The Things We Carry: The Hermeneutics of Moral Education and Teaching High School English

by

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Abstract

In an ever-changing world, we look to schools to educate young people to become responsive, sensitive, and in possession of a critical consciousness. While the study of literature can assist in developing these qualities, the work of teaching literature to adolescents is challenging to define or master. This hermeneutic narrative inquiry explores issues arising in the work of three secondary school teachers, including the author, who seek to use literature to mediate their students’ moral development. Drawing on Vygotskian theories of mediation and concept development and Jardine’s educational hermeneutics, alongside a variety of literary works, it illuminates the tensions and dilemmas involved in choosing texts, guiding discussions, and engaging students in imaginative narrative writing.

Keywords: Hermeneutics; Pedagogy; Literature; Moral education, Imagination; Narrative writing
For the kids, who are reading and writing the world.
Acknowledgements

Narrative writing suggests a kind of going back. When I think about my beginnings as a reader, I remember the weekly trips I took my mother, sister, and I took to our public library, which had a gaping mouth of an underground parkade, concrete walls, orange carpeting, and a vast children’s selection on the second floor. My parents let me take out as many books as I wanted, and brought me back as soon as I’d finished them. This total love and support opened up so many worlds, including the one I live in, now.

I have had many great teachers along the way. Mr Murray at Handsworth Secondary was my own high school English teacher who believed in the transformative power of literature. Stefan Stipp, who taught me a course during my B.Ed, showed me that English classes could be places to ask hard questions about the things that mattered most. My MA classes with Allan Mackinnon and Robin Barrow gave me support and encouragement as I navigated the philosophical and practical beginnings of this thesis. Most recently, Mark Fettes offered me support and guidance, and always let me find my way through my own problems. He was able to step in with the right article, or right edit suggestion, just as I needed it, but was also adamant that this thesis be my own. His confidence in me gave me confidence in myself. Valia Spiliotopoulos was incisive, insightful, and incredibly kind in our work together, and she helped me to think about how my own life and story brought me to this work.

In my years of work as a teacher, I have had many colleagues who are dynamic, passionate, and giving. Two in particular are the teachers whose work I discuss in these pages. Both were incredibly generous and open, and outstanding educators in their own rights. My students were supportive of this project, and were always happy to have me turn on the tape recorder or ask questions about their thinking and reading.

I am lucky to be surrounded by a community of friends who are brilliant, ambitious, and supportive, and I owe much of my way of seeing the world – critically, but with hope – to a circle of amazing women. For this project, I especially acknowledge my friends Jackie and Kate for the many hours of conversation we’ve shared about writing and reading, over the years. Each is a remarkable writer in her own right.
When I teach literature, I sometimes think about the conversations I have in my book group, and hope that my students will also enjoy the same kind of deep, playful, engagement with stories. A few years ago, that very book club yielded a welcome surprise: my partner Stewart, who has been a source of courage, support, and love throughout this thesis project. He is living proof that serious reading really can change your life.
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Chapter 1. “I don’t know how she did it, but she did”

In the older building that I teach in now, the bookroom, where I begin every school year, is in the basement. There, the air is heavy and musty, and never circulates; no matter the season, the room is too warm. The blinds are always drawn and the carpet is a deep, ancient red. There are shelves on both sides stacked with books. Some of these books, like Animal Farm and Romeo and Juliet and The Outsiders, are taken out and used regularly. Others, like C.S. Lewis’s weird Out of the Silent Planet and ancient, weathered stacks of Tom Sawyer are left behind, and Boyden’s Three Day Road and Galloway’s Finnie Walsh and other more recent titles look like they’ve been bought new, but never used – like a shirt you buy on sale but don’t like enough to wear. There are readers and expensive hardback anthologies and grammar books that no one ever uses, or no one has used in decades. At the end of the room there are stacks of large Rubbermaid containers filled with library extras and odds and ends, so-called book boxes for classrooms and no one seems to use those, either. There is a table towards the front of the room that accumulates the detritus of busy teachers coming and going. When I recruit students to carry books back and forth with me, they walk around, staring at the shelves. “I never even knew this room was here,” they say. Despite the clutter and the boring-looking readers and the dust, despite how abandoned and forlorn all the left-behind books seem, there is still something enchanting about a room full of books.
This is an enchantment that I know well. In the back corner next to the radiator there is a hard plastic chair, of the kind that stock the classrooms. Some mornings, if I get in with a little extra time, I sit in it and read. This is one of my great pleasures – being tucked away in a quiet school with my thermos of coffee on the ledge, reading a novel. I read books that I might want to teach, and I read books that I love but can't imagine convincing a class of teenagers to love. I read books and think, "Why would anyone teach this, let alone buy ninety copies?" When I am in the bookroom I am in the comfort of my friends, the books, and their possibilities. Any of these books I could bring into the classroom, where they could enact magic on some young person.

That spark of possibility, when you start to pay attention, is everywhere. It lurks in my bookshelves at home, a public radio program, the public library, the magazines that pile up on the kitchen chair, and conversations with friends. When I am most excited about teaching, the world seems full of texts that can invite imagination and permit entry into a world that is larger than us, but contains us. Certain stories, though, I keep going back to; I can't shake their power.

One of the books I keep coming back to is Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1990), a series of linked short stories, woven together by narrating character Tim O'Brien, a middle-aged writer struggling to make sense of his experiences in the Vietnam War. O'Brien the author fought in the war, and the book is dedicated to men who appear as characters in its stories. Altogether *The Things They Carried* is a work where life and art intersect, and a location for the tension between "truth" and "story". The idea of story-as-truth is one that is explicitly explored throughout the work.
I came across O’Brien in my year of substitute teaching, when I filled in for a teacher named Derek Brown. While his class wrote about the story “The Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong,” I read it and was grabbed on a visceral level. When I got a class of my own, I taught the same story, which is a story within a story that gets told by one of Tim’s buddies about some soldier’s girlfriend, who manages to get shipped in to their sleepy field hospital post. She gets caught up in the war, and begins to go out on patrol at night with the Green Berets who have a hootch nearby. Mary Anne pulls away from her boyfriend, pulls away from the outpost of civilization that Rat Kiley and the other guys have created, and disappears into the jungle, becomes one with it. Mark Fossie, the boyfriend, didn’t know Mary Anne had it in her, but – according to the story - anyone is capable of transforming in war. According to Rat Kiley: “You come over clean and you get dirty and then afterward it’s never the same” (p. 114). When I read the story now, I am struck by Mary Anne’s transformation, but I don’t know if her shift was good, or bad; it happened. I don’t think O’Brien wants me to moralize. Things do just happen.

Back then, with my first-ever English 11 class, I didn’t know how to teach “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong.” We read it, and then I had them write some useless composition about whether Rat Kiley was telling the truth, or if he’d made the whole story up. What I know now is that that question didn’t matter to the truth of the story, not even a little bit; what mattered was that it didn’t matter if the story was true. Even though my students were hooked into the story, no one had very much to say about my question, and the class discussion never caught on. If any of them realized my mistake, they kept their mouths shut. I think it’s possible that, then, I didn’t really know what the story was about –
not enough to articulate what I wanted to share with my students. I just knew there was something in it that was shining at me so brightly.

Fortunately the story was stronger than I was and it stuck with them – they'd reference it in the months ahead - so I taught it a few more times, but never in a way that deepened my students' understanding of it, or helped them to articulate questions or possibilities about what it meant to step outside oneself and undergo a transformation. I figured it was the story that was getting me stuck, so instead I started teaching "On the Rainy River," which takes place before the war. Young Tim O'Brien is served with a draft notice and runs away for six days to a fishing lodge in northern Minnesota. On the other side of the river is Canada. The climax of the story takes place in the elderly owner's fishing boat - Tim knows that if he's going to jump, now is the time – and he stays put, sobbing, because he can't bear to be known as the sissy that ran away from the war. The story ends with Tim telling us he went home, “and then to Vietnam, where I was a soldier, and then home again. I survived, but it's not a happy ending. I was a coward. I went to the war” (p. 61).

I did a better job of teaching "On the Rainy River". It may be easier to teach because it is less ambiguous than "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong", and it keeps you close enough to Tim to understand him, unlike Mary Anne, who remains at a great distance from the reader. The writing I assigned after we read "On the Rainy River" was creative and narrative in form, rather than analytic. When I read my class's writing, they seemed to have gone much deeper. They were often critical of Tim's actions in the story, but empathized with him personally. Many questioned that final statement. Going to war, like it or not, was courageous, they said. Without knowing the term, they read him as an unreliable narrator.
“On the Rainy River,” as a classroom text, had worked as I had hoped it would. What was different this time?

In both stories, throughout the book, it is the act of storytelling itself that matters most. It’s tempting to speculate about whether the author O’Brien actually lived through it all, but eventually, later in the story, he reminds us that, “You can tell a true war story by the questions you ask. Somebody tells a story, let’s say, and afterward you ask, ‘Is it true?’ and if the answer matters, you’ve got your answer.” (p. 83). He gives two scenarios: in the first, a guy jumps on a live grenade to save his buddies. The answer matters, so it isn’t a true war story: “a true war story does not depend on that kind of truth” (p. 83). The true story:

Four guys go down a trail. A grenade sails out. One guy jumps on it and takes the blast, but it’s a killer grenade and everybody dies anyway. Before they die, though, one of the dead guys said, “The fuck you do that for?” and the jumper says, “Story of my life, man,” and the other guy starts to smile but he’s dead. (p. 83-84)

See, this second story is about people, about choices. It represents, it doesn’t just tell. The Things They Carried is a manifesto on what fiction can do and be. It can help us make sense of the absurdity of the world (“Story of my life, man”), and it gives us a way to make sense of that absurdity, a reason to keep showing up and acting with compassion, or even jumping on that grenade when the time comes. Although O’Brien tells us that “a true war story is never moral,” what he means is that a true war story will never tell you how to be or offer up easy solutions. Instead, it can shine a spotlight into the gristly parts of being alive – and in the light, we begin to see.
So here, we begin to arrive at the beginning of my story, with a question. What happened, when I taught “On the Rainy River,” that didn’t, when I taught “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong”? If at this point it’s conventional to state a research question, well, here we are.

Stories are at the centre of the school curriculum. More so than math, more so than science, more so than social studies or physical education or fine arts (and all those disciplines have stories, too). From kindergarten to the Grade 12 Provincial Exam, we read stories with students and ask them, What do you think? or Why did he do that? or What would you have done if...? The question I’ve been trying to ask and answer, is what do stories do? Why do they matter? And how, as a teacher, do I help them to do what they do?

In my application to the MA program, I wrote about a Grade 11 student, Azim, who had just completed my English 11 course. He was a boy who sat quietly towards the back of the room, whose work was competent but unremarkable. To be honest, I’d never much noticed him, until he wrote in a semester-end reflection that before he’d been in my class, he’d never really cared about reading. But now, he said, he’d learned that books could help him understand the world better. “I don’t know how she did it, but she did,” he wrote, about how he’d found meaning in reading literature. In my letter of intent to the admissions committee, I quoted him, and said that I didn’t know how I did it, either – but I wanted to find out.

The path to answering this question took me through moral philosophy (Plato, Aristotle, Kohlberg, Noddings), and developmental psychology (Vygotsky), through critical
pedagogues (Freire, hooks, Postman) and literacy researchers (Smagorinsky, Miller, Applebee), to ethical criticism (Booth, Nussbaum) and finally to hermeneutics (Gadamer, Jardine). I read and thought about many, many works of fiction – this work is built on about 25 years of serious reading. I had conversations with classmates, colleagues, students, and friends. I went into the classrooms of teachers who were trying to use literature as a way to help their students better understand their moral lives, and thought more rigorously about what was going on in my own work. Now, I have come to this topic as a writer.

Good stories are about more than one thing, at the same time. See O’Brien:

in the end, of course, a true war story is never about war. It’s about sunlight. It’s about the special way that dawn spreads out on a river when you know you must cross the river and march into the mountains and do things you are afraid to do. It’s about love and memory. It’s about sisters who never write back and people who never listen. (p. 85)

In the same spirit, this inquiry is about teachers who believe in the power of stories, and students who learn to believe. It’s about the days where nothing seems to go right, and the moments when things lift and suddenly, an idea swims into focus. It’s about suddenly seeing something of yourself in a story and it’s about going beyond that, into the unknown, and into the uncomfortable. Clifford and Friesen write of being lost (Jardine, Clifford, & Friesen, 2003, p. 181), in that terrain of wilderness that a narrative can walk us into. It is about the landscape beyond the river, and how teachers prepare their students to take that journey with strength and grace.
Chapter 2. Teaching the whole person: Moral Education in the contemporary school

There’s a long review by the great American writer David Foster Wallace of a series of academic biographies of Dostoevsky, that is also about Dostoevsky, and also about what it is to really countenance a serious work of fiction, as a human being. Dropped into the text are asterisk-bound, block-quoted, moments of exegesis:

"Is the real point of my life simply to undergo as little pain and as much pleasure as possible? My behavior sure seems to indicate that this is what I believe, at least a lot of the time. But isn’t this kind of a selfish way to live? Forget selfish—isn’t it awful lonely?" (2006, p. 261)

Wallace argues that Dostoevsky’s writing invites these moments because his characters “dramatize the profoundest parts of all humans, the parts most conflicted, most serious – the ones with the most at stake” (p. 265), and that his fiction - fiction at its best - can be “passionately moral [and] also ingenious and radiantly human” (p. 274). I read Crime and Punishment in my first year of university. I spent the first half of the novel trying to keep track of who everyone was (patronymic, diminutive, Christian names, surnames) and in the second half I was pulled in by its tide and lifted away by the story. My Arts One program chopped through a major text each week and I don’t remember much about what we did in class, and I certainly don’t remember the fumbling paper I must have written, but the novel’s steady gaze on a complex man groping around in a strange world stayed with me.
At this point in my thesis, I’d like to say a few words about moral education, and what literature’s role in it can be. Few people, whether experts in education or ordinary people, would disagree that part of the school’s work is to help children become adults who exhibit moral behaviour; that this is part of the task of schooling has been remarked on by everyone from Plato and Aristotle to the writers of the BC curriculum documents. However, the question of how it should be done, and reaching further back, what a moral education even is, is much more difficult and complex.

Before I dig in too deeply, therefore, I’d like to identify exactly what I mean by moral education. As a term, it seems a little old-fashioned, carrying with it a certain connotation of rectitude or even stuffiness. When I told friends that I was working on moral education for my master’s thesis, a blank-faced pause would hang between us, until I began to babble about the value-neutral connotations of “moral” in academia. For me, moral education is a way to identify those aspects of schooling that help people to behave in moral ways, ways that recognize and support the dignity of individuals and communities. It does not imply blind adherence to a set of principles. Instead, a moral education should enable people to look into the complexities and ambiguities of a situation, and understand it so to act in ways that reduce harm and increase compassion.

It has always seemed to me that the high school years are a special time for moral development, especially for understanding the complexity and ambiguity of moral life. Lev Vygotsky, a Soviet developmental psychologist whose work I discuss in detail later in this thesis, describes adolescence as a crisis period, a time of rapid change when children begin their initiation into intellectual adulthood; most importantly, they begin to be able to use
concepts in their thinking (Mahn, 2003). Through conceptual thinking, adolescents can see a “systematic, ordered, categorical picture of reality” (Vygotsky in Mahn, 89). One focus of this increased intellectual capacity is on social relations. According to Karpov (2003), interaction with peers is the activity most important and interesting to adolescents, and along with this behaviour comes a growth of self-awareness and sense of identity. There is plenty of academic work to do in schools, but adolescents are especially prepared to explore their behaviour, and examine the behaviour of others, as they wonder what kind of life they want to have. Literature, approached both academically, and in relation to their growing social awareness, can be a powerful and nuanced tool in their explorations.

**From Kohlberg to Noddings**

In 1973, educator and psychologist Laurence Kohlberg proposed a three-stage model for how people develop moral reasoning, suggesting that people move through a primarily self-interested approach, to alignment with social norms and social structures, and then in some cases, ultimately to a set of moral principles. His theory has been influential in understanding how people develop a moral code, and his idea that graduation through the stages depended on the ability to take on perspectives of others is one that has broadly resonated in our culture.

While this belief of Kohlberg’s – that at its heart, morality is about the ability to understand how your behaviour affects others – seems unproblematic, Kohlberg has been criticized for being overly individualistic and focused on justice, and de-emphasizing more collective values like compassion and care (Gilligan, 1982). His critics have also argued that
moral reasoning is no real predictor of moral behaviour, and that Kohlberg's emphasis on thinking de-emphasized what people actually did. Feminist scholar Carol Gilligan's 1982 book *In a Different Voice* remains the best-known repudiation of Kohlberg's theory. Gilligan argued that Kohlberg's studies privileged a male way of thinking, and de-emphasized relationships, which for women who traditionally acted as caregivers was important to moral development. Morals are about acting, living, and being with people in the world, not just about thinking and judging.

Education philosopher Nel Noddings' care theory (1984, 2002) is a way of understanding the moral behaviour that links to Gilligan's work. Care theory attends to context, and defines virtue as it applies to behaviour, and through situations and relationships (Noddings, 2002) instead of as something fixed and static. Care theory's responsiveness to context and situation make it a useful frame for understanding moral life in today's diverse world. I don't believe that pure moral relativism is useful, especially in education, but a degree of sensitivity to differences in culture, ethnicity, gender, class, and myriad other differences is important for moral navigation of the world. Noddings, in her writing on moral education (1982, 2002) argues that the "primary aim of every educational institution and every educational effort must be the maintenance and enhancement of caring" (1984, p. 172). Certainly schools and teachers can have other objectives, but according to Noddings, those objectives should never stand in the way of promoting caring as the ethical ideal. Such a stance, she points out, has consequences for curriculum planning, and also for how the teacher comports herself and the types of relationships she establishes and encourages between her students. Beyond that, Noddings avoids absolutes, refusing "gods, or eternal verities, or an essential human nature" (2002, p. 15). Circumstance and
behaviour are what is considered when assessing the morality of an act, not some common yardstick of morality.

In this sort of a paradigm, there is more space for ambiguity and we acknowledge that in the real complexity of life, what may be virtue in one case can do real harm in another. As one way to approach moral education, Noddings cites literature as a useful tool, preferring “powerful literature to philosophical fictions concocted as moral dilemmas”, and stating that "stories are thus chosen are valued for themselves" (2002, p. 3). When we read about Raskolnikov’s actions, his justifications, his torment, we are invited to reflect on the complexity of moral life and the possibility for redemption in the case of a breach. This is altogether different from being told what to do.

Noddings announces that good stories are, of course, rich terrain for moral learning, and in this thesis I work to unpack how the stories work, how – returning to Wallace – they can illuminate the “passionately moral [and] also ingenious and radiantly human”, and how teachers can support these inquiries. By good stories, I mean stories that have complex characters, authentic conflicts, and explore themes rather than moralize. Noddings isn’t speaking for parables or didactic stories, but is acknowledging that both philosophers and writers of fiction have always been asking what it is to live a good life. While philosophers write in an expository style, writers represent the journey and struggle; they demand interpretation on the part of the reader, and are better able to embody the ambiguity and complexity that attend a moral life. Reading this sort of literature, I argue, allows us to participate in or at least imagine our way into these conversations.
Early into this project, I mentioned my interest in the convergence of moral education and literature to my Philosophy of Education professor, who had on more than one occasion said how much he valued literature, increasingly so through his life and career. He responded to me that while “there are many of us who feel it is obvious that literature is a vital path to moral education, it is extremely difficult to produce the compelling argument to support the conviction or to find the texts that argue the case well” (Barrow, 2013, personal communication). What I have found since is that some critics (and social scientists, and philosophers) are reluctant to give moral weight to art, or read it as having a purpose beyond itself; it is writers and readers who are convinced that art really can influence how one lives one’s life. These critics are also readers, and some writers, but there seems to be something lost, when the intuitively knowable transformation of reading is held up to analytic scrutiny. Wayne C. Booth, one critic who argues for literary narrative, speaks for those readers and writers in stating that “almost everyone – except for a few theorists – would agree not only that we read for instruction but that the instruction often works” (1988, p. 229). The conclusion that I’ve reached is that the moral power of literature is found in its ability to engage and widen the imagination.

The philosopher Martha Nussbaum writes, “an ethic of impartial respect for human dignity will fail to engage real human beings unless they are made capable of entering imaginatively into the lives of distant others and to have emotions related to that participation” (1995, xvi). The imagination is at the crux of literature’s moral possibility, for it is imagination that fuels empathy; Maxine Greene writes, “imagination feeds one’s capacity to feel one’s way into another’s vantage point” (1995, p. 37). It is reasonable to question whether, as Gribble (1983) does, the empathy we feel for a crafted literary
character can really be compared with empathy towards real people who are affected by our behaviour. Of course, the full range of human emotions cannot be experienced vicariously. But it is the imagination that is engaged in the flow of reading, and it is the imagination that must be active if we are to perceive and understand the perspectives and realities of others, which is the very action that moral education depends on. Furthermore, certain literary narratives, ones that I feel are of great value, embrace the ordinary and focus on the plights of everyday people, just like the people we encounter in our lives (Nussbaum, 1995). This is important because other disciplinary areas (like history) tend to focus on the lives of the extraordinary. It is important that students see their ordinary lives as the location of moral life – that the mundane can contain the extraordinary. Of Dostoevsky, Wallace says, “his concern was always what it is to be a human being – that is, how to be an actual person, someone whose life is informed by values and principles” (2003, p. 265). By showing the inner landscape of real, complex, and striving people, our great writers can illuminate the inner lives of readers.

So how does reading about Tim O’Brien, hunched forward in the hull of a fishing boat that is chopping through the waves of the Rainy River, increase our capacity for moral behaviour? For one thing, the climactic scene in the boat, the din of Tim’s mind contrasting with the quiet of the surrounds, takes us into the thick confusion of the moment of decision. Here’s an example:

A hallucination, I suppose, but it was as real as anything I would ever feel. I saw my parents calling to me from the far shoreline. I saw my brother and sister, all the townsfolk, the mayor and the entire Chamber of Commerce and all my old teachers and girlfriends and high school buddies. Like some weird sporting event: everybody screaming from the sidelines, rooting me on – a loud stadium roar… My unborn daughter waved at me, and my two sons hopped up and down, and a drill sergeant
named Blyton sneered and shot up a finger and shook his head. There was a choir in bright purple robes. There was a cabbie from the Bronx. There was a slim young man I would one day kill with a hand grenade along a red clay trail outside the village of My Khe.
The little aluminum boat rocked softly beneath me. There was the wind and the sky. (p. 59)

We have to, as readers, be with Tim on this boat, and imagine something impossible – this parade of images from his past and future, as he tries to will himself away from his entire life and out of the boat. Booth attacks the idea that “sophisticated critics never judge a fiction by any effect it might have on the reader” (1988, p. 2), and I stand with him in his stance that this contradicts the belief that literature matters. This passage invites us to understand and empathize with Tim, and to imagine what it would be like to endure this sort of dilemma. That imagination could carry over into a life more generally, either when we are faced with a dilemma ourselves or are seeking to understand someone else’s.

But beyond that, O’Brien invites in a deeper moral complexity. He was a coward for going to war, he says. It is hard to understate the importance of this irony to the story, to the whole book: of course, if Tim O’Brien had fled to Canada there would be no *The Things They Carried*; it would have been another life. The whole story hinges on Tim staying in that boat. There could be no other choice. But there is also an ambiguity in the ending, and a chance to recognize that Tim’s judgment of himself is not the only possible way of seeing. When we read the story together, this is something that some of my students picked up on, quite outside of my coaching:

*Arguably, courage could also be represented by the fact that Tim packed up his things and left everyone he knew and loved behind to escape the draft notice. Whilst the act itself is cowardly, it takes a lot of courage to continue to run from it and to do any*
necessary precautions to prevent it from ever happening... For many people, this type of act would simply be frowned upon and he would likely be considered a fool or a weakling, but to Tim, this was most likely the bravest thing he has ever accomplished yet. [Essay excerpt]

This student’s recognition of Tim’s flight as courageous required an act of imagination. He had to cross over and imagine himself in Tim’s position, and because the story itself and the way I taught it centred on this concept of courage, he was able to see Tim’s flight as courageous.

“On the Rainy River” explores especially the emotion of fear as it relates to courage, and illustrates the complexity of the moment on the precipice – the moment before you decide what to do, and get swept up in whatever may come. It educates that emotion: as philosopher Robert Solomon might argue, it gives an accounting of and language for a particular emotional experience or event (1986). Literature is “the communication of emotion” (p. 44) and therefore a route to developing culturally literate people with a range of experiences, whether lived or vicarious, and a language for understanding what he calls “imaginative constructions” (p. 39). Vygotsky, in his doctoral dissertation The Psychology of Art (1971) also pursues the relationship between art, emotion, and culture. He writes about emotional and cognitive mind as one, and claims that art allows us to lift our private experiences into the social context: “an emotion is individual, and only by means of a work of art does it become social or generalized.” Put another way, art can teach us how to feel; it mediates our emotional agency, and our capacity to use emotions as we think. However, the perception of art is a creative act, in which “one must also creatively overcome one’s own feelings, and find one’s own catharsis; only then will the effect of art be complete.” In Smagorinsky’s (2013b) words, “a person does not simply think about art, or respond
emotionally to it, but has emotional reactions that, when reflected upon, enable a person to consider more profoundly the depths of the human experience” (p. 195). A study of art – and therefore literature – gives people the ability to be informed by our emotional lives, and connect our private emotions to the cultural forces that shape us.

What I want to conclude with is first, that moral education in schools happens and needs to be thought carefully about, and that it must be undertaken in the context of the imagination. Through imagination, we can empathize with people whose experiences are different from ours, and we can recognize the novelty in each situation. A moral education should produce a responsive, reflective moral person, and not someone who operates by a series of scripts or axioms. Second, imaginative literature – that is, fiction that requires some interpretation, and that represents the emotional lives of ordinary people – is a fine vehicle for moral education. Literature offers access to a breadth of experience, but most importantly, it provides an entry into experiencing those experiences, and thereby coming to understand them from the inside: their emotional patina, their internal life, their storying.
Chapter 3. Vygotsky’s theories and literary education

If reading literature, and engaging with it imaginatively, is a path to moral education, the question that follows is, how do teachers engage students in moral questions about texts? In other words – what actually goes on in those classrooms? If literature studies are to be meaningful in the broader world, our students must be aided to make connections between the texts they read, discuss, and respond to in English classes, and the moral choices and judgments they make every day and will be making for the rest of their lives.

The relationship between the academic learning one does in school, and the learning that happens through the work of everyday life, was of central interest to the early 20th century Soviet developmental psychologist Lev Vygotsky (2012). Vygotsky believed that a central task of schools consists in developing students’ understanding of systemic (or academic, or scientific) concepts – concepts that are rigorous and represent the sum of human learning. Vygotsky’s work was original because of his assertion that systemic and spontaneous concepts (the conceptual understandings that are developed through observation and experience) are both important to development, and that the relationship between them is of central importance in education. Summed up in a phrase, “scientific and spontaneous concepts reveal different attitudes toward the object of study and different ways of its representation in the consciousness” (Vygostky, 2012, p. 170). For example, a social studies teacher working on developing the systemic concept of democratic
government might incorporate some discussion of the spontaneous concepts her students had developed through their understanding of leadership in schoolyard games. Through both means we can come to know something in a more nuanced, reflective, and perhaps useful way.

Vygotsky, whose work has become steadily more influential in North American education over the last thirty years, generally seemed to understand concepts as something fixed or existing outside of an interpretive paradigm. However, in today’s post-positivist and interpretivist epistemological paradigms (those you might find in humanities and social sciences), is understanding knowledge as fixed really appropriate? Such questions have been taken up, to some degree, by an academic community of researchers and writers on cultural-historical activity theory, a form of social science originating from Vygotsky’s work. One of them, Peter Smagorinsky, is a former English teacher who studies Vygotsky’s work in the context of literacy. Smagorinsky argues that in certain contexts, a fixed “scientific” concept is not useful, and suggests something he calls the “practical concept” that seems to occupy some middle ground between the scientific and spontaneous concept. While the practical concept may occupy ambiguous terrain, it “enables one to make good enough progress toward cognitive and social destinations that are, by definition, amorphous and protean” (2013, p. 11) – that is, the cognition of moral life.

One of Smagorinsky’s research efforts is to connect Vygotsky’s efforts to the work of today’s English Language Arts teachers. He emphasizes speech as a tool for thinking, the interconnection between emotion and cognition, and the importance of culture on ways of thinking and knowing (2013b). While his writing on the practical concept actually deals
more with the education of teacher candidates, for me, it was a lynchpin that connected Vygotsky's systemic concepts to the much less concrete terrain of moral education. Smagorinsky's discussion of constructed knowledge, and questions like, "How do people know if they are approaching clarity of a concept that itself means different things to different people?" (2013, p. 239), spoke to the tension I faced as I considered how English teachers could systemically and deliberately use literature to teach concepts like justice, love, and vulnerability, which lack the stable features that characterize concepts in many other disciplines. Even the idea that English as a school subject could occupy an intersection point between systemic concepts and spontaneous concepts (Smagorinsky, 2013b) required there to be an available systemic concept. Smagorinsky's proposition of the practical concept offered me a new perspective. Unlike the spontaneous concept, the practical concept need not be individualized and case specific; it can be rigorous and robust, but acknowledges that the kind of knowledge it relates to is sensitive to changing social and environmental factors, and that the learner is forever in a state of developing, testing, and revising his or her concepts.

While certain systemic concepts are prescribed in the teaching of English Language Arts in British Columbia, the practical concepts are, for the most part, left up to the teacher's discretion. While there is an expectation that students will graduate with a reasonable grasp of what systemic irony is, there is no parallel expectation that a BC graduate will have carefully examined the emotional consequences of growing up with a loving but ill-equipped single father, as the protagonist of Heather O'Neill's *Lullabies for Little Criminals* (2006) does. In general, British Columbia curriculums allow the teacher a fair amount of professional discretion, and they are being revised to do so even more (British Columbia
Ministry of Education, 2013). Consequently, teachers have choices to make: will the class be designed around the textbook sequence, and rely heavily on its exercises? Will plenty of supplementary texts be brought in? Will there be lecturing, or dialogue, or essays assigned, or multiple-choice tests? Furthermore, beyond the day-to-day activities of classroom life, teachers can lend legitimacy to and invite in many other voices, whether they come in text form or in the contributions of students or guests, and these voices too will in turn affect the learning that goes on.

A useful shorthand term for the work the teacher and the texts do in fostering and supporting learning is mediation (Vygostky, 1978). Mediation is a word that denotes the act of intervention in a process, or relationship; one most often mediates a dispute. In this case, the process is learning, and the mediation is any kind of cultural tool that intervenes and facilitates. The tools are myriad: books, articles, math manipulatives, and laboratory experiments are all mediators, but so are class discussions, teacher responses, or even the prevailing attitude in a classroom. All these factor into how learning happens in schools, and while the teacher doesn’t control all of them, she controls or can influence many.

The Talk

In the sunless wooden room at noon
the mother had a talk with her daughter.
The rudeness could not go on, the meanness
to her little brother, the selfishness.
The eight-year-old sat on the bed
in the corner of the room, her irises distilled as
the last drops of something, her firm
face melting, reddening,
silver flashes in her eyes like distant
bodies of water glimpsed through woods.
She took it and took it and broke, crying out
I hate being a person! diving
into the mother
as if
into
a deep pond - and she cannot swim,
the child cannot swim.

(Olds, 1980)

What it is, to teach a poem? There’s any number of ways I could go about it. Perhaps
I’d teach this poem through response and discussion – start with, What do you like about it?
What lines stick out to you? What do you see in your mind, and what kind of feelings come
up? Or instead, I’d incorporate it into a unit on family relationships, or on childhood, and I
could ask my class to each take a minute to write about a time when they felt angry as a
child, or got in trouble with a parent, and relate this poem to the helplessness and
dependence of childhood – the “distant bodies of water glimpsed through woods” that make
tangible the otherness of children. Or maybe I’m concerned about the upcoming
standardized examinations, and I ask them to look through the poem and label every poetic
device that they see (“wooden room at noon” = assonance). Each of these ways of
approaching the poem, and journeying through it, would mediate a different understanding.
It’s still the same poem – something endures, certainly – but the approach the teacher takes,
matters.

Of mediation, Vygostky wrote that we do not come to know and understand, or
develop, directly; instead, we arrive at our understandings of the world through culturally
produced tools (1978). The most important example of a mediating tool is language itself,
which shapes how we think, know, and interact with the world. In my study mediation is important for two reasons: first, as I’ve described above, teachers make choices that affect how a particular text might be interpreted and understood. Making choices about how one mediates a text is tricky, if we are to produce the kind of reflective and imaginative thinker that might best be equipped to live in a moral way. Perhaps ultimately more importantly, though, I argue that literary texts are a tool for mediating various aspects of the human experience, including emotions, human relationships, and moral life. Fiction is a place where people can encounter and reckon with what it means to be a human being. “The Talk” can mediate an understanding of the complexity of one’s emotions, the responsibility of parents to teach emotional growth compassionately, and indeed – the difficulties of being a person. These understandings can begin to happen when the teacher picks up on particular statements or bits of dialogue, assigns provocative essay questions, brings in additional mediating texts like non-fiction articles, films, or even just anecdotes, all which might be chosen to encourage and support the exploration of a complex moral issue. The reading experiences of other students in the class, should they be invited to discuss, will also mediate the way the text is read. All of these efforts affect how a student experiences a literary text. While hardcore constructivists might criticize this approach as a teacher “controlling” a student’s experience, Vygotskian mediation gives students useful tools to guide him or her to a richer and more meaningful experience of a text, if the student’s experiences and knowledge are given space and honoured.

Teacher mediation can generate what Vygostky called the zone of proximal development, or ZPD, which is the potential present for growth of the learner’s developmental level, given the material and the social situation (Vygostky, 1978). I use the
term carefully here, because it is frequently misapplied, and often conflated with Bruner’s (1978) scaffolding, to describe any kind of teaching where students are given help to learn something that is a little bit harder than what they can do on their own. Vygotsky defines the ZPD specifically as developmental growth:

[The ZPD] is the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. (1978, p. 86).

More famously, Vygotsky said of the ZPD that “what a child can do with assistance today she will be able to do by herself tomorrow” (p. 87). In an example that resonated with my work, Miller (2003) explains how in open-ended discussions of literature, a social space inhabited by students, texts, and teachers, a ZPD (p. 290), is created wherein students learn to make meaning and reflect on those meanings. Although not every student inhabits an identical ZPD, it is the social environment, where the teacher and students model use of new tools, that generates the potential for development in individuals. A question that came up over and over again in my research, one that I have taken only tentative steps towards answering, is: how much should teachers intervene, or mediate, a student’s experience making meaning of a text? The ZPD suggests that direct help is less useful than creating a space where dialogue, the use of tools, occurs between teachers and students, and students and students.

The link between systemic concepts and spontaneous concepts, Smagorinsky’s practical concept and its relation to social and moral life, mediation, and mediation through assistive social spaces, are all important ideas for this thesis, because they offer ways of
thinking and writing about how teachers can guide learning in school, and can specifically be applied to how teachers guide students in making meaningful connections between the literature they read and discuss and the real moral choices that they face in their lives. Reading fiction can lead students to develop their understanding of the way that people and the world works, by enunciating some of the spontaneous concepts that readers have developed around social, moral, and emotional life, and holding them up against the concepts of others – including the literary text itself – to build a practical concept, something that is evolving and adaptable, but with integrity.
Chapter 4. Hermeneutic Understandings of Literature and Inquiry

Here, I’ll return again to those English 11 classes, to when I was teaching those two O’Brien stories. Each time, I told my class a little about the Vietnam War, and asked them to think about what it would be like to be one of the boys in the story – young, brought up to expect a comfortable and predictable life of pursuing the American Dream. When I taught “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong”, I had a question in mind - was Rat Kiley telling the truth? – that doesn’t, when I look at it now, seem all that important to the story, and that wasn’t relevant or urgent to the students in my care. What might’ve been better? Listening to the story, and thinking about the kids in my class, “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong” makes me think: could I really change so much? Could someone that I love? What does war really do? Later, when I taught “On the Rainy River”, I gave them a little space to play, and imagine what else might be going on. Together we thought about how Tim might be feeling, and how the other characters might react to his behaviour; we discussed whether what he was doing was right or wrong, or cowardly or courageous. The thing was, I didn’t have the answers, and I was really engrossed in trying to consider different possibilities. Under those circumstances, so were my students.

This kind of experience in teaching brings to mind David Hawkins, and his essay “I, Thou, and It” (1965), in which he writes about how a good student-teacher relationship is characterized by the presence of the it, something that captures the fascination of both adult
and child. When I taught “On the Rainy River,” my students and I worked together to understand the story. Hawkins writes about how the teacher is able to give feedback, and suggest and support particular types of activity to deepen the inquiry – put another way, to lead a process of collective inquiry, something that creates a zone of proximal development that enables each student to travel more deeply into the pursuit of the subject. In this case, I was still the teacher in the class – I set the agenda, spoke about the context, and chose the assignment – but when it came down to interpreting the story, they had the space they needed to read beyond what we had done together, and in their writing, space opened for me, too, as I read the story.

What Hawkins says is important here, and I agree, is that the interest in the “it” needs to be genuine in the teacher. If it isn’t, eventually the children are going to find out, and to some degree, that’s a betrayal of the respect that the relationship needs to be imbued with. Luckily, the study of a piece of literature isn’t something that eventually amasses enough data and gets finished. We never get to say that a reading is done. Literary studies are fecund ground for exhilarating and mutual inquiry into the It, by the I and Thou.

This sense of never being done, of finding that the more engrossed you get in something, the richer the It becomes, comes up again and again in David Jardine’s writing on educational hermeneutics – Jardine, quoting Gadamer, says that “the living truth of things must ‘always be renewed in the effort of our living’” (Jardine, 2006, p. 286). Jardine’s suggestion is that understanding a human endeavour like education is always emergent; instead of amassing the words and numbers that render a complex human experience into data to be analyzed, we would be better served by dwelling in attention and immersing
ourselves in the fecundity of an event, a perception, a happening that is going on in our midst. Good teaching is idiosyncratic, and good research on education captures the lived experience of that idiosyncrasy — as well as what it does to the people doing the learning, and to everyone else involved.

The questions I asked myself about Vygotsky’s work, and what it meant in light of the experiences I was having in my classroom, began an iterative process of considering answers and trying new things, reconsidering and going back again. What were concepts, in English Language Arts? Could reading really have anything to do with moral development? Was I giving them enough space to reach their own understandings, or was I being too directive? What I had to do was pay attention to what I was seeing, and do my best to make some kind of meaning out of my experiences. As it’s turned out, my struggle to make sense of my experiences and the experiences of those around me has quite a lot in common with the thinking and meaning-making my students participated in, as they read and tried to make their own meaning of the literary texts we read together. Interpretation of life and interpretation of literature aren’t too different, after all.

Reading Jardine, I have come to realize that I brushed up against hermeneutics (a way of thinking about, and practicing, interpretation of this kind) years past without quite knowing it. I’m going to divert from the present path and tell that story, because it continues to influence the way that I think about the world: in Jardine’s words, the thing that grabbed me then still hasn’t let go. Sometime during my third year of university, I was loaned a copy of Don McKay’s Vis à Vis (2001), a book of essays and poetry. It took hold of me, in the way things sometimes do, and though I haven’t entirely sorted out how it connects to the project
at hand, I am convinced there is an ancestry. McKay begins the book by the side of the road, where he has found a dead, mutilated raven. From there, he moves into lyrical philosophy, discussing what he calls wilderness, "the capacity of all things to elude the mind's appropriations," (p. 21), “implicit in the things we use every day, as close at hand as a flat tire or a missed step” (2001, p. 57). What I was pulled into was the idea that beyond and within the human-made world, there was a wildness, a separateness that could never be bridged. I was fascinated by the idea that the objects all around us, which we routinely thought of as tools, could have characters and substance of their own, like McKay's meat grinder, which caused “the kitchen [to take] a step back toward the butcher shop and sideways into the exotic” (p. 59). Later McKay gets to discussing language, which Vygotsky would agree is the ultimate tool, rife with ambiguities and is metaphoric by its very nature.

I didn't know anything about hermeneutics or phenomenology in 2003 – I skimmed across the surface of the more technical sections - but now, reading Vis à Vis again, I see that it engages with both kinds of thinking, something I wish I'd taken on board when I wrote my undergraduate thesis on his long poem “Five Ways to Lose Your Way” (2005). In Vis a Vis, McKay, following Heidegger, enacts the “phenomenological experience of Dasein” (Kakkori, 2009, p. 24) – Dasein is a “being that has the ability to question its own Being” (Kakkori, p. 22). McKay's effort in the text is to explore what it means, for a poet, to step back and see the essence of things, even though the essence of things is obscured by language, by mediation, the way we understand the world through the things of the world. Yet at the same time: language and tools are themselves what we can move, manipulate, and play in to make meaning, to make art.
Here is a place to step back into 2014 and my efforts to teach high school English. Part of my work, I believe, is to initiate my students into the wonder, and weirdness, of being a person in the world, an initiation that is best mediated through literature. As we study literature I ask them to be observers in their own lives, and to re-understand their own experiences by digging into another’s. Kakkori says,

A good story – for example, an autobiography – widens our worldview. Gadamer refers to this kind of experience as ‘hermeneutic’ or ‘dialectic’ experience. Hermeneutic experience broadens our horizon and enables us to see something differently than we had in the past. (2009, p. 24)

Although literary fiction speaks to me more than autobiography, Kakkori sums up the essence of what I hope to accomplish for my students – to broaden their sense of what might be possible.

There is, though, my longing for that existential understanding, and then there is life in schools, those classes themselves – thirty pubescent bodies with their crinkling snack wrappers, and surreptitious cell phone messaging, and sleepy eyes; the inevitable broken or overactive heater, or someone passing through the hallway with a dog. It’s an easy reach to grapple with what it means to be human alone, out in a meadow waiting to spot some obscure bird; it’s quite another to ponder such things while watching the clock in a high school classroom. Part of the difficulty of teaching is wondering whether anything has ever, actually, landed. See here:

*It is midway through the semester and I have been frustrated with my English 11 class. It is the last block of the day, every day, and by the time we meet, I’m not at my best and neither are they. They are on the verge of the rest of their lives: their sports games, their trips to the gas station to buy candy with friends, their chances to lie on the sofa*
of their empty homes, maybe while eating a generously-sized snack. Or else they are off to their jobs, or their music lessons, or their tutor: at least, they are doing something that they've chosen. And the only thing standing in their way is old Ms. Atkinson and their English class.

The kids are, for the most part, a sociable and energetic crew. They know each other well, so they know each other’s business well and so constantly, endlessly talk. As a teacher I want them to have conversations as a way to reach and engage in an idea, but when I ask them to discuss something, anything, many of them turn to one another and start to talk about anything but what we’re studying. This means it is hard to invite exploratory conversation, because time seems to be so easily wasted, and then the climate in the classroom doesn’t support either casual or more formal discussions about the issues at hand. And I get frustrated, or just assign seatwork to get something done.

So once again, I am feeling in something of a slump. I was feeling slumpy before, and then got inspired to organize my unit on Macbeth around the theme of Violence, but the beginning of it was so unevenly received, plus I hadn’t started the unit with the right questions, so it just faded away. Well, it’s not fair to say that “it just faded away” – what I mean is I didn’t work very hard to make it happen and then it became Spring Break, and I decided I’d rather just move through Macbeth and start on a unit that required less guided reading, than try and force through something I didn’t have a clear plan around.

I think part of what was going on is that I don’t really know very much about the psychology and ethics of violence, nor, I suppose, is it something that sparks a particular connection or passion in me. When I step back, I know it is a rich topic culturally. The kids I teach grew up immersed in violent movies, and video games. They are raised to believe that there is real risk that someone might hurt them, that they must remain vigilant about strangers. Many of them play sports where the risks and rewards of violence are debated. I can see that it could have real purchase, but me throwing it together in such a haphazard way, and wanting to get through it quickly, was a real detriment to the possibilities that such a topic could’ve offered. Again, this goes back to one of the real obstacles in thematic teaching: time, and finding the right resources in a way that mirrors the way that people read. Anthologies are often thematized but there is something so sterile and disconnected about moving through a textbook chapter, piece by piece. There needs to be an authenticity in the choices a teacher makes.

So back to my evil Grade 11s. As seems to happen with Macbeth, almost every year, we have hit the point where they actually seem a bit invested in the characters, and comfortable with the language, and are more receptive towards reading the play. I have also given them a Body Biography assignment, which they grumbled about at first, but now seem genuinely invested in. I do, however, have to chase them around in the hallways like they are small children. I also am not sure about their willingness to
fully invest in the projects they do, and I’m not sure how much genuine learning is going on, but rather doing enough to get by. [Research journal]

I wrote this journal piece in April, at the end of my Macbeth unit – a unit that had been uniformly frustrating. I’d tried to teach it as a way to explore a central theme of Macbeth, the seemingly inverse relationship between power and ethics. But nothing I tried to do worked – I started with some discussion questions that I thought were provocative, and got almost nothing in return. I showed them what I thought was a gripping video about the Stanford Prison Experiment, and they fell asleep. I talked about *The Wolf of Wall Street*, a Scorsese film that had just come out and explored many of the same themes, and they were interested in that, but not interested in comparing it to *Macbeth*. Eventually, I gave up and just started giving occasional quizzes and a fairly conventional assignment. When I think about it now, when I re-read my journal, I come up with many reasons why the unit failed to connect with anything bigger, or realer, and I come up with no reason.

Just as there is simultaneously something known, and something unknown, in an object, or a poem, there is something of this same wilderness at work in a classroom. You, the teacher, toss something out there without knowing where, or when, or if, it will land. Education is difficult, messy, argued about by experts and laypeople alike – so it follows that it would be awfully difficult for anyone to look at something as complex as literary education and be able to say exactly what is going on, or to generalize about what is happening or what has to happen with every teacher, child, or school. The excerpt above demonstrates my attempts to understand, but also points to some blind spots. I seem to be participating in two narratives: the first story is about the kids in my class, and how they’re distracted teenagers who don’t care about school, and that any failing in the classroom, the
failure of an idea to catch or a conversation to spark, is because of that. The second story is that if anything went wrong, it’s because I didn’t work hard enough, because my planning and talk didn’t do enough to grab their interest. Probably both were part of the problem. Probably there were other things going on, too. Maybe the unit wasn’t so much of a disaster as I felt it was. There was what actually happened, somewhere out there (there are thirty or so versions that you could get if you asked the kids in that class), and then there is mine. Jardine (2006) writes about hermeneutics as a process of grasping at threads, unwinding a bit at a time, being haunted by the same question – the unknowability of that answer – for years. The question beneath the question is, what was I really trying to do, in that class? Was the most important matter at hand getting through Macbeth, or was there something else going on? Perhaps we blame the restlessness of a group of Grade 8s on the upcoming holiday, or we castigate ourselves – “I was so unprepared”. We try to make meaning of and understand what’s happening.

I struggled through this *Macbeth* unit, too, because I wanted to see that the students in my class were coming up with their own routes to understanding, and that they were able to grab onto something in the Shakespeare and see it as meaningful in their own lives. Yet over and again, I found myself at the front of the class explaining, telling them what it was all about. Coming up over and again, as I worked through this thesis, was the question: how much interpretive guidance is appropriate? While I’ve thought and read about it a great deal, and had conversations, and watched how my teacher participants navigated the terrain, I don’t have an answer because there cannot be an answer. Or the answer can only be, “some, but not too much, and you must be aware of when and how you are shaping their thinking”. The question remains: did my interpretation of Shakespeare – my telling them
what to notice, what mattered – did that allow them to grasp it, and carry it into their own lives and experiences? Or did it rob them of their own opportunity to step into the wilderness of another person, time and experience?

Part of the difficulty, too, with *Macbeth*, is that it’s hard reading for anyone who isn’t used to 17th century iambic pentameter. We have to let go of the possibility that we’ll understand everything, that we’ll get it all the first or second time. Fearing a moving away from education that gazes into the wilderness, Jardine writes with concern about the recent emphasis on jobs training and skills development in education, what could be termed as an instrumentalist argument that with the right training, job, and material success the difficulties of life could be solved (Jardine, 2000). Of course it is important for people to have employment, and good incomes, but I think what Jardine is trying to get at is that there is so much else that happens that gives life meaning. If people don’t learn to occupy the difficult spaces in their lives, the ones where they don’t have all the answers, and be awakened to the connections they share with one another and the physical and historical places they live in, then life might be experienced as very lonely and painful. Of the technical-scientific ideology of education, Jardine writes, “Being alive becomes something to *solve*, and finding one’s life difficult, ambiguous, or uncertain is a *mistake* to be corrected” (2000, p. 125). The idea that there is something out there that will ease suffering, that we can be free of pain if we apply this technique, or get this kind of job, or travel to the right place, is a seductive old song.

The study of literature is a way to get beyond the “being and doing” of our lives, and to look more closely at what is actually happening. Literature asks us to look at ourselves
and the society we live in; it asks us to reflect on our relationships, how we connect to the whole. It mediates an understanding of our emotional lives and it may grow our empathy. However, the study of literature itself, especially the way I often see it taught in secondary schools, isn’t free of the technical-scientific ideology: the idea that the study of a literary work can be completed is one that is implicit in multiple-choice unit tests and chapter comprehension questions that have only one “right” answer. English teachers experience a tension between allowing students to interpret texts for themselves, and pressing them towards an accepted reading (Bickmore, Smagorinsky, & O'Donnell-Allen, 2005). It is possible, but troubling, that students can come to see literature as something to be mastered rather than experienced.

3. Spoon

whose eloquence
is tongueless, witless, fingerless,
an absent egg.
Hi Ho, sing knife and fork, as off they go,
chummy as good cop and bad cop,
to interrogate the supper. Spoon waits
and reflects your expression,
inverted, in its tarnished moonlight. It knows
what it knows. It knows hunger
from the inside
out.

(McKay, 2004)

It was one of the last days of school when I gave my class “Setting the Table”, McKay’s weird suite of poems (Knife, Fork, and Spoon). So late in the year, I had given up on
doing much besides bringing a few pieces of writing that I loved to class every day, to read together and talk about, and maybe write a little about in response. I had no particular end in mind, other than knowing that these poems and articles meant something to me and hoping that they might mean something to some of them. I didn’t want to participate in the hysteria and intensity that can accompany a study of poetry, so all we did with “Setting the Table” was read it aloud, alongside a few other poems, and then they wrote about one of the selections. To my surprise, many of them came up with beguiling metaphors and fantastical images, wonderful things that these tools stood in for. I didn’t look at a piece of cutlery the same way for days. For some reason, not interpreting it for them – standing back and giving space – resulted in the exploration of possibility I’d longed for with Macbeth. But so much was different, then, too. It was the end of the year. It was a short poem, written in today’s English; they chose it. I can’t hold one up against the other.

With that tension hanging, let’s return, again, to the O’Brien. After my English 11 class read “On the Rainy River” and discussed it a little – we chose quotes that we thought were most important to the story’s themes – I asked them to choose a section of the story to re-tell from Elroy’s perspective, doing their best to consider what he might’ve known and what he didn’t, and how his life and experiences might have shaped what he thought of 21 year old Tim, the story’s narrator, who had run away to Elroy’s fishing lodge to deliberate on whether he would cross the river into Canada. I reminded them of a bit of historical context. The story takes place in 1968 – it’s right there in the text. Elroy Berdhal is 81 years old, so would’ve been eighteen years old in 1915, in time to go join the horrors of WWI. He would have been 44 in 1941, when the US joined WWII. This is something I realized as I stood at the board writing down these dates. Elroy, in the story, never asks Tim any
questions, finds a way to give him $200 in cash, and takes him out in his boat, halfway across the river. When I think about that, as I do now, I see that to me, some of the story is about an older man who knows what it is to go to war offering a younger man a way out. I’ve read “On the Rainy River” dozens of times, but it wasn’t until my third year teaching, there at the board with marker in hand, that I noticed this detail. Did I fail to understand the story, until then? I don’t think so. I was coming to it willing to be changed – the way that I wanted them to come in, too.

What they wrote varied. Some, fresh out of their Canada and the War unit in Socials 11, made up detailed backstories about Elroy’s years in the trenches during WWI; others described the pain of losing a son to battle in WWII. Others wrote about Elroy as a benevolent figure who simply thought Tim should make a choice for himself. Another immersed herself in Elroy’s apparently simple world, and had him poke about in the kitchen choosing which knife to cut his apple with, right up to the moment when Tim knocked on his door. There is, of course, no way to know what Elroy was thinking: instead, we bring in what we know already; we watch, and listen, and the meaning comes when we bind what we see and hear to our selves, to our place, and to our experience of the world.

This is the topic – what happens when we try to put ourselves in Elroy’s shoes, or subjecthood – that has, in Jardine’s (2006) words, grasped me. What happens to me when I read, and think about, a literary work, and what happens when I try to induct the young people I teach into that experience? I go back to Azim’s statement: “I don’t know how she did it, but she did.” The days when something wonderful happened, when the spoons we ate
supper with became personified, what happened then? And what about poor Macbeth, who spends his afterlife making me irritable and my class bored?

In the preamble to “I, Thou, and It,” Hawkins writes, “Adults and children, like adults with each other, can associate well only in worthy interests and pursuits, only through a community of subject-matter and engagement which extends beyond the circle of their intimacy” (p. 49). Jardine writes of educational hermeneutics: “it begins, rather, with topica – great image-filled, sensory, alluring topics that address us and draw us into their sway and ask things of us” (2006, p. 272). When teaching works, when we get caught up, when there is something going on that together captures our attention - these are the moments and places that I wrote this thesis to illuminate.
Chapter 5. Methods and Contexts

Many narrative studies are judged to be important when they become literary texts to be read by others not so much for the knowledge they contain but for the vicarious testing of life possibilities by readers of the research they permit. (Clandinin & Connolly, 2000, p. 42)

The first text I read with my Grade 8 class during the semester of study was Paul Zindel’s The Pigman (1968). The initiating incident of the story is a prank phone call protagonists John and Lorraine make to the elderly and lonely Mr. Pignati, who they eventually befriend and in a moment of poor judgment, betray. In class, the Thursday of the first week of the semester, a conversation began about the morality of John and Lorraine’s actions (I use the passive voice here because, as with most good conversations, it grew out of something else). Was making a prank call really that bad? How did the incident in The Pigman, which ends with John and Lorraine soliciting a “donation” to a fictitious foundation, stack up against a prank call to your uncle (who you know will get the joke) or a 911 hoax call?

They took the question seriously, furrowing brows, offering up ideas. They talked about the phone pranks they had done, mainly goofy, innocuous calls to other kids in their class. These Grade 8s, and Grade 8s in general, were very new to me and I found their zeal and energy charming. Plus they loved the book, despite its musty yellowed pages and bizarre cover art. They said that the fact that the phone prank had turned into a real conversation, with someone who was lonely, should affect how we understood it morally.
Adrian, who was a little aloof in the class, and sometimes arranged fantastical Lego creatures at the top of his desk, put his hand up and said that while he wasn’t quite sure why, it seemed wrong for the kids to be playing a game, and letting someone else think that it was real. Adrian’s comment helped me out with my thinking, which was that Lorraine and John were using Mr. Pignati for their own ends. Together, we constructed an understanding of what had happened between the three characters. Reading *The Pigman* together, we began to think about things that we had done – whether it was prank calling a vulnerable friend, or using someone’s loneliness to our advantage. Reading about the conversation that we had in my class could, recalling Clandinin and Connolly’s words, offer a “vicarious testing of life possibilities” for those who spend time thinking about how we teach literature, just as the novel and conversation with my Grade 8s might have enlarged their sense of possibility, too.

When I began to recognize that I was interested in what literature could be for, in an English class, and that I was interested more specifically in how fictional narratives could enrich moral life, suddenly many days were full of similarly broad possibilities. The result is this study, which uses narrative inquiry and hermeneutics to explore the stories, experiences, and beliefs of three high school English teachers who are somewhere on the path of using literature to explore moral imagination and moral life. It is qualitative work, more concerned with describing and interpreting what *has* happened than with predicting what *will* happen. Underlying this project is my belief that literature, specifically stories, offers an inherently valuable way of knowing.
Of course, these ideas, and the way to finding them, can't all be captured in a few declarative sentences. Gadamer's title, *Truth and Method*, captures the separation, the pause, the hang time, between Truth and Method. Method is, of course, a way of pressing towards truth, but any method of research is only able to capture the phenomena from a particular angle. There is a divide — a conjunction, a bridge — in between what a method gives you and what you are trying to understand. When I was just beginning to conceive of this project, I ran into a course instructor in a café, and she showed me the book she was reading — Law's *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research* (2004). Ever since, I've had his words rattling around in my head: “if much of reality is ephemeral and elusive, then we cannot expect single answers. If the world is complex and messy, then at least some of the time we're going to have to give up on simplicities” (p. 2). This made sense to me. I knew I would be pursuing an investigation that concerned some of the messiest aspects of human existence: emotions, morals, the representation of life through art. How, then, could I expect simplicity?

However, acknowledging the complexity didn't offer an approach. I had strayed into a forest of ideas — I'm thinking of a sun-dappled, lush, West Coast forest, with trees draped with old man's beard and the open floor of a cedar canopy. Beautiful, inspiring, but I wasn’t going anywhere. I began to pick up a trail, though, when I read Jerome Bruner's essay “Two Modes of Thought” (1986). Early on in it, Bruner writes, “there are two modes of cognitive functioning, two modes of thought, each providing distinctive ways of ordering experience, of constructing reality” (p. 11). The first kind of thinking, analytical and paradigmatic, is familiar to anyone who has spent time in an educational institution. The second is narrative, rooted in story. Although narrative as a genre had been challenged for its legitimacy,
accused of being insufficiently rigorous, Bruner argues that it “deals with the vicissitudes of human intentions.” Narrative thought invites possibilities and recruits the reader in creating meaning. I read furiously, scribbling down notes and nodding along. In a couple of pages, Bruner legitimized and put language to the deep belief I held in the value of story.

Sometime after that, I picked up a copy of Clandinin and Connelly's *Narrative Inquiry* (2000). Bruner’s work is mentioned only in passing, along with other thinkers who pointed to story as a vehicle for understanding, but Clandinin and Connolly implicitly support Bruner’s argument for the legitimization of narrative thinking. Inspired by Dewey’s claim that “education, experience, and life are inextricably intertwined”, and a focus on what they call “personal practical knowledge” (2000, p. 3), Clandinin and Connolly make the case for a form of qualitative inquiry that situates the researcher in the text, and uses the human process of making meaning from experience to tell the stories of the lives of students, teachers, and administrators. They argue, essentially, that there are aspects of school life that cannot be fully seen by the analytic, paradigmatic modes of thinking that quantitative and some forms of qualitative study demand. Instead, the everyday struggles and successes, the larger-scale challenges and relationships that characterize school life, are better understood and explained as stories. Stories, Clandinin and Connelly say, are both “phenomena under study and method of study” (p. 4).

Clandinin and Connelly’s approach was compelling, and also intimidating. Before I started my MA, I – like many, many others – had looked a little askance at qualitative research. What could we really learn by asking a few people about their thoughts and feelings? But my view had changed and I was emboldened by Bruner, who I circled back to
over and again. I knew that the second mode of thought, the narrative, was the one that held
the truth I wanted to dig up. Narrative inquiry, or some form of it, seemed like the best way
to acknowledge the place of story. And, as I kept reading and thinking, I knew that I would
understand this work by telling stories about it. Whether there’s a first-person or third-
person narrator, stories are almost always inflected by the views, experiences, and ideas of
a perspective character. In more sophisticated words, “the qualitative researcher
emphasizes episodes of nuance, the sequentiality of happenings in context, the wholeness of
the individual” (Stake, 1995, xii). The narrator emphasizes certain things, puts events into
sequence and suggests cause and effect, and turns a cacophony of people, moments, beliefs,
and happenings into a whole story. Now, stories don’t always wrap up neatly. In
“Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong”, Rat Kiley tries to leave the story of Mary Anne
unfinished: she disappeared, he jumped the next chopper out. Mitchell Sanders: “Jesus
Christ, it’s against the rules,” (O’Brien, 1990, p. 112). Rat Kiley makes something up, and it
all goes a little off kilter; it turns to fantasy. We readers have to do something better than
what Mitchel Sanders can. We have to accept that stories don’t always have neat endings, or
satisfying resolutions, because they are about real people, and the living goes on. The
hermeneutic nature of my study is a reminder that the subjects of my study are
continuously in flux, and because it is about living and making meaning in the world, it is
always approaching. I take to heart Jardine’s words:

Hermeneutics suggests that there is a “truth” to be had, an understanding to be
reached, an experience to be savoured in the provocative, unmethodical incidents of
our lives that address us, a truth which is despoiled and thus left out of
consideration by the methodical severances and isolation requisite of much
qualitative and quantitative research work. (2006, p. 278-279).
**Participants: Who and how**

These moments that swept me up and grabbed me happened in my own class, with my students, or while I was working with the two teachers who agreed to be a part of my study. Both of my participants, who I describe in more detail later on, are people I knew before the study began. One, Paul, worked in another school in our district, and I invited him directly because I was interested in the work he did and I believed it would be valuable to my project. The other, Susan, was a colleague at my school at the time of this study; she responded to a department-wide email that I sent out requesting participants. The students in my classes, Paul’s classes, and Susan’s class were simply the students we happened to be teaching that semester, enrolled according to normal school procedure. To gather material for the thesis, I followed the work of my English 8 and English 11 classes through a five-month semestered course, and about six weeks of instruction in Paul’s English 8 and 11 classes and in Susan’s Humanities 8 class, a Grade 8 cohort program class that combines Social Studies and English. That all the classes studied were either Grade 8 or Grade 11 was serendipitous. As with the teachers, more detailed portraits of the classes follow. All names, of schools, teachers, and students, are pseudonyms.

Susan, Paul, and I all worked in a large suburban school district serving an economically, linguistically, and culturally diverse population of students; Paul worked at Lakehill Secondary and Susan and I worked at Northwoods Secondary. Of the two sites, Lakehill had a somewhat better academic reputation, though both Northwoods and Lakehill
were situated in comfortable middle-class neighbourhoods with diverse student bodies. Lakehill enrolled about 1300 students and Northwoods about 900.

Paul, whom I had known a little in teacher training, had been working in Burnaby for six years at the time of the study. He had taught English internationally before choosing teaching as a career, and believed in his work as a way to do good in society. His teaching style merged intellectual curiosity, irreverent creativity and professionalism. On various occasions, I heard him express strong views about teaching that subjugated students to teachers, enforced norms, or lacked creativity and flexibility. With his obvious intellectual vigor, the volume of books and periodicals that lined his classroom, and his standard dress of jeans, button-down, and Converse sneakers, Paul could’ve been cast in a movie as an inspiring English teacher.

Susan had been teaching at Northwoods for many years at the time of our study. While she had been teaching the English classes of the Grade 8 Humanities program for several years, she saw herself primarily as a Social Studies teacher and took my study as an opportunity to generate some ideas and strategies for teaching English. She was the go-to teacher in the school for social justice issues, and had a thoughtful, intelligent manner that I was drawn towards. Susan also valued education tremendously, and spoke glowingly of her own English teachers in high school. She saw the texts that she had read in her English classes, with her English teachers, as literature that gave her a paradigm for thinking about the world; eventually, she had decided that she wanted to pass on some of that knowledge herself.
Generating Field Texts from My Own Teaching

Clandinin and Connelly use the term “field text” in lieu of “data”, a practice that I adopted in my research. I gathered field texts from almost every aspect of my teaching: research journals and reflections I wrote several times each week; my planning daybook, where I recorded class plans and ideas; excerpts from student work; audio recordings of class discussions, my own teaching, and on a few occasions, a dialogue with students; and, of course, my own memory of events. In writing about my own classes, I am the subjective narrator. Regarding student work, I have quoted without making changes or corrections to spelling and grammar. I have chosen to transcribe interviews and classroom dialogue into sentences and paragraphs, and on a few occasions omitted excess verbalizations and stutters. I feel satisfied that the transcribed results accurately capture the voice and language of the person speaking.

Generating Field Texts - Paul

As well as a brief visit to make arrangements, I made two afternoon-long observation visits a few weeks apart to Paul’s classes at Lakehill Secondary, where I watched him teach English 8 and English 11. During these observations, I sat in a desk tucked in the corner and did not take an active role in the class. Outside of some stares at the beginning of class, Paul’s students seemed unperturbed by the stranger in the room; they had recently had student teachers come through, and on the first day, Paul introduced me, and I explained what I was doing. As well as being described as a researcher, I was identified as a teacher in the school district. Two of Paul’s Grade 11 students had been in my English 9 class two years previous, when I taught at Lakehill, and I chatted with each of
them for a bit. While Paul taught, I took notes, attempting to capture what Paul was doing and saying, what the students were doing and saying, and what I was thinking about and responding to. In this thesis, anything that is in quotation marks is recorded word for word in my notes. Paul passed on to me many of his classroom handouts, copies of texts that his class had studied, and student work that he thought I might be interested in (generally entire class sets of assignments).

**Generating Field Texts - Susan**

My research with Susan took a more collaborative tone, perhaps because we were teaching colleagues at Northwoods Secondary, and perhaps because of Susan’s expectations for the project. We had regular informal hallway chats about her class, and I came in for several observations, usually for about half a class. When I was in the class, Susan encouraged me to act as a co-teacher, rather than an observer. I was identified as a teacher in the school, and invited to help facilitate conversation, or offered chances to chime in with my opinion. When students worked or talked in groups, I usually joined a group’s discussion. Because I was more actively involved in Susan’s classes, I audio recorded my observations and then wrote field notes about my reactions and thoughts immediately afterward. At the unit’s end, I collected copies of the response journals the class had completed throughout their study of *The Taming of the Shrew.*

After the observation cycle was complete, I met with both Susan and Paul for semi-structured interviews. The interviews were centered on the following questions:

- What is your story of coming to teach English in secondary schools?
• What do you believe is the purpose of literature is in schools? Why do you think literature is worth teaching? What do you want your students to take away from a literary text? How have your beliefs developed and changed throughout your own education, and teaching career?

• What kinds of activities, assignments, or practices do you do in your classes to support your beliefs about literature? What works best? Why do you think it works?

• What role do schools play in developing character, morals, or social conscience in young people? How can literature help develop character, morals, or social conscience?

As the interviews were semi-structured, I asked some follow-up questions on specific aspects of their teaching that I had observed, and follow-up questions relevant to their answers. I audio recorded and transcribed both interviews, once again into sentences, deleting some verbalizations to keep the text readable while maintaining Paul and Susan’s voices.

**Interpretation and Analysis**

Here, I’ll pull back to the story that opened this chapter. In that English 8 class, in the first week of the semester, I didn’t think it was my job to render a verdict on John and Lorraine’s phone prank in *The Pigman*. What I hoped to do was hold a space to have a serious conversation about what we had seen, and thought about, and how it connected to or built on the knowledge of the world that we held. I knew that (by virtue of being older, more experienced and well-read) I’d had more time to think about questions of moral behavior, and was well-positioned to point to an event and say – here, I think this is
important. What do you think is going on? I now see narrative inquiry doing the same kind of work. By showing my reader what has happened, and attempting to show the character of what went on in its nuance and complexity, I hope to hold a space in which meaning can unfold.

As a novice researcher with a humanities background, I felt overwhelmed by discourse around qualitative data analysis. There were library workshops on InVivo, and suggestions that I go through my data with multiple colours of highlighters, circling recurring words. There had to be themes, and categories. I couldn’t help but see all these highly structured models of analysis as yet another attempt to replicate the traditions of positivist science, in a humanistic area of study. I knew that my inquiry would require something more intuitive and deliberative. I would have to trust that if I could go out and see enough, and read enough, and think hard enough about what I wanted to study, that I would be adequately prepared to act as a narrator and guide.

**Validity and generalizability – What’s the point, anyway?**

Early in my grad school experience, I attended a talk where an educational philosopher referred to education as a “universally contested concept” – that is, a discipline where smart people disagree about just about every possible aspect, from its goals to how to evaluate it and just about everything else in between. Kieran Egan writes, of the current era of education reform as seen from the future, that “it staggered forward year by year, with people heroically doing their best to make it work – even though there was a lot of vagueness, confusion, and argument about what it would look like if it were working
properly” (2008, p. 7). Egan goes on to argue that schools are stretched by simultaneous and contradictory objectives and goals – fully realizing human development, pursuing an academic ideal, and achieving socialization for useful participation in society. These are contradictions that are inherent to doing education. Recognizing them doesn’t equal solving them, but trying to find some comfort with the contradictory nature of the system is important for trying to do any work in it.

The diversity of beliefs, practices, and recommendations about how to teach effectively in schools is a challenge, but when the system works, part of its strength lies in its diversity. Good teaching looks very different from teacher to teacher, and different approaches work best for different students. A prescriptive approach to teaching is only going to diminish creativity. I have sat in the classrooms of some extremely talented lecturers, and remember much of what they taught me. I have colleagues who are gifted at facilitating groups in conversation and dialogue, and others that can make space for and support individuals in their learning. One of the hallmarks of a good education system is that educators are free to design a program that, in their professional estimation, will be most effective. The result: classes and teachers that are quirky, genuine, and idiosyncratic.

This is all a rather long-winded way of saying that the objective of my inquiry was not to come up with a prescription for how to teach literature. In terms of purpose, I imagine this document to be closer to a novel. A good novel will invite reflection on some human theme, by representing it through the lives and experiences of its characters. *The Things They Carried*, for instance, explores what it means to live through trauma and both leave it behind and never stop living through it. Tim O’Brien has left the war behind, and has
gone on to lead what seems to be a full, meaningful life. And yet he never leaves it: he is
called to tell and re-tell these stories, digging through the mess and muck of memory for
something he can hang onto and call truth. It is this kind of truth, Clandinin and Connolly’s
“vicarious testing of life possibilities by readers,” that I hope to invite.
Chapter 6. Stories that invite possibility: Choosing the class texts

I’m writing these words in the last week of August. Next week, a new school year begins. I'll meet seven new groups of students, who will mostly come in a little hesitant and eager to impress. We’ll take a few days to get to know one another, and then, we’ll begin to read together.

In the bookroom is where I usually choose this first text. It is the hardest to choose. I don’t yet know who my students are, and I don't know what they care about or might need. I want to choose something that signals that English this year will be interesting, relevant, and challenging, but not so hard that everyone can’t find their way. I want to choose something that will invite some conversation and maybe stir up some controversy, because I want them to get used to talking to one another. And I want to choose something that is about something, because I want to show them that English – at least in my class – is about reaching beyond the page and into the world of ideas, and social forces, and human context and experience.

This is difficult to achieve, especially when all I have to go by is a list of names on a class roster. Even when I get to know my classes a little better, choosing the texts we’ll read is a decision, a choice, that so much hangs on. For some teachers, there is no choice. The Grade 8s will read *The Outsiders* and the Grade 10s will read *Romeo and Juliet* and the Grade
12s will read *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. Though nothing specific is prescribed, habit endures. There are certain novels, and plays, that tend to be taught in a given grade, and the expectation that these texts will be taught comes from an understanding of English as a form of cultural initiation.

My questions about which texts we teach, and why, began when I found myself two years ago staring at the wall of books in the bookroom, saying to my colleague Robert, “I’m hoping to have some choices written by someone other than just white men”. He looked at me a bit askance, and carried on making coffee. Of the eight titles I pulled out (for a choice novel study unit), only three were written by women and all were written by people of Northern European ethnic origin (that is to say, mostly white guys, many of them rich and dead). Thinking about hooks’ (1994) concept of engaged pedagogy, of the power that flows from the body of the teacher in the room, I trundled down the hallway with my selections. I had to wonder: are we best serving adolescents by teaching what’s always been taught, whether it’s *Lord of the Flies*, or *Macbeth*, or *To Kill a Mockingbird*? If the moral and ethical concerns of a community have shifted, or a cultural context has changed to make the themes of a text less relevant, why do we continue to teach these books? In our interview, Paul spoke about ensuring that the curriculum was relevant to the struggles and questions and ways of thinking in the here and now.

The influence of the so-called canon in English classes is, of course, persistent. The list of books presently taught in my school district, in 2014, in a large and diverse first-ring suburb, does not differ much from the list of Applebee’s 1989 study of book-length works taught in American public schools. And Applebee notes that his list does not much differ
from the lists that came decades before his. Of the top ten titles taught in public schools, all but two are by men and all are by white authors (Applebee, 1989). Of Applebee’s commonly taught high school titles, eight are frequently taught in the schools I have worked in.

High school students, of course, encounter many titles beyond those in the core curricular canon, but the canon maintains supremacy in its perceived importance. Many popular library titles are written by women and members of minority groups, and students in grade eight and nine are much more likely to read books written by diverse authors and featuring diverse characters than their older counterparts. However, Applebee notes that the lists “reflect what schools explicitly value as the foundation of students’ literary experience” (p. 4). As the common titles for senior students tack towards white, male, middle-class authors, so do the suggestions of what is culturally valued.

I don’t want to suggest that classic texts ought to be excised from the schools. Most of the books on Applebee’s list are there for good reason, and it’s not meaningful to be critical of teachers just for using them. However, teaching something simply because it’s what gets taught isn’t good enough. It is tempting to claim that students should read, say, 1984, because it is a cultural touchstone, and people ought to know what an allusion to Big Brother is all about. A better reason to teach 1984 would be to ask: are its themes, so compellingly presented in the context of the Cold War, and McCarthyism, and changing technologies, still treated in way that is compelling today – in a world with Edward Snowden and Wikileaks and the NSA reading our text messages? I am not arguing against teachers choosing to teach 1984; instead, I want to suggest that teachers consider whether
the theme and context can represent something real and vital about the world as it is in 2014, and beyond.

Choosing texts well requires us teachers to draw on our experience, and knowledge of our students and contexts and communities, and a little intuition, too. If the texts are to be the boats that bear us forward through the tides and currents of human and social experience, of life and the mind, they need to be sturdy enough for us to peer over and gaze at what lies beneath, and nimble enough to pass through water that can get a little rough. The boats, too, the work of master craftspeople, are beautiful and worth beholding. But they are not propped up in a museum or trapped in a bottle – they have a purpose. I think of Martha Nussbaum’s invocation of the novel as an essential contributor to public discourse, and a just society: she says that novels can “invite their readers to put themselves in the place of people of many different kinds and take on their experiences” (1995, p. 5). Through stories from my class work and that of my participants, and research and writing that speaks to our choices, this chapter investigates how and why teachers choose the texts that they do, and offer some suggestions about how to choose stories that will invite in the moral imagination and open up the hermeneutic space that changes readers.

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Pat Clifford and Sharon Friesen (Jardine, Clifford, & Friesen, 2003) left their box of copies of I Heard the Owl Call My Name (Craven, 1973) on the floor of their classroom for awhile, letting their Grade 8 class poke at it occasionally, complaining about the prospect of having to read a novel and do all of the stuff that reading a novel can be burdened with –
response journals, chapter questions, summaries, whatever. Clifford and Friesen were steadfast, and knew they needed to read this novel together, and that they would “learn more about helping students understand that through common engagement with this book, here and in this place, we would come to know ourselves and one another differently” (p. 180).

Clifford and Friesen’s chapter is less about I Heard the Owl Call My Name and the power it eventually had over their students; it is mostly about how the novel worked on them as teachers, as people who entered a marginalized community and hoped they could make a difference in the lives of the people they met. As I read Clifford and Friesen’s words, I wanted to know: why this novel? They say it is about a young priest’s journey into a First Nations village, and they say that it is about dying (dying communities, dying ways of life), and that very little actually happens. The idea of waiting, especially, went to work on Clifford and Friesen, and the notion of endurance, and steadfastness, as gifts that could make a difference in their students’ lives as well. Their students were resistant to it. There were complaints, but Clifford and Friesen moved steadfastly forward with it, certain that they knew best what their students needed. The bulk of their narrative describes the work the story did on the teachers, themselves, how it changed them. I still wanted to know what happened first: how do teachers choose that book, the book that has transformative potential for both student and teacher?

As I moved towards a novel study unit with my own classes during the period of this study, I was more interested than Clifford and Friesen with initial buy-in and engagement, having spent up much of my class’ goodwill on the draggy Macbeth unit. I opted to give them
a choice, something that in my experience, and according to the literature, leads to greater engagement (Lenters, 2006; Reeves, 2004). Here in my research journal I documented some of my thinking about what we could study:

It is another book choice day with a Grade 11 class. Again, I’ve dug through the bookroom and pulled out four choices. Three of them are decades-old “classic” novels: Lord of the Flies, The Catcher in the Rye, and Brave New World. The fourth is The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time by Mark Haddon, a novel narrated by a fifteen-year-old autistic boy who unwinds the strife and struggle in his family. I stood there awhile and considered some other options. Should I throw in something more plot-driven, and a little easier, for my students who struggle with reading? If I offer up some of these more complex contemporary novels written by Canadian Aboriginal writers, will I be able to offer enough support to the students who are reading them, or will they just end up confused and lost? How important is it for me to offer them a chance to read these old canonical workhorses? I stood there for awhile, flipping through a yellowing copy of Of Mice and Men, and only semi-satisfied I hauled the stacks of them up from the basement to my third-floor classroom.

“Okay, this one is super famous. It’s a classic and is referred to all the time, culturally. It’s about a guy named Holden Caufield. He’s a teenager boy, I guess around your age, and he’s just gotten kicked out of his fancy private boarding school. The school principal’s going to write a letter to his parents so Holden figures he has a few days and takes off, to go hang out in New York and enjoy some freedom before his parents find out,” I told my class. “But this isn’t really a plot story. It’s really character driven, it’s really about getting inside this guy Holden’s skin and seeing the world from his perspective. He’s really cynical and disillusioned. But it’s also really funny and warm and loving. The more I read this book, the more I love it, and the more I care about Holden. Some of you will read it and love him, and some of you will hate him,” I went on. Then, I read about a page or so. This I repeated with all the books, and then they chose. Choosing is a complex negotiation. Many of them like the sound of one or two over another, and then they also weigh in what their friends are choosing. Some kids care a lot about choosing something famous, something classic. Few at first are scared off by my description of a book as something “hard”, but I know that most of the kids who choose Brave New World will be lost within a few days.

Within a few days the groups settle out into three of about the same size: Lord of the Flies, which is populated by two subgroups, the quirky, quiet, boys in the back who rarely speak, but with deadpan humour when they do, and the jocks who attend class when their ball hockey game schedule allows; The Catcher in the Rye, which is heterogeneous but with a high complement of girls who are academically competent, but make no attempt to hide the fact that they’re more interested in their social lives than school; and The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time, which is a varied group of kids who actually seem genuinely curious about the novel’s topic and theme.
[Research journal]

Lord of the Flies, The Catcher in the Rye, Brave New World: the texts I was offering were conventional. I wasn’t immune to constrictions placed by my own education, the normalizing forces at work in any English department (Smagorinsky, 1995), and what was even available. At this point, my choices tended to be guided by a fairly loose, intuitive decision-making structure: was it a text that I liked? Did I think that it would speak to my students and interest them? Was it appropriately levelled for at least some students in my class? And was it a good book?

The last question deserves some more unpacking. It was important to me that my students read what I think of as literary fiction. By literary fiction, I mean fiction that is intended to represent some aspect of the human experience in a complex and ambiguous way. It is possible to “read” just about anything – I took a senior Literature seminar with a professor whose favourite text to analyze was US Weekly – but what I care about are texts where the reading happens within, rather than around, the story. You can read, say, Alexie’s The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian (a young adult list title that is often adored by the Grade 9s who are assigned it), and ask a lot of questions about the characters and their experience with prejudice and discrimination, about their humanity and compassion, and about what really is right for these characters. There is rich terrain to explore inside the book, and few easy answers. Conversely, Collins’ The Hunger Games, a highly readable and exciting YA dystopian title, is mostly interesting because of what it shows about the culture that was captivated by it. There are interesting, if somewhat stale, observations about reality TV and repressive governments, but the characters are either noble or evil and never
in between. The Hunger Games will certainly get a kid reading, but the Alexie novel has a better chance of getting them thinking which is what I want for them in an English class.

Although my method of choosing texts was – until I started this thesis – a fairly unreflective process, I can now read into it a heuristic for making curriculum choices. Schwab, in “The Practical 3” (1973), refers to “four commonplaces” in making curricular decisions: the students, the teacher, the milieu, and the subject matter. When I think about what my students would find interesting and consider their reading abilities, I am addressing the first commonplace. When I make sure that I am choosing texts that I am excited by and care about, and have some expertise or insight into, I am addressing the second, the teacher. When I consider my students’ background knowledge, and the issues that are relevant in our community and school, I consider the milieu; when I look for texts that are Arnold’s “the best that has been thought and said” – famous works, works that are particularly important in framing a culture’s beliefs and knowledge, winners of important awards - I am considering the subject matter. Locating the works I teach within each of these commonplaces makes it more likely that the work we do in English class is relevant, challenging, and is able to speak to the moral imaginations of my students.

This heuristic went to work when Susan and I were selecting a text to study with her English 8 Honours class:

Susan and I talked a little about how we would approach the play with the girls. Susan noted that even the title, and that ugly word Shrew, could be read either with a gloss of irony, depending on how much credit you were prepared to give Shakespeare. Certainly the play itself presents the same problem: are we meant to take it at face value, or read the whole thing as a farce and critique of men’s antiquated beliefs about how women should be? We knew we wanted to find a way to ask this question to the
kids. We also agreed that one thing we liked about the play, and about the opportunity to teach it, was that it didn't offer a solution. We would be unraveling the play just as the class would be, and while perhaps we would come out with some moral absolutes (women deserve to be happy just like men do, people should respect their spouses) we would keep some real questions about the way gender gets performed in marriage and family relationships.

[Field notes]

Susan started off this unit of study knowing that she wanted her Grade 8 Honours class to read a Shakespeare play, partially because of the challenge the language would represent, partially because drama was a genre they hadn’t yet explored, and also because it would connect nicely to the historical period of the Renaissance that was an important focus of the Grade 8 Social Studies curriculum. In an early conversation, she and I discussed which of the plays might work best for her class. We were, again, restricted to what was in the bookroom. My first impulse was to suggest The Taming of the Shrew (tellingly, I had studied it in high school myself); I personally was interested in the themes of masculinity, femininity, and gender relations that are at the heart of the play. Susan also noted that there were quite a few central female characters, which might be engaging for the many girls in her class.

While the teacher’s interest was there, as was the relevance to the subject matter, the play actually wound up having less of a sense of connection to Susan’s students than we had anticipated. The play is about women who must behave in subservience to the men in their lives, and Susan and I had assumed that the issue of gender expectations would be interesting and relevant to her class, which was dominated by high-achieving girls. It turned out that in their world, gender expectations were not yet something that was relevant. Although Susan and I, as adult women, believed very much that they were, Susan had
difficulty engaging her students with the themes and lived experiences of the characters in the play. Their interests and lived experience had not yet led them to questions about the topics that *Shrew* explores. Because Susan’s students were high-achieving and cared about doing well in school, they were compliant – they read the play, completed assignments, and some were able to observe that the issues related to gender and relationships were important to Susan, and tailor their work accordingly. However, there seemed to be little sense of newness or excitement around the text. It didn’t appear to me that they were transformed or moved by the play, or were able to make meaning of it in their lives; likely, few of them will go forward with any sense of being changed by it.

**Starting with a Theme**

*When I look at what’s in the bookroom, I say to myself, This is, you know, what people teach, and I was shocked, really shocked and embarrassed for our education system that we are still teaching the same books that our parents got, learnt, when they were in school, and I thought, wow, this is really – I mean, it’s, it’s this really sad situation where tradition is determining values just by way of – you know, the sort of, well, a. because it’s traditional, b, because of the financial constraints of the school system, you know, so leading to these sort of weird situations where we’re teaching Lord of the Flies, in a world which needs a different kind of thinking ... a lot of our curriculum which is very, very much like a 1960s mentality, or a post second world war mentality...I was always trying to ask myself, how can I make this more relevant to the kids, you know, and not wanting to teach things like To Kill a Mockingbird, which is relevant to the sixties, but now, when you read it, it I think in this context is really self-congratulatory. You know, and, and not – not relevant to the contemporary struggles around those same issues in our school.*

[Paul, interview]

In our conversations, it became clear to me that Paul put a lot of work into choosing the texts that his class would use. In the year that I observed him, Paul’s teaching was organized thematically, around topics that his students would choose as ones that mattered to them in their lives. He then used the themes his students selected to guide the texts he
taught, as writers like Smagorinsky (2001) and Schnellert (2009) recommend. While Paul had aspirations of choosing themes that would be developmentally important for his students, his actual choices tended to be eclectic. During my observations, he was exploring Conspiracy Theories with his Grade 8 class, and Drugs with his Grade 11 classes.

Paul was himself a prodigious reader with eclectic taste, and drew on everything from the contents of the school bookroom, to the literary periodicals that filled the shelves of his classroom, to Internet sources and films and books of all kinds. He told me often how he relished pulling together the texts and anthologies that his class would use to explore and deepen their understanding of their chosen theme. He appeared to me to be fairly experimental in his choice of texts. More than once he referred to attempting to teach texts that were too complex for his students, or just didn’t quite work, and he brought in artefacts from pop culture as texts, videos or comics or articles that he thought were interesting, or funny, or worth sharing. Since Paul’s classroom philosophy was very student-centred, he believed that ideally his students would be choosing the texts they would read, but in doing so ran into difficulties:

the challenge has been that, okay, the next step would be in them generating the texts. So what are we actually gonna study. Now, I’m really good at finding this stuff. And, um, because I’ve got access to all these libraries, and I’ve got the research skills and stuff, and but more importantly what I have is the ability to, the ability to tell the difference between, you know, quality writing and hackery, which is what I get from them a lot if I say go find me a text on this issue, they come back with – they will often come back with these essay mill essays, you know what I mean? Like, from like TermPaper.com, some, some stupid paper about abortion, or like, or some amateur poem, like you write, you know, like a poem about whatever, you will not find any published poetry. You will find, you know, gigabytes of really really bad amateur poetry on the Internet. So you know, it kind of created this problem where I didn’t – I, I felt like it was important that, you know, we be for the sake of how the class runs and the sake of respect for the field (laughs) that we be looking at things of a certain
quality. So I’ve kind of, like, I’ve taken a lot of that responsibility on myself which is a lot of work.
[Paul, interview]

Although Paul repeated over and again that finding the texts that he wanted to teach was a lot of work, it was obvious that it was work that he took a great deal of pleasure in, and was keen to discuss and show me. And while he suggests above that quality was important to him, he was also willing, just like my *US Weekly*-loving professor, to teach texts that were interesting because of the commentary they could invite. He was unafraid to include texts that fell outside of the parameters of what would usually be done in school, such as texts that were popular, or included violence, profanity, or depictions of sexuality. In his class there was little divide between the sorts of texts one encounters in school, and texts that you encounter in the world – both provided good fodder for thinking and learning. Most important to Paul in his choices, it seemed, were the texts’ ability to mediate the theme the class had chosen.

Occasionally this aspect of Paul’s teaching confounded me. For instance, his Grade 8 class, during the span of my observations, watched the 2009 film *Angels and Demons*, a high-budget Tom Hanks production about the secret society Illuminati and their infiltration of the Vatican conclave. While the film’s hyperbolic plot clearly related to their unit topic, conspiracy theories, it was still taking up time and attention in English class that – I felt – might’ve been better served by a more complex text that demanded some interpretive work. I think in this context of Vygotsky’s claim (1978) that a child’s playthings ought to have high affordances: that is, they should be places and objects that demand and support an inventive imagination. A stick and a refrigerator box comes to mind, or the kind of Lego
that I grew up playing with, a large set of blocks of various sizes, shapes and colours that my sister and I used to construct palaces, space colonies, and abstract forms. *Angels and Demons*, to me, resembles more the Lego you see sold today, of elaborate spaceships or film sets that require you to closely follow instructions to reproduce the illustration on the box. It leaves little to the creative imagination.

In some schools I have worked in, I have had colleagues who assigned the book *Tuesdays with Morrie*, by Mitch Albom, to their senior students as a novel study. I am not sure how to classify this book – distressingly, Amazon.com refers to it as a “non-fiction novel”, and other sources call it a memoir – so I suppose “book” will have to do. *Tuesdays with Morrie* tells the story of Mitch Albom’s relationship with his beloved college professor Morrie, who had encouraged Albom towards a creative life, eschewing corporate ambition and material gain. In his late 30s, Albom, having ambitiously pursued a career in sports journalism, reunites with Morrie, who is dying of ALS. The bulk of the book is the advice that Morrie gives Albom over a series of weekly visits, about work, love, family, happiness. Here I will resist the temptation to denigrate the book and instead point out that it cannot be read interpretively any more than the owner’s manual for my Toyota Echo can. The New York Times reviewer wrote, of it,

To be told that we should think more of love and less of money is no doubt correct, but it’s hard to put such advice into practice unless it is accompanied by some understanding of why we ever did otherwise. Because Albom fails to achieve any real insight into his own previously less-than-exemplary life, it’s difficult for the reader to trust in his spiritual transformation. (de Botton, 1997).

What is going on here? When I speculate about why my colleagues are teaching this book in a literature class, I come away unsatisfied. It is short, and an easy read, and
probably elicits less complaining than a longer, more complex work would. More importantly, it speaks to the issues that teenagers care about: how should I live my life? How can I be a good person, and also a happy person? Yet while Morrie offers some platitudes, some ideas, they are just that – statements that haven't had to hold up anything difficult or real. The narrator – Albom – doesn't meaningfully struggle with how he went astray; he hears Morrie and then seems to shifts his life accordingly; Morrie is only virtue, so readers don't need to interpret their actions and sit with them through the contradiction, confusion, and ambiguity that is life. The imagination is not invited in – Tuesdays with Morrie tells you how to live just like the Lego Star Wars Imperial Destroyer set tells you how to play.

A novel I mentioned earlier, Alexie's The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian (2007), tells the story of Junior, a 14 year old Spokane Indian who decides to leave his reservation school to attend high school in a rich, white town. Junior's family is loving but troubled, insightful but depressed. His community is his – but he is beaten up, belittled, and isolated for being different. Junior is torn between his loyalties to home and his knowledge that "Indians were drunk and sad and displaced and crazy and mean, but, dang, [they] knew how to laugh" (p. 166), and the life of hope that unfolds for him when he leaves the reservation. The novel also asks questions about how to live: what does loyalty mean? Is it okay to leave behind one's family and community, in search of something better? Why are some people successful and others failures? Alexie gives some answers in his double impeachment of a United States that systemically destroyed a culture, and the culture that then turned on itself through alcohol, isolation, and violence. But he doesn't answer the individual questions – as readers, we walk with Junior as he tries to figure out how he can
honour his family and community, and also himself. The novel is funny and sad and remarkably engaging, and it demands interpretation and imagination. It is the kind of story that has high affordances, that invites real dialogue, and opens up the space beyond the reader and into the realm just beyond.

And here is where the Lego metaphor falls short. Lego, like literature, has several purposes. It's fun to play with. Often it exercises the imagination (that old-school Lego that I grew up with, or when you change the given plans to fit your purposes). But Lego is a toy, a play material, and literature is art; literacy “suggests an opening of spaces, an end to submergence, a consciousness of the right to ask why” (Greene, 1995, p. 25). What I am suggesting is that in the hands of a good teacher, Tuesdays with Morrie or Angels and Demons might open up some interesting conversations, and give us a chance to think about how people tell us to live (in reading the former) or why people are so quick to call conspiracy on something that they don’t understand (the latter). What they are less able to do is to cast a reader into the empathetic world of the other, and into the realm of possibility. Critical readings of popular texts encourage critical thinking and conversation. Art does those things, too, but it is generative. It invites us to consider possibilities and create something, ourselves – art's creative potential being the subject to which this thesis soon turns.

During the first trip into the bookroom that I wrote about, I was mainly concerned with which voices were being heard and legitimized in my classroom. I’m still concerned about it. I’m working on bringing in more diverse voices, but I’m not there yet. It’s a couple of years later, now, and I still spend a lot of time standing in bookrooms scrutinizing
shelves. I ask: what will expand my students’ understanding of themselves, of the world?

What do they need? What can I pass to them that will speak to who they are and the work they will do in the world?
Chapter 7. Waverings, questions, and play: Making meaning of the texts

In Back to the Basics of Teaching and Learning, Friesen and Clifford are convinced that their students needed to read I Heard the Owl Call My Name: that it will speak to who they are, and the work they will need to do in their worlds. Inspired by Sumara's idea of the commonplace text (1995), Friesen and Clifford read the book out loud with their students, together, accepting the sense of being lost, and waiting for the class to find its way. Rejecting the sorts of activities that are seen all too often in English classes - “grotesque certainties of worksheet questions that treat the landscape of text as inalterably given” (Jardine, Friesen, & Clifford, 2003, p. 183) – they wanted students to:

experience the ways in which small details and large events could speak directly and powerfully to them, not as what they were, Grade 8 students in our classroom, but as who they were: diverse, unique individuals bound together in a web of relationships created through the work that we did with one another. (p. 183)

Friesen and Clifford offer some glimpses into what they actually did, but what went on in the everyday life of their classroom is obscured, or, at least not really the focus of their chapter. Their intention resonates with mine, but I wanted to know – thinking back to Azim’s statement – how do you, in what can be the routine grind of the classroom, really get there? How do teachers invite students into the practice of serious reading? How can teachers mediate interpretation, so that a student makes her own meaning, but meaning that makes sense within the contours of the text? And how, ultimately, can teachers help
students open up "the imaginative capacity that allows us also to experience empathy with different points of view, even with interests apparently at odds with ours" (Greene, 1995, p. 31).

"Start where they are" is an old workhorse axiom that ricochets off the walls at workshops and conferences, and echoes around in books until it reaches department meetings and staff rooms. What teachers (and administrators, and program consultants) generally mean by it is that teachers ought to start their exploration of a subject or text in a place with some kind of concrete connection to what we know of their interests and experiences. For example: why not begin a study of Romeo and Juliet with a discussion of some ill-fated Hollywood romance? Or their beliefs about what a good relationship looks like (Wilhelm, 2007)? This way, the thinking goes, students will have a natural engagement in the topic or text, and remain engaged as the learning goes on, now that they can see how it is relevant to them in their lives. The intention is commendable, but the suggestion that students are most interested in celebrity culture, or each other's opinions on a topic they have little experience with, can lower the level of discourse. "Starting where they are" is something, but the purpose of an education is to move them further along, and show them that Romeo and Juliet is, in fact, a more robust and interesting story than the tabloid rag. More importantly, while opinions will vary, Romeo and Juliet is about more than just a love story. Woven into it are many themes, and an effective teacher should open up those possibilities.

In this section, I attempt to show what went on in Susan's class, Paul's, and my own, as we lived through the every day routines of school. I discuss how we attempted to engage
our students, and then tried to increase their understanding of the world through dialogue, conceptual frames, and opportunities to respond personally and creatively. I consider how teachers can use literature as a way to transport oneself outside and beyond one’s immediate experiences, how it can speak directly to whom one is and even change one’s understanding of the world.

At the beginning

it also tied in with this idea from –this idea from Paulo Freire, which was, you know, about education being a way of helping students to transform the world, and the idea of like, starting where they’re at, and their concepts, so basically I sort of came up with this, with the idea that really, the students should be directing. I should allow the students to direct the content, you know the thematic content for those reasons because a. that is what people, what real people have to do, you know, b. it makes it, it's a way of making sure that it's relevant to them and not – it's not an expression of my dominance in class, right, me saying, this is what's important, this is what you need to learn. Which is not the way that literature works.

[Paul, interview]

Guiding Paul’s classroom practice was Freire’s idea of education as a way to transform the world, and how literacy could transform one’s conception of the world. Paul was also clearly affected by Freire’s (1970) warnings about the “banking” concept of education, wherein the teacher is transmitter and students are receivers, a practice that is repeatedly criticized, but difficult not to fall into (Smagorinsky et. al, 2004). One way he worked to resist that model was to have his students determine the topic, or theme, they would use literature to investigate. He describes his process below:

I get them to generate the topic, something you know universal, something, well, universal or something that answers the question What Matters. That’s what I always come back to – what matters. And so, you know, quite often, so you get this social justice kind of answers, like race and poverty, and then you get you know like more universal things like friendship and family, and then other things that are just like well this would be fun, like zombies, or, adventure.
[Paul, interview]

Before he had selected the texts, before the students had a chance to see or hear about what they would read, together, Paul and his students would choose a theme, or in his words, topic, to explore. Then they would look at what they already knew about the topic, and what questions they had, to form a conceptual framework to work from. Of course, Paul’s students’ concerns were different from Freire’s favela workers. Nevertheless, he took their concerns seriously, transcribing them word for word and using them to frame the unit of study. Questions about drugs and addiction – his English 11 unit that I observed, one that signalled Paul’s willingness to resist expectations of what doing English should look like – included:

- Which drug is most addictive?
- Why do certain people take drugs even when they know it’s bad?
- How prevalent is drug use?
- What classifies someone as an addict?

These questions seem authentic, like they are really some of the questions and concerns that a population of sixteen and seventeen year olds might have at the time in their lives when they may be experimenting recreationally with drugs, or using them more seriously, or feeling concerned, left out, or simply sensitive to the conversations about drug use that permeate popular and high school culture. Paul’s willingness to humanize the questions that are taken on schools, but sanitized, likely signalled to his students that something unusual was going on here – something worth paying attention to. And while Paul also asked his students to think about what they already knew about their topic of
study, he put more time and energy into generating questions, questions that he would return to at various points in the unit. It was important to him that these beginning steps be a starting place, and be the foundations of an inquiry that could be applied to the texts they would read together. Paul, in attending to the questions his students had, opened a space where what it meant to use drugs could be discussed. The topic could enter the moral imagination, as Paul’s students’ questions led them to learn about the social context of drug use, empathize with people like Evelyn Lau (1989), and challenge their preconceptions. Paul was also willing to say when he didn’t have answers, and was willing to narrate for his students how his own experience and understanding buttressed each other, and how for him, meaning unfolded.

Paul’s approach was markedly different from Clifford and Friesen’s, whose account opened this chapter. They taught a book that garnered quite a lot of resistance, on a topic that they thought their students needed to uncover and be given a chance to talk about, while Paul brought in texts about topics that his students wanted to understand better. Certainly Paul’s approach brought about more immediate engagement, but whether his approach invited in more possibility and understanding, is more difficult to resolve.

**Starting with Dialogue**

Like Paul’s class, Susan also started by uncovering what her students already knew. The topic was relationships between men and women, and boys and girls, and Susan had selected it because she thought it was important to the text they were about to begin studying, Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew*. Susan (and I) believed it would be
interesting to her class, and it was also a topic that she believed was important to learn and think about critically. The activity she began the unit of study with, often called Four Corners, is a fairly common one in discussion-focused high school classes. In it, the teacher makes a values-based statement and the students position themselves in the room based on whether they strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree. Because it requires students to move around, talk to one another, and state their opinions, this activity can lead to some rich and engaged discussions. It can also be dominated by a few outspoken students, or poorly worded questions can invite confusion, or a large cluster of students all standing in the same place.

*We had already spent time discussing how we could transform a play about marital roles and relationships into something that this class could access and understand, given their relative lack of experience. Her class is mostly girls, and since it was an advanced-tracked course, her girls would probably have experienced a lot of success academically. Most of them were probably raised being told that girls can do anything boys could, and probably in most of their elementary classrooms, boys outperformed the girls. We thought, going in, that these girls would probably see feminism and gender equity as struggles that no longer applied to them in their lives.*

*Susan and I, as adult women, knew differently.*

[Field notes]

Susan and I agreed to start the unit by trying to talk about some of the gender expectations that to tend to shape the lives of girls and boys, men and women. We came up with a series of prompts about roles and expectations for men and women, especially as they related to romantic relationships, like “Men should take the lead in pursuing women” and “in order to have a good relationship, you will need to compromise your values significantly”.

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As we facilitated the conversation, I was surprised by how little the students had to say about the topics, and how much they looked to one another for cues about what an appropriate response might be. Although Susan began the discussion with the suggestion that they relate the responses to experiences they’d had and also to what they knew of the events of the play so far, student responses tended to be fairly straightforward and opinion-based, rather than relying on evidence or ideas from the text.

At one point Susan shifted the class from a fairly uninspired discussion about whether men, or women, ought to take the lead in romantic pursuit, into a question of whether boys expected to propose to women, when the time came, and whether the girls in the class expected they be proposed to. From one moment to the next, what had been a cluster of neutral responses became a large, loud response and reaction, as they shoved aside furniture to realign themselves in the room, clustering in the corner under Susan’s hastily hand-drawn “Agree” sign. Although they claimed to be indifferent towards who might make an initial approach, boys expected to propose marriage and girls expected to receive a proposal. The changes in the reaction from the previous moment, to this one, revealed both to Susan and I how bound up in cultural expectations these Grade 8s really were, when the stakes were high enough. Yet the students themselves seemed nonplussed. In one (male) student’s perspective:

*I guess the perception is that there’s equality in asking people out, but when it goes to being committed, to show that you love someone, it goes to the male, I don’t know, but there’s a perception that males are the breadwinners... a perception that women should stay home with the kids, but there’s still the perception that the male should propose, and there are some things you can’t really change*
In low-stakes ventures (asking people out), women and men had reached equality, this student ventured. But when it came to the bigger things – breadwinning, childcare, marriage proposals, his views were remarkably conservative. While there were some spirited assertions made earlier in the discussion regarding women’s abilities at work and in school, the final statement that this student made – “there are some things you can’t really change” – seemed to be echoed generally in the discussion. The young man whose words I quoted seemed to resonate with the class, and he went unchallenged. Could these attitudes be examined through a study of *The Taming of the Shrew*? What could Susan do, or I, to invite in the imaginative capacity to shift to a world where things *can* be changed?

When I consider whether this kind of open-ended discussion is a useful entry point to a text, I do respond with a measured yes, because it can incite interest and thinking about topics that the teacher has identified as important. It gives a class space to dig into issues and topics that relate to them, in their lives, and can provide them with a bridge into the thematic concerns of the text. But without continuing to return to those places, without attending to openings and shifts, we only start with the first opinion, maybe an uninformed opinion, and remain there, unless there is really grounds for a student to reconsider and look again. In the *Shrew* discussion, students made statements, and while Susan or I would ask follow-up questions, or clarify, neither of us – when I listen to the audio recording – really pressed or challenged our students on their beliefs. Neither of us challenged that statement, “there are some things you can’t really change”. Now, I wish a little that we had, instead of just hoping there might be a student in the conversation who was willing to push back. How do you hold space for student voices, while also showing them that this, here, today, is a time for us to go beyond what we believe to be always and already true? Does a
teacher’s dissenting opinion open up a ZPD or does it just end the conversation? If we are going to avoid instructing values directly (Noddings, 2002), we need to find ways for our students to explore, reflect, and challenge their values through encountering and creating stories.

**Making meaning: teachers guiding the interpretive process**

I want them to waterski
across the surface of a poem
waving at the author’s name on the shore.

But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.

They begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means.
(Collins, 1988)

When I read Collins’ poem, I can’t help but think of all the doing of my own English classes growing up, except for Mr. Murray’s freewheeling, associative lessons. I remember long lists of comprehension questions, and incomprehensible plot diagrams. Then I flash forward to my first teaching job and remember finding in the photocopier a legal-sized poetry analysis worksheet that touted a “helpful” acronym like TPPCAST, each letter standing for some dull technique like paraphrasing every line in the poem, and then, somewhere in there, stating the theme in a single declarative sentence. While Collins has said that the “they” of his poems are college students, I can’t help but note that the torturers learned their technique, somewhere. Reading poetry is difficult, and teaching the reading of poetry is difficult, and I can’t fault teachers for looking for tools. However, tools that reduce
understanding to a set of prescribed exercises, that deny the abundance and possibility of a text (Jardine, Friesen, & Clifford, 2006), will never help to open up imaginative possibilities.

Learning how to guide a discussion and interpretation of literature, without dominating or directing how students understand a text, is difficult for teachers. Many of us proclaim that we value open discussions, but we tend to prefer interpretations that line up with our own, or even insist on them (Miller, 2003). Certainly there is incentive, too, for students to figure out what the teacher thinks and parrot it back to her (Applebee, 1996). At its worst, this sort of classroom dynamic once more resembles Freire’s (1998) banking concept, where teachers possess authoritative knowledge and dole it out to acquiescent students. Further, teachers most likely were educated in a system where they were expected to learn the “right” version, or to memorize facts and events about the text (Applebee, 1996). Rosenblatt’s reader response theory (1978), which positions students in a more active role and was a central theory espoused in my own training as an English teacher, is effectively undercut by standardized tests (including the BC provincial exams) that emphasize one correct version.

These conditions mean a perplexing situation for teachers who want to teach students how to do literary interpretation for themselves, especially literary interpretation focused on uncovering the moral relevance of a text. There is, of course, the option of leaving students to their own devices, by adopting an entirely project-based curriculum or only using literature circles (Daniels, 1992). “Leaving students to their own devices” today, though, tends to mean leaving students to the clutches of Wikipedia pages and Coles Notes, all ready to explain what a work of fiction is “trying to say”. Avoiding teaching
interpretation out of fears of domination and indoctrination doesn’t necessarily produce independent thinkers. Doing interpretation requires that a text be difficult, that there is something that the reader cannot initially grasp; and just as many of us begin to learn to read by sitting in the lap of a parent or older sibling and listening to them translate the shapes of words into story, many of us learn to interpret by listening to a more capable reader describe how she came to understand a story.

This then is the work Paul, Susan and I found ourselves doing, looking for ways to empower and guide students to read literature skilfully, and for themselves. There is ample research support for dialogue, discussion, and conversation as an effective teaching method in English (Applebee, 2004; Miller, 2003; Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991); dialogue and discussion offer students experiences with exploratory talk, talk that helps them to think through things that matter to them (Smagorinsky, 2002). This section describes how Paul, Susan, and I used dialogue, the practice of sharing perspectives in a reciprocal, generous way, to partner with our students in making meaning, and ends with a discussion of how a dialogic style might assist with the foundational task of moral education, understanding of others beyond the self.

*What happened to Sly?*

On a hot day at the end of May, I sat in the back corner of the room while Susan read the end of *The Taming of the Shrew* with her Grade 8 class. Her students sat in rows, in pairs; they were quiet but the mood was more sleepy than attentive, and some of them doodled in the margins of their notebooks or snuck glances at their phones beneath their
desks. She had assigned roles to student volunteers who read the parts, and Susan came in regularly to ask questions, clarify meanings, and offer her reactions. This sort of teaching is common in teaching Shakespeare, as the Elizabethan English presents a significant barrier to most readers. In the final scene of Shrew, Petruchio brags to the other men about how obedient Kate has become; to demonstrate, each man calls his wife to come to him. Kate, who arrives first, is called on to deliver a speech on a wife’s duties to her husband, which she prettily delivers. Shakespeare’s own intentions behind Kate’s reformation are, of course, unknown, but a contemporary reader might regard Kate as a broken woman, suffering from an abuser’s Stockholm syndrome, or as a bright woman who has learned how to manipulate her husband to get the kind of life she wants.

Susan offered both possibilities to her students, but made it clear that she preferred the second interpretation, and that it aligned better with her values. As her class read the play together, she tended to pause when something particularly egregious happened, and after the first time Kate refuses to come to Petruchio’s call, she asked the class, ”When Kate wouldn’t come, did you have a little hope – that Petruchio would do what? Hope that Petruchio would bend to her will for once? I did.” After she spoke, several students nodded, but it was the type of question that reflected Susan’s understanding and response, rather than inviting theirs. Later, in her speech Kate says,

A woman mov’d is like a fountain troubled—
Muddy, ill-seeming, thick, bereft of beauty;
And while it is so, none so dry or thirsty
Will deign to sip or touch one drop of it. (V, ii, 144-147)
Susan took the time to explain the metaphor, asking her class, “How are women, according to her? Give me some adjectives.” This question sought to check reading comprehension, rather than response and interpretation, and the class was quiet, as if they were participating in something they did not quite understand – which in a way, was true. In my field notes I scribbled down: Is it obvious to the kids that this is totally nuts? Antiquated. What do they make of it as a contemporary audience that has experienced third-wave feminism?

When I spoke in smaller groups to some of the students, it seemed like, to me, the discussion was indeed irrelevant to them. They acknowledged that women in the developing world lacked the opportunities they took for granted, and that women’s lives were seen as less valuable in Shakespeare’s time, too, but they had little sense of how the events of the play meaningfully connected to their lives. Despite Susan’s attempts to dialogue with her students and demonstrate her process of meaning-making, the discussion seemed to stagnate. Later she said to me that they had been unusually sluggish: it was the end of the school year, and it was hot and sunny. They were interested in aspects of the play – when it ends, Shakespeare never catches up again with Christopher Sly, the protagonist of Shrew’s frame story. There was a flurry of interest in what happened to Sly – why he had just evaporated from the narrative – but less in the fate of Kate, Bianca, and their husbands.

Could there have been a way to engage Susan’s class, with dialogue, to capture their fascination with the lives and experiences with the people of The Taming of the Shrew? It was late in the school year – I think of Clifford and Friesen, waiting (2003). There wasn’t that kind of time. The gap between Kate, Bianca, Petruchio, and the kids at Northwoods
remained that – a gap for now, at least. Perhaps Susan planted something that will
germinate after some time.

**Co-Constructed and Emergent Understandings: Dialoguing The Catcher in the Rye**

The first time I offered *The Catcher in the Rye* as a choice in a novel study unit, Jun, a tough, hyperkinetic kid from a working-class immigrant family, picked it up. He was charismatic, often slipped out of class to go see some girl in the French teacher’s room, came in to my English 11 class claiming that he hadn’t read a book in three years. Jun finished *The Catcher in the Rye*, and swallowed it well ahead of schedule, telling me, “I just got it, you know, not wanting to grow up”. Despite the superficial differences between Jun and Holden, that a book could name his fear at having to leave the enclosure of youth was a revelation.

Kids who are already readers, or who possess an assuredness about themselves, also find *Catcher* moving, and meaningful. But there’s something more special about the non-readers reading *Catcher*. They haven’t had a book speak clearly about what is inside of them before. Reading *Catcher* is an intimate experience. For that reason I’ve never taught it as a full-class novel, and don’t think I ever will. As groups of my students read it, I read it and think about it again, and for me it has been a reliably fecund location for my own thoughts about the nature of literature.

*What has changed, as I’ve taught The Catcher in the Rye, is my experience with it. As I’ve read and re-read, created worksheets and eavesdropped on conversations, graded essays and coached kids through response journals, I’ve become more intimately involved in the story. What I see now is, as the New Yorker put it, “a story about a boy whose little brother had died” (Menard, 2001). Holden was only 13 when Allie died. His older brother, D.B., would have been old enough to participate in the adult rituals of*
death, to sit in on the conversations and understand them. Little Phoebe would have been young enough to be seen as a child, and to be given special care. Holden, though, slept out in the garage, where he smashed the windows and broke his hand. “They were going to have me psychoanalyzed,” he said, but they never did. Somewhere between childhood and adolescence, Holden was forgotten, and let down by adults, by doctors who might’ve promised cures, by his grief-stricken parents. Now all he can see are adults who fail to keep their promises. Mr. Antolini, the only adult to pick up James Castle’s body, drunkenly tousles Holden’s hair in affection, and Holden takes him for a child molester and runs out, allowing him to discount Antolini’s advice for him – that following the path he is, he’s setting himself up for a terrible fall; that to lead a satisfying life, he needs to choose a path, become educated, and follow it relentlessly but humbly.

Anyway, what I am trying to say, is that it has taken me years of teaching the thing to get to this point. I think I only arrived at it in May sometime. I think it is an incredible book, and rich and deep and complex and funny and everything else good that you can say about a novel.

So the question I am left with is: if it took me, with my degrees and professional credentials, so long to get to this point, what chance do they possibly have?

And another question: if I tell them what I have discovered, will that change them, too? The question that underlies this whole project is, I suppose, how do you help people have transformative experiences with fiction? How do you get them to first read Catcher as a funny, touching story about a cynical boy who is very fond of his little sister, and then read it as a deeply human exploration of what it means to engage genuinely with the world, what it means to try and live, when little boys die for no reason? It might seem a little hysterical to suggest The Catcher in the Rye as cure for existential despair, but it also might not be.

[Research Journal]

Like many canonical high-school texts, Catcher is loved by many and reviled by many. I offer it as a choice rather than a requirement, just as I do Golding’s Lord of the Flies, and although I often offer both as selections during a novel study unit, the types of teaching that each of those novels requires is so different. Lord of the Flies demands an explication of an allegory, a good knowledge of the historical context, and holds up well to standard classroom activities like making lists of symbols and their meanings. The characters are more typologies than portraits and can be discussed in terms of their philosophical orientations. To understand Holden Caulfield, I think, you really just have to be a human
being who has felt lonely, who has felt different, who feels like the only real person walking around in the world. *The Catcher in the Rye*, it seems to me, is best experienced as a story that juxtaposes Holden’s inner life with one’s own. If we can empathetically understand some of Holden’s blind spots, his misunderstandings, his complexity, perhaps we can begin to glimpse into our own, or see the ocean of hope, of insecurity, of life behind each face.

Robert Case writes about his encounter with a young woman who, after reading *Catcher*, has learned “The world has lots of phonies, and when you finish *Catcher in the Rye*, you can spot them better” (p. 41). She goes on to describe her wealthy uncle, with whom a schism has opened up between him and the rest of the family. Case and his wife continue to dialogue with the student, who has also been studying *Pride and Prejudice* (you get the sense that the Cases see the Austen as a more morally useful book, especially in an America caught up in the crisis of segregation and integration, especially because in 1963 they probably read the book as too new and the Austen as a classic). Through that dialogue, the student comes to see that prejudice operates in multiple directions. It is this kind of treatment that I believe is most effective with Salinger: the efforts the student takes, supported but not transmitted by the teacher, can also help him or her to better understand ourselves and the people around us. The teacher’s work is to participate in this process herself, as a “partner of the student” (Freire, 1998, p. 70).

With the *Catcher in the Rye* group, my teaching had been fairly hands-off. There were three simultaneous novel studies going on in room at the same time, three circles of kids clustered together under the window, or out in the hallway, and it was also the second half of the course – I thought it was time that they applied their skills more independently.
As I went from group to group I’d catch snatches of dialogue, sometimes summary of story events, often one kid explaining something to another, and just as often, most frustratingly, it would be discussion about something else altogether. I didn’t really want to give them assignments, or pieces of work to produce for the end of a session, but in order to keep them discussing the book or at least ideas that were related, I sometimes had them complete a task like choosing important quotes or coming up with lists of open-ended questions about the book, or reflecting on emerging themes. I would circulate and join a group for a period of time, just listening or chiming in or asking for a summary of what had been discussed, if I’d caught them off topic or simply sitting together silently (as, unfortunately, I often did). While there were capable students in the group, they weren’t very academically motivated, and tended to think they were finished after a cursory, shallow discussion; consequently, what I’d hoped to be dialogue often quickly morphed into monologue on my arrival. This was especially frustrating for me because one of the pleasures of teaching, and of life, really, is a generative, sprawling conversation, the kind of talk that invites curiosity and imagination. Dialogue of this kind, flexible, responsive, situational, can help students to generate a better understanding of themselves as people who can make moral choices and behave with compassion and empathy, and my students were refusing to make an effort to participate in it.

This lack of substantive dialogue in a novel study was a little unusual, among classes that I’d taught. Take, for example, this transcript from a small-group discussion between several of my Grade 8 students, as they discuss Bacigalupi’s *Shipbreaker* (2010):

*Cassie: Okay, I have another question for you. Tool. I know he’s dead, but like how did he, like, become? Like, how is he not, like, one of those evil half-men?*
Mark: Half-men are not necessarily evil –

Cassie: Okay, okay. Trained to be evil.

Mark: They’re not trained to be –

Cassie: OK. How is he, like, different from the rest?

Nathan: What happened was, they like accidentally, like made him smarter than the rest, and so

Mark: He realized he does have the capability of independence.

This dialogue, fairly typical of their interests and interpretive skills, was conducted outside of my supervision. That I was rarely able to elicit this kind of a dialogue with my Grade 11 students was a source of regular frustration to me, and became a problem that I had to address with more teacher-directed work, like supplementary readings, or choosing quotes to discuss and analyze. I noticed quickly how much these incursions affected their reading experiences. In essays, and conversations, the quotes I chose were referenced frequently, and many cited the article “Holden at Fifty” (Menard, 2001) as influential in how they understood Holden.

Friesen and Clifford, and the teachers in Miller’s (2003) study, had sat together with their students, as a whole class, and dialogued about the book they were reading. I had created three self-elected groups in the hopes of raising interest, and moved between them; I wasn’t sure whether my choice had given my students more opportunity to imaginatively engage with the novel’s themes and topics, or whether it meant they just weren’t getting
enough support and instruction to see how the story could mean something to them, as people and not just as English 11 students. I got a glimmer of insight when, towards the end of the unit, I met with each student to discuss their responses to the book. Here’s text from the explanatory handout:

Interviews will take place this week from Tuesday-Friday. Be prepared to have an informal discussion with me about the book. I will be prepared to interview you but to get an A it needs to be a conversation (you bring up points, ask questions, etc). I’m interested in seeing:

- Your ability to talk about the themes of the novel, and what it has to say about life and the world
- Your familiarity with specific events and why they matter to the bigger picture
- Your ability to communicate orally about a novel, and to speak with confidence but also be comfortable with not having all the answers

[Classroom artefact]

Although these interviews were part of the end-of-unit assessment, they were also my best opportunity to actually participate in dialogue with my students, and respond to the ideas they were generating, allowing for spontaneous, supported development of ideas in a way that is much more emergent than a comment on the margin of an essay.

Functioning at its best, I believed it generated a supportive space to go beyond what the student could, or would, do on her own (Miller, 2003).

Maria and Lily chose to do their interview together. Both were sometimes disposed to socialize over classwork, but were on the whole strong students who were fairly comfortable talking about their ideas, although both admitted to being nervous before we got started. The three of us sat at a desk I’d carried into the hallway, while the rest of the class worked on a writing assignment inside the classroom. We were across the hallway
from the girls’ bathroom, and the hand dryers continuously interrupted our conversation, as did the procession of teachers, administrators, and students down the hallway. Despite the distractions, almost every conversation I had in this setting felt genuine and interesting, especially once the student I was speaking with relaxed and stopped trying to perform a role. In my conversation with Maria and Lily, one of the first topics that came up was oriented around the ways Maria and Lily felt they could relate to Holden:

Alison: So I just want to start off with, what did you think of the book overall? Did you like it? Did you not?

Maria: Honestly, in the first half of the book, I didn’t get into it, to be honest.

Alison: Yes, be honest.

Maria: But as the book progressed, it was a little more – it was more entertaining, I felt like it was a little more, like, relatable, and um, readable – well, not too relatable, because my life is very different from his, but it was just a little more went on, and you kind of got [inaudible]

Alison: I’m curious – I’m just going to pursue that a little, because you said relatable, and of course, like, [responds to distraction in the classroom] – of course your life is super different in many many many ways, and you’re a very different person from Holden, but despite that, is there something relatable there? Like, when you say it’s relatable?

Maria: I feel like, one part of it being, like, similarities in age, maybe kind of experience, not the same things, but we kind of go through the same parts of our lives, like, we struggle with school, we struggle with the outside world, or, like, progressing into adulthood, so that part of it was relatable.

Alison: I find Holden super relatable, as well, still. Absolutely, very much.

Maria: Which parts of him do you find relatable?
Alison: Um, I think his sort of, like, quest for wanting things to be really genuine and real. And feeling like a lot of what goes on in the world is people just acting like in ways they think they should. Or, um, yeah. Or maybe sort of not relatable, but sympathetic in some ways, or maybe it’s a little bit of both, like I just feel like –

Maria: Because sometimes the extent he goes to is a little out there, like I would question people being phonies and whatnot as well, but sometimes not to the point that he would, but yeah.

Lily: He like rips into them.

Alison: And too, yeah, like I’ve sat around in those, like, parties, and stuff, and he’s had sort of exposure to – especially through his brother – to people who are a little bit older than him, too, and those like – those kind of like guys who like, go to, you know, those guys who are from rich families, who just feel like they have every advantage in the world,

Alison: Lily, what did you think of the book?

Lily: I was going to say, the beginning was more relatable for me, not like in terms of me as an individual, because we see the parts where Holden was like talking about, obviously, like, I feel like he has the same perspective for things, like he’s the same age, so it’s like, like even when Jane and Stradlater had that kind of really casual kind of relationship, he like couldn’t grasp that and I feel like, like some of my peers – like I don’t understand how that works either.

Lily and Maria tended to use “relating” when they spoke about the moments when they wanted to comment on his thoughts and actions that resonated with them. These moments of relating were when they saw him as fully realized and human – the moments that gave them access to the landscape of consciousness (Bruner, 1996). This is part of moral education because moral education is about being able to understand people who are not us, people who are not like us, as wholly human and capable of feeling as complexly as
we do. Especially in high school, where so much depends on how you look and what you wear, who you hang out with, the sports you play and the grades you get (a system that Lily and Maria seemed quite successful in), to really see someone else’s insecurities and vulnerabilities is no small thing. Likely this is why so many teenagers feel such a strong connection to Holden. They see themselves in him.

As the discussion continued, Maria and Lily began to speak about one of the important conflicts that Holden faces, how he clings to the idealism and innocence of children, while wanting the freedom and fun of adulthood. As Grade 11 students preparing for their final year of high school, and watching some of their friends graduate, growing up was clearly on both of their minds. In our dialogue, they reflect on this theme:

*Lily:* Yeah. he wants his, [inaudible], but he has his, he’s like dipping his toe in the water because he has his chance with that prostitute, and he could’ve full out – he could’ve slept with that prostitute, but he didn’t because he wants to – I feel like he cherishes his innocence, like his childhood more – I’m writing about that in my essay – because, like he looks up to Allie because he died in his childhood and in a god-like and that’s what he cherishes. Like he looks down upon DB because of his life. He goes to Hollywood, he’s partying, like he’s doing all of that.

*Alison:* Yes, yeah,

*Lily:* and I don’t know if that makes sense, but that kind of caught me in the beginning.

*Maria:* Yeah, because yeah. Because one part he wants to be older, like he does all those things with the prostitute and he tries to hang out with an older crowd, he tries to impress people with his drinking – like not to impress people with his drinking, but he want a drink all the time

*Alison:* I think he does want to impress people, yeah
Lily: 

He does drink everywhere (laughs)

Maria: And just the way he acts but then at the same time there’s that whole thing about, like, the parts where he’s like listing all the chores of adulthood or whatever, like he doesn’t express them as chores but the context that it’s in – it’s, like, quite negative, and so yeah, like you said it’s like a toe in the water, he’s just like

Alison: Yeah. He kind of wants both at the same time.

Lily: And like he’s not praying for adulthood like he’s, um, participates in adult activities and when he was talking to Sally about, like moving, like he knows the responsibilities that come with adulthood and he’s not fully committed to it, but he likes the little taste of things, like – what is it in the states? you’re 21? – he likes being able to do that. But not having to fully commit to like going to work, or having to go to university, and all that stuff first.

Maria: He kind of looks to the stereotypical, like, positives of being an adult, like adult, like freedom, and I guess the partying and the drinking and then he never really tries to experience like, he doesn’t want to experience the negatives.

In the case of this particular dialogue, my role as teacher was to hold the space for their observations and discussions. They were able to translate some of their feelings, reactions, and thoughts about the book into language, and were therefore better prepared to interpret Holden’s behaviour, and understand that his often-prickly, even maladaptive behaviour, came from his own real feelings of conflict and fear. While the between-student dialogue in my Grade 11 novel study unit rarely reached the level of engagement I had hoped to reach, through one-on-one dialogues I heard the students relate to the novels they had chosen as people, finding in them parts of themselves and of the world as they had experienced it; I was able to encourage good observations, ask questions and ask for
elaboration, and share some of my own insights and observations, in my own voice. What I hoped to nurture in them was the realization that my own understanding, while taking into account what was actually contained in the text, was emergent and intersected with my own life experiences, and that theirs should be, too. We could be ourselves and we could also be Holden. Both were possible at once; both were necessary, for us to take in what the book had to offer.

**Paul and “Say Something”**

Dialogue was also very important to Paul, and a large part of his daily lessons was structured around providing opportunities for his students to talk, with each other in small groups and together with him as a class, about their responses to the texts. In the conversations I had with him, Paul emphasized that letting students take the lead in deciding what was important about a text was foundational to his teaching philosophy. During one of my observations of his Grade 8 class, he introduced an excerpt from the novel *Where the Rivers Meet* (Sawyer, 1988). Like Susan and me, he primed them to read the text in a particular way, by asking, “Does school brainwash you? If so, who is behind it?” After a few jokes, he followed up with a few more questions, describing them as, “kind of open questions for you to think about as we read.” He wrote on the board: “Has this school brainwashed its students? Why?/How?” “I think it kind of does,” he said, then, “How can we resist it, if it’s real?”, and wrote on the board: “How do people resist this brainwashing?”

The class began to read the story together, each student taking a turn with a paragraph. After a few pages, Paul asked them to pause and talk to a neighbour about
something that they’d read. He didn’t give them further direction, and they talked for a few minutes and then Paul called on a few students (he had a pack of cards he flipped through, pulling one out seemingly at random, to read out the name that was printed on it), to report back with something that they’d said or something that they’d heard. He responded to their comments, making and clarifying inferences and following up with questions, sometimes leading questions. Just as I had with my novel studies, Paul let his students indicate what had caught their attention in a text, and then helped them to refine their thinking, or simply held the space for them to talk their way through their ideas.

A few minutes later Paul came over to my corner and explained to me that this “say something” bit he does lets them lead the discussion. He told me that he doesn’t want to decide where he wants them to go, and then work backwards by asking leading questions – instead, he lets them set the path. The second time he went around, the kids he called on didn’t have anything to say. Paul was firm with them: “You must have something to say – make an inference, make an observation – it can be anything – but you need to say something”. It’s essential to his teaching, he told me, that they be able to participate in this way.

Later still, after the class had ended, I told him that it had also looked to me like he was filling in gaps that he saw, and extending their thoughts towards interpretations that he thought were important to address, or spoke to his purposes for selecting the text. This tension had, already, emerged as something that I was becoming interested in as I moved forward with my research. I wondered whether he was aware of the degree to which he was, in fact, guiding the students’ interpretations, through the questions he posed before
they started reading, and the student comments he chose to pursue. There is a tension present: hermeneutically speaking, texts invite a particular direction or way of understanding, and teachers ought to work with their students to guide them in those directions. But it is a delicate balance between doing that guiding, and doing what Smagorinsky calls “getting somewhere” (2010), the hustle towards a pre-determined end point. Paul navigates this tension well, and is able to skilfully model his own interpretive processes, ask questions that supports students in uncovering truth and meaning, and is passionate about his work as a teacher and as a reader.

I did, though, continue to think about this question, of the degree to which teachers knowingly or unknowingly guide students toward a particular reading of a text, especially in a context like this one, where the text was one in a grouped, themed unit. In a reflection on the observation day, I wrote:

*This is quite a teacher driven class with space for student voices to enter. You hear a lot of talk in progressive education, and in inquiry-based learning, that the students should be directing the class. Paul is directing the class. When I was first recruiting him for this project, he said to me, that he’s pretty traditional, or “normal” was the word I think he said, in his day-to-day delivery. If teacher-directed is normal, then yes, that’s what I’ve seen. But he works hard to amplify and extend student voices, and is engaged with the same question that I am: how much do we as teachers direct their readings, and tell them how we make meaning? How much space do we give for them to pursue their own ends?*

Whether Paul’s students felt like there was space for their own interpretations, or whether there were greater benefits to repeating back the things Paul might have said about a text, is something that I can’t speculate on, beyond saying that Paul regularly expressed uncertainty, modeled his emergent understandings, and led discussions that students were required to participate in. These two things don’t necessarily need to be in
conflict, either: Paul used his direction to model and demonstrate psychological tools that
his students could appropriate and eventually use themselves (Vygostky, 1978).

Did Paul’s class contain those glimpses of something greater, the waverings, the
“playful, risk laden, unanticipated interchanges” (Jardine, 2006, p. 278) of hermeneutic
experience? Well, there was this moment:

On the screen, he pulls up a Youtube video of “Heroin” by the Velvet Underground. He
says, “the lyrics – doesn’t say go out and do it. It’s in song form, so it’s nice. Right?
What’s the difference between songs, poems, and non-fiction? What influences you?
Would reading a bunch of poems make you – your classmates – want to do drugs?” The
music plays, that thick, drony seventies rock that does, absolutely, evoke endless hazy,
dreamy nights; sunny afternoons, and sweet freedom. Telling them not to talk, he turns
the lights out and lets the music play. Because of course, the song is beautiful, and it’s
part of the complexity of the whole drug theme. You can’t turn away from the magic,
too. [Field notes]

He had just spoken about how, in the Drugs unit, he’d veered away from poetry, how
he was concerned about selecting texts to study that glorified drug use. But, here we were,
and there I was – ostensibly a serious teacher-researcher, now getting pulled down into a
topic that, as it turned out, evoked the full depth and complexity of teaching, especially
teaching art. The Velvet Underground is a rare text to encounter in schools, but that
moment, floating along in Paul’s classroom on that Friday afternoon, brought me back into
the currents of life itself.

And also the resistance

Sometimes, things happen that are surprising. I like to teach Alice Munro’s story
“Red Dress – 1946” (1968), about a 13-year old girl who dreads going to her first high
school dance, but goes, in a childish red dress that her mother has sewn for her. After a
humiliating encounter with a popular boy, the narrator flees into the washroom, where she
meets Mary Fortune, an older girl who dismisses the other "boy-crazy" girls at the dance
and suggests the two of them leave to get hot chocolate at a diner, and talk. The narrator,
elated and finally feeling seen, goes to get her coat, and is intercepted by Raymond Bolting,
who asks her to dance; she goes off with him, and despite his monologue about hockey and
sweaty hands she feels as if he has rescued her.

Without much introduction, I read the first couple of pages out loud with my class,
assigned the rest as reading, and asked them to complete a short response:

*Of Raymond Bolting, the narrator says, “he turned back to town, never knowing he had
been my rescuer, that he had brought me back from Mary Fortune’s territory into the
ordinary world.” What is Mary Fortune’s territory? Is the narrator right – was she
“rescued”?

It is obvious to me that the final statement is ironic. The story was a tragic one, or if not a
tragedy, at least a missed opportunity – rather than taking a risk, the narrator favours the
stifling conventional choice, and we can imagine that she will end up like her mother, stuck
at her house at the end of the road, sewing dresses badly and hoping someone might pass
by.

Many of the responses I received contradicted my own reading of the story. They took
the narrator’s word very literally, and agreed with her that she was rescued, that she was
better off avoiding the unconventional choice. Karen wrote about how Mary seemed lonely,
and that by acting according to her own rules she had become “angry and isolated.” While I
saw little evidence in the text that Mary was all that angry – she’s on Student Council, coordinated the decorations for the dance, is involved in athletics – she is hiding out in the bathroom; independence in a conforming community of course means some isolation. Then, there was another reading. I wrote that day in my research journal:

*An interesting thing that happened in this particular class was that a widespread belief caught on that Mary was a lesbian. It wasn’t something that I had considered, but when I did, it seemed like a queer reading was certainly viable; signifiers were there. Mary despised girls who were boy-crazy, and aspired to be a physical education teacher. For no particular reason she took a much younger girl under her wing; each girl recognizes something of the self in one another.*

The Mary-as-lesbian theory didn’t come up in responses, but came up first in whispered conversations that I overheard and then in discussion more generally. It took me aback: my first instinct was to say no, that certainly wasn’t what Alice Munro was trying to do. But – as my journal suggests above – there was good reason why a sixteen year old in 2014 might read it that way, and the possibility actually breathes something deeper into the story and the disjoint it portrays when the narrator turns away from her true identity.

This happened months ago, and it keeps coming back to me. In the moment in the classroom, I didn’t know what to do. My first impulse was to dismiss it and some of them fought back, pointing out what they saw, what they thought. I tried to assert that my reading lined up with everything I knew about Munro, and the context, and the time, but I also worried about silencing my students’ reading, and just as much about silencing a queer reading of a text. I eventually asked that we put it aside – we could never know, we each got to decide for ourselves, I said – but it has stayed with me. I don’t believe in only one correct interpretation of a text, but I also don’t believe that anything goes. Mary’s rebellion – to
work, to go to college, to aspire to a career rather than a husband – is something that my girls and boys take for granted, now: just like Susan’s class found with The Taming of the Shrew, had the themes that Munro wrote about become irrelevant? Was I, with my better grasp on the social history of the 1940s, better able to grasp the story’s themes? Could the story reasonably be read literally? Does it matter whether Munro conceived of Mary as queer, if we read it that way today?

I went back the next day and led a discussion on the story, drawing up the board with “Mary Fortune’s World” on one side and “The Ordinary World” on the other, and drew up a pro-con list on each. I told them more about what it was like to be a woman in 1946 and the options that were generally available. I told them, basically, how I wanted them to interpret the story. Looking back, I’m not sure whether it was the right thing to do, but I’m not sure it wasn’t, either. Possibilities announced themselves.

Later on, I couldn’t stop thinking about what Karen wrote. I think of the narrator’s mother as the lonely character: she stays at home all day and sews, looking out the window onto the road that no one really ever comes down. It’s true, that Mary’s invitation to go get a cup of hot chocolate could just as easily be born of her own isolation. I still think that the trade-off (some isolation in that small town, then independence, education, a different life) is worth it, and I think Munro does, too. The rub and tension of different things going on in the same story, of me reading it “that way” and them reading it another, brought me back to the complexity of interpretation.
Like Noddings, I believe that moral education must be flexible, responsive, and situationally generated, and should help students to behave in moral ways, not out of obedience, but out of choice and compassion. Unlike a recitative style of teaching, or one that is based on producing a determined set of answers, dialogue – especially dialogue structured around authentic, open-ended questions – develops in students a tolerance for ambiguous situations, as long as the teacher herself models an embrace of ambiguity. They may learn that as far as understanding people goes, there will likely not be right or wrong answers.

Moral life requires this kind open and tolerant thinking, and a teacher can model and encourage the talk that supports useful thinking about behaviour, and fiction is uniquely positioned to reveal the landscape of individual experience. A student can use fiction to see into the psychological journey of someone who is not them, and then through dialogue, he or she can ask questions, learn about others points of view, and explore possibilities in a safe and supported way. The tension remains: how is a teacher to know when to demonstrate her own thinking and the language and ideas she uses when interpreting literature, and when is it more appropriate to back off and let students lead the interpretation? How does the teacher, who knows that a text is both personally and subjectively evocative, and contains broadly observable truth, steer her students through both kinds of thinking? There are no fixed methods and approaches that guarantee that teachers will get it right all the time. Nevertheless, if teachers model their uncertainties, their questions, and show their thinking, as Susan, Paul, and I did, students are more likely to see interpretation (of literature, of life) as an emergent, ongoing process.
Chapter 8. Creating moral worlds: From thinking to writing

In *The Things They Carried*, Tim O’Brien says that it was his work as a writer that saved him from the despair that many of his comrades faced, upon their return from Vietnam. As he addresses the post-war guilt, dread, and suicide of his company mate Norman Bowker, O’Brien writes, “the act of writing had led me through a swirl of memories that might otherwise have ended in paralysis or worse. By telling stories, you objectivize your own existence. You separate it from yourself. You pin down certain truths” (p. 158). By “stories”, O’Brien isn’t referring to memoir and autobiography, but to *stories*, narratives, that tell truth through craft, that line up incidents and events so that they make sense, so that meaning is exigent.

Vygotsky wrote, “Precisely because thought does not have its automatic counterpart in words, the transition from thought to word leads through meaning” (2012, p. 266). From thinking, to speaking, to writing, so goes the process of meaning-making and concept formation; a person does not simply write down her thoughts, but instead her thoughts come into clarity and focus – they are developed – as she writes. In the particular context of this project, a student reads a work of fiction, and thinks about it as he reads. Then the act of speaking to others begins to order and structure those thoughts, but speaking is still highly referential and demarks thoughts that are still becoming. Writing is the stage where meaning takes its form. Writers must choose a course and stay with it – they must support
their ideas, and provide enough description and detail to make the writing meaningful to the absent reader. Writing, in short, is hard and necessary work, a way to seriously consider possibilities, elaborate on and support complex ideas, and figure out what is true for the writer, in her or his lived experience of the world.

**The Narrative in Classroom Writing**

In almost every English department I've worked in, there is an annual discussion of the writing skills we want to make sure our students are taught from year to year. This discussion is dominated almost entirely by analytic modes and their composite parts, like the paragraph, transition words, thesis statements, expository essays, and persuasive essays. While many teachers want to give their students chances to write imaginatively, it is almost never discussed as being central to the work we do in English. Often I hear: “I don’t have time”, or, “I’ll have to fit it in later”. And yet, our discipline is structured around the value of stories. Recall the aim of English Language Arts in British Columbia: “to provide students with opportunities for personal and intellectual growth…to make meaning of the world” (Ministry of Education, 2007). Narrative writing, writing that tells stories and assumes a point of view, gives students a way to imagine what it might be to live through something different, and try on the thoughts and feelings that might follow, from some other set of possibilities. Narrative writing isn't just about “articulat[ing] and render[ing]” (Jardine, Clifford, &Friesen, 2003, p. 75) what has been read; instead, it is real work and participation in a living discipline. When my class writes stories that attempt to authentically and respectfully occupy the perspective of a person living with mental illness, they are communicating to others, and to themselves, about something that is important and real. While there is merit to learning to formulate an argument and support one's points
in an analytic piece of writing, the danger of only requiring students to compose five-paragraph essays that reiterate what was discussed in class is that English becomes flat and recitative; the boundary between the work of the class and what it is to live in the world becomes solid, even impenetrable. Narratives – even the clichéd, overwritten stories that turn up in a stack of high school assignments – leave room for ambiguity and moral uncertainty, and help students to see that there is some real truth and meaning that exists in the world of things happening, of human life.

In March, I was coming to the end of my English 11 unit that had explored the concept of courage through a variety of text: fiction, poetry, and film. I had given them a variety of assignment choices, one of which was to write a story that took on the theme of courage in a complex way.

When I read through their work, the stories stood out. The essays that had come in were competently written, and I appreciated that some of them had decided to take on poems and make art. But the stories had done something that nothing else had: they examined the complexities of acting courageously, and connected an external conflict to the inner conflicts that usually accompany an act of courage. I had established for myself that reading fiction gave students a pathway to Bruner’s landscape of consciousness; now, I began to see that writing stories was giving my students a chance to explore the internal and external aspects of a conflict, or an ambiguous situation. Writing narratives has been shown to have many benefits. They help students define who they are and what matters to them, they help make meaning of experience, and they help us understand the structures and patterns that we use in stories (Fredricksen, Wilhelm, & Smith, 2012). What I observed
that was when students used narratives to explore a concept, they seemed to understand it more deeply.

Both Max and Danielle chose to write a story for their project. They were both strong students, though not very actively engaged in schoolwork. Max rarely spoke in class or even to me when I visited the back corner where he chose to sit, although the other students respected his opinions, and leading up to the assignment due date I'd been frustrated by Danielle’s habit of skipping classes. However, both Danielle and Max exceeded the required word count and submitted stories that showed evidence of care.

Max’s Story

The sun was beginning to set now, and I was almost home. I was holding the gun in my hand, lost in its beauty and craftsmanship. Suddenly, Tuteur stopped walking, and his eye grew big. He was staring at a man, with a little girl who seemed to be his daughter. Before I could say anything, Tuteur ran up to the man, and what he did next, would change everything. He started to beat him. I ran up to him, and pulled him away from the man. “What the hell are you doing,” I yelled. The man’s daughter was crying, screaming, terrified of what was happening. However, Tuteur seemed even more afraid. “This man...this man...he was the one that killed my parents.” I just stood there when I heard this news, paralyzed; I did not know what to do. Tuteur then pulled out the knife that he always kept in case of emergency. The man, who killed his parents, was unconscious on the ground, unaware of what was happening. Tuteur then pointed the knife towards the girl, who was on the ground, in tears, shaking her dad. “I’m going to kill her,” Tuteur said with an unemotional voice, “I’m going to take away something precious from him, just like how he took something precious away from me.” I grabbed him and pulled him back. “You can’t do this,” I pleaded with him. Tuteur filled with rage, pushed me away and I stumbled and fell. “Don’t get in my way.” I did not know what else to do, except to pull out the silver hand gun, and point it at Tuteur.

“I will shoot you,” I said in a whisper, soft, but loud enough for Tuteur to hear. Tuteur looked at me. “You’re going to shoot me? I made you! I saved you! You are nothing without me!” then he raised the knife. I didn’t have a choice, this was not justice, and I
couldn’t let the girl die. I couldn’t let Tuteur get his hands dirty. I couldn’t let him face God like this. I would have to become like my dad. I would get my hands dirty before he did. Just before the blade struck the girl, for his sake, I pulled the trigger.

Max

Max’s story was about a boy who befriends Tuteur, an orphan boy who searches the streets, interceding in acts of bullying and violence by frightening the aggressors away with his beautiful, delicate handgun. In Max’s words, “We didn’t hurt them, that wouldn’t be justice. Instead, we used the gun. We did not shoot them, we didn’t need to anyways. All bullies are cowards, and when they are threatened, all they do is run away, like little babies.” But at the climax of the story, excerpted above, Tuteur betrays his own belief in non-violence and the narrator of the story, who has recently been gifted the gun by Tuteur, is compelled to turn the gun on his friend.

Max’s choice to write about justice through violence and action, especially justice against bullies, is common especially amongst teenage boys. What made Max’s story stand apart was his refusal to moralize, and the way he placed his justice-seeking character Tuteur in a position where he betrayed his ideals. Whether the narrator did the right thing in shooting Tuteur is ambiguous, and worth thinking about – it placed Max in a position where he had to grapple with the consequences of taking a moral stand, and acknowledge that those kinds of beliefs are often fallible.

Danielle’s Story

Things didn’t get better within the next two weeks either. I was still trailing behind in fitness and no matter how hard I tried to convince myself my knees was perfect, I was still hesitant to make a solid pass or control a hard pass. The fear of my knee buckling
from underneath me got worse with every practice. I was still wearing the yellow pinny – meaning I couldn't be tackled – but even with it on, every time someone ran at me I backed out in fear of getting my knee taken out again. By the third week of training I was allowed to start shooting again but I have still failed to make one decent shot. The thought of the impact on my knee makes me cringe and stresses me out to the point where I get anxiety. But the biggest disappointment of all was knowing I wasn't playing anywhere as good as I was before and that's probably the hardest thing a person can ever try to accept – that you're not as good as you once were.

Danielle

Danielle's story was about a teenage girl, an accomplished soccer player, who suffered an injury and had to grapple with the consequences to her sense of identity. Danielle herself was a soccer player, and the story seemed to be drawn from her own experiences, or perhaps the experiences of people she knew: the vivid details of the pain of physiotherapy, and the crisis of no longer being able to do the thing you do best, rang true. A critical scene of her story actually takes place in the narrator's English class, where her teacher is facilitating a discussion of O'Brien’s “On the Rainy River” – Danielle’s narrator is able to use her own experience, “accepting that she wasn't as good as she used to be”, to develop an understanding of the inversion of courage and cowardice O'Brien uses in the story. It seemed very likely to me that Danielle had written her way through her own experiences, or perhaps through fears based on what she had seen a teammate experience, but didn't resolve them with a happy ending or one that sought a locus of control outside of the narrator herself. Writing about this kind of difficult experience allowed her to reflect on what happened next, when something unarguably bad happened. Danielle's story left the clichéd territory of, “What could I learn?” and instead considered what it was to accept the loss and to live with it. As a writer she confronted suffering and found a way to live in it, and use it to become more empathetic and insightful about human experience – specifically, she was able to empathize with Tim's suffering in "On the Rainy River".
Narrative as Instrument: Paul’s Class

Paul recognized the value of student-written narratives as a way to express or explore the themes that literature studies can open up. He believed that writing narratives gave his students a way to apply the concepts that they had learned about through literature:

it’s important for them to be able to take those ideas and then respond in a way which I hope sort of sums up some kind of trajectory, where at the end of the unit they’ve now thought more deeply about this issue which they’ve identified as important, something that matters, and hopefully now they can apply some sort of new knowledge from their own lives or bring it to life or illustrate it in a way that’s going to make it feel meaningful to them.

Paul, interview transcript

Paul was methodical about bringing his class to the point of having a clear thematic statement to write about, rather than assigning them more freely to write about a general topic the way I had. I observed his process with his Grade 8 class at the end of their Conspiracy Theories unit, following a sequence of activities that Paul says he basically uses with all of his classes. He prompted his students to recall what he called “important topics” about each text they’d read in the unit, then look for similarities and relationships between these topics. From my field notes:

Paul tries to get them to list the “important topics” contained within each text. They look first at Angels and Demons. I’m impressed how quickly the class reels them out: “Religion vs. Science”, “Political power”. “Secrecy and fear”. Paul picks up on the last one: “Especially fear as a ... what? A distraction? A tool, maybe?”. When I tell him that I remarked on how quickly they came up with these complex themes, he tells me that they’d just planned and written an essay on the film.

Next Paul hones in on the topic of Political Power. “Where else did that come up?” he asks. They’re still, and then one suggests The Outsiders. “Sure. Remember, the Socs get all the stories in the newspaper,” Paul recalls.
He has to pull them along a ways to get where he wants to go. He asks about 9/11 – is there a connection there, for political power?

[Field Notes]

Once his students have come up with topics for each text, and drawn connecting lines on the page, he asks them to make connections:

He goes back to his grid and tells them to draw lines of connected topics, that they can circle and mark up the page. He asks, “If we have things that seem to go together, can we explain it?” They consider the example of secrecy and political power. “Can we explain this connection?” He tells them to take two ideas, connect them in a sentence, and put them on the board.

[Field Notes]

Soon they have generated sentences and crowded up to the whiteboard to print statements in shaky hands. Some included: Secrets create fear and the fear leads to people creating conspiracy theories. Secrecy comes together with Political Power because authorities tried to hide dark secrets that will keep their power. The people with more power drive fear into those who don’t have power. Fear can be created and used as a distraction to gain political power. As they wrote, Paul sat with his laptop and transcribed them, sent them to print, and then distributed them with the instructions that they were to pick one idea and use it as the theme of a short story.

Paul went on to further clarify the assignment. Many of the texts that they had read, many that his students might feel they had expertise in, dealt with high-level conspiracies like the moon landing, alien landings, and more. He wanted them to write about what they knew about, and the places where power mattered in their everyday lives. Paul banned
stories about presidents, Prime Ministers, and CEOs, insisting that his students connect the themes they generated to their lived experience.

The way Paul facilitated the development of story themes set up a zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) that allowed his students to see their stories as vehicles for illustrating a truth or idea about the world. The process promoted their conceptual understanding of fiction, as a means to tell truth about the world, especially truth about lived experience. This emphasized again the instrumental role of texts in Paul’s class: fiction, stories, films were seen as a way to transmit or communicate larger social ideas. The narratives his students wrote, like the ones mine did, tended to be set in the sorts of taboo worlds that fascinate young teenagers, and give them the power and independence they crave; they tended to enact fears and fantasies. Put another way, the students used the stories to explore possibilities that seemed real and meaningful to them.

Clifford, Friesen, and Jardine (2003) write about working with Manuel, a challenging Grade 1 child. Somewhere in there, they describe how a little girl, Sinead, wrote a Coyote story about Manuel, wherein “the monster child was welcomed in from the margins and given a home” (p. 45). The authors describe how in her writing, Sinead was able to twin reality and possibility; how her depiction of Manuel allowed them to see him in a new way, too, and that they all could begin to see Manuel “in ways that are more generous, more open, more forgiving than the flattening psychologizing discourse of education generally allows” (p. 50). Clifford, Friesen, and Jardine tell what happened as if Sinead’s choice to write the story was some kind of accident, saying that they never asked the kids to write Coyote stories, but I read it differently. In their work reading the Coyote stories – “we
offered the children the heady opportunity to inhabit some of the spaces that a character like Coyote offers” (p. 44) – of course they made passage for the telling of stories. By immersing themselves together in the imaginative world of stories, the children were able to see how creating a story could help them make meaning of their worlds.

While Grade 1 students might be a little more likely to share their stories with adults than Grade 10s, the storytelling impulse still remains. The Internet proliferates with fan fiction, with poetry blogs, with YouTube videos and Tumblrs and more. Young people employ narrative to make sense and meaning of their world. Teachers can help, as Paul did, by showing students that a story can be a vehicle to explore a complex topic or theme. Teachers can also help students understand the literary concepts of complex characters, internal conflict, irony, and symbol, so that students can apply them in their own writing.

I was a C grade student, whose dream was to become a construction worker. I went to L.A. Douglas Secondary School. I was very upset, after my parents died. The next day I had school. I got pushed into a couple grade 12’s. I was badly cut up and bloodied. As I was leaving the school, I thought to myself, “What is going to calm me down.” I never thought I’d think of doing it, but I felt like that was the only way. Ecstacy. I was too depressed and devastated about what happened, but I wasn’t thinking of the damage it can do to me. “Is the government going to put me in a foster home? Am I going to be homeless?” I thought.

Martin, Paul’s student

“Well Lux just remember if you’re going to be bald we are going to get weird looks on Monday.” Blaine says with a shaky voice.

“Yes, I understand its social murder but I need to do it. For myself.”

The blade is cold as it shaves off the last bits of hair on my heard. My head feels lighter without the weight of my hair. I’m scared of going back to school on Monday; I mean everything on TV about being different is so negative Boy Dies due to Bullying are they trying to scare kids and parents.

Alex, Paul’s student
Sinead, the little girl in Clifford, Friesen, and Jardine’s piece, wrote her Coyote story in response to the stresses and excitement of knowing Manuel, a child who challenged her teachers and classmates. Paul’s students wrote the stories I’ve excerpted above about the thematic topics of prejudice and discrimination. Their stories explore the tensions that they care about. Can you really accept yourself if everyone around you thinks you look terrible, or sick? Can you be a good person, suffer a loss, and decide to use drugs to dampen those bad feelings? Over the years I’ve taught, I’ve read countless student stories about deaths in families, about addiction, gang life, and bullying. Most of the stories I read are clichéd, overly detailed, and unevenly paced, but they are about things that matter deeply to the writers. Buried within the botched drug deals, the fatal car crashes, and the lengthy descriptions of the narrator’s outfit, there are questions: Can people make bad choices, and still be redeemed as good people? If something happens to my family, will anyone still love and care for me? Will I still be okay, if the popular kids at school never accept me? Arguably, when kids write stories, they enter more deeply into the possibilities of their lives, and the lives of others. The stories they write enable them to ask, What if, and explore their kinship to the world of meaning.

Out of the months of my study, paying attention to what was going in my classes and Paul’s and Susan’s, a conclusion slowly emerged. I hadn’t actually thought that this thesis would wrap with one central idea – but, here we are.

There are many good reasons to read fiction in schools. A big one is because fiction can, more than any other form, help young people to be more understanding of their emotions and the emotions of others; it can transport them into other lives and possibilities,
through the encounter with the inner landscape stories provide; it can help them connect to their place in the wider human story. What I am suggesting now is that all these moral contributions can be mobilized and energized through the act of writing one’s own stories. Using literature studies to prepare young people to do writing of their own is a critical step in educating them to have insight into their lives and the lives of others, and to act with moral self-regard. Creative writing, writing that generates complex, ambiguous characters who are faced with authentic dilemmas, engenders a kind of liberation.
Chapter 9. Go out, and be in the world: Conclusions

My students write to understand their lives, their circumstances, and the possibilities – good and bad – that could define their lives. They write to figure out what’s happened, and to try out what could happen next. Despite the auspices of a graduate program, my reasons for writing are similar: to understand the work I’ve done, and to make the work that is to come richer, deeper, and more alive. Azim said: “I don’t know how she did it, but she did”. At the end of this thesis, I know a little better how I did it. Here, I offer some reflections on the how of moral education in English – the theory, ways of thinking, and classroom practices that created a guided, creative space of inquiry in the classroom, and the ones that I’ll continue to use in my teaching.

Choosing the texts

Whether teachers decide to organize their curriculum around a focus that they or their students selected, like Paul did, or around a single text or cluster of texts, like Susan did, so much depends upon the narratives themselves. The importance of choosing texts that open up the space for imagination, reflection, and genuine dialogue – that spark something human and real in us – cannot be overstated. In my discussion of how teachers choose the texts they teach, I suggested that Schwab’s (1969, 1972) four commonplaces provide a useful heuristic for teachers to consider as they choose texts to read with their classes. The first commonplace, the student, requires that the narratives speak to adolescents about something that matters to them. It doesn’t necessarily have to be about
young people, or written for a teen audience, but should speak to some human concern that is of relevance to young people. The second commonplace, the teacher, is probably one of the easiest to accommodate: teachers should offer texts that they, themselves, approach with love and reverence and excitement. Ideally they should be texts that have opened up a new way of seeing or thinking, or have invited some special pleasure or joy. Put another way, if you don’t really care for Orwell’s Animal Farm, if you don’t see it as a vital and valuable fable about the dangers of totalitarianism and abuses of power, you should probably find something else to teach, something that you think is amazing – or, you should look at Animal Farm again, and find a way to loving it.

The third commonplace, the subject matter or discipline, can be accommodated by choosing narratives that feature complex and challenging characters, that welcome some degree of ambiguity, and treat themes as questions rather than as morals. These literary narratives are burnished by investigation and discussion and awareness of literary concepts like irony, conflict, and perspective. Finally, the fourth commonplace, milieu, requires the teacher to have some sensitivity and awareness of the place and time that her students inhabit. She needs to be able to say: what is it that they need? What can literature, stories, articulate about the world that is important in the here and now? While this final commonplace has something in common with the first, it demands an extra sensitivity on the teacher’s part. She must see what her students need, beyond the needs that they can divine for themselves. Alexie’s The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian speaks to needs all young people have, or will have – of finding an identity and a home in a world that can feel cold and indifferent, of living in a world where some people have and exercise more power than others, of comprehending loss. It speaks to needs that we all have – to
understand that these acts of dominion and aggression happen not just individually, but systemically, and that we can be victims of and complicit with acts of violence. If the first commonplace is about the individual understanding herself and her place in the world, the fourth commonplace is about the collective and community, and how it moves and breathes and acts.

In the classroom

Much of this thesis has discussed the balance between guiding students towards forming their own interpretations of literary texts, and teaching students – often through modelling – how to interpret skilfully. I think again of the Munro story, the one where my English 11 class read Mary Fortune as an outsider because she was a lesbian. My instinct was to say, wait – there isn’t any evidence of that! But when I re-read the story, I see that to a 2014 audience, when a queer reading is not so transgressive and queer characters appear in all sorts of texts, the reading makes sense. That moment was instructive: we need to help our students interpret and make meaning based on what is actually happening, but sometimes, something is happening – and we don’t see it.

There are certainly ways to avoid dominating the interpretive process. Some are fairly straightforward, like eliminating multiple-choice tests, and choosing open-ended interpretive activities like discussions or response journals over the comprehension worksheets that really only check to see whether the student’s comprehension has been aligned with the teacher’s. Others are more subtle and circumstantial, and have more to do with the way teachers respond to student questions and interpretations, what kinds of
answers teachers praise and which ones they pass over. Students often complain about the teacher practice of asking an open question, hearing a few responses, and then answering it themselves (Applebee, 1996). This is a behaviour that is hard to avoid, but can be moderated by the teacher making references to what the students have said in that conversation or in one previous, which shows meaning-making to be a collective act. Paul was especially consistent, in observations and in the way he spoke about his teaching, at talking his way through his meaning-making process, announcing when he noticed something new, or had a striking impression, or had changed his mind. There is, of course, a tension here: part of the teacher’s work is to teach interpretation, and model a rigour and persistence of thinking, to demonstrate how to read a text to a particular end. I’m thinking of how Susan highlighted particular phrases, and asked guiding questions, as she tried to enact a feminist reading of The Taming of the Shrew with her class. There are times where guiding a reading – even mandating one – can best serve a class’s interests, if our goal is to produce students who become kinder, empathetic, and more attuned to the struggles of others, through reading fiction.

Writing to see the world

To read good stories, to read them so that we can “come to know ourselves and one another differently” (Jardine, Clifford & Friesen, 2003, p. 180), is necessary preparation for writing our own imaginative stories. In the English departments I’ve worked in, narrative writing seems to be the first thing to be cut when courses start to feel busy, and rushed, or narratives are assigned in isolation from the other conversations going on about concepts and themes. My research, though, suggests that narratives are a powerful way to think about a theme or concept. And because students have been listening to stories, and telling
stories, for their whole lives, they have a sense of how to write a narrative that can be
harnessed and developed. However, the end goal with creative writing should not be to turn
everyone into publishable writers. Instead, the writing done in schools should encourage
imagination, test out ambiguous scenarios and complex characters, and be a playground for
imaginative possibility.

Some pages ago, I mentioned Danielle and her story about an injured soccer player,
struggling to make sense of her injury and muster the courage to accept the change in her
life. I mentioned that the turning point of Danielle’s story took place in her narrator’s
English class, a class where O’Brien’s “On the Rainy River” was being studied. In Danielle’s
story, it was the narrator’s experience of interpreting the story that allowed her to
understand her own experience, and in turn, her experience gave her the ability to interpret
the story with more insight. Whether the story events were based on Danielle’s personal
experiences is less important. What there was is a suggestion of such a turning point in
herself, a vantage or a vista that allowed her to know her struggle as a participation in a
bigger human story. She was telling a story about understanding a story. Danielle’s story
gave a rare picture of both things happening at the same time: Danielle used a text she’d
read to create a fictional character, a girl who was living through something that Danielle
herself had either faced – and was making sense of – or something she feared. When I think
about what Danielle did with our class text, in transforming it into something held meaning
for a character she created, I move to reflect, so near the end, on why I hold the teaching of
literature so dear.
As Danielle was learning, life is complex, and messy, and often very difficult to understand; routines and structures tend to break down, or become too constrictive; relationships evolve, and at times you lose people you love. Telling stories to understand one’s experiences, either to figure out what it all meant or to accept that it really meant nothing at all, is a theme of *The Things They Carried*. The title story, the first story in the collection, begins by describing the letters that Lieutenant Jimmy Cross carried through the war in Vietnam. The letters are from a young woman named Martha, who Jimmy loves, who doesn’t love Jimmy back in the way he wants her to. The story at points becomes paragraphs lists, of the material and immaterial things that Cross and his men carry with them through the jungles and spaces of Vietnam, spaces that are thick with fear, or with ghosts. Somewhere you’re inside the story, when you realize that it’s actually about Ted Lavender and how he died in a firefight. It’s about how much easier it is for Jimmy Cross to grieve about Martha, than about Ted:

then later, when it was full dark, he sat at the bottom of his foxhole and wept. It went on for a long while. In part, he was grieving for Ted Lavender, but mostly it was for Martha, and for himself, because she belonged to another world, which was not quite real, and because she was a junior at Mount Sebastian College in New Jersey, a poet and a virgin and uninvolved, and because he realized that she did not love him and never would. (p. 17)

The next morning, Cross burns Martha’s letters, and is lit by a steely resolve to inspire discipline in his men – to dispense with emotions, to “get their shit together, and keep it together, and maintain it neatly and in good working order” (p. 25).

You leave the story knowing, of course, that it won’t last. Liberation doesn’t come from that kind of discipline. Equipment rusts and breaks down and you have to leave it by
the side of the road, and they're fighting in a war – some of the other boys will die, either in battle or in dumb accidents, and love and fellowship will begin again between the men who, through the entire book, just seem to be travelling across the countryside without pattern or rationale.

I've never taught "The Things They Carried". There are a few reasons why, none of them all that good. When I first started teaching, I thought about what I'd remembered reading in high school and looked around at what my colleagues were doing. With short stories, there seemed to be a great deal of concern about applying terms and names. You wanted to be able to diagram out the plot, or label the characters as “dynamic” or “static” or “stereotypical”, or identify the breed of conflict. "The Things They Carried" wasn't going to tolerate that sort of interrogation, and I worried that my students needed to know the right names for things going ahead. The story is also slippery. I don't think you can sum up its theme in a singular objective sentence: well, maybe you could, but you'd miss too much. "The Things They Carried" resists doing – it does something to you. There are things that could be elucidated for readers who haven't spent much time reading fiction of this sort, and some discussions you could have about the men in the story, Cross especially, and the disjointed, iterative style might be interesting for accomplished writers, but I find that when I read it, I just want to sit with it quietly. "The Things They Carried" is a reminder about the complexity of being a human person and alive in this world, where things change quickly, and how much lives beneath the surface of every breathing moment. There is always so much happening in the background. Will I teach “The Things They Carried”? The more I sit with the story, the longer I think maybe I should, although I'm not sure yet how, other than to read it, sit with it, talk about it, and write about it. In preparing for this thesis I took a
book out from the library called *Tim O’Brien in the Classroom* that suggested that to prepare for the story, teachers should ask their students to make a list of everything in their backpacks, and think about “what their lists reveal or suggest to an outside observer about their character” (Gilmore & Kaplan, 2007). But the story is much more about the immaterial things we carry. It is about this moment: “It was very sad, [Cross] thought. The men things carried inside. The things men did or felt they had to do” (p. 25). It is about how the weight of Martha, the “hard, hating kind of love” (p. 24), which Cross knows ought to matter less than the immediacy and reality of death, still matters so much, and how we know that his vow at the end of the story to dispense with love is impossible for a man like him, or at least ought to be.

This story opens up a little space in us to see what we carry, what we can’t let go of, the times and people and places that shape us, the hope and the despair. It is never finished and never fully interpreted because while being everything else that it is, it is also a mirror upon ourselves, of the objects and places and peoples and experiences and feelings that help us to see meaning in our world.

*But I guess what’s, you know, good about fiction, is that it gives you, it gives you a really well fleshed out example, you know, of one person, or a couple people, which you can then, you know, analyze and then judge in this non-judgemental way in the sense that of, like, you’re not judging a real person. You know, like it’s, we, you want to be able to talk about serious issues without reference to real people, but you don’t want to be talking, you don’t want to be talking about your friend Sam and his drug problem obviously, right? So, so I think what fiction provides is safe, you know safe examples where we can safely debate and be judgemental or, or empathetic or whatever, as necessary, but also, you know, like the thing with fiction is that they – a good short story or a good novel will always present you with way more information than you need to make a thesis, so that it means that, you know, that everyone responds to it in slightly different ways. And then, , kids can bring up, notice things, or make connections that I didn’t expect, and that maybe the writer didn’t even expect in some
Getting to read, to explore, and to interpret fiction – to understand – is to participate in an old and sacred art. The shelves of the bookstores of the world are bowed with novels and story collections that represent an author’s best attempt to explore something rich and real and true about the world, and many of them succeed, and succeed at being evocative or funny or make us feel seen, and known.

Reading fiction matters. It connects us to a bigger human story, and helps us sift through the barrage of everyday life. It is especially important for young people, because in and out of school they are learning what it is to be human. Adolescents especially are grappling with what it means to be authentic, and to be themselves, in a world of image. Holden Caulfield is such an important character for so many of them because he embodies that struggle, and Holden is also a reader who wants books to speak to him, where “you wish the author that wrote it was a terrific friend of yours and you could call him up on the phone whenever you felt like it” (p. 18). Like Holden, Booth (1988) suggests that we could see a narrative as a friend, rather than as medicine, and rather than asking what effect a narrative might have on a person after-reading, we could think a little about how a story treats us, today, and whether the time we spend with them is edifying.

By friendship, though, I mean something more than pleasure, although pleasure is certainly a part of the experience. The best friendships bring out one’s best qualities, and call on us to offer and receive support and compassion. They are a source of refuge and of encouragement, and they offer us chances to try our honesty and loyalty. I like Booth’s
metaphor of friendship, because it recognizes that our relationships with stories are forever emergent, just like the relationships we have with the people in our lives. We can never fully presume to know a person, because he or she is in a constant state of becoming – we can be delighted by them, or frustrated, or fall more in love. Narratives as friends can carry us further because they invite in the imagination. Literary arts expand one’s sense of what is possible, reveal a world where there are many possible questions and more possible answers (Eisner, 2002), and awaken imagination, “to disclose the ordinarily unseen, unheard, and unexpected” (Greene, 1995, p. 28). Writing a story, especially once you understand that stories can help you ask questions about the world and explore possibilities, is taking steps into the unseen, unknown world, the world of questions.

Stories for a better world

We carry stories with us to help us understand the world. We use them to make meaning of what has happened, and we create them to test the experiences that will come. This is important work: I want each of my students to live a life that they experience as meaningful and happy, but the focus of my thesis is moral education, and how fiction can be taught to increase empathy, compassion, and a recognition that other people are as real and complex as oneself? I’ve asked this question because I believe this work is urgent. Along with most of my students, I live in the most comfortable and prosperous society that has ever existed. We have so much good, nutritious food, easy access to vast stores of knowledge, and a comfortable, safe city to live in. It has never been a better time to be a woman or girl, and racism and systemic inequity is, at least, a part of the public discourse.
Yet the gulf between the wealthiest and the poorest is expanding, both on the global scale – where we are the lucky ones – and on the local scale, where many of us wonder how we will ever be able to raise a family in the city where we grew up. In response to those inequities, people are radicalized, or become fiercely protective of only their own self-interest. As the result of both our prosperity, and our lack of imagination about what it would be to give some up, I imagine Yeats’ rough beast slouching forth as catastrophic climate change that will inequitably devastate the people on the poorer side of the global wealth gap.

At no point in the preceding pages have I directly referenced critical pedagogy, but it underlies all the work that I do. The development of a concept of justice ought to be the point of any good pedagogy, as far as I’m concerned; this thesis presents my best attempt to explain how that pedagogy can be enacted. I believe that literature has the ability to develop a moral imagination that will lead to a critical concern for justice that is robust, resilient, and able to endure in trying circumstances. People with moral imaginations will, I hope, value all human life as they do their own. To fight for climate justice, for worker’s rights over profit margins, and for helping others as we help ourselves, first requires the ability to imagine the humanity in people who appear to be different from us. This way of looking at the world, I believe, is something that literature can nurture. There is great urgency here and much work ahead. Fortunately it is work that is purposeful, and often hard, but beautiful, too.

I’m thinking back to last May, at Northwoods Secondary, when my Grade 8 class wrote stories that were bursting with unconventional and bold characters who took risks,
and lived through hardship. Our unit theme had been “Other Worlds: Dystopia, Fantasy, and Science Fiction”. Most of my students had used the class to play out their fantasies and fears about the world as it could be: totalitarianism, loss of family, and opportunities to be courageous and form new communities and relationships. I’d asked that they do their best to write protagonists who were complex and imperfect, who felt a full range of emotions and behaved in ways that seemed human. Their stories were imperfect, too, but it wasn’t about the product. It was about the hours spent trying to leap from themselves and their experiences, into someone else’s. Here are some of their words:

I smash my fist into the window and slip inside. I light up my flashlight and shine it around the dark corridor. The first five minutes of House Running are the scariest.

Once I find the house to be empty, I settle down and put my back pack down. I try to dry myself off from the storm I just walked miles in. I light up a fire and begin to warm up. The fire lights up the dark house. I glance at the walls. Photos of a family line the walls evenly. I shudder at the thought. This house was once lived in.

Elizabeth

Hunger pained deeply and strongly as she watched the merchants sell their fruit and naan to the citizens that were able to pay. Another growl of hunger made the teenage mother groan in pain, unable to see clearly. Physically, she was weak and tired but mentally she was strong and feisty. Giving a sigh, she thought of her son who was at home with his father. A happy family they were, despite their state. A look of disgust painted itself onto her tan and dirt covered face when she thought of the state of her country.

Delia

“Like what? There are not many “fun” things to do around here when we need to follow The Routine. Plus, we’re so overpopulated around here we can’t even get to the washroom without bumping into someone.” My answer comes out a little too quick, unlike my usual speaking pace, and I bet Kris heard the frustration in my voice.
“Ali, there’s not a lot you can do about this. We can only live life to its best, our way. So what if there’s no room? We all need space, but in our situation, we can’t be allowed any of it.”

I like my brothers’ logic most of the time, but sometimes it’s intolerable. He knows how much I hate living in this cramped space where we barely have any fresh air to breathe in. I also hate myself for understanding Kris’s logic. After a minute or so, I finally answer his question: “Yes, I want to do something fun for a change, but what are we going to do?”

*Matilda*

Although the theme was “Other Worlds”, there is no other world. There is only this one, and the infinite possibilities that the future holds. Would the future be as dire as many of my students imagined? And if so, how could each of them respond to their circumstances with grace and compassion? We prepared for these possibilities as we read together, to enter imaginary worlds and test out possibilities. Now, they were the writers, and had done the work of imagining a world that could be – a world where they would go forward to live their lives, carrying the stories they read and the stories they wrote with them.
References


