

**Bridging Lives:  
Storytelling towards  
Agency, Advocacy and Change**

**by**

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B.A. with distinction, Vancouver Island University, 2003

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## **Abstract**

In this thesis, I look at storytelling as it relates to the ability to bridge understanding with others and how it fosters advocacy, agency and change. In 2013, I was the videographer/photographer to a New Westminster community initiative. Based on this experience of witnessing story and its effect on a community, I was inspired to explore social change and personal agency within storytelling. With the use of Narrative Portraiture as my writing method, the thesis follows six-storytelling journeys through the challenges of immigrating to a new land. While in the midst of witnessing these storied journeys with other community participants, I started to recognize a transformation in the community as well as myself.

This storytelling project became one component of a Welcoming and Inclusive New Westminster(WINS) initiative that explored a participatory action research(PAR) method as its knowledge acquisition. PAR utilizes a dialogical, recursive, reflective, and iterative approach to achieve change within practices whether individually or globally. Using the two different methodological approaches the reader will witness the journeys as experienced by others, amidst evolving social and personal changes.

**Keywords:** Immigration, storytelling, narrative portraiture, participatory action research, advocacy and agency, change

*This academic and personal exploration is dedicated to  
my two daughters, Samantha Faye and Brianna Dawn.*

*In part, it is due to them that I have come this far.*

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## List of Acronyms

<b><u>ACRONYM</u></b>	<b><u>TERM</u></b>
<b>ISSOFBC</b>	Immigrant Services Society of BC
<b>WINS</b>	New Westminster Welcoming and Inclusive
<b>CGCD</b>	Common Ground Circle Dialogues
<b>EAL</b>	English as an Additional Language
<b>LINC</b>	Language Instruction for Newcomers of Canada
<b>UNHCR</b>	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
<b>PAR</b>	Participant Action Research
<b>GAR</b>	Government Sponsored Refugee
<b>PSR</b>	Privately Sponsored Refugees
<b>BVOR</b>	Blended Visa Office Referred Refugee

## Introduction



**Figure 1 - "Common Ground " by Theresa K. Howell**

*In the moment of storytelling, the teller and listener, performer and audience share the goal of participating in an experience that reveals their shared same-ness.<sup>1</sup>- N. K. Denzin*

<sup>1</sup> Denzin, N. K. (2001, p.25)

Stories have always been fond friends to me. Yet, I have not thought of myself as a storyteller. I am a listener, reader and appreciator of stories. As a photographer and video documentarian, I have been witness to stories through my art. Simultaneously, as an EAL educator to adult newcomer Canadians, I have listened to my student's life stories about both pre and post immigration. However, in the early part of 2013, my path, of listener and witness, was soon to change.

As I walked past Andrea Solnes' office one day, she pulled me aside and asked, "Would you be interested in filming and documenting some footage for Immigrant Services Society of BC (ISSofBC)?" The organization wanted to document their contribution to the Welcoming and Inclusive New Westminster (WINS) community initiative. WINS spanned three settlement related sectors: the business sector, the service provider sector and the community sector of New Westminster. As part of an initial planning process, the municipality sponsored a contest to find the best ways to make the community a friendlier place to live and work. Individuals of all ages and community groups could submit their ideas for "little things" people can do to reach out to neighbours and make life in New Westminster more welcoming." <sup>2</sup> Following this the Welcoming and Inclusive New Westminster Community (WINS) initiative would then further engage and aid the community with changes that intended to make it easier to navigate for all. There were many unique elements to WINS and the one I would be a part of was the Common Ground Circle Dialogues

<sup>2</sup> City of New Westminster (2014)

(CGCD). This particular component would represent the grassroots settlement sector, which addressed the citizens within their communities, both newcomer immigrants and Canadian residents alike. The CGCD's would be founded on immigrant stories as a way to engage an interactive community dialogue.

Therefore, as a LINC (Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada) instructor as well as a photographer/videographer, the request seemed like a great opportunity to make a difference for others and my community. As the project moved forward and I saw an evolution in the perspectives of the people involved, it reminded me how stories can inspire change and create connections. In *Stories of Change*, an anthology on narratives as it relates to social movements, Davis (2002) posits that stories can "reconfigure the past, endowing it with meaning and continuity, while projecting a sense of what will or should happen in the future." <sup>3</sup> For the WINS initiative, the underlying motivations were to create a community that "engaged a broad range of stake holders to develop a common vision and take action...thus creating a vibrant community."<sup>4</sup> With this particular project, the stories would be an avenue for the whole community to benefit from some of their community member's experiences. These personal stories, about how newcomers had navigated themselves through

<sup>3</sup> Stories of change: Narrative and social movements (2002, p. 12)

<sup>4</sup> City of New Westminster (2014)

the challenges of coming to Canada, might possibly help future newcomer residents find an easier transition as well. Interestingly, many people witnessing these stories were surprised at the struggles that immigrants went through.<sup>5</sup> While the storyteller's confided their autobiographies to a group of New Westminster residents and community officials, the audience shifted from laid-back listeners to engaged participants. In one session, the stories conjured responses of advocacy and injustice. "How could our government do this to these people? Didn't they realize what these people were giving up to move here?"<sup>6</sup> reacted Dianne Clarke, President of the Seniors Planning and Action Network (SPAN).

As the specific areas of focus revealed themselves, I realized the videos and interviews were soon to become part of larger endeavor. Even in the process of retrieving this information, some interpretation and analysis of themes already started to surface. Meanwhile, the project itself evolved and metamorphosed areas of my life as well as in the lives of others. As I pulled together the themes of these newcomer stories, both digitally and narratively, reflections about why storytelling matters surfaced and the topic for my thesis was born. The listener and appreciator of stories was soon to become the storyteller.

<sup>5</sup> Field notes from CGCD

<sup>6</sup> One on one follow up Interviews

## The Lay of the Land

For this thesis, I will delve into how storytelling acts as a medium that bridges connection and understanding from one culture to another; from one generation to another plus acts as an avenue, that fosters self-reliance and strength.

Change or transformation that evolves from the storytelling itself becomes the phenomenon I wanted to understand. How is it that a story can alter an audience's perception through personal narrative? This question, I pondered during the initial stages of my inquiry.

For me, these immigrant autobiographies became a hub for change. While I appreciated the evolution of storytelling, it was not the linear string of spoken words about a life as much as it was the big picture and the conceptual themes that intrigued me. It was how these stories affected the lives and perspectives of the community members.<sup>7</sup> These narratives grew to be more than just personal stories; they were a synopsis of a particular life experience. As one of the facilitators related in her summary of the CGCD event:

"There are so many statistics and surveys but it is these stories that are so powerful that you understand the emotions that are involved. There are sacrifices both ways and... We understand this is a two-way process, like the analogy of a plant giving and taking...Integration is a two-way

<sup>7</sup> Boelryk, Annique (2013).

process; It is not a one-way process. It is understanding what was here and what is changing because... newcomers have come into this place." <sup>8</sup>

How is it possible that a narrative of someone's life experience can evoke this depth of understanding?

As I traversed my own lineage, I started to reflect on these questions regarding people and moments that had made impacts in my life. I, then, looked back on my relationship towards my Norwegian ancestors. This reflection reminded me about a particular moment in time when a personal connection was made. During our annual cultural heritage week celebration, a bridge of understanding formed between the students and myself. Wanting to give a presentation example for my students, I decided to research my ancestral past. However, I hadn't known anything about my grandmother's background, outside of the stories I was told by her during our weekend visits. Since, I was bestowed a small family history journal written by my Great Aunt Nellie, years earlier from Grandma, I started to delve into the modest green spiral bound book. As I poured over the pages of typewritten text, a diversity of circumstances and culturally relevant narratives revealed themselves before me. Much of the historical writing surprised me. There were so many similarities to my student's immigrant journeys such as the familiar challenges, the resistance to change, and

<sup>8</sup> ISSofBC (2014) Part 3 "Responding to the Challenges"

finally, an acceptance of the prevailing circumstances. Suddenly, a bridge of mutual understanding had formed.

Nellie Fjeldheim-Hoveland had compiled and printed a bio-narrative back in 1987. It was based on her recollections of her parents, my great-great grandparents, and their migration to Canada at the turn of the 20th century. It told of the struggles, challenges and wonder found in the move to a new country. I became inspired to summarize a portion of Nellie's story as a symbolic metaphor and example of how this thesis will present itself through narrative. As well, it serves to frame the ontological foundations of this thesis.

On June 22, 1915 Great-Great Grandpa Nils and Great-Great Grandma Andrea along with my Great Grandpa Fred and his five siblings boarded a train in Drammen, Norway. This city was the closest major city to their rural "home gaaard" or homestead, Fjeldheim. With only a few belongings in tow, they made their way to Christiania (now Oslo) to traverse the Atlantic Ocean on the large ship, "Christianiafjord". This trip was the beginning of my ancestor's historical move to this new land, Canada.

After two weeks of riding west on the turbulent waters of the Atlantic, they landed in Montreal. Grandmother Andrea and the children experienced seasickness throughout the trip unlike Grandpa

Nils. Finally, on dry land, Andrea and the children were ecstatic.

However, Nils was calm throughout the journey. He embraced life on the sea due to a previous occupation as a seafaring fisherman.

This, quite honestly, was one of the primary reasons for their migration. Andrea worried incessantly about her husband during his trips on the Atlantic. Her sons were now grown and ready to partake in the family business, she dreaded the thought of them all leaving. Nils had just arrived back from a previously long and arduous fishing hiatus down south and she didn't want that moment to end. So together, the two decided to migrate after much deliberation and consultation with her older brother, Ole. Ole had already immigrated to Canada with their other sister and her family.

Once they landed in the Port of Montreal, they transferred to a train to make their way westward to Ponoka, Alberta. Here, Ole picked them up in a horse-drawn lumber wagon. The children all piled into the back of the flatbed wagon while Nils and Ole hoisted up the chest with the few belongings and luggage they brought with them. During this era, the cross-country trip took them over a week by train in combination with the fifteen-mile buggy trek to Ole Kraft's family home on the harsh north

central Alberta plains. This life was in stark contrast to the lifestyle on the Fjords of Drammen in Norway but they were determined to make the most of it. Shortly after their arrival, Nils bought some farmland and proceeded to clear some of it to build their new home.<sup>9</sup> From the family diary, Nellie wrote that:

"This was a new venture for our family. ... A 16'x 24' structure was built over a small dugout which served as a cellar to store a winter supply of potatoes and other articles to be kept from freezing. The logs were not too even and a good deal of fill and chinking had to be done to keep some of the cold air and snow from coming in. Two rooms downstairs and one large room up. ...this space was shared by eight."<sup>10</sup>

As a couple years passed, the family became adept to the new life on the prairie.

Following this, my Great Grandpa Fred sent for my Great Grandma Eva Therese Hansen to join him in Canada. After her long solo trek from Drammen, Norway to Ponoka, Alberta, the two of them married on November 28, 1918. Shortly afterwards, "Fred bought a farm

<sup>9</sup> Fjeldheim-Hoveland, N. K. (1987)

<sup>10</sup> Fjeldheim-Hoveland, N. K. (1987, pg. 10)

about three miles north-west from the original home place (of Nils and Andrea). Here they built a log house much like ours."<sup>11</sup> Aunt Nellie documented. That was the beginning of my ancestor's journey.

While scanning the pages of text, I recognized a unique culture and innate strength within these stories. My respect and appreciation for my forbearers grew. By looking at my ancestral history through story, I gained an insight into what it must have been like to live during that time. The story also described what circumstances are involved to motivate families to migrate as well as how challenging the upheaval can be. Simultaneously, I started to recognize the commonalities between the student's oral narratives and my ancestors. With every adventure, my newcomer students told me, this insight allowed me to reframe my perspective. From that moment onwards, my pedagogical stance shifted. I opened myself to recognize the "other" in me.<sup>12</sup>

By relating my ancestor's historical journey, an autobiographical immigrant narrative is illustrated and situated into a certain place and time. In this portrait, a variety of voices are heard; my voice as witness, as interpreter, and as autobiographer. By sharing my family's story, in the introduction, I am giving a metaphorical example of the storied narratives that will be demonstrated from here onwards.

11 Fjeldheim-Hoveland, N. K. (1987, pg. 29)

12 Koh, A. (2012)

Throughout this thesis, I have chosen two different fonts to guide the reader in and out of the changes in voice as they relate to the different contexts and stances. For my voice of witness, interpreter and storyteller, I have used a Papyrus font. To me, these CGCD's, storied self-reflections and autobiographical voices signify a perspective reminiscent of a significant moment in history; Papyrus' old world script emulates this for me. With the bulk of this theses' being made up of academic research and writing, I have chosen a standard Calibri font. Now I will lead you through the chapter summaries.

In this chapter, I will preface the thesis with the motivations that guide it, the methodologies used and some of my reflections. Next, Chapter II will discuss some of the literature I researched to support and inform the foundations of the project and thesis. Then in Chapter III, I give an overview of what the Common Ground Circle Dialogues (CGCD) entail with an introduction to the physical settings as well as background information needed to grasp the epistemological perspectives of this thesis. Chapter IV starts the CGCD storytelling sessions, which were separated into four demographic groups. However, for the sake of streamlining the portraits, I have chosen to relate only three. So this chapter combines the Men's Storytelling session with personal and scholarly reflections as they relate to community. Similarly, in Chapter V, the Women's Storytelling portraits are related by weaving together self-reflections with academic literature to create a tapestry of information. In this particular portrait chapter, I focused on pedagogy. Finally, in Chapter VI, the Youth Storytelling portrait,

I weave reflections and scholarly literature based on my chosen research methodology of narrative portraiture. Following these three portrait chapters, Chapter VII looks at my own personal journey as an artist/scholar while working through my writing and research process. Then in Chapter VIII I revisit the portrait themes, the research methods as well as the foundational elements of my thesis process with thoughts about the learnings I gathered. Finally, in Chapter IX, I conclude with some final thoughts as a researcher, educator and artist.

## Chapter I. The Idea



**Figure 2 – “HiStory Wall in Pier Park” By Theresa K. Howell**

*Stories seem to be everywhere. But while some stories entertain, inform or teach us, others move us deeply. They change us and bring us closer together. -Charles & Anne Simpkinson <sup>13</sup>*

<sup>13</sup> Simpkinson, Charles and Anne (Ed.) (1993, p 1)

As I look at people I see stories. Realizing this, I often find myself pondering questions inside my head as to what these people might tell me. By asking the questions, visual narratives are drawn within my imagination. I walk along the street; my eyes scan the environment; many people pass by, different shapes, various hues; diverse ways of seeing and ways of being. This makes me ponder what is it that makes us unique? What stories do we share? I decide to grab a beverage in a local cafe. Sitting at the window seat, I sip my coffee as I watch this societal world walk by. My mind drifts off. I start to imagine what lives certain people live as they walk by. My eyes capture the subtle movements and behaviours that make them who they are. How does their life unfold over the day? Will the man dressed formally carrying his briefcase get to work and receive calls at his desk? Is he a bachelor or a family man? What makes his life similar or different to mine?

I realize similar ponderings, which relate to the role of relationship and story, are evident in academic inquiry as well. Various scholars have often reflected on the foundations of storytelling based on their own questions; Amy E. Spaulding asks how, as a teacher of storytelling, can she

teach the art before knowing the students;<sup>14</sup> meanwhile Maxine Greene an educational philosopher and social activist, ponders how can storytelling in the classroom build individual connections through its use;<sup>15</sup> while Marianne Horsdal, a professor in Educational Research at the University of Denmark, explores the idea of who is allowed to tell the stories and when and where can they be told.<sup>16</sup> While storytelling as a medium for discussion raises so many questions, how did story find its place in the realm of humanity?

Anne Pellowski (1977) underscores six fundamental premises as to how storytelling came about in her book *The World of Storytelling*. Firstly, it was thought that storytelling grew out of the playful, self-entertainment needs of human beings. Secondly, it satisfied the need to explain the surrounding physical world. Thirdly, it was felt to have come about due to an intrinsic religious need in humans to appease or placate the supernatural forces believed to be in the world. Fourth, it evolved from the human need to communicate experience to other humans. Fifth, it fulfilled an aesthetic need for beauty, regularity and form through expressive language and music. Finally, it was thought to stem from the desire to record the actions or qualities of one's ancestors, as a means for familial and cultural continuity.<sup>17</sup> Realizing the foundations have diverse applications, I sense that storytelling weaves itself into many areas of

<sup>14</sup> Spaulding, Amy (2011)

<sup>15</sup> Greene, Maxine (1995).

<sup>16</sup> Horsdal, Marianne (2012)

<sup>17</sup> Pellowski, Anne (1977)

people's lives. For myself, stories have taught me: who I am and what potentialities and possibilities I can strive for. Stories can also unconsciously build or scaffold a connection with others. From my experience, stories, as a form of communication, can take down walls as opposed to building them.

Narratives also allow us to live a life without living *the* life. In listening to or reading another's story, it allows us to glean the same experience without putting in the time. Horsdal (2012) states that storytelling allows us to "safely acquire a large narrative repertoire of lived experiences way beyond what we could possibly assemble in our individual lives."<sup>18</sup> It quite literally allows us, as the expression says, *a means to an end*. This then enables us to gain a similar insightful experience without actually experiencing the situation ourselves. This particular motivational behavior is referred to as "the social brain" as coined by neuropsychologists.<sup>19</sup> Cozolino (2014) goes on to say that mirror neurons are neuron networks, which compel us to emulate others based on the behaviours and actions displayed by the other. This system not only links networks within the brain but also links us to each other. Rukmini Bhaya Nair (2003) proposes this in combination with our ability to interpret or to empathize with certain aspects of another's experiences allows us to safely live and learn vicariously through another.<sup>20</sup> By intently listening and sharing our stories,

<sup>18</sup> Horsdal, Marianne (2012, p.27)

<sup>19</sup> Cozolino, 2006; Siegel, 2007; and Johnson et al., 2005

<sup>20</sup>Horsdal, Marianne (2012, p. 25)

avenues for development and perceptual change can be unearthed. Even in the most mundane or routine situations, I have found myself recognizing the connective possibilities that the sharing of stories can provide. Often riding public transit or sitting in a public space, I open myself up to relational possibilities.

As I sit in my seat, I find another person sits down beside me. Before long, we are deep into a conversation. This often leads into a synopsis of someone's life story. Sometimes short, sometimes long. If my dialogical partner is willing to answer my queries, stories unfurl themselves from their insides out. As I listen, I realize this is a moment of deep connectedness.

As they describe a situation, I find myself nodding in agreement.

Similarly, my eyes widen as theirs do at the pinnacle moment before the story's climax. Every story gives me a greater sense of the world I am living in. This person beside me is a part of a larger whole. What role in my perceptual life world is their presence to become? What part would I be in theirs? Sometimes, I feel sad or guilty to leave this moment; it is almost as if I am leaving a close relative. To appease these feelings maybe a "see you again soon" consolation is expressed. In saying this, it is an invitation that sprinkles the future with the possibility that our synaptic and physical connection might find us together again.

As I relay this small vignette, I realize how even in daily situations change can occur in how we perceive others and ourselves. Meeka Noelle Morgan (2005), an SFU graduate student, discusses the ideas of change and connection as they relate to storytelling in her dissertation *Making Connections with the Secwepemc family through storytelling: A journey in transformative rebuilding*.<sup>21</sup> In the process of her research, while being involved in the storytelling of her Secwepemc community, Morgan, confronted this same perceptual change. During her conversations with the community members, she discusses how her participant relationships entered different levels of connection as they went from the “unlocking of the first door to a deeper sense of relationship”<sup>22</sup>.

As I talk about *relationship*, the definition that best outlines my intentions are “the way in which two or more people are connected.”<sup>23</sup> Morgan’s experience with her participants is some of the relational connections that are built during personal exchanges.

It seems to me that as social beings, we are interested in one another; it is what makes us human. *Humanity* at its essence, as defined by its 14<sup>th</sup> century Latin *humanitatem* etymology, is “human nature; the

<sup>21</sup> Morgan, Meeka Noelle (2005)

<sup>22</sup> Ibid (2005, p.160)

<sup>23</sup> Merriam Webster Inc. (2016) retrieved from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/relationship>

human race, mankind "with an equivalent French definition of *philanthropy*, *consideration for others and kindness*. These nouns share synonyms of *compassion*, *fellow feeling*, *brotherly love*, etc.<sup>24</sup> From this morphology, it stands to reason that there must be a desire to create connections due to the fact we are born human. As Wade Davis points out in his 2013 lecture at the Garrison Institute, "we are all cut from the same cloth...modern sciences have proven the interconnectedness of the human being...and for all of us and through all time the multiple voices of humanity are integrally connected to our collective and naked geography of hope."<sup>25</sup> This connection between humans is what brings us in to communities and when we are not connected, a feeling of isolation and fear can take over. Speight (2011) tells us, in Hannah Arendt's narrative description of life pre-empting Nazi Germany, that people were isolated from their communities, which allowed for inhumane acts to occur. When we have no mutual communication and relationship, knowing what it is to be another becomes the challenge.<sup>26</sup> C.G. Jung referenced this as well when corresponding with Sigmund Freud, establishing that "the reason for evil in the world is that people are not able to tell their stories."<sup>27</sup> These ideas pertain to the reason why bio-narratives are so important as a way to educate, to know and to

<sup>24</sup> Harper, Douglas (2016)

<sup>25</sup> Davis, Wade (2013)

<sup>26</sup> Speight, A. (2011).

<sup>27</sup> Carl Jung Depth Psychology Group WordPress (October 2016)

listen to each other on a deeper level. As we are communicating everyday by talking to our neighbours, friends and relatives, bridges of communications are built. Indigenous writer, Richard Wagamese puts it this way, "...when you can lean over the fence to hear each other's stories, you foster understanding, harmony and community."<sup>28</sup>

Having these 'small talk' conversations is good, yet, these often remain on the external surfaces of a relationship. However, it is the topical conversation then becomes the initial contact point; one that leads us into the deeper story. As defined by Marianne Horsdal (2012)<sup>29</sup>, a small request to enter may be required when someone's 'life story' is about to be opened. When entering into this space we are moving into personal landscapes. By sharing stories, we go into the soul of another as well as into ourselves. This is where the connection lies. This process may leave the storyteller feeling vulnerable, yet, permits others to feel vulnerable too. Tell me about your day and I will listen; tell me your story and you will open my heart and mind.

## **My Big Questions...**

As I moved through and reflected on the Common Ground Circle Dialogue (CGCD) project, I starting unearthing ideas of how storytelling not

<sup>28</sup> Wagamese, Richard (2008, pg. 4)

<sup>29</sup> "a spatio-temporal embodied construction of self and identity in a social world and an interpretation of existence including world views, values and attitudes" (pg.76) Telling Lives; Exploring dimensions of narratives (2012)

only relates to connection but to how it can shift perception. This shift seemed to change people, sometimes creating avenues for personal agency or social advocacy. In doing my research on the phenomenon of storytelling as it relates to connection and perceptual change, I wanted to look at whether or not personal stories can build bridges of understanding. In addition, can these stories empower people and do they act as a conduit for further reflection? Ultimately, can storytelling promote advocacy and change within communities and classrooms? Recognizing that storytelling is a form of historical documentation, has the documentation of it changed or evolved over time?

### **Looking into the Methodologies**

During the past nine years while working for Immigrant Services Society of BC (ISSofBC), as a LINC instructor, I had witnessed a variety of pedagogical practices. As well, I have listened to a variety of student storytelling experiences. With this said, I have also witnessed many storied dialogues within my workplace and beyond. Over the years, storytelling still resonates with me as a way for the individual to mediate connections within their immediate surroundings as well as the larger community. In my experience, storytelling has evolved to become a way for local communities, cities, countries and the world to give a face to our, sometimes, unnoticed lives. This inspires me to seek out what it is that makes these stories so relevant to others as well as ourselves. What is it in

them that make us take notice ...to see an echo of ourselves within the "other".<sup>30</sup>

Once I had decided to approach storytelling as the focus of my research, I realized I would need to figure out the research methodology that adequately spoke to the ontology, or ideology, of this thesis. As well as what methodology reflected the structure and process of the storytelling project I had participated in. It also was relevant that the methodology, as well as the project, echo each other.

Initially, I thought I would use a phenomenological approach due in part to the idea that I wanted to look at a person's common and shared experiences as they related to story. This methodological approach looks at the human lived experience, as a phenomenon, reflexively. It does this by analyzing the textual and structural descriptions of the experiences. Once accessing these descriptions clusters of meaning evolve through analysis. The personal descriptions as well as the observer's analysis of that particular experience form these clusters. Following this analysis, these clusters are categorized into themes. From these themes, summaries of information can communicate an idea as to what the researcher will conclude from their study.<sup>31</sup> Since I was working alongside the community in this WINS initiative, I also wanted to involve a proactive community based approach.

<sup>30</sup> Koh, A. (2012).

<sup>31</sup> Creswell, J. W. (2007).

One day, while I was scanning the library stacks at SFU and sifting through the books on storytelling as a form of pedagogy, I discovered a book that discussed participatory action research (PAR). PAR is a methodological research process utilized by educators, community groups and organizations alike.<sup>32</sup> As I started to read some of the methodologies foundations, a couple of points resonated with me. PAR, as described, is self-reflective and recursive. Another major feature that resonated, with the research and myself, was its methodological framework favoring societal and individual change.<sup>33</sup> From my perspective, these features reverberated with the CGCD stories as well as with the community outcomes. Social change was also the impetus for the Welcoming and Inclusive New Westminster community initiative (WINS), which was at the root of the storytelling project. In addition, knowing the project spoke a language of reflective, dialogical collaboration within community, it became important for me to refer to the PAR model. As the name states, the researcher and participants become part of an interactive dialogic process based on mutual reflexivity. Due to this reflective nature that is so dominant in both the CGCD process and also in the intention of this thesis, I concluded that PAR supported both aspects. Simultaneously, PAR is dialectical in its application, which represents the foundations of the

<sup>32</sup> McIntyre, A. (2008).

<sup>33</sup> Kemmis, Stephen; McTaggart, Robin; Nixon, Rhonda (2014)

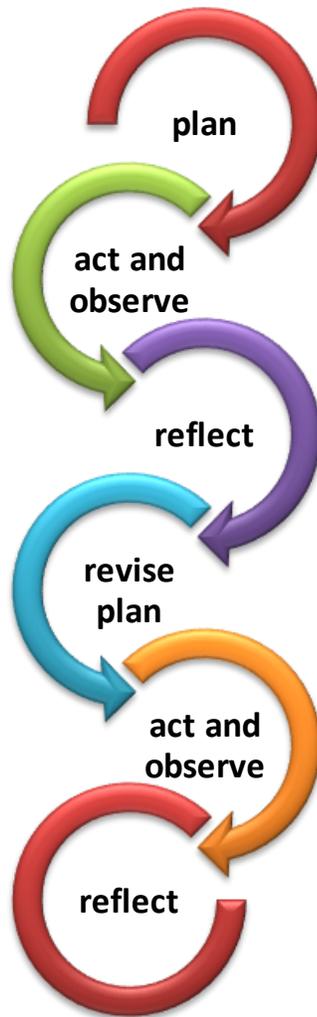
CGCD's. As outlined in Kemmis and Wilkinson's essay (1998), on *Participatory Action Research and the Study of Practice*, this model establishes that all the dualities of its foundations come together whereby the dichotomy of individual and social; objective and subjective, coincide within the aspects of human life and practice.<sup>34</sup> PAR, an almost century old methodology, is an applied research which focuses on issues or problems within a specific setting using an iterative reflexive, dialectical approach to facilitate knowledge construction as it relates to problem solving.<sup>35</sup> Kurt Lewin, a social scientist and theorist, is said to have originated the term '*action research*'. The reflexivity model, known as a Lewinian spiral, is often associated with the PAR process. This model became a point of reference for Action researchers. However, Lewinian action research framed its perspective on the researcher looking in from the outside. Over time, a 'participatory' component was added and the methodology evolved. Therefore, it became known as *Participatory Action Research*. In this, a collective understanding produces final outcomes, with the involvement of both the participants as well as the researcher's.<sup>36</sup> As the methodology expanded and evolved, the Lewinian spiral evolved as well. Now the model is known as a self-reflective spiral.<sup>37</sup> (Fig.3)

<sup>34</sup> Atweh, Bill, Kemmis, Stephen, and Weeks, Patricia. (1998)

<sup>35</sup> McIntyre, A. (2008).

<sup>36</sup> Kemmis, S., McTaggart, R., & Nixon, R. (2014)

<sup>37</sup> Atweh, Bill, Kemmis, Stephen, and Weeks. (1998, pg.22)



**Figure 3 – Action Research Spiral Interpretation**

In reference to Atweh, B., Kemmis, S. and Weeks, P. (1998). pg. 22

It is important to note that within this thesis there are two directions that the action research took. First, from the WINS initiative, an interest in *critical action research* guides its mandate. Secondly, my personal involvement comes from a *practical action research* direction. The differences between them are:

“a) *practical action research* is guided by an interest in educating or enlightening practitioners so they can act more

wisely and prudently; while b) *critical action research* is guided by an interest in emancipating people and groups from irrationality, unsustainability and injustice.”<sup>38</sup>

Both approaches are still participatory, reflective and iterative. However, a *practical action research* is more self-directed with participant collaboration being one of reciprocity whereby the practitioner gains insight from the participants in order to modify their practice. While *critical action research* is amplified, whereby the responsibilities are collective through all aspects of the PAR process to result in a social reformation of the previous practice.<sup>39</sup> For the sake of simplicity, I will just refer to them both as PAR in what follows.

As the storytelling dialogues were one element of a larger exploration into a New Westminster community initiative, I saw them as one of the participatory action research projects amongst others being implemented to gather information for WINS. In reviewing the three characteristics that guide PAR, I recognized how the CGCD’s echoed back to the research process. These characteristics as outlined by Alice McIntyre (2008) are: 1) the active participation of researchers and participants in knowledge co-construction; 2) the promotion of self and critical awareness that leads to individual, collective, and/or social change; and 3) the building

<sup>38</sup> Kemmis, S., McTaggart, R., & Nixon, R. (2014, pg. 14)

<sup>39</sup> Ibid

of alliances between researchers and participants in the planning, implementation and dissemination of the research.<sup>40</sup>

Reflection and dialogue, led by storytelling, was the basis for the project's contribution to a social commentary for the community. Based on this, a PAR methodology aligned well with my research explorations. As a larger collaborative, social, participatory, and emancipatory process was taking place in the community, a self-reflexive process was also being practiced throughout my thesis development.<sup>41</sup>

Acknowledging the WINS initiative as a PAR process, here is how I saw it revealed: 1) the initiative was led by community members seeking to address issues in the current Newcomer settlement process; 2) WINS propelled community organizations to construct various outreach activities to gather input from the specific community sectors. 3) Upon gathering the information, through an iterative and recursive process, this information would shape and reshape outcomes to facilitate changes to the settlement process issues. 4) WINS involved government leaders, community service providers and members who helped to implement the gathered information to activate the outcomes

In addition, I asked myself "Can PAR as a chosen method relate the aesthetic storytelling roots of the CGCD's within the thesis writing process?" Upon seeking out options, I looked at Narrative Inquiry. This

<sup>40</sup> McIntyre, A. (2008)

<sup>41</sup> Atweh, Bill, Kemmis, Stephen and Weeks, Patricia. (1998)

methodology seemed to uphold the narrative aesthetics desired in its presentation of story. However, it felt limiting in its scope. It could describe a situation through narrative but lacked the methodological underpinnings to explore the phenomenon of storytelling as a means for connection and change that represented the thesis foundations.<sup>42</sup> In my research and video editing, mixed with my personal reflections, themes were already emerging. Therefore, I needed to find an academic process that aligned itself to this research and its representation.

As I searched to unearth an academically based creative process I could implement in the writing, my supervisor, Dr. Vicki Kelly, introduced me to Narrative Portraiture. Portraiture has a phenomenological like framework that bridges aesthetics with empiricism. The methodology illuminates the phenomenon through an artistic portrayal of the research process via five main elements. The elements are “context, voice, relationship, emergent themes and the aesthetic whole.”<sup>43</sup> By addressing my thesis writing through this process, the methodology allowed meanings to evolve and describe themselves through the community dialectical process. In addition, it accommodated multiple changes evident in the various story circles. This methodology gave the research a holistic storytelling foundation based on individual experiences as well as the collective experience of the group. With regards to the individual experiences, narrative portraiture looks at the relationship with the

<sup>42</sup> Creswell, J. W. (2013).

<sup>43</sup> Lawrence-Lightfoot, S. and Davis, J. H. (1997, pg. xvii)

participants as “complex, fluid, symmetric and reciprocal” while traditional qualitative researchers take a more “pragmatic” approach. Portraitists seek to uphold relationships of balance and reciprocity. At the same time, they work to negotiate fluid boundaries that maintain a sense of distance, yet, intimacy. The relationships are not just seen as “vehicles for data gathering.”<sup>44</sup> For me, it was important that the participants, I would be engaging with, be given recognition and respect for their voice within this thesis. With narrative portraiture, the participant actors are part of the whole not left at a distance and objectified.

That being said, with the collection of observations, conversations, interviews, video footage and field notes, various narrative portraits emerged. Incorporating narrative portraiture as a method for the structural and textual description allowed a phenomenological lens to illuminate the essence of the complex goodness inherent in the emerging story. It is hoped that the depiction of the narrated portrait is related in a way that a broader more eclectic audience can access it.<sup>45</sup> Simultaneously, my research also supports "participatory action that is recursive and dialectical and is focused on bringing about changes in practice..."<sup>46</sup> By looking at these various modes of engagement, representation and critical thinking, this study provides a broader perspective on the story circles as well as their eventual outcomes.

<sup>44</sup> Lawrence-Lightfoot, S. and Davis, J. H. (1997, pg. 136-138)

<sup>45</sup> Ibid

<sup>46</sup> Creswell, J. W. (2013, pg.26)

Now I will outline how this process culminated: once the notes, interviews and observational information became collected, I sifted through the information and analyzed it in relation to the orientation of the thesis. By utilizing this process of documentation, interpretation and analysis, by way of narrative portraiture, I tried to capture the aesthetics of descriptive imagery that honored the essence echoed within the immigrants' stories.<sup>47</sup> Initially, I cross-referenced the WINS Common Ground Circle Dialogue (CGCD) videos with the observational notes; based on my experiences of the situation plus the site documentation. I then followed up with a select number of community participant interviews regarding their observations of the event. These interviews were then further cross-referenced with the academic literature. The interviews were gathered within a two-month period following the CGCD's. This time frame allowed reflective thoughts to remain fresh and attainable within the minds of the storytellers and community participants. In finalizing this information gathering process and its analysis, I proceeded to write the various narrative portraits of each of the Storytelling Circles; the men's, the women's and then the youth. These narratives intermingled with the academic literature and my personal reflections created a storied quilt while representing the recursive nature of PAR. Over and over the portraits were reworked and crafted to truly encapsulate the essence and detail required for this writing process to acknowledge its foundations within Narrative Portraiture. As the narrative

<sup>47</sup> Lawrence-Lightfoot, S. and Davis, J. H. (1997)

portraits became complete this allowed me to reflect on the aesthetic whole, to offer recommendations and new visions of further possibilities.

Following the publication of the CGCD videos to YouTube by ISSofBC, an art installation was produced as a celebration of this participant community. This three-dimensional art piece incorporated the CGCD video via a centrally located iPad illustrating how this WINS Initiative had proliferated. By incorporating photographic samples of the art project plus related artistic renderings, it further grounded this theses' art-based, visual and narrative complexity. As well, these various creative formats generate a richer, denser description for an audience to garner a unique perspective on the projects dynamic exploration of storytelling as it relates to community connection and social change.

## Chapter II. Journey into Research

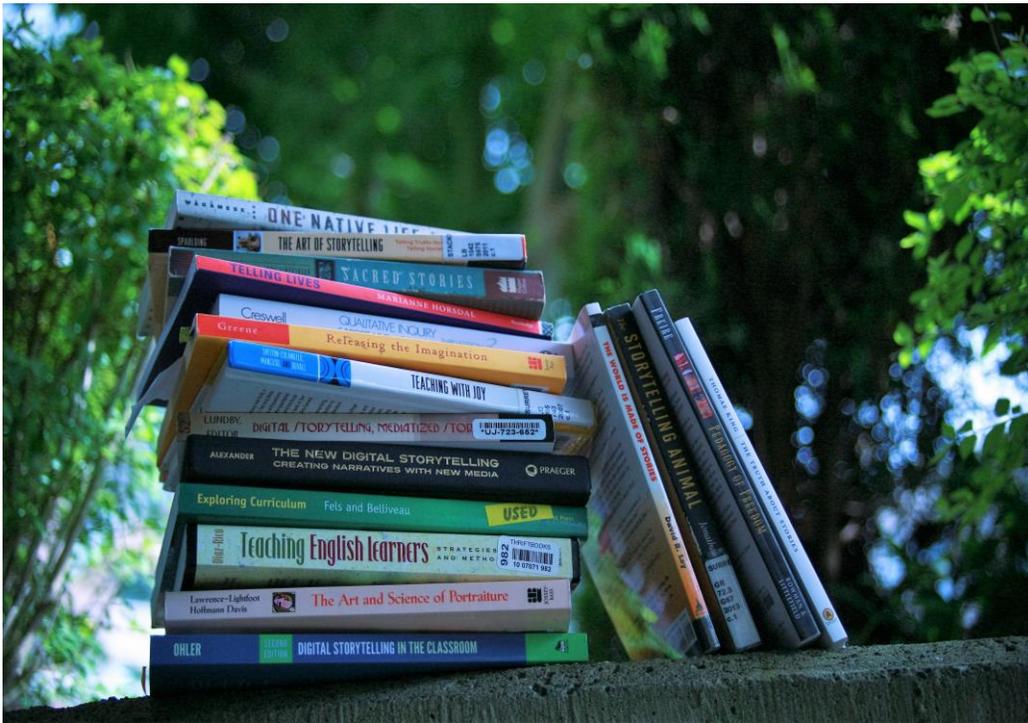


Figure 4 – “Some Reading” By Theresa K. Howell

*“I do research to know what I do not know yet know and to communicate and proclaim what I discover.”* <sup>48</sup> Paolo Freire

<sup>48</sup> Freire, P. (1998, pg. 35)

As I scoured the literature within my area of storytelling relating to pedagogy, change and agency, I realized that I could see two distinct areas of focus for my research and inquiry. The first area of focus related to the ontological foundations, or philosophical contexts and understanding; the second was the methodological aspects of the thesis. I asked myself, "What methodologies related to storytelling as a phenomenon within communities and classrooms? Alongside this, who were the spokespeople that aligned themselves best to the understanding of story within communities and classrooms? As I looked at all of the materials, I classified my literature reviews into the "the story that we live", which relates to the ontology and the "methodologies within the telling", relates to the research and writing methodologies chosen.

### **The Story that We Live**

Now while storytelling can be considered a genre of communication that serves many purposes from educating to recreation, historical accounts to future ideals, I will be primarily focusing on narrative as it relates to personal agency and advocacy through social communications. As Lindsay Brown establishes in her paper on `Storytelling; a cultural studies approach, "hearing and telling stories is a method of building historical consciousness in community and imagining an alternative position."<sup>49</sup> As I read literature based on these ideas of social justice, advocacy and transformation, I

<sup>49</sup> Brown, Lindsay (1997)

realized that story has facilitated the restructuring of communities based on its use. From the beginning of CGCD project, this idea of social change and advocacy runs deep. It was one of the reasons for its inception. As part of the WINS initiative, “a series of community dialogues would incorporate best practices for engaging communities in order to build broader support for newcomers living in New Westminster.”<sup>50</sup> As a participant/witness during this project, I realized certain scholars rose above others to articulate ideas of community as it relates to personal agency and advocacy using narrative dialogue. Hannah Arendt as reflected on by Shari Stone-Meditore, Marianne Horsdal, and Joseph E. Davis support the idea of what it is to produce change within a community through the use of holistic dialogically based narratives. Meanwhile, Dr. Maxine Greene, Paolo Freire, Amy E. Spaulding and Silvia Richardson scaffold the discussions on pedagogy, social change, identity, personal agency and-advocacy, sought through the process of storytelling.

In, *Telling Lives: Exploring dimensions of narratives* by Marianne Horsdal (2012) specifically analyzes how autobiographical narratives can support the perspective of a person’s lived experiences, individually and within group contexts. She discusses how observers of narratives; the audience reflects on what the story relates in relation to its larger context within community. She later ponders the implications of the newcomer on their community and vice versa. By doing this, she looks at Lave and

<sup>50</sup> Welcoming and Inclusive New Westminster: Receptive Communities Dialogues (2013) Common Ground Circles Report -documented field notes (pg. 1)

Wenger's (1991) article *Situated Learning*. In the article, the idea of legitimate peripheral learning explains social interactions within communities by way of how newcomers and community participants can affect each other within a particular community. Over time, the theory hypothesizes that change is reciprocal. There were a couple of reasons why this book resonated with me for this project and thesis. One reason is that the CGCD immigrant storytellers had an effect on the community and, as pointed out in the stories, the community affects the immigrant. Secondly, various conclusions, based on the exploration of autobiographical narrative and the telling of them, seems to parallel my own narrative of self-inquiry.

As for Shari Stone-Mediatore's (2003) *Reading across Borders: Storytelling and knowledge of resistance*, I resonated with how Mediatore's interpretation of Hannah Arendt's politically based storytelling parallels Arendt's self-inquiry. The text also explores how a particular narrative could reconstruct outcomes within communities. Being that the CGCD's were community events initiated to serve the community through social change, the CGCD's seemed to resonate with some of the ideas discussed in the book. Mediatore explores ideas and values from Arendt's immigrant perspectives, which align themselves with the CGCD storytellers. Arendt's use of political narrative as it relates to the human condition helps to show resiliency, yet, vulnerability within public spaces. Arendt's process of storytelling through the narrative approach adds a broader perspective and a multiple dimensionality that basic facts and figures cannot. In other words, storytelling creates a broader visual picture of a given situation one that numbers are ill equipped to translate. This allows for certain contextual

recognition which is otherwise missing. All these factors contributed to how Hannah Arendt became an academic resource for my inquiry.<sup>51</sup>

I was similarly drawn to the idea of how narrative affects societal change as I read various chapters in *Stories of Change: narrative and social movements*, edited by Joseph E. Davis (2002). In Chapter 1, *Narrative and Social Movements; the power of stories*, Davis summarizes the characteristics of storytelling as they shape auto-narratives and their place within society. Then, he goes on to outline what storytelling looks like as a social transaction within a social movement giving a detailed overview of how storytelling can be implemented within community context as a catalyst for social change.

By reading Amy E. Spaulding's (2011), *The Art of Storytelling*, I saw an exploration of how storytelling is a conscious act of sharing. She goes on to talk about how storytelling becomes a form of gift giving. She says the storyteller tells the story; however, it is the audience's responsibility to decide what to make of it. Since I wanted to look at how autobiographies relate to the audience and how they were explored in the CGCD context, I saw her book as relevant to the further development of these explorations.

Meanwhile Sylvia Richardson's autobiographical narrative, *Flesh mapping: Cartography of struggle, renewal, and hope in education* (2013) related ideas on how self-inquiry within a narrative contributes to reflexivity. In her initial thesis, now a publication, she explores how story

<sup>51</sup> Speight, A. (2011)

has shaped her as a Salvadorian-Canadian. Her work also discusses the act of storytelling as it relates to her pedagogical experiences and their social implications.

As I read *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy and Civic Courage* by Paulo Freire (1998) I could hear my educator's voice saying "yes!" Paolo's ideas on how reflective teaching creates change in practice and the values of being open to reciprocal dialogues within classrooms truly resonated with me. He also demonstrates what it is to be a scholar who supports agency in the classroom and beyond. His scholarship speaks to the foundations of my own reflective practice, which I echo throughout this thesis. Similarly, his conversations, regarding advocacy and agency for the immigrant, echo itself within the roots of this research project.

Meanwhile, Maxine Greene's words echo many of the underpinnings of my pedagogical practices. In her book *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts and Social Change* (1995) she establishes that pedagogical praxis should encourage and perpetuate relationship, thereby supporting a sense of personal agency for the students. Opening up the classroom to a diversity of voices can create encouragement and, in essence, support the ideals of democracy by way of communication. This then builds bridges of connection through mutual sharing of lived experiences in a respectful dialogical engagement within classrooms as outlined by Greene. She also discusses moments as a teacher educator wherein she recognizes how using storytelling, as a tool, fosters

understanding of each person's "life world".<sup>52</sup> By utilizing story as a way to stimulate psychological gateways, people learn to treasure each other's uniqueness, therefore, making way for new world communities.

Similarly, Horsdal (2012) discusses how autobiographical storytelling elicits identity, interpretations, analysis and reactions with its performance. As she establishes "sharing a narrative builds community. Narratives are the glue that makes us stick together...through the sharing of our dreams and plans."<sup>53</sup>

In all these cases, the authors have supported what I have also found in my research. By participating and listening to story, perceptions shift.

## **Methodologies within the Telling**

While exploring my chosen methodologies, Narrative Portraiture and Participatory Action Research (PAR), two points of reference initially guided me: *The Art of Science and Portraiture* (1997) by Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot and Jessica Hoffman Davis and *Action Research in Practice: Partnerships for Social Justice in Education* by Atweh, Kemmis, and Weeks (1998). However, as time moved forward other texts presented themselves as expansions on my acquired theoretical knowledge of PAR. These texts were Alice McIntyre's (2008) *Participatory Action Research* and *The Action Research Planner; Doing Critical Participatory Action Research* (2014).

<sup>52</sup> Greene, Maxine (1995)

<sup>53</sup> Horsdal, M. (2012, pg. 67)

When I looked at narrative portraiture as a process for writing the thesis, I found its style welcomed the reader into the room with the participants and researchers. Even as an academic methodology, it reads like a seamlessly filmed documentary where the lines between empiricism and aesthetics blend to form research material that is as beautiful to witness, as it is to arouse questions.<sup>54</sup> In Narrative Portraiture, a phenomenological lens is used within the narrative structure. This particular writing and research style allowed me to represent the amalgamation of "systematic, empirical research with aesthetic expression...capturing the richness, complexity and dimensionality of the human experience in social and cultural contexts while conveying the experiences of the people negotiating those experiences."<sup>55</sup> As well, the process itself still honors the foundation of storytelling both fundamentally and holistically. At the same time, it is important to recognize that portraiture and phenomenological writing share the idea that "no interpretation is ever complete, no explanation of meaning is ever final and no insight is beyond challenge."<sup>56</sup> As narrative portraiture shares some characteristics of a phenomenological approach, this method seemed to align itself nicely with the writing of this thesis as well as its PAR foundations. Stories also evolve and create new

<sup>54</sup> Lawrence-Lightfoot, S. and Davis, J. H. (1997).

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. (1997, pg.3)

<sup>56</sup> Van Manen, M. (2011, para. 5)

meanings for others, sometimes, changing perceptual and structural foundations through time. This then becomes the *wonder* which likened to the “condition and principle of a phenomenological method” according to Van Manen.<sup>57</sup>

Throughout Lightfoot and Hoffman’s text, they skillfully outline the applications of narrative portraiture. In seven chapters, each contain the three repeated subheadings of illumination, implementation and artistic refrain. Within these subtopics, the researcher is guided subtly through a woven tapestry of descriptive applications with the use of sample portraiture projects. Artfully and respectfully mirroring the methodology with their own experiences, they create vignette portrayals within the text. This allows the qualitative researcher an academically creative piece of literature as a guide. Step by step, I revisited the text to assist and guide my writing process.

In my initial considerations of assessing Participatory Action Research, I found *Action Research in Practice; Partnerships for Social Justice in Education* (1998), edited by Bill Atweh, Stephen Kemmis and Patricia Weeks, an illuminating overview of various academic articles on the subject. These articles discussed various perspectives of PAR and the guiding principles behind it as it relates to educational practice. The one particular article I gained extensive insight from was *Participatory Action Research and the study of practice*. In this article, Stephen Kemmis and

<sup>57</sup>Van Manen, M. (2002, pg. 2)

Mervyn Wilkinson eloquently summed up considerations for PAR practice with specific outlined principles plus images and graphics to support their writing. The listed questions offered an evaluative tool for incorporating PAR, were extremely helpful in my initial thesis process. As I read these questions, I instantly recognized how the CGCD project; my classroom experiences, mixed with my research process aptly attributed themselves to the foundations of PAR.

Another methodologically based text, which I found useful, was *Participatory Action Research* by Alice McIntyre. This text gives a broader overview of PAR practice. In this Qualitative Research Method Series edition, McIntyre explores PAR from two directions. She gives a glimpse into PAR's history while showing the key methodological influencers who have spanned the globe. Two sentences that immediately resonated with me were: "...there is no fixed formula for designing, practicing and implementing PAR projects. Nor is there one overriding theoretical framework that underpins PAR processes."<sup>58</sup> As I noticed in my research, practitioners from a variety of fields utilize PAR through a diverse range of projects. For the WINS initiative, participating non-profits utilized a variety of tools and projects to coalesce information, which alongside with the participants guided strategic action plans. In the research, the PAR process took two distinct directions, one based on an individual process and the other on a community process. I recognized commonality in McIntyre's text when she referenced educational scholar, Paolo Freire. In the text, she

<sup>58</sup> McIntyre, A. (2008, pg. 2-3)

discusses Paolo Freire's influence on Action Research regarding his ongoing stance of reflexivity in teaching as it relates to social change.

Finally, a mandatory text for any researcher, who is contemplating PAR from a social issues perspective, would be *The Action Research Planner; Doing Critical Participatory Action Research* by Stephen Kemmis, Robin McTaggart and Rhonda Nixon. In the 200+-page text, the authors give an in depth, detailed outline of PAR with an array of exemplars to draw from. Many aspects to this text drew me in, from its distinctly honest accounts of how they had experienced PAR, to the skillfully balanced approach in describing the process by three astute scholars in the field. As I read the text, I realized how the WINS initiative could be categorized as a PAR process. However, I also realized how my educational PAR practice differed in some ways. Overall, the main idea that resonated with me were how legitimate, current and relevant this research methodology is and how it fits into the realities of collaborative, community-based projects.

### **What I bring to this Journey...**

As I reflect on my own journey, it has led me to acknowledge the key point that stories have played a major role in my life. This reality has been in part due both to my upbringing and to my interest in stories as a way of knowing. In this next section, I would like to impart, through a journal entry, some of my motivations as they relate to my exploration into storytelling.

For as long as I can remember I have listened to my ancestors, mentors and good friends reel off tales of their lived experiences with Shakespearean ease. Like a child listening to the librarian during story hour, I would sit passively chin in hands letting my mind drift away into another world. As I said earlier, stories were always fond friends to me but they were never an item that I envisioned myself as having the capacity to narrate. I am not a storyteller. I am a listener, reader and appreciator of stories. I have never desired the attention or responsibility a good storyteller gains. However, like the day I gave birth to my daughter, the need to provide my story to another happened upon me. It was now my turn to start embracing my role as orator and educator. This was a huge shift for my life and pedagogical practice. During my Master's program, one of my reasons for turning this storytelling table around one hundred and eighty degrees, involved my daughters. I needed to pass on anything and everything that I could think to tell them; describe for them, about my life and what I knew to be my life; if not for them, then for my grandchildren and my grandchildren's children.

For me, storytelling is a mode that describes a person and the values they uphold. It becomes a way to impart ancestral knowledge which then gives rise to strong and grounded future generations. As I reflect on how

family has entered into this storytelling conversation, the thought harkens me back to an Indie movie I watched many years ago *My Life Without Me* (2003) starring Canadian actress/director Sarah Polley and American actor/activist Mark Ruffalo. This movie tells a story of a struggling young mother diagnosed with a terminal illness. While caring for her two daughters and a husband, knowing she only had two months to live, she decides to keep the diagnosis to herself. She then proceeds to document her life via taped cassette recordings. These recordings will be for the daughters once she is gone. In each recording, she narrates certain morsels of her life experiences with advice to her husband as to when to pass them along. These recorded dialogues are documented stories of who the mother is and was in relation to her children. I found it to be a truly engaging film where Sarah Polley manages to depict "a deep, witty and truly heartbreaking personal journey into a young woman's mind" through the words of Isabel Coixet.<sup>59</sup> Coixet wrote a script that generated a character Polley could embody. In scriptwriting, it becomes imperative that a writer captures the aesthetics of the environmental surroundings, the emotions of the character as well as their relationships. What the character represents is the story. This is how an actor is able to turn a piece of written script into a lived life.

Similarly, with narrative portraiture, an audience is led word by word into the experiences of the portraitist's vision of the experience. However, in narrative portraiture as a form for academic writing, there is also a

<sup>59</sup> Coixet, I (2003)

means for unearthing relative truths through objective omniscient observation. This allows the voice of the narrator to remain as authentic to the situation as possible and maintain the scholarly integrity required. Portraiture embraces analytic rigor while supporting community building. Joseph Featherstone calls it "a people's scholarship" whereby "scientific facts gathered in the field give voice to a people's experience."<sup>60</sup> Therefore, the portraitist, unlike a scriptwriter, is carefully observing and listening in order to capture the central story and develop the authentic narrative portrait.<sup>61</sup> Portraitists are witnesses to the experience not creators of it. At the same time, portraiture creates an artistic rendering of a phenomenologically based study, which is also appropriate for an art-based thesis such as this.

<sup>60</sup> Featherstone, J. (1989, p 367-378)

<sup>61</sup> Lawrence-Lightfoot, S., & Davis, J. H. (1997).

## Chapter III. Situating the Project



**Figure 5 – Community by the River By Theresa K. Howell**

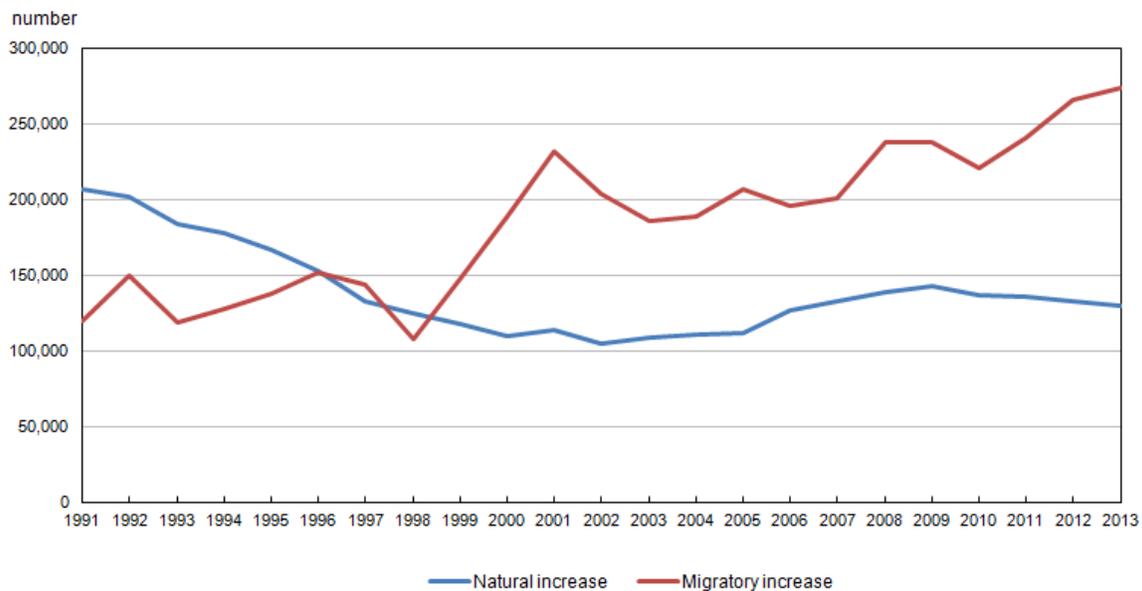
*“Even if we are present at some historic event, do we comprehend it-can we even remember it-until we can tell it in a story?”*

*-Ursula K. Le Guin <sup>62</sup>*

<sup>62</sup>Loy, David R. (2010, p.53)

To me, storytelling has become a means to foster understanding for newcomer voices within my classroom. In 2012 over a quarter of a million newcomers had been welcomed to Canada, the highest influx of immigrants in over 50 years.<sup>63</sup>

**Chart 2**  
Annual natural and migratory increases in Canada, 1991 to 2013



Source: Statistics Canada, Demography Division, Population Estimates Program.

### Figure 6 – Migration Graph

Due to this, many local communities decided to address mediation techniques to assist newcomers towards settlement within their communities. This mediation would assist mutual understandings and

<sup>63</sup> Statistics Canada. Minister of Industry (2016)

communications within communities outwards to the society as a whole. One of the keystones, for the facilitation process, is the idea of exploring inclusive community projects with newcomer populations.<sup>64</sup> New Westminster has become one of these aforementioned communities.<sup>65</sup> Being one of the smallest municipalities in the Lower Mainland, New Westminster decided to initiate a project for businesses, service providers and its citizens, both new and old, to join in a conversation on how the community could become more inclusive and barrier free. In doing so, the implementation of the various WINS community initiatives began. The conceptual graphic (figure 2) below outlines the considerations important for what this particular CGCD project needed to focus on.

<sup>64</sup> Welcome BC, Province of BC (2016)

<sup>65</sup> New Westminster Chamber of Commerce (2016)



**Figure 7 - CGCD Project Conceptual Graphic By Theresa K. Howell**

Since New Westminster was one of a growing number of city municipalities in which newcomer populations were on the rise, the municipal leaders felt the WINS initiative would be a welcome component to a future vision of community engagement. Part of this project involved the use of storytelling dialogue circles. Immigrant Services Society of BC, the organization I had worked for, partially led the project. In conjunction with Family Services of Greater Vancouver, both organizations worked to enlist eight volunteer immigrants and a variety of community members to come together with intentions to enable stronger community communications and connections. The idea of "community stories" isn't new concept but it manages to utilize a collection of oral narratives for "the express purpose of defining or building new communities, with the local stories being

published or taped..."<sup>66</sup> By engaging in this project, the collaboration of participants hoped to engage and alter communications within the city for now and into the future. From my perspective, the WINS CGCD project presented a valuable and momentous opportunity for newcomers to directly affect the place where they reside.

At the same time, by watching these dialogue circles unfold, similar moments of yearned for answers from ongoing questions surfaced; Where have these newcomers come from? What motivates them to come here? What are their lived experiences? Hearing the foundations and backgrounds of these immigrant communities, plus some of the hardships they suffered, proved to enlighten community members to the struggles that these populations experience. Through communication, a community can create an open door for greater understanding. Hannah Arendt, renowned scholar and theorist, has described her experiences of being a WWII holocaust survivor in many of her texts. In the book, *Reading across borders: Storytelling and knowledges of resistance*, Stone-Mediatore discusses Arendt's descriptions of her own lived experiences of a time and place that refused communication. Arendt felt that shutting communities off from dialoguing and storytelling is dangerous. It can establish a breeding ground for isolation and discrimination. When people shut themselves off from dialogues and communications from others that are different, ignorance supplants truth.<sup>67</sup> As an educator and student, I have realized

<sup>66</sup> Brown, Lindsay (1997)

<sup>67</sup> Stone-Mediatore, S. (2003, p. 52)

how important these communicative exchanges can become for a person's well-being and integration into a culture, a city, a school or workplace. This is the difference between *living in darkness* to *living in light*. To understand the other has allowed me to shift and alter my life world. The ability to open myself up to other perspectives has expanded my visions into new possibilities.

### **Immigration and the need for community connections**

Immigration to Canada, like most other first world countries, has risen in recent years. Possible reasons for this rise could be due to the ease of global travel, rising austerity in other countries, or global political unrest and economic strife. These factors plus Canada's reputation as a growing, peaceful and resource rich country as well as its open door policy on immigration may also be relevant reasons.

Through a variety of conversations with my students mixed with further reading and research, I started to recognize the initial challenges and costs of integration for the newcomer and their supporters. As can be noted from the Canadian Immigration and Citizenship website, immigration applications are categorized into four categories; *family class*, *economic class* and *refugee status* with a fourth being "*other immigrants*" which has a limited number of applicants.

*Family class* is defined as spouse, common law partner, dependent child, parent, grandparent, adopted children, children to be adopted, orphans and other family classes. In family class, Canadian citizens sponsor any of the aforementioned newcomers. If a citizen is specifically sponsoring

a spouse or common law partner, they must live together for a minimum of two years.<sup>68</sup> While it is understood that based on sponsorship, the citizen:

"... must make every reasonable effort to provide for your own essential needs and those of your family. You are responsible for supporting your relative financially when he or she arrives. As a sponsor, you must make sure your spouse or relative does not need to seek social assistance from the government."<sup>69</sup>

I think it is important for people to realize that this also means that the newcomer remains dependent on the sponsor until this process of approval is achieved. However, as of December 22, 2014, eligible spouses or common-law partners have the opportunity to apply for a work permit while they await their permanent residency.<sup>70</sup> For many of us that form of dependency in adulthood could equate to living with our parents again.

In regards to parents, as of 2016, Canada had an annual 10,000-person application limit for immigration of parents or grandparents.<sup>71</sup> However, the federal government inaugurated a "Super Visa" application

<sup>68</sup> Government of Canada; Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (2016)

<sup>69</sup> Government of Canada; Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (2016) retrieved from <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/immigrate/sponsor/spouse.asp>

<sup>70</sup> Ibid

<sup>71</sup> Government of Canada Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (2016) retrieved from <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/immigrate/sponsor/parents.asp>

procedure in 2014 for any parent or grandparent wishing family reunification. Under the visa guidelines, the particular individual or individuals are allowed to stay in Canada for up to 2 years before returning to their home country. The same financial and assistance responsibilities as sponsorship would apply as stated above for these visa applicants.<sup>72</sup>

In *Economic Class*, the category is broken down into different sub categories. These are as follows: *skilled workers*, *Canadian experience class*, *immigrant investors*, and *self-employed*, *provincial nominees*, and finally *caregiver's*. Since June 2014, the immigrant investor program has been terminated and is awaiting pilot programs. All others are still running and accepting applications under certain specific guidelines outlined for their said category. However, as of April 2015, a new label called *Express Entry* has replaced the *Federal Skilled Worker Class* and the *Canadian Experience Class*. In the *Economic Class* category, unlike Refugees or Family Class, the applicant must be able to provide proof that they have the funds to support themselves as well as their dependents before they are accepted.<sup>73</sup>

Finally, the *Refugee Status* category can be further delineated into refugees applying within Canada or outside of Canada. If applying from outside Canada, these are specified as *Conventional Refugee Abroad* class

<sup>72</sup> Government of Canada Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (2016) retrieved from <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/visit/supervisa-who.asp>

<sup>73</sup> Government of Canada Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (2016) retrieved from <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/immigrate/skilled/arrival.asp>

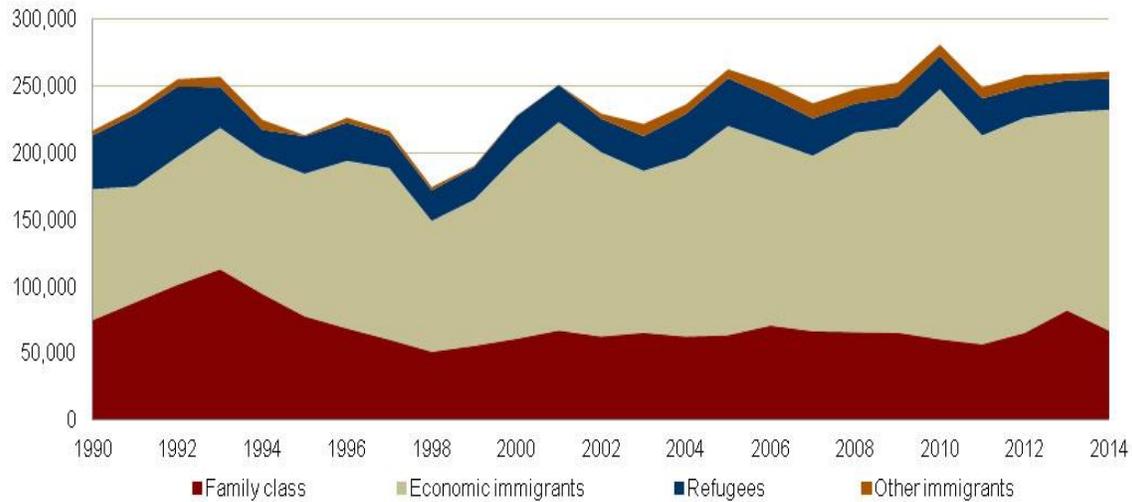
and *Asylum Country* class. Refugees can be Government Sponsored (GAR), Privately Sponsored (PSR) or a Blended Visa Office-Referred refugee (BVORs). In these categories, the refugee could be supported for up to one year.<sup>74</sup> As of May 2016, GAR's represent 15,355 people; PSR's, 9,494 and BVOR, 2,341.<sup>75</sup> For refugees applying for *Conventional Refugee* status, they would be outside of their home country and applying to come to Canada based on a well-established fear of being persecuted based on their race, religion, political opinion, nationality or a member within a particular social group, such as women or people with a particular sexual orientation. In applying under this status from abroad they may be government assisted, privately sponsored or can support themselves and their family. They also need to be referred by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) or another accepted referential organization. A private sponsorship program or group can also sponsor them. *Asylum* class holds the same criteria, except, it is based on their home country being and continuing to be seriously affected by civil war or armed conflict, or suffering massive human rights violations.<sup>76</sup> Many examples of such refugee home countries, that my recent students have been from, are Syria, Iran, Iraq, Somalia and the Republic of Congo to name a few.

<sup>74</sup> Government of Canada Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (2016) retrieved from <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/refugees/outside/index.asp>

<sup>75</sup> Government of Canada Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (2016) retrieved from <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/refugees/welcome/milestones.asp>

<sup>76</sup> Government of Canada Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (2016) retrieved from <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/refugees/outside/index.asp>

It is important to note that the largest numbers of immigration applications are applied via Economic class as can be noted in the following graph.



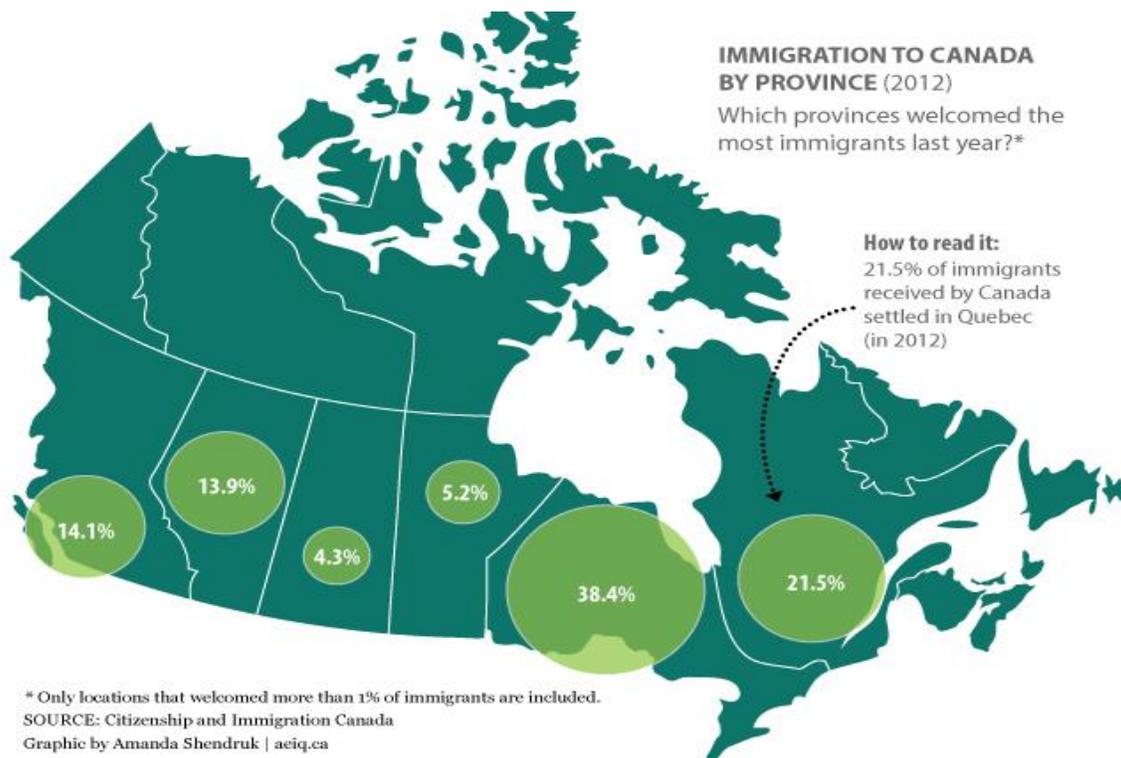
**Figure 8 - Canada – Permanent residents by category, 1989 to 2014<sup>77</sup>**  
Retrieved from Government of Canada website statistics on Permanent Residents June 2015

It must also be recognized that the majority of newcomers to Canada are coming here electively. In most cases they are seeking work or wanting to go to school. In 2014, 63.4% were economic immigrants, 25.6% were family class and 8.9% were refugees. This has been an increase of approximately 20% for the economic class since 1990 but a 10% decrease for both family class and refugee class in that same timeframe.<sup>78</sup> I think these numbers become relevant in the face of the recent Syrian Refugee crisis. From 1990

<sup>77</sup>Government of Canada Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (2016) retrieved from <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/resources/statistics/facts2014/permanent/01.asp#figure2>

<sup>78</sup> Government of Canada Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (2016) retrieved from <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/resources/statistics/facts2014/permanent/01.asp#figure2>

to 2014, the highest influx of refugees to Canada was in 1991 whereby 54,069 were taken in. Meanwhile, as of May 2016, only 27,190 have entered. If we further breakdown these numbers as to where people are relocating to, it can be seen from the "Immigration in 2012" graphic that the third largest immigration of newcomers has been coming to BC while the largest numbers are still located out east in Ontario and Quebec.



**Figure 9 - Immigration Graphic** by Amanda Shendruk

Source: March 4th, 2013 at <http://www.macleans.ca/authors/amanda-shendruk/canadian-immigration-by-the-numbers/>

Seeing these numbers might have sparked some realizations in local municipalities that integration programs for new Canadians needed to be looked at specifically. As early as April 2011, the municipality of New Westminster realized it wanted to take a more proactive stance on how to approach their integration process. Thus, in 2012, John Stark, Social Planner

for the City of New Westminster, put out a call for submissions for any ideas on how the city could be more welcoming and inclusive. Stark had looked at the immigration stats and realized that between 2006-2011, 61% of new residents to New Westminster were immigrants. Based on the gross population of New Westminster in 2011, this number made up a third of the municipalities population. Certain ideas needed to be implemented to assist the breaking down of barriers faced by newcomers within the New Westminster community. Responding to this, the city formed a multicultural advisory committee. Once the committee was formed they started to narrow the scopes of focus into workplace and employment concerns plus general accessibility issues faced in a newcomer's settlement experience. Looking at a portion of these issues, an idea for utilizing a "Common Ground Circle " dialogue as a means for knowledge acquisition surfaced.<sup>79</sup> This project became founded on the idea that:

“...intercultural dialogues served to be a wellspring of learning. Where the results obtained through these activities could provide a structured framework that can be presented to the local media, community organizations and service providers throughout the City of New Westminster. ”<sup>80</sup>

<sup>79</sup> Bartel (2014)

<sup>80</sup> New Westminster Common Ground Circles Report (2013, pg. 5)

Being a resident of New Westminster as well as employee for one of the participating settlement services agencies, I became directly impacted by the project.

## **The Community on the River**

Along the Fraser River, in New Westminster's Pier Park resides a sign that reads "Community on the River" (Figure 3) This quaint, hamlet community is one of the smallest and oldest in the lower mainland and its history rivals that of Vancouver. In the early 1800's, before Confederation, it held the honour of being British Columbia's provincial capital. However, once the colony of British Columbia was joined with the Vancouver Island colony, the primarily British aristocratic populous of Victoria outvoted New Westminster for being the colonies official capital 13-8. Unlike Victoria, New Westminster was made up of business oriented locals and mariners, which considered themselves to be more grounded in enterprising, day to day living and community focused activities. Because of this, the downtown main artery named Columbia Street, was given the title of "the golden mile". This shopping district hosted, Eaton's, Kresge's and Woolworths, which was the central shopping area for the Fraser Valley until the 50's and 60's when malls became popular and the #1 highway was built. As time moved on many other changes were thrust upon New Westminster. The Fraser River became one of the biggest assets to the community. It was a major means for the transportation of resources in and out of the various lower mainland communities. Due to its reputation as a waterway transport resource hub, Canadian Pacific Rail (CPR) built its first

transportation center here in 1886 but one more time New Westminster (New West) was left in the dust. In 1887, CPR decided to relocate its main terminal to Vancouver instead.

With regards to transport, currently New West prides itself as being one of the most accessible communities whether by public transit or car. It lies at the center of many growing lower mainland communities such as Burnaby, Coquitlam, and Surrey. It is important to mention that New West had the earliest and largest Chinese community in colonial times. As well, in 1879 three reserves totaling 153 acres were allocated to the New Westminster First Nations Bands. Unfortunately, many of the members were devastated by the small pox epidemic, while the remaining Qayqayt were absorbed into the Musqueam Band before 1913. Currently, almost 40% of New Westminster's population is constructed of visible minorities and aboriginal populations.<sup>81</sup>

In my decision to relocate from Vancouver Island to the mainland, I remember a friend telling me about New Westminster. She said, "...it's the perfect place, it is surrounded by water yet, it is on the west side of most of the major bridges in the lower mainland. Therefore, you won't have to cross them. As well, it is a central hub for transport and it has a diverse population...possibly one of the most diverse next to Vancouver. At the same time, it is still affordable plus it has an old world charm." By creating this picture, my friend called up relevant information on which I could base my relocation decision. In a contextually descriptive format she related a

<sup>81</sup> Wikipedia (2016)

substantial grounding to base my decision on. In saying this, painting a picture of a site is also relevant in narrative portraiture. As Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) establishes moving from the macro to the micro environment or from the *outside in*, is a mandatory part of creating context for a study.<sup>82</sup> So let's begin.

### **Common Ground Circles Dialogues; The Beginning**

Two streets up from the historical "Golden Mile", on Royal Avenue, between a medical clinic and Douglas College, stands the building where the dialogue sessions will take place. Immigrant Services Society of BC is the destination. It's tucked modestly in the corner suite on the second floor of a Royal Avenue business low-rise alongside the dominating presence of a *Service Canada* office. As I approach the door, I notice it is open. A volunteer staff member greets me, "Hi, you must be Theresa?", as if welcoming me to a housewarming party. As I fumble to gently nudge my photo and video equipment to one side, I expose my hand for a handshake and give my head an affirmative nod. As the volunteer starts down the hall, she beckons, "Follow me, it is right down here." I do not want to expose the fact that I have been in this office

<sup>82</sup> Lawrence-Lightfoot, S., & Davis, J. H. (1997, pg. 61)

space over 1000 times before. This has been my place of employment for the last 5 years. I want my role to remain a participant observer so I follow along silently. ISSofBC is one of the service agencies working on the Receptive Communities component (the grassroots community chapter of WINS) of the Welcoming and Inclusive New Westminster Community Partnership table alongside Family Services of Greater Vancouver. ISSofBC joined WINS since it is one of their mission mandates to "develop partnerships with local communities and promote an integrated and equitable community". ISSofBC is a non-profit service agency that facilitates educational, settlement and employment services to Canadian newcomers. It started back in 1972 and has become one of the largest, multicultural, immigrant-serving agencies in western Canada.<sup>83</sup>

As I follow the community volunteer along the narrow hallway, which opens up into a common area, I acknowledge the walls, which feature various 16x20 portrait photos of newcomer Canadians. These were the results of another project that ISSofBC initiated back in 2009 called "New Faces of BC". I was also co-opted into writing curriculum for this project where I did some 'one on one' interviews with a couple of the

<sup>83</sup> Immigrant Services Society of BC (2016)

participant photographers. This photography contest was for Greater Vancouver residents to capture the diverse culture of the city. The resulting images now dawn the walls of the agencies schools and settlement offices. In front of the entrance to the room sits a table where the nametags lie. I pick mine up and walk inside. About 10 people are milling about talking in small groups and a couple of participants are sitting at the central round table. The room is large with computer stations aligned against the two adjacent walls facing the entrance while a set of eight tables form a hexagon circle in the middle of the room. In the opposite corner, a smaller laminated beech wood table hosts a coffee and tea station, biscuits, fresh fruit and cheeses. A couple of people are stirring a coffee before the meeting starts. As I move into the room, I, inconspicuously, set up my video and camera gear. I see my manager, Andrea, hurriedly walking in, "You made it." "Yes." I respond with relief, "I was worried I was going to be late. The microphone, I rented, was on Georgia Street downtown." She responds, "Well, I can take the mic back with me on my way home. Make sure to give me the receipt, I'll get a cheque cut for you." I respond with a respectful "Thanks."

The main facilitator from a nearby Family Services agency brings the room to attention. "Can we all grab a seat? Before we get started I need to let you know our videographer, Theresa, will be recording these proceedings. Please, could you carefully read the photo/video release form that is in front of you. If you have any questions please let me know, if not could you please sign it and I will collect them. Thanks."

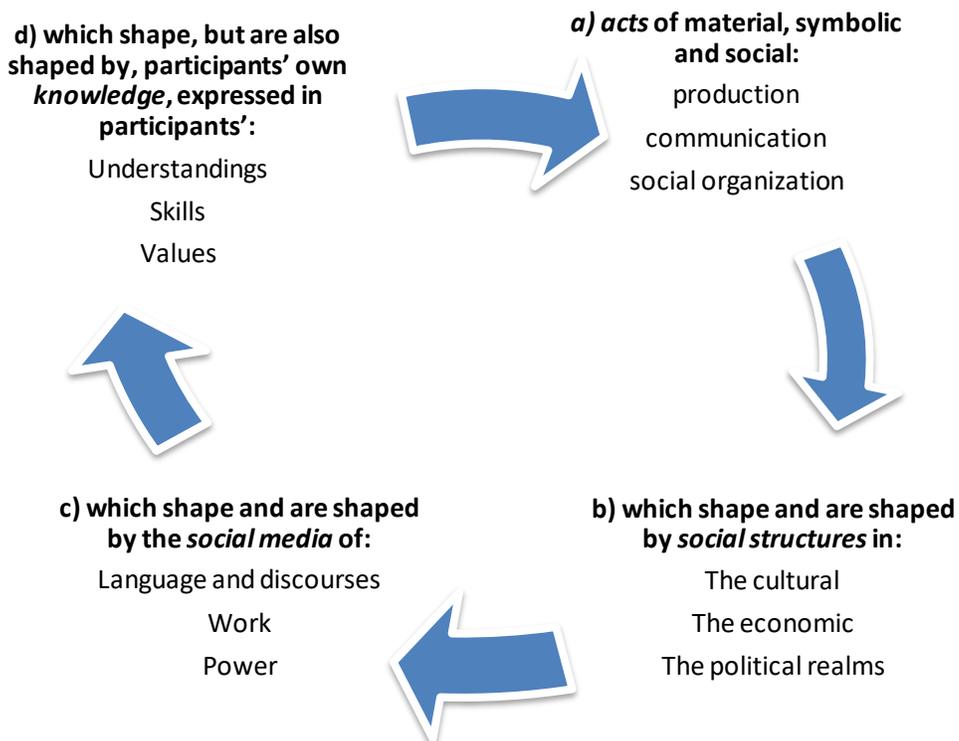
As some look in my direction, I give a gentle nod and smile to the group. They reciprocate. Once the formalities are over, Andrea gives an overview of what the "Common Ground Circle Dialogues" are about. Following this each participant is asked to introduce themselves and comment on one aspect about New Westminster they like the most. Once each person has had time to do this, the storytellers begin.

This initial vignette and the previous background information create a context for this study. Lawrence-Lightfoot establishes as a portraitist that having a social, cultural and historical context creates authenticity and purpose for human interactions. As in any academic research study, it is important to create context. Portraiture should illustrate the environment in such a way that it gives readers a greater sense of being there.<sup>84</sup> By synchronizing a visual memory with the crafting of the narrative this helps

<sup>84</sup> Lawrence-Lightfoot, S., & Davis, J. H. (1997)

situate the audience. The narrative should also incorporate a means to understand the values and themes lying beneath the surface. In describing the images on the wall as well as narrating the dialogue between Andrea and myself I want to emphasize the integrity of the people hosting the event and the environment.

Like portraiture, PAR involves underlying contextual information that guides the practice of research. PAR practice involves areas of focus that sensitively look at a way to facilitate its process. These areas are highlighted in the diagram below which shows the major tangible factors considered for a PAR related process:



...and the cycle repeats itself as the participants own knowledge reshapes the acts of material, symbolic and social

production, communication and social organization which in turn shapes...<sup>85</sup>

I saw the three phases of the CGCD project attending to these various focal points. In the first phase there was a three-hour workshop, which involved only the immigrant storytellers and their friends plus a facilitator. This became the initial *act* of production, communication and social organization for the CGCD's. In the session, a LINC instructor, and colleague, guided the participants through the development of their story process. The preparatory workshop was set up in the same room as described above but the room housed five separate smaller hexagonal tables. On these tables were bins filled with markers, pencils, pens, glue, and scissors plus notepaper as well as cards. The facilitator first gave examples of what the story might be about. Then she described her story of moving to a new province and being faced with the challenges of adaptation. After her story, she modelled how her story could be constructed using a tree diagram, which included circular cut-outs of yellow, and green paper which were to resemble leaves. These circular cut outs were written on in point form based on specific eruptive or poignant moments in time relating to her migration process. They were then glued onto the specific branches in a manner significant to the storyteller. Therefore, the tree became a tangible, visual starting point whereby the storyteller can hang their initial thoughts. Like a tree of life this particular diagram structure gave not only something two dimensional to initiate the

<sup>85</sup> Atweh, B., Kemmis, S., and Weeks, P. (1998)

thought process but also became a useful metaphor. Because it was non-linear, it allowed for greater fluidity of movement and gave a better sense of a dynamic whole that better depicts a person's life path. Trees also symbolize growth mixed with stoicism, evolution as well as growth and rootedness. Thus, they are a perfect metaphor for lives and stories.<sup>86</sup> Once the storytellers had determined the distinct highlights of their personal story, based on their immigration process into Canada, they practiced telling their stories using the noted highlights. In small comfortable groups, which included their friends, they narrated their story. Throughout this workshop, the *act* of material production was thoughtfully considered. This production process facilitates a simplified, authentic communication of the immigrant's story. Through the symbolic choices for materials as well as the social organization and communications within the workshop itself, the basis for the CGCD's were established. Once the workshop concluded, the storytellers had a rudimentary story structure to hone and practice before the next phase started.

The second phase involved four separate three-hour sessions with the community members, which initially became the tangible *social structures*, the CGCD addressed. These were based on four specific demographic groups; seniors, men, women and youth. With these, a professional facilitator mediated and guided the sessions. During these gatherings, the educative value of the sessions evolved through the stories followed by an interactive dialogic process. During the interactive

86 Field notes from WINS CGCD

dialogues, the community group, which was comprised of residents and active community members, would ask the storytellers candid questions relating to what they heard. By specifically attending to these demographic groups, the project allowed for related cultural and economic considerations plus their relevant communications. It also accounted for the specific identity understandings and values, which also created a safe, conducive platform for personal agency.

These sessions were further broken down into two stages. The first stage consisted of introductions, the storytelling and a reflective process. The second stage consisted of the interactive dialogues with the storytellers, reflections and conclusions. These next two stages shaped the *social media*, which affected the participant's *knowledge* in an repeated flow of reciprocal ranges of communications. In the two stages, the community groups were asked to reflect on what was said in the stories as well as on the session itself. The immigrant storytellers were only asked to reflect on the session itself since their stories were the focal point of the reflections. In each stage, the participants were given 5-10 minutes to sum up their thoughts and write them on cards or sticky notes. In the specific dialogic and reflective process within the CGCD's, the storytelling helped to shape and reshape the discourse amongst the community members based on their experience and career backgrounds. With this, certain amounts of knowledge surfaced to reinvigorate further reflections and actions within the community participants and storytellers. In the following Chapters IV, V & VI, VIII, you will find the portraits and story vignettes from these dialogue

circles. In these chapters, I will also share my learnings and reflections on the process.

The final phase of the CGCD process became the outcomes from the dialogues: a mixture of newspaper articles, toolkits, organizational and community based meetings, the CGCD videos, the thesis plus the community action plan initiatives implemented by WINS. These outcomes shared their own cyclical process of PAR iterations to reach the final product, which in turn could further be refined over time. Primarily, the outcomes became examples of the change and transformation sought. They also became the beginnings to further iterations. A majority of these outcomes are cited and sourced throughout the thesis plus the CGCD videos, a direct source for the storytelling vignette's and the research, can be accessed on YouTube.

## Chapter IV. Community Journey: Reflection and Advocacy



**Figure 10- "Jonah" By Theresa K. Howell**

*"There are stories that take seven days to tell, then there are stories that take all your life."- Diane Glancey<sup>87</sup>*

<sup>87</sup> Glancey, Diane (1997, p. 39)

Personal stories need a particular occasion to introduce themselves into the common lore of a community. By describing circumstance and weaving the information together, a storyteller draws the audience in through the personal connections made. From here conversation allows for "people to process the material conditions of their existence and comprehend their place within the social order. Without sharing and communicating culture a sustained collective action becomes impossible."<sup>88</sup>

A narrative can become a symbol of a group's identity through sharing a discourse that coalesces that particular identity and gives possible future actions.<sup>89</sup> As these Common Ground Circle Dialogues (CGCD) came to fruition, the idea of pulling together various people to witness the immigrant storied experiences was one of the collective actions. Based on the impact of these storytelling journeys, I recognized, as an educator/artist, an obligation to inform and educate others with the results. Paulo Freire establishes that as educators it becomes a duty to engage communication regarding social action within our communities. As he says, "Education is always political and educators are the political operatives..."<sup>90</sup> As a videographer, I can affect change into the larger community around me through my art. It is through this art that the voices

<sup>88</sup> Schneider, William (2002, pg. 41)

<sup>89</sup> Stories of change: Narrative and social movements (2002, p.230)

<sup>90</sup> Steinberg, Shirley and Cucinelli, Giuliana (2012, April 30)

of others can be heard outside of closed doors. When I think of communities, I see a league of individuals working together collectively. This word *community* derives itself from the French word *communauté* which came from the Latin word *communitas*; "*com*= with/together + *munas* = gift". Community, as defined, is "a group of interacting organisms sharing an environment."<sup>91</sup> Based on the etymology of the word, it makes sense that the key to community would be having the gift of interaction with each other. As witness and videographer to the CGCD's, I respectfully became part of the community process of shared engagement. Because of this, the documentation of the event became another contribution to a growing digital storytelling record. Therefore, a time, space and event, within the historical record, presented itself.

Stone-Mediatore's discusses Hannah Arendt's approach to the public role of storytelling. Arendt took great strides in staying balanced about her narrative depictions of communities. These narratives became a way of "learning from" not just "a stating of fact" based on a historical time and place. It was also important for Arendt to establish a moral foundation of non-judgement. Yet, she wanted learned conclusions or insights to follow in order to support further community development. In her depictions of Germany during WWII, she drew on literature, biography, and testimony in order to treat events in their specificity, their strangeness, their moral intensity, and their situated-ness within our world. By doing this, it was

<sup>91</sup> Wikipedia Foundation (2016) retrieved from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Community\\_\(disambiguation\)\]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Community_(disambiguation))

Arendt's goal to help establish a different outlook for her community's intrinsic health and well being.

Relating difficult experiences to others reminds me of how witnessing vulnerability can be uncomfortable at times. In communities, I believe, we should view this discomfort with reflection, deep compassion and communication. What is it that made this situation difficult? What are the barriers and why are they there? Stone-Mediatore pointed out that Arendt noticed, "the widespread Nazi indoctrination was facilitated by the lack of communicative relations."<sup>92</sup> People were literally isolating themselves and being insulated from communicating with each other. Not only can stories open up unseen possibilities for communication but they can also open a means for change outside the story.

As communities restructure, these dialogic forums of interaction can change and evolve alongside it. With the incorporation of storytelling into culture as a means for coping and transcending difficult challenges, a possible reanimated form of communication may help prevent a sense of isolation and insulation. It gives us another tool for reflection, critical thinking and shared communications. It can also develop as an avenue to inspire new ideas or, at the very least, give rise to them. Here in lies the metamorphosis. This is the awakening of the *in-between*, from the individual's lived experience to community engagement. As will be seen in the following stories, cultural challenges can arise both *between* cultures

<sup>92</sup> Stone-Mediatore, S. (2003, p. 52)

and *within* cultures. By dialogically engaging in these CGCD's, connections and conversations understanding arose. While witnessing the men's dialogues, I saw connective themes blossoming.

### **The Men's Storytelling Dialogue Circle**

The men's session was the first evening meeting of the three week long Common Ground Circle Dialogue events. Somehow, this evening generated a particular uniqueness. Walking into the room the lights were quite bright and the environment was electric. It may have been the anticipation of the weeknight community networking activity that created a different energy for this demographic group. Either way, it felt unique. As I made my way into the room, I saw a table to the right of the doorway. It had an array of participant nametags lined up on top of it. As I moved into the room, six tables formed a single large hexagonal shape in the middle of the room. On the tables were pens and pads of paper and 12 chairs surrounded it. The smell of fresh brewed coffee permeated the air and about eight participants had already arrived. Some of the male participants were milling about creating sparse small talk as they introduced themselves to each other. Meanwhile others were grabbing coffee, tea and complimentary refreshments at the corner table. Before

the meeting began, I learned this demographic group would entail local businessmen and politicians, though Chris, my ISSofBC colleague and note taker. So as not to draw attention to myself as the media person, I made a point of dressing in a subdued manner, wearing a grey long sleeved cotton shirt and black dress pants. I needed to be the so-called "fly on the wall". It was a good thing too as all of the men were dressed in a more formal attire. Most wore dress pants and shirts, some blazers and only a few were in casual wear. One gentleman that entered late was in sports attire as he had just arrived from coaching an afterschool basketball practice. All of the men were proactively involved in the New West community and the number of people at the session soon reached its maximum; the expected twelve participants. The Welcoming and Inclusive New Westminster (WINS) committee decided to limit the number, for the adult sessions to twelve in order to keep the Common Ground Circle Dialogues intimate, yet, big enough to involve an array of community members.

As the meeting started, the men were informed of the schedule for the evening as well as the purpose behind the WINS Common Ground Circle Dialogue project. After this, release forms were signed and

individual introductions with an accompanying personal thought about New Westminster was requested. Some of the thoughts that were uttered while going around the circle were..."New West is family oriented; it has a strong sense of community; it has many accessible resources; and the city embraces diversity."<sup>93</sup> As the last few participants articulated their thoughts, a certain spirit of positive engagement was established.

Now, the two storytellers were directed to share their experiences of moving to Canada. However, before the first storyteller started another latecomer arrived. It was New Westminster's/Burnaby's provincial MP, Peter Julian. Being a soft-spoken, low-key man, his presence was acknowledged but it didn't detract from the direction the session was heading. This was the only session of the four that had governmental, (municipal and federal), members present. Once everyone got settled in again, Hamed, the first participant storyteller, started. He was a tall man with a deep, calm voice. His saucer shaped eyes depicted a bright innocence while his unshaven worn face depicted a certain maturity that years of hard work alluded to. One of the more casually dressed men, he wore a cotton dress shirt with an Aztec design. He sat

<sup>93</sup> Field notes from CGCD

comfortably in his chair with his hands atop his written story. Hamed, was a Lebanese born immigrant, who had moved to Canada, as a refugee, years earlier via Dubai. As he started his story, we soon learned that he was a tradesman. He established that he "gained work easily in Dubai...working six weeks on and three weeks off at an oil platform for eight years before returning back to Lebanon. However, it was a bad time to move back...Lebanon had just broken out in war"<sup>94</sup> and he was a peace-loving person at heart. He shared that it isn't easy to take that stance "They expect you to take a side".<sup>95</sup> So he made his way back to Dubai in order to immigrate out of the middle east war zone. He initially migrated to Montreal where he found the cold harsh winters difficult to get used to. Yet, as a trained electrician from Dubai, he found it easy to access a job in Montreal. But after a couple of years, he started feeling the changes in some people's attitudes regarding cultural tolerances within the city. Being sensitive to segregationist behaviours, he chose instead to migrate west to British Columbia before sponsoring his wife and children from Dubai. Upon arriving in New Westminster, he instantly

<sup>94</sup> video footage from WINS CGCD

<sup>95</sup> video footage from WINS CGCD

felt more comfortable. There was one drawback though; finding employment wasn't as easy for him in New Westminster. Soon after his trek west, he finally became reunited with his wife and three children. Their immigration applications from abroad had been processed and they arrived in Vancouver shortly before his participation in the CGCD event. Therefore, his sense of urgency to attain employment had become paramount. At the time of the dialogue circles, he was still in the process of looking for a job and had spent numerous hours volunteering for local organizations such as the Food Bank and Salvation Army. He also contributed his time to his children's school. Even though his means were limited, he asserted, during the earlier workshop sessions, "We are all equal even without money."<sup>96</sup> ...and with the conclusion of his story, he proclaimed, "BC is the best place, I have ever lived."<sup>97</sup>

During Hamed's story, there were definite references to how dissonance can happen within cultures as well as across them. I also realized how difficult it must be for a person to come to another country that is so different from their home country to start all over again. The immigration journey seemed to take its toll on some newcomers; for Hamed, this was written on his face and in the tone of his voice as he talked

<sup>96</sup> video footage from WINS CGCD

<sup>97</sup> Field notes from CGCD

of trying to find employment. Through follow up interviews, with some of the other participants, I learned that immigrating at certain ages could come at a price. Maliha Mayeed, a program assistant at ISSofBC and a previous immigrant to Canada, informed me “Volunteering and working at places you don’t want to...is hard but that is how you get started.”<sup>98</sup> She also established that starting all over again at an older age is definitely a negative aspect to immigration. It is the point in a person’s life where they are usually winding down; yet, upon immigration they are, now, moving from job to job, not knowing people or where to go next. “It is hard” but she points out that there is a saying from Bangladesh, her country of origin: “Turtles bite... when turtles bite they don’t let go. So it’s important to not give up hope.”<sup>99</sup> It is then that the need to move forward springs from hope. As Freire points out “Hope is not a question of grit or courage. It’s an ontological dimension of our human condition.”<sup>100</sup>

In Jonah’s story, the other CGCD men’s storyteller, another meaning to this idea of *turtle’s bite* is described. Simultaneously, while listening to Jonah’s story, I felt he had an innate ability to capture his audience’s attention with his storytelling sensibilities.

Jonah, the next participant storyteller, held an air of being an astute professional with an approachable, friendly demeanour. He came to the meeting with a manicured moustache and a clean starched white

<sup>98</sup> ISSofBC (2014) Part 2 “Understanding the Challenges”

<sup>99</sup> ISSofBC (2014) Part 2 “Understanding the Challenges”

<sup>100</sup> Freire, Paulo (1998, pg. 58)

shirt with black pin striping. His smile easily welcomed others to reciprocate. As Jonah smiled, his whole face smiled, which helped illuminate an already bright environment. Originating from Mexico, he had a previous career as a project manager for a major IT company. Under the skilled workers program, he moved to Canada via a job transfer with his wife. He started his story with an analogy about his character by saying "I was the child of a tough life." In other words, he stated, "I always wanted things my way even if it was the hard way." When he first moved to Canada, 7 years earlier, he took up cycling as a new passion. It also became a means of commuting to work. During his daily rides, he anticipated a day where he might actually fall as could be expected from any novice. That instance arose as he was coming home from work one day. He went on to point out that even though, he had suffered some minor wounds and scratches, "I was prepared mentally for falling and that was one of the things that kept me going...one of the reasons, I never quit."<sup>101</sup> Although, he found a job more readily than most, the workplace

<sup>101</sup> ISSofBC (2014) Part 1 "Common Ground Circle-Sharing the Journey Together"

culture was starkly different from what he was used to. In his past workplace he states "it was common to shake hands with all the staff members. It was seen as team-building."<sup>102</sup> However, in his new workplace he started to recognize certain aversions to his behaviors so much so that he was demoted from his original job title. This was a difficult lesson but one he embraced since he couldn't deny the challenge. Instead, he decided to "suck it up" and learn new ways to readapt his learned workplace habits. With his innate sense of determination mixed with his need to test his abilities, he decided to become an independent practitioner as well as join the *Ride to Conquer Cancer* organization. Closing the story, he ended it the way he began. He stated that "if I ever feel I am not fit for the job or not good enough, I just have to remind myself that I can do it, I can push through it, after all I am a child of a tough life...." <sup>103</sup>

Grabbing people's attention through orating and storytelling requires a mindful selection. Jonah's use of the metaphorical phrase, "I am a child of

<sup>102</sup> ISSofBC (2014) Part 1 "Common Ground Circle-Sharing the Journey Together"

<sup>103</sup> Ibid

a tough life” engaged us all right away. He seemed to be preparing the audience for a tale of challenges. By using a metaphor such as this, curiosity arises and the listeners, now need to figure out why Jonah had a tough life. There is a common universal formula in stories which equates to character + challenge + resolution = story.<sup>104</sup> Jonathan Gottschall (2012), from his book *The Storytelling Animal*, hypothesizes that the function for this problem structure in storytelling happens because “the human mind was shaped *for story* so it could be shaped *by story*.”<sup>105</sup> The implication here is that since the human mind has a natural tendency to problem solve. It then follows that humans gravitate to learning from challenges, which then reshapes them in the process. With Jonah’s depictions, a certain resemblance to the “cuentista” or natural storyteller is seen. Silvia Richardson (2013) speaks of this in her book, *Flesh Mapping; Cartography of struggle, renewal, and hope in education*.<sup>106</sup> In *Flesh Mapping*, Richardson explores her life through story, poetry and images. In her autobiographical narrative, she unveils intersections where she harkens back to her family’s use of story to paint a picture of their historical narrative. Her uncle would often sit down and relate stories about himself and his sister, Richardson’s mother. Like Richardson and her uncle, Jonah’s story held all the dynamic

<sup>104</sup> Gottschall, Jonathan (2012)

<sup>105</sup> Ibid (2012, pg. 56)

<sup>106</sup> Richardson, S. L. (2013)

qualities synonymous with many family storytellers. He used simplicity, emotion, and real life experience mixed with truthfulness to create validity and resonance with the audience.<sup>107</sup> I have realized in my own process of writing, how the choice and mindful attention to words is essential. It is the difference between relating information and misrepresenting information. Jonah was mindful in his attention to his word choices and this helped to evoke a response in the listeners.

Even though I felt like applauding this display of great storytelling, it seemed ill advised as silence fell amongst the group. Adhering to the CGCD session guidelines was seen as critical for the success of the initiative. Following the storyteller's presentations, the audience was asked to take time to write various thoughts and questions on paper for later retrieval. As this process transpired, the two men sat in quiet anticipation of the break whereby they could network with their fellow community members. Once the ten-minute reflection time passed, legs and arms flew outwards to stretch and unwind as the ritual of break-time mingling began. A sudden hive of activity replaced the silence as all of the men endeavoured to meet and talk to as many of their colleagues as possible. Once the time came to get back to the task at hand, the men

<sup>107</sup> Jarvis, P. (2013)

eagerly prepared themselves for the round table discussion. They all sat at attention, hands atop the tables, with paper and sometimes pen in hand. The participants waited in anticipation for a signal from the facilitator in order to pose their questions to the storytellers. Any and all of the community members were able to ask questions or add information to the forum. Right away, Jacob Sol, the New Westminster School District #40 representative, broke in with a comment. He was a casual professional whose warm and inviting mannerism allowed his mid-toned rhythmic voice to erupt the silence. He started his storied response with a kindred agreement to Jonah's feelings of cultural dissonance. During his first months of dating and courtship with his Latin American wife, he experienced what it was like to meet her family. He goes on to describe how he learned the importance of shaking everyone's hand during the leave-taking at a neighborhood social. This practice was also part of the visit to meet her parents in Central America. Instructed by his wife, he realized that saying goodbye was going to be a lengthy 20-minute ordeal versus his learned North American ritual of shouting "goodbye" and exiting. Everyone chuckled lightly in recognized agreement with both men's shared experiences. Next John Ashdown, a retired business owner

and proactive community member, presented a query to the storytellers. “I have a question for the two speakers. Have you been or tried to belong to service groups and how were you treated?” Right away, Hamed responded with his multitude of experiences volunteering at his child's school as well as his more formal positions such as the stint with the Salvation Army. “However” he paused “I'm getting older and I need to make money for my family.” Following this, Jonah spoke of his participation in the Ride for Cancer and how it reframed his life through the positive experiences of leadership he gained from it. MP, Peter Julian initiated the next query He started the question with an anecdote about his wife finding the visa application process difficult when she decided to ask her family to visit. As he wound down his personal experience, he asked the two storytellers, “Did they share this challenge and what was its impact on their life?”<sup>108</sup> Jonah responded immediately with his experience since the new visitor's “Super Visa” policy had been introduced...he noted that it challenged the ability for parents to come

<sup>108</sup> ISSofBC (2014) Part 2 “Understand in the Challenges”

immediately for a birth or some important event. “It would take up to a month before the family members could enter and this is harder on my wife.”<sup>109</sup> he noted. The various dialogical exchanges germinated further reflections and thoughts to ponder. An overall curiosity and desire to engage permeated the room. At the same time, the group’s energy generated a dynamic balance of discussion on related issues with the immigrant storytellers. Within this session, a new found awareness arose.

In the end, the gentlemen wrapped up the dialogic event of communal problem solving by jotting down any lingering final thoughts and revelations onto the insight cards<sup>110</sup>. To finalize the proceedings, the facilitator thanked the group to conclude the evening. As the meeting wound down the electricity became muted but was still evident and I thought to myself, it will be interesting to watch the results as they unfold within the community at large.

<sup>109</sup> ISSofBC (2014) Part 2 “Understand in the Challenges”

<sup>110</sup> **Insight cards:** blank index cards used for the participants used for jotting down the reflective points at the end of the sessions.

## Reflexivity within Community Circles

While witnessing and reflecting on the CGCD events, I suddenly, realized how they emulate an example of what participatory action research (PAR) outlines as one of its criteria. In PAR, there is an interaction and ongoing relationship between the individual and community presenting itself in a dialectical exchange. As people participate within these dialogues, reflections follow the circles of communication. This process repeats itself reinforcing an act of immersive community engagement. In the CGCD's, once the stories ended, the reflective process began. Following this there was a process of reiteration and inquiry, which produced another moment of contemplation then iteration and reflection on the insight cards. This circular vortex of reflection and action is a dominant quality of PAR. An additional example of how this reflexivity surfaced outside the sessions materialized during the follow up interview meetings I had with Jacob Sol. Jacob, one of the community participants from the men's group, commented that he began to realize from the CGCD's "it is not necessarily a tight community for the person who just moved in."<sup>111</sup> He goes on to establish how he wants to "make a point of connecting with more of the service providers so the needed info gets out to newcomer's sooner as opposed to later."<sup>112</sup> In this, Jacob consciously recognizes his ability to be

<sup>111</sup> ISSofBC (2014) Part 2 "Understanding the Challenges"

<sup>112</sup> CGCD video footage

proactive in his own practice. Of course, each of the gatherings presented themselves in different and unique ways. However, they all displayed similar resonance with the PAR model.<sup>113</sup> Through the eyes of others, participatory action reminds me that these storytelling dialogue circles have the ability to create a means for reflexive and thoughtful communications that can result in conscious change.

### **The Ability of Action Research to Engage Change**

One of the main underlying principles that resonated with me as I looked at PAR was that it “contributes to a stream of action and inquiry which aims to enhance the flourishing of human persons, their societies, communities and organizations and the wider ecology of which we are all a part.”<sup>114</sup> Once the project started, I recognized the praxis of PAR unfolding. This practice of Participatory Action Research has six central features: PAR is a social process, it is participatory, it is practical and collaborative, it is emancipatory, it is critical and it is recursive, reflexive or dialectical.<sup>115</sup>

Firstly, the social process of the CGCD’s looked at the individual immigrant stories as a forum to engage. These stories gave examples of what was happening in the immigration process as well as what could be learned from this. Secondly, each specific demographic group (men, women and youth) contributed to new flash points for change and

<sup>113</sup> Atweh, B., Kemmis, S., Weeks, P. (1998)

<sup>114</sup> PART ONE Groundings. (2008 p. 13)

<sup>115</sup> Atweh, B., Kemmis, S., and Weeks, P. (1998)

reflection. Another aspect of PAR that was reflected in the CGCD's, was how both the individual stories and community group's reflexivity looked at the educative values of the project. As well, the Dialogue Circles became a means for social action, which is also another principle in PAR. Specifically, the immigrant stories created a referential avenue for social change, both extrinsically and intrinsically, for the community as a whole. Finally, the CGCD's were dialectical in nature, which is fundamental for participatory action to transpire. Therefore, each component of this process connected in a reciprocal way; the subjective with the objective; the individual with the social.<sup>116</sup> In doing this research, I have discovered that every layer of this project as well as my research and writing process has embodied cycles of reflexivity that are so dominant in the PAR process.

In the midst of going through the thesis research and writing process, I often reflected back on my own life as I embarked down the path of storytelling. Certain points of reflexivity resonated within me outside the project. As I have witnessed the act of storytelling, I have learned about how relevant it can be for breaking down barriers within classrooms as well as communities. In the EAL classroom, many adult students from across the globe have stories to tell. As an instructor for a federally funded settlement English language program, I have had newcomer students that range from recent refugees from war torn regions to skilled immigrant workers from first world locations. Within the refugee population, many stories have crossed my path that could rivet the average person's attention and

<sup>116</sup> Atweh, B., Kemmis, S., and Weeks, P. (1998).

overwhelm their sensibilities. Being empathetic, these stories have profoundly influenced me and I have learned that listening with intention and no judgement is imperative to my teaching. Years of training and work in the Child and Youth Care field mixed with an Anthropology undergraduate degree has allowed me some background into what is required and needed within these storied assertions. As counsellors, we were taught to be present and listen. Also as an ongoing anthropological practitioner, I incorporate cultural relativism into my work-life, whereby a person “suspends any ethnocentric judgement in order to appreciate and understand other cultures”.<sup>117</sup> Therefore, I learned to be present with quiet resolve while holding no judgement as the stories revealed themselves. As I say this, I reflect on a particular adult refugee student who came to our Language Instruction for Newcomers of Canada (LINC) program back in 2012.

One of our LINC students, Sherry was an Iraqi refugee who arrived in Canada via Dubai. She was a pretty young woman with hazel coloured doe shaped-eyes. Her strawberry blond hair and slight stature hid a young woman whose mental strength was twenty times her physical size. She was verging on twenty-eight years old at the time. She was two years older than my eldest daughter but their life experiences were many lifetimes apart. Actually, she wasn't in my class but the class level below

<sup>117</sup> O'Neil, Dennis (2009-2013, sect. C)

ours. However, every Thursday we had *Conversation Club* whereby the Level 4 and level 5 students would come together to talk about cultural events and other issues that stimulated them to speak in a more relaxed context. The instructors and local volunteers alternated weekly facilitation roles for these conversation circles. During these times, one of the two instructors would sit in with a group while the other instructor would float from group to group assisting the club volunteer's involvement.

From previous interactions, I gleaned some background information about Sherry via the other instructor. "She is so difficult. She often sermonizes the class on the benefits of Christianity when others are talking about their Islamic beliefs and it disturbs the other students." This initiated a concern for me, as I knew from my days in counselling that this type of behaviour usually had an underlying motive attached to it. In that moment, I felt the need to build a bridge of trust with Sherry. Each day that she arrived at school, I would greet her with a smile and a morning salutation to let her know her presence was appreciated and welcomed. As time wore on, she took time to stop and engage in some small chitchat before going into her classroom. However, it was the one *Conversation Club* day that really broke ground into what created the truest evidence

of trust. We were in our groups; Sherry and four other students were in the one I was facilitating this particular Thursday morning. We were discussing the upcoming Remembrance Day holiday and its meaning. We opened up the discussion with questions for the students to ponder and reflect upon, thereby initiating conversation. One of the questions touched on their opinion about war. As the responses moved around the table, the majority of the students responded in the standard way of stating that "it is horrific and wished we could all live peacefully." As it came around to Sherry, I could see her eyes gloss over with tears. She started to say how "thankful to GOD that she was in Canada". As a couple of tears found their way down her round, rosy cheeks, I grabbed the tissue box and quietly put it between us. Quietly, I responded with a reassuring "yes, I am thankful you are here too, Sherry." As she wiped the tears from her cheeks and eyes, she went on to tell her story of her last day in her small village in southern Iraq. Her family was locked inside their home. "My mother, father and brother were crouched down as the shelling and gunfire were ringing out in the streets outside our home. We were Christian." A primary Islamic state was the desired preference. As the gunfire got closer, her father demanded that she run and hide. Being

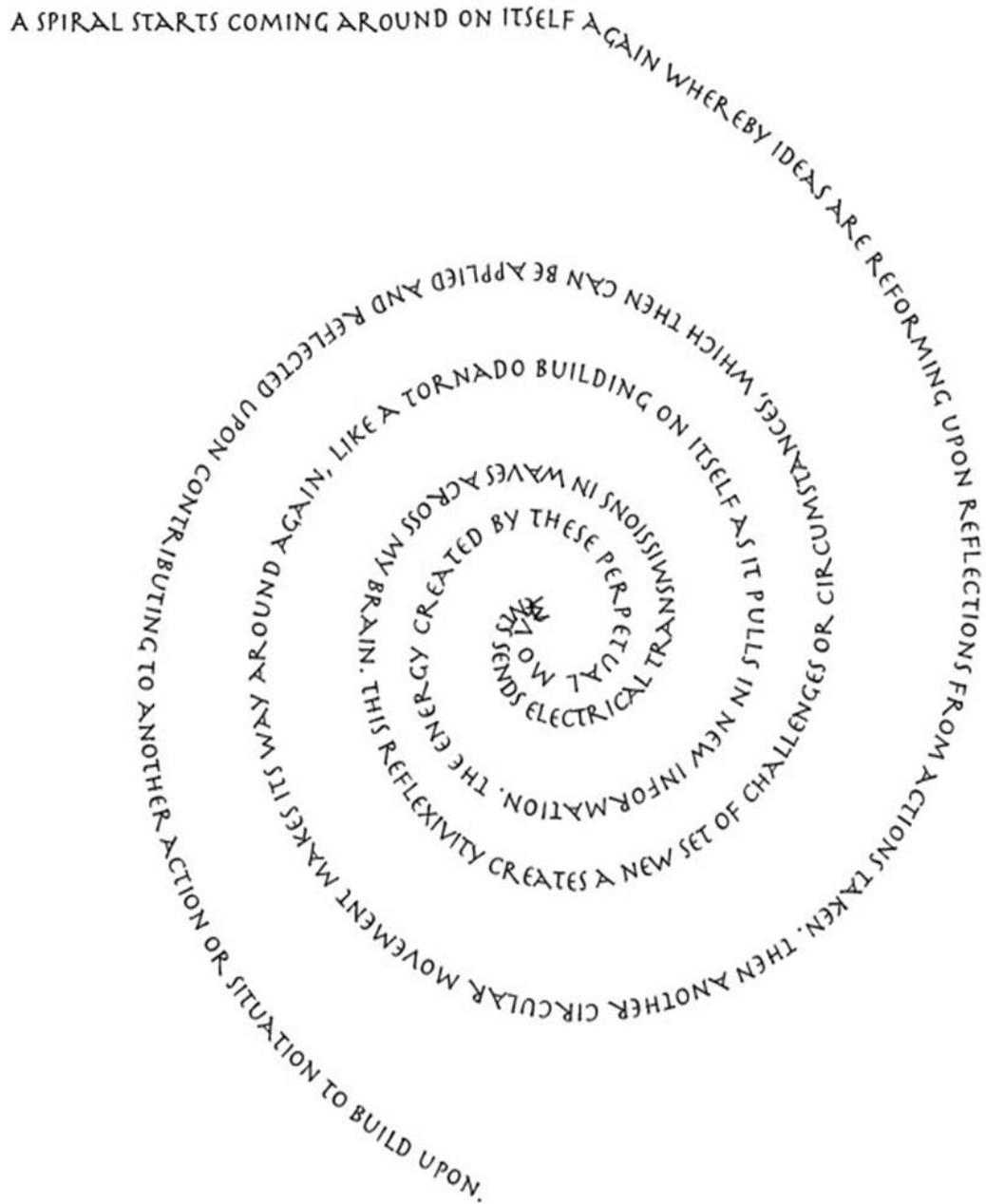
the respectful daughter, she obliged. As she shrunk and hid inside an underground dugout that her family had made, "I heard heavy footsteps above, then, a flurry of screams and shots being fired. This moment lasted forever" she said, "Once all the noise stopped, I looked carefully from my underground hideout. When I crawled out of the space from where I was hiding, I found my mother, father and brother lying dead in pools of blood that surrounded their bodies. I ran over to my mother and held her bloody head in my hands and cried to God. WHY!!??. Later on that evening, once the guns were silent, my uncle came by and whisked me away. We made our way southeast to Dubai." As she divulged her story, our group began to realize that not one of us could reconcile with this set of circumstances thrust upon a young girl. As an educator/counsellor, I knew I needed to sit mindfully attending to this and that this was the best action I could take. She went on to talk of how through many years of living in Dubai, she soon learned to find her way independently. It was then that she had applied to Canada as a refugee. She knew if she was able to start a new life somewhere far away from the memory that haunted her, it would allow her some solace. She told us that when she was on the plane to Canada, she cried during the journey. She revealed that they

were not tears of sadness but of happiness. She knew that she was given this gift as she said "from GOD." No matter the reasons, she was finally finding happiness in a life that had its lion's share of sadness. As her story wound down, I pulled her close and gave her the biggest hug. The only thing I could think to say was "you are such a brave young woman. Your honesty inspires me. Thank you." We were all stunned by her story. It reshaped our perspective. From that day onwards to the moment Sherry left the program, new bonds between students were formed. The Muslim students were especially empathetic and a group of them would surround her at break making an effort to build back the broken trust created by others from her past.

Sharing these moments with students reminds me how participatory and collaborative actions can "engage local knowledge producers to facilitate... emancipatory practices"<sup>118</sup> as established by Amelia Mallona and M. Brinton Lykes (2008) in their article *Towards Transformational Liberation: Participatory and Action Research and Praxis*. In my classroom, I promote a student-centered approach as my pedagogical practice. This perspective promotes autonomy as opposed to traditional teacher-centered classrooms. It also supports collaborative learning with a large

<sup>118</sup> Lykes, M., & Mallona, A. (2008, p. 106-121)

focus on conversations. Due to this, I find it facilitates moments where students command their learning processes. In so doing, the classroom becomes an environment that allows for ongoing reflection and learning through dialogue. The following image relates to my reflexivity of the journey to this point.



**Figure 11 – Spiral of Reflexivity By Theresa K. Howell**

By including this image, it symbolizes what PAR embodies. Lewinian’s field theory (1951) emphasizes, “that behaviour is influenced by its environment,

the context within which it occurs.”<sup>119</sup> He also posits the premise that by reflecting on ourselves, based on our actions, we can create intrinsic change. It is this idea of action then reflection, then change and action again, that the spiral emulates. Therefore, by consciously and conscientiously approaching my own reflexivity this allows me to activate change in myself and hopefully translate this outwards to others in my environment. In Participatory Action Research as the Lewinian spiral shows, reflexivity works in ongoing cycles of inquiry. Nothing is ever finished it is just built upon.<sup>120</sup>

So I pondered the idea that through other people’s stories, I have grown and learned. In the process of trying to uncover my own challenge with storytelling I look to other storytellers for guidance. In assessing another’s story, my direction and focus is re-established. The shape of who I am and what I recognize evolves as I reflect then write and again read, reflect then write. Throughout this iterative process, the essence of why storytelling becomes relevant to my pedagogy falls easily into place. The more I uncover, the stronger my synaptic connections develop and create a web of relations.

<sup>119</sup> Bradbury, H., Mirvis, P., Neilsen, E., & Pasmore, W. (2008, p. 77-93).

<sup>120</sup> Atweh, B., Kemmis, S., Weeks, P. (1998)

## Chapter V. Pedagogical Journey: Support and Change



**Figure 12- "Zoe" By Theresa K. Howell**

*"It is not enough to emancipate individuals or to enable them to disclose their lived worlds for their enlightenment and our own. Lived worlds must be open to reflection and transformation."-Maxine Greene <sup>121</sup>*

<sup>121</sup> Greene, Maxine (1995, p.59)

" What can be learned from a story, woven with fragmented moments, created out of random stories of survival...?" ponders Silvia Richardson from her autobiographical narrative, *Flesh-Mapping; Cartography of Struggle, Renewal, and Hope in Education*. As an activist, educator and writer who immigrated to Canada from El Salvador, Richardson decided to write about her experiences in order to re-imagine education as it relates to the liberation of minds. As she admits

"...this is only one story that makes visible the historical, social, economic, political, educational processes that inscribe my identity as a child forced by war to suddenly grow up; now a mother, a worker, a learner...".<sup>122</sup>

The idea of liberating minds to go beyond a perceived idea of what we know or knew about self and the world around us dominates action research. It is how Paulo Freire's praxis of critical consciousness actively engages in social change as it relates to education.<sup>123</sup> However, he recognizes that by merely acting on this practice will not guarantee transformation, but consistent action will leave footprints for others to reflect on.<sup>124</sup> Similarly, in the Common Ground Circle Dialogue (CGCD) stories, the sharing can create footprints of reflection, which can lead to possible action. In this CGCD project, the teacher in me became the

<sup>122</sup> Sylvia L. Richardson (2013, pg. 154)

<sup>123</sup> Lykes, M., & Mallona, A. (2008, p.106-121)

<sup>124</sup> Freire, P. (1998).

student, and a door to new realities opened. Suddenly, this project cultivated my curiosity; I wanted to know how the participants and community would act on these storytelling experiences and how these reflections could provide bridges of understanding through the communication of them. Another branch of curiosity, about storytelling within a community setting, was how change would be produced. During the men's storytelling circles, the stories provided reflections for the participants on how a community addresses and engages in relationships with the newcomers as cited by J. Sol and J. Ashdown.<sup>125</sup> These sessions also provided a reflection on policy as illustrated by MP Peter Julian.<sup>126</sup> Understanding that the community members and storytellers decided to voluntarily be a part of the CGCD's demonstrated a willingness to be a part of some form of change.

Paolo Freire reminds us that "curiosity as restless questioning" signifies that there is a certain disposition towards change.<sup>127</sup> I have also noticed that curiosity in the classroom is tantamount with change. When two of my former students volunteered to become the storytellers for the women's group, I was overjoyed but not surprised. Both of these women had discussed their background stories with me. As well, both had an insatiable desire to give and receive knowledge. Often in class, both Lydia and Zoe were proactively engaged in the act of learning and teaching. Their

<sup>125</sup> video footage from CGCD

<sup>126</sup> video footage from CGCD

<sup>127</sup> Freire, P. (1998, pg. 37-44)

change had come in gaining gradual familiarization with their new home in Canada.

When I started down this project path, my manager, Andrea, asked me if I knew of anyone in my class who would be interested in participating. At first, I wasn't sure whom to suggest but afterwards as my thoughts became clear, Zoe came to mind. She was a single parent who had immigrated to Canada via Lebanon from Iraq as a Refugee Status Claimant. She came with her three sons leaving a life as a practicing Psychiatrist in Bagdad, the capital of Iraq. Her sons were under 14 years when she escaped to Lebanon. After arriving in Lebanon, she applied for refugee status to come to Canada. Upon arriving in Canada, with help of the ISSofBC settlement program, she found a place to live and immediately volunteered to speak at the World Refugee Day in Library Square held on June 30th, 2013.<sup>128</sup> After this she started her English classes at ISSofBC and this is where we met. Soon afterwards there was an opportunity to assist in mentoring women like herself in an *Immigrant Women's Peer Support Program*. Knowing Zoe's background in counseling, I suggested she look into the training to be a peer support aide, which started in October. She was in the midst of training for this program when she agreed to participate in the WINS Common Ground Circle Dialogues.

My other student Lydia, who is Brazilian, had a starkly different background. Lydia arrived here from Brazil over a year ago with her newlywed husband. Her husband, who had been a previous resident of

<sup>128</sup> ISSofBC (2013) ISSofBC World Refugee Day

Canada, wanted to move back here to do his Master's degree. While he was doing his education, she decided to explore and expand her career possibilities here. In Brazil, she had worked for a finance company. She also held a business degree plus was an avid 'foodie', due to her keen interest in critiquing her food experiences.<sup>129</sup>

She had been here for almost two years at the time of the CGCD's. She came here via a work permit and was being sponsored by her husband. While awaiting approval, over and above her work, she also started a blog based on her interest in food. As soon as her approval for permanent residency came through, she decided to take English classes at ISSofBC. During her time in the LINC classes, she regularly attended, forever engaging in the conversations and contributing a positive energy to the classroom. Since her mother had a career in education, back in Brazil, Lydia found learning eased her transition and integration plus it increased her English skills. When she moved into the level 5 English classroom from Level 4, she starting putting out applications for work as well as volunteering. She didn't want any gaps in her process of adaptation to occur. Once she completed her English exam, she successfully found employment at an International Language school as a counsellor and facilitator for the Portuguese student population.

As smooth as these integrations sounded, the initial relocations came with great costs, which also caused intense trepidation. This was followed

<sup>129</sup> foodie. (n.d.). Dictionary.com Unabridged. Retrieved May 26, 2016 from Dictionary.com website <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/foodie>

by immediate reflection and change in both women's life situations as will be described in the portraits that follow.

### **The Women's Storytelling Dialogue Circle**

As I walked into the meeting room that evening, I saw fewer participants than the previous men's gathering and part of me wondered why this might be. The room shared the same hexagon formation of tables, which were sparsely seated. Three of the CGCD community participants found their way to the chairs; two were talking with each other, while the other person was on her smartphone. A few others were mingling about since they had recently arrived and were more intent on getting oriented before finding a seat. "What could be the reason for the low turnout? Was it ...family obligations?...a limited population for this demography?" I was soon informed that some participants would be late due to family obligations. Somehow, the lighting in the room seemed warmer and the atmosphere more relaxed than I previously remembered. It seemed to have a rich warm orange hue as opposed to the cool blue tone reminiscent within the men's sessions. My two students, who had been talking with my manager and another participant, immediately greeted me upon my arrival. "Hi Teacher..." EAL educators seldom get away from

this label since first names are rarely used in the rest of the world when referring to teachers. "It is so good to see you!" Zoe wraps her arms around me in the typical Middle Eastern greeting of a hug and kiss to both cheeks. Meanwhile, Lydia stands at her side waiting her turn to greet me. They both had their nametags attached to their semi-formal attire. Zoe was wearing a pink, black and white leopard Hijab with a white blouse, a designer jean jacket and some dress pants, somewhat dressier than what I have witnessed in the past. Lydia wore a casual V-neck green sweater, dressy jeans and boots. Both storytellers seemed surprisingly at ease. Confidence was something both of these ladies exuded in class as well.

Once the round table got started a better sense of who the participants were surfaced. A majority of the nine-person group were past immigrants both old and new. One woman, who was a nanny, arrived to Canada from Germany 20 years earlier with her husband. While another woman worked at the Bank of Nova Scotia in downtown New Westminster. I recognized her from my previous bank transactions. She had arrived to Canada 8 years earlier from Central America with her family. The three other participants had a south Asian background, one

of them the facilitator and the other my colleague from ISSofBC. Both women had been in Canada for over ten years. Then there were three people who were born in Canada: Andrea, my manager, another lady and myself. This other Canadian born woman was working with School District #40 as a settlement worker. A settlement worker assists newcomers through various outreach services such as job searches, housing assistance, etc. As soon as the introductions were finished, everyone in the room stated what they appreciated about New Westminster. The answers varied but echoed similarities to the other two adult groups: *“friendly; don’t need a car; small city with diversity; the quay; everything is in reach; “people in the bank, library, and other community businesses know me”*.<sup>130</sup> These were some of the responses offered as we went around the circle.

After the participant introductions, facilitator, Sangeeta Bhonsale, set the stage. She was a soft-spoken woman with an astute ability to articulate thoughts and ideas into short summarizations. As she introduced the group to the dialogues, she discussed how...

<sup>130</sup> Field notes from WINS CGCD

"New Westminster has changed so much mainly due to new immigrants who have come...these changes have brought new languages and culture so... the storytelling will help us to understand the different perspectives...find common ground because so many of us have been through changes in our life... this helps us to understand what it is to live in a strong and welcoming community."<sup>131</sup>

After Sangeeta's opener, Zoe proceeded to describe her experiences upon her arrival to Canada. Her bright, innocent-looking, blue eyes gazed out onto the crowd like a dolphin looking out at its aquarium spectators. She smiled and thanked everyone for being there to listen to her story. She looked briefly at her notebook then pushed it forward as to not to be distracted by it. On Zoe's arrival, she found Canada to be "beyond... imagination". However, the "honeymoon ended"<sup>132</sup> as she recognized the challenges of learning the language, finding a job, and getting her kids settled in school. Suddenly with all these realities hanging over her head, she hit a wall; culture shock had set in. So much so, that she stated "One day, I found myself lost on the street" of New West. She had no idea what to do; her husband was in another country

<sup>131</sup> ISSofBC (2014) Part 1 "Common Ground Circle-Sharing the Journey Together"

<sup>132</sup> video footage from CGCD

and couldn't help her. She only had herself to rely on. Suddenly her sense of isolation and panic overwhelmed her. She established that there were "so many bad thoughts and ideas blowing around in my mind". She just sat down on the curb of the street "almost in tears and at that moment I really wished to die."<sup>133</sup> Finding her internal strength and perseverance, she called a friend and found her way home. However, a fear that her children would face a similar moment such as this one abruptly caused her to pause. "After that I consider that ...*the switch* after the stop moment, so I have to '*switch*' my life to a different lifestyle. I have to stand up again." The experience taught her that she had to change her life; think deeply; help herself by discussing her feelings and apprehensions. "I have good experience" as she refers to her degree in Psychology. "I supported many people before so what about myself? I need help right now..." From that point on, she sat down with her three sons every day and they talked through the things they were facing, the feelings they were having. She stated that

<sup>133</sup> ISSofBC (2014) Part 1 "Common Ground Circle-Sharing the Journey Together"

"my teacher advised me one day to write down my memories and it was good idea for me. So I started to write down all my experiences since I came here..."

She further went on to ask the participants, "Do you know what LG means?" She immediately replied to the silence, "Life is Good ... and it deserves to be lived in a good way."<sup>134</sup>

Hearing Zoe's dilemma, I am reminded that integrating into a new culture or even a new city will produce challenges. Poignantly stated, Jacob Sol mentioned, "It is not necessarily a tight community for the person who just moved in."<sup>135</sup> As a frontline settlement English educator to adult newcomers, I became aware of how my classroom needed to become a bridge to the outside community. Education as a community bridger became not just about making it easier to speak English in order to get things done, it meant building relationships in the classroom to facilitate the student's life outside of it. As Maxine Greene (1995) relates "community is not a question of which social contracts...but what ways of being together, of attaining mutuality, of reaching toward some common world."<sup>136</sup> When I teach, this understanding becomes center to my

<sup>134</sup> ISSofBC (2014) Part 1 "Common Ground Circle-Sharing the Journey Together"

<sup>135</sup> ISSofBC (2014) Part 2 "Understanding the Challenges"

<sup>136</sup> Greene, Maxine (1995, pg. 39)

pedagogical practice. When my students feel a sense of isolation and shock, what can be done to reduce that feeling of “powerlessness”? As Hannah Arendt establishes, it is when diverse people speak of “*who*” *they are*, not, “*what*” *they are* that builds an “in-between”, or safe space of communication that allows the vulnerability to be shared.<sup>137</sup> Articulating this harkens me back to an evening class I was teaching back in February 2016.

The class started out with me asking my students to introduce themselves to each other. There was a new stream of students present that evening so I do these introductions as a way to ease the transition for both old and new students. My old students knew the routine since they did it often, but the new students weren't sure what to say. I suggested that they say their name, where they were from, how long they have been in Canada and one other interesting thing about themselves. As we circled the room, most of the students would relay all this info plus their occupation as the additional piece of info. As we got to the second to last person, one of the new students started to speak. An older gentleman with a friendly smile and calm demeanour spoke slowly. He methodically relayed to the class in a slow but succinct manor “My name is

<sup>137</sup> Greene, Maxine (1995, pg. 39)

Azar, I am from Syria, I have been in Canada for 8 weeks...” He paused. As a minute passed, I echoed “8 weeks...you are definitely a newcomer.” He goes on to finish his narration with the statement “I am homeless.” For a long few minutes, we all fell silent. I paused then proceeded to ask him to tell us what he means by “homeless”. As the conversation moved forward, the class became witness to his story. This Syrian refugee brought to Canada with the throng of others based on a post-election promise, was quickly relocated to a home that had bedbugs.<sup>138</sup> Due to this, they had to be sent back to the main settlement housing location but lost all of the items they came to Canada with.

To get a better understanding, here is a brief overview of the settlement process for many Government Sponsored Refugees (GAR). For refugee families arriving in larger centers temporary housing is provided at a settlement housing facility. Once the caseworkers find financially appropriate housing for them, they can move in. Following this, the other facets of settlement are then initiated such as education and job hunting. However, in Azar’s case, his family was moved out then back to the facility due to the incident.

<sup>138</sup> Part of the fumigation process, for bedbugs not to spread, is any material items that could house them have to be disposed of.

After Azar's report, we were all a little speechless. As to facilitate the uncomfortable silence, yet honour it, this quiet moment was maintained. I then apologized for the difficult situation. I felt it was my duty, as an educator and citizen, to do this. Following this, I suggested, "There *will* be someone who could help you and your family." We moved to the next person to respect everyone's place in the classroom. At break Adel, a long time senior student who spoke Arabic, came over to sit with Azar. From that day forward a bond of friendship was formed. The next week I heard that Adel facilitated the relocation into a good home for Azar and his family in Burnaby.

The stories are always different but often share common challenges; the first challenge is most often the process of integration into a new culture. However, using narrative dialogues, connection, communication and change can replace feelings of isolation and helplessness. Sometimes the challenges of immigrating can surface unconsciously as will be seen in Lydia's story.

Lydia proceeded to describe her own immigration challenge. Lydia like Zoe had her story narrative written down in front of her. She looked up then down to the paper. Once everyone was ready again, she started to narrate her story. A new adventure and chapter in her life, Lydia was very excited about migrating to Canada; a new husband and a new home.

She established "I have seen myself as a strong, outgoing and courageous person. I knew the challenges of coming here; learning a new language, being far from family and friends, making new friends, getting a good job or maybe having to get a survival job until my English had improved."<sup>139</sup> What she didn't expect was that her body would dictate her transition timeframe. "My mind showed me I was not as strong as I thought I was."<sup>140</sup> Sitting in her living room one night watching TV, as her University student husband studied, her heart began to race. Then her fingers began to tingle, she thought she was having a heart attack. Immediately her husband jumped up, quickly escorting her to the car. He drove her to emergency. After six hours in emergency, it became clear that she was having a panic attack; doctors assured her that time would take care of things; she only needed to take care of herself and slow down. Almost a year later, she has been changed by the experience. She takes things slower and reminds herself to breathe. Finishing her presentation, she concluded by saying, "I grow in strength, day by day."

Both of these strong and confident women found themselves vulnerable at some point during their immigration process. Yet, once this

<sup>139</sup> video footage from CGCD

<sup>140</sup> Ibid

realization occurred they turned the vulnerability into strength over time. It is this regular theme of turning adversity into resilience that I found common amongst the storytellers. As they related their stories, I am reminded that they seem to share a "wide-awakeness"<sup>141</sup>, an idea of living with intentionality. I often recognize that my students are teachers as much as I am. Within my classroom as well as beyond its walls, I have learnt many things from them. As Paolo Freire (1998) states, "whoever teaches learns in the act of teaching and whoever learns teaches in the act of learning."<sup>142</sup> Recognition of this quote can be realized from different perspectives, I chose to see it from an educationally directed framework; one that attributes itself to working together in a reciprocal process of teaching and learning. As part of my pedagogical practice collaboration and cooperation are at the center of my classroom. Similarly, in the CGCD project, a collaborative, cooperative approach was an important foundation for the sessions. Therefore, the facilitators were carefully sought to support this intention.

Sangeeta, the women's group facilitator, quietly thanked the storytellers and introduced the reflective writing time to the community participants. Everyone immediately took to their reflective writings as the storytellers awaited the conclusion of this first stage. Lydia went to the washroom while Zoe went to the refreshment table to get a tea. Once the

<sup>141</sup> Greene, Maxine (1995, pg. 35)

<sup>142</sup> Freire, P. (1998, pg. 31)

ten minutes had passed. Sangeeta reiterated to the group there would be 15 minutes to have some refreshments and a bathroom break. As the group dispersed, many walked eagerly over to the refreshment table where a plate of fresh melons, strawberries and pineapple waited alongside a variety of pastries and cheese plus a selection of hot and cold beverages. Once everyone had a plate of food, the mingling started. Zoe and Andrea immediately struck up conversation. Meanwhile, Lydia took up a conversation with Helen, one of the group's Canadian born participants. Sangeeta and a couple of the community members, both past immigrants now citizens, were reacquainting themselves. The time flew by and suddenly we all realized twenty-five minutes had passed. Sangeeta calmly invited people back to their places for the second half of the meeting.

Once the group collected themselves back together, again the dialogues started. The stories seemed to inspire a sense of collectivity when it came to talking about support and finding strength. Many of the community members instead of asking questions went on to show support through their own storied experiences. One of the community members reflected on her own experiences and established that "No matter how

much we prepare, how educated we are or are not, whether or not we have children, immigrating is a shock."<sup>143</sup> As this particular participant shared her thoughts with the group, other members started to describe their own thoughts regarding their experiences. "You can't go back...to find your home, you won't find belonging, because you have changed, and the country has changed, too. It also delays settlement, and makes it more difficult for children."<sup>144</sup> This particular participant described how she had initially spent 3 months feeling isolated at the beginning of her immigration process, but now in Canada for three years, sees her life differently. She recently visited her home country. "It was good to be there, but it was good to come back – it felt like coming home".<sup>145</sup>

This dialogue session like the others had a unique quality to it. Instead of question and answer interchanges, it felt more like a support group where testimonials and storytelling became the central core of the dialogue. As the community discussion came to an end, the groups were asked to formalize their thoughts on paper. This activity was the second

<sup>143</sup> video footage from CGCD

<sup>144</sup> Ibid

<sup>145</sup> Ibid

reflection process that was a fundamental component as described in Chapter III. To initiate the reflexive process, everyone was asked to summarize the meeting in a couple of words. Here are some of the thoughts that arose:

- *Shared experiences*: "with others especially with people who already came as immigrants..."<sup>146</sup>
- *Determination*: "Have big dreams – post it somewhere you can see and work your way to get it"<sup>147</sup>
- *Strength in sharing*: "I will never be alone in Canada and now I am stronger than yesterday"<sup>148</sup>
- *A desire to reach out more*: "I learned that settlement and integration is a process – I will use this whenever I see someone lose hope"<sup>149</sup>.

As the evening wound down, Sangeeta concluded the meeting by saying, "Life itself is a journey, a process and we are all just at different phases in our life...and what I will take away from this, is that *Life is good*."<sup>150</sup>

During this women's dialogue session, a common outcome and theme seemed to involve the idea of *strength* and *determination*. As some of the community members listened to the stories, a sense of mutual

<sup>146</sup> Field notes from WINS CGCD

<sup>147</sup> Ibid

<sup>148</sup> Ibid

<sup>149</sup> Ibid

<sup>150</sup> Video Footage from CGCD

connection or recognition arose. For me these reflections conveyed how narratives can evoke an affinity from one person to another. As Paolo Freire points out, we strive to engage in order to fulfill a need to be part of the whole. This *desire to reach out* to others comes down to our sense of wanting to belong; to connect. “All of us are longing to belong,” posits Horsdal.<sup>151</sup> Every day we become wide-awake to new possibilities through our socio-cultural interactions.<sup>152</sup> It seems that we do not merely exist, but we strive to connect, to grow and change through engagement with another. It is this “process of becoming”<sup>153</sup> that leads us to learn and as an educator, I feel I am a constant student as I strive to chase my own sense of “incompleteness”<sup>154</sup>. There is a constant need to develop myself knowing that with each certificate or learned skill, I am somehow enhancing my well being. In applying action research as a means to attain this knowledge base, dialogical engagement is encouraged, which can also perpetuate an ongoing move towards self-development. I teach and am taught, therefore, I am becoming.

The more I teach, the more I learn about myself and how others have influenced my life. Through a reflexive process, the circle comes around

<sup>151</sup> Horsdal, M. (2012, pg.131)

<sup>152</sup> Greene, Maxine (1995)

<sup>153</sup> Freire, Paulo (1998, pg. 72)

<sup>154</sup> Incompleteness as it related by Paolo Freire’ discusses the idea that education must allow people to be aware of their incompleteness and strive to be more fully human.

again and again. As stated by Kemmis and Wilkinson (1998), action research is recursive; dialectical...a process of learning by doing. Through the interaction with others, we learn when we utilize our reflexivity.<sup>155</sup> It is important to recognize that this component is what makes iteration of action research so relevant to pedagogy. It is through the inquiry then that the reflection and rethinking as well as the revised action plan can create a new direction towards furthering the learning. This concept and practice can be applied to knowledge acquisition both in schools and outside of them.<sup>156</sup> An example of this application of a practice outside of the classroom is the Common Ground Dialogue Circle. As part of the WINS community initiative the CGCD's helped facilitate awareness-building, intercultural relations and mutual trust.<sup>157</sup>

### **Pondering the Pedagogical Path**

In these tales of adversity, I am heartened once again to what it is to be an educator. With Zoe's and Lydia's stories, gifted snapshots of lived experiences were presented to the community. These stories painted a sincere, heartfelt picture by which others could transform distinct human emotions and understand life's adverse moments, such that another way of

<sup>155</sup> Atweh, B., Kemmis, S., and Weeks, P. (1998)

<sup>156</sup> Atweh, B., Kemmis, S., and Weeks, P. (1998).

<sup>157</sup> New Westminster News Leader (2014, March 14, p. A9)

seeing the world emerges which recognizes *"life is good."*<sup>158</sup> One then realizes that they *"are not alone"*.<sup>159</sup>

Upon reflection, I have recognized how the strength and resiliency as depicted through story from others can inspire the same in ourselves. In 2002, while doing my practicum as a Child and Youth Care (CYC) worker at John Barsby Community High School, I saw how storytelling can create an avenue for advocacy outside the school walls as well as create personal agency within them.

For my child and youth care practicum at John Barsby Community High School, my supervisor suggested that my colleague and I brainstorm some out of class projects for the youth. With my fine arts and tech background mixed with my colleague's background in theatre, we decided to initiate an afterschool film club. Many of the students that decided to show up the first day were from the special education class we talked to earlier that day. These were all the students who had "fallen through the cracks" in some form or another. Most had behavioural or emotional challenges that inhibited their ability to perform in the regular classrooms. As a student in counsellor training, I recognized the youth to

<sup>158</sup> ISSofBC (2014) Part 1 "Common Ground Circle-Sharing the Journey Together"

<sup>159</sup> ISSofBC (2014) Part 2 "Understanding the Challenges"

be ideal participants for this after school program that engaged storytelling and narrative by way of theatre and film.

Collectively, the group initiated the idea of creating drama plays about problematic classroom situations or relational challenges in the school and beyond. In creating the plays, they collaborated and wrote story lines together; scripted and dialogued them; and finally filmed and edited the pieces. A variety of productions were made that were successfully showcased in their special ed. classes.

With the success of this project, they were hooked. Following this, our supervisor approached my colleague and myself to invite the students to become engaged in a more focused semi-professional production for CBC. That year, CBC offered secondary students across Canada an opportunity to create a video on racism. Discrimination was something they all intimately understood. Each of these students came from one of the poorest districts in Nanaimo and some were of First Nations heritage. They worked long and hard, brainstorming, constructing storyboards, to finally shooting the video. The added pressure of competing took its toll on the previous fun-loving activity of just making sporadic carefree movies. Yet, over a month and a half, they consistently

stayed afterschool, superseding their desire to troll the neighbourhood with their other friends. After dedicating many early evening and some weekend hours, they finalized their two-minute video production. As the time got closer to the announcements, they kept asking if we "have any news, yet?" By Friday, the final announcements came in via Canada Post. Respecting the sanctity of the student's investment, my colleague didn't open the letter but brought it to school on the following Monday. She handed it to the lead director of the teen collective. He opened it quickly and scanned the parchment. His face told the story, from saucer shaped eyes of hope to a furrowed brow of defeat. "We didn't win any of the top prizes." I glanced at the letter over his shoulder to see they won an honourable mention instead. As the form letter went around and reality set in, they all realized that an honourable mention was still a recognition of their effort. We all celebrated. Each student received two rewards that day. The first reward was knowing what it is to gain a sense of accomplishment. The second reward was having the solidarity of building a strong team-working environment. Overall, this served as a perfect avenue for these special education students to recognize the strengths within themselves with a group of like-minded individuals.

These students recreated their life experiences through an unconscious “performative inquiry”<sup>160</sup>, as Lyn Fels (2008) coins in the text, *Exploring Curriculum; Performative Inquiry, Role Drama, and Learning*. Suddenly, a drama based afterschool activity became a means for students to learn reflexively about themselves and others. The learners became the teachers. As I observed and reflected on these interactions, I recognized my own perception changing as well. These self-made role dramas unlocked new possibilities for consideration.

By opening up my mind to other worlds, bridges of understanding were constructed. Suddenly my reflection on how past mentors and professors used storytelling tools to create multiple literacies for their students’ conceptual understanding brought a new light to an age-old pedagogical element.<sup>161</sup> As time moved forward and situations multiplied my awareness of this storytelling phenomenon came to the forefront. This transformed my teaching methods. By enacting my reflective practice, it was essential for me to maintain not only a sense of curiosity and critical thinking but also the openness to change.<sup>162</sup> It seems crucial to recognize how the power of a story can engage, negotiate and problem solve everyday situations. Being an LINC educator, it became paramount for me to shift the way I taught.

<sup>160</sup> Fels, L.&Belliveau, G.(2008, pg.43)

<sup>161</sup> Fels, L.&Belliveau, G.(2008)

<sup>162</sup> Freire, P. (1998, pg. 44)

Reflexively looking at my life as it relates to my pedagogy, certain patterns emerge. In my first class of my Masters of Education program with Dr. Vicki Kelly, we were asked to summarize our pedagogy, creatively utilizing spaces and places as a foundation. To do this I created the following portrait in a poem. The following excerpt was written during the course in Curriculum Theory and Art Education. It summarizes my ontological stance as it relates to how education embodies much of my existence.

## ***Pedagogy of Places and Spaces***

*Theresa pronounced "Tree sa". Trees are a central place in my space. They have been woven into my life. Their roots are grounded in my ancestral soil.*

*My life is dualities; dichotomies of life. The two branches; the yin and the yang. Two worlds embody the places in my spaces;*

*Alberta and British Columbia; The city and the country; The environment and industry; The heart and mind My world is about creating harmony between these dualities.*

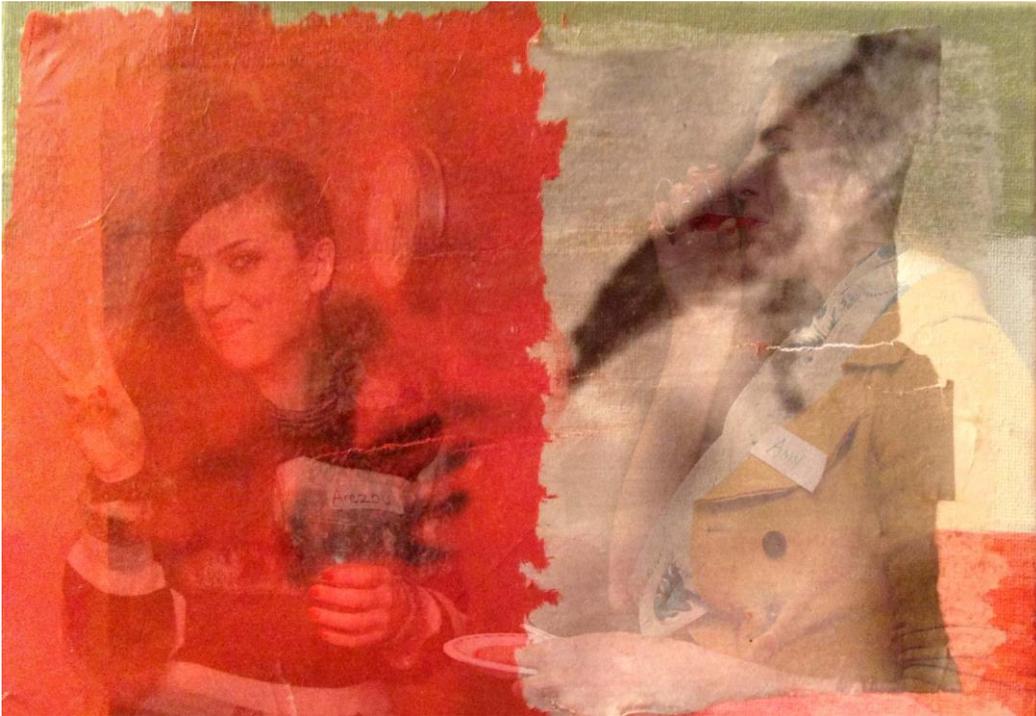
*Therefore, my pedagogy involves the marriage of dualities. Co-opting bridges between cultures is a pre-occupation. My pedagogy is like the mangrove trees, a boundary-bridger that creates islands and continents of understanding.<sup>163</sup>*

*Canada is home; more importantly, the earth is my home. People who love, respect and appreciate these aspects are my truest friends. Pedagogical interconnectedness is a branch of my life. In the roots of my childhood, I was taught to grow into a canopy of compassion and nurture the world I live in.*

*By Theresa K. Howell*

<sup>163</sup> Hogan, Linda. (1995)

## Chapter VI. Relational Journey: Relationship and Agency



**Figure 13- "Azure" by Theresa K. Howell**

*We heal each other by sharing the stories of our time. We heal each other through love. ...that means you leading me back to who I am. There's no bigger gift, and all it takes is listening and hearing.*

*– Richard Wagamese<sup>164</sup>*

<sup>164</sup> Wagamese, R. (2008, p.181)

Finding common threads, while conveying pieces that are relevant and reverent to the listener, is a key factor in storytelling. In telling tales to children and our children's children, it builds and scaffolds a sense of belonging, imparting age-old wisdom with every story. So in this way, oral tradition works as a means towards continuity, generation after generation.<sup>165</sup>

"Mom came across the great Canadian landscape from the eastern seaboard to settle in the west with Dad. She sailed across the Atlantic from Norway, then took a train across Canada in the early 1900's to be with your grandfather, all on her own."<sup>166</sup> Grandma Lila told me this story over and over again. Often, I would coax her to tell me "*one more time*" about how Great Grandma came across Canada. I never tired of hearing it.

It was not just a story about a woman coming to meet her husband it encapsulated so much more. It was a story of strength, determination, love and loyalty. Even more, the story was of my namesake, Theresa Hansen nee Fjeldhiem. In Inuit culture bestowing an ancestral name upon someone, "means that we are expected to be like that person, to reflect their qualities, to carry on their lives in our life."<sup>167</sup>

<sup>165</sup> Archibald, J. (2008)

<sup>166</sup> Lila Griffiths, personal communication, (1972-2000)

<sup>167</sup> Schneider, W. (2002, pg. 41)

Grandma knew I needed to hear this story, she knew it would give me strength in the face of adversity. She was supporting her family while instilling a sense of pride and fortitude. "The old time people always say, remember the stories, the stories will help you be strong." Jo-ann Archibald quotes in her book *Indigenous Storywork*.<sup>168</sup> Whether it be family relationships or various other relationships, a sense of support and identity is sought through the interactions within them. In my experience, with my daughters as well as with my students in the age ranges of 16-25 years, peer relationships seem to be extremely important. Searching for self-identity and understanding through others is common. During the Youth CGCD's, I soon recognized and witnessed how prevalent this was.

### **The Youth Storytelling Dialogue Circle**

The ISSofBC office space had a vibrant energy surrounding it on the last night of the dialogue circles. As I walked down the hall many people were milling about young adults and teachers crisscrossing between the staff kitchen and the meeting space. Someone called out "Hi, Theresa!". Standing off to the one side behind a young participant, smiled Andrea Canales, the youth group's department administrator. Then suddenly, I heard a deep baritone voice inside the meeting room,

<sup>168</sup> Archibald, J (2008, p. 44)

talking about his last weekend's events then giving a deep hardy laugh. I have heard this voice before. Many Friday evenings when I was caught working late, this voice brought an energizing verve to an otherwise subdued office environment. I often remember smiling both inside and out as I stood at the photocopier, mundanely doing teacher prep, as this male voice brought an upbeat tempo to the office atmosphere. Diego Cardona, a support worker for a Multicultural Youth program, was also the facilitator for this dialogue circle. A perfect candidate since he had the trust and respect needed from all young newcomer adults who came in contact with him. He explained that he: "came as a refugee in 2005 from Colombia with my mom and my sister. We lived in Montreal for a year and a half before moving to Vancouver in 2007."<sup>169</sup> Most of his family escaped the civil unrest in Colombia; however, his father went missing during those times. Recognizing possibilities of a life in Canada, he seems to bring an air of passionate commitment to everything he does.<sup>170</sup>

When I quietly move into the room, I see a large circular open space, no tables this time, only chairs encompassing it, breaching the original

<sup>169</sup> CBC News (2013, Oct.3)

<sup>170</sup> Youth Philanthropy Council (2012, June 18)

boundaries of the past CGCD sessions. Seeing the new environmental dynamics, I move around the space trying to find an open, quality vantage point for the video camera. Weaving in and out of chairs and people, I soon understand this will be an evening where I need to revisit my adaptability skills. Young people keep arriving and by the time the evening gets started it is a good 15 minutes after the scheduled time. In the end, there are 22 young people present. I surmised that a youth based dialogue circle might require flexibility in participant numbers since comfort may require extra companionship. Once the blank nametags were distributed, written on and adhered each of the participants found a chair and completed the release forms upon request. Next Andrea Canales outlined the evening's schedule. This event began with an icebreaker called "The wind blows when..." This activity is an amalgamation of "keep away" and "musical chairs". It starts with a lone person standing in the middle of a circle of participants who are sitting in chairs. This person's objective is to get themselves into a chair so they must make a true statement to get a majority of students standing up. One such statement could be: *The wind blows when you had cereal for breakfast.* Whoever had cereal gets up and quickly rushes to find another seat. There is

always one seat missing so it is a scramble to be sure to get a seat.

Whoever is left standing is the next person to make the next statement.

To assist the understanding of the game and not put any one person on the spot, Andrea starts the icebreaker. Andrea looks around the room and says, "The wind blows when you wear jeans."<sup>171</sup> Suddenly a burst of people wearing jeans jump out of their seats and run to whichever ones opened up. Andrea finds a seat. As the last three participants are left rapidly scanning the circle for the last remaining two chairs, two of the three find one and a small young lady with a quiet demeanor is left standing. She looks around then looks down at her feet and says, "The wind blows when you love dancing."<sup>172</sup> Another flurry of activity erupts. This activity goes on for the next 10 minutes. Everyone is laughing and shouting during it. By the time they finish, they are invigorated yet ready to sit and listen to the two storytellers.

Gustaf begins. A 16-years-old Iraq native, Gustaf's disposition still seems more mature than the average Canadian teen. However, he still slouches forward in his chair as he tells his story supporting his weight

<sup>171</sup> video footage from CGCD

<sup>172</sup> Ibid

with his elbows on his knees while holding his story cue cards. One of the reasons he chose to participate, I am told, is due to his mother's influence. He is Zoe's oldest son and she said Gustaf wanted to support her and vice versa so they both volunteered to join the Common Ground Circles to tell their stories. As the group sat and quietly listened to Gustaf, he talked of being in Canada as a surreal experience "like being in a movie"<sup>173</sup> the languages; people and scenery were reminiscent of all the western movies he had watched when he was in Lebanon. Living in Iraq and then Lebanon everyone spoke Arabic and looked the same. Now that he was here in Canada, everyone "came from all over the world" and their first languages were different and they all looked different but they shared a common ground in the English they spoke. "One of my dreams was to speak English." he told us. Other things became challenges though, like taking the transit. I didn't even know where or how to validate a ticket."<sup>174</sup> When he and his mother went grocery shopping together for the first time, they couldn't find the eggs. "In my country they put eggs on the shelves, I didn't know here in Canada they put them in the fridge. So

<sup>173</sup> video footage from CGCD

<sup>174</sup> Ibid

my mom and me were searching for the eggs for half an hour. Then we finally found the eggs...it is very different. Even the easy things are difficult."<sup>175</sup> He goes on to establish that he has many goals here in Canada and tells the group, "But, I think the future looks bright for me, here in Canada. Thank you for listening."<sup>176</sup> A round of applause and a cheer rang out. He smiled shyly.

As I reflect on Gustaf's story, it reminds me how important relationships can be when facing change. It also reminds me of one of the reasons portraiture as a methodology fits so effortlessly within my thesis. Portraiture requires that the researcher build productive, respectful relationships, which establish trust and maintain boundaries.<sup>177</sup> Within my profession, relationship is one of the most important elements of teaching for me. Assisting students in their integration takes precedence. A number of occasions have arisen when students ask, "How can I expedite my English education so I can test sooner?" or "Can you proofread my resume or cover letter? I am hoping to use it in a future job application." In those instances, I will take the time required to facilitate their requests. Often, I am reminded of the exemplars in education that have paved this road for me. A willingness to be available and listen with an empathetic ear was the primary characteristics of my mentors. This is now what I bring to my

<sup>175</sup> video footage from CGCD

<sup>176</sup> Ibid

<sup>177</sup> Lawrence-Lightfoot, S. and Davis, J. H. (1997, pg. 135)

teaching, listening in relationships is quintessential to my pedagogical practice.

By choosing portraiture, three central elements are important when building relationships. First, the researcher will search for the goodness; second, they will have empathetic regard; finally, they will build relationships through symmetry, reciprocity and boundary negotiation.<sup>178</sup> Once I was part of these CGCD's, searching for the goodness was easy. I soon recognized how each storyteller gave a consistent depiction of vulnerability counterbalanced with strength. This balance of the negative with the positive is what creates resilience as well as the 'goodness' as outlined in narrative portraiture. They are not only stories of challenges; they are stories of victories. Sometimes the challenges surface because of a certain discourse or discord with others. Taking the time to listen with intention helps me to facilitate and support people along the way. However, these concepts are not universally practiced as noted in Azure's story.

*With her big brown eyes and radiant smile, Azure created a feeling of calm as everyone looked on. "Hi, I am Azure and I am from Iran but lived in Turkey before coming here. I have lived here for about eight months."<sup>179</sup> Unlike Gustaf, Azure sat poised with confidence in her seat.*

<sup>178</sup> Lawrence-Lightfoot, S. and Davis, J. H. (1997, pg. 141)

<sup>179</sup> video footage from CGCD

Being independent from a young age as well as being a number of years older than Gustaf, she emitted an air of self-assurance.

Azure initially had to do everything on her own, as she had no direct connections upon her arrival. She was "very excited" and she "was so happy, but in other ways so sad because I had to start all my life again for the third time...but I am used to fending for myself in Turkey. So in no time, I will learn everything about this country ... the culture, the language, finding a job, everything people should know for living here."<sup>180</sup> As self-assured as she was, this soon dissipated as she spoke of a combination of experiences, noting one in particular.

One day she wanted to make an appointment for the doctor so she called a local physician's office. A receptionist answered. During the call, the receptionist began asking her a variety of questions. Azure was unable to understand or answer, so she responded by saying, "I'm sorry but can you speak slowly because I can't speak English very well." The receptionist responded with "you can't speak English very well, so we can't understand each other. Then she just hung up the phone."<sup>181</sup> This

<sup>180</sup> video footage from CGCD

<sup>181</sup> ISSofBC (2014) Part 1 "Common Ground Circle-Sharing the Journey Together"

left Azure feeling a sense of dismay and shock. She established that she “started to feel that all Canadians were like this receptionist.” She began to believe this new country didn't care about her and her needs.

As time passed, another situation arose whereby she needed to open a chequing account. Azure felt determined to deal with her new life in Canada. So, off to the bank, she went. Again, she was confronted with this same fear of doing something in English. But with no support of friends or family, she had to persevere and proceed. She walked into the bank and then up to the clerk. “Hello, I would like to order cheques.”<sup>182</sup> The clerk asked her a question, Azure didn't respond so the clerk repeats the question. Azure tells the audience “I couldn't understand again. So she asked me what is your language? I said Farsi/Persian. Then she said ok wait a minute...she gave me a phone and on the phone was a translator...It may have been so simple for her but it made me so happy. ...It showed me that I am not alone, there is someone there that cares about me.”<sup>183</sup> So after that she started seeing the good things in her life and “looked at the good things in this culture.”<sup>184</sup> Azure has since

<sup>182</sup> video footage from CGCD

<sup>183</sup> ISSofBC (2014) Part 1 “Common Ground Circle-Sharing the Journey Together

<sup>184</sup> video footage from CGCD

then gone back to school and learned more English because she realized that one of her goals is to reach out to others. It is a pathway to making friends and opening more doors to learning the culture. Azure explained, "Day after day, I am doing better and now I have a friend here...so even if I can't speak English very well there are some people that help me." She gives a small cheer and thrusts her arm up into the air like she has won a marathon, "YES!!"<sup>185</sup> Looking out at the audience, a coy smile comes across her face and she completes the story reflectively by stating, "These are some of my experiences"<sup>186</sup>. A collective round of applause echoes through the room as Azure graciously nods her head and thanks the audience for listening.

Often I have taken for granted, that everyone feels empathy. The idea that everyone has the capacity to understand each other in this way is assumed. However, it became evident during my research process that this is not always the case. Confronted with comments from people about "how immigrants are lazy", "they cost taxpayers so much money" or "they don't even try to speak English" these are a few of the comments I have been witness to in my own neighborhood. This discrepancy within my experienced realities was another reason this project appealed to me. It

<sup>185</sup> ISSofBC (2014) Part 1 "Common Ground Circle-Sharing the Journey Together"

<sup>186</sup> video footage from CGCD

was important to me that bridges of understanding and advocacy were being built within my community.

With portraiture as my chosen methodology, for the writing process, empathetic regard for the other was imperative. Lawrence-Lightfoot establishes that “the more knowledgeable you are about the actor’s reality and the more self-analytic you are about your own, the better you will be able to empathize.”<sup>187</sup> Within the community groups that were apart of these CGCD’s, this capacity for empathy dominated. In all of the follow up reflections, most of the participants expressed their reciprocal identification with what the storytellers discussed. In this next section, evidence of this reciprocity reveals itself once again

Following the stories, the young community group is given some sticky notes and pens, Diego asks them to jot down some thoughts possibly questions regarding the stories. They are then asked to stick the notes to the window glass. He also establishes once they are done, there is sushi, pizza, snacks and beverages awaiting everyone in the communal kitchen. The youth group abruptly gets on task and posts some testimonials, questions and personal reflections.

My time has arrived once again to photo document the casual unstructured dialogue component of this interactive event. I find these breaks are essential in the process of giving pause and reflexivity to the

<sup>187</sup> Lawrence-Lightfoot, S., & Davis, J. H. (1997, p. 149)

groups involved. They also act as a comfortable warm up for the next stage of development in the dialogue circles. The coffee/snack breaks work as a transitional forum for grounding the group. They are also like a generative "liminal space" whereby the group goes from a state of reflection and attentive listening to a state of dialogical engagement and exchange.

I move quickly around the meeting room taking images of the participants in their act of writing before I lose them to the dinner break. As they hurriedly scurry into the kitchen to feast, I take a variety of pictures. Going back and forth between the two rooms felt easy and relaxed as the students readily accommodated my physical presence within their social space. Gustaf came up to me thanking me for being there and asking me "what did you think of my video and photography" from a USB his mother had brought to me previously during class. I told him "I thought the video looked professionally produced and directed" and his photography reminiscent of National Geographic photos I have seen. From images of kids in the streets of Lebanon to the marketplaces with all their activity, "It was like I was there." Then I asked him, "Would you like to take some pictures right now? I sure would appreciate another perspective to this event." He smiled and nodded. After the break time lapsed, he handed the camera back to me.

Leisurely, the group migrated into the main room for the community dialogue component. During the break, Diego had organized the sticky notes into categories and proceeded to summarize the themes. As he points to three sticky notes "...these are the people who identified with issues of taking the bus... they totally connected to the storytellers."<sup>188</sup> As he moved his hand across to the right to the second grouping of notes, he stated "these here are the people who identified with the whole language barrier...there was a lot of people who said, yah, we totally get what you were going through..." The third column of notes got wider..."then all this is the cultural track...getting used to new cities."<sup>189</sup> The themes were categorized readily into three columns of commonalities for easy reference. The final rows of sticky notes were the questions, which Diego relayed to the two storytellers, "Why did you come to Canada? What are your future goals?...and people wanting to learn more about yourselves."<sup>190</sup> The reason he arranged the dialogue stream in this format enabled the audience to feel safe. It worked as a time management strategy, which was necessary due to the overwhelming participation from

<sup>188</sup> ISSofBC (2014) Part 1 "Common Ground Circle-Sharing the Journey Together"

<sup>189</sup> ISSofBC (2014) Part 1 "Common Ground Circle-Sharing the Journey Together"

<sup>190</sup> video footage from CGCD

this community. He then opened the forum to the audience to add any additional comments over and above those already mentioned.

This type of format seemed to be very effective since it created a sense of safety and comfort for the quiet people but also gave them a voice even if it was only in writing. It also left room for the more outspoken members. Some of the documented accounts of the reflections included; people identifying with the challenges of day-to-day tasks from taking the bus, crossing the street, grocery shopping etc. Secondly, many of the youth identified with the idea of the language barriers, which caused isolation and homesickness. Thirdly, the local culture on the West Coast seemed difficult to adjust to, relationally speaking. Finally, the economic difficulties of daily living with trying to find a balance of work and school mixed with paying the rent was challenging.

To conclude this session, each participant in the circle was asked to express in one or two words what they felt about this CGCD experience. These feelings and thoughts described are outlined in a concept illustration. (Fig. 13)



**Figure 14 - Concept Illustration by Theresa K. Howell**

*\*Words contributed by Common Ground Circle Youth Group*

During my follow up interviews, I sat down with Angelique, one of the CGCD youth community participants. As we started, I saw a glint of light in her dark brown eyes. Her voice had a singsong rhythm to it as she spoke. Yet, despite her name and physical attributes, she was not naïve. This 23-year-old woman had accumulated a world of experience up to now. A previous UNHCR translator/interpreter in Nairobi, she was currently trying to navigate potential career possibilities here in Canada. She discussed with me the possibility of getting into acting. Born in Rwanda she spent most of youth and adulthood in Kenya. She pointed out that she is not sure what to

call herself, Rwandan or Kenyan. During our interview, I had the impression that Angelique would take everything presented to her in stride. I asked her “what was the one thing she remembered thinking about after the storytellers were finished?” She explained that “the best thing was how when” these young people were met with challenges “they overcame them and also that people helped them. I was actually thinking like...oh my god, I’ve been there. This is exactly my story...”<sup>191</sup>

Through this interview plus the other reflections, evident through the sticky notes left on the window glass from the circle dialogue session, I realize the strength in storytelling to create moments of deep connection. As was discussed earlier in Chapter 1, ‘mirror neurons’ can suddenly activate a sense of commonality and trust; a knowing that we are not alone in this world.<sup>192</sup> However, humanity understood this long before we had the science. By bringing people together within communities, through storytelling, this has been around since the beginning of time.

## **Movement through Time with Storytelling**

It seems that pedagogy and storytelling are deeply intertwined; they are two threads within the same cloth. From the beginning of time, communities have used storytelling as a way to transmit traditional knowledge, instill beliefs and facilitate common understanding.<sup>193</sup> In *So They*

<sup>191</sup> ISSofBC (2014) Part 2 “Understanding the Challenges”

<sup>192</sup> Horsdal, Marianne (2012, p. 25)

<sup>193</sup> Leeming, D. A., & Sader, M. (1997)

*Understand; Cultural Issues in Oral Tradition*, William Schneider (2002) establishes that oral tradition gives a culture and its people a way to generate mutable information through time which helps define themselves within *said time* as well as allow for adjustments *through time*.<sup>194</sup> How is it that a people and their culture can be defined by and through story? The African word "Ubuntu" refers explicitly to the concept of oral tradition and its importance in the culture. In its translation: "a person is a person through other persons". "Ubuntu" is similarly understood to encapsulate this conceptual passing forward of tradition throughout time; the same can be said for the concept of "storytelling" within cultures.<sup>195</sup> We pass stories from one person to another to remind us of who we are and where we have come from. This allows us to find the strength to move forward to surpass the challenges and adversities of life.

Leeming and Sader authors of a "Storytelling Encyclopaedia" reacquaint us with the idea that Creation myths across various cultures function as a guide for survival and appropriate moral conduct. From the Book of Genesis to the Brhadaranyaka Upanishad to the Creation Story of Turtle Island, each creation story embodies ideas of where and how humans are first brought onto the earth. In each of these stories, certain culturally relevant references and metaphors are utilized to encapsulate

<sup>194</sup> Schneider, W. (2002).

<sup>195</sup> Ibid (pg. 56)

the foundations of human life and the moral guidelines that are to be upheld within the culture being addressed. However, throughout these stories there are also commonalities that traverse all cultures. <sup>196</sup>As Thomas King points out, in his CBC Massey Lecture Series "The Truth about Stories", picking the right story to tell is important and not to be taken lightly. On that same note, "a person can never go wrong with a creation story for contained within creation stories are relationships that help define the nature of the universe and how cultures understand the world in which they exist."<sup>197</sup> Similarly, listening to ancestors tell stories of how they faced situations in their life helps to ground our sense of identity in the world. Stories of resiliency, strength, fortitude and belonging are dominant themes of these storied traditions. An example of these themes is cited in Richardson's autobiographical reflection about her life as a Salvadorian immigrant making her way in the Canadian culture within its institutions. She iterates again how personal identities can find resolve.

*"Our experiences are moments engraved in a narrative that gives meaning to our journey and inspires new steps. Our family is one story within multiple stories that weave the tapestry of our collective lives.... These stories are the threads that weave my identity. The love, tears and joy give transcendence to my visions of a better today and*

<sup>196</sup> Leeming, D. A., & Sader, M. (1997).

<sup>197</sup> King, Thomas (2003, pg. 10)

*inspire a new tomorrow. I was brought up to see community as essential, and see myself as part of a natural world that is alive, ever changing. Stories informed my identity and ways of being in the world all my life."* <sup>198</sup>

<sup>198</sup> Richardson, S. L. (2013, p.152)

## Chapter VII. Personal Journey



**Figure 15- Art Installation for the Anvil Center**

Photo by Janet Kvammen

*There is an art to listening to our lives. Research is not only an outward endeavour, but it travels in the realm of re-searching our own lives, knowledge, passions and practice. -Celeste Snowber<sup>199</sup>*

<sup>199</sup> Snowber, Celeste (2007, p. 346)

During my thesis writing process, I realized I was experiencing the emerging themes that were such a huge component of this research. Concepts of resiliency, determination, strength and challenge, all became words that I recognized within the CGCD stories. Likewise, these concepts have resided in many of the stories I witnessed in my career as well as within my life. In artmaking, I often explore depictions of social challenges. As noted earlier, I feel that by citing and highlighting these issues in art the audience will seek to resolve the problem or at least recognize it.

In the summer of 2014, an artist submission call for the “Wait for Me Daddy” exhibition was announced on the New Westminster community webpage. For me, this request was an opportunity to open up avenues for storytelling through art. As my personal art making has often taken a backseat to my teaching, this event gave rise to awaking the artist in me. With the announcement of the theme “love, loss and loyalty”, I recognized the commonalities with the CGCD stories and my student’s stories. This idea of letting go and starting anew dominated both the CGCD participant stories as well as the classroom stories. It seemed a logical next step to construct an art piece that would give voice to these immigrant experiences that I had witnessed.

In the lead up to the “Wait for me Daddy”<sup>200</sup> art opening, on August 14th, I posted on my Facebook status, “So excited!! Today, I

<sup>200</sup> <http://www.newwestrecord.ca/news/new-westminster-artists-invited-to-submit-to-inaugural-show-at-anvil-centre-1.1210761>

got the official news that my art piece was accepted for the Grand Opening of New Westminster's Anvil Center on September 14th!!!"

After the array of congratulations, my friends and students established they would come to meet me that day and view exhibit in the community gallery. I was elated to feel appreciated and supported. I had never seen such a wide range of *likes* and *comments* on one of my Facebook posts before. How was I going to live up to their expectations? Nevertheless, and more importantly, how would I receive feedback from people about what they thought of the video and art piece? The motivation for this art production was based on my recent experiences with the WINS dialogue circles and my overall experience with my students and their stories. Its evolution was a lengthy process of going back and forth with my site manager and another artist/teacher colleague to come to the final concept. These two people had become my art making confidants over my years of teaching and creating. As always, it felt good to know it was a collaborative project. The main theme for the show was "love, loss and family". Therefore, integrating the published YouTube video from the New Westminster Common Ground Circle Dialogues into an art project seemed appropriate. The CGCD video explored the

challenges of leaving home and coming to start a new life in a new country. For some of the newcomers I have met; leaving everything to start a new life in a foreign world was their story. In some of the cases, huge webs of family connections were left behind. In other cases, some newcomers were never able to go back to their place of birth. If this art piece was part of a community gallery opening, within the New Westminster's Arts Centre, it might be the perfect location to engage the community as a whole. Hopefully this installation would shine a light on what it is like to be an immigrant within the New Westminster community.

Once the opening day arrived, I left my apartment at 10:45 am so I could get special early access to install my first generation iPad that had the video component for the art piece. Interestingly, this portion of the composition took more than a day to assemble. I needed to analyze and evaluate which software program to use and reduce the amount of apps installed so as not to confuse viewers. I soon realized, the majority of video player apps I could access were ill suited for this generation of Apple OS (operating system). Suddenly, this roadblock set back my schedule by hours versus minutes as I scoured Apple's app store. This has become some of the common challenges facing digital media users,

out-dated or old tech becoming obsolete or having limited interfacing capabilities.

Fortunately, through persistence, I found a looping video app that would work for this particular digital dinosaur. Arriving onsite, I suddenly became aware of the weightiness of this day. As I put the iPad in the frame, my hands were shaking. Then I proceeded to mount the suction cup hanger for the headphones. Once I finished installing these components, I took a deep breath and walked calmly down the marble staircase to grab a celebratory coffee. Due to the early anticipation of getting there on time, I had bypassed my morning coffee. Sitting on the Wave's Coffee outdoor patio, I watched the crowds gathering for the twelve o' clock opening. When the time finally struck noon, I wandered back to the conference center. In the center auditorium, there was a poetry reading by New Westminster's Poet Laureate, Candace James. This was one of the few items that were "a must see" for me that day, so I slid inconspicuously into one of the audience chairs. After she finished, I made my way upstairs. It had now been 30 minutes into the opening and I figured I would soon be seeing some familiar faces. As I reached the exhibit, I saw the art pieces' audio headphones dangling from the art

hanger mechanism, not from the original suction cup hanger. "Arrrgghh.... I knew something like this would happen!!! It must have been my nervousness." my inside voice bellowed. I rushed to the piece and my eyes scanned the floor for the clear plastic hanger. I whipped around and caught a glimpse of it on the glass shelving that lined the walls of the community art space. Once retrieved, I reapplied it to the same spot. However, this time I took the required attention to do it correctly. It adhered. Relieved, I stood back and just watched as people would go up to it and interact. It seemed that the biggest audience to interact that day was the younger demographic. This made me reflect on how I might have made the video shorter to accommodate their viewing attention.

Suddenly, someone tapped me on the shoulder. "Jeremy! It is so great to see you! Thanks for coming." "We wouldn't have missed it." he responded as his partner, Alejandro, nodded. Alejandro, a recent immigrant himself, had relocated to Canada from Mexico. "Where is your piece?" he queried. "Over there, the one with the head phones." I responded. "Great we're gonna take a look." Jeremy started walking away. "While you do that I'm gonna go check and see if anyone else is here. Talk soon. Just to let you know the video is 10 minutes long." I warned. I soon found

a couple of other friends and pulled them upstairs with me. After everyone finished viewing the piece with the video. It was my chance to get the much-desired feedback. "So what does the art piece say to you?" I asked the group. Alejandro starts, "I see people reaching out, helping." Jeremy adds, "...it also seems to be as if there is a space of disconnect between two people. It has so many layers of meaning." Other points that my audience added; "I saw people losing, struggling, trying to reach out for help." Others saw people rising up to the challenge of starting a new life. All the input was so wonderful. The art piece was many things to many people. It was reaching people on different levels without being trite or simplistic. This to me was a mark of success.



**Figure 16- Viewing the Community Art Piece**

Photo by Theresa K. Howell

### **Art-Making; a Forum for Advocacy and Agency**

In presenting this multimedia art piece at New Westminster's Anvil Center, I wanted to create a medium that gave a voice to others much like storytelling does. In moving art forms into a public forum, I have found that it is a helpful way to initiate conversation. At the same time, people need to read their own stories into the art. As an artist educator, I want to respect the audiences' ideas and facilitate meaningful dialogues. Advocacy for others is the undercurrent that resides within my artistic creations. During this present phase of my life, honouring our human diversity permeates many of my depictions. Through my many years of creating, I have learned to make pieces that can subtly communicate a place of contemplative reflection for the viewer. Many of the thoughts and ideas, I take into

consideration before I create are: How does this art piece serve to promote a positive global vision? How can I make the piece thought provoking and respectful, yet, contemplative? How can I make it accessible to everyone? What is my creative skill set and how will I represent it within the art piece? Based on these many questions, I decided to use the CGCD video and a photographic transfer as two of the central components. The use of a video via Apple iPad technology encapsulated within an art piece is said to promote "Multiple Proscenia". Multiple Proscenia is as a way in which digital stories can be experienced across various mediums or platforms as prescribed by Bryan Alexander (2011) in *The New Digital Storytelling; Creating Narratives with New Media*. By introducing storytelling across a variety of digital and analog ecosystems creates a story *mash-up*.<sup>201</sup> These introductions mean that the "creators and audiences can meet each other across multiple stages for the same story..."<sup>202</sup> Utilizing various mediums and formats to relay stories and develop docudramas is also becoming a trend for some public radio shows.

With ever-growing development in technology, we are able to access various forms of storytelling via radio podcasts, YouTube videos, blogs as well as a broad swath of computer-based apps. I now realize how biographical storytelling is fast becoming a huge forum for advocacy and relational community engagement due to its ease of access and use within digital media. However, good storytelling still remains the same as it did

<sup>201</sup> Something created by combining elements from two or more sources

<sup>202</sup> Alexander, Bryan (2011, p.42)

back in the early part of this last millennium. As Ira Glass establishes "a story, in its purest form, is an anecdote. It is what makes a story interesting or suspenseful. This historically old structure has forward movement that inherently captures people's attention. When we are in school nobody teaches us how to write this way which is so much more mesmerizing and fascinating."<sup>203</sup> This one statement makes me wonder "Why not?"

### **Returning to Family Stories**

While working and discovering my thesis process, I learned that telling stories of the past could shape the future for new generations. These storied moments strengthen people, both the teller and the listener. Meeka Noelle Morgan, an SFU graduate, recognized this strength in story during the research with her first nations community. She established that once the participants had recounted their past life events "they became conscious of how much they had been through to get to where they were now." Noelle-Morgan goes on to point out that the awakening within the storytellers also awakened her and "brought them closer to her heart, regardless of what family they were from, or whether or not they were 'related'..."<sup>204</sup> It seems as though storytelling builds bonds and connections that can inspire. Finding strength and hopefulness within stories was

<sup>203</sup> Talks at Google (2013)

<sup>204</sup> Morgan, Meeka Noelle (2005, p.167)

evident with the CGCD storytellers as well. Reflecting on Zoe's comments about her experiences leading up to the CGCD's:

“My teacher advised me to write down my memories and it was an excellent idea for me...maybe I will finish a book later on to leave it to my next generation.”<sup>205</sup>

I felt honoured to be recognized outside the classroom. Zoe, as much as myself, realized how biographical storytelling was a way to connect to the past and to give new meaning to the present. In being part of a Master's program as well as in crafting this thesis, I too, have found a similar awakening in revisiting my past. As part of my personal and pedagogical inquiries, I explored and generated through writing many family stories, which I look forward to compiling for my daughters as well as any of our future generations. As I went through this writing process, I have also recognized a certain creative skill as it relates to writing. The transformative nature of producing visual art projects echoes itself within the literary art process as well. Revisiting and refining a written piece has the same contemplative pleasure as creating a work of art. And with this, being an artist and mother, a newfound desire to update my family's anthology awoke within me. From my perspective, anthologies can illuminate a picture from past times to the redefine present ideals and values. Subsequently, narratives become a form of cross-generational communication of the past to those in the future. With narrative

<sup>205</sup> ISSofBC (2014) Part 1 “Common Ground Circle-Sharing the Journey Together”

portraiture, Lawrence-Lightfoot describes these portraits as marking a moment in time but feeling timeless. As she describes a portrait of herself she reflects on how “I could see my grandmother, and my mother, and anticipate the way my children would one day see me. “<sup>206</sup> For myself, generating an autobiographical form of writing gives me pride knowing that I am walking in tandem with the footsteps of my great Aunt Nellie.

<sup>206</sup> Lawrence-Lightfoot, S., & Davis, J. H. (1997, pg. 260)

## Chapter VIII. Teachings from the Journey



**Figure 17- “Knowledge Crystallized” Photo by Theresa K. Howell**

*“...life is an interactive process, an ongoing dialogue between perspectives that is, in its totality, a kind of ecology. In a healthy ecology all participants are respected and allowed to speak.”-Shaun McNiff<sup>207</sup>*

<sup>207</sup> Simpkinson, Charles & Anne (Editors) (1993, p. 170)

Walking along this learning path, I have seen, felt and envisioned many experiences. In looking back, I see myself changed; transformed by them. What have these three years revealed to me since I opened this door? As I move myself back through this thesis writing and research process, I want to share my thoughts on what this process has revealed to me.

### **Moving from One CGCD Story Space to Another**

While working with the Common Ground Circle Dialogues project, many thoughts and themes revealed themselves to me. By applying narrative portraiture as a component of my writing process, certain criterion is expected for assessing the information gathered. As narrative portraiture is a form of qualitative research, this methodology seeks to prove research through emerging themes.<sup>208</sup> The emergent themes are unveiled using five modes; these are *repetitive refrains*, *resonant metaphors*, the *triangulation* of data, the *revealed patterns* and finally, *institutional* and *cultural rituals*.<sup>209</sup> Within the WINS initiative plus the CGCD project, themes such as *connection*, *agency*, *advocacy*, *challenge* and *struggle*, *support*, *change* and *determination* emerged. Looking at how some of these themes unfolded through the research process, I will visit each of the aforementioned criterion specifically.

<sup>208</sup> Creswell, J. W. (2013).

<sup>209</sup> Lawrence-Lightfoot, S., & Davis, J. H. (1997, pg. 193)

## Repetitive Refrains

Portraitists look at *repetitive refrains* to gain insight into phrases or verses that “are spoken (or appear) frequently and persistently, forming a collective expression of commonly held beliefs.” as defined by Lawrence-Lightfoot<sup>210</sup> In the follow up interviews with some of the participant’s concepts of *support, connection and advocacy* for the storytellers were revealed. As I sat down with Angelique, the youth group participant, she commented that the youth stories were, “exactly my story”. Angelique had been one of the 20+ participants witnessing the stories of Gustaf and Azure. Angelique had been one of the few vocal and communicative participants, she willingly shared a small sample of her immigrant experiences with the youth group in the second phase of the CGCD’s. For Angelique, the session seemed to prompt a real feeling of *connection* and *solidarity* with the storytellers. Likewise, Maliha Mayeed, one of the women’s group participants, commented on how the storytelling “compensates you, knowing you are not alone in the boat”.<sup>211</sup> Maliha, a previous immigrant from Bangladesh and employee of ISSofBC, talked of how moving to a new country can be a struggle. Moving to Canada with her husband and young son was an eye-opening experience with many sacrifices. However, it was about giving her child greater opportunities. She, too, *connected* with the challenges of relocating to Canada. Meanwhile, in the men’s CGCD’s, Jacob, a community participant and District School #40 administrator, echoed

<sup>210</sup> Lawrence-Lightfoot, S., & Davis, J. H. (1997, pg. 193)

<sup>211</sup> ISSofBC (2014) Part 2 “Understanding the Challenges”

Jonah's sense of isolation as it related to localized greeting behaviors. During the CGCD's, Jacob shared an anecdote with the group describing this common ground.

When Jacob went to visit his wife's home in Latin America, he felt awkward and somewhat unusual. In his recollection, he discussed how all of her relatives and friends spent generous amounts of time greeting both of them, individually with hugs and handshakes. Then, likewise, saying goodbye with handshakes and hugs. What he knew from his North America upbringing and what he experienced during his visit reminded him of the perceived cultural contrasts. Suddenly realizing his own sense of isolation.<sup>212</sup>

Yet, in this, he was able to find an alliance with Jonah, the men's CGCD storyteller, based on these differences. In these few samples, the themes of *connection*, *support* and *advocacy* are shown. Similarly, the WINS video production crew realized certain repeated refrains that informed the chapter breaks for the production. In video productions, refrains are often used in titling to facilitate the audience in recognizing a story's overarching themes. Since this video production started before the research, it can be noted that the themes started to unfold early on. In the same regard, but on a larger scale, the phrases used in the titling of the WINS Action Plan: *Inclusive Workplaces*; *Welcoming Spaces*; and *Receptive Communities* echo ideas of *support and advocacy*. In this, the supportive language intermingled with the actions and words of others created a sense of *agency* for the storytellers. By maintaining this language, spoken or seen,

<sup>212</sup> Video Footage

creates a growing sense of consistency, congruency and meaningful coherence within the minds of the participant's and storytellers.

Reflecting on these particular CGCD components reminds me of how a story's thematic foundations emerge. For example, as I listened to Ira Glass talk about what it is to create biographical radio podcasts for *This American Life*, he discusses that "finding great stories... takes a large amount of time. Sometimes you need to abandon huge portions to allow the goodness to surface."<sup>213</sup> In these productions, large amounts of digitally recorded interviews are gathered. They are then funnelled down from an array of digital audio pieces to specific cuts that speak to the essence of the story. All these selections are integrated to form a plot line. The interview pieces are the live dialogues, which are woven in with voiceovers. Then the injected voiceovers work as reflective commentary. All of elements help to meld and make sense of the foundations of the particular story. As a person listens to any story from *This American Life*, they hear an engaging real life tale that is difficult to turn off. It is easy to see how the American Radio Show has become one of the most downloaded podcasts; a million downloads each year. Moreover, the radio podcast has an audience of 15 percent overseas since they utilize "themes...that are universal."<sup>214</sup>

<sup>213</sup> War Photography (2009, July 11) *Ira Glass on Storytelling 2*

<sup>214</sup> Ibid

Lawrence-Lightfoot's perspective on how a portraitist conceives a narrative echoes Ira Glasser's ideas on time and universality. She points out "a portraitist's conception grows out of the dominance of an emergent theme that reveals itself in many forms, through diverse voices, in a variety of settings."<sup>215</sup> Portraiture, however, utilizes an academic perspective grounded in qualitative research whereby the repeated refrains help to establish data congruency through a narrative structure. From my perspective, the video production, ISSofBC embarked on, assisted in cementing the theses findings.

### **Resonant Metaphors**

Emergent themes are also found in "the metaphors, symbols and vernacular language of the actors" which are called *resonant metaphors* Lawrence-Lightfoot establishes. The "words and phrases resonate with meaning and symbolism, sometimes representing the central core of institutional culture or the dominant dimension of a life story."<sup>216</sup> These themes can sometimes be noticed in the "...expressions that reveal the ways actors illuminate and experience their realities."<sup>217</sup> Finding symbolism and metaphors became defined by what perceived elements and words were emphasized repeatedly overtime. Between all three groups of the CGCD's: the men's, women's and youth, a consistent concept within these immigrant experiences was the *disconnection* from the past to present

<sup>215</sup> Lawrence-Lightfoot, S., & Davis, J. H. (1997, p. 248)

<sup>216</sup> Ibid (1997, p. 198)

<sup>217</sup> Ibid (1997, p. 193)

realities followed by a revision of self which resulted in a *change*. All of these changes were earmarked with a pattern of *overcoming a challenge*, a *letting go* phase, with the finale of *starting all over again*. These particular italicized phrases best describe the moments of change for the participating immigrants. Most of the participants, either the storytellers or community members who had recent or past immigration experiences, discussed the need to let go of certain old behaviours, expectations or beliefs in order to move forward. Often this concept of letting go was not vocalized but consciously or unconsciously acted on. Other vocalized concepts were commentaries of *overcoming the challenges* and *starting over* that bridged changes they saw in their lives. These resonant metaphors and symbols displayed themselves in the strength gained from their experienced adversity. Again, Angelique described for me the monumental change she sees for herself.

Angelique, at the moment of the interview, had lived in Canada for three months. She worked as an interpreter for the Nairobi branch of UNHCR in Kenya. Coming to Canada as a Refugee from Kenya she realized she could finally get citizenship to a country unlike her previous situation. As a refugee in Kenya, she would always remain stateless with little chance of making a difference to the country she resided in. In Angelique's testimonial, I am witness to an overall trait that many newcomers possess.

"I am Rwandan but we left in 1984 and went to Kenya. We left a French speaking country to an English speaking country. We had to start all over again. I see myself as Kenyan since I was brought up in Kenya. The best part of the dialogue circles was hearing about how they overcame the challenges and finding

people to help them. I was thinking we are finally somewhere that we can make our lives better."<sup>218</sup>

Angelique's account became one of many in the CGCD's. Witnessing these stories plus hearing my student's experiences often caused me to ponder how it would be to leave a known way of life for something foreign.

### **Triangulation**

The third mode: *triangulation* "employs various strategies and tools for data collection which look for points of convergence."<sup>219</sup> In doing qualitative research, compiling data contributes to the rigor and credibility of the research.<sup>220</sup> Therefore, the "emergent themes arise out of this layering of data" be seeing it through various lenses and perspectives. <sup>221</sup> As I scanned the videos of the CGCD's, listened to the interviews, plus read the field notes and reports, patterns and themes rose to the surface. By revisiting these data collections repeatedly through time, new and sometimes divergent views converged to produce consistent themes or concepts. Examples of the overall concepts that initially arose were *feelings of isolation and dissonance* recognized in many notable stories and

<sup>218</sup> One on one follow up interviews

<sup>219</sup> Lawrence-Lightfoot, S., & Davis, J. H. (1997, p. 204)

<sup>220</sup> Creswell, J. W. (2013)

<sup>221</sup> Lawrence-Lightfoot, S., & Davis, J. H. (1997, p. 204)

comments. Meanwhile other concepts such as *strength, support and awakenings* were heard, seen and written through the accounts of the various participants.<sup>222</sup> Some of these samples surfaced in the one on one interviews. Again it was Angelique who noted that, “the best part of the dialogue circles was hearing about how they overcame the challenges and finding people to help them.”<sup>223</sup> Yet, it was Maliha Mayeed, participant in the women’s session, who brought the reality of how these experiences can truly be understood universally.

When Maliha immigrated with her family to Canada back in 2001. They left after a year to take a contract in Malawi, Africa, teaching with a CIDA backed project. They lived there for 2 years and then decided to come back. She tells me:

“I have lived here for 7-8 years now. I have volunteered and made a network to facilitate my integration. It takes time. It is difficult when you leave a life and the network that you built and now you need to rebuild it all over again.”

She further goes on to establish that:

"Everybody has their own story but the gist is the same. It compensates you and makes you feel like you are not alone in the boat. When you are struggling and there is no return. You say "why me?" but it is not you always, it is everybody.  
...Everybody has their own story whether they are immigrant

<sup>222</sup> Field notes from CGCD

<sup>223</sup> One on one follow up interviews

or non-immigrant. But our immigrant issues are similar. Everybody has their own set of problems. It gave me a sense of comfort that others have the same set of challenges it is not just me so I keep on going."<sup>224</sup>

Throughout the journey of this project, changes abounded. It was through the overall storylines, the emerging perspectives within the CGCD's and the overall outcomes that when triangulated conveyed *changes*. With the theme of *changes*, other emergent themes, such as *advocacy*, *agency* and *connection* became hallmark concepts within the data triangulation as well. In the act of writing, the iterative process of reassessing the information supported the triangulation of data. By repeatedly, revisiting the material descriptions, I realized some of the themes evolved based on my initial thoughts. This process itself helped to reshape the thesis, titles and emphasis from their original findings. However, other themes and patterns became more rooted such as those relating to *connections* and *understanding*.

### **Revealed Patterns**

Another mode is seen in the *revealed patterns and themes* that could be contrasting or dissonant to what the participants/actors acknowledge.<sup>225</sup> Triangulation of data sometimes does not tell the whole

<sup>224</sup> One on one follow up interviews

<sup>225</sup> Lawrence-Lightfoot, S. and Davis, J. H. (1997)

story and there are unheard or unacknowledged information that becomes another aspect to the story. These are “the underlying patterns.”<sup>226</sup> A dissonance or disconnect between known realities and a current reality was one of the main characteristics inherent in the climax of each immigrant story. Through a variety of jarring moments in the storyteller’s situations, *change* emerged. In the men’s group, Jonah points out in his story, that there were distinct cultural differences in team building. However, he decided to “suck it up” and learn new ways to see things.<sup>227</sup> In Jonah’s story, he related how he proceeded to utilize a previously learned greeting technique within his new workplace. It was through his social stigmatization and further demotion that he realized he needed to change what he was doing. It was a difficult lesson but one he quickly adapted to in order to maintain employment.

Such truths can become a repeated disconnect for many newcomers. In going through this shift, the understood ideals and values of a situation or culture can shake a person’s identity to a new wide-awakeness, if the shift is embraced. Sometimes the change is gradual and incremental which requires reflection on a previous mode of existence to notice the shift. Lydia, the women’s storyteller, noticed this shift during her follow up interview. She established that “When I reflect on what I went through two

<sup>226</sup> Lawrence-Lightfoot, S. and Davis, J. H. (1997, p.209)

<sup>227</sup> ISSofBC (2014) Part 1 “Common Ground Circle-Sharing the Journey Together”

and half years ago I realize how much I have changed from that time. I like to tell about my feelings now."<sup>228</sup> Consistent in all the challenging situations was a desire to change a behavior, attitude or perception. With time, a conscious transformation replaced old ways. These themes and patterns remind me of what Maliha said about how all of us experience change and upheaval, immigrant or non-immigrant. I personally see change as a normal process when being confronted with a dominant life-altering event. Dr. Andrew Dobo (2013) postulates that there are six stages to psychological transformation with any major life experience. Upon confrontation of a challenge, the human psyche will deny its existence. Next, the person will surrender. However, this is only preparation for the next stage, which is the dismantling of self. Following this, a sense of confusion sometimes a feeling of chaos can be evoked. This will be the moment that the person experiences a transformation. Once this stage is completed, a rebirth occurs and the final stage evolves in the assimilation of the new self.<sup>229</sup> In many major upheavals, people will experience a profound change. However, the duration may vary. It could take one person a lifetime to come to the sixth stage while others may only take 24 hours to go through the various stages. There is no right or wrong way to unfold a life journey.

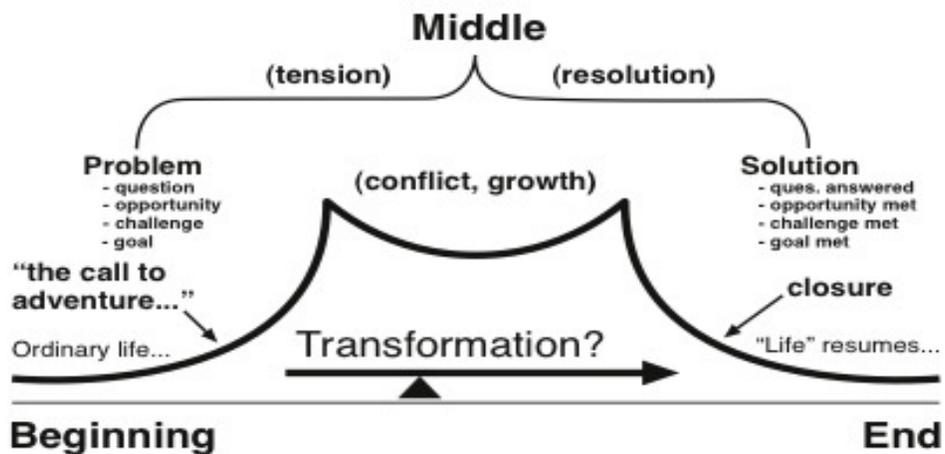
<sup>228</sup> One on one follow up interviews

<sup>229</sup> Dobo, Andrew (2013)

Characteristically, transformation and change as a plot line, in storytelling, is quite common. Ira Glass, host and producer of *This American Life*, alludes to the idea that a story needs to move forward in order to capture a listener's interest.<sup>230</sup> In this case, the climactic moment in the story is where a character's transformation needs to occur. The transformative moment is one of the most utilized climaxes within a plot line for character development. In that regard, the protagonist's character is called to task. Upon engaging in this experience, the character, inevitably, faces a challenge whether it is real or imagined. As the protagonist meets the challenge, an internal or external conflict will arise causing intrinsic growth. Herein lies the moment of change. At this point, the character will never be the same as before this specific arena of time.<sup>231</sup>

<sup>230</sup> War Photography (2009, July 11) Ira Glass on Storytelling 1

<sup>231</sup> James, Steven (2014)



(Dillingham, 2001, with transformation, Ohler, 2003)

### Figure 18 – Visual Portrait of a Story

Original Graphic by Dillingham, B. (1992) revision by Ohler, J. (2003)

This particular plotline became a consistent foundation for all the CGCD immigrant stories. The storytellers were not consciously trying to recreate their lives based on this storytelling plotline. Their narratives were merely a depiction of consequential actions and reactions to the existing human experiences. For example, Zoe's story, from the women's CGCD's, directly establishes that the experience taught her that she had to change her life; think deeply; help herself. From that moment onwards, her relationships within her family changed and her communicative approach with her son's took on a new direction. Similarly, from the men's CGCD's, an abrupt change evolved in Jonah when his previous approach to "team building" did not work anymore. Suddenly, he knew he "had failed" and a new way of thinking had to prevail if he was "going to get back up again".<sup>232</sup>

<sup>232</sup> ISSofBC (2014) Part 1 "Common Ground Circle-Sharing the Journey Together"

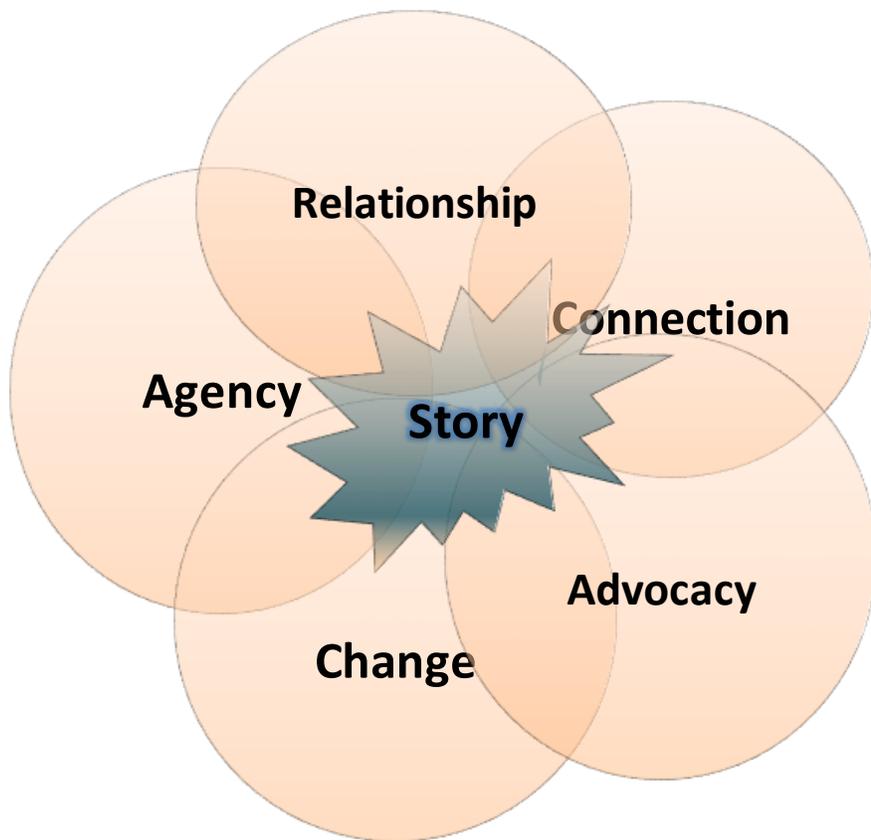
In the editing stage of the video footage for the CGCD's, our production team looked at the various repeated themes within the storyteller's tales. These themes became synonymous with the aforementioned plotline. Three distinct areas of focus were found; the challenges, the crossroads and new beginnings. Based on these focal points we began disseminating the most memorable and relevant video pieces and to compile them into one 10-minute video segment titled *Common Ground Circle-Sharing the Journey Together*.<sup>233</sup> So what makes this relevant? It is these stories that create impact. When a person is moved through shared realities such as barriers or challenges, it pulls them together. Zhi Liu and Michael Morris state in their research article *Intercultural Interactions and Cultural Transformation* that "Common ground *consistent* information in a message helps with interpersonal bonding because it is easily comprehensible."<sup>234</sup> Due to these common ground scenarios the community then found it easier to identify with and understand the experiences of the storyteller's. Following these assumptions, social changes as well as policy initiatives become easier to initiate.

During similar moments within the project, I realized that storytelling becomes a bridge from one culture to another, from one generation to another and finally as a pathway, that fosters self-reliance and strength. A person's biographical narrative can describe an access point between two realities whereby change can occur. We then meet on common ground

<sup>233</sup> ISSofBC (2014) Part 1 "Common Ground Circle-Sharing the Journey Together"

<sup>234</sup> Liu, Z. and Morris, M. W. (2014, p.101)

while the act of telling empowers the narrator. Storytelling communications, therefore, lend themselves easily to unearthing solutions for communal and relational understandings by fostering dialogue. For me, these CGCD's paved a pathway that opened eyes and minds to other realities. Finally, these ideas and ideals echoed a direct relation to what I found within my classroom community though the sharing of stories.



**Figure 19 - Concept Graphic -Themes of CGCD's**

## Institutional and Cultural rituals

The last mode to consider is how to “listen for themes expressed through *cultural and institutional rituals* that seem to be important for the organizational continuity and coherence” within the structures involved.<sup>235</sup> Often, these themes express themselves “through the rituals and ceremonies that punctuate life in a community or institution.”<sup>236</sup> Since, I had worked with ISSofBC for almost a decade, I had taken for granted the interwoven networks of *advocacy* and promotion of *personal agency* that the organization perpetuates. These themes are reinforced through staff diversity, projects that are undertaken and through the surrounding environment and community. Looking back at the description of the CGCD projects location, ISSofBC New Westminster, I saw an environment that strongly supports the immigrant voice. Seeing the visuals and actions surrounding this environment reinforces the value placed on *personal agency*. The cultural diversity displayed by the portrait photos on the walls, within the website and in the ongoing events and activities echo a supportive workplace culture. As it states on the website: “ISSofBC is a stimulating, culturally diverse work environment with 400 staff members representing all corners of the globe.”<sup>237</sup> One of the more directly related

<sup>235</sup> Lawrence-Lightfoot, S. and Davis, J. H. (1997, p. 193)

<sup>236</sup> Ibid. (1997, p. 201)

<sup>237</sup> ISSofBC website (2016) Work at ISSofBC

displays of institutional and cultural ritual, I witnessed, was the final WINS celebration held at the Century House. Century House is said to be the oldest city-owned senior's center in all of Canada. It officially opened near Moody Park, in 1958.<sup>238</sup>



**Figure 20-"Celebration Time" by Theresa K. Howell**

As I walked towards Century House, it was sprinkling rain on this typical dark, West Coast winter day in February. I had told Andrea I would be at the WINS final celebration event for 1:00 pm. This was to help set up for the 1:30-3:30 pm schedule that I was to photograph. In preparing for this activity, I had asked one of my students, a career photographer from Iran, if he wanted to assist me. Knowing he would be

<sup>238</sup> Century House Association "ABOUT US" <http://www.centuryhouseassociation.com/> - retrieved from website on February 17th, 2014

able to make a variety of connections, this event seemed enticing. He agreed. However, that morning, I received a call from him saying he wasn't able to make it. Suddenly, I felt some pressure knowing it would now solely depend on me to photograph all the activities. The scheduled list was expansive from hair braiding, henna, turban tying, lion dancers, and stilt walkers to a youth interactive theatre, a drum circle and children's art making activities. As well, to inaugurate the celebration there would be city and provincial speakers invited and a Qayqayt Nation Welcoming Ceremony. Overall, it would be an intense 2 hours of shooting. Once I psychologically readjusted myself to the idea that I was on my own, I took a deep breath and stepped inside the venue. The dimly lit entrance opened up to an informal common room where horseshoe shaped wooden chairs surrounded twenty round maple tables; early eighties era furnishings. Approximately twenty people sparsely scattered themselves throughout this space chatting and mingling. To my left hung a bright yellow material banner with a large "Welcome" was inked on a brown and green fabric tree, which was surrounded by similar greetings in other dialectic scripts of various international languages. Moving inside, my eyes scanned the environment for the "Douglas Fir Room" which was

listed on my schedule. There was no signage but my eyes were drawn to a room that stood at the back of the common area. It was brightly lit and looked to be exhibiting an active group of people bustling about. I thought, "This must be the place."

Walking through the glass doors, again my eyes were drawn to the middle of the room by an array of photographs being displayed. Off to my left was a child's roundtable with six preschool sized chairs surrounding it. On it crayons and freshly printed images of people wearing unique traditional cultural attire sat anxiously awaiting creative little hands. To my right was a BC Transit kiosk featuring transit information in various dominant languages and giveaways. Following close beside was a henna hand-painting table with a Middle Eastern henna painter sitting behind it awaiting the event to begin. On the painter's right was a poised gigantic, purple, Chinese dragonhead. Propping up the Dragonhead was an Asian man already talking with a participant. Red envelopes were scattered along the three wooden 6-foot long tables. It had been two days since the official end to the 2014's Lunar New Year concluded with a lantern festival. Due to this, the volunteers were showing people how to make lanterns with the paper envelopes. Following this was the turban-

tying table. Here two Sikh gentlemen were already preparing an Asian woman's head with a yellow fabric headband wrap. This would be the base for the turban. The turban-tying table was supplied with the largest number of volunteers. About eight Sikh men were on hand to educate and facilitate people in today's event. As I walked around the room, I found myself on the opposite side of where I entered. Here a two-foot high main stage was set up with a microphone for the MC, the First Nations Welcoming speaker and the other participant speakers. Finally, next to this, I found my department, the video display whereby the WINS Common Ground Circles Dialogue video was being shown. My video editing colleague, Chris was there with Gustaf, the youth storyteller, who had arrived early to see what was going on. Gustaf and I shared a love of film and photography. Right away, I saw an opportunity to facilitate my needs with his. As I introduced Gustaf to Chris, I said, "Oh by the way, Gustaf was part of the storytelling dialogues plus he is a photographer." Chris shook his hand nodded and smiled. As he showed me the camera he had brought from our head office, I reminded him that I had my own equipment but interjected, "Gustaf would you like to help me photograph this event?" He quickly but quietly responded with an affirmative "yes".

We were set. I had my assistant and Gustaf was that much closer to feeling more at home in his new community. The two of us moved in and out of the throng of people capturing the celebratory activities in digital celluloid. As the event wrapped up, the three of us met back at the video station and exchanged contact information. As I walked to the exit, I ran into Robert (Robbie) Bandera, the First Nations Welcome speaker for the Qayqayt Nation. As we stood there and talked, I soon learned he was an Aboriginal storyteller with the Surrey Public School District. He had been introduced to his role through his sister years earlier. Moving up from Washington State, he was taking on the role of one of the primary storytellers for the New Westminster and Surrey Public School Districts. Through our 30-minute dialogue, I soon learned many things about Robbie and we exchanged stories about why we were here and where we were going. In the end, the dark, rainy day provided bright moments within the Century House walls...and again another bridge, between people, was built through story. Another common ground found and brought to light.

Reflecting on the meaning within this final celebration, I recognized how inclusive the whole WINS initiative had become. Promoting the diverse cultures within the community permeated every level of this process from

beginning to end. This celebration became a micro example of institutional and cultural ritual that emblemized *agency, advocacy* and *support* that the CGCD project as part of the WINS initiative has promoted.

## **Community Foundations Revisited**

Many things changed and evolved during the project and long afterwards in the midst of my thesis process. As discussed earlier, the reflective, iterative, collaborative dialogic foundations of Participatory Action Research (PAR) residing comfortably both within the project and outside of it. Evidence the PAR process not only symbolically described itself in the title of project, Common Ground Circle Dialogues; it was resurrected within the implementation of the WINS action plan outcome. Now that the New Westminster Welcoming and Inclusive (WINS) Community Partnership Table had completed a Community Action Plan, which took place between April 2013 and March 2014, the next step became important. Based on the plethora of information gathered through projects such as the CGCD's, surveys and further meetings, the partnership created a "Strategic Action Plan for 2015-2020". In the final action plan, four major goals were outlined. Additionally, these goals will be reviewed annually.

*Goal one: Newcomers to New Westminster are supported with streamlined and integrated opportunities that promote healthy outcomes and increase their sense of belonging.*

*Goal two: Newcomers to New Westminster can access appropriate employment.*

*Goal three: Newcomers to New Westminster are supported by a community invested in and aware of the important role of immigration in the community.*

*Goal four: Newcomers to New Westminster are supported by a strong, collaborative Council.<sup>239</sup>*

The point that the plan will be revisited annually harkens back to PAR's process as an ongoing iterative, recursive process; a cycle, which is always changing and evolving. This echoed itself in a larger national picture as well. During the beginning of the project and until now, October 2016, immigration policies have changed. As of November 2015, Canada swore in a new Liberal Government Leader, Hon. Justin Trudeau replacing the previous Conservative Government. With this, a new wave of changes took place. As stated in Trudeau's political platform, a promised 25,000 Syrian Refugees were welcomed into Canada by February 2016. Since coming into office, the new government has regularly redressed changes to its immigration policy. As for New Westminster, the community itself welcomed 100 Syrian Refugees with half of those being PSR's; privately sponsored refugees.<sup>240</sup> As a need to recognize ways to accommodate surfacing shifts in societal structures, waves of change and adaptive

<sup>239</sup> Local Immigrant Partnership Council (2015)

<sup>240</sup> City of New Westminster (2015, Dec. 10)

strategies need to occur. And in this process storytelling platforms could readily bridge the communication within these changing times.

## **Re-examining the Methodologies**

Reflections of why storytelling matters unfolded in the pulling together of themes within these newcomer stories. Building narratives through a nuance of voices and defined details retrieved from the data is what *Narrative Portraiture* teaches. This particular process and writing style enriched my thesis process academically and creatively. During the Common Ground Circle Dialogues (CGCD) the dominant themes of *connection, advocacy, agency* and *change* affirmed one of my reasons to embark down this academic path. Consequentially, through the process and execution of writing the portraits, I was able to discern these thematic details through words spoken and situations observed. I finally grasped why this storytelling methodology has been implemented repeatedly throughout time. By carefully melding a dichotomy of art and science, somehow, gives this methodology its distinctiveness. The challenge of balancing intellect with creativity enticed me. The balance must be achieved through thoughtful writing in order to reach “a synergy of context, voice, relationship and emergent themes.”<sup>241</sup> Like working a piece of clay on a turntable, each turn or pass would further develop the image until the final piece became a comprehensible and engaging portrayal of a

<sup>241</sup> Lawrence-Lightfoot, S. and Davis, J. H. (1997, p.260)

person through their voice and their story. It is interesting to acknowledge that even Rousseau and Diderot, collaboratively, applied a form of narrative portraiture to their writing. The novelist/philosophers would inspire each other by maximizing their ability to encapsulate the texture and nuances of human experience in their works. The artist/scientist within them would often try to assemble, in minute detail, a particular perspective, which would best emulate a life experience.<sup>242</sup>

Lawrence-Lightfoot attributes portraiture's proficiency, as a methodology, to its ability to embody the essence of a lived experience through writing while staying objective. In accomplishing this, it is important that the methodology respect the actor's/participant's authentic experience. Other renowned portraitists are acknowledged in John Dewey, W.E.B. Dubois and Clifford Geertz

Simultaneously, interpretations and analysis repeatedly surfaced through the CGCD sessions. By actively engaging in the exploration of PAR as a process in the project, I saw how action research engaged outcomes through the storytellers and participants themselves. In this, I realized how powerful it becomes in activating agency and change. As McIntyre states about the implications of PAR:

Participants of PAR projects discover an appreciation of local knowledge and their capacity to speak about and to that knowledge. In so doing, they enrich their sense of themselves as contributing members of society. That enrichment fosters

<sup>242</sup> Lawrence-Lightfoot, S. and Davis, J. H. (1997).

community building, and community building fosters a willingness to engage in ongoing processes of action and research. <sup>243</sup>

By reflecting on the information provided in the CGCD's, then reassessing it through interviews, surveys, and cross referencing the information within my classroom, concepts and illustrations developed and crystallized. By the end of my thesis research, new concepts on how storytelling acts as a conduit to change, in the classroom and beyond, materialized. Yet, it was through the lengthy writing process of this thesis, where a newfound skill in descriptive, mindful and creative writing was honed through an iterative editing process. By reflecting back on the CGCD, teaching, researching then writing, editing and repeating these practices over and over, my process developed and my perceptions changed. In the end, employing both these methodologies within my thesis research and writing process, a symbiotic relationship was produced; one, which wove back and forth creating a seamless, graceful dance of applied and academic practices. All of this has deeply informed me as an artist, educator and scholar.

### **Looking Back to Where I Started**

During this research on the phenomenon of storytelling as it relates to connection and perceptual change, I found that personal stories built bridges of understanding. As recognized through various excerpts,

<sup>243</sup> McIntyre, A. (2008, p. 245)

participants felt that they either gained new insights or shared a common ground via the stories. Did these stories empower people and act as a conduit for further reflection? This is seen throughout, the CGCD sessions and their integrated reflections within the actual structure itself. At the same time, throughout this thesis writing process, I show how stories acted as a source of reflexivity for myself as well as others. While Lydia, the women's group storyteller, expressed the concept of empowerment in our follow up interview together. She explained to me that:

The experience was wonderful and to hear others stories they help a person feel less alone. When I heard another person's story, it helped me to better understand my spouse's perspective.<sup>244</sup>

With this statement, I realized that sharing stories gives a sense of acknowledgment as well as introspection. To better others as well as ourselves acts as an additional layer of goodness. Within communities and classrooms, a transmission of stories can come via the act of writing as well as oration to facilitate *advocacy* and *agency*. During the WINS project, these oral stories helped to advocate for governmental change. Relating to their documentation, storytelling acts as a static artifact, which can facilitate *dialogue*, *advocacy* and *change*. Witnessing my student's biographies has given me a glimpse into their lives and contributed to a fuller picture of them outside the classroom walls. Due to this, I have found their stories

<sup>244</sup> One on one follow up interviews

create a form *agency* for themselves but also a relational connection I would not have had otherwise.

*Connections* and *change* through storytelling can take many forms. In the CGCD's and through all the interviews, I noticed one consistency in these forums of engagement and understanding. The community and surrounding participants were affected immediately by the stories they heard. Awakenings and epiphanies abounded with the presentation and elicitation of the newcomer's biographical tales. However, in my interviews with the storytellers they consistently established that the telling of the story was a conscious act of sharing. They had already experienced their evolution. Their *transformation* or *change* was already apart of who they were and what they had experienced. They participated in a proactive response as community members. Most of them were already volunteering or active in other community based activities. Therefore, the transformation, which was the foundation for these plotlines, had already taken place. Therefore, the cycle of change and transformation of "the storyteller's tale", in these circumstances, acted as a conduit for perpetuating or influencing change outwardly.<sup>245</sup> In this regard, their participation in the CGCD's actively produced a means for advocating for other newcomer's in their community by the mere fact that it engaged community members to take notice and feel acknowledged by their shared

<sup>245</sup> James, Steven (2014)

experiences. In this, I sensed a feeling of empowerment through the display of reflective connections resulting from these CGCD sessions.

In my classroom, the story or narrative has acted as a dialogic communication tool. In these instances, two or more parties became engaged in the act of describing autobiographical narratives that evoked queries and mutual exchanges of reciprocity and understanding. By nature, these exchanges became a form of transformational therapy session. Feelings of social inclusivity and cultural bridging are at their roots. Melding cultures and lives became the foundational fibres that weave the bonds within these transactions. At these moments, the enactment of a narrative can happen via conversation clubs; project based storytelling dramas or digitally implemented software tools. With project-based storytelling, various student groups are brought together to compose their common story. With digital narratives, I have witnessed student blogs serving to engage listeners with visuals and text. Meanwhile responsive comments or e-mails feed the dialogical element between the creator and reader. Pedagogically speaking, these platforms can serve to unite classrooms and root its membership in community. This can further nurture educational development via the surrounding collective community in and out of the classroom.

## Chapter IX. Reflections and Conclusions



**Figure 21- WINS Project Final Party By Theresa K. Howell**

*We are appreciative now of storytelling as a mode of knowing...for the importance of shaping our own stories, and at the same time, opening ourselves to other stories in all their variety and their different degrees of articulateness. -Maxine Greene<sup>246</sup>*

<sup>246</sup> Greene, Maxine (1995, p.186)

As my process of research unfolded over time, I realized that storytelling is a form of pedagogy. The richness in how storytelling relates across various forums whether it is in a community, a classroom or within families reaffirms to me that it subtly informs and educates. As well, going through the recursive process of researching, analyzing and reflecting, writing and repeating each of these steps again and again, I recognized the writer within me. In following this path, a transformation and change rooted itself in my process.

### **Reflecting on my Research Journey**

This three-year adventure became a communal act of reciprocity. By storytellers bestowing their autobiographical stories to a community audience, over time, the larger WINS participant community was able to visualize some needed community changes. Specifically, SPAN<sup>247</sup> representative, Dianne Clarke commented on the disconnect she saw between what should happen and what was happening for newcomers regarding their relocation and training. Through a storyteller's presentation, the information broached her known reality. She established that witnessing this knowledge affected her emotionally. Due to this, she recognized a perceptual change within her everyday life. She commented

<sup>247</sup> Seniors Planning and Action Network (SPAN) is a New Westminster group of seniors and service providers since 2005 have been working to advocate and implement projects based on the needs and priorities of seniors in the community.

that for her there became a greater awareness of people in her community. She stated that:

I started to wonder what their story is...how did they make it here and were they born here or did they immigrate here and how was that for them? It (CGCD's) opened up so many questions of curiosity and interest in what people's lives were.<sup>248</sup>

On other points of convergence within the research, such as personal agency and community advocacy, I refer back to Hannah Arendt's use of narrative. Stone-Mediatore points out that Arendt felt that the vulnerability and openness of the storyteller, towards others in their community, empowers the social transaction. This transaction then becomes a means for social change.<sup>249</sup> During the CGCD men's group sessions, storyteller Hamed expressed to the group his vulnerability as an older man, when asked about volunteering. He said that he "has volunteered for a variety of organizations in New Westminster. However, I need to get fulltime work, as I'm 54 years old... "It then became more important to use his time wisely. In follow up interviews, Maliha Mayeed, community participant and ISSofBC employee, confirmed that New Westminster does well in facilitating shelter and food for newcomers. However, one area they need to work on is how to facilitate people with accessing local employment or accessing job

<sup>248</sup> One on One Interviews (March 2014)

<sup>249</sup> Stone-Mediatore, S. (2003)

counselling.<sup>250</sup> Throughout the CGCD's these sessions explored autobiographical narratives as a hub for change and self-efficacy. Educating others through story serves ourselves as well as others who do not have a *voice*. So by finding a *voice* for self through story, the storyteller can "move readers to tap into their own stories"<sup>251</sup> as Greene iterates in her chapter, Teaching for Openings. Succinctly, Sangeeta Bhonsale, CGCD facilitator, pointed out during her conclusion of the women's dialogue, how "the CIC does so many statistics and surveys but it is these stories that are so powerful that you begin to understand the emotions that are involved and the sacrifices that are involved and it moves both ways. We understand this is a two-way process."<sup>252</sup>

In summary, she reminds the audience that storytelling is a way to advocate for change as well as remind others about the reciprocity of it. As storytelling became the primary application to initiate conversation within these CGCD's, it was the PAR process that facilitated a reshaping of community structures. Through the various phases and stages of WINS and all the projects involved in an unearthing of tangible truths, policies were written. The CGCD's became part of a bigger whole. It is in this collaborative process that is the hallmark for PAR, that it invigorates a

<sup>250</sup> ISSofBC (2014) Part 3 "Responding to the Challenges"

<sup>251</sup> Greene, Maxine (1995, pg.113)

<sup>252</sup> ISSofBC (2014) Part 3 "Responding to the Challenges"

creative energy to problem solve. At the same time, PAR increases the possibility of regular people becoming agents of change in their own lives while assisting the practitioners to see other avenues for that change to take place.<sup>253</sup>

Being an ongoing participant, researcher and writer as well as witness to the WINS Common Ground Dialogue Circles; I had only a few reflections once the CGCD process had finished. I realized that as much as all the participants recognized the gist or intentions of the dialogue circle, I am not sure I felt that their input was heeded enough or sought after with regards to the final outcomes of these circles. This was in part due to time constraints regarding the deadlines for the projects closing deadline to align with the event gathering and the other mandates. However, if the project were reproduced using the same methods, I would offer a few recommendations as a result of my research.

Firstly, before commencing with immediate analysis or a video production of a project, doing follow up interviews with some of the participants would provide a deeper more rounded perspective. Secondly, when implementing these interviews allow for a timely reflection period such as two weeks before following up. I believe these recommendations create a more respectful, insightful and reciprocal process. It can also generate time for well-developed and thoughtful articulation of the storytelling dialogue experience. As Jackie Shaw (2010) points out in

<sup>253</sup> McIntyre, A. (2008).

*Including and Excluding: Collaborative knowledge production through participatory video*, there should be an awareness of all participant's when using this medium for influencing social change as people work within community projects. <sup>254</sup> "Stakeholders need to reflect on how these projects might be manipulated to support vested interests and agendas that control rather than empower..." Crosschecks with storytellers as well as community members should be at a feasible optimum. In my research project, we incorporated this time frame process at the back end, since further reflection was required. However, with any future project, accommodating this time at the front end would be my recommendation. For example, setting up specific timed surveys or meetings to find out what all stakeholders regard as important, relevant or possibly unnecessary during the process itself.

## **Reflections on Pedagogical Practice**

While in the third year of a newly mandated contract with ISSofBC, I gained some newfound insight into my research on storytelling. The new LINC program, that replaced the previous provincially run ELSA (English Language Services for Adults) program, had many contrasting requirements and revisions. One major change was the amount of time spent on evaluation, assessment and administrative tasks. As an EAL educator, it had meant more time creating lessons that provided a tangible piece of "*real*

<sup>254</sup> Copeland, Sarah (2010, p.197)

*world*” evidence that can justify the status of a student’s present day English level. *Real world* in this case meant practical versus ideological applications such as writing resumes versus writing stories. For me, this assessment process missed the spontaneous creative relational exchanges so essential for building strong classroom connections. Every month each LINC teacher would assist the students in uncovering *an English need* through a monthly needs assessment survey. Consequently, the joy in learning became overlooked due to required productivity.

However, during one particular curriculum month, I asked my students to write me a story about their hometown and what aspects they found endearing about it. This writing practice was a specific task builder for using sequencing words such as *firstly, then, after that*, etc. Using these sequencing adverbs and adverbial phrases would enable them to write about a complaint or an incident report, which in the current mandate, is a sample of a *“real world task”*. In this preparatory activity, I realized that the majority of pieces, I received back, had colourful adjective use plus other grammar specifics often missing during their regular in class assignments. The essays became a joy to read. I told each of them “Put these in your classroom portfolios as examples of your exceptional writing skills.” Reflecting on this situation, I realized that by incorporating personal narrative tasks into the classroom a newfound joy in exploring language came back to the students. These instances open doors to communicating a lived life and establishing possible relational connections. In reading “Understanding Multicultural Education”, Stanton and Rios point out that, it should be a right for “people to see themselves in positive ways and as

members of a social group reflected in the schools where they learn.”<sup>255</sup>

Storytelling allows people to not only build and establish relationships with others but it allows for personal reflection and growth. It can also break the silences that isolation can cause. By opening up more avenues for storytelling or personal narratives in the classroom, students can practice actions that could further build bridges out into their communities.

While pouring over the literature, I have recognized that stories like life can serve a variety of purposes as well as parallel different meanings for the individual and the larger community. Stories and narratives can act as a jumping off point for further analysis or as a staging ground for reflexive internal development. Even though we hear or see one side of a story, we need to remember there is also another side or aspect, which is yet to surface. This reflective transitional space can bring the teller and listener to a common understanding as well as create greater heights of agency, change and connection.<sup>256</sup> It becomes relevant, in an era of ongoing change, to remember to integrate time within a curriculum unit for personal exchange and dialogue. This allows the classroom to build bonds and community that are so necessary for students to grow within and beyond the walls of a classroom. As an educator, I see these integrated intervals as building deeper connections and meaning for the student/teacher relationship.

<sup>255</sup> Rios, F. and Stanton, C.R. (2011)

<sup>256</sup> Greene, Maxine (1995)

## Concluding Personal Reflections

As I moved through my research and writing process, the recursive, reflective and dialectical nature of an ongoing PAR process echoed itself back to me. As I wrote, I saw the words evolving and changing as each instance challenged my creative and academic eye. Once the sentences hit the screen of the computer, I reflected immediately upon them. Asking, “Is this as authentic to the voices within this research as it can be?” Similarly, I saw how proficient narrative portraiture, as a methodology, was able to appropriately articulate the storytelling within the project. By actively, researching and writing through narrative, I discerned the art and science that is the essence of portraiture. By writing through rich, descriptive narratives while balancing the perspectives with academic literature, I realized a gracefulness inherent in the methodology itself. Writing with intention, by amalgamating design with analysis, created a dance of words. Even in the act of editing, to crystallize the meanings, became a conscious and conscientious act of writing. As described by Lawrence Lightfoot, it is a “process of creating the gestalt.”<sup>257</sup> At the core of portraiture a nucleus of forces needed to be harmonized; art & science; analysis & narrative; description & interpretation; structure & texture. So in the end, an academic piece of art rendered itself. However, I found Lawrence-Lightfoot limited their emphasis on the iterative writing process that is so much a part of Narrative Portraiture. To wield the essence within these portraits without repeatedly reworking and reframing the portraits is like expecting

<sup>257</sup> Lawrence-Lightfoot, S. and Davis, J. H. (1997, p. 244)

to paint the Mona Lisa in one sitting. Like all profound works, time spent revising, reworking and re-attending to the project requires an appropriately proportionate amount of effort for expected results. That being said, Narrative Portraiture aligned with PAR makes for a complementary research pairing for art-based research. As an artist and scholar the process challenged me both intellectually and creatively, personally and professionally.

So what does this mean for storytelling as it relates to my future pedagogy and to my life? I have witnessed and practiced the art of autobiographical storytelling and how it becomes a unique and powerful form of communication. Narratives allow people to give voice to feelings, perspectives and opinions in subtle ways. It becomes a way to educate and inform through engagement. Stories also give space for understanding another person's reality as well as reflecting on aspects of ourselves. The most profound element taken from storytelling would be its ability to motivate self-reflection. Often, I have told my daughters, "*write out your thoughts, your feelings in those moments when you feel overwhelmed or desire another avenue for communication.*" By talking through narrative writing within a daily journal then looking back at it again, insights can arise. Since "Storytelling is an organic creature, changing and moving, living and breathing..." it accommodates reinterpretation.<sup>258</sup> When reflecting on the punctuated moments of personal-narratives, an image of a lived life appears much like flipping through an old photo album. By actively

<sup>258</sup> Josephts, C. (2008, p. 259)

engaging in journaling, personal development easily follows and perceptual depth greatly increases. Allotting time for writing and reflecting, allowed me to know what it is to craft portraits, environments, and ecologies through language. Therefore, writing becomes a visual art form by way of our imaginations. It is challenging but definitely rewarding. In this, I feel an increased strength of spirit in painting pictures through words.

Fundamentally, I believe storytelling, whether through written narrative or oral transmission, creates a communicative and connective opening. As I listened to the variety of storied voices and “*wrote this thesis into its existence*”<sup>259</sup>, I learned to appreciate a deeper connection to myself, my community and the world. In the end, my life erupted into new dimensions of being based on these profound explorations and I sense there are new possibilities just beyond this horizon.

<sup>259</sup> Dr. Vicki Kelly (personal conversation)

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