Be Kind and Listen

An Alternative Approach to Pedagogy in a New Brunswick Classroom

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Author's Note

Terminology

This thesis considers my experience as a teacher. I have taught in prisons and in alternative education classrooms in New Brunswick, Canada. As such, the terms I use may not be familiar to some readers. In New Brunswick, the terms "alternative education" and "at-risk" both refer to programs for students whose behaviours have caused them to lose their right to attend a main-stream public school. The terms "alternative education", "at-risk", "alt ed", are all interchangeable in most teachers' vernacular, while "the alt site", or "alt school" are the most commonly used names for the Moncton Alternative Education Centre where I currently teach.

There are many potential reasons for a child to be deemed "At-risk" and sent to the "alt site", but the bulk of our students arrive because of behavioural problems in their local schools. However, there is a constant population of students who come to us because of medical or social issues which requires some sort of alternative learning environment. The students who arrive on our doorstep need an alternative to traditional schooling. This is the story of what and how and who and why I teach.

Chapter One
Disrupting the Commonplace[1]

I had come home at the end of the day with the
tasty sensation of someone correcting a mistake he
or she had been making.
Paulo Freire[2]

1.1 A Day in the Life of an Alternative education Instructor

It wasn't working.

Everyday I woke up and thought about going to work. Everyday I opened my eyes and entered into that first light of day space that greets us all - that first moment when you measure your life in some degree of anticipation, when you measure the energy the coming day will require, that moment just before your first breath of self awareness. This is the part of my day which used to be filled with a bursting well of joy and expectation, that moment when "eager" was the only word to describe the way you felt deep down inside. I was fit, healthy, and married. I had fathered wonderful children, owned property, felt respected in society, and had secured a job with a good income and benefits that would allow me to spend time with, and to provide for, my wife and family for the rest of my days.

But the eager was gone. Mid-life crisis? Naw, I felt good- no grey hair, no aches no pains- nothing. More than anything, when I woke up and thought about my going to work, the best thing I could say was that a good day ain't got no rain[3].

Why? Because I taught alt ed and alt ed stunk. Not only did my job stink, I wasn't doing it very well. Oh sure, I was a great professional. The kids all liked me, the staff enjoyed me, my superiors respected me; but I knew that my students weren't getting a whole lot of eager injected into them by virtue of being my students. I knew they were not truly learning- at best they were surviving. This was made worse by the fact nobody cared. Nobody. This was alt ed. If the school wasn't phoning home or suspending the kids, then the parents were happy. As long as the parents weren't screaming at the district office about

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[1] I have borrowed the phrase "disrupting the commonplace" from Jerome Harste (Lewison, Leland & Harste, 2008), which is how he has phrased the idea at the heart of critical literacy and pedagogy, the idea that learning begins when you start to question the value of everyday practices of society, and that life begins when you start to change it.

[2] Freire, Paulo, Pedagogy of Hope, R.R. Barr, trans., Continuum Publishing Company, New York, 1994, p. 14.

[3] Paul Simon, "Slip slidin' away"

suspensions and prejudice, then my supervisors were happy. As long as enough of the bad kids were locked up in an alt school somewhere far, far away, then the administrators and classroom teachers at the local schools were happy- overjoyed, actually. Heck- these were kids who had never been allowed to remain in school before, so even they were pleased.

So if everybody was so happy, where did my eager go?

When I screwed up courage enough to be honest with myself, I knew that while everybody else was happy, beyond any shadow of a doubt, my job was to teach, and I wasn't doing that well enough. Treading water doesn't get you anywhere it just keeps you from drowning. There is more to learning, and to life, than not drowning. My responsibility was not to make people happy, my job was to teach my students, and they weren't learning much of anything that would ever help them in life. So what could I do differently? We were playing peek-a-boo with the curriculum, but what good was that doing any of us?

Don't get me wrong- it's dreadfully important to know that Canadian soldiers were issued the terribly ineffective Ross rifle during the Great War. It must be, because it's all I remember from my high school history. Not true. I also remember sitting on a tack. If that's all a high school honours student can remember, what could the poor, ignorant souls that had been banished to Room 306 at the alt site be garnering?

Marilyn Manson. We had just watched Bowling for Columbine. The class was very interested in it, and we had entered into some good debate. During the movie, however, Marilyn Manson put forward the idea that if you could go back, and ask the two youths what was wrong, that they would in all likelihood tell you that nobody had ever listened to them. More than anything, this was the statement that stayed with me.

Monday morning. I walked into my classroom and moved everything out of the way. I piled the desks in the corner, shoved the tables to the wall and spread out an old quilt and some camping pads in the middle of the floor. As 9 o'clock rolled around, the students wandered in, their typically blank sleep-and-coffee dazed looks replaced with absolute uncertainty. School might never have been fun, but at least it was predictable.

Some students found their desks in the pile, and pulled them out to sit on. Others stood next to the snuggly comfort of the desk pile. For five minutes, one student stood quietly at the spot on the floor where his desk used to be and then slid over to the windowsill where Justice was leaning. He and Justice had been cellmates at the youth detention facility. Others climbed onto a table or up onto the windowsill. Something was going on, but nobody knew what.

Students from other classes stuck their head into the doorway and proclaimed "I wish I was in this class!" or made any number of similar remarks. Word spread. Every staff member in the school somehow managed to nonchalantly peek into the room. Old timers made comments that ranged from sarcastic to caustic. The more open-minded made nervous jokes. Everybody was on edge. That crazy Jardine kid was up to something- why couldn't they just teach, dammit? Teachers get paid to teach – isn't that enough?

Zero hour, nine a.m.[4] I sit down in the middle of the floor, cross-legged. I tell the class that I have a challenge for them. I want to hear what they think. I want them to talk to me. I invite them to sit down on the floor and talk with me. If this is too weird, I say, and they don't want to buy into whatever craziness this turns into, then that's cool, I'll dig out their desk, sit them down with a pen and paper and let them work out of the textbook. Pick you're poison, it's all good.

Kevin, who has been with me the longest, is the first to jump in. For the first time since grade eight, he's speechless - smiling, but speechless. Kate, my TA[5], is a former commune-living, soybean farmer socialist, who is the daughter of a sociology professor, and nothing makes her happier than to contest the establishment. She is wearing a gleeful smile that could light the city. Slowly, and I mean slowly, the students choose to grab a hunk of quilt, or stretch out on a camping mat.

Ricky takes a long look at the desks. "Do I have to write?" he asks.

"Nope," I say, "Just talk. Tell me what you think."

Ricky takes another look at the desk. Justice jumps in, "If I don't gotta work, I'll do anything." Ricky looks at Justice, who has grabbed the last pillow. Ricky sits down next to him.

We begin to talk. We talk about some of the things we had seen in the film. We talk about how South Park is created by two guys who used to attend Columbine, and how does that change the way we look at the show? We talk about violence, we talk about how they feel, we talk about how we teachers treat them. Before long, everybody has spoken, sometimes talking, sometimes laughing, sometimes angry.

"It doesn't matter what we do," says Kevin, passionately. "Nobody cares what we think. Nobody."

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[4] Elton John, "Rocket Man", Honkey Chateau, Uni, 1972.

[5] In the Province of New Brunswick, the term "TA" refers to a "Teacher's Assistant", whose job it is to help the teacher in a class that has a student with an exceptionality.

That, more than anything, is what they have learned. Nobody cares what they say, unless it's a bad word. Nobody cares what they do, unless it's a snowball. Nobody cares because we see them as nobodies.

We talk about ways to change that. We talk about how they see society, we talk about metaphors for society- Kevin grabs my clipboard and draws walls in a doughnut shape. Conversation explodes after this. We talk about whether or not they are outside the donut trying to get in, or if maybe they are like a ghetto, stuck on the inside, hoping to get out. We talk about doorways into or out of the metaphor, Kevin and Robbie begin a dialogue about how there are people standing in every doorway, and Kevin says that a lot of those people are teachers, and Robbie says that most of the teachers are the ones locking the doors, and everyone in the circle agrees. Kevin agrees, but says some of them, some of the teachers, the good ones, try to unlock them.

We talk, we listen. We talk about the formative nature of society:

"What am I?" Shouts Robbie, "I am whatever you say I am."

As he says it he slides into a tone of sullen wisdom. Robbie later coins the phrase "Media Normal" to describe the way in which mainstream media portrays the way people are supposed to look, and speak, and act, and how it's all based on a lie, on an unattainable reality. Happily ever after isn't in their vocabulary. As a whole, the conversation is energetic, positive- there are moments when the dismal view they share of the world seeps in, but overall, the group is energized by the act of being in dialogue.

We talk of the judging nature of society: When I echo Robbie's earlier statement, he clenches his fists and bursts into a snarl "I am nothing you say I am!" He is angry now, and points his fist at me, because I am, as we have discussed, "The Man". I am a white, university educated, Anglo-Saxon protestant with a 20 year bi-weekly mortgage and a minivan that blooms rust and car seats. We talk through break, we talk for three hours.

That day, we establish a tone for the year. We establish metaphors that frame our discussions for the coming months. Regularly, we gather into a circle for discussion. We hold an ongoing dialogue that suggests anything is possible, as long as you dare dream, as long as you believe that the outcome is not predetermined by either the great machines of society or the small machines we encounter- like school[6]. Kate and I challenge them, because we believe that it is possible to change the world, and that change often starts with regular people like us. We challenge them because we believe that changing the world begins with changing yourself. We challenge them to believe that what they do and say matters, and that they can invoke change. We warned them: possible is real, change is real, but it is not necessarily easy.

[6] Alan Luke refers to school as a site of "local discourse", in Luke, 1987, p. 38.

Did we change the world? No. Did we see great leaps in standardized test scores? No. Did we totally throw out our schoolwork? No. A teacher and a group of self proclaimed thugs got together and the teacher learned how incredibly deep their perceptions of the world went, how intensely they believed in their own validity, and in the systemic oppression they felt directing their entire lives. More than anything, what we established was a different kind of relationship amongst teacher and students, and that foundation has been opening moments of learning ever since.

What about me? How did that day change me? It was an obvious moment of dialogue that was exhilarating for both its range and its honesty. I knew that I had gotten a glimpse of what classrooms could be, and that I needed to figure out a way to foster that sort of environment, that sort of dialectic, over the long haul. Knowing is a continuum of hearing, thinking, and speaking, and there are times when that process becomes an unforgettable aspect of your humanity. For me, it had been one of those days, and it had cemented the idea that what I was doing professionally was insufficient. I knew there was a way for these children to learn things that could shape their lives, and I knew they could do it in my class. Something had shifted. I couldn't quite name it, but I knew, deep down inside of me, something was changing.

I had my eager back.

What next? This one day made a change in the way I looked at the students, but how did it change the way I taught? Chronologically, it paralleled the beginning of my graduate studies, where questions were put to forward for me to answer-formative questions such as "What is knowledge?" or, "Can you make knowledge?" P.J. Finn's book Literacy with an Attitude: Educating Working-Class Children in Their Own Self-Interest (1999) raised the query "In whose best interest am I teaching?" I encountered (or re-encountered) concepts that prompted me to reflect on my profession: praxis, dialectics, semiotics.

A nice synchronicity developed between influential concepts that had been encountered in the early 1990s (Roland Barthes, Northrop Frye and Michel Foucault) and the concepts of action research and critical literacy. For Frye,

there was an invisible structure that helped provide meaning to the reader (Cayley, 1992, p.63). For Jim Gee, there was a deliberate purpose to the learning structure of a space (Gee, 2004, pp. 85-88), and for Lawrence Stenhouse there was the conscious nature of teaching (Stenhouse, 1981, p. 16) and for Adrienne Rich, there was the realization that learning was not a function of socioeconomics or neighborhood (Rich, 1979, pp.57-58). Through it all, the structure and impact of process was intertwined with a single goal - the empowerment of the student to create change.

What became obvious to me was that there was a relationship between structure and content. Structure informed meaning, so I should be deliberate about the structure of my classroom. To do so would require me to understand the purpose of education. Was it to teach individuals how to be bankers, standing calmly at the wicket counting off the commodity of facts? No. One thing shone though all of the theory, thoughts and questions: in the end, the point was to teach students how to learn better, to help them become aware of themselves as learners.

What follows is an evaluation of my current approach to teaching, my personal pedagogy, and the theory that has informed my teaching practices. Central to my classroom is the idea that alternative education students in New Brunswick need to be aware of the meaning-making processes they will encounter in my classroom and of the manner in which they enact these processes themselves. I believe that both the human interactions and the textual

content within the space of the classroom need to be carried out in a deliberate manner.

My students are secondary aged children at risk of failing to complete their schooling. They have met with chronic school failure of all kinds and have been officially excluded from the regular academic stream.

My premise is that language is the dominant means of expressing knowledge and that the primary meaning-making model of language is metaphor. Further, I would propose that metaphor is an innate characteristic of human communication and is representative of the human learning process.

Why then do certain groups of students fail in school? They fail because they have not been made aware how to use metaphor within a classroom. They fail because they use metaphor in non-conventional ways. They arrive with slightly different metaphorical conventions and flounder. They need not flounder.

When extended to the classroom, my premise is that students fail or succeed based mainly on the extent to which they have an ability to deliberately use the process and language of metaphor. That is, students fail or succeed based on the extent that students enact metaphor in ways the dominant school discourses expect.

While the process of metaphor is innate, the use of it is learned. If we expect a student to use a skill, we must teach them how we expect them to use that skill. This is where education fails - meaning-making processes are hidden, and when students don't arrive having already internalized those processes, we often forget to teach them.

When someone joins the army, the army teaches them to do what soldiers do- to march, to shoot, to shine their shoes and to take orders. To be effective, we need to be conscious of the nature of the constructive process. Garth Boomer points out that it is "simply, or rather profoundly, a matter of doing deliberately and formally what comes naturally" (Boomer, 1987, p.8). If metaphor is the main meaning-making engine of the classroom, then it needs to be taught in a systemic fashion.

Metaphor is the process of comparing one known or familiar factor to another so that the second factor may be better understood. This process mirrors the general learning processes of humans. When someone understands the process they are enacting, they become more efficient in it. In this way, metaphor forms a structure that is able to help students understand how to make and express meaning.

Metaphor creates a structure which allows students to fulfill their potential in the classroom. However, it also allows teachers a way to address the issue of mandated content in a classroom. The acquiring of enforced content appears to be a constant struggle for at-risk learners. Or rather, demonstrating that the enforced content has been mastered is often a struggle for at-risk learners. By acquiring an understanding that there is a structure to meaning-making, students will be better able to make meaning in school-appropriate ways.

Andy Manning and Jerome Harste (1994) have stated that the purpose of teacher driven research is "learning, not truth" (p.4). This same principle applies nicely to curriculum content. A classroom needs to be structured around the

concept and processes of learning. I undertook a journey that saw me evaluate the classroom processes that I was enacting, compare it to learning theory, and separate the effective from the ineffective. This is the story of how I got here.

1.2 What to Expect

1.2.1 Chapter One

I have begun with a retelling of my "this just won't do moment" when I realized that I was not teaching my students in their best interest, and how my own education pointed me towards developing a classroom environment based on student-centered learning within deliberate teaching structures. It is here that I first mention the idea of listening to students, and discuss the significance of the process and structure of dialogue in a classroom.

1.2.2 Chapter Two

My second chapter provides a snapshot of alternative education in New Brunswick, and examines several students who represent the actual population of the Moncton Alternative Education Centre. This student population has not been successful in traditional classroom environments and the character sketches present a snapshot of the average alternative education student whose failure to respond to traditional intervention requires a structured alternative classroom approach.

1.2.3 Chapter Three

In Chapter Three I introduce two fables that use metaphor to describe the various stops I have taken on the student into teacher journey I have experienced. I follow the fables with a retelling of my personal experiences with traditional educational pedagogies and how my gradual exposure to student-centred ways of knowing and the related impact of contemporary information paradigms direct me towards an eventual change in thinking about the role I need to play in the classroom. Over the course of this chapter I contrast the traditional educational paradigms with perceptions of text and meaning and arrive at the point where I commit towards a change of thinking, towards a new mindset based on the ability of my students to learn, and about how I should direct my teaching.

1.2.4 Chapter Four

Having arrived at the realization that there was both good reason and strong theory to justify a new mindset, I examine the current approach to curriculum in New Brunswick. I briefly recount my experience in at-risk classrooms over the last 15 years in relation to content and curriculum. I then establish that a directed approach to content is insufficient because all learning is reader centred as opposed to author centred: learning depends on the ability of the learner to form significant connecting patterns between new and old information sets. The metaphor of “curriculum as conversation” (Manning, 1993, Keynote) begins to get unpacked, and the idea of meaning making as a process of recognizing, questioning and connecting information patterns begins.

1.2.5 Chapter Five

Having already examined the meaning making process, I put forward the idea that learning is a three step process: the learner must become aware of how we learn, must practice the skill of making connections, and finally must articulate the significance of the similarities or differences in the information patterns. This chapter will establish the concept that to complete the learning process, the student must go public with what is believed. Simply recognizing connections between old and new information is insufficient if the learner is to transform into a knower.

The final step in the meaning making process is to name the similarities and differences in the connected patterns. Knowing is a creative process and there needs to be a final naming to complete this process. Again, the manner in which these three steps point toward the metaphor and process of dialogue is stated.

1.2.6 Chapter Six

The way in which learning theory informs the human interactions of the classroom is the classroom ethos. This ethos forms the day to day structure of my classroom, the nature of what my classroom practice actually looks like. This chapter provides examples of how my classroom ethos and practices help provide both a space and an opportunity to explore the process of becoming knowers in ways that are linked directly to theoretical concepts already discussed.

1.2.7 Chapter Seven

This chapter will examine the issue of the assessment or measurement of students in an alternative classroom, and also how to consider the success or impact of the alternative education practices. One approach is to look at the degree to which alternative education students are completing their education through Class Graduation Rates. I also evaluate the manner in which students respond to information over time is addressed, using anecdotes and work samples from one student to demonstrate growth in the way the student interacts with new information in a classroom environment.

1.2.8 Chapter Eight

In the final chapter, I discuss the process which I have undergone as a teacher, using the process of writing as a means to evaluate the impact of learning theory on my classroom practice. I discuss my journey in light of Anne Berkhoff's theory (1987) of writing as a legitimate method of teacher research. The writing process parallels the learning process and classroom practices I hope to engage and encourage in my classroom: a period of evaluating prior knowledge in light of new information, followed by an opportunity to state, reconsider and then restate the impact of the new information in a way that constructively informs future actions.

In conclusion, The Fables are revisited with a Happy Ending that illustrates the manner in which new knowledge is first and foremost dependent on previous knowing.

Chapter Two
At-risk of what?

"At-risk? At-risk of what? Not wearing a tie when I grow up?" Robbie, a fourteen year old alternative education student shouts his question out to me, during a class discussion on labels and bias. It turns out that the class didn't know they had been labeled anything other than "bad", and they had trusted us to be civil enough not to use that in any official capacity. To discover that society had actually designated a label for all 70-odd students in a single school affronted these children who were quite at ease with the idea of living outside social conventions. You don't get sentenced to the "alt-school" by accident, but to discover they held a common label provided the students with a little moment of awareness that feeds the solidarity of a class, but which does not necessarily endear any of us to any of them.

While Robbie's sarcasm is honest, he is making a statement that is at the heart of alternative education: "I will not grow up to be like you. I will not dress like you, I will not speak like you, and I will not drive a leased minivan, go to church picnics, nor vacation at the cottage. I do not come from your world, nor do I often aspire to join it. I am not you." This creed leads to another truth of alternative education: "I have not learned like you. I do not bring the same experiences, preconceptions, aspirations or meaning making processes that you expect students to have. Yet here we are, I am here to learn, and you are here to teach me."

"At-risk students", "student at-risk", "alternative education", "oppositional and defiant children"- or, my personal favorite: "Conduct disordered youth"- are just some of the terms given to us to apply like a salve to our conscience upon the children who are failing to thrive in our schools. At the Moncton Alternative Education Centre, students are bussed to school from across a section of south-eastern New Brunswick that is over 100 Km wide. They have been cast out of their respective schools for a litany of offences- for selling or using drugs, for truancy, for disrupting class, for fighting, for being disrespectful to teachers and to students, for vandalism, for pregnancy. The list of offences is decades old. Everybody knows that smoking ain't allowed in school. If you persist, they will

send you to the “alt site”, and once there, they will tie you down and torture you with rules and goodwill and poetry and math.

This chapter will examine the current context of alternative education in New Brunswick and School District 2. It will also examine the local at-risk student population and some student profiles which demonstrate the correlations between the various factors which influence the at-risk student population. This will help establish the environment in which my pedagogy is rooted, and the challenges which it is designed to work around.

2.1 The alt school? What’s that?

Lying is done with words and also with silence.
Adrienne Rich

Alternative Education is a funny thing- every school board has some form of it, yet few people have ever heard of it. It is the great secret of Western Education. “Alternative Education” is the title we have chosen for the service programs we put in place for our “At-risk” students. While it means many things to many people, a simple and effective definition of students that are “at-risk” is that they are in danger of failing to complete their education with an adequate level of skills (Spence, 2000, p. 86). The term “at-risk” is not new, and according to Chris Spence:

> Identifiable factors are: low achievement, retention in a grade, poor attendance, low socioeconomic status, and attendance at a school with poor students (p.86).

The Moncton Alternative Education Centre is the home of NB School District No. 2's primary service program for at-risk students. It is a conglomeration of programs and classrooms with a staff of six teachers, a full-time administrator, three classroom support workers and a secretary. The Centre also has partial access to a resource teacher, a behavioural psychologist and a social worker. Students are referred to the program from 13 elementary and middle schools, and six area high schools. Students may be placed at the centre from Grade 5 onward, but the bulk of the students are in Grades 8 through 11.

The Moncton Alternative Education Centre has had a short history and a low profile in the area, so much so that few teachers and even fewer parents are familiar with the service programs offered. As a new, small, and exclusionary program that is physically segregated from the rest of the district, there is a great deal of ignorance amongst administrators, teachers, students and parents regarding the site. It came into existence for the oldest of reasons: political economics. It is cheaper to take all of the most challenging students out of their schools and bus them to a separate building (which will be conveniently located in the poorest section of town). It helps solve a litany of problems: a school's lowest achieving, loudest and most disruptive students are removed from the hallways, playgrounds and conscience of the school, so that it functions more calmly, the student body is safer, rules and authority are seldom contested, and everyone feels better. The smelliest and dirtiest, the most poorly groomed and most often tattooed children are segregated in one fell swoop, so the school looks better from the inside out. We tell ourselves that the students themselves

are better off in an “alt site” far removed from the principal’s office at the big school, where they will “fit in better” and “receive the services they need”. We make it so easy on ourselves to do what we do with these children. If they then fail, it’s not our fault, we did all we could for them.

To the province’s credit, New Brunswick has been trying to address the issue in a realistic, logical and professional manner for a decade at least. In 1998, The Province of New Brunswick established a task force whose goal was to examine the issue of high school dropouts and to develop a plan of action. The result was High School Graduation: The New School Leaving Age. This document called for a focus on the needs of students at-risk of not completing high school and established the province’s responsibility for providing services and programs to these students. The task force recommended a “dedicated budget” to oversee these changes of service, and the At-Risk program was born (Province of New Brunswick, 1998, p. 15). However, in implementing the recommendations, the province failed to establish a province-wide service program, but rather left service in a de-regulated state by making each particular district responsible for servicing at-risk learners. There were some provincial expectations, as can be seen in the 1998 document, but financial responsibility, program oversight and accountability was placed in the hands of local superintendents.

In 2002, as a continuation of this process, the province published *Guidelines for New Brunswick Alternative Education Programs and Services*. The “guidelines” form a miniscule document, which spans an entire ten pages

from “Rationale” to “Conclusion”. It speaks in often unexplained terms, such as “differentiated instruction”, and sets the high academic standard of alternative education as being “thematic and project-based” (Province of New Brunswick, 2003, p.5). It is this document that informs the direction of the Alternative Education Programs in New Brunswick.

Alternative education is an administrator’s nightmare. It is a provincially mandated service initiative, with a locally driven infrastructure, whose clients are chosen by individual administrators at local schools without any clear definitions of service. It involves servicing challenging students, and incurs a significantly higher per-student cost due to lower student-teacher ratios, complicated transportation issues, segregated facilities[7], and the multiplicity of services and agencies that these students so often require. Added to this is a lack of top down direction from the province, the invariable complications these children experience in living and learning, and the fact that parents of students deemed “at-risk” are seldom effective advocates for their children. What emerges is a series of localized programs which show a great deal of inconsistency regarding student profiles and the services they are provided.

[7] To the author’s knowledge, there is little to no research available to indicate whether physical exclusion of at-risk students is either detrimental or beneficial to the success of the programs. In New Brunswick, physical segregation is certainly the norm, either in terms of a dedicated building (e.g. Saint John, Moncton), or by separating the students in a controlled-access portion of a larger school (e.g. Petitcodiac, which uses a dedicated entrance and the students study exclusively in an area with washroom facilities attached).

2.2 Who gets sent to Alternative Education

Students who are referred to the Moncton Alternative Education Centre generally fall into three categories: those for whom there are no apparent service programs, students who have suffered through chronic socioeconomic hardships, and students who have displayed shortcomings in their school achievement. Furthermore, most students inhabit two or three of these categories.

2.2.1 Students for Whom There Are No Appropriate Service Programs

Adam

Adam is a child in his mid-teens. He has been described by staff members as a cross between Frankenstein and the Adam's family. Adam is large – standing six feet tall and weighing nearly 200 pounds. He has obvious physical abnormalities, which include appearing slightly walleyed, having misshapen fingers, and having a limited range of motion around his neck and head. Adam has difficulty with both gross and fine motor skills. This is noticeable when he walks, and unmistakable when he runs. Adam has been identified as having a hearing impairment, and has an APSEA itinerant teacher assigned to his case[8]. In addition to the obvious physical impairment, Adam also suffered brain trauma as a result of Shaken Baby Syndrome.

Cognitively, Adam functions well below grade level. He speaks very slowly, with simple sentence structure and limited vocabulary. Adam often has difficulty naming abstract concepts or processes- regularly interjecting "What you call that?" into his conversations when looking for a word.

Adam is unable to work independently, even on heavily modified material, for more than a few minutes. When given a task he can complete independently, he remains on task for long periods, as shown by his interest in colouring.

Socially, Adam has a history of being bullied in his community and often arrives at school bloodied or scraped from difficulties in his neighborhood. He lives in a

[8] APSEA stands for the Atlantic Provinces Special Education Authority, and it is their mandate to provide services for students who are deaf, deaf-blind or hearing impaired. In 2007-2008, 4 alternative education students had significant hearing impairment (about 5% of the total student population), 3 of whom were tracked by APSEA.

poor section of an outlying community with a reputation for criminal activity. Adam self reports drinking alcohol regularly, and smokes both cigarettes and marijuana daily. At times, Adam reportedly becomes enraged and in the past has been tasered by the RCMP.

While at the Centre, Adam has displayed a range of disordered behaviour which includes occasionally sleeping on his desk, walking out of class when frustrated, and truancy. Adam has also been known to spend too long in the washroom. Adam is very popular with other students, several of whom have taken responsibility for keeping Adam on schedule, for buying him coffee, and who generally try to help Adam through his day. To arrive at the school Adam must spend nearly two hours on the busses.

For the Moncton Alternative Education Centre, the dance between special and regular education is significant because there are student populations for whom the district (and I daresay the province) does not have adequate service programs. In many of these cases, hard to service students get placed in the Centre regardless of the gap between service models and service needs. To illustrate, in 2007-2008, there were at least 2 students who had committed sexual offenses against children, and a third student who had repeated school-related instances of sexually deviant behaviour. One of these students has been deemed a sexual predator. The Moncton Alternative Education Centre shares its building with a K-8 elementary and middle school.

When School District 2 encounters a student who does not fit into any service model that exists at a large high school, the Moncton Alternative Education Centre seems to be the automatic solution to everybody's questions. However, there are many students who will either not succeed in our environment, or for whom adequate service will not be provided. Adam provides an example of a student who will only receive partial service. His service needs

supersede the ability of the Centre to provide an environment where he is effectively engaged for adequate amounts of time. He will succeed in that staff at the Centre work well with him when able, and that he encounters an encouraging and supportive environment. To date Adam remains in school with regular attendance. For Adam, this is greater success than he has ever known.

2.2.2 Economic Poverty

Randy

I first met Randy in middle school. He had been sent to the Temporary Student Placement Centre as a punishment for behaviour at school. He was to remain in my care and sit in physical isolation working quietly on seat work supplied by his home school for a prescribed number of days. Randy, however was unable to complete his educational sentence and had to be sent home. While we were waiting for a relative to come get him (neither his mother, whom he lived with, nor his father had a vehicle and so were unable to retrieve him) I told him that I could tell he was angry, and if there was anything he wanted to say, that he could, that we were alone, so this was his chance to express himself.

Randy looked at me. "For real?" he said, clearly looking for a set up.
"For real," I said. "We're alone and we're both big boys, if there's something you want to tell me, it's totally off the record."

"All right," said Randy, and launched into an invective that was both foul and short lived. He seemed to realize that he wasn't really mad at me, and he discovered that cussing out a teacher wasn't as rewarding as it seemed. We soon fell into an earnest conversation about life. Finally, Randy looked at me and said, "You know, Mr. J, I ain't good at sports, I'm not smart, and I ain't rich - being bad's just what I do."

In New Brunswick School District No. 2, at-risk students tend to be poor. While socioeconomic data is obviously not compiled for the student referrals, it requires little experience to understand that for New Brunswick alternative education students, economics are clearly a common demographic. These students

seldom have the trappings of middle class, and the majority of the families involved in alternative education are nontraditional in the sense that there are few stable-two adult family units[9]. Many students come to us with legal undertakings pending or whose attendance is legislated by the courts[10]. Many others live within a spectrum of non-parented living situations, ranging from emergency foster care, group homes and a variety of provincially mandated closed custody arrangements. In 2007-2008 at the Moncton Alternative Education Centre, there were only two children in the entire student body who were involved in organized sports. Despite many musically talented students, there were none who received organized music lessons. Many have no permanent phone or address, and first-hand knowledge of the underground drug and pawn-shop culture is a reality for almost every "alt site" student.

Among those students which do arrive from a middle class family, there are, almost universally, caveats attached to their lifestyle- a child who has suffered sexual and physical abuse at the hands of multiple stepfathers, another who watched his stepfather attempt to escape across a marsh while he himself was tackled, handcuffed and taken into custody while the police seized drugs and related possessions. The stepfather was later sentenced federally to six years.

[9] The term stable is not intended to reinforce the Judeo-Christian concept of a nuclear family, rather it reflects regular employment patterns, as well as a consistency in terms of time- do the adults who populate the child's life remain the same? Are they stable in terms of the support, guidance and nurturing they provide?

[10] Of the 18 student placements for 2007-2008, 12 had documented current or pending legal undertakings against them or an immediate member of their family.

New Brunswick does not place children in alternative education programs based on socioeconomics, ethnicity or cultural values. That would be absurdly prejudiced. Each case is judged individually. Behavioural concerns form the baseline for most referrals and somehow it works out that cash, crime and cops remain common experiences for youth with disordered behaviour in New Brunswick.

2.2.3 Academic Poverty

Few alternative education students in New Brunswick are achieving academically at grade level. For instance, 88.9% of the secondary student placements in Room 306 in 2007-2008 had been unable to successfully pass the middle school literacy assessment, a prerequisite for the New Brunswick High School Diploma. There seem to be two thoughts which seem able to explain this academic disparity: the disordered learning theory and the gap theory.

2.2.3.1 Disordered Learning

Many in the education field feel that a large number of students who arrive in alternative education suffer with undiagnosed learning disabilities. The 1998 Task force on school leaving draws attention to a supposed correlation between unidentified learning disabilities and early school leaving (Province of New Brunswick, 1998, p. 15). The Learning Disabilities Association of New Brunswick (LDANB) supported the province's attempts at early intervention with at-risk children, but also pointed out

> … that children with learning disabilities are not always identified. This lack of identification leads to remediation efforts that do not meet the special needs of the learning disabled student. Without a psycho-educational assessment, it is not possible to delineate the exact nature of the problem or to plan appropriate interventions (Province of New Brunswick, 1998, p. 15).

Without entering into a debate on the accessibility or the effectiveness in psycho-educational assessments impacting classroom practices, the point at the heart of the learning disability question is that disabled or not, many alternate education students arrive with disordered learning.

Identifying learning disabilities is a complex legal issue, on which the province has not taken a clear position, as provincial policies and binding human rights decisions both recognize learning disabilities as requiring specialized service from the province, while providing administrators little motivation to identify them. The impact of naming, or not naming is everywhere in this province's education system[11].

The good news on the learning disability front is that there is a change in how educators approach the issue. The Response to Intervention approach, or RTI, as a measure of disability versus cognitive ability scores is gaining ground, and is being used as a measure for service in the District's Early Years Program. The idea behind RTI is that if a student does not prosper under good teaching, then the school team will adjust the teaching strategies. If the student does not respond to these and subsequent interventions with improved academic

[11] To their credit, District 2 is working diligently at early identification and intervention of students at-risk for learning difficulties. Furthermore, they are attempting to foster the growth of professional learning communities in the district. At the core of this movement is the concept of being aware of current educational literature and incorporating common pedagogy in schools.

achievement, then it becomes clear that the student requires some form of special education services. It is hoped that a systemic approach to identifying students who require different teaching support will gradually reduce undiagnosed disabilities in the district.

The RTI approach has a second impact for alternative education. There is a wave of thought which is strongly supported by educational research in this field which says that an individual's level of intelligence is not responsible for academic success (Fuchs and Young, 2006, p.8). If student-appropriate pedagogy is more significant to academic success than student intelligence, then it legitimizes the concept of creating an education service model that relies on an alternative pedagogy.

Many students in alternative education arrive with chronically delayed academic development. These students have achieved well below grade expectations for much of their entire school life and require special education plans to accommodate or modify curriculum. These are students who have been on the special education radar for years, but whose behaviours have moved them out of the regular school populations. While I hate to use the term "disordered" to describe a human's capacity to learn, I will use it here in the context that their learning is "disordered" in comparison to how we expect students to learn while in a traditional classroom environment.

Abbie

Abbie's early years teachers are all eager to recall what a wonderful child and how perfect a student she was. Her cumulative record backs up these

anecdotes that Abbie was a perfect student for the first three years of her academic life. Somewhere in or around grade 3 or 4, her behaviour became suddenly and uncontrollably disordered. By grade six she was slashing tires in the parking lot at recess. She encountered much difficulty in class, and her behaviour was often volatile. She spent the grades from 6 to 9 in a constant carousel of in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, and alternative education settings. Abbie is a good reader, although extended periods of reading often appear to frustrate or bore her. She is able to express herself well in short bursts of writing, although writing conventions are inconsistent in their application, and prolonged writing tasks make her increasingly frustrated. She has a wonderful sense of humour and understands jokes and wit that few of her similarly aged peers do. She is often able to synthesize textual comprehension with previous knowledge or situations. In math, she can work out quotients to several decimal places using double digit divisors in her head, albeit this requires her to be extremely motivated and focused (430/18=23.89 was a sample question she completed). She was, however, unable to write the work down or to express verbally what steps she has done to discover that 430/18= 23.89. While Abbie is able to complete such math tasks, she finds such effort exhausting, and often finds new or abstract high school math concepts (significant digits, for example) confusing.

Abbie was finally tested late in grade nine. Her test results showed a 24 percentile difference between her language achievement (53rd percentile) and her math achievement (29th percentile).

At some point each week, Abbie will clench her fists and blurt out in math class- "Mr. Jar-dine! This makes me want to KILL myself!" Abbie has since been diagnosed with a mood disorder, spent half a year on medication, moved out of home at the age of fifteen, and become pregnant.

Abbie is significant because she represents one of my highest functioning academic students, yet she displays a significant gap between her math and English achievement. She struggles to express her vibrant ideas in writing, and she cannot transfer sequentially solved math problems from her head to paper. Something is out of order in the way her brain tries to transfer information from the inside out. In alternative education, it seems that even the best students have to adapt to disordered learning.

2.2.3.2 Gap Theory

The other theory for the disordered learning of at-risk students is the gap theory. The disordered learning displayed by at-risk students can be explained not by cognitive dysfunction or impairment, but rather by gaps in their learning caused by chronic disruptions in their schooling. These disruptions can be caused by a variety of factors- transient housing and being shuffled from school to school, illness, or, quite often, by disordered behaviour. These students have simply missed the opportunity to receive instruction in, and achieve mastery over, curriculum related skills.

For many students who arrive in the alt site, they have been constantly removed from the classroom through a cascade of time-tested interventions: specialized seating (often in the hall until they choose to conform), hours waiting in the principal's office, time-out rooms, detention, and in-school suspension. The Province of New Brunswick refers to this process as the "standard management practice" of "supervised time alone" (Province of New Brunswick, 2002, p.2).

In terms of managing student behaviour, New Brunswick is firmly entrenched in a culture of punishment. This same document instructs us "to remove the student from school and to . . . return after hours to make up some of the lost time" and that "in the case of student non-compliance it may be necessary for the teacher to physically move the student." (Province of New Brunswick, 2002, page 3). If all of the adults in the school are unable to successfully move a student into an appropriate quiet place, then the police are

to be brought in (Province of New Brunswick, 2002, page 4). When, after all this nurturing, the student does not develop self control, we turn to the time-honoured tradition of out of school suspension. The argument is simple: students will not learn if they are not in class, and they cannot be in class until they get their behaviour under control, and only the student can be held responsible for their individual behaviour.

Other students come to alternative education having been unable to attend school regularly for a number of reasons: school phobia, sickness, residential transiency. Regardless of the reason, these students have missed out on the chance to thrive in the normal academic environment, and need a place to recover lost time and skills. This is the gap theory.

The gap theory ties in nicely with the Response to Intervention concept, because, in theory, all these students need is a chance to receive the education they missed. The smaller class sizes of the Moncton Alternative Education Centre seem like a realistic response to the needs of this student profile. However, the students who find themselves in alternative education seldom fit any single category. Many of the Moncton Alternative Education Centre students are affected by multiple socio-educational factors.

2.3 Co-morbidity of Factors

It is the exception to encounter an alternative education student who fits any single criteria – the norm is to experience some range of co-morbidity within the

factors we have identified. Consider two alternative education students, Dougie and Victoria.

Dougie

Dougie was referred by his home school in September of his grade 7 year. When he was referred his principal said, "He's not a bad kid, he's just lazy." After arrival, Dougie's achievement proved to be chronically and globally below grade level, and he exhibited no response to intense academic accommodation. I had worked with the child's father while he was in federal custody, and so had the unique experience of knowing explicit details regarding the child's life. The child had suffered atrocities. The child lived in poverty. The child was exiled by his peers in one of the most desperately poor schools in the province, because everybody knew about his father. The child found a pair of sneakers on the school ground, had a buddy throw them on the school roof and later went back to "find" them. We called him lazy, and we called him a thief, and we sent him to the alt school.

Victoria

On the opposite end of the achievement spectrum is Victoria. Victoria was an older student who had excellent math and language skills (she scored 100% on the grade 11 trigonometry test), and she displayed excellent organizational abilities and a ferocious drive to do well on assignments. Victoria, however, had a nearly complete inability to understand any tasks which required inferential thinking. If she could not find concrete evidence of an answer in the text, she was stymied. Victoria grew up in poverty (I met her first when she was in grade 2), and at the age of 19 was a mother of two living on social assistance, and struggling to maintain custody of her first child.

Victoria presents an excellent example of our students. She is an impoverished single mother, with some areas of real academic strength, but who also has some academic weaknesses or potential learning disabilities which are both hard to identify, and surprising when encountered. Dougie is a child with complex social and academic challenges that prevent him from thriving in school. It

requires more than sending Dougie down to see the Resource Teacher for a little one on one during fifth period to help him master his Grade 8 Science.

Alternative education students live in that limbo between regular and special education. Some, such as Dougie, are clearly within the confines of special education, but require the attention they can receive in a full-time smaller setting. Others, like Abbie, need to be in a classroom where their weaknesses do not overshadow the many things they do know, or their ability to express that knowledge.

In a small program such as the Moncton Alternative Education Centre, one that is based on localized control, the process of being duly diligent in choosing appropriate service models for our students risks becoming subjective, as does the very content and nature of the programs . This speaks to the necessity to formalize a service delivery model, a pedagogy that administration, teachers and parents can point to and say this program, this classroom, follows a service model that could benefit this student. Alternative education is not a sentence, it is a service.

Chapter Three
The Process of Learning: A Change of Thinking

This chapter tells the story of the teacher I am becoming. This story is rooted in my early struggles between my experience as a student in a traditional transmission style environment, and the deep rooted knowledge that my learning had been incomplete. Learning theories, teachers and classroom experience worked together to form a new concept of learning, which in turn led me to grappling with a new mindset regarding curriculum and how I approach meaning-making in my classroom. The end result is a new way of being and of knowing. This chapter tells the story of the theories which changed my life, and of the first step down this road: my change in thinking about the human process of learning.

3.1 Schoolhouse Tales and Fantastic Fables

3.1.1 Fable the First

Once upon a time, there was a little country village called Simile. Things were simple in Simile. If you were happy, your face shone like the sun. If you were sad, then you cried like the rain. As you grew, the boys became as strong as an ox, and the girls became as pretty as pictures. The children who went to school in Simile were happy. They were happy because they understood the rules. They could find Simile on a map. They could voice the village motto in unison. They understood all aspects of life in Simile, and everyone was happy.

Then one day, the government man came. The government man told them that he had great and wonderful news. A new school was being built in the nearest town, and when all of the children from all of the neighboring villages reached a certain age, they were going to be sent to the big new school in the nearby town of Metaphor to get a fancy, modern education.

There was much debate. There were angry town hall meetings with parents wanting to protect their children, while politicians and government men were telling everyone how wonderful it was all going to be. Some parents wanted this new, modern education for their children, others wanted to keep their children home, safe as dormice. In the end, however, as with all things, the government men won out, and long lines of big yellow school busses wound their way over hills and around mountains and into the stark, sophisticated town of Metaphor.

When the children went home at night to Simile, they smiled at their parents and recited the school motto.

“Oh,” said their parents, “that sounds sophisticated. They never would have learned that in Simile.” So many of the parents said they were happy.

“Johnny,” said their parents, “Tell your Gram what you learned in school today.” And the children would recite the school motto.

“Oh,” said the grandparents, “That sounds sophisticated.”

The government men beamed whenever they came to the village. The teachers at the new school were very content. They had used their new methods and even the simple country children from Simile were able to learn the school motto. Everyone was happy. Everyone said they were happy.

The children from Simile were happy. They were told how much they had learned, and how smart they now were.

3.1.2 Fable the Second

In the beginning, in the town of Metaphor, there was a school full of happy teachers. Every day, long lines of yellow school busses wound their way into town from all over the countryside. The simple country teachers gathered their classes around them and taught them how to recite the school motto in unison. Every two weeks the smiling government man came to the school and handed out their paychecks for work well done.

One week there was a new government man. His smile was twice as bright as before. He had great and wonderful news. Over the mountain and down in the city there was a University. At the University, there were people who were willing to teach teachers new and wonderful things. Teachers who were accepted to go

to the University would be given an honorary title until they returned. They would be called “Grad Students”.

Upon completion of University, the Grad Students would become “Masters” and would be paid more by the government man when he came to Metaphor with the weekly paychecks. So many Grad Students hugged their spouses and kissed their children, and said, “Goodbye. We’ll be back in two years! You won’t even know we’ve gone!”

When the Grad Students arrived at the University, they were told that curriculum was conversation. “Oh,” they said. “Oh. That sounds sophisticated. I never learned that in teacher’s college.”

The Grad Students all nodded wisely and said, “Yes, yes.” But they leaned over to their fellows and whispered questions, “Curriculum as conversation- do you know what that means?”

“No,” was the constant reply, “But I think it’s a metaphor. So as long as we don’t say like or as, we should get by.”

3.2 Lessons Learned

3.2.1 First Lessons: How to be a Grade Five Wunderkind

I was terrified of going to school. My neighborhood kindergarten teacher had told me that real school was serious business, and I wouldn't be able to sing there, that they wouldn't let that sort of thing happen. This made me very angry with her. Later, when I did go to Grade 1, I was terrified. Not of being told that I could not sing my John Denver songs, but of discovering that I was stupid. I was a simple child who had been raised in a simple family. What if I went to school only to find out I was stupid? If that happened, I told myself, I would run away and hide in the park, or maybe in the cemetery. The trees in the cemetery were much bigger than the trees in the park, and in the park, the big kids liked to burn things.

However, I got to school and found out that I was smart enough to get by. I remember the wonder of learning to read. It first came when Mrs. P was reading a story about bunnies. I was following along, and sometimes even running ahead. I could read! Later, I learned the junior high school motto: "A simile is a comparison using the words 'like' or 'as'". I could define it on a test, I could write one of my own, I could remember it on a shade-in-the-circle multiple-choice provincial assessment. This made my teachers very happy. They told me I could learn to be anything I wanted to be. They talked about letting me skip a grade.

Later, I learned the high school motto "A metaphor is a comparison not using the words 'like' or 'as'." This confused me greatly until King Lear explained

that I should “not come between the dragon and his wrath!” (King Lear, Act 1, Sc. i).

“Oh,” I said, “It is just like simile. You just can’t use those two words.” But there was a thought nagging at me- I knew I didn’t really get it, because if I was asked for an example of a metaphor, I couldn’t think of one. My education had trained me to believe that truth was this kernel of content that was neatly packaged, identifiable, reproducible, measurable, and objectively, unarguably, absolute. I had reached my ceiling. I wasn’t stupid, but I wasn’t smart either. I was working as hard as I could in my enriched English, and I was able to squeak out a 77. If I was an average student in Grade 10, then I certainly could never hope to study English in university. So I dropped it, and went back to the regular stream of English, and eventually found myself studying History in university.

3.2.2 Second Lessons: Transmission in Practice

History was clearly my strong suit: it was transmission pedagogy at its best: quantifiable data packets prepared for regurgitation: if you answered the big questions: who, what, where, and when, you received a “B”. If you extended yourself just a little and took a timid shot at answering why, you got a “B+”. Go to class. Be polite. Listen. Nod. If you have short haired teachers, get a haircut. Answer questions whenever you are sure that you know the answer. Go to the library and do all of the readings. Do all of this and by the time you were graduating, that “B+” might even have turned into the occasional “A-“.

All this I did, and once again, school made sense. Once again, I was content. My mother was happy. My Grandmother was pleased, very pleased.

3.2.3 Third Lessons: The Quiet Revolution

Eventually that BA in Canadian History was translated into a degree in Education, but not before I spent a year studying English under a man who had himself studied under Northrop Frye at Victoria College in Toronto. It was during this year that things began to change. Dr. Mantz required that you take a Linguistics course. All of a sudden, I was studying the theory of meaning as it pertained to language, studying how readers make meaning. It was described as the Reader Response Theory. Rosenblatt, Barthes, and Frye, were the names that I was reading but under it all, the ground was shaking.

> One emerges on the other side of this realizing once again that all knowledge is personal knowledge, but with some hope that the person may have been transformed in the meantime (Frye, 2007, p.10).

Meaning resides in the reader, and all new knowledge transforms the reader, so that they are able to make more meaning or new choices. This was a disruption to my commonplace.

I am responsible for what I think about a text. There is no absolute truth that can be transmitted from author-teacher to reader-student. The teacher can prescribe that this and that must be kept by the student and returned to the teacher as thus and so on the exam, but that is not connected in any way to what the student remembers. This helped me understand why, throughout my

education, I had felt flummoxed, because I had been busy trying to make meaning on other people's terms, using other people's processes.

3.2.4 Fourth Lessons: Metaphor, Take Two

My introduction to Frye was a serious interjection into the way I looked at the world around me, but his influence would continue to haunt me as I entered into teaching as a profession. Much later, as I was discovering that my experience with teaching practices were unacceptable to how I felt about learning, I would rediscover Frye, and suddenly, the process of learning seemed to make more sense.

Frye wasn't the first to put forward the idea that meaning making was reader-based, nor was it what gave him significance. What made Northrop Frye notorious was his concept of literary structure. Frye points out that there is a structure to human meaning making that develops naturally out of our attempt to understand the world around us (Frye, 2002, p.66). The development of associative language ultimately forms the shape of all literature.

To put it simply, Frye helped me cross the great bridge Metaphor. He introduced me to the idea that there is a difference between *the process of metaphor* – what I think of as "Big-M" Metaphor - and *a metaphor*. Big M-Metaphor is the natural process of thinking that helps humans make meaning of their natural world: it is the process of saying 'this' means 'that' (Frye, 2007, p.46). Metaphor is the process of recognizing that one concept, narrative, or fact can be identified as similar to another, and can therefore be understood.

Personally, the thing that grew out of Frye is the idea of thinking in patterns. Frye pointed out that just as humans use patterns to identify meaning, so too are there recurring patterns within texts. He borrowed Jung's phrase "Archetype" to describe these recurring patterns of meaning. As Robert Kroetsch put it,

> *One of the things you have to ask yourself is what story am I retelling? Because you're not really making up a new story, you are retelling a story in a new way (Wiebe and Kroetsch, 2008, p.7).*

For Frye, there was even a more basic pattern, a singular pattern in literature: the story of loss and redemption (Frye, 2002, p.66).

There are two key things which stand out here: firstly, the idea that my personal experiences and interaction with the text are legitimate and crucial to any significance I get from a text; secondly, that the reader must think in terms of patterns, because literature is based on an underlying structure that provides it with form and meaning.

3.2.5 Fifth Lessons: Brave New World

The idea that a structure existed on which the meaning of literature was hung, and that the purpose of this structure was to serve me gave the young reader a starting point to analyze the meaning to be found in a text. First, I began to think about how I personally made meaning from a text, and then I began to think about how to I could teach meaning-making from a text. The story had turned.

3.3 The related expansion of text and meaning

3.3.1 Text: New Paradigms

I came to believe that knowledge and meaning-making is first and foremost the learner's, that the meaning of a text is found within the reader. This impacts the classroom in several ways. Firstly, the concept of "text" needs to change. It has been argued that an expanded sense of text is a key to understanding contemporary meaning-making in the classroom (Nichols and Bayetto, 2004). This concept of an expanded sense of text is tied not only to the digital proliferation of texts, and the goal of legitimizing students as author/knower, but it is also tied to the learning structures that are developed in the classroom to promote meaning-making.

Traditionally, the term "text" has been associated with the idea of the written word, with "a text" being considered as a complete unit of written words taken together, regardless of length, and "the text" being considered as the written words within "a text". My premise is that this is too narrow a concept because all meaning is found outside of the physical constraints of letters and words. Indeed, in the age of the "Digital Revolution", I daresay words need not even form a part of a legitimate narrative text.

All communication is inherently multimodal- the Light Brigade was instructed to take "that hill", a command which was accompanied by a horribly indistinct gesture; a motion which sent them not on the intended flanking

maneuver, but riding dutifully "into the valley of death"[12]. In the same manner that the spoken word relies on gestures, inflection of tone, and a trust that the listener understands certain shared unspoken intentions, so too print relies on a shared weaving of unseen images and emotions and ideas.

The purpose of text is communication- and this is key- the outworking of that purpose is naturally and inescapably multimodal. Surely, no sooner than Gutenberg had invented the typesetting press, writers began finding ways to include illustrations, because communication and understanding are both inherently multimodal. I cannot remember any "textbooks" without pictures.

A problem with the idea of 'communication' is that it lends itself to the idea that the author is creating this complete ball of content and tossing it to the audience. This has often become the primary ethos of the classroom, and my premise is that this is ineffective and limiting and must be replaced with a teaching paradigm that better mirrors language and learning, especially in the alternative education classroom. So yet again, what is commonplace must be disrupted.

As all text - indeed all communication - is multimodal we must take a more inclusive approach to text. The way texts are viewed will impact the role the student plays as reader and author, and will ultimately shape the classroom space itself. Students must see themselves as having a voice in the formation of knowledge in my classroom. This is especially significant in an alternative education classroom, where so many students arrive with a voiceless past. So the first step in achieving that voice is to expand the sense of text – to identify a

[12] Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "The Charge of the Light Brigade", 1854.

culture of relevant content in the alternative education classroom space. As Gee (2004) points out, it is the process of interacting with a text that is most significant, not the text itself:

> Neither sounds nor letters themselves have any real meaning. We decode so that we can get to more meaningful tasks like understanding or arguing with a text (p. 46).

To use Frye's words - "no mode is a self-enclosed entity" (Frye, 1990, p.91). Communication is an outworking of the imagination, and the imagination is inherently multimodal. In the digital age the concept of "text" needs to be expanded to include all representational forms used to transmit meaning. "Text" may therefore be considered as any complete unit of communication. A song may be written, or it might be sung, or it might be recorded for broadcast, or played with an accompanying video or series of tableaux. Each rendition of the song carries with it the potential of transmitting different messages, and as such, each version represents a slightly different text, with different meaning making processes enacted by both authors and audience.

The government of Australia and the University of Southern Australia co-authored a report, "Mapping Multiliteracies" (Government of Australia & Unisa, 2004), which focuses on the effect of the Digital Revolution on the emergent generation of learners. In light of the digital revolution some have declared that the learner needs to develop "multiliteracies", or "new literacies" (Knobel and Lankshear, 2007). At first glance, this seems like a bit of cardsharking. There has never been a time when humans did not need the ability to navigate a wide range of skills in their formal communication. The Digital Revolution has not

produced a new way to communicate. Our ability to receive information remains sensory and our senses still travel the tunnel between Plato's cave and Magritte's pipe.

The Digital Revolution has not changed information in and of itself, but Lankshear and Knobel are right in recognizing that there are new information paradigms evolving. It is their point that "new literacies involve different 'ethos stuff' from that which is typically associated with conventional literacies" (Lankshear and Knobel, 2007, p.9).

Information has always been contextualized in a broad range of formats. What has changed is the sheer density of information that has crystallized with the new digital technology. This in turn, has created a new paradigm: people are reading and writing today more than ever before, and they are doing so in wider range of formats.

There are two keys here. Firstly, the concept that people write more often, and they write in a broad range of formats – formats which do not necessarily include conventional text or traditional textual conventions. While Christmas cards and thank you notes in the mail are part of the old textual mindset, instant messaging and video posts are prolific ways to convey the same message. Word processors, social software and email have spread like rats in Rome.

Teachers will often grumble about new language conventions that are corrupting school, but this is not about what is better, the old or the new, this is about the impact that new technology has on how people view themselves. In a world where everyone expects to see their words in print, and in a world where

nobody seems to criticize other people's spelling, punctuation or syntax, anyone and everyone is expected to be an author.

Together, Wycliffe, Gutenberg and Luther put a Bible in every home. Today, the computer and telecommunications industries have given us not only the chance to access and use an inconceivable amount of information, but also the power to create, record or modify information in ways unthinkable a few short years ago. The power of this new information paradigm is rooted in its versatility. Information can be blended seamlessly into a multimodal format of sound, colour, graphics, and words. Each of these aspects carries with it an ability to bring meaning to the reader. This is the key effect of the new age for us. It is a question of balance.

Print remains a powerful semiotic tool that forms the core of much digital communication, but there is a shift towards a more inclusive concept of communication where information is both recorded in and sought for in non-traditional mediums: image searches, video streams and podcasts all offer today's learner access to information that has transcended traditional text-based reference paradigms while cell phones and instant text-messaging has provided access to "distributed knowledge" (Gee, 2004) which will certainly grow in its influence as the Digital Revolution continues to boom.

What Northrop Frye said he liked about the book, was that it remained the same (Cayley, 1992). What it said was static. Ironically, Gee points out that the unchangeable nature of the written word is what Plato found most problematic about writing (Gee, Situated Learning). However, today's readers are growing up

with more malleable texts. Perhaps the book will be overcome by wikis and the Wii, but in a classroom that is seeking to increase the students' self awareness as both potential authors and readers, the new balance between static and collaborative texts should only be of benefit.

3.3.2 Making Meaning: What if it's just a mountain?

As a class, we have been discussing "Railroad Worksong". I ask the class to recount the story that is told in the song. "This guy sends his hammer to the captain and takes off," would be a concise summary of how the class interprets the song. So I ask them "Who is the Captain?" and some other questions, finally, I hit on a question that helps them understand that there may be something extra hidden in the simple words – "What do you think it means when he says 'I'll be flying' what do you think that's talking about? Is he really flying?"

Nate opens his mouth and says, very slowly, "Do you mean he's dying and when he says he's flying, then that means he's like going to heaven?"

This opens a good conversation about how we read, and what questions we ask the text. I point out that I sang the song for twenty years before I ever took the time to try to answer the questions I had always held about the text. It wasn't until we were looking at it in class one day that I just blurted out an interpretation of the song, and the more we talked about it that day, the more meaning I found hidden in it. We continue the conversation about how some readers develop a sense that there is a second layer of meaning in a text, and how I had to learn to be comfortable with looking for that other layer.

As lunch beckons, we are discussing "She'll be coming 'round the mountain". What sort of things could you equate the mountain with?" I ask them, trying to get them to name some things that the reader could substitute into the reading – the idea of two stories hiding inside of one other seems appealing to several of them.

Finally, Alan raises his hand. "Mr. J, what if it is just a mountain?"

The question "What was the story about?" or "What did the story mean?" was always something I struggled with. How was a reader supposed to know what the bird represented? At the end of The Mountain and the Valley (Buckler,

1952), the main character dies, and a bird flies up to heaven. This book has been taught for many years in many Canadian schools, and when Moncton High School's Grade 12 English teacher said that the bird was a symbol of David's soul, Scott believed her, because teachers know all of the answers – that is their job isn't it -to know? The question that nagged was "How?" How was the student, or any reader for that matter, supposed to know what the bird was *supposed* to mean?

I had to learn how to understand texts in a manner beyond the concrete. If meaning is rooted in the reader, the reader must come to learn what sort of questions to ask about the text. Frye's concept's helped shape a framework of meta-questions to ask regarding the action and purpose of a text: Where have I seen this before? What is there that I know or have experienced that echoes in this story? What can I relate to? These sorts of questions give the reader a framework to interact with a text on a personal, experiential level.

Justice

Justice has complete hearing loss in one ear, he has been assessed as being severely ADDH, and as a child was tested to see if was "mentally retarded" (the words of the social worker originally involved in the case). He was given a psycho educational evaluation, which showed both Math and Reading Composite scores in the first and third percentiles. Justice has not been able to successfully complete the month of September since he was in Grade 5. He has been a ward of the state for the last three years. At 16, he was released to his mother's custody. At 17, he found his way into the alternative school. Justice finds it difficult to write anything more than two lines with a pen and paper, but enjoys working on a computer. He has just completed a project on the movie <u>The Lords of Dogtown</u>, a story about skateboarders in the 70s.

“C’mere Mr. J, I think I’m finished.” Mr. Jardine comes over and Justice jumps directly into a long description of pictures he had placed on the computer, rapidly naming the digitalized faces and logos that flash across the screen .

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, Justice, hold on. First, you’re going to have to give me a little background on the story. I don’t know anything about these guys.”

“Well, Dogtown is about these guys who are really close friends when they’re kids and they start skateboarding in like empty swimming pools and stuff, like back before Tony Hawk and they wind up making they’re own boards and all of a sudden they get really famous but then this guys gets punched in the nose and really messed up and loses an eye and another one of their friends gets cancer or something and dies, and - “

“So wait a minute- “ Mr. Jardine interrupts, “What you’re saying is that first these guys have nothing, but they all make it big and everything else is good, but then everybody loses it again, and they have to figure out what’s important in life again.”

“Exactly.” Justice beams.

“Can you think of any other stories we looked at this year where someone loses everything and has to look inside themselves for the strength to keep going?” Mr. Jardine asks.

“You mean like that one you read us where the hunter falls off the boat?” (Justice is referring to the 1924 short story “The Most Dangerous Game” by Richard Connell).

“Sure,” says Mr. Jardine.

“Yeah, I can see that. The hunter is famous and thinks he’s got it all figured out, but then splash and it’s gone.”

“So what did these guys lose?” asks Mr. Jardine, pointing at the screen.

“Well they thought thay had it all until one guy got cocky and lost his eye and he thought maybe he was never gonna skate again, and this other guy got cancer, and then all that other stuff really didn’t matter anymore.”

“Great, Justice, that’s what I need you to say somewhere in this slideshow, can you do that?”

“C’mon Mr. J,” grins Justice, “I can do anything.”

In the Massey Lectures of 1962, which would be later published as The Educated Imagination, Frye notes that there are both singular patterns and a set of core patterns that informs meaning-making in literature (Frye, 2002, p.21). The singular pattern, Frye said, was that all narratives ultimately told the story of the loss and redemption of humanity. Furthermore, there were lesser patterns which existed within and across the narratives of literature which were told to give shape to the ultimate story of loss and redemption.

More comes out of Frye than just the idea that there is a frame on which to hang a reader's narratives, for he also deals with the symbolism that exists in literature, for loss and redemption need legs on which to travel through narratives. Frye began his analysis with language itself, and postulated that humans are unable to exist without asking questions about greater meanings due to the sheer immensity of the universe we find ourselves in (2004, p. 31). In The Educated Imagination, there is a chapter titled "The Motive for Metaphor", in which Frye reasons out this process. There is a gap between the "language of consciousness" (p.4) i.e. the language of nouns and adjectives, or rather the language of the world you live in, and the world you want to live in (p.5). Associative language (metaphor), he says, comes out of humanity's need to try and reconcile our innate insignificance in comparison to the universe. The universe, being too vast to experience in a concrete manner, required a language that could transcend that immensity, so in response, the human mind develops associative language and the structure of learning has entered into the era of metaphor, or the "this is that" stage.

Essentially, Frye is restating one of the oldest pedagogical postulates: that the process of knowing invariably and irreversibly changes the knower. In this case, that self awareness situates the human in a world beyond his or her ability to comprehend, which gives rise to associative language:

> The motive for Metaphor, according to Wallace Stevens, is to associate, and finally to identify the human mind with what goes on outside it, because the only genuine joy you can have is in those rare moments when you feel that although we may know in part, as Paul says, we are also a part of what we know (Frye, 2002, p.16).

Subsequently, metaphor becomes a microcosmic example of how language and literature works, and of how humans think and learn. As such it becomes the starting point for my alternative education classroom practices.

3.4 Towards the Classroom

I am a teacher. As Frye pointed out in The Great Code (2007),

> The teacher, as has been recognized since at least Plato's *Meno*, is not primarily someone who knows instructing someone who does not know. He is rather someone who attempts to recreate the subject in the students mind (p.9).

How does the teacher do this? Students need to become aware of how to make meaning and how to express it in ways that work in a classroom. We begin with Metaphor, or the process of "this means that", and move forward.

As a I student I was relatively successful. Yet with the exception of the ability to decode, encode, take notes and do some computation, I learned almost

nothing through my first sixteen years of formal education. This is because nobody stopped to help me learn how to make meaning. Nobody said this is how we humans learn, and this is what students need to do. All my teachers were government men, arriving regularly to hand out pay stubs for compliance. I learned nothing of use except to be obedient, and everyone told me how wonderful I was.

Once I realized that what I was doing as a teacher was insufficient, I sensed that I needed to disrupt the commonplace. So I began by setting a goal: to teach my alternative education students in their own self-interest (Finn, 1999). I had begun to change how I thought about the human process of learning and this would lead to a new consideration of curriculum – a new approach to how teachers and students make meaningful changes in what they know. In turn, my new approach to curriculum was part of a change of being (Ethos) and a change of doing (pedagogy).

My students were at-risk learners who struggled to make meaning in the regular classroom environment, and I believed they were not truly thriving in my classroom. My experience had revealed moments of learning in which at-risk students had grappled with complex ideas and made incredible statements of knowing. So I had to decide in which of my classroom practices could foster such moments and which restricted such moments. I realized that the way humans made meaning should be the basis on which my teaching and their learning should be based.

3.5 A change in thinking

Writing this, I am conscious of how obvious it all seems and how unnecessary it now might appear to demonstrate by little anecdotes that ghetto students can handle sophisticated literature and ideas. (Adrienne Rich, 1979, pp.58-59)

At-risk students are capable learners. To internalize this is both the greatest challenge and the most significant leap of faith for a teacher. As humans, we tend to divide the world. While we describe time in terms of a sequential or linear progression, we assess our actions in non-linear terms, but rather in ascending layers or levels, with each strata being associated with an increased measure of value. Levels are different in terms of their worth, with different layers being viewed as having more or less worth than other levels or layers. This is the first roadblock to effective teaching: as a profession, we value some learning, some work, indeed, we value some students more than others.

At the Moncton Alternative Education Centre, few students arrive with strong learning habits. There is a wide range of strengths and weaknesses, but few come in as accomplished students. Experience has shown that when a learning structure is provided for the students, they are able to do very well. They are able to express, reflect, and compare. Their problem often begins in the fact that they are unaware of and unpracticed in the processes expected in school, and often remain unaware of the processes they do or have acquired.

Underlying this change of thinking is perhaps the single most significant step a teacher can make: belief. The teacher must believe that all students are capable – not only of learning – but are capable of excelling in the classroom.

This is not an easy task, for teachers have long been taught that if your work is good, then mine is invariably better or worse.

How one teaches is dependent on how one views learning and knowing. There is a movement afoot that challenges traditional mindsets about measurable intelligence and learning. To quote James Gee (2004),

> *The perspective taken here views the human mind as a "pattern-recognizing" device that works primarily by storing experiences and finding patterns in those experiences (p.70).*

So while teaching has for many years been a process of transmission – think of Freire's 'bank model' of teaching (Freire, 2005, p.71)– it should really be a process of helping students to recognize, create and store more patterns.

A key point here is that I am talking about the way the *human* brain functions, not the way that the middle class brain or the English brain, or the Protestant brain works. This is significant, because many alternative education students are considered to be somehow incapable – by themselves, by teachers, by the system. Yet if teachers understand the way all humans make meaning, and if they teach accordingly, then it stands to reason that all students should be able to perform.

My argument is simple: my at-risk learners are capable of school achievement because people share a common way of making meaning. Research supports this. Douglas Fuchs and Caresa Young (2006) point out that almost twenty years ago Siegel indicated that evidence was emerging to suggest that low achieving students function more like high achieving students than not

(p.10). They also point out that current research trends continue to support Siegel and indicate "intelligence is relatively unimportant- if not irrelevant- to an understanding of poor school achievement and how to address it" (p.8).

When a human encounters new information, he or she compares it to what is already known. Consider the example of Marco Polo and the unicorn. Umberto Eco (1997), a semiotics professor and novelist, explains the process of making sense out of new information:

> … when faced with an unknown phenomenon… we seek that scrap of content already present in our encyclopedia which for better or worse seems to account for the new fact (p.57).

Marco Polo, he points out, "discovered" unicorns on Java. That is, he discovered quadrupeds with a single horn stuck in its forehead- what else could it be? The only thing in his personal "encyclopedia" that could describe this beast was the idea of a unicorn. He noted that this "unicorn" obviously was nothing like the magical beast of legend, and that it also shared characteristics with both the buffalo and the elephant. However, the idea that was closest to the animal, the image which he was translating into text, was the "unicorn" (Eco, p. 58).

The theory is simple: as the learner uses his or her encyclopedia to make new connections, it expands. So too does the learner's ability to make new connections and to establish new patterns. In this way learning and knowing are like the two halves of Velcro, whereby the learner purposefully attempts to connect new information patterns to see what sticks to the information patterns the learner already has.

3.5 How the change in thinking supports the structure of Metaphor

The general meaning-making process in both language and literature, which Frye calls Metaphor, is that process of saying “this is that” (Frye, 2007, p.46). This first process parallels the concept of the brain as a recognizer of patterns quite nicely. Furthermore, the idea of reoccurring patterns as a starting point to examine texts from a pattern-based approach is useful: what is the pattern of the story, and what other similar patterns do I already know? As the learner encounters new information, there is an attempt to rationalize or balance it according to what is already known. This is an easy definition for Metaphor, which I would postulate is the basic human pattern of meaning-making, and the process which my students need to be able to use deliberately.

Chapter Four
Curriculum and Meaning: A New Mindset

> People keep saying that traditional directive methods "work" with working-class children. No one seriously thinks these methods educate anyone. They keep the lid on while giving the children a kind of domesticating literacy, which prepares them to take their parents' place in society. It's our old friend economic reproduction, and when you understand it, it just won't do (Finn, 1999, p. 119).

In chapter 3, I presented the first step in my new approach to teaching: a change in thinking about learning that came out of my dissatisfaction with my struggles as a learner and my desire to become a better teacher. This dissatisfaction was rooted in the human element of my profession, for the way I was teaching had no connection with the way humans learn. Rather, my teaching was based on how I was told to mark.

4.1 New Brunswick Curriculum

In New Brunswick today, curriculum is seen as a series of set, quantifiable data packets and content driven outcomes. The province has spent the past 18 months having classroom teachers compile "Essential Learnings" for each and every course in the New Brunswick curriculum. These "Essential Learnings" are then compiled into course-by-course taxonomies that are downloadable by classroom teachers to serve as a checklist to ensure that common content is being covered across the province.

New Brunswick has been impacted by the culture of content that found root in Western education paradigms. This culture pervades local education paradigms, and determined how curriculum would be translated into local alternative education classrooms.

When James Paul Gee (2004) discusses the "content fetish" of Western education, he says:

> Both Mendel's Laws and Pokémon have to do with the nearly limitless variety that can flow from a rather simple, but elegant, set of underlying characteristics (p.118).

The idea that a set of underlying characteristics – a simple pattern that establishes the shape of a space – can establish very complex and varied communication is the starting point for the alternative education classroom.

4.1.2 Alternative education classrooms

My experience in alternative education is that classes are formed of students who work in several courses at several grade levels simultaneously. One approach to dealing with this situation is to compartmentalize the curriculum. In the Canadian federal penitentiary system, upgrading students are provided with workbooks or photocopied modules which are completed sequentially by

students working independently at their own pace. When each module is completed, it is passed in to the teacher and marked[13].

My first teaching assignment was to teach a class of 12 to 15 adult learners in a federal penitentiary in English and Math spread over 6 grade levels: 12 students and 12 courses. In 2006-2007, at the Moncton Alternative Education Centre, I had 18 students in thirteen different course and grade combinations. It is unrealistic to expect someone to teach 13 courses at a time, so the curriculum is turned into a list of exercises to be completed sequentially. The approach to curriculum at the Moncton Alternative Education Centre echoed the process the prisons used: new students would arrive and would be given two sheets of paper, one for whatever English grade they were in, and one for whatever math course they were in. If they could prove themselves on the bread and water of education, then they would be given the privilege of working on other sheets and other courses. The students were instructed on how to use the sheet, which contained a list of texts with assigned readings and assigned question numbers marked next to the title. The students were expected to sit quietly at their desk and read the appropriate section and answer the appropriate questions, as noted on the sheet. If there was anything which the students could not understand, then they were to ask for assistance. When the students had completed all sections on the sheet, they had completed the grade and would be assigned

[13] I worked for 7 years in the federal justice system and was a member of regional curriculum working groups whose task was to develop a standardized regional curriculum that would also meet provincial curriculum outcomes (in Canada, education is a provincial responsibility, not a federal one, so the federal programs had to meet provincial expectations).

work from another sheet in another grade. At some point, the teacher would run out of sheets, and the student would be free.

The approach of the Moncton Alternative Education Centre and the Canadian penal system typify what I consider the traditional approach to alternative education – create small classes and exert absolute control on content, movement and production. PJ Finn (1999) recounts his experience "handling" at-risk learners in Illinois, and the toll it took on him as a teacher and a human being (p.6). In order to handle at-risk learners, concessions to the curriculum were made:

> *"Good" students were obedient students, students who followed orders. Assignments were so easy that all obedient students got good grades, but I gave plenty of bad grades to students who were not obedient, who did not do their assignments (p. 4).*

One tactic Finn used to maintain control over the students was to have a list of assignments in place so that the students always have work in to do. Encoding the entire curriculum onto a sheet is a small extension of this strategy, only the list of exercises on the sheet remains static from day to day and year to year.

I would argue that when curriculum can be shoved into a can or condensed to a list of page and question numbers, then it is likely that there is little that will engage the learners, and that this means there will be very little learning. One of Gee's requirements for learning is the motivation for extended engagement (2004, p.77). In the alternative school, experience tells me that nothing disengages the learner quicker than a textbook. I believe this is because

the textbook represents an unassailable mountain of content that is largely irrelevant and chosen by people far removed from the students' lives and social circles- content that is chosen to help children better understand the truths about the universe. An alternative education placement is the last chance for these children, and everyone loves to remind them of this. So when the teachers hand them a sheet and tell them to obey or end their formal education, more often than not, they sit down and muddle away at the sheet.

Condensing curriculum into finite packets has persisted because it fits perfectly into the banking model. Every alternative education classroom I have been in expects to succeed by imposing organization and on-task compliance on its students. The message is that the students would succeed if only they tried. They would succeed if they wanted to learn more than they wanted conflict. The old mindset works, so let's take the core aspects of the old mindset and emphasize them even more – turn the curriculum into a series of finite seat-based assignments, give every student teacher and administrator a checklist, and watch the download progress.

4.1.3 A New Curriculum Mindset

The first time I encountered the idea of "Curriculum as conversation" I was bamboozled – befuddled beyond words. It made no sense to me. However, as I read, I kept returning to the idea, and slowly began to understand that what I

learn – curriculum – is based on a pattern or structure which is similar in nature to a dialogue – a conversation.

A second idea took shape – that there are two senses to the idea of curriculum. One is the sense in which I interact with curriculum, and the second is the sense that curriculum has a purpose for, or an impact on me.

If "curriculum as conversation" is the means by which I interact with curriculum, then Jerome Harste's other definition of curriculum "as a metaphor for the lives you want to live and the people you want to be" (Harste, 2008, email) is the means by which curriculum impacts me. In this light, Frye's definition of literature as giving humanity a "myth to live by" for the purpose of providing a "peace" in our lives (Cayley, 1992, p.96) begins to make sense. The meaning I make in my conversations with a text will shape the manner in which I interact with the world – the meaning I make will shape all my future meanings, and it is the meaning I make from the information around me which informs all of my human actions.

4.2 Communicated Meaning

One summer day, when I was seven or eight or nine, I went into town with my dad and my cousin. My father needed to go to the wood shop, and didn't want the fetters of pesky children while he talked to the sawyer. So, we stopped by the house so he could rid himself of us for a bit. We piled out of the car and my father zipped away. Gram and Gramp were not at home, but the yard was big and Buster the Dog was wagging his tail at us. However, as soon as my father left, it began to rain. We were locked out, but the worst kept secret in town was that the key was kept in the red algebra textbook in the porch (page one hundred

forty-six, a single key with no ring, string or tag). "Go on in and make yourself at home," was the understood etiquette of the day. So we did.

I remember that two young boys were nothing if not thirsty creatures, and on the bottom shelf of the fridge door was always a large bottle of Chapman's Orange Soda- soda so sharp it made your eyes water. So I poured each of us "two fingers" (a joke I shared with my grandfather, who was secretly fond of Gordon's Dry Gin). My cousin, Chris, was my maternal cousin and this was my father's house. He was horrified at my nonchalance- his grandmother was of high stock and one dared no privilege in her kitchen- and so, partly to soothe his conscience, and partly to impress my older cousin, but mostly because that was what one did when they let themselves in to Frances' kitchen, I left a note.

I wrote the note in pencil, to my grandmother: it was a simple text with a simple purpose. It stated that Chris and I had visited and had drank some Chapman's. I wrote it on pulpy construction paper, made several mistakes, which were erased or crossed through to the best of my ability, and then I tore it off so as not to waste the rest of the sheet, and placed it on the fridge with watermelon magnets.

The purpose of the text was simple: Chris and Scott drank some pop, and they wanted Scott's grandmother to know. However, that scrap of pulpy paper stayed on the fridge for fifteen years, until Gramp had died and Gram had moved to an apartment in a larger town. A decade again later, while moving her into a senior's residence, it resurfaced.

"Don't throw that out," she warned me, "I want it." One did not argue with my grandmother.

Years again later, when blindness and death had taken her, the scrap of paper once more resurfaced. She had kept it in her night table, next to her magnifying glass, her "hidden" envelope of cash, and her dentures. How much then had the purpose and meaning of the text changed? In a house full of books and bibles and clan histories, it was clearly precious to her. How much again, did its value and meaning change to the author, when it was found amongst her few final possessions? And how much again did its meaning grow when the pulpy mid-nineteen seventies paper crumbled into final, unsalvageable dust?

There is no magic formula to ensure the transmission of a prescribed meaning, for the meaning an individual finds in a text cannot be predicted, and what engages meaning-making with one class might not work for another. Every text has the ability to communicate far beyond the scope of its author's intention- the

one can guarantee no bearing on the other. In the story above, the intention of the text was simply to say "Sorry I missed you, and thanks for the drink." However, the text carried with it far more meaning than that when discovered, and furthermore, by the time the original text crumbled, the author had become audience, and the audience had managed to write meaning into the text more profound than anything the original author could ever have imagined possible.

4.3 Making Meaning

People make meaning by comparing something new to something that is already known or experienced. In the same way, texts exist in a continuum of things that have already been known or experienced by the learner. Central to Frye's work in literary criticism and Umberto Eco's work as both a writer and a semiotics professor, is the manner in which the meaning of a text is built and incorporated from both the reader's and author's experience of other texts. In the same way a human thinks by comparing what is known to what is new, texts echo one another. While discussing the influence of culture on writers, Eco commented that "I say this… to lead myself back to a principle that I think is fundamental…: this most important point is that books talk to each other" (Eco, 2002, p.122).

Gregory Bateson states that "nothing has meaning but that it is seen in some context", which he defines as "patterns through time" (Bateson, 1988, p14). Humans develop meaning by connecting new information to information they already have. Bateson sums the process up thus: "that reminds me of a story" (Bateson, 1988, p.13). People transfer meaning from one set of events to

another set which are seen as similar. This is the process I think of as Metaphor - the idea of "this means that", and by creating a deliberate awareness of how humans create meaningful context is where effective alternative education begins.

In this age of expanded texts, and for alternative education students in particular, I would like to propose that teachers need to recognize that what is significant is that students learn and master *how to make meaning*. Students need to learn how to make texts talk to each other. This is done by recognizing patterns and making connections between texts, events and experiences. Students must first learn to create significant connections, and teachers must learn to encourage this process.

The first step towards making my teaching space an effective alternative education classroom is to create an environment where students learn that their individual knowledge and experience is both valid and indeed essential to their education. What is important is the student's ability to recognize the connectedness, to identify the pattern between what is new and what is known.

When the student looks for a pattern of connectedness, when the student makes a connection between information patterns, the process he or she is beginning is really the process that some have called wonder, and others have called questioning. My students often struggle when they are told to "question" the text. We were reading the Alden Nowlan short story "Hurt", in which one character, Kevin, lives in a trailer. In an effort to lead the questions away from concrete, I asked Nate what the trailer looks like. Nate, a strong reader, was

confused - the story doesn't say. "It just says, 'a trailer'", he replied from his seat in the laundry hamper. When pressed on the issue, when asked what the trailer looked like in Nate's head, whether it was a double wide or an Airstream, Nate instantly replied that it was "one of those old-fashioned silver Airstream things". Why did he see it that way? Nate thought for a moment and said the story had a 1950s "feel" to it.

It was explained that while Nate didn't ask himself the question, "What does the trailer look like?" it was still something he wondered about for an instant, and then he made up his mind and read on. That decision, that connection between the text and the reader would proceed to influence the remainder of the story as he read. Of note, this is Nate's third year with us, and he is due to graduate. He is very interested in the way the class works, and Nate's father has asked why can he do so well with us and yet encounter such difficulty in a regular school? Nate recounted that he knew it was different, but he couldn't say why the alternative school was different – "they just … talk to you different."

My argument is that Nate is learning how to make meaning, and he is in environment where he has the opportunity to practice and prove that he is capable of knowing. Chapter 5 will examine some of the processes that allow Nate to grow into the student he is.

Chapter 5
Knowing and Naming: la disposition des matières

If I were marooned on an island, I'd scratch poems on the sand for want of pencil and paper, and watch the tide erase them (Earle Birney, 1972, p.14).

5.1 Introduction

There are three steps in the learning process. Firstly, the learner must begin by developing an awareness of the process of learning, by becoming aware of the way the mind transforms information into patterns. Secondly, the learner must develop the habit of looking for patterns and connections amongst all that is known and done – in other words, the learner must then practice making these connections with and between texts and experiences. Finally, finding similarities in patterns allows the learner to compare two sets of information, and to identify similarities and differences of significance in the patterns.

5.2 Naming to Knowing

It is here, at the beginning of the third step in the learning process that the learner begins to transform into the knower. In this stage, the learner, having identified a connection between past experience and new information, must name the relationship between old and new patterns. This first naming allows the learner to compare his or her new information pattern with other, exterior patterns, and become a knower.

The third stage of the learning process is twofold. Firstly, it requires naming and secondly, it creates a knower. The student must be able to name the relationship between information patterns. Until a learner is able to name what is known, the learner will never fully transform into the knower: the act of knowing will never become completed.

To refer back to the general process of Metaphor, to the idea of "this" means "that", the process requires both a "this" and a "that". However, the learner must take it one step further, and name the way the two are alike or different. The student must be able to identify two similar or different patterns, and then be able to name how and why the patterns are significantly similar or different.

5.2.1 Going Public: A readership of one

The process is simple, whether in terms of human interaction (what can be called dialogue), or textual interaction (what can be called intertextuality). Something new comes along – new information, experience or a text – that is reconciled against what is already known. This results in a new something. The act of knowing is a creative act, and as such the new event is both transformative, and requires naming because there exists something new. In the words of Paulo Freire (2005),

> To exist humanly, is to *name* the world, to change it. Once named, the world in its turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of them a new *naming.* Human beings are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection (p. 72).

New knowledge is formed based on what is already known to form a new paradigm that transforms both the knower and what is known. One important point here is that nothing can truly be known until it is named, for naming turns thought into statement. Naming turns the private public.

The naming process is what allows learners to move forward. It provides a rationale for actions and a completion of thoughts. It makes the learner accountable for what is being considered or done in the classroom. Earle Birney (1972), the Canadian poet, refers to this process of going public as writing for a readership of one (p.13): the poem is written out of the need for the poet to name the surrounding world, and it is not complete - it is not tangible - until it has been released to the critique of a readership. It is not the size of the readership that matters so much as it is the act of completion that allows the writing to become real. So it is for all forms of knowing – it is incomplete until it is made public and open for debate.

5.3 Curricular Conversations

In this way, using the metaphor of curriculum as conversation makes sense, for the give and take of the learning process is paralleled by the process of a conversation. Of course, it is hoped that this process will become a dialogic process that sees new knowledge formed from the interaction that surrounds going public. New knowledge is a like a good joke: it keeps the conversation going. New knowledge always leads to the chance for a reassessment of what is known, to an opportunity for further knowledge. In this way, the act of naming is

not something which represents an endpoint in the classroom processes, and this is important to understand the ethos of my classroom.

The processes of conversation and dialogue are fundamental to the process of naming. Despite the manner in which curriculum is often presented, knowledge is not a quantifiable currency divided into neat banknote-like divisions. Nor is the journey from unknown to known instantaneous. The learner requires the opportunity to ask questions, to consider answers, and then to make declarations. In this way it can be seen how the process of conversation is a metaphor for curriculum, and I would also suggest how curriculum is a metaphor for conversation.

My students need to discover a structure or a space where they may ask questions, and enter into the dialogic process, into a process where new and already known collide, are questioned and are reformatted. They need opportunities to practice all parts of this process, and they need to be made aware of the processes they are enacting.

For now, what remains my focus is the classroom process of dialogue – the conversations students have with themselves, their classmates and teachers, and indeed, the conversations they have with the texts they create and encounter.

I have chosen to teach my students to become better learners, which means to teach that knowledge is personal, malleable, and must be made public to be fully understood. This requires the learner to ask questions, to sift through responses and to makes statements, and then finally to listen to what others

might have to say. So in this way the concept of a dialogue emerges, the idea of curriculum as a conversation really begins to take shape.

When all is said and done, the process of dialogue rests on the ability of my students to take part in the naming phase. Eco points out that what matters is not whether the thing which is named is new, but that the learner has been able to articulate it. As he puts it:

> And he would have proudly taken as his own model that phrase of Pascal's that I placed as an epigraph to my book A Theory of Semiotics, "And don't let anyone tell me that I have not said anything new: la disposition des matières est nouvelle" (Eco, 2002, p.122).

The goal is to have the students take part in the naming process. It doesn't matter if it is new to me, or new to the entire world- I won't fully understand what I perceive until I get to name it, and that is the same process that my classroom practices need to invite the student into. When that happens, the classroom will experience the gentle dialectic necessary for a long term learning environment.

As Finn (1999) said, having seen economic reproduction in practice, and having come to the understanding that it just won't do, I looked at what it meant to be a learner, and what it meant to know. My approach to this learning process – my new mindset- has impacted not only how I think, but what I do. My teaching has changed the way I interact with the students in my class and how I structure the space we share. Chapter 6 will examine the way this new mindset manifests itself in my classroom, both in terms of human interaction and in terms of what structures are in place to practice the learning process in the class.

Chapter Six
Classroom Structures: Ethos and Action

> The *raison d'être* of liberation education, on the other hand, lies in its drive towards reconciliation. Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles so that both are simultaneously teachers *and* students (Freire, 2005, p.72).

6.1 Introduction

In the preceding chapters I have presented the ideas surrounding meaning making, text, curriculum and knowing all of which helped me revise my approach to teaching. The process of applying new theories into my actual workplace has resulted in a new mindset, a new Ethos in my classroom. This Ethos both impacts and grows out of the practices and structures of knowing which occur in my classroom.

6.2 Ethos

It is January, and my TA is in her final week. She is being replaced by three new community college students, who are receiving their tour of the alternative education centre. They are introduced and it is suggested that Kate give them some advice based on her experiences in the alt school.

"Wait a minute," I say. "I want to take notes."

Kate smiles and says, "I think firstly, you have to be kind, and then you have to listen." She tries to make a third point, but is put off by the fact that I AM taking notes. No matter. She has struck on the one great commandment, and the second is like unto it: Be kind and listen.

Ethos is a particularly slippery word. Its Greek ancestor meant 'character', and for my purposes, ethos can best be described as those human interactions which characterize the culture of a space. There are expectations or beliefs which

shape the actions within a space. Traditional classroom ethos is formed by the actions and beliefs which surround the banking or transmission model of education. I try to separate myself from this ethos, to separate myself from teaching which is characterized by control and by a checklist approach to content. This chapter will try to explain what it is that characterizes the space of my classroom, to explain the characterizing culture which surrounds my approach to meaning and knowing in my classroom.

6.3 Becoming Knowers

A learner begins by seeking out a pattern which connects two or more sources of information – texts – and the learner finishes by declaring what impact the connecting pattern has.

My students have often struggled because they do not succeed in making connections in a traditional classroom, nor do they succeed in declaring the things they do know. Think of the eager child blurting out answers – a child who is unable to wait his or her turn, often unable to wait long enough to fully know what questions are being asked. Every class has one child who disrupts the teacher's rhythm, one child who prevents others from sharing their knowledge, one child who seemingly cannot comply for the good and orderly education of all. Even when they know the answers, even when they want to be students, alternative education learners often find themselves on the outside of classroom norms, unable to blossom.

This is where alternative education needs to thrive. This is where Ethos becomes significant. The day to day environment is formed by human interaction, and the mindset the teacher brings to these interactions will shape the learning that occurs. As Freire (2005) points out, it is the teacher who chooses between dialogue and instruction in the classroom (p.66).

The teacher must provide the students with opportunities to be knowers. The role of the teacher is to help student understand what it means to know. Knowledge is often a concept that is misunderstood by at-risk learners who have had the idea that they are unsuccessful not-knowers driven into their brains by their experience on the fringe of school discourses. This means the teacher must help them to see themselves as learners and knowers. I seek to accomplish this firstly by engaging them in the process, by making them aware of how we make meaning, and by encouraging them to become deliberate in their attempts to interact with new information. Thirdly, we examine structures that allow for a way of organizing information so that we can seek meaningful patterns and make connections of significance between patterns.

6.4 Classroom Ethos

I have already discussed the general structure of meaning and the classroom structure of dialogue. I now turn to the way Ethos impacts classroom practices and the teaching structures that are used in my classroom. What I mean by Ethos can be seen in the way I approach the use of Metaphor. Ethos in action is the subtle shift between asking “What does the rose symbolize?” to asking “What

do you think the rose means?" This is how the human interactions which shape a space are formed, because both questions are actually statements. The first question says: "I know." while the second question says, "I am listening."

This last question is significant because it illustrates the difference between what my experience tells me is a traditional classroom space and the new classroom space to which I aspire. In the first space, the all-knowing author transmits truth via the priest-like teacher to the student, who is asked to restate the single viable answer. In the second space, which is rooted in the potential of meaning, the student is asked to create meaning. Any answer risked is a good answer, is a valuable answer. There is no wrong answer.

One idea which had a significant impact on me was Frye's identification of an imbedded structure for meaning making that was both dependent on the reader and common throughout literature – "the idea of a structure to which all things could adhere" (Cayley, 1992, p.63[14]). In many ways, I am trying to mimic that same duality in my teaching practice. Frye intimated that what he did in Literary Criticism was not to invent anything, but simply to recognize a structural pattern that nobody else had named before (1992, p.63). He simply recognized the meaning making framework inherent to literature and then he named it.

6.5 Classroom Practices and Teaching Frameworks

[14] To avoid confusion, it should be noted that the text of the Cayley book, Northrop Frye in Conversation, is the transcript of a series of interviews between Northrop Frye and Desmond Cayley of which the topics was mostly Mr. Frye and his work. These conversations were recorded late in Mr. Frye's life and where I quote the text, I quote Mr. Frye himself, as a primary source.

There are two types of structure in my classroom that bear noting – deliberate classroom practices and teaching frameworks. Classroom practices are ways of doing that are practiced by the teacher to help develop a productive classroom space. Teaching frameworks are structured activities or lessons that embed the learning process into the content of the classroom.

6.6 Classroom Practices

I am attempting to develop an alternative approach to teaching and curriculum in my alternative education classroom. It only makes sense that an alternative education class should provide the students with an opportunity to access learning practices that are somehow an alternative to the traditional classroom practices from which they have been excluded. In my classroom, this begins with a physical set-up which promotes conversation. The desks are seldom in rows, and the teacher is usually part of the configuration. As often as possible the teacher tries to be at the students' level, either while beside the desk for one on one tutoring or explanation, or in a chair facing the class. This is an intentional structure. Students and teacher share both the space of the classroom, but also a common endeavour.

Gee points out that one of the keys to engagement is that people in a space – be it a classroom space or otherwise - need to know that they are able to access status while in that space (Gee, 2004, p. 87). If a teacher maintains the traditional military ideal of achieving an elevated physical position (standing and lecturing to seated students, for instance), then the teacher is engaging in a

power paradigm wherein it is difficult for students to achieve status as a knower. This may seem trivial, but managing physical space and proximity is one of the first skills a teacher needs to develop.

To manage physical space the teacher can simply attempt to maintain the following rules as often as possible:

- Remove large physical barriers like the teacher's desk during periods of communication. My desk is in the corner, away from the boards and out of the students' line of sight.
- Seek the students' physical level. If they are sitting, be seated. Try to avoid standing all of the time, but rather seek to spend as much time at the same physical level as those with whom you are talking.
- Mingle. Try to avoid teaching at 180 degrees. If the students are sitting in desks that face a board, then try to avoid always being the one at the board. If the teacher can take a place in the physical arrangement that is occupied by the students, then the invitation is there for someone else to be the one at the front, and the message is that leadership is fluid rather than teacher centred.
- Get the students to the board. People enjoy status, and being at the board is the time-honoured position of classroom status: that is where the knower stands.
- Get the work on the walls. The students must be able to impact the shape and content of any space they are expected to be consider "theirs".

I believe this approach to physical structure applies across human relations, but in an alternative education setting it is even more significant. Many alternative education students arrive with a history of conflict with authority and authority figures. Remember the two great commandments of alternative education: be kind and listen. It is sometimes hard to be heard when you must shout at someone standing on top of a wall. However, by achieving an equal physical space with the students the teacher is inviting the students into a conversation.

6.7 Teaching Frameworks: into the sandbox

In his work on affinity spaces, James Gee makes reference to "sandbox tutorials" (Gee, 2007, p.66). The idea is simple. If someone wants to learn how to do something, one must get into the sandbox with it and play awhile. Gee states that part of what makes what makes video games so successful is that they are built in such a way that new players are able to comfortably experiment without feeling incompetent or disheartened – a process he calls "horizontal" learning[15]. It should be noted that this is the same idea that is manifested by the dialogue. In a dialogue, students are able to toss ideas about, asking questions and discussing answers.

A key component to enacting this pedagogy is to take this idea and develop a structure that will allow students to access curriculum content in a horizontal learning or sandbox style while reinforcing the learning process. For a student to achieve mastery over a specific concept, he or she must have the chance to play with that concept. Take for instance, nouns. High school students are expected to have an understanding of the various parts of speech. Having a student memorize the fact that a noun is a person, place or a thing is pointless if it does not actually help the student to know nouns. For instance, in a traditional classroom the student earns status for knowing that a noun is a person a place or a thing, while a knower understands that the word "pipe" is a noun

[15] Gee borrows the term from Stan Goto in "Basic Writing and Policy Reform: Why we keep talking past each other", Journal of Basic Writing, No. 21, pp 16 – 32.

(and hopefully that a picture of a pipe, while also a noun, is only sometimes a pipe).

Students must have the opportunity to take their nouns into the sandbox and play. I call this the act of embedding content. Deliberate frameworks are developed to help the students interact with the content. The following nine frameworks demonstrate a variety of concepts and activities whose structure allows the students to access either content or meaning-making processes in the classroom.

6.7.1 Framework One: Connectionism

The starting point for making meaning and demonstrating metaphor in the classroom are what I call connecting strategies. There are two such strategies, the "Personal Connection" and the "Text-to-Text Connection".

Personal Connections are made when a student examines a text or enters a literacy event and makes a connection with personal experiences. It is often explained by the "This reminds me of…" prompt. New students to Room 306 often see this as cheating, for it is not really schoolwork to talk or write about what one thing makes you think about. They have been trained in what "is" school, and what "is not" school. Comparing the mundane experiences of childhood to a high school English poem, for instance, is not expected to qualify as real work, however it is precisely the metaphor Gregory Bateson enacts to describe the process of human learning (Bateson, 1988, p.13).

Personal Connections are very simple to make and have a couple of purposes. Firstly, they help the learner practice the process of metaphor, of comparing one thing to something different, and secondly, they give the learner an easy way to jumpstart their work whenever they are stuck. If a teacher is looking to a student for input, any student can learn to say, "This reminds me of…."

Text-to-Text Connections (or T2T as I sometimes refer to them in class) are similar to Personal Connections except that they extend the concept a little farther. In place of personal experiences, though, the learner substitutes textual experiences. When confronted with a text, the students are taught to practice comparing the text to another text. This is where the concept of an expanded sense of text comes in. consider a student who has struggled through a scene of Shakespeare, or through a disengaging short story handed out by the well meaning, literature-loving English teacher, and is asked to make some sort of analysis or value judgment on the text. It is perfectly valid to compare the one to a text from within the learner's own experiences. It is OK to say that Hamlet reminds you of Mr. T from reruns of the A-Team, because the student who succeeds in making that connection will remember something about Hamlet.

6.7.2 Framework Two: Music, stillness.

One example of how I approach poetry in the classroom is to interact with the text by using grammar frameworks. An example of this process can be seen in a lesson involving the poem "Music, stillness" by Alan Cooper, a local New

Brunswick writer (Appendix I). It is a brief poem that first appeared in The Fiddlehead in the 1970s. The students are given a copy of the poem and they are told to go through and highlight all of the nouns. After a few minutes of working, the class begins to review the content collaboratively. After identifying all of the nouns in the text, they are told to individually rewrite the poem, replacing all of the original nouns with nouns of their own. Students with graphic difficulties are given a second copy of the poem that has been reproduced with blanks where the nouns had been. Others are allowed to type out their new poem.

During this activity, the students begin with the concept of finding nouns, but they soon begin to interact with language patterns, discussing the manner in which nouns and verbs interact, and how some words can fulfill both the noun function and the verb function depending on their use. As they begin to replace the nouns with words and thoughts of their own, they have an opportunity to author these patterns themselves. Furthermore, by the end of the lesson, the students have encountered poetry as authors, creating their own unique poems in a quick and easy manner, without ever feeling the need to tell the world how much they cannot write poetry.

While the framework does begin with the old mantra “a noun is a person, a place or a thing, (there is always at least one student who spouts it off)” it doesn’t linger, as the students find themselves examining the poem in a word by word and line by line manner, and that is what is of significance; the students are not scored on how well they identify nouns and verbs, what is important is that they

interact with the text and try to fulfill the role of author. One must always remember that there is a tension between traditional knowledge paradigms and approaching content as a means to celebrate the student's response to poetry. When content becomes the focus, then learning is in jeopardy. In the alternative school, poetry can be a hard sell to students who don't see themselves as artists, knowers or poets. Poetry can be something students are forced to follow, line by line and word by word, but in this framework, by becoming authors, they also end up listening to the text. This framework has proven a successful introduction to the alternative education students becoming authors and readers of poetry.

6.7.3 Framework Three: the poetry framework.

The poetry framework (Appendix II) tries to extend this idea of celebrating the student's response to poetry. The poetry framework is a single sheet. Again, students work as a group to move through some of New Brunswick's mandated curriculum content. However, as the class moves through the information at the top of the sheet, they slow down and examine the text in a deliberate manner with a deliberate purpose. There are places to record the author's name, the title of the poem, the narrative voice, any evident rhyming pattern, and to identify the presence and number of stanzas. Much of this is information that the students may easily access, but when faced with interacting with a text, my students have traditionally been unaware of what information is significant to a classroom. This framework provides the student with the opportunity to practice accessing and

recording information in a classroom setting. It is quick, easy and provides a positive interaction with the content.

The framework is designed to work with short poems, typically thirty lines or less. As the poem is read, the students are required to record each noun. This provides a quick summary of the poem. The framework has a blank space for each line of the poem. In each of these spaces the student records the line number and lists any nouns that are in the corresponding line of the poem. The student leaves any break in text as a blank space, creating a visual reinforcement of the idea of "verse" and "stanza". This takes up the left half of the page. Due to the short nature of the poems that this framework is used with, this process is very quick – typically two or three minutes. It should be noted that the reading and writing of poetry is often far removed from an alternative education student's social experience, so meaning-making opportunities are often missed as students struggle with the story and shape of the poem and language. This framework allows the class to slow down and interact with the poem by recognizing deliberate structural qualities and by promoting the idea of beginning a conversation with the poem.

The conversation with the poem begins on the right half of the page. This section is a large single blank column where students are asked to record questions they have as they read. Cris Tovani makes the point that readers often understand better when they write about what they have read (Tovani, 2000, p. 53). As the class reads the poem, questions pop up – what does this

word mean, why is there no noun in this line? In poetry, changes in patterns often signify that the author wants the reader to pay attention. The arrival of punctuation or the shape of a line can be a signal that something is changing. In a classroom where students are encouraged to find patterns, shifts in patterns are often noted and can kickstart dialogue and focus class attention on the text.

How the teacher handles the tension between transmission of content and discovering what the students believe about a text is always crucial to the classroom, because whichever is the teacher's dominant ethos – content or listening will shape what does, or does not, happen in class: so be kind and listen.

6.7.4 Framework Four: Meet NED

"Relax, man. That's NED," said Nate, a Senior in his third year in Room 306, to a 306 newbie, who was nicknamed, appropriately, "New Kid". New Kid had laughed at one of the NED posters and its artwork.

In the "Meet NED" assignment, the class has to draw a cartoon character named NED. Somewhere on the character's body or clothing, the name NED must found. Elsewhere on the poster, the terms Narrative, Expository and Descriptive must be written in large text. These are the three genres of writing that have been identified by the province of New Brunswick that must be explored, and they appear repeatedly in provincial language assessments.

Students have created farmer NED, Jesus Saves NED (who also morphed into the Stephen King "It" Clown NED), and Banana NED to name a few. For those students who are not comfortable with drawing, a physical framework is provided. This is a blank sketch of a human that demonstrates proper body

proportion. Students can then add detail to this to complete the exercise. It was using the body frame that a student added a multicoloured afro about the head, and instantly the Jesus Saves! NED was born, which then morphed into the evil It-clown NED. Mr. Jardine invoked executive privilege and said "No," when someone suggested the class make a John Wayne Gacey clown-faced NED. Even in the alternative school, there are some absolutes.

6.7.5 Framework Five: Get to it Later.

Oftentimes in dialogue, there are ideas or comments that arise that are both intriguing and beneficial, but cannot be discussed at that time. To allow discussion to be both fluid and focused, the class and Mr. Jardine have agreed on a compromise strategy. If something comes up that the class wants to discuss, but Mr. Jardine feels that it is too far removed from the current topic or subject, then it is written down in the "Get-to-it-Later" section of the board. The topic gets recorded on the board, and together the teacher and the class will make time to investigate it later.

For Modern History, the class is discussing the rise of nations, and what makes a nation. This discussion leads directly to the idea of a separatist Quebec. Art has just returned from a few weeks in Quebec, and is full of opinions and ideas. The class had decided that a shared language, a shared territory and a shared culture or religion were fundamental to the rise of a nation. If applying this taxonomy to Quebec, it would seem that all of the requirements are in place.

Ten minutes before break, Art speaks up about his recent trip. When someone mentions the First Nations in Quebec, Art says, “Yeah, where I was, the government gave them this little ghetto suburb.” The conversation is flowing around a few central points, and the history of how the First Nations have been treated by the Canadian government and how other Canadians perceive it, and how people reflect that in their language is a hugely significant topic, but it cannot be broached in ten minutes. It is more productive to finish one topic and then move to another. So the “Get to it Later” clause is invoked, and a promissory note is placed on the whiteboard.

6.7.6 Classifying and Summarizing Skills

There are two skills which are useful in a classroom, and neither of them are skills which are typical strengths for alternative education students. One of these is classifying, and the other is summarizing. These two skills are linked because students must learn to be readers. At the heart of this idea is the belief that student must learn to “interact with a text” (K. Croft-): they must enter into a dialogic process with the text, a process where interaction creates meaning. At-risk students have not yet learned how to interact with a text; they have not yet learned how to structure their meaning. The result of this is they have not acquired much skill or practice in either classifying information or summarizing information. The following two frameworks are examples of ways to structure the

space of a student's work that allows for students to use their voice to name their experience.

6.7.6 Framework Six: the Pyramid of Truth

The Pyramid of Truth is a visual organizer with three levels (Appendix III). Typically used as a class or small group exercise, a group of learners have to identify the three most significant events in a text, and write them into the block on the first level, or base of the pyramid. Everyone has a chance to make a suggestion and give reasons for their choice. If there are more than three events nominated, the group then votes to decide which three are the most significant. Everyone votes once, top three vote getters move on.

The middle level of the pyramid has only two blocks, and the students have to decide which of the three first events are least important. Again, arguments are made and the top two vote getters move up. The final level, or peak, of the pyramid has room for only the single most important event, and as before, votes decide. This strategy allows for an excellent review of the content in a collaborative manner, as well as helping students identify what sort of things are significant to the text as a whole. As the group moves through the discussion and vote process, the moderator of the group is forced to ask questions of the students, which serves to model the overall learning patterns of the classroom.

6.7.7 Framework Seven: Desktop Organizer

Another classroom activity which provides an opportunity to practice pattern recognition and naming is the Desktop Organizer. Students are removed from the classroom one by one. In the hall is a desk with four bins and a jumble of objects that you would find in an average desk – pens, pencils, markers, scissors, white out, tape, rulers – items gathered at random from my desk. The directions are simple: students must separate the items into four different bins, and label each bin according to its contents. When they are finished, they are to inform the teacher. Once they have completed this task, the students are given a second task: repeat the exercise using only three bins. Again, the bins are to be labeled according to the contents.

This exercise provides an opportunity for the student to practice categorizing skills, and to practice the concept of naming. Not only must the student think about what they undertake, but they must complete the process by naming it. By having the students redo the exercise with a smaller number of bins, the students must search the information for new patterns of similarity. This is a quick exercise to complete

6.7.8 Framework Seven: T-Bar Graph

The old mindset

In the conversation about the rise of nations and of Quebec as a country, the T-Bar graph was used. The headings were "Quebec Country" and "Quebec Province". On the country side of the graph were several points: a shared language, religion, culture, and territory. On the province side, there were no points.

"Sure they have the same language and religion and stuff, but that doesn't matter. They should just be part of our country," said Abbie, who had a puzzled look on her face. She felt she was right, but couldn't find the exact words.

John spoke up. "Really, that's like the old mindset that causes wars and stuff. We're all just people and we live in Canada. You shouldn't worry because somebody's different than you."

The old mindset - could anyone say it better than that?

The T Bar graph is a simple framework that provides students with a way to question a text. How are they different? How are they the same? In exercises which use this, the act of questioning is structured for the learner from the onset. This framework can be provided by the teacher in a handout, can be formed simply on the whiteboard, or can be produced by the students on paper. It's form is simple: the page is divided in two halves with a central line. A second line is drawn horizontally near the top of the page to provide header space. On this graph the students are asked to put headings such as "Alike" and "Different". The students are then forced to classify information according to the specifics of the assignment. The phrase "compare and contrast" is one that is familiar to many New Brunswick students, as it is often used in demand writing exercises on provincial assessments, and this is a simple tactic to ask questions and organize the responses.

6.7.9 Framework 8: Just In Time

The "Just in Time" concept is borrowed from business administration. The "JIT," or the "Just in Time" inventory theory was a concept which originated with Henry

Ford, but would become a hallmark of Toyota's success. The idea behind JIT is that parts arrive at factories "just in time" to be used. There is no need to warehouse huge inventories of parts when you can have an infrastructure in place that allows the receiving and use of parts in a fluid manner. If you organize inventory to be supplied to the plants in a manner that makes the inventory available to the workers "just in time", then you allow your supplier to absorb the cost of warehousing. This concept is one of the pillars of the Toyota Production System, and Gee sees it as a concept which has manifested itself throughout the digital learning culture of this century (Gee, 2004, p. 66). In short, students today expect to have information provided when they need it. When a student has a question, it's off to Wikipedia or YouTube or Google to find the answer. No rummaging through encyclopedias or microfiche for these learners.

In a class examining the myths around Camelot, the Cuban Missile Crisis and the assassination of JFK, one student, Nate, has seen the Zapruder film, and some computer simulations on YouTube. Instantly, his request was to look it up and show the class. This is of interest for two reasons – it shows an example of how the JIT mindset and technology works - and it shows how multiple individuals can achieve status and impact content in a moment or two of class time.

The request leads into a discussion about the 'Magic Bullet' theory, during which Justice is able to use his knowledge of classic automobiles to influence the class dialogue. Some people in the class are arguing about how the bullets and their trajectories prove that there had to be multiple gunmen.

Justice, who was once thought to be “mentally retarded” by his social worker, is able to explain that the 1963 Lincoln Continental’s wheel base and jump seat configuration would have pushed one of the victims slightly to the inside of where they looked to be in a two dimensional film, creating a plane consistent with the positioning of Oswald and Kennedy and the other victims. Justice demonstrates this using two or three diagrams that he creates for the class. A further Google image search provides an overhead computer generated diagram demonstrating Justice’s knowledge and confirming his status in the class.

This example illustrates how the teacher does not have to be the profound, all-knowing expert, but if flexible, can allow the JIT process to create class leadership that is fluid and shared. Such activity then rewards instances of intensive knowledge – knowledge that a student has that connects to or promotes dialogue with the curriculum.

This conversation has another point of significance: the idea of critical literacy. There seems to be a broad willingness for my students to rush off and support any theory which sets them against the establishment. In this way, the JFK assassination and the Warren Report offer great appeal. However, one of the arguments that point to a conspiracy is the idea of multiple gunmen. By allowing access to information into the classroom in a non-traditional way (Just in Time as opposed to planning it into a neatly organized five point lecture), Nate was able to access status by accessing “distributed knowledge” (Gee, 2004, p.86) becoming a generator of content (another Gee concept, Gee, 2004, p. 85),

and Justice was able to gain status by using his intensive knowledge to modify the opinions of several classmates. By using his status in the classroom, Justice is able to convince his classmates to consider a different and radical possibility – the idea that part of the traditional, Warren Commission supported interpretation of the assassination (Oswald as shooter) was worth considering as valid.

This is one side of alternative education and critical literacy- the willingness to question the validity of information. Humans often rush to conclusions based on their emotions- either a willingness to believe or disbelieve. What is important is to learn to think, to test new information against old. Justice, who wanted to charge off into a theory of multiple gunmen, government cover-ups and CIA murders, found himself adjusting his opinions based on knowledge he already had, and opening up a dialogue with classmates about what it all meant.

If a teacher is to be successful in this type of a classroom he or she needs to be confident in a fluid environment. This is not "winging" it. To teach effectively in this way, the teacher must understand that knowledge is not housed in his or her brain, that what is important is not the correct answer, but rather that the students interact with the information. Students must be able to take the information into the sandbox and play.

A recent exercise demonstrated that not only must the students trust the teacher, but the teacher must be willing to trust the students. It demonstrates the role of Just in Time information and the how modern students can use digital technology to enhance their educational experience.

A work packet was put together for the class. It included a short reading, some pre-fab worksheets that included concrete comprehension questions, and a word search. However, attached to the packets was a sheet of instructions and 2 graphic organizers. The directions stated that the class was to work collaboratively to list everything they knew about raccoons. Questions which demonstrated what sort of information they should consider were included with the instructions. The reading was a brief expository piece on the Tasmanian Devil. Students began interacting by discussing raccoons, and the general consensus was that they "don't really know much of anything" about raccoons. They were right, of course, they weren't sure what biomes they should look for a raccoon in, nor did they know the Latin nomenclature for the beast. Indeed, they weren't even sure of its actual name. Ten minutes in, however, they had answered all of the questions that the average person might ask about a raccoon, and began reading about Tasmanian Devils. No sooner had a knock on the door taken the teacher away, than the class migrated to a computer to watch Youtube. Surely Youtube is the bane of all teachers, with its practically uncontrolled public content blaring into the classroom. However, it was not providing the students with footage of music videos or traffic crashes, it was providing an example of the Tasmanian Devil screaming. For the next thirty minutes, the class gathered around computers looking up videos of raccoons and devils. Then the class completed a T-Bar graph listing ways in which raccoons and devils were similar and different. The final step in the exercise: was to

individually name the three most significant ways in which the two animals were different.

This is an example of how technology can be used effectively in a space to actually enrich the experience of the class. It requires a teacher who is willing to trust the students to use Youtube effectively, to access legitimate information "Just in Time". This reflects a potential paradigm shift for a teacher who should attempt to incorporate this process into their classroom practices.

For decades, the lesson plan was king. Every moment of every child's time was planned, plotted and structured. This kept the teacher in firm and comfortable control of curriculum, behaviour, and student movement. So it is only logical that this might not feel right for a teacher. However, this is a paradigm shift, not a sea change.

Control and direction is not forsaken, it is embedded. Consider the teaching strategy known as direct modeling, where the teacher provides a direct model of the behaviour or strategy that is being taught. This is the same process. As a practiced recognizer of patterns, the teacher is able to take incoming information and connect it to prior knowledge. The teacher needs to become comfortable with the concept of linking things together in real-time, just as we expect students to do, and just as the work force expects them to. If the teacher is human and encounters a concept difficult to rationalize, then the teacher can enact the "Get to it later" clause, and revisit the concept after the interested parties are able to stop and question the idea. The point is, the teacher and the students are working together, so when something occurs that

doesn't quite work in a classroom setting, they work together to come back to a space with a shared set of values.

These are not intended to be an exhaustive list of activities, but rather a snapshot of how my new mindset has impacted what occurs in my classroom. The manner in which meaning-making processes collaborate with teaching practices and activities can be seen throughout these examples. Chapter 7 will examine the idea of measuring the success of an alternative education classroom in a competitive grading system.

Chapter 7
Measurement

La disposition des matières est nouvelle.
Blaise Pascal[16]

7.1 Introduction

Room 306 is in a school. The school is in a district. The district is in a province. The province has mandated that courses be scored numerically, with 60% being a passing grade. This creates, either purposefully or accidentally, a competitive grading system. If your learning is scored, then my learning will be scored as either better or worse than yours.

This issue of "success" and "failure" applies not only to the students in my classroom, but also to my pedagogy as a whole. Students expect marks for the work they do. It is the proof to the world that they are succeeding. In New Brunswick, province wide math and literacy assessments are undertaken at various grade levels, and school by school results are published in local papers. With results that place New Brunswick near the bottom of national standards, the entire educational infrastructure is under intense pressure to improve provincial assessment results. Schools, administrators and teachers are feeling the pressure.

Art
Art's attention seems to be wandering, so I reach out with a question to bring him back to the group. He grins and says defiantly "I want to be King of New

[16] As quoted in Eco, 2002, p. 122.

Brunswick." At first glance, this seems to be a saucy comeback from a kid who would rather be outside – it seems to be a comment that has nothing to do with what I am supposed to be teaching in Modern History. At second glance, there are actually many connections to be made between being King in New Brunswick and the content prescribed in the curriculum document.

More importantly, it is a really interesting thought. Art is sitting watching me, he is bemused and a little defiant, curious as to where this will go, how I will react, and how far he should push.

"I don't know, Art. Could you?" Somebody interjects with a snicker. "No, no. I'm serious. Let's look at this. Could Art be King of New Brunswick? What would have to happen for you to be King of New Brunswick?"

For the next hour, we discuss the infrastructure, logistics, cost and manpower required to take over this little square of forest and beach that is our home. We compare it to the Oka standoff in 1990, we discuss the USSR's attempted occupation of Afghanistan. We talk about our current involvement in Afghanistan, we compare today's war to the battle of Stalingrad, which was also fought with one eye on oil. We discuss the issue of maintaining a secure border in a territory that is half coast and half forest. We discuss what Art would have to provide the citizens of New Brunswick for us to keep him – much as ancient Kings and tribal leaders provided safety and shelter and food for their subjects, - we examined the idea that conquering with raid and pillage in mind is fundamentally different than conquering with an idea of staying in the conquered land, and how one's goals or ideas and intentions need to inform one's actions.

It is time for break, and the students exit the classroom. It has been a dynamic hour of conversation that establishes ideas and provides examples that will revisited for months. Yet in a traditional classroom, the teacher must face a question. How does the conversation just finished relate to the traditional curriculum mindset? How are these students going to be marked on a conversation? Some said a lot, some said a little. So who gets which mark? How does this get reflected on the report card?

This is the tension that exists between learning and measurement. When the teacher controls the content, and supplies the students with assignments that measure how much of the teacher's knowledge the student has absorbed for test day, it is quite easy to assign a grade. However, how does one crawl inside a

head to examine what old knowledge patterns were enacted and what new patterns were created across a field of a dozen or so brains?

By naming a school an alternative education centre, it seems to follow that the teaching that is expected to take place within the school is somehow different from what occurs in other schools. Somehow, the pedagogy should provide an alternative to traditional classroom practices. Anne Berkhoff pointed to an alternative education program and made the declaration that what the teachers needed was a means to handle any question in dialogue (1987, p. 31). In my classroom, where learning is considered dialogic, and the framework of dialogue is used as both a teaching method and a learning model, the concept of measurement forces me to confront a tension that is inherent in New Brunswick's education system, and my classroom in particular.

A few years ago, the development of "Mission Statements" was thrust upon the education system. Every school district has one, every school has one, and they are everywhere – on websites, letterheads, posters, agendas, newsletters. A common phrase throughout the district is that we shall endeavour to make our students "lifelong learners". To an outsider, it might sound as though "learning, not truth" (Manning & Harste, p.4) was indeed the goal of a New Brunswick education. However, standardized achievement test results are ever-present in our school system. 2009 has seen District 2 implement "District Assessments" to be used as "common formative assessments" (Dufour, et. al, 2006, p. 49) to enable teachers to better prepare students for provincial assessments, and to provide students with practice in a formal assessment

environment. The tension between fostering learning and improving public relations via positive media assessments is rampant in our education system.

I cannot avoid this tension in my classroom. Every day, I have the privilege of greeting students who have been excluded by traditional schools. I am expected to enroll them in classes that follow a prescribed curriculum and help them earn marks and credits towards a provincial diploma. To achieve these marks and credits my students are to meet the stringent expectations outlined in provincial curriculum documents. As noted in Chapter 2, the provincial guidelines for alternative education are not specific and do nothing to reconcile the tension between the two approaches to learning.

I would propose that I cannot currently reconcile this tension to my satisfaction, and so I must strive to please two masters. In terms of measuring success in my classroom, I am forced to consider two ideas: has the student shown a growth in his or her ability to engage in healthy learning practices surrounding school? Secondly, is the student able to succeed in terms of satisfying the systemic requirements for completion of his or her education?

I would suggest that the two issues are not unconnected. If students do show growth in their ability to respond to the human requirements of the common space, then they are also able to satisfy the more traditional educational concepts.

To examine the success of the program on a more traditional scale, I will examine graduation rates for the students in my class. For many of these

students, a diploma represents an opportunity to secure work or attend college and escape from the cycle of economic reproduction: an escape from poverty.

In order to examine human growth concepts, I will use the example of Justice, who entered the class with a host of challenges, a history of extreme behaviour and complete failure in a school setting. I will recount three different assignments that show Justice's growth from a confrontational and angry young man, into a learner who respects and engages in the learning practices of the classroom.

7.2 Systemic Measures

Due to the wide age and grade range of students referred to the Moncton Alternative Education Centre, and to the complexity of issues our program encounters, there are many different definitions of success. In Room 306, however, the students find themselves at or near the end of their high school education. For years, there were few options for New Brunswick alternative education students beyond returning to a mainstream high school to complete a regular diploma, to remain in alternative education until they were old enough to be moved into the provincial community college system, or to drop out entirely (New Brunswick, 1998, p.4). Recently however, changes to the system have allowed for New Brunswick alternative education students to receive an adult education diploma. This development has also allowed for the Moncton Alternative Education Centre to have a realistic measurement of success for many of our high school students – at long last, there is an end game.

7.2.1 End Games

There are three graduation options for students in New Brunswick; a regular New Brunswick high school diploma requiring 17 Grade Eleven and Grade Twelve credits; a New Brunswick Adult High School Diploma which requires 5 essential credits 3 electives and a computer literacy assessment; and finally a certificate of completion for those students who remain in school until they are old enough to graduate but who are deemed unable to meet curriculum outcomes.

A typical student arrives in the alternative education program without any credits, having lost at least one year for any number of reasons. From 2006-2007 until 2008-2009, all student placements in my room could account for having been retained in a grade due to one of three reasons: medical issues (including parenthood), chronic or long-term suspension from school, and truancy. Of course, as already noted in Chapter 2, these factors are usually co-morbid with a general academic poverty.

The recent creation of the New Brunswick Adult High School Diploma offers our students an opportunity to realistically complete their high school diploma. It is designed for adults who left school to join the work force and wish to complete a diploma. It stipulates that the student must be at least 18, and because the bulk of our students arrive having been retained in at least one grade, they qualify as candidates for the diploma.

7.2.2 Graduation Rates

The New Brunswick Adult High School Diploma is what most of my students aspire to, and to which the bulk of our studies are directed. Therefore graduation rates present a simple measurement of my classroom's success. Since 2006-2007, of the 12 students who have remained in my class until their graduating year, 10 of them have either graduated or remain on track to graduate in June 2009. Of the two who did not complete their studies, one exchanged school for full-time employment after becoming a father and moving out from home. The other child works mostly full-time hours and is experiencing difficulties balancing work and school and appears doubtful to complete graduation requirements on time.

The New Brunswick Adult High School Diploma has only been an option for three years, and our program was recently reorganized to reflect this opportunity. The Moncton Alternative Education Centre now has two Graduation Program classrooms. When students enter the Graduation Program - either through referrals of new students from Moncton-area high schools, or through the transition of students from our other programs (the Middle School Transition Program, and the At-risk Tutoring Program) – they are provided with a course track that identifies a year by year program that will see them meet their New Brunswick Adult High School Diploma requirements. For those students who do not meet those parameters, other program schedules are put in place.

About 90% of the students in my classroom study towards the New Brunswick Adult High School Diploma, so graduating students will provide a realistic long term measurement of success of the program.

Over the past three years, the Moncton Alternative Education Centre has been able to develop a program which allows our students to achieve public success in their education. If our current student population remains steady in terms of learning profiles, it is expected that the Moncton Alternative Education Centre will continue to offer a program that will allow our students continued access to success and status. However, education is a human endeavour, and to use graduation rates as the sole measure of what transpires seems limiting. While a diploma is a huge social achievement for many of our students and their families, I would suggest that I need to look a little deeper into what happens in the classroom, because ultimately the value I place on my role in the system will be defined by the extent to which my students are able to experience a change in how they interact with the world.

7.3 Verum Factum

One paradigm of Western education that remains entrenched in Canada is a competitive grading system. Despite having inclusive education practices legally entrenched for decades, the actions of teachers, curriculum developers and ministers of education indicate that some answers are better than others, and this is reflected in our classroom culture: everything “counts”. Everything in the

classroom is to be marked – graded - according to values of which the teacher is the primary scorekeeper.

The foundation for inclusive education is the idea that every student in the class is a blessing, and has equal rights to an education. An educational equality based on citizenship rather than achievement and social status. The leak in the foundation of inclusive education is the fact that public education is built on a competitive grading paradigm. In many ways the two are incompatible. Student achievement is assessed in a manner that the separates strong students from average students, average students from mediocre students and mediocre students from at-risk students. Teachers are assessed on class averages. Schools are assessed in like fashion. From top to bottom we add value to student learning and success, and foster a system which entrenches the idea that not all learning is equal. This system is embedded into our culture and can be seen from kindergarten to university. The result is that some learning, and hence some students, have more value to the system, and to the people who form the infrastructure of the system, than others.

Northrop Frye warns of the dangers of adding value to one truth over another, invoking Vico's axiom *verum factum*, or "that which is true is that which we have made true" (Frye, 2007, p.132). This rings true for all we do in a classroom. I must ask myself if my students are being graded on a scale that reflects personal growth as a learner or are they being graded on scale that reflects our old friend economic reproduction.

Frye points out that the scale has been a concept that is fundamental to both scientific and artistic thinking. For Frye, however, the purpose of life is to find a measure of peace and balance (Frye, 2007, p.116), and literature and learning are fundamental to this process. What we learn impacts how we live, so the question of making one work or idea of more or less value than another is redundant.

In this way, we can use Frye to understand the study of literature not in terms of a value laden scale or ladder, but as a becoming part of process of human growth. The stories matter. They carry meaning. They are of value. Literature's purpose is to provide a "myth to live by", a "model for continuous action" (Frye, 2007, p.116). The things I learn impact the way I think about the world, which in turn inform the actions I make. All action is born of thought, and so the connection between how we learn and what do is fundamental to our humanity.

7.4 Measuring Human Growth

Alternative education students have struggled with society. Oftentimes, the struggles are as virulent as they are surprising. I have often shaken my head, unable to understand why the student is unable to see or is refusing to acknowledge that there is validity to another person's perspective. Most often, the conflicts have to do with submission to authority.

7.4.1 Justice: Conversation One

It is Justice's first day in Room 306. One of the first orders of business with any student is to try to establish some sort of understanding about who the child thinks he or she is, and where decoding and writing strengths lay. This usually manifests itself in some open ended writing assignment where the student is encouraged to express him or herself on a topic of personal interest. Justice chose a news article from the internet. The teacher had encouraged him to find some skateboarding information, as Justice identified that as an area of interest. However, what he downloaded infuriated him.

Bam Margera is a skateboarder who had his own MTV reality show where he and his friends did the worst things they could think of to each other. It was rude, raunchy and barely legal. Bam's uncle was occasionally on the show. The news story centered around the uncle who had just been convicted of sexual offences against a pair of teenage girls.

Justice was livid. He was cursing and swearing at the top of his voice (he is quite a large boy, and with complete hearing loss in one ear, he can be loud at the best of times). Justice was using every word that was never allowed in school. Every last one of them: the b-word, th c-word, the f- word, the s-word. He was shaking with fury.

"You don't understand! He would never do that! He's a great guy! He's Bam's uncle! These are just two gold digging" – the invective was endless. Slowly, he was able to regain some composure, and slowly we were able to talk about it.

Reason didn't work. He had never met the man, knew nothing of him except that he was a "good guy" and "funny", that he could "take a joke". Justice likewise knew nothing of the victims, save that they were teenage girls who had accepted an invitation into a car with someone from MTV.

The next day, Justice handed in his assignment. Two brief paragraphs covering five lines describing what had happened and what he knew. Again the invective remained atrocious. The moral character of the children was attacked, while the character of the man was defended on the basis that he was funny, he was "a nice loveable guy", and that he was on TV. "Bam wouldn't have him on his show if he was a perv," declared Justice. On every line there were horrible expletives denouncing the character of the victims – "They're just looking for money… I think they're just accusing a nice loveable guy who wouldn't hurt a fly." As Justice handed me the paper, he narrowed his eyes and said, "Whatever they got they deserved."

In the media, Bam Margera portrayed himself as a man for whom social expectations did not apply – he was displaying himself as a rebel who did and said what he wanted when he wanted without regard for the impact on others. As long as his actions made him and his audience laugh, all was good and well. Justice was a young man whose life experiences had been consistently in opposition to social institutions. He and his brothers were consistently in and out of closed custody arrangements their entire lives. For Justice, Bam Margera seemed to validate those things which were most important to him – a freedom from social rules. To witness some of his heroes submitted to society's rules incited anger and frustration, and his only response was to lash back at the rules he himself was subject to, and because everybody knows that swearing and being loud ain't allowed in school, that's what he did. However, we began by listening to him, and not by suspending him, and the angry young man that had not made it through September in any year since Grade Five, began to develop into one of my most memorable students ever.

Perhaps the single most significant question that I ask myself is whether or not my students have grown in their ability to learn and interact with new information or in new situations[17]. This is a vital aspect of an alternative education classroom, as the primary response to placement in the program is to see if there is a response to intervention. This applies to both the human interactions of the program as well as to the approach to content. Throughout this chapter, I ill present anecdotes which show the contrast of one student's

[17] I consider information and social situations as being very much part of the same process: one requires action regarding textual information, while the other requires interaction with new social information.

response to information, and how he was able to experience a shift in the manner in which he interacted with new information patterns.

7.5 Testing in an alternative classroom

The reality is that teachers have to produce marks, because our system demands it, and our system is often specific about how our marks are to be formulated. Testing is part of the traditional structure that is entrenched in our system. As a change of mindset helps develop a new approach to classroom structures, the concept of measurement arises. However, a new mindset for classroom measurement is born out of the new mindset for teaching. Indeed, the two are part of the same process. If the new mindset of teaching is based on the principle of listening to the students, so too is the new mindset of testing. The goal is to listen to what the student knows, not to force them into providing specific answers in specific ways. Using this mindset, it is actually quite simple to create effective testing practices.

The point of having an alternative education centre is not to use old ways of teaching, but rather to provide access to curriculum in an alternative manner. The adjustments which the teacher needs to make are actually more often adjustments to teaching structures than testing structures. In my class, the adjustments to my teaching practices immediately began to inform my assessment practices. As soon as the idea of listening to my students began to become a part of my teaching practice, so too did it begin to be a part of my assessment mindset.

The biggest issue is test format. My goal is to make sure that I do not force students into ways of representing in which they are unable to engage successfully. A simple means to achieve this is variety. Avoid using singular formats, i.e. assignments and questions that only present the class with a single way of representing what they know. To do so is almost certain to exclude certain types of learners. The teacher needs to be responsible for ensuring that the students have the ability to engage their knowledge within the structure of the assessment. For example, one assessment exercise which was both entertaining for the class and a good example of what I mean is the crossword.

The class had just completed a week of work on Romeo and Juliet, and they were asked to create their own crossword puzzle using the play as a theme. This activity enabled the class to display both their concrete understanding of the play, and their ability to discern between issues of significance in the text.

Crossword puzzles, however, represent everything alternative education students struggle with in school – for every question, there is only one answer, and even when you can read the clue effectively and arrive with the correct answer, you still have to be able to spell it correctly and put all of the letters into each of those little squares. Furthermore, every answer you record impacts other answers, so any wrong answer can have catastrophic results. So crossword puzzles, as one might expect, are almost universally despised by my students. However, by asking the students to create the crossword puzzle, it reverses the traditional relationship between at-risk student and assignment. Firstly, it gives the students an opportunity to shape the content. It is a chance

for them to be heard, for them to decide what is significant and what is not. Each student finds his or her self in the position of being the knower, for the puzzle they create is reflecting their knowledge, not somebody else's. Instead of resenting the experience, the students freely took up the challenge of being Shakespearian knowers.

The process however, is never simple. Before they could create a puzzle in which they controlled the answers, they had to learn how the puzzles worked. As a group, they displayed complete ignorance of how a crossword puzzle worked. Even the concept of providing a textual clue to help complete a portion of the puzzle was, well, puzzling. So time had to be dedicated in class to provide opportunity to play with the idea of creating crossword puzzles. Without this prior experience, much of the class could not have met with any success, regardless of what they might have known about the play.

This activity shows an approach to assessment that typifies the mindset of my teaching. I must always make sure that I am not asking students to manifest their knowledge in ways which remain foreign to them. In order to enact one assessment strategy that allows for the students to speak, I have to be confident that they have had the opportunity to practice using the strategy. Again, the process needs to be made deliberate for the students to have an honest chance of success.

The case of the crossword puzzle also shows why the teacher must provide opportunities for choice in assessments. To force students to use an assessment format in which they have no real experience or in which they

struggle, can doom them before they ever begin. Keeping this in mind, testing must be developed according to the class's common experience and strengths.

One example of a format which can hinder my ability to listen to my students are open ended questions and assignments, be they writing assignments, research projects or the making of a fruit smoothie. Open-ended assignments are typically difficult for alternative education students, because the question itself demands the students to structure their work independently, and to sort through what they know about a subject and what is relevant. Of course, it is the lack of these specific skills which so often plays a part in a student becoming termed as "at-risk". Many of the questions students are asked in classroom situations rely on the ability to structure information according to an outside and often unstated structure. So it falls to the teacher – to me – to make sure my students are able to navigate the assessment structures that are enacted in the classroom.

The key to navigating the issue is to provide enough variety of formats and choice that students are able to use their strengths to relay what they know, and to avoid formats that rely wholly on one or two type of questions. Broadly speaking, students who have shown good engagement in the classroom practices have also demonstrated an ability to represent what they know in some manner. I believe most schoolwork is not so much about mastering the content as it is about being able to do it the way the teacher wants it done when the teacher wants it done. So for me, testing becomes about structuring the

assessment in such a way that the learner can demonstrate what he or she knows – testing becomes about listening to the student.

The basis of my assessment mindset is that there must be enough variety in format to allow for student voice. One way I have structured assessments is to have each portion of an assessment with a given value, and ask the students to each choose enough questions to provide a set mark. So that when the students added up the values of all the questions asked, the total would equal a given value. This allows the students to choose the formats they felt most comfortable with. In addition, this format also allows for students to attempt extra questions for extra marks. These two options tend to provide motivation for honest engagement and a realistic opportunity for assessment.

7.5.2 Conversation Two: Winter Exams

Exam week: English

Justice faces the most significant challenges in the class. He is hard of hearing, decodes with difficulty, experiences a host of dysgraphic tendencies, he displays a high level of physical energy and is armed with a brief attention span. He reports that he was a blue baby at birth and that the doctors struggled to keep him alive. Justice is very aware of his academic difficulties and often jokes about how stupid he is, often comparing himself with other learners in the class, pointing out their superior academic talents.

Today, however, Justice is very serious. He has not remained in school this long for years, and examination day poses a significant hurdle for him. He has been engaged in the classroom, and clearly wishes to do well. Before the exam begins, I have made arrangements for the students to review the texts involved with the exam, however, when Justice enters, he is ready to write.

"Nope," he says when I try to explain that he has a chance to review some of the English texts. "Just give me it, and let me do it."

He takes the test into a corner and works diligently for almost two hours. He asks few questions, and brings his exam to my desk. He wants it marked immediately.

"C'mon," he says, grinning, "mark it. Mark it now."

When the marking was finished and Justice looked down at his exam, the big red 76% jumped off the page at him. He turned to me with his telltale sheepish grin.

"Aww shucks, Mr. J, my Mom's gonna be so proud."

And she was.

The exam was quite traditional, with the exception that students had some degree of choice over which parts to complete. The exam was structured to allow students such as Justice the opportunity to avoid some question formats which would present a challenge for his specific skill set, while also forcing them to engage in some formats which would challenge their test skills. Overall, I considered the exam a good balance between formats some students would enjoy, and the traditional examination questions I was expected to encourage. Students could neither escape the traditional stuff entirely, nor did they have to rely on multiple page essays to achieve their grades.

As a class, there were decent results, but it was Justice's exam which stood out in my mind. He scored 76% on his examination, but in one portion, he was able to demonstrate that the extent to which he had engaged with a text (Oscar Wilde's "The Happy Prince") by replicating on a storyboard the minutest details from the poor writer's grotto.

The exam shows how different the human interactions between Justice and school had become, and how different an experience school can be for a student who is engaged in the classroom space and processes. He entered the class ready and willing to engage with a high school exam in a serious and mature manner. He was willing to interact with school instead of opposing it. In terms of traditional measurement, he scored a 76%, but in terms of human growth, he had made significant strides forward.

I believe that Justice, and others like him, have flourished because they found themselves in a place where they were listened to, where they were accepted. They found themselves in a place that was willing to provide education structures they could access. They found themselves in a place where they matter. Growth in learning and human interaction is difficult to measure in a system which demands quantitative measurement scores, but the development of Justice as a student cannot be denied. So what is important is that the structures which work for him and others like him remain in place. So it is with naming these structures and mindsets that they become real and deliberate aspects of my classroom, aspects for whose existence I remain accountable.

In conclusion, I provide Justice's final conversation with the alternate school. It was a simple classroom exercise that Justice accepted with vigour. It can be used as a measure of his continued engagement with classroom processes.

7.5.3 Conversation Three

The following is one of Justice's final assignments in Room 306. He gave full permission for its release, and publication. It appears in its original form, including both font size and style, and original spelling. Justice later worked with the principal to correct the spelling and sentence structure into a more school appropriate text. It appears here in its original. Notice should be made of the text, as Justice preferred large, all capital fonts. Interacting with more traditional fonts sizes posed comprehension difficulties for Justice, and when he was creating text he would do so in an all cap format – again, one of those issues which had no impact on his knowing, but had often set him at odds with traditional classroom practices. The assignment was to write an ending for Roald Dahl's short story "The Landlady", which ends in a bit of a cliffhanger.

THE LAND LADY

BILLIE WEVAR

ASKED WHY THERE HASENT BEN ANNEY GEST IN THE LAST 3 YEARS AND THE OLD LADEY ANSERD NOT TO MANNEY PEPPEL COME THIS WAY ANNEY MORE AND BILLIE SAD WHO WOOD NOT WONT TO STAY IN SUCH BUTIFEL HOUSE THE OLD LADEY REPLIED THAT THE MITH OF THE LADEY THAT KILD ALL WHO STAYED IN THE HOUSE DROVE THEM AWAY AND NO ONE EVER CAME BACK BILLIE POSED FOR A SECENT AND THOUT TO HIM SALF THE OTHER TWO MAN HAVEN LEFT WHY WQAS THIS THEN BILLIE CAME TO REALISE THAT THE NICE OLD LADEY WAS THE KILLER

AND SHE HAD KILLED THE TOW OTHER MEN BUT HE DIDENT LET ON HE SIMPLIE ASKED I HE COOD BE EXUSED FOR HE HAD TO USE THE BATHROOM BUT HE HAD NO INTONS ON USING THE BATH ROOM HE WONTED TO SEE THE FORTH FROL SO THE OLD LADEY SAD YES THE BATH ROOM IS ON THE 3 FORL DOWN THE HALL BY THE DORE THAT LEAD TO THE 4 FORL SO BILLIE WENT TO THE BATH ROOM SO THE OLD LADEY THOUT HE NEARD THE DOOR JUST TO FLEL THE COLD COMING FROM THE CRACK UNDER THE DORE OF THE 4 FROL HE TOOK THE DORE NOB IN HIS HAND AND HE TEARND TO THE LEFT TO SEE IF THE OLD LADEY WAS COMING BUT SHE WAS NOT SO HE OPEND THE DORE JUST TO FIND NO STARS IN FACED THERE WAS NOT EVEN A 4 FORL IT WAS A SMALL COLISET AND IN THE RIGHT CORNER OF THE ROOM HE SEEAN A WIGHT SHEET HE WENT TO THE SHEAT HE PUT HIS HAND TO PUL IT AWAY AND TO HIS A MASMINT THERE SAT THE TWO MEN BUT THEY WHERE NOT ALONE THE OLD LADEY WAS SITING THERE IT FRITEND BILLIE THE OLD LADEY WAS A STONE COLD KILLER THE TWO MEN WHERE STUFD BILLIE ASKED WHY WHY

DID YOU DO IT THE OLD LADEY SMIELD AND SAD MY SONE DIED IN THE WAR AND I THOUT IF I HAD MORE BOYS IN THE HOUST I WOOD BE FINE BUT WHENE THE OTHER BOYS SAD NO TO STAYING I SNAPED AND BEFORE I NEW IT I HAD KILLED ONE THEN THE OTHER THENE THAT MITH SCARD EVERYONE AWAY BUT WHENE YOU COME DOWN THE PATH I NEW THAT YOU WOOD MAKE A NICE BOY TO HAVE AROUND BILLIE WAS STUND BUT BEFORE HE COOD RUN THE OLD LADEY HIT HIM WITH A FIER POKER IT KILED HIM INSTLEY EVERY SENS THEN THE OLD LADEY DIED AND THE 3 BOYS TILL THIS DAY ARE IN THAT LIL ROOM ON THE 3 FROL.

Chapter Eight
So What?

I do not know what will follow the map and enclose
it in some wider and more difficult question.
Gregory Bateson, 1988, p. 232.

8.1 Two-thirds done[18]

I looked at my classroom and I knew what I was doing was insufficient. When I looked deeper, I recognized that same feeling of dissatisfaction through most of my own studies. I had enjoyed moments as a student when I felt clear and engaged as a learner, and there were moments in my teaching when I again became aware that the act of teaching, of telling and retelling, had in fact, informed my own understanding.

I always enjoyed Latin phrases – I had enjoyed the idea of a hidden meaning that needed to be teased out of a motto or quote. One such I encountered was "Docendo Discimis", which my dictionary translated as "to learn by teaching". I placed it high up on my first classroom wall, behind all of my students, but facing my prison-teacher desk. One day, as I was trying to teach the addition of mixed numerals to a seventy year old man, I realized that 1+2=3.

No matter how often I converted the mixed numerals into improper fractions, found common denominators, and added them together to form a new improper fraction, which I then reconverted back into a mixed numeral, did I realize that the original whole numbers, say, 1 and 2, when added together, still

[18] Anne Berthoff commented that in evaluating teaching, the conclusion is always a new starting point, so that we are only ever "two-thirds done" (Berthoff, 1987, p. 31).

equaled three. I was trying to find a way to convince an adult 40 years my senior to blindly follow a bunch of rules he did not quite grasp the purpose of in a specific sequence (which I, the all-knowing teacher, had given him) when I realized that if I pointed out what he already knew (that 1+2=3), the battle was half over. So I decided to change how I taught.

In that instant, I began to understand what the Latin meant: in stating and explaining what I knew to be true I understood that it wasn't, and so changed what I knew, in turn changing what I did. This is the pattern the Greeks called Praxis: old information patterns (this is how we do it) evaluated in the light of new information (why can't he get this?) leading to a new understanding (1+2=3) resulting in a thought driven action (a new teaching practice). This simple pattern is the process I have tried to recreate in order to evaluate my teaching practice and classroom ethos as a whole.

I have used the writing process to state what I believe about teaching and learning and knowing, and to use it as a means of solidifying my own knowledge so that I might improve my future classrooms. In the process of writing my knowledge into existence, I have realized many things about myself. I am confident that what I do as a teacher and as a student is greatly improved, for I have used the process of writing as a means to argue with myself – I have used the writing act itself as a dialogic process.

I began with the idea of learning as a process of metaphor, but as I wrote, I changed my mind. Originally, I thought I had realized the truth of metaphor, but what I eventually understood was that 'knowing' is a dialogic process, and

metaphor is only the first step in it. Metaphor is the process of making meaning, but to get all the way from meaning to knowing, another step is involved: naming. It is the process of naming which really let's one see what it is one means, because the act of naming makes one's meaning explicit. Not until thought is named, can it be evaluated, considered, and reconsidered: only then can it lead to new knowledge.

In this way, writing allowed me to examine my teaching practices dialogically: it gave me an avenue to be explicit about what I did, and gave me the opportunity to explain why I did it. For forty years I struggled through life with a weight of uncertainty around my neck: I was dissatisfied with school, and I had assumed that it was because I was somehow intellectually flawed. Slowly, what I had read began to knock on the door of what some people were trying to teach me, and when the two met, I began to understand that maybe the flaw was not in me, but in the system. I began making little changes to my classroom practices, and thinking about what things worked and why they worked, and what things did not, and why they did not. I began thinking about what I was trying to accomplish and what I thought learning was and should look like.

I had lots of books about what it means to mean and to know, where meaning and knowing come from and how meaning and knowing are affected by the way experience and communication is shaped. I even had lots of books written by people about their classrooms, and how their theories worked out in their classrooms. However I only ever had a vague notion about how things should be in my class, and how they should become that way.

It was writing that gave me the means to deliberately formulate and review the way I taught. It was writing that gave me a means to become a knower. For my ideas to become knowledge, I needed a process that would subject my thoughts to a rigorous evaluation. Writing gave me access to such a process. Firstly, writing allowed me to separate my emotional response to how I felt about teaching and alternative education. It forced me to think only about the process and purpose of teaching in my classroom. Secondly, writing forced me to realize that I did not know as much as I thought I knew when I began. In effect, writing led me to the conclusion that I was only "two thirds done" (Berkhoff, 1987). Most importantly, the act of writing helped me balance Frye with Eco and Bateson and Birney. As I began to understand that meaning making is about reconciling patterns of information and expressing them in some sort of dialogic space so the learner can move forward, I realized that writing was simultaneously giving me the means of expressing what I knew while providing the dialogic space I needed to generate new questions and new patterns.

While the concept of using writing as a rigorous means to evaluate one's personal professional experience was new to me, others had already come to the same idea. The moment I realized I was not teaching mixed numerals effectively illustrates a larger concept which I needed to learn: I needed to realize that it is crucial for me to continually examine what I am doing professionally, because what I am doing might be either inefficient or insufficient. If so, then action is needed. Michelle Knobel and Colin Lankshear have referred to this process as

"teacher investigations of teaching and learning in context" (Lankshear and Knobel, 2008, p.8).

It seems so obvious: if I was a doctor, and my patients were suffering, I'd try to find out why. I ***am*** a teacher, and I felt that my students ***were*** suffering. So I tried to find out why.

Anne Berthoff advocates an approach to such teacher investigations through a process of "analyzing and interpreting prior experience through the practice of reflective, serious writing" (Lankshear and Knobel, 2009, p. 14) in a dialectical relationship with theory (Berthoff, 1987, p.30). The teacher needs to evaluate what happens in the classroom, and theory informs what happens by pointing to why it happened. Likewise, theory is able to inform the teacher as to how to reproduce the good and avoid the bad (Berthoff, 1987, p. 32).

This is what I did. I found myself wanting, and began questioning my professional practice. I encountered new authors, dead authors, previously read authors, all of whom instructed me in some way about what it means to know and how we are able to know. I began a long process of writing and rewriting, of cutting out old and adding new.

Berthoff points towards poets, because she says, they have long understood the validity of writing knowledge into being (Berthoff, 1987, p. 30). Knowing and writing are both creative acts. Earle Birney, a Canadian poet and Professor of English, put it this way:

> Mature art, I think, emerges when there's a certain balance of tensions . . . an aura of energy and a drive to grasp personal "truths" still emerging into perception. To grasp and to shape

> them. The difference from the child's approach is one of *form,* a containment instinctively felt but in the end conscious.
>
> In these respects, I suspect the mature artist is no different from the creative scientist, the mathematician, the explorer, the philosopher. All are energized by an obsession to make real and clear and formally memorable what began as only a cloudy guess. The creative experience is psychedelic in its beginnings but becomes a "good trip" only if it moves eventually into the discovery of final form, into a sense of completing, of saying something as well as one can (Birney, 1972, p. 9).

For Birney, who was both poet and teacher, hearing, teaching, reading and writing are all means to knowing, and in this way, good hearing, teaching, reading and writing are creative acts, while dogmatic hearing, teaching, reading and writing are not (Birney, 1972, pp 45-79). Good processes are a part of knowing, for the form of a thing cannot help but to inform knowledge. It is in this light that I have set out to set down what I know about my teaching now.

Berthoff points out that teaching is always about looking ahead. A teacher's existence is about preparing: "We must learn continually how to build on what has gone before" (Berthoff, 1987, p. 32). This is what happened to me. When I began to articulate that the 'what' of my classroom was insufficient, theory began to inform the 'how' of my classroom. So I had to evaluate how we learn, and compare what I was doing with that information. I had to evaluate what worked well and what did not. Now that I am nearly finished writing, I know one thing surely: my eager is back. I have become an alternative education teacher, and I am eager to be so.

8.2 Happy Ending

One day, I sat down on the floor with a bunch of young people to talk. It is perhaps ironic that I began my journey by sitting down, and that I learned what it was I wanted to say only when I stopped to listen. Now that I have completed this part of the journey, I would offer the reader a happy ending to the earlier fables. As The Teacher returns from The City to his childhood home he gets to witness his journey in reverse. When he is asked to recount his travels to his father, the teacher realizes that he is only able to understand new things insofar as he is able to relate it to knowledge he already possessed. Northrop Frye stated that the original purpose of literature, of associative language, was to grant us peace in light of all we did not know (Frye, 2007, p.117). This happy ending is my way of saying that I agree.

8.2.1 Fable the Third

Once upon a time in the town of Metaphor, a teacher was convinced to leave. He went to The City where he attended The University and became a Grad Student. Eventually, as is the case with all Grad Students, he went back to teaching.

For many years he taught in The City. His own father was a simple country man who lived on the far, far side of Metaphor on the outskirts of a simple country village named Simile. The Teacher was a nostalgic man and so decided he should return home for a visit. With family in tow, The Teacher left The City.

As The Teacher left The City he drove past The University. "*I learned so much while I was there,"* he thought to himself. "*Everything I have now, I first earned there."*

The next day, The Teacher passed the town of Metaphor. "*Good old Metaphor*," thought The Teacher, "*This really is where it all began, where things first made sense. Where would I have been now if that Government Man hadn't convinced me to go to The University?"*

Finally, The Teacher crested the rise of the last hill and peered down into the valley at the village of Simile. *"Ahh,"* The Teacher thought happily, "*I remember this place; such a good place to grow up."*

The Teacher drove through Simile, and when he arrived at his father's house, a small farm on the outskirts of the village, it was dark and the children were asleep. One by one, The Teacher carried the children into the house and placed them sleeping, in bed. After hugs and happy smiles, and a cup of tea for all, The Teacher went to bed.

Early next morning, while the children were all still abed, The Teacher rose, and quietly joined his father in the kitchen. Together, father and son, they sat eating, much as they had many years ago. Finally, The Father turned to The Teacher.

"I have never been to The City. What is it like?"

The Teacher laughed, then, and smiled. *"It is wonderful. Everywhere I go, I see things that remind me of you."*

"How so?" His father said*. "I am a farmer and have never been there."*

The Teacher smiled. *"No, but everyday when I get up, it is dark, and cold, and I think of you, for I know you are already awake, and are in the milk shed. When I take the children to market, I tell of the time I angered you and hid in the henhouse because it was the one place I never liked to go.*

"In the winter, the teachers gather at the window, wondering if there will be snow, and I laugh at them and tell them to read the sky, for they wouldn't know a mare's tail from a mackerel scale – it's all a mystery to them. In the spring, the snow melts and the water forms little freshets on the concrete, and I think of the Smelt Run and of sitting with you on the ice, and of rolling fish in flour while you sang.

"The City is just a place, Dad, but wherever I go," said the Teacher, smiling, "It reminds me of you, and I feel at home."

Appendices

Appendix 1

MUSIC, STILLNESS

music is stillness
each singer
a wing lying in the field

there is a point where
each note opens
and then goes
like quiet death

it is not the note that matters
not the moving air
not even the chill we feel
running inside us

we must learn to sing
like the firefly
that answers the night

Originally published The Fiddlehead, Winter 1979, No.120, p. 34.

Appendix 2

Poetry Analysis

Title:_____ Author:_____ Name:_____

Narrative Voice: O 1st Person O 3rd Person **Rhyme Pattern** : O Yes O No

Stanzas: _____ **Rhyme Pattern**:_____/_____/_____

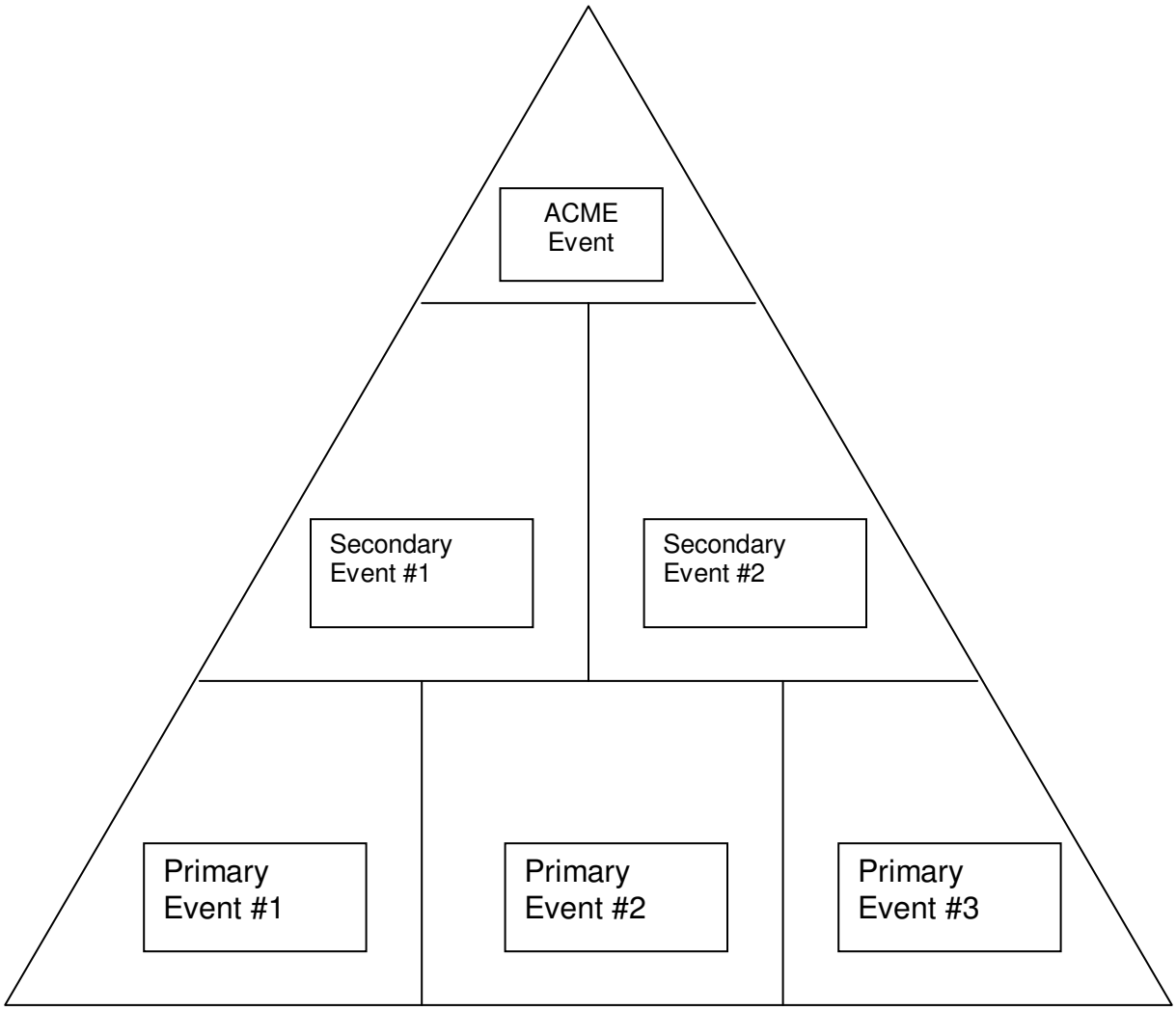
L#	**Précis: list nouns by line**	**I wonders, I thinks, I connects**
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		
6		
7		
8		
9		
10		
11		
12		
13		
14		
15		
16		
17		
18		
19		
20		
21		
22		
23		
24		
25		

Sight Lines: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25

Meaning Lines: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25

Note: the worksheet has been modified slightly to fit into this document.

Appendix III: The Pyramid of Truth



Primary Events: as a class, students choose three events which they feel are the three most significant events in the text.
Secondary Events: as a class the students vote on the primary events, choosing the two most significant events in the text.
ACME Event: as a class the students choose which event was the most significant in the text.

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