individuals in those industries from all over the United States - in order to build a successful business employing, at one point, thirty-five men. He further parlayed that learning into a position researching the relative abrasion resistance of various materials as an employee of the new owners of that same business several years after the sale was complete - after I left home to complete my own formal education - and after his health improved as a result of cardiac by-pass surgery and despite two myocardial infarctions prior to the surgery.

For myself, I once again attempt to show, rather than tell, the validity of my own claim to belonging in that lineage, my own position as an exception to most successful students, especially students in academic disciplines.

“Finished?”

“Yeah. I'll be ready in a minute.”

The older man who posed the question walks toward the back of the industrial building, away from the homemade furnace - crafted from the burner of a 45,000 B.T.U. (British Thermal Unit) natural gas heating unit and cinder bricks atop a heavy metal table, also homemade - that

appears to shimmer, appears hallucinogenic and radiates terrific heat from the poorly insulated sheets of steel that serve as a top, a cover for the furnace. Pass a hand above that top from less than two feet away and the hair will singe. Pause too long in that passing and the skin will blister. The younger man who answered, the kindergarten dropout, has just replaced those steel sheets, has just removed a heavy, aluminized leather jacket, has just finished welding a machinery part within that same furnace. This explains the poorly insulated steel sheets that serve as cover: they must be removable while the part within remains at 1,000 degrees Fahrenheit else that part will crack even as it is welded. This also explains the younger man's perspiration soaked shirt, the slightly melted plastic lens in his welding helmet, also aluminum colored for heat reflection. This explains the deep red coloring of his face, slowly diffusing to normal in a barely perceptible breeze of midnight air, the same air that quickly wicks the perspiration from his shirt.

“That’s one thing I love about these uniform shirts: the sweat wicks out of ‘em in a hurry. Cools you off quick. ‘Course anything feels cool after that,” he says.

“I told you I’d do some of that if you got too hot,” says the older man.

Both know the unspoken hazard and the subterfuge implicit in the offer. The older man, the father, no longer has the heart for such work. Two heart attacks in five years - two myocardial infarctions - have left him largely disabled, largely a mentor and advisor in this business. He still welds but risks another heart attack, risks sudden death with every overexertion. Of course such hazards remain unspoken between them. Many relationships revolve around unspoken conditions.

“What time Larry and Charles comin’ in tomorrow?” the older man calls from the rear of the shop.

“They’re supposed to be here at eight. Larry’s got the pattern torch set up for BBC parts and Charles has American Screw pin orders to grind. And I’ve got to get the heads on that motor for O’dell’s Thunderbird,” comes the answer.

“Let’s shut these doors. I’ll come back and turn this furnace down in an hour or so. You can go on to bed,” says the older man.

“Okay. I’ll pull that door down. But if we wait about fifteen more minutes, we can turn

the furnace down the first hundred degrees and then it won't need but one more step before morning. I can leave Larry a note to turn it off as soon as he gets here. And I'll be here again at nine. Can you come back in an hour and a half after we leave, about two? Or we can just leave it at nine hundred 'til morning. Don't you want to go to bed?"

"No, I'll probably still be awake. I don't sleep until then, anyway. And I won't try to come down here in the morning, either."

"I know. Alright. I still think you'd feel better if you'd sleep more at night and get up earlier. I said I'll get that door. Leave it alone. And I'll get the other side, too. I'm ready for bed."

The younger man walks into another section of the building, across forty feet of grease-stained concrete toward a garage door that closes on a loading dock washed in fluorescence. Moths and gnats dart in and out that door, swirling in and out of darkness like unrecognized thoughts sparkling in and out of consciousness.

Autobiographically, of course, or even ethnographically, such stories seem far more easily told:

In the momentary boredom of an exhausted midnight, as I inhaled the flat sweat off my drying shirt, I considered a life of forty or so more years of similar mornings, similar drying shirts, similar orders completed for similar, demanding customers always looking for cheaper parts, quicker deliveries, closer tolerances, cleaner welds; eventually I despaired and sought escape in what was to me the unknown of formal education. Little knowing that the education of my former high school classmates with their college degrees and their suited offices and mortgaged children only offered forty more years of exhausted midnights through an office window instead of over a loading dock, I began an inquiry into greater knowledge that I now know can only end in the polished mahogany and tufted satin of the grave. Another unknown. There is no escape. For true education, the true story of a life never ends, never ceases being at least in part an inquiry, never ceases being at least in part unknown, except in the death of the learner. There is a bittersweet quality to such knowledge, a quality I'll keep from my two daughters for as long as possible, for as long as they will not benefit from that truth. It is too late

for me; I have looked into the glass, darkly, and cannot withdraw my gaze.

Today, for now, surprisingly, I hope ethnographically, I leave school most days smiling, leave school having enjoyed my time with the children with whom I share a classroom, an institution; I leave school thankful for their patience with me, a hardened veteran of boring countenance, amusing articulation. My anger and my rebellious reflections seem largely phenomena of the night and the keyboard that passes for my writing desk. Yesterday Dale said he needed a thesaurus to talk with me. I believe this signifies growth in his vocabulary. This I mark progress. Yet I do not believe this progress will be reflected on any test, even a verified vocabulary test like the verbal section of the Scholastic Aptitude Test (S.A.T.). Dale will not take the S.A.T. Dale will turn 18 this May. Dale is in “English 10.” Yet Dale continues to dream, according to his Writing Notebook, of pursuing a career in sports medicine. Those who laugh need read no further.

For I continue to hope I will convince Dale that not all schooling involves punishment for wrong answers, wrong interests, wrong families, wrong cultures, and immature writing styles even as I fear he’d call me a liar if he knew the institutions I know, could understand the experiences I have, could see through my thirty-nine-year-old, graduate-degreed eyes. I continue to hope, at least occasionally, for our collective educational futures even as I talk with Dale and several of his classmates about hunting and fishing and new trucks and classic muscle cars of the sixties they’ll mostly never buy, about welding and electrical codes and future jobs with decent hourly pay purely because they at least will talk to me about these topics. Reminder: At least the students continue to talk to me and without condescension, without the apparent deceit I witness in too many of their conversations with other adults in this school. Shane, another tenth-grader, came to visit me the other day during my second period planning time. He came to tell me he’d been to court the day before, thus explaining his absence, and that his mother (the “bitch” he called her) was set on using the threatening letter from his father, from prison, to add at least ten years to Shane’s father’s prison sentence. The Assistant Principal found him sitting beside my desk but not before he had assured me that he’d tell “them” that I asked if he had checked in, that I had asked for his note to be out of class. I’d never enter Blue Hollar High

School another day if this were not a part of my educational identity. I have not cognitively disposed of Dale or Shane or their classmates and never will. I am too stubborn, too committed to my own educational identity, my own return to formal education to ever despair of Dale or Shane or their classmates. Perhaps I seek wisdom while they seek diplomas. I do not have a useful definition of wisdom no more than I have a useful definition of enlightenment. The diploma is self-explanatory in our society; I intend to submit this document in partial fulfillment of the requirements for another diploma of my own.

Autobiographically, I hope ethnographically, once again I return to my adolescence to show a little, tell more, even as I consider apologizing to readers for my already faltering sense of autobiographic chronology.

“Settle down boys and girls. Settle down. Listen to me,” says Mrs. Jones in Room 15 in the old wing of Blue Hollar Middle School. The subject is seventh grade science.

She is mostly ignored.

“That’s enough talking!” her voice rises as she continues to be ignored.

POP! POP! POP! Her ruler slaps against the polished black surface of the laboratory table. The students voices settle from the air like dust motes, thick at first, then thinning to a sprinkling, then to occasional glimmers in random shafts of sunlight. The students have learned this routine.

POP! A fat boy in white bell bottoms and a purple shirt slaps his own ruler on the table at which he sits. Other students snicker and smirk; the dust motes thicken briefly. The boy innocently blinks, completely straight-faced, at Mrs. Jones

“Go to the office,” she is not amused.

“What’d I do?” he asks.

“You know exactly what you did. Go to the office.”

“Awww.” He lumbers up, sulks from the room, turns left and trudges down the brown-tiled hall. “Ol’ bitch,” he mutters under his breath.

“Ah, who sent you here?” Mr. Patterson, the principal asks.

“Mrs. Jones,” the boy mumbles.

“Ah, what for?”

“All I did was slap my ruler down on the table,” he dissembles.

“Ah, uh huh. That’s all? You might as well tell me. Ah, she will, you know.”

“Uh, she does the same thing, you know ...” still mumbling.

“Ah, uh huh? And so you thought it’d be fun to copy her, I suppose? Make a little fun of Mrs. Jones?” the principal’s tone turns sarcastic, a tone not lost on the boy.

“I dunno. No. I just did it.”

“Ah, you don’t know? I think you do know. Do you think it’s ‘smart?’ Do you think you’re ‘smart’ because you’re in trouble and the rest of your friends in class aren’t? Do you think you already know more than Mrs. Jones? Ah, would your parents be happy if I called them and told them that you were making fun of Mrs. Jones instead of studying? Do you?” Mr. Patterson’s voice gets louder at the end. His eyes pop, leaving him slightly bug-eyed as he stares his hardest at the miscreant. This is his usual technique.

“No sir,” the boy mumbles for he understands that now the talk is serious.

“Ah, I think you know exactly why you’re here and exactly why you need to straighten up and worry more about studying instead of entertaining your classmates.”

“Yessir,” he mumbles again, into his purple shirt.

“Well, I’ll have to think about this. You wait here,” the principal says as he leaves the room.

Fifteen minutes later, he returns.

“Ah, okay, I’m afraid I can’t let this pass. When will you understand that you can’t just do whatever you want? Looks to me like you’d get tired of these little ‘sessions.’ And next year, at the high school, I can tell you right now they won’t be as easy on you as we are.” Patterson withdraws a paddle from a drawer. He is resolute, sure of his duty. “Ah, I think two licks. Stand up. C’mon, stand up!” his voice fills with impatience. “Put your hands on the desk in front of you ...”

To tell the truth, I learned the most about universal institutional limits in sixth and

seventh grade as I became more and more focused on my own, newly forming social life, even as the institution continued to ask me to please Mama and Daddy and Mrs. Smith and Mrs. Alexander and Mrs. Sullivan and several other generic “Mrs.” and “Mr’s.” I couldn't. In particular, I learned about trips to the principal’s office, about the punishments possible in middle schools in 1970-71, 1971-72. I only attended there for sixth and seventh grade and was among the first class of eighth graders to move - perhaps too early - to Blue Hollar High School. Yet I clearly remember the adrenaline of fear that combined with pride as I trudged slowly toward the Blue Hollar principal’s office for this or that infraction or petty rebellious act. I clearly remember the sense of importance I gained when Mr. Patterson and Coach Smith and Coach Spraker and even Mr. Hounshell in shop, the only men I remember in that institution, treated me differently from many of my classmates, treated me with the respect due any adult (I thought at the time), knew my name and spoke to me in passing in the hall. Yet I never miscalculated the degree of rebellion that would be tolerated as I always passed every subject, completed every grade. My grades went down while I tinkered with model cars and pellet guns and toy trucks and worked summers at Williams Manufacturing Corporation (Daddy’s machine shop; \$7 a week the first summer; I was 12; I bought a \$49 bicycle that July.) and worried about my looks since I’d discovered that the rest of the world was watching me, suddenly. My grades went down and I also discovered that instead of pleasing all those generic “Mrs.” and “Mr’s.,” I could please my friends by dis-pleasing almost all the adults in my life. Naturally, the displeasure of all the people outside my circle of friends (Mrs. James was wrong.) or most adults soon became by far the most important mission in my life. My grades continued to sink. They sank all the way to an "F" one quarter in tenth-grade English. Daddy said I had to graduate, that I couldn't quit school, so I went back next quarter and pleased a different Mrs. Alexander enough to get a "B." Third quarter was another "D" or a "C," I don't remember which for sure, but I didn't go to summer school and I graduated on time, with all my classmates from Mrs. Robinson’s first grade. I even went to the community college, pretending to be like a lot of those same classmates, pretended that I'd go all the way through college - for what, I never knew and since I didn't know, going all the way through college never became (until much, much later) a component in my educational identity. I didn't (until much, much later) ... go all the

way through college, that is. I continued to read all the time. I rarely wrote, except for book reports and worksheets and two, clearly remembered assignments, one from eleventh grade, another from tenth. I remember those two assignments well, my only authentic writing from public schools, and I will no doubt return to them later - if definitely not chronologically - in this dissertation.

At the community college my luck and my innate intelligence ran out; I couldn't quite sneak through without doing any homework or any of the assignments. I didn't care. I was working full time, second shift, in Daddy's machine shop, same as I'd done all through my senior year of high school. I knew someday it would be my machine shop. I knew, someday, I'd have the same thirty to thirty-five men working for me. I didn't need school. I needed to punch a time clock with those thirty or thirty-five 'real' men who worked with machines and metals. I needed a girlfriend. I needed to become a man, not a student, my eighteen-year-old self thought. The education that eighteen-year-old had seen seemed awfully trivial - and easy - and boring. Most of the people in education that that eighteen-year-old had seen weren't at all interesting or connected in any way, shape, or form to the real life of the men and other adults that I wanted to be. The people of education didn't seem to know cars or motorcycles (I had both); they didn't seem to know machines; they didn't seem to know sex; they didn't seem to know much of anything except what was in their textbooks. I'd read those textbooks (Remember, I never quit reading.) and I simply didn't see the point in 'studying' a book once I'd read it. I'm not entirely sure I do now, as a thirty-nine-year-old. That lack of insight into the purpose of dry and unapplied academic 'study' contributes to my educational identity. Perhaps that lack of insight continues to haunt me. I still mostly read for insight, not study. Oh, I read many books more than once. I often re-read passages I find particularly interesting, especially poetry. I still read all the time. Now, as you see, I also write. I intend that this will be only the first of many professional compositions.

Today, reflectively, angrily, is another day, another deal with another devil as the sixth period twelfth graders in "Advanced Composition" procrastinate, waiting for lightning to strike or time to run out as they avoid putting marks upon the paper lest they waste a single word of

prose that won't be turned in for credit. "Efficiency," indeed. I call it the "Critical Mass" model of writing, to their minor amusement. "Critical Mass" is reached when the time remaining in which to complete a writing assignment becomes insufficient for genuine drafting and revision and only allows for a single, unedited draft to be submitted to the instructor. Thus, the excuse is ready-made, and more importantly, serves to protect the writer's ego admirably. To wit: "If I'd taken more time, my grade would have been better. But what do you expect? Considering I wrote it last night, a (pick a grade: "A," "B," "C," or "D") is pretty good."

I am familiar with such efficiency, with this model, have suffered interminable agonies at its hands in the past. Oh yes, during my undergraduate years I wrote the literary essays, the literary criticism. I wrote the scientific reports, the summaries, the comparison and contrast papers. I proved I'd read the story or studied the facts or learned the definitions or considered the position or researched the topic ... but there was so little of authentic writing in that proof, so little of honest writing in my "Critical Mass" model, that I almost despaired of ever writing anything authentically, in my own style. I almost stopped writing altogether, several times. There's so little life in writing for others, in writing for an assignment or an administrator or a committee. There's no creation or even remembrance in forms. Forms are to be filled, not written, even the forms that begin with a blank sheet of paper, with an assigned thesis statement. I learned how to complete that kind of writing: fill the paper often enough, (it's easier than it sounds, once the pages are filled) - even coin a pretty metaphor - and too often if the conclusions suit the assignment or the administrator or the committee, if the conclusions remind those others of their own conclusions, then the writing's successful, the contract's fulfilled. I will not enter into those contracts with the "Advanced Composition" seniors, more to their dismay. Unfortunately for them, they have been successful students; they have discovered the truth already of Victor Villanueva's strategy of reading faculty publications and then imitating the style and conclusions of those same publications (1993). This strategy will not suit for me. They have my criteria: I have told them (too much of 'telling' but I sensed they were asking) that good writing must be clear, concise, written in an active instead of passive voice, must be appropriate to the audience and the purpose, include details and literary devices like similes and metaphors and descriptive verbs and nouns wherever possible and must be, after final editing,

error-free. I have refused to assign them topics and will continue to do so. These seniors complain; I remain adamant. I understand my own "Critical Mass" model too well, understand too well the eventual agony and superficiality of writing for others who control a grade, a promotion, a degree.

Cynical? Perhaps. I call this perspective wherein I refuse to assign topics liberatory (to return to those two authentic high school papers) from the time I wrote my own story, in my own voice, instead of the essay I was supposed to write ... and was rewarded with a "D" for that tenth-grade assignment. I call it liberatory from the only other time I wrote a story for a high school assignment, the time Timmy Alderman thought my story was funny, hilarious, actually ... and everyone else laughed and I luxuriated in that response when Mrs. Alexander let Timmy read it to the class.

Oh, I understand these seniors' unhappiness because I understand my own unhappiness when I had to write other people's assignments, other people's thesis statements. These seniors are too adept already at that enterprise even as they understand too its pain as they write papers the night before their assignments are due. Of course, at Blue Hollar Community College, Bobby Wymer encouraged my poetic writing even as she demanded formulaic thesis statements in literature classes, even as she truly befriended me and read all my amateurish poems with due seriousness. Likewise, Don Craft, the psychology instructor at that same school also befriended me even to the point of informally counseling me, spending precious hours of his limited office time, when he feared that my dark and brooding poetry signified a dark and brooding psyche or worse. True, at The College of William and Mary Professor Mary Ann Melfi liked my essays and unremittingly encouraged me to continue writing in "Advanced Composition," but that was a class about writing. And I learned a lot about professional writing from her, about using personal examples, about reinforcing arguments, about buffing out the scratches left from previous buffings, even about writing to discover my own thesis statements. The student editors published one of my essays from that class - an essay about writing, of course - in A Gallery of Writing, the small magazine published twice each year by the English department students at The College of William and Mary (p. 52, 1989). Professor Melfi and I were impressed, but no one else was. No one, including myself or Professor Melfi saw the irony of it all. But while

Professor Melfi encouraged me to write authentically, Professor Frank⁹ (also at William and Mary) said my essays weren't at the proper "level" in "Medieval Literature," said I didn't quote the text enough - but he'd ignore the mid-term assignment if the final was greatly improved. The final was greatly improved. I took his advice, offered an argument, cited three passages to prove it, offered an argument, cited three passages to prove it, offered ... the format is clear, familiar to every successful survivor ... I mean "student" ... of an undergraduate literature course. I lost some sleep but Professor Frank ignored the mid-term. He said the final essays were "excellent." I thought they were dry and formal, stuff nobody would read. But I said, "Thank you. I think I understand better now. I see what you mean. Thank you. About that recommendation for "Creative Writing: Fiction"" And to his credit, Professor Frank demanded a fictional writing sample, read it, told me to go wherever my obvious talent led (I am equally sure he never envisioned a dissertation in Curriculum and Instruction.) and then penned a strong letter of recommendation for that creative writing course. Of course I also learned from Professor Frank - I learned about medieval literature, about literary analysis, about literary criticism; but despite the pages and pages of writing I produced for the take-home final exam for that class, I didn't learn anything about honest writing, about the learning inherent in personal writing, in using writing for learning, not purely as an instrument for assessment and subsequent evaluation. The assessment rarely occurs anyway; it's all evaluation, unfortunately.

Autobiographically (ethnographically?), I am tempted even now to advise the "Advanced Composition" students of my own, egocentric writing strategy when confronted with inauthentic writing 'assignments.' If only I could show them that method

Midnight. Williamsburg, Virginia. 1990. A majority of windows in squat brick dormitories weakly emanate yellow as students study or play. Seemingly, too many of these students only study. A man, too old at thirty for these rooms, stares into a computer screen as if its glare will somehow reveal to him his purpose, his future. He writes poetry despite the

⁹Still another pseudonym ... perhaps the last.

deadline looming before him for an essay for any of a number of English literature classes. He writes - possibly desperately - and tinkers and finally concludes another poem that will earn no credit in any class, saves it to the hard disk invisible within the computer:

Morning Animals

Sun woke hung over
 the gothic arches of Old Campus,
 unmerciful,
 driving the trees outstretched palms to flower insanely,
 trying to protect the sleeping trunk,
 the heart.

Under the canopy,
 Under the protective canopy,
 Analytic perspectives of traditionally new places
 Glint from professorial wire rims
 In early beady pigeon's eye,
 Perched to elderly wavering
 In appreciation of squirrel industry.

Squirrels' shell games
 are illusive translated into cooing:
 they scamper half-way from elevated
 spectator box unconforming to pinfeathers;
 but they study scroll-design in baroque acorns
 anyway ... anyway they can may.

Wise pigeons swoop to graphic letter grades

Instead of winging electric squirrel language.

More common children offer crumbs

In admiration.

Crim Dell is a grey man
 --bushy tailed, hesitant of winter--
 despairing of coupling dry leaves
 until finally bench-settled,
 glass-beaked old woman stooped
 to repair broken acorn spines
 with her glassy Ph.D.'s eyes.

Another night, any night might easily do, and with another in a long line of dry, unpalatable essays due too soon for real critique, real reflection, real learning, that same man too old for his position, his undergraduate status in modern American society, writes more poetry:

Ivory Animals

Musty babies

shored against a premature wall

of Rockefeller bricks,

stillborn with silver wire frames

all uptilted on philosophical noses:

"Is God dead?"

But (*they say*)

of course he is
the reply demanding argument --

"And what is the nature of reality?"

Ah,... (*they pronounce*)
according to Derrida
or was it Nietzsche, or some other
well-dropped name the *a priori* question:

The reality of whom?
because the common reality man
lives in another town--but not

here in our high foreheads
skin-white
stretched to burst (not bust) ing
by learned dead books
quite impressive,
titular in other languages
we can't speak but certainly read very well;

(*as they*) mark their place
with soft pallored finger,
that while quite accurate may never be callous;

fiercely volunteering too
(*like*) up-propping the homeless
black against winter snow; feed the starvers

(especially the children)
 so they'll have a place to go...

A place inside...
 A place of light...
 A place warmly buried...
 A place quite well out of sight.

Although it doesn't matter
 eventually we know
 and remember all the lyrics,
 singing dirges of youthful celebration
 and imitation prayers to self-righteous preservation.

*Only to ask
 how much per fucking hour
 is that worth?*

The Blue Hollar High School students would not benefit in the least from my model. I will keep this secret to myself.

Today, reflectively, and yet once again the “Advanced Composition” students whine and hesitate, combining laziness with futility but sure in the end that the essay, the error-free words will miraculously emerge. And I, the degreed and anointed adult in the room, beg them to trust my telling, to just write, accumulating words on paper or disk that will serve for any essay, every essay if they'll only write regardless of inspiration, regardless of seemingly distant deadlines, regardless they've been taught that great writers simply open a vein and the 'great' words pour forth. I am reminded of another poem, from my community college days, probably from about the time I began to distrust this model:

Letter Perfect

Bloody writer.

Psycho-surgeon.

Letting precious ink
on every starkly sterile page.

Stitching, slicing deity
with wrists slashed
by the pen's severity.

Damn the writers and critics and grammarians that ever foisted such misguided ideas of muses and artistic conceits, of dingy garret studios, of 'retreats,' of genius suffering for art and inspiration upon readers and composition students. Inspiration has been, in my writing experience, greatly overrated. The suffering perhaps remains - sadly - a prerequisite for tirades such as this seems destined to become. I tire of this suffering even as I tire of the institution and its denizens. Too often I prefer the company of the students. No doubt the other adults will talk. Perhaps I'll challenge the sixth period "Advanced Composition" students to write of overflowing joy tomorrow. Forgive me. Our heavenly Who art Forgive us We call ourselves ... learners?

Daddy says the only welding shop in Blue Hollar may be closing. Once upon a time, we did much of the work they now do. I ask myself if I really wish to remain in education. I ask myself too many questions.

Autobiographically, a single line may show the most, provide a refuge from the day-to-day, from unanswerable, un-ask-able questions. Telling always follows.

“Robert, this is Mr. and Mrs. Wood. They’re thinking about buying the shop.”

I didn’t inherit the machine shop. My father sold it after his first heart attack. He had no choice as he watched, incapacitated, the profits slide away. I was an irresponsible nineteen, had perhaps been too sheltered and ‘spoiled’ as a child and was obviously unprepared to manage a business with two shifts and over thirty employees. With that business gone, my own future suddenly seemed less settled, more a choice for me than an inheritance and I reveled in the possibilities. In short, I dreamed. We rented a small industrial building several blocks away and began working as Robert H. Williams Incorporated. We worked on other people’s cars, welded anything that came along to be welded, repaired machinery, started another business. We bought ten thousand dollars worth of specialized metal-cutting tools and envisioned ourselves as a major wholesaler for the growing industrial market in the Blue Hollar area. I’m sure Daddy had visions of building a second business equally successful to his last but also a business in which his only son could grow and mature and learn without the pressure of two shifts and thirty-plus employees. I had visions of making more money than most of my friends even while I didn’t answer to a time clock or a supervisor or a foreman. I had visions of race cars with our names on them and visions of speed and tire smoke and dreams I had visions like too many other young men and women, young men and women who never contemplate those visions at thirty-nine and never endure the pain of understanding what a singular component in their educational identities those visions, those lost dreams must be. They weren’t blessed as I have been with not only the opportunity to experience, but the time and opportunity to contemplate. Most aren’t blessed with families with a heritage of independence and mechanical or other aptitude and the finances to pursue (no matter the interest rate), for a few years, those youthful dreams. Most of the students I see every day will never have such opportunities. What opportunities might I provide them - instead - within my current institutional boundaries? Autobiography definitely provides a refuge.

Daddy and I spent most of the money from the first business trying to build that second, largely unsuccessful business. I watched the money flow in but I also watched slightly more of it flow out even while Daddy had a second heart attack and I assumed more and more

responsibility, even while I hired one man, two men, a third, a fourth, all the while jumping at every opportunity for more income, a way to stop the slow hemorrhage that continued even as we and then I alone conducted welding classes for the community college from which I'd flunked out a few years earlier, even as we abandoned the metal-cutting tools and most of the automotive repair work in order to specialize in difficult welding for companies in nearby cities like Roanoke, Virginia and Bluefield and Princeton, West Virginia and even across several states. The accounts receivable never outpaced the accounts payable except for brief periods of time. I continued my informal education throughout this period, learning from the welding burns and the financial burns and the relationship burns. Relationship burns. I dated a girl with more rural roots, a girl from outside of town, from the county, a high school junior named Stella Davis who, much to my surprise, continued to accept my invitations for movies, for fast food, for long rides through laurel-soaked hollows. I later came to understand that she mistakenly found me attractive only because she found her own life so unattractive.

I did become a man. Biology and chronology and past due invoices saw to that. Stella and I married, with her mother's consent, when she was seventeen. I thought myself lucky that any girl would actually say "Yes." Are most young men that different? Perhaps the popular ones, the ones that date in school and experiment with relationships are different. I will never know having been, in my own eyes, fat, unattractive, and always unwilling to expose myself to possible rejection. She quit school, I worked days and nights, same as before, while she (I now know) dreaded the hours alone in a too small apartment and we slowly discovered our own immaturity, our mistakes. I now understand that in some ways, I was trying to duplicate my father's life, his marriage to a 'country' girl who quit school and pledged herself to his fortunes as he tried mechanical repair work, logging and saw-milling, welding, and even working for a local cinderblock manufacturing company as plant manager until he found a niche in precision machine work with one local industry (transplanted from Illinois) as a client. That business, finally, prospered and grew. Likewise, I now understand that my mother was and is unique as she would have been valedictorian of her small rural school and thus had no difficulty with her General Education Diploma (G.E.D.). After all, I learned to read at least in part from her constant and lifelong habit of reading during every spare moment. Stella didn't read much,

didn't come from a family interested in reading. Finally, I now understand that my mother and father married and began life together in 1955, not 1980. I was naive. Worse, I was ignorant. I have long since forgiven myself that ignorance.

After nine months, Stella fled. Bitterly, unreasonably, I have never forgiven that betrayal even as I continue to discover the depths of my own immaturity, both then and now. The legal entanglements took two more years to unravel as I waited for the separation period to end, the lawyer to write it up, the judge to sign the papers. I suppose I should consider myself fortunate. I learned much those years, about both myself and relationships. If nothing else, I learned that the world did not revolve around me. My educational identity certainly matured as I became far less innocent, far more wary, more cynical about others. If nothing else, I learned much of sarcasm.

This perspective also undoubtedly informs my current relationship with the only true love of my life, Kathy, my wife of almost six years. Kathy reads all the time, as do I, still. Kathy writes well, if mostly out of necessity, as seemingly too often do I. Currently, that necessity seems largely for me a defensive movement as I consider my educational priorities as an educational professional employed by the Blue Hollar Public Schools, as I consider my unalterable belief in personal choice as a necessary prerequisite for authentic learning, against the predetermined and preordained curriculum so recently mandated by the Commonwealth of Virginia under the moniker of "Standards of Learning" ([English Standards of Learning for Virginia Public Schools](#) [Online]). I have read those, as well, and have written an absolutely seamless and impenetrable syllabus for all my classes that conforms I believe perfectly with the letter of those "Standards" (see Appendix B). Those syllabi, written purely to satisfy an institutional requirement since the students discard them as they leave the room, however, mention nothing of the actual activities in which we engage in our classes, in "English 8," "English 10," or the three sections of "Composition."

Today, damnably, according to the "Weekly Update" schedule we get from The Principal - I now call him Howdy Doody because he reminds me of that television character and because this small injustice to an apparently dedicated and even sincere - if as I believe completely

misguided - man lightens perhaps my misery at the injustice I see perpetrated on the students every day by the institution of which he remains but a small and inconsequential component among a million such components - but as of yesterday we have completed forty-six of our allotted one hundred and eighty instructional days for this year. I'm counting - perhaps desperately - and this means I have one hundred and thirty-four days left before I close the books on eighteen "English Composition" eleventh- and twelfth-graders in first period, twenty-two "English 10" ninth-, tenth-, and eleventh-graders in fourth period, nineteen "English 8" eighth-graders in fifth period, twelve "English Composition" twelfth-graders in sixth period, and eighteen more "English Composition" eleventh- and twelfth-graders in seventh period.

Of course I want to close the books on too many of them now. More accurately, I want some of them out of the classroom now. I want them gone. I want them to disappear. I want this because Brian (tenth grade) already understands as did Freire that this system doesn't and won't serve his interests other than he receive a diploma at some point. Brian just moved because his family's home was taken (he says in his Writing Notebook) after his father's drug-related arrest and conviction. According to the authorities, their "double-wide" was bought with drug money. Brian's family intends to hire a lawyer, finally, and fight this confiscation.

I want this because Bill's (also tenth grade) only interests involve hunting, fishing, and talking to Brian but definitely not writing or reading about hunting and fishing (according to Bill's Writing Notebook).

I want this because Matt (also tenth grade) writes, "I hate poetry. I won't read poetry. You can't make me read or write poetry. You can punish me however you want and I won't do poetry."

I want this because Stephen (eleventh grade) has a perfect zero for our previous forty-six days and has every intention of maintaining that zero throughout the rest of the year. He says, "I know I can do the work in an hour or two a week so why should I sit in here six hours a day, five days a week? Why don't they leave me alone and let me learn what I want? I'll just get a G.E.D."

Unfortunately, he's probably right considering the caliber of work most of us accept and I thus have no reasonable answer except to remind him that he can't quit school until he's

eighteen. He will never believe me if I tell him that the reading and writing we are sort of doing will enhance his understanding of the world, will increase his ability to earn money as he grows older, will improve his ability to persuade others of his opinion, will affect his life at all. Of all the educational writers with whom I am familiar, and to my great disappointment, only Paul Willis appears to truly understand students such as these that are not minorities, not identifiably learning disabled, not already pigeonholed and numbered but who nonetheless do not conform to societal expectations (1977). I suppose his book, Learning to Labor, resonates with me on several levels as I graduated in the year that the book was copyrighted, I come from a similar if unconventional blue collar culture, and perhaps most importantly because I lived my high school years in similar fashion to the subjects in Willis' study. They rebelled. I rebelled. They delighted in the torment of the adults in their school. I delighted in the torment of the adults at Blue Hollar High School. Unlike his subjects, I have completed my formal education at least to this point, just short of a doctorate. Unfortunately, however, his subjects, the blue collar boys of a British "factory town" and me at a younger age, now share a classroom with an older, more experienced, more mature (I hope) me, in a different era, fourth period every day. We call it "English 10."

Of course, minority or "borderland" (in current academese) literature is replete with such subjects, from the personal, autobiographical writing of Victor Villenueva, who I have mentioned before, and the similar if older Hunger of Memory by Richard Rodriguez (1981) to essay collections such as Learning from our lives: women, research, and autobiography (1997) to more artistic, if less scholarly collections such as Words Are What I've Got (1991) and even fictionalized accounts such as Push (1996). Educational identities are implicated if not directly addressed in them all; the universality of institutional and educational denial of developmentally appropriate and psychologically sound learning, genuinely student-centered curricular reform that allows and even celebrates the true lives of children, is not. Ultimately, my disappointment simply involves the absence of the universality of say, Michael Apple's early treatment of institutional and sociocultural hegemony in Ideology and Curriculum (1979). This book, with its broad, all encompassing explications of the hidden curriculums of public schools and its candid if densely written critical analysis of sociocultural reproduction seems to me almost an

icon of its type, if a largely ignored and soon to be forgotten icon with regard to actual public school realities for too many students. Seemingly, the universality of sociocultural reproduction has been forgotten in the milieu of egocentric accounts, mostly written by minorities, accounts such as this if I become too mired in my own, current institutional misery and despair. Apple argues just this as he points out that the hegemony of the dominant culture operates exactly so to subsume its own critics by incorporating them, if only marginally and as token spokespersons, into its all encompassing arms (pp. 1-13). I will not allow that. I will remember, every day, that in my experience and my analysis this institution which employs me denies every day of its existence the real identities of most of its inhabitants, minority or otherwise. I disagree with most if not all of the educational writers I have read in that I do not believe that this institution of public schooling as we currently know it is salvageable if real children's real lives are to be honored. I do not.

And yet I do not indict or mistrust or actively hold accountable most of the paid denizens of these institutions. Like Frank Smith, I trust most faculty's motives, their sincere desire and belief in their own practices (pp. 90-102, 1998), even as I agree too with his conclusions that there can be no "ideal" school but only a variety of learning communities operating in a variety of forms (pp. 100-01). I further conclude, moving beyond Smith's analysis, that such learning communities will necessarily cease to function as institutions, as reproductive organs for the dominant culture's continued ease and comfort at the expense of too many of those not so well served but who serve, as do we all, unwittingly to perpetuate this inequality. Unfortunately, in my own rebellious, formally educated, cynical and even disillusioned if idealistic educational identity, I vacillate between despair and hope for such an outcome ever to materialize. For tomorrow, I live these contradictions every day. I hold little hope that my own survival will outlast these contradictions.

For Tomorrow, I remain unsure of my future career in education. I remain determined that at some level I can contribute, can help prepare future education professionals, can if nothing else inoculate some few against the institutional viruses responsible for at least some of the misery I witness and endure each day. I would prefer to equip them with the metaphorical

bricks and mortar with which we might build new educational communities without the assembly line methods and numeric equivalencies of today.

Today, my mentor across the hall says we all get classes like this from time to time. She seems oblivious to the reality of my conflict.

My mentor: Despite my twelve or so years adjuncting a welding class at Blue Hollar Community College, despite my three years full time in Machine Shop at the Blue Hollar Vocational School (currently known as the Blue Hollar Technology Center), despite my almost doctorate in Curriculum and Instruction (for which this dissertation is written) and my Master of Arts degree in Reading, despite my two years of supervising and observing and ‘mentoring’ pre-service interns in Virginia Tech’s Montgomery County Model for Early Childhood Education majors, despite all this, I have been assigned two ‘mentors’ at Blue Hollar High School since this is my first year in the Blue Hollar English Department. This assignment is apparently an institutional requirement. I received a handout from Howdy Doody on the value of mentors. I write more effectively than the author of that article; I quickly noticed that the author overlooked much of the research available on first year teaching. I have enjoyed the conversations with my mentors, first with one, then the other and sometimes as an informal group, as both are genuinely dedicated to their view of student learning and perhaps, in more ways than one, “know not what they do.” Magnanimously, I request forgiveness for them. I have yet to determine to whom that request might best be submitted. Besides, my mentor across the hall has a wry sense of humor, similar to what I think of as my own. She was a classmate of my older sister at Radford University, Radford College then, and worked her way through that school while raising children of her own. She appreciates, in current societal terms, the value of what we call a “good” education. She has a master’s degree in English, also from Radford University, but I doubt many of the students with which she inhabits a classroom (dual-credit Advanced Placement English) will be so inclined despite her content-driven insistence that they be so prepared.

My mentor across the hall who’s also the head of Blue Hollar’s English Department says we all get classes like my “English 10” from time to time and we all simply try to survive the

year. Her empathy is welcome ... but I don't feel 'mentored.' She reminisces about her own eleventh-graders a few years back in the class that read the same novel four times that year because one student, the girl who transferred in from a detention center, liked it and could terrorize all the other students in the class and thus maintained order if they read the one novel she had read and liked. I still don't feel 'mentored.'

Of course, "English 10" is only one of my five classes.

The eighth-graders ... well, I have little problem with this group if my planning provides adequate structure and support for their work. They take orders well. Of course, I'd have an easier time with that structure and support if this were my only class. One of them, a junior 'Stephen-in-training,' also carries a perfect zero to date. My colleagues and my mentor complain of the planning and support required for eighth-graders, too. My colleagues dream of the day five years hence when the eighth grade will return to Blue Hollar Middle School, from whence it came with my own eighth grade class all those years ago. They dream of a newly monied, state-supported building program that does not exist, of course. One eighth grader, the very intelligent son of two teachers, continues to complain at the absence of grammar worksheets and tests in our class.

On the other hand, the forty-five twelfth-graders and three eleventh-graders in the "Composition" sections work diligently. They, including the two co-valedictorians, believe in the institution or at least in the institution's power to afford them comfortable positions in our society. They all intend to attend college. They want me to show them how to survive a first year of college, "Critical Mass" writing models aside, a first course in 'real' composition. They appear to be immensely relieved that I do not intend to hold them accountable to that same standard. Some have spoken openly of this. Of course, they will be accountable to that standard soon enough and I believe that through my relaxation and emphasis on authentic writing they will be competent to survive. One or two seem to understand, if hazily. The rest merely relax during our time together. They mostly write well but still largely avoid revision and continue writing the night before their papers are due. I conduct 'lessons' as I see a need in their written submissions but not in any predefined order, not to any systematic or programmatic curriculum from simple to most complex. My mentor across the hall requires a draft one week before the

final paper is due, as do I, and we both complain routinely of the lack of revision that occurs between the draft and the final. She is, however, doing quite nicely at holding them all accountable to her aforementioned 'higher standard.' I've seen many "F's," many "D's," many "C's," one or two "B's" and "A's." My mentor across the hall firmly believes her duty entails holding these students accountable to the same standards by which she herself was punished her first year of college. That was in 1976. The students have regular literature tests wherein they must prove they have read the works, memorized the literary trivia, can regurgitate the official interpretation of the story or poem. I envy them not at all. I envy myself even less. Enough of personal writing. I will not capitulate to this brick-armored demon. I have applied for a position with the State of Virginia as an "Assessment and Accreditation Specialist" for our local "Governor's Best Practices Center." These centers are advertised as evidence of our legislators' sincerity regarding improving the learning of Virginia's public school students. Of course, the principle mission of this particular center will no doubt involve helping the institutions in our end of the state retain or regain their accreditation when the fallout from our new, statewide "Standards of Learning" curriculum- and content-based student testing program takes effect in 2004. I don't believe I have a snowball's chance in hell of acquiring this position but the application symbolizes my refusal to surrender to this institution and thus helps energize me for one hundred thirty-four more days. I have no "red badge." The state application must serve as must this dissertation. My misspellings, along with the many words this computer program does not recognize, are underlined in red on this computer screen.

This same day, a Saturday, alternately flies and drifts past. I have plans to complete for Monday. I must decide if I will close the books on the tenth- and eleventh-graders in "English 10" and begin programmed instruction or continue with the current chaos of student-centered reading and writing. My mentor tells me to expel a few of them to Internal School Suspension (I.S.S.) for a day or two and the rest will settle down. I vacillate, know that I.S.S. is the wrong answer for learning, the right answer for control. I do not want control. I still don't feel particularly mentored.

I do not want control.

I want learning.

Seemingly, I continue to daydream, if not dream outright.

Partially Autobiographically, I suppose, and I hope ethnographically, I sent another in a long history of electronic mailings to my colleagues at Virginia Tech today regarding our joint endeavors in pursuit of learning for preservice student interns and Blue Hollar High School students. That message reads:

Pat¹⁰, you have mentioned "how and when." I do not know. I am too frustrated with a system that demands both the "how" and the "when" and ignores real lives, real children as it forces that same "how" and "when" into neat compartments, neat segments lasting 180 days each for 13 years. Many, maybe most, such as myself reject that systematic "how," that institutional "when" and become merely passive residents awaiting emancipation. Equally unfortunately, only a few return to the "how" and the "when" as did I. For in dictating too soon and too often the "how" and the "when," this same system routinely creates lasting if not lifelong negativism related to both. That then may be your (our) burden as we attempt to determine "how" and "when." For some, "immediately" is soon enough if not too late. For others, "never" remains the unfortunate truth. For most, a point between will certainly serve. Anyway, the psychologically realistic answer seems to be, as Eleanor Duckworth says, "Either we're too early

¹⁰“Pat” is Ms. Patricia Garst, my former intern co-supervisor and continuing writing group member with whom, along with Dr. Richard T. Graham, my committee chair and former supervisor, I have continued to correspond even as I left Virginia Tech and returned to full-time employment with the Blue Hollar Public Schools. Through their largesse I have likewise continued to participate, albeit in a limited way, in leading and supervising this year’s preservice interns in the Virginia Tech College of Human Resources and Education Montgomery County Model Preservice Internship for Early Childhood Education students. Additionally, we are indeed collaborating on a project whereby a few Blue Hollar High School seniors are in contact with those same Virginia Tech seniors. No doubt neither will tell the other the truth about institutions.

& they can't learn it, or we're too late & they know it already” (pg. 39, 1987)¹¹.

Terry¹², tonight is not a good night for reflections in Ceres, either. I do not know what I need. Yes, a meeting for eats is in order ... soon.

Kathy and I do suggest Macado's in Radford, this Friday, about 6:00 p.m. Whaddya think? Is Joe¹³ around then?

As you may note the fragmentary nature of this rambling, I decline to rubble as the night wears thin, abandon sensibility for plans, six-week assignment sheets, e-mail assignments, etc. for tomorrow. I still await Howdy Doody's second and also unannounced observation; he's two weeks overdue. I expect him tomorrow, every day. I'm not sure I really care, anyway. He represents (to me) the very institution I abhor more completely every day.

Autobiographically, if horribly out of chronological sequence, and partly because I suddenly saw schoolmates returning to town with fancy degrees from various colleges but also at least partly because I saw myself as ignorant of too much of life outside my own, especially when I stood in front of community college welding classes and didn't have enough answers to suit myself, at the age of twenty-six I did return to formal education. The department chair to whom I answered as a member of the adjunct faculty, Gary Laing, at that same community college - for whatever reason - gave me no chance to reconsider as he personally escorted me to “Precalculus I” three days after summer classes had started in 1986. He never offered me an opportunity to say “no.” I know now I should thank him. As a matter of fact, I have. I also replaced the clutch in his 1963 Ford two summers ago and welded a section of replacement frame rail under the passenger floor board of that same car in the spring of 1998.

¹¹Obviously, I did not include this citation in the original electronic message. I provide it here for purposes of academic accountability.

¹²“Terry” is of course Dr. R. Terry Graham.

¹³“Joe” is Pat’s husband, Joe Garst, also a doctoral student and likewise a pilot for Virginia Tech’s airline service.

Of course in returning to school as an adult I didn't have any interest in impressing classmates that were mostly six or eight years younger, as I'd had in middle school, and I wasn't distracted by the hot rods and motorcycles and social worries of my high school years. I did have my own pride at stake. I decided that if I was going to voluntarily do this, go to these classes, pay this suddenly scarce money, then I was damn well going to do it at my personal best and I was going to be in charge of the process. Besides, this was something at which I had always known I could be good. I thought I'd show the world just how good. So there, Mrs. Austin (twelfth-grade English). Take that Mr. Reardon (eleventh-grade History). If you'd treated me like more of an adult back then, I might have worked for you, too. If you'd worried more about helping me understand the 'system' and how I could profit from it, I might have taken more interest.

Autobiographically, also, I have never worked for just anyone. I have never worked much for anyone I didn't respect. I never did as I was told just because I was told. I wasn't raised that way. I was raised to question almost everything and make my own decisions. Daddy told me early on that a piece of paper would “lay there and let you write anything on it, right or wrong.” That absolute reliance on my own decision-making process, that absolute demand for answers as to “why” certainly informs my educational identity, my educational rebellion. Rebellion? Yes. Perhaps in our culture, “Unfortunately yes.” And at rock bottom, in the mortar of my educational identity and among my reading and now my writing too, that component of rebelliousness may still have as much to do with that same educational identity as any other single issue. For if I can get an explanation, if I can personally make sense of something, then I listen and participate. Otherwise, the school, the world can go to hell. I do what I think's best. I was raised that way just as I was raised to gracefully accept the consequences, accept responsibility when my decisions are poorly informed or poorly thought out or poorly executed.

Are the best students raised differently? Do some folks take orders because they were raised to take orders? Of course the best students rarely make the best learners. That seems a truism. In my experience at Blue Hollar Community College, at the College of William and Mary, and at Virginia Tech, many of the faculty with whom I've talked uniformly complain of

lack of initiative, lack of creativity, of students who wait to be told what to do. I do not know if they have considered that these are the best students in most public and private schools because most schools reward order-takers highly and punish rebels and original thinkers. Freire is absolutely right. I was punished because I said, “Worksheets my ass. Give me a real task.” I was punished because I said, “Fuck you (with profane adolescent self-importance), Mrs. Austin. I’ll read all the stories in the literature book before you finish the first one in class. And I’ll correct all the sentences because I know the difference between ‘proper’ grammar and ‘bad’ grammar and I don’t need to know the terminology to do it.” To this day, I am not a grammarian; does this document betray that fact?

I was punished for reading too fast, for knowing what was correct grammar and what was incorrect grammar without studying it in a classroom or a textbook. I built much upon my educational identity while I worked eight hours every night making parts on a machine Mrs. Austin couldn’t even turn on. Mrs. Austin was the head of Blue Hollar’s English Department in 1977, the year I graduated. I scored 1280 out of a possible 1400 on my S.A.T’s that year. I still remember Mrs. Austin’s supercilious, if mildly amused smile when those scores were reported. “Educational identity” indeed. I have lived the theories and the analyses of Michael Apple, of Paulo Freire, of Paul Willis, of Frank Smith.

Unlike so many if not most of the students “precipitated” out of formal education as a result of Freire’s and Apple’s aforementioned hidden, if adversarial curriculum, unlike many laborers in numerous exhausted midnights and predawn, blue-collar clock-ins, I did return to schools. I may have returned primarily as an escape from what I then saw as the endless round of business debts covered at the last possible moment by barely enough and sometimes not enough money from exhausting work, money that seemed always just a few dollars short of meeting total operating expenses, but eventually I remained in college for the joy of learning I rediscovered within myself and because I truly was more successful in schools than I seemed to be in anything else I’d attempted. Was that cliché? I had a high school diploma and an excellent reputation as a welder and mechanic. If nothing else, I simply wanted to know more of the world, more of literature, mathematics, history, the classical world of ancient Greece and Rome. I returned to formal education and began an institutional journey diametrically opposed

to the rebellious path I had traveled in high school. If the faculty said read “this,” I read it. If the faculty said study “that,” I studied it in exhaustive detail. Make no mistake: I learned. I am conversant in much of world literature, all but the more esoteric mathematics, civilized history from Greece to modern America, anthropology, sociology, economics, politics, psychology, art history, engineering Name a discipline and I can at least claim passing familiarity with its terms. And indeed I have succeeded in at least some measure. But at what price?

For I have suffered for this success, this education, this learning. In addition to my punishments in earlier years for reading too fast, for finding grammar worksheets unnecessary, I have likewise now been punished for wrong answers, wrong interests, wrong families, wrong cultures. I have watched others’ dismiss me upon hearing my Appalachian drawl. I have seen the shades drop over their eyes, their minds, for they were not subtle enough in that dismissal. I have been told that my writing lacked maturity, that my essays lacked a certain depth of thought, whatever the hell that was supposed to have meant. And I have invested the better part of ten years of life, full of late night essays and poetry and artificial deadlines and uncompromising test scores and indeed, even sound and fury, in this enterprise. Is nothing signified? I returned to formal education naively, eagerly, absolutely trusting that those from whom I sought enlightenment were themselves enlightened. I continue as a professional in that discipline uncertain of the nature of enlightenment. I continue today obviously more experienced in the ways of institutions and institutional personnel than would be my preference. I continue - successfully to date - having once again become adept at negotiating institutional bureaucracies. The circularity seems at best ironic, definitely disappointing, at worst a betrayal of my adult educational aspirations. Too often, these questions seem too large for a member of the Blue Hollar High School English Department.

For Tomorrow, I have begun perusing the classified employment advertisements in our local daily paper. I remain uncertain to what end I continue this activity. Perhaps lightning will strike and I will stumble upon an unfilled faculty position in one of the several universities within these Appalachian mountains. I refuse to live anywhere else.

Of course, autobiographically and ethnographically and today, and just as I often wrote poetry when undergraduate essays were due and since I have lesson plans to fabricate (re-fabricate? pre-fabricate? pre-varicate?) for Howdy Doody for tomorrow morning, I write and rewrite and edit this document instead. Those plans should resemble in some measure what I did this afternoon while he loomed in the corner. He refused the handout a student offered as part of the student's presentation on a chapter from our textbook, Write for College. I hope I can remember the lesson plan I held in my head. If I write this first, perhaps my written lesson plans will conform to appropriate standards and to the lesson plans in my head.

Of course, this all arises from the oft mentioned and equally often dreaded second and unannounced inspection ... I mean "observation." Howdy Doody, unlike any other principal I or my colleagues have ever encountered, arrives with the bell, departs with the bell. Isn't he bored? After all, an hour and ten minutes in a corner, recording minutia for eventual typing (first inspection, he took two weeks to schedule the follow-up meeting complete with typed notes including minute-by-minute activities and positive and negative comments for me) ... but I carried the class through their scheduled presentations on book chapters (the most painless way to cover the material in what is essentially a reference book for writers), greatly embarrassing several of the less prepared groups. They should have been prepared. I give them the time, the support. I give them freedom to breathe; they return with the exuberance of young children but none of their industry. Many continue to find me frustrating because I continue to refuse to tell them what to do at every turn.

"What, no tests?" They are overjoyed, then angry.

"What do we do?" They retreat to students.

"Can't we just write normal essays?" They retreat still further. They will be excellent, if selfish and petty college students.

Besides, I have finally decided I do not care what Howdy Doody thinks. He did not get the superintendent's job for Blue Hollar. We will have a new superintendent come December; I forget his name but he reminds Kathy of Ralph Waite, the actor who played John Walton on the television show by that same last name. Howdy Doody will be gone before this year is out, I suspect, to be replaced by another, perhaps equally dedicated if equally ineffective administrator

(they're all ineffective; they can't help it; the institution sees to that). I doubt I'll be there, either. I'm just no good at pretend play. The institution sees to it that it's all pretend play. I am too attached to reality to pretend the students are learning in these classrooms. The students know better, too.

I remind myself again: I have written lesson plans to fabricate on paper; I intend they will absolutely match the lesson plans within my head, the plans from which I conducted class and to hell with the institution's expectations and "appropriate standards." Howdy Doody may well be gone before the conference arrives. If not, I am a Buddha, smiling, serene, implementing his every wish as far as he knows. "Time on task" indeed.

"Oh, I'd never take observation (inspection) comments negatively. Of course I understand they're suggestions as enhancements to my existing [superlative] methods. Of course these ideas would enhance student learning. Yes, yes, thank you."

I am not this sarcastic in person. I am sincere. I promise to be more sincere. I will write "I promise to be more sincere" 100 times, on an overhead if you'll buy me a projector on which to do it.

I will sleep. I avoid dreaming.

Autobiographically, of course, and just as I learned that I could succeed in school, I also learned what to study. I learned to study education, individual staff members, bureaucratic systems, and social relationships. English major? Isn't every native citizen of the United States an English major? I was an education major as are the majority of successful college undergraduates, successful high school students. I believe I could have been any major - yes, even math - if I'd really been studying a discipline. English was just the easiest because it took the least time to satisfy the course requirements and because I wanted to read the literature anyway. Remember, I never stopped reading. Writing, however, once I began really writing, in 1986 when I entered "English 111" at Blue Hollar Community College, that was sometimes the hardest. I hated doing papers until they were done because I just couldn't seem to get enough of myself in them and still make them look like the papers in the literature journals, the papers

other English majors had written. Of course there were exceptions but they were few and far between. And the worst were the kind-hearted souls that tried to allow for individual expression and only succeeded in creating confusion as to what was acceptable, what was too shallow for their liking. Far better to be told what to do against what yardstick than to be blindly led into darkness while the path remained secret, the 'correct' answers out 'there' somewhere but hidden. This is in large part why I have provided the Blue Hollar students with clear and understandable criteria for their own writing. For myself as student, I survived and succeeded. As I have said, English literature was easiest because it took the least time. I had the help of Bobby Wymer and Don Craft and Dr. Melfi and Dr. Herman and many others too numerous to mention who genuinely tried to be humane even as they labored under artificially demarcated curricular partitions and institutional mores such as those under which I labor every day. I'd already read most of the stories, if only by type but not by particular and the themes really are universal since they're all social themes anyway. Only the names of the characters, the settings, the skill of the writer changes. Other disciplines, other studies required extra work because I had to learn more jargon and more facts that weren't related to my true study of education. Indeed, I probably read less in college than at any other time in my life, at least until these last few years since I began working in public schools and attending classes once again.

In the end, I simply discovered that what I really needed to discover involved more my educational identity than any discipline. Only I couldn't articulate that discovery. I am trying, with this writing, to articulate at least in part that educational identity even as it evolves further. The success or failure of this project remains truly hidden from me to date. Yet I continue just as I continue to organize activities and provide what opportunities for learning I can each and every day at Blue Hollar High School.

Today and Autobiographically and Ethnographically too, I write while Ginny (Virginia Ann), my daughter sleeps. I rarely write except when Ginny sleeps. At two years and 8 months she is too important for mere writing to displace her need for attention, for play, in my activities. I miss her and her mother, Kathy, every work day, some days 'til late into the night, as they're often asleep as I arrive from my adjunct position at Blue Mountain University. I inhabit a

classroom there, too, with nine students working toward master's degrees as Reading Specialists and I rarely arrive home before 10:00 p.m. those nights. The Blue Mountain students do, however, contribute to my sanity as they appear to genuinely appreciate my nontraditional approach coupled with genuine scholarship in certain areas of literacy and psycholinguistics and identity formation among learners and even the sociocultural position of institutions in our society. The Blue Mountain students began educational autobiographic writing last week. They are scared but willing to explore. I share their fear even as I believe that they begin to better understand (the Oxford English Dictionary has now ruled this split infinitive proper grammar - imagine my relief) they begin better to understand in both an academic and an applied fashion the psychological necessity of meaning-making as opposed to decoding, especially in reading, but likewise in life. Blue Mountain University names this class "Alternative Approaches to Reading." Our group still seeks the "Standard Approach" against which we might consider 'alternatives.' This has become a private joke among us. Previous to our class they have studied phonics until they can't tell "reed" from "read" from "red" from "read." Tuesday night they searched the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) for Frank Smith and Ken Goodman, among others. We visited the library last Tuesday because eight of the nine had not previously been there, despite their completion of fully half their respective programs of study. According to them, they have been largely lectured at to date. I do not know this of my own observation but am not surprised at anything I hear in educational settings. They are full time employees of public schools, also, and began this Blue Mountain program as a cohort group. One of these students has four years of experience; all the rest have more. I offer no criticism of the university or its staff (except myself) for I truly understand more each day the nature of such institutions.

Or I weld in the evenings with my father for the extra money such welding provides. We weld for local industries; we weld the parts that no one else can, the tool steels and alloys that others with less metallurgical knowledge don't understand. I still hang over 1,000 degree Fahrenheit furnaces occasionally. Kathy doesn't work outside the home now, as Ginny grows toward three years of age and we await a new addition, Grace Katherine or Samuel Allen (Sam/Grace in Ginny's vernacular), officially due this December 31st, and I scramble for money

at most turns. Of course we spend too much, pretend to be more affluent, perhaps more cultured, than we are. In the mirror, I remind myself of the students I talk with at Food Lion, at the convenience stores, at local restaurants, with their hollow eyes and nodding heads in Blue Hollar classrooms. I am become a product of the institution, subsumed in my own socioeconomic woes and institutional desires, desperate for some distance from this daily charade, still desperate for enlightenment.

Supper at Macado's last night was good. The food was okay, too. We often laughed as crying seems too pitiful, too pathetic. For Pat and Terry, the positives outweigh the negatives in this year's group - or so they assert for now. For me, ... I move on. I miss both the professional duties of preservice intern supervision and the collegiality of working collaboratively with two professionals who share many if not most of my beliefs about authentic education. Terry seems comfortable with my dissertation progress (this too emotional, too reactionary diatribe that aspires to some measure of ethnography) and hopes, as do I, that the rest of the committee agrees. Obviously to any reader surviving thus far, this document too often declines to polemic, to monologue, to the fragmentary rubble of explosive disgust, implosive frustration re- and even maybe mis-directed at a keyboard, at the night. Weekends and some nights, I reserve for healing. Writing serves to lance the wound. I return to Blue Hollar with the incision irritated and swollen but drained. Unfortunately, the infection grows throughout the day. I fear eventual and systemic corruption, blood poisoning. Are institutions resistant to antibiotics? I fear viral infection. Enough of another Autobiographic Day. I have plans to fabricate for next week, a dissertation to complete and I hope defend (I am nothing if not optimistic), a conclusion to write. Today is October 31st, Halloween at our house, Fall Festival at most schools. I will travel tonight dressed as a Teacher. Most costumes are ill-fitting.

January, 1999.

All Blue Hollar schools are closed today because of icy roads, a brief extension of our Christmas break. I write. Kathy attempts to sleep as Sam/Grace (officially Grace Katherine, born January 4th) alternates between nursing and sleeping. She nurses day and night, noisily and seemingly continually, and Kathy recovers - still exhausted - from hours of labor and the exertion of giving birth to yet another red-haired girl. Ginny, "Pie-face" for short and by her own designation, occasionally pauses briefly to watch a moment or two of "Wimzie's House" on Public Television as she alternates between handing me her toy phone with the announcement, "It's for you," crawling in and out of her "rabbit hole," a large cardboard box replete with a nesting blanket and pillows, and rushing happily against my leg as she demands, "Pick me up." I usually do, if only briefly, as she immediately wriggles down, grabs her play oven mitt, and chomps large pieces from my arm. I feel guilty about the singing, laughing television in the background but rationalize its idiocy against my own responsibilities and Ginny's obvious inattention coupled with her equally obvious and intense love for the books that fill boxes and shelves and litter the floor of her room. She often 'reads' to "Pink," her constant companion, a stuffed, terrycloth bear dressed as a ballerina in a now faded if shamelessly bedraggled, pink tutu. I smile, return to writing and re-writing and editing and revising, not necessarily in that order, but grateful nonetheless for this juxtaposition of winter weather, newborn baby, closed schools, bouncing toddler manifestly healthy despite her open-heart surgery at five weeks of age (Tetralogy of Fallot, completely repaired), and apparently contented wife.

Reflectively, I suppose idealistically, I envision myself for today and for the future as an advocate for children, for all learners even as I remain ever and always educational 'Cynic,' with a decidedly uppercase "C." I find the "C" especially appropriate because this letter signifies, widely if not universally, "average," even for most educational professionals "mediocre." I envision myself as an advocate for all learners but especially for "average" learners, "average" thinkers, "average" children who will probably never appear on school-based honor rolls, never earn advanced degrees, never wear academic robes. I hope to advocate - often cynically - for confused, distrustful, usually ignorant, occasionally naive students who

are routinely punished at least in part because they neither understand nor recognize their own position astride the statistically swollen centers of institutional bell curves everywhere. I likewise perhaps dream of advocating for even those parents absolutely sure that they or their children must - absolutely must - attend college even as they remain themselves largely ignorant of why except as fulfillment of idiotic sociocultural prophesy mostly prophesied by the aforementioned idiotic television. This much of educational self-identity I have discovered even if I have less expertly articulated that self in ethnographic style.

Of course, as ethnographer I continue telling: for in the end all costumes, all sociocultural identities are ill-fitting in greater or lesser measure. Roles change. Children become parents yet remain child-like in their own parent's eyes. Perhaps childlike myself, I have for all my years been negotiating an educational identity among all those with whom I have had, do, or will in future have contact, institutional or otherwise. Mrs. Robinson knows me, if by chance she still lives, as a hesitant and shy child, quiet but diligent, intelligent but eager to please. Mrs. Robinson might yet remember me as the first-grader who accommodated in Piagetian fashion to school by throwing up each morning, quietly and unobtrusively in the bathroom, before returning to his seat and without interrupting her lesson. Mrs. Jones, who died some years ago, knew me as a surly if quick-witted and troublesome boy, uninterested in the content of seventh grade science but eager to disrupt the class. Mrs. Austin, who I spoke to just recently (imagine her surprise at my current educational identity) still knows me as a bright but completely uninterested student, reading beyond my years but never for study, never for school. She did not really remember me I think, anyway, except for the details and dates of which I reminded her. Indeed, I know my symbolic and dialogic identity, following Bakhtin and Rothstein, educational or otherwise depends upon all those 'others' both within and without me. I likewise know that if I abandon one Blue Hollar student to I.S.S. or to the graveyard of 'write-off's,' of "average mediocrity," if I cease to have an educational identity in that student's eyes, then I too will be abandoning at least a tiny, potentially negotiable component of my own educational identity to that same graveyard. Thus I cannot enter another school with my own identity intact if I refuse even one attempt at dialogue with even one student capable of coherent conversation.

In short, I'll gladly continue talking of hunting and fishing and trucks and trumpet-playing and yes, even the potential jobs for electricians or welders or veterinarians with each and every student if they'll continue to visit the classroom we inhabit along with all the books, notebooks, paper, and pencils, the institutional trappings of 'official' learning. I'll continue to hope that tomorrow one or another of these who the system continues to precipitate out through expulsion will learn, as did I, that the same system can be made accountable to at least a certain degree. This then must be my educational self-identity. I have lived the theories of radical, socially critical, liberatory and mostly minority writers yet I belong to no underserved group, can claim no lineage to the traditional victims of traditional discrimination. Possibly I wish if nothing else to interrupt and disturb, with this ethnography, the seemingly endless avalanche of redundant and institutionally sanctioned methodological garbage that is printed about reform, about authentic learning and marginalized students and learners and ill-served ethnic or sociocultural groups, but that seems never to address or challenge the institutional mores responsible for reform-oriented literature in the first place. More institutional control and attendance will never reduce the damage done by too much institutional control and attendance in the first place. And thus, with this ethnography I wish, personally and professionally, to step forward and demand an accounting of these institutions, these public schools that uniformly discriminate against all children of all races and genders and ethnic origins by their very existence, their own, dialogically (more to our shame) negotiated, institutional self-identity. Thus Emily, wisely naive intern, I continue to hope that you and I and all the others in education with whom I interact professionally and personally may learn to be rebellious and subversive ourselves, may learn to signify Hope among rebellious learners, curious learners, dismayed learners, and even successful learners too deeply institutionalized themselves to even recognize their own injuries, their own abusers.

Even more pragmatically, and to return to my earlier discussion regarding the dialogically constructed nature of sociocultural identity and self-identity, Nikolas Rose, writing for a recently commissioned series entitled "Cambridge Studies in the History of Psychology," and drawing much upon the work of Michel Foucault and a variety of feminist scholars concerned with issues involving both the body and the self suggests that questions of identity

and self-identity might better be investigated not so much in terms of the individual so "composed," but in terms of the enabling characteristics of the socioculturally negotiated identities and self-identities of those same individuals. Rose argues (1996)

[w]hat humans are able to do is not intrinsic to the flesh, the body, the psyche, the mind, or the soul; it is constantly shifting and changing from place to place, time to time, with the linking of humans into apparatuses of thought and action - from the simplest connection between one organ or body part and another in terms of an 'imaginary anatomy' to the flows of force made possible by the links of an organ with a tool, with a machine, with parts of another human being or beings, within an assembled space such as a bedroom or a schoolroom. (pg. 182)

And so I must ask myself, quite literally and aside from philosophically utopian statements about rebellion and hope, "What do you intend to do? What will you do? Will you quit or will you continue in education? Does this supposedly self-articulated educational self-identity enable you? Or in the dialectical antithesis to Rose's thesis, does this self-identity dis-able you? What will you do?"

And indeed, I admit to finding myself too often feeling dis-abled by my current institutional circumstances. I find myself too often consumed not so much with possibilities, but with impossibilities. Manifestly, this document clearly illustrates many of those impossibilities as I perceive them in the public school in which I currently work. This document, for all its ethnographic and autobiographic features, clearly resonates with disabling negativity regarding my desire to authentically engage other learners in meaningful ways. Yet that has never been my intent with this writing. Indeed, in order to aspire to academically useful ethnography, compositions such as this should illustrate the whole, if subjective, vision of the writer ... and my vision is in no way purely negative. In point of fact, and as a further component of my educational self-identity, I continue each day in my attempts at enlarging and expanding the literacy - the self-awareness and understanding - of the learners with whom I interact. But illustration is better than direct instruction, storytelling better than lecture.

I have in hand a letter from a current student, a "note" (her term) composed while a substitute baby-sat for my day off this Wednesday past. This student ignored the assignment I left - do I dare say, "To her credit?" This student, a mature but bewildered (as are they all)

sixteen, congratulates me on my newborn daughter, thanks me for my efforts on her behalf this year, mentions nothing of English 10, of writing, of literature or even of the dismal (compared to the "A's" of first and second six-weeks report cards) "C" grade she received in our third six-weeks of school. Of course her grade remained an "A" for the semester; I am not an idiot or an ogre. Jessica's note is well written: orderly, logical, grammatically correct for the most part, and displays a reasonable vocabulary. Naturally, in academic circles these factors would be seen as more remarkable given the child's membership in what is seen as a traditionally underprivileged group: lower socioeconomic status probably bordering on "working poor;" small-town Appalachian "bible belt" geographic locale; divorced parents; loving if too often absent and poorly educated mother. Jessica desperately wishes to be an adult, has no idea of the particulars of that status. But she thanks me nonetheless for teaching her more about "life," about helping her understand that her "bad girl" (again, her term) persona served her poorly if at all even as she further learned of the necessity for self-respect regardless of circumstances or peers. Circularly, if in no way self-congratulatorily, I am reminded of Troy Pollard, of learning about "life." I am grateful to both Jessica and Troy, now, but find myself nagged at every turn by thoughts of the remaining ninety students with whom I interact on a routine basis. What of those ninety? What effect, if any, do I have with them? In last year's group of twenty-three preservice elementary education students, how many currently treat their own students more human-ely because of my efforts and the efforts of my colleagues? One? Two? Three? Most? A very few? Why are they not all outraged, as am I, at the inhumane and mechanistic treatment afforded institutional learners at all levels?

Selfishly, I appreciate Jessica's "note" perhaps the more so as I have composed similar notes myself (unfortunately more mentally than in actuality); likewise, I appreciate Jessica's response all the more as I too have wandered bewildered among educational and institutional and yes, societal mores only to encounter various individuals, learners more experienced than I, leading classes in which I assimilated far more of intent than of content but even so discovered more of content than most might suppose. The content was a bonus; far and away the greatest learning I embraced occurred as I was suddenly (it seemed at the time) allowed to simply learn at my own pace and in my own way. Importantly and chronologically Dr. R. Terry Graham of the

Virginia Tech faculty led this paradigmatic shift in my professional life as he encouraged me to discover for myself the truth of authentic and natural (as articulated by Frank Smith in an earlier citation, 1998) learning in the summer of 1995, during my second year as Machine Shop instructor in the Blue Hollar Vocational School. Equally importantly, the juxtaposition of Dr. Patricia Kelly's "Teaching Composition" and Dr. Darrel Clowes' "Schooling in American Society" in the fall of that same year cemented that shift for me. If, metaphorically, Terry Graham opened a door for me, Patricia Kelly and Darrel Clowes allowed and encouraged me also to leave that same door open ... forever. Certainly, other teachers throughout my previous collegiate career had occasionally cracked that door, allowed me glimpses of the independent learning possible in other spaces; but none of them threw wide the barrier as did these three. In retrospect, possibly in arrogance and unfounded condescension, I honestly believe that most of the instructors whom I had encountered before were constrained themselves by content, by institutional threats, by probably largely unconscious adherence to and dependence upon content-driven responsibilities. In fairness, perhaps I was not ready myself until I enrolled in Terry Graham's course; or perhaps those previous instructors were not ready, or aware, either.

Make no mistake: I have paid a price both in the opening of that door and in holding it wide. I returned to formal education eagerly, if naively, determined both to succeed and simply to know more, to learn and learn and learn. I returned to education convinced that this pursuit would satisfy the unacknowledged and even less understood dissatisfaction I felt at my own ignorance. I returned to school convinced that formal degrees somehow likewise conferred formal contentment. I have now paid the price of understanding that this will never be true. I was misled by no one and by everyone. I believed the advertisements, the pronouncements of society and idiotic television that education was indeed a "Holy Grail" for all citizens in all situations, that education largely ensured - if it did not guarantee - that my life would get better upon the granting of a degree. I have now paid the price of understanding that education - formal or otherwise - simply changes the terms of individual existence, not the condition. I have learned that no matter my earned degrees, no matter the number or type of my diplomas, I will never know enough for my total satisfaction. I will die leaving important experiences unattempted, important books unread, important ideas unconsidered, important opportunities

missed, important individuals unknown. I have paid the price of understanding, finally, that my formal educational efforts were after all far less significant than I could have ever imagined thirteen years ago, when I returned to formal education at Blue Hollar Community College. In short, I have paid the price of understanding that my experiences and learning inside of schools have always been and always will be insignificant compared to my writing and thinking and learning outside of schools, outside of institutionally dictated curriculums.

Finally, and as a direct result of what I see as the enabling educational self-identity I have negotiated for myself through reflection, inquiry, and writing, I aspire to a full-time university faculty position involving pre- and in-service educational professionals, a position wherein I may continue negotiating for myself and for others successful educational identities and self-identities founded on authentic learning regardless of its content or curricular formalities. I absolutely refuse the hegemonic role typically accepted - if often unwittingly - by educators and instead rebel as an educator primarily interested in fostering awareness of that hegemony. I absolutely intend never to be guilty of the typical if “naive” optimism found in many educational institutions (Escobar, Fernandez, and Guevara-Niebla, 1994, pp. 29-30) that does not recognize the dialectical and political properties of pedagogy within those same educational institutions. Conversely, I will likewise always remain committed to a purpose involving the creation of public schooling spaces both more personally challenging but infinitely more humane than those with which I am too intimately familiar.

In short, I conclude with no answers, only questions; no subservience, only subversion; no loyalty, only rebellion; no morality, only ethics; no institutional allegiance, only humanity. I conclude, paradoxically, with no conclusions, only fragmentary if I hope illustrative statements. I remain proudly, humanely un-trainable even as I desperately wish to be enlightened knowing full well the illusory nature of all enlightenment in this life. I quit public school myself, cognitively, in sixth grade ... and I was wise beyond my years in that decision.

References

- Apple, M. W. (1979). Ideology and curriculum. Boston, MA: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd.
- Bruner, J. (1986). Acts of meaning. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- _____. (1996). The Culture of Education. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Campos, J. J., & Haith, M. M. (Vol. Ed.). (1983). Vol. 2. Infancy and developmental psychobiology (4th ed.). In P. H. Mussen (Series Ed.). Handbook of child psychology (4th ed.). New York: Wiley.
- Duckworth, E. (1987). "The having of wonderful ideas" & other essays on teaching & learning. New York: Teachers College Press.
- English Standards of Learning for Virginia Public Schools [Online]. (1995). Richmond, VA: Board of Education, Commonwealth of Virginia. Available: <http://www.pen.k12.va.us/go/Sols/english.html>.
- Escobar, M., Fernandes, A. L., and Guevara-Niebla, G. (1994). Paulo Freire on higher education: a dialogue at the National University of Mexico. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Freire, P. (1973). Education for critical consciousness. New York: Continuum.
- Freire, P. & Macedo, D. (1987). Literacy: reading the word & the world. Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey.
- International Task Force on Literacy. (1991). Words are what I've got. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Sister Vision Press.
- Morris, P. (Ed.) (1994). The Bakhtin reader: selected writings of Bakhtin, Medvedev, Voloshinov. London: Edward Arnold (Publishers) Ltd.
- Neumann, A., & Peterson, P. L. (Eds.). (1997). Learning from our lives: women, research, and autobiography. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Rodriguez, R. (1981). Hunger of memory: the education of Richard Rodriguez / an autobiography. Boston, MA: D.R. Godine.

Rose, N. S. (1996). Inventing ourselves: psychology, power, and personhood. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Rothstein, S. W. (1993). The voice of the other: language as illusion in the formation of the self. Westport: Praeger Publishers.

Sapphire. (1996). Push. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Sarbin, T. (Ed.) (1986). Narrative psychology: the storied nature of human conduct. New York: Praeger Publishers.

Smith, F. (1998). The book of learning and forgetting. New York: Teachers College Press.

Waters, R. (1975). Welcome to the machine. On Wish you were here [Album]. New York: Columbia Records.

Waters, R. (1979). Another brick in the wall: part II. On The wall [CD]. New York: Columbia Records.

Wertsch, J. V. (1991). Voices of the mind: a sociocultural approach to mediated action. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Williams, R.H. (1989). Lovers. A gallery of writing, 8 (1), 52.

Villanueva, V. (1993). Bootstraps: from an American academic of color. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

Appendix A

Blue Hollar High School

English Department

Curriculum Reading List

Grade 12

Advanced	Regular	Optional
Antigone	Antigone	Gulliver's Travels
The Canterbury Tales	The Canterbury Tales	Heart of Darkness
The Catcher in the Rye	The Iliad	The Importance of Being Earnest
A Doll's House	Macbeth	Jane Eyre
Hamlet	Of Mice and Men	The Metamorphosis
The Iliad	Beowulf	Othello
Lord of the Flies		A Streetcar Named Desire
Macbeth		Everyman
Oedipus Rex		
Of Mice and Men		
I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings		
A Separate Peace		
Beowulf		

Grade 11

Advanced	Regular	Optional
Ethan Frome	Ethan Frome	The Crucible
Emerson & Thoreau	Our Town	Death of a Salesman
The Glass Menagerie	The Glass Menagerie	Last of the Mohicans
The Grapes of Wrath	The Red Badge of Courage	The Old Man and the Sea
The Great Gatsby	The Scarlet Letter	Uncle Tom's Cabin
Huckleberry Finn		
Our Town		
The Red Badge of Courage		
The Scarlet Letter		

Grade 10

Advanced

Bartleby, the Scrivener
 Cyrano de Bergerac
 Julius Caesar
 Le Morte D' Arthur
 Medea
 The Pearl
 Pride and Prejudice
 A Tale of Two Cities
 Twelve Angry Men

Regular

The Pearl
 Cyrano de Bergerac
 Julius Caesar
 Le Morte D' Arthur
 Twelve Angry Men

Optional

One Day in the Life of Ivan D.
 Benito Cereno

Grade 9

Advanced

The Call of the Wild
 Great Expectations
 The Light in the Forest
 The Odyssey
 Romeo and Juliet
 To Kill a Mockingbird

Regular

The Call of the Wild
 Great Expectations
 The Light in the Forest
 The Odyssey
 Romeo and Juliet

Optional

The Romancers

Grade 8

All Classes

Animal Farm
 The Diary of Anne Frank
 Flowers for Algernon
 Greek Mythology Unit
 The Outsiders
 The Adventures of Tom Sawyer

Optional

Hound of the Baskervilles
 Johnny Tremain
 The Miracle Worker
 The Red Pony

Appendix B

ENGLISH 8 SYLLABUS '98 - '99

Instructor: Robert Williams, Blue Hollar High School

Description:

English 8 involves the study and application in everyday life of literature, of written composition, and of oral communication in standard American English. More specifically, English 8 students read widely in a variety of literary genres, including Greek Mythology, Continental literature, mass media, and American and British literature in both prose and poetry in all their traditional forms. Likewise, these same students practice techniques of literary analysis as applied to these readings, techniques involving authorial or editorial intent, plot, theme, tone, point of view, and symbolism. In writing, English 8 students learn about prewriting, organizing and elaborating topics through research, revising for specific audiences and for standard grammatical conventions, and editing for typographical and compositional errors for final publication both on paper and electronically in a variety of forms. Finally, in oral communication English 8 students learn to gather and present information both individually and in small and large groups through traditional interviewing, researching, and reporting techniques.

Objectives:

Successful English 8 students, upon completion of the course, will readily:

Understand and differentiate between literary forms and genres;

Understand authorial voice and tone;

Identify literary plot, theme, point of view, symbolism, and word choice;

Read critically with an understanding of authorial and editorial intent and message;

Evaluate and synthesize information presented from a variety of sources and in a variety of media;

Understand and apply prewriting strategies in their own compositions;

Understand the necessity for revision and editing in the composing process;

Write persuasively, expositoryly, and in traditional narrative form;

Create, store, and retrieve writings and research information electronically;

Create and ask relevant questions in interviewing others;

Evaluate their own effectiveness in gathering information;

Orally report both direct and synthesized information to small and large groups;

Evaluate the accuracy of information obtained from both print, voice, and electronic sources.

Evaluation:

English 8 students accumulate a maximum of 10 daily points for active, engaged attendance and in-class, daily writing assignments. Likewise, each student maintains a "learning log" in which the daily writings, "Reader Reactions," rough drafts of composition assignments, and completed project reports are accumulated. These same process exhibits and products carry point values ranging from 100 points for each "Reader Reaction" and each completed (edited and polished) composition assignment to 300 points for a major research project (subdivided into variable points earned for various components of the project). Finally, each 6 weeks, students will be responsible for an end of 6 weeks "Self-learning Report" worth at minimum 100 points. Overall evaluation and total point scale explanation and letter grade equivalences are on the reverse. Finally, bonus points will be available variously throughout the year for specific course-related activities outside the normal course requirements, just as end-of-semester exams will carry at minimum 10% grade credit.

English 8 student processes and products will be evaluated according to the following scale for the identified Blue Hollar Public School reporting periods:

6 Weeks Report Cards

Reported Letter Grade	English 8 Accumulated Points	Blue Hollar Numeric Equivalent
A	900 +	94 - 100
B	800 - 899	86 - 93
C	700 - 799	78 - 85
D	600 - 699	70 - 77
F	0 - 599	0 - 69

End-of-Semester Grade Reports:

Reported Letter Grade	English 8 Accumulated Points	Blue Hollar Numeric Equivalent
A	2,700 +	94 - 100
B	2,400 - 2,699	86 - 93
C	2,100 - 2,399	78 - 85
D	1,800 - 2,099	70 - 77
F	0 - 1,799	0 - 69

ENGLISH 10
SYLLABUS '98 - '99

Instructor: Robert Williams, Blue Hollar High School

Description:

English 10 involves the study and application in everyday life of literature, of written composition, and of oral communication in standard American English. More specifically, English 10 students read widely in a variety of literary genres, including Greek Mythology, Continental literature, mass media, and American and British literature in prose, poetry, and drama in all their traditional forms. Likewise, these same students practice techniques of literary analysis and critique as applied to these readings, techniques involving an understanding of dramatic convention, authorial or editorial intent, plot differences between varying cultures, universal themes across cultures, cultural archetypes across varying forms and time periods, and critical analysis from multiple literary perspectives. In writing, English 10 students continue to learn about prewriting, organizing and elaborating topics through research, varying sentence types, using figurative language effectively, choosing essay forms and revising for specific audiences and for standard grammatical conventions, and editing for typographical and compositional errors for final publication both on paper and electronically in a variety of forms. Finally, in oral communication English 10 students learn to gather and present information both individually and in small and large groups through traditional interviewing, researching, and reporting techniques even as they learn to include all the members of the group in a presentation and to critique their own oral performances and the performances of others.

Objectives:

Successful English 10 students, upon completion of the course, will readily:

- Understand and differentiate between literary forms and genres across cultural boundaries;
- Understand authorial voice and tone variations among different cultures;
- Identify cross-cultural universals such as plot, theme, and point of view;
- Identify culturally specific literary devices and archetypes;
- Read critically with an understanding of authorial and editorial intent and message;
- Evaluate and synthesize information presented from a variety sources and in a variety of media;
- Understand and apply prewriting strategies in their own compositions;
- Understand the necessity for revision and editing in the composing process;
- Effectively choose an essay type for various audiences and various purposes;
- Write persuasively, expositoryly, and in traditional narrative form;
- Create, store, and retrieve writings and research information electronically;
- Create and ask relevant questions in interviewing others;
- Evaluate their own effectiveness in gathering information;
- Orally report both direct and synthesized information to small and large groups;
- Evaluate their own effectiveness and the effectiveness of others in presenting information;
- Evaluate the accuracy of information obtained from both print, voice, and electronic sources.

Evaluation:

English 10 students accumulate a maximum of 10 daily points for active, engaged attendance and in-class, daily writing assignments. Likewise, each student maintains a "learning log" in which the daily writings, "Reader Reactions," rough drafts of composition assignments, and completed project reports are accumulated. These same process exhibits and products carry point values ranging from 100 points for each "Reader Reaction" and each completed (edited and polished) composition assignment to 300 points for a major research project (subdivided into variable points earned for various components of the project). Finally, each 6 weeks, students will be responsible for an end of 6 weeks "Self-learning Report" worth at minimum 100 points. Overall evaluation and total point scale explanation and letter grade equivalences are on the reverse. Finally, bonus points will be available variously throughout the year for specific course-related activities outside the normal course requirements, just as end-of-semester exams will carry at minimum 10% grade credit.

English 10 student processes and products will be evaluated according to the following scale for the identified Blue Hollar Public School reporting periods:

6 Weeks Report Cards

Reported Letter Grade	English 10 Accumulated Points	Blue Hollar Numeric Equivalent
A	900 +	94 - 100
B	800 - 899	86 - 93
C	700 - 799	78 - 85
D	600 - 699	70 - 77
F	0 - 599	0 - 69

End-of-Semester Grade Reports:

Reported Letter Grade	English 10 Accumulated Points	Blue Hollar Numeric Equivalent
A	2,700 +	94 - 100
B	2,400 - 2,699	86 - 93
C	2,100 - 2,399	78 - 85
D	1,800 - 2,099	70 - 77
F	0 - 1,799	0 - 69

ENGLISH COMPOSITION
SYLLABUS '98 - '99

Instructor: Robert Williams, Blue Hollar High School

Description:

English Composition emphasizes analysis and understanding of personal writing processes and styles as they are explored while composing a variety of essays, stories and poems. English Composition students practice daily writing activities, both prompted and unprompted, even as they reflect upon those activities in a research-based format consisting of a double-entry writing log. Such analysis and exploration encourages students to better understand their own, unique writing style and process. Additionally, English Composition students identify, organize, compose, revise, and edit for publication at minimum one poem, one comparison/contrast essay, one personal narrative essay, one traditional literary analysis essay written from an identifiable literary perspective, one cause/effect literary essay, one descriptive essay, one short story, and one traditionally researched and documented longer essay.

Objectives:

Successful English Composition students, upon completion of the course, will readily:
Understand, choose, and independently apply prewriting strategies in their own compositions;
Understand the necessity for independent revision and editing in the composing process;
Effectively choose an essay type for various audiences and various purposes;
Write persuasively, expository, and in traditional narrative form;
Research, organize, and insert literary analysis information in their own compositions;
Create, store, and retrieve writings and research information electronically;
Evaluate their own effectiveness as a researcher;
Evaluate their own effectiveness as a writer.

Evaluation:

English Composition students accumulate a maximum of 10 daily points for active, engaged attendance and in-class, daily writing assignments. Likewise, each student maintains a "Writing Process Log" in which all daily writings, including reflections upon those same writings, rough drafts of composition assignments, and completed compositions are accumulated. These same process exhibits and products carry point values ranging from 10 additional points for each writing process reflection entry to 100 points for each completed (edited and polished) composition assignment to 300 points for a major research project (subdivided into variable points earned for various components of the project). Finally, each 6 weeks, students will be responsible for an end of 6 weeks "Writing Process Report" worth at minimum 100 points. Overall evaluation and total point scale explanation and letter grade equivalences are on the reverse. Finally, bonus points will be available variously throughout the year for specific course-related activities outside the normal course requirements, just as the successful completion of an end-of-semester, published booklet of representative student writing will carry at minimum 10% grade credit.

English Composition student processes and products will be evaluated according to the following scale for the identified Blue Hollar Public School reporting periods:

6 Weeks Report Cards

Reported Letter Grade	English Comp Accumulated Points	Blue Hollar Equivalent
A	900 +	94 - 100
B	800 - 899	86 - 93
C	700 - 799	78 - 85
D	600 - 699	70 - 77
F	0 - 599	0 - 69

End-of-Semester Grade Reports:

Reported Letter Grade	English Comp Accumulated Points	Blue Hollar Equivalent
A	2,700 +	94 - 100
B	2,400 - 2,699	86 - 93
C	2,100 - 2,399	78 - 85
D	1,800 - 2,099	70 - 77
F	0 - 1,799	0 - 69

Curriculum Vitae

Robert H. Williams, Jr.
P.O. Box 35
Wytheville VA 24382
703/682-4350
rwilliams@naxs.com

EDUCATION:

Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction Coursework

Pre-service Teacher Education
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University,
(Blacksburg), February 11th, 1999

M.A. in Curriculum and Instruction

Reading Concentration
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University,
(Blacksburg), 1997

B.A. in English

The College of William and Mary,
(Williamsburg), 1991

A.A.S. in Education & Science

Wytheville Community College,
(Wytheville), 1989

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:

8/98 - present: Wythe County Public Schools

Classroom Teacher: Secondary English Language and Literature
Responsibilities include English 8, English 10, Senior Composition, Advanced
Composition, Coaching Mountain Academic Conference Competition (English
Team), Advising Student Council Association
Principal: Dr. Cary Atkins

1998 - present: Radford University

Adjunct Graduate Faculty (Fall 1998): “Alternative Approaches to Reading”
Department Chair: Dr. Sheila Reyna

1996 - 1998: Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University

Graduate Assistant to Dr. R. Terry Graham

Specific Responsibilities:

Intern Supervisor (1996-1998): College of Human Resources and Education,
Department of Teaching and Learning, Montgomery County NK-5
Undergraduate Preservice Certification Program

Instructor (Fall 1997): “Field Study in Education”
Montgomery County Undergraduate NK-5 Model.

Co-Instructor (Fall 1997): “Assessment in Reading and Language Arts”
Roanoke County Undergraduate NK-5 Model. Co-instructor: Ms. Patricia Garst.

Co-Instructor (Spring 1998): “Assessment in Reading and Language Arts”
Montgomery County Undergraduate NK-5 Model. Co-instructor: Ms. Patricia
Garst.

1993-1996: Wythe County Public Schools

Classroom Teacher: Precision Machining Technology I and II, Grades 11 and
12

Principal: Ms. Ernestine Dalton.

1991-1993: Windward International, Wytheville, VA

Technical Specialist:

Installed and managed a variety of PC software packages, both DOS and
Windows environment, for multiple PC's in Lantastic peer-to-peer network;
Created, edited, and catalogued Computer Numerical Control (CNC) machine programs;
Purchased and managed inventory of CNC tooling.

Immediate Supervisor: Mr. Allen Wood

1986 - present: Wytheville Community College

Adjunct Faculty: “Fundamentals of Welding”

Division Chair: Mr. Gary Laing

HONORS:

1989: Dr. John V. Neff Memorial Award for Outstanding Contribution to the Humanities

1991: High Honors in English for Senior Thesis: Yellow is for Wandering Mountain
Fields

1997: Fellow of the National Writing Project, Summer Institute

PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS:

Phi Kappa Phi, International Honor Society

National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE)

International Reading Association (IRA)

National Education Association (NEA)

PUBLICATIONS:

Williams, R.H. (1987). Co-ed. American collegiate poets, (24 ed.).

Williams, R.H. (1987). Power Lines. American collegiate poets, (25 ed.).

Williams, R.H. (1989). Lovers. A gallery of writing, 8 (1), 52.

Williams, R.H. (1990). American Asylum. A gallery of writing, 8 (2), 45.

Williams, R.H. (1996). How granddaddy bought Christmas. In Christmas memories. East, M. T. & Kessel, L. B. eds. Roanoke, VA: The Roanoke Times.

PRESENTATIONS:

Garst, P. & Williams, R. H. (1997). Autobiographic teaching. Workshop conducted for the Virginia Association of Teachers of English State Conference, Williamsburg, VA.

CONTINUING RESEARCH INTERESTS:

- Identity Formation in Preservice Public School Teachers
- Reading and Language Arts Instruction and Assessment, NK-12
- Writing Instruction and Assessment, NK-12
- Critical Literacy
- School Reform

REFERENCES:

Dr. R. Terry Graham
315 War Memorial Hall
Department of Teaching & Learning
College of Human Resources & Education
Virginia Tech
Blacksburg VA 24061
540-231-4999
rgraham@vt.edu

Dr. Kathleen Carico
300-D War Memorial Hall
Department of Teaching & Learning
College of Human Resources & Education
Virginia Tech
Blacksburg VA 24061
540-231-8328
kcarico@vt.edu

Dr. Darrel Clowes
495 Mt. Pleasant Road
Christiansburg VA 24073
540-381-2335
clowes@vt.edu

Dr. Jimmie Fortune
318 East Eggleston Hall
Department of Educational Leadership
College of Human Resources & Education
Virginia Tech
Blacksburg VA 24061
540-231-9731
fortunjc@vt.edu

Dr. Patricia Kelly
225 War Memorial Hall
Department of Teaching & Learning
College of Human Resources & Education
Virginia Tech
Blacksburg VA 24061
540-231-5174
kellyp@vt.edu