Grading with Compassion: Transposing the Tensionality of Lived and Planned Assessment

Erin Ochoa Whelan

University of Alberta

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Abstract

Growing anxiety, disconnection with the environment, and the prospect of school and work as endless competition seem to characterize some of the more damaging elements of contemporary society. In an educational system that overvalues competition and compartmentalization, where are the spaces for teachers to demonstrate care? In this paper, within the local landscape of teaching as mapped out in current curriculum documents provided by Alberta Education, I consider the pedagogical and ethical obligation of tending to the student-teacher relationship as one of care. Through an autoethnographic examination of memory and curriculum towards a teaching practice of care and forgiveness, I examine past encounters with the emotional work of assessment in order to map the culture and place of assessment in the ecology of English Education, particularly as guided by the Alberta Senior High English Language Arts Program of Studies. Through this research, I have gained insight into the possibilities of care and mindfulness as a Senior High English teacher, operating within the current constraints of the contemporary educational system.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

> *The most common classroom practice in evaluating secondary students' writing is for the teacher to read student papers, mark errors, comment on strengths and weaknesses, and assign a letter grade. Several problems arise from this tradition, beyond the harried and oppressed teacher: teacher's comments often address only an end product, not the process that preceded it; focus on the narrow, easily graded issues of mechanics (spelling, grammar and penmanship) rather than on student meaning; justify the grade rather than respond to the writing; and hinder students' ability to assess their own writing.*
>
> (Milner & Milner, 2003, p. 378)

Who I am, Where I am

Grading has always ranked among the most harrowing of my lived experiences as a teacher. As an English teacher, some may assume that my time is spent reading, but to be more accurate, much of my time is spent marking. Perhaps it is that I have no head for numbers, perhaps it is because I lack the appropriate discipline when it comes to spending my weekends wisely. Still, there is no denying the dread and dullness I have felt in equal measure when beginning to work my way through a pile of student essays. It seems a common enough complaint, especially among those teachers whose subjects lend themselves to essay writing. The time it takes to whittle away at the pile of grading, the repetitive nature of the work, the dawning feeling of having not taught the students well enough to have prevented their glaring or sometimes bewildering errors – these factors all culminate in a jumble of feelings strong enough to make any pile of dishes or laundry seem a much more attractive way to spend one's afternoon.

I have been teaching High School English for 10 years, and have mentored student teachers a total of eight times. I greatly enjoy mentoring, but every year, every session, I notice the same thing: the student teacher assigns their first written assignment and that afternoon as they leave the classroom with a stack of the returned work, they share with me their eagerness to wade in. The next morning they return, and their enthusiasm is invariably replaced with a listlessness, or weariness - a shift that I feel powerless to prevent. I recognize this shift and that powerlessness in my student teachers, as I also recognize it in myself. What could be - should be - a practice of communication, opportunity or mentorship becomes something else. It becomes drudgery, work that is completely uninspiring, monotonous, even depressing. Among all the teacher colleagues that I have worked with, been inspired by and learned from, I have yet to meet someone who genuinely enjoys the work of assessment.

The opening quotation is taken from Bridging English, a textbook I acquired while completing my undergraduate Education degree- one that is still used today. Even before I became a practicing teacher, the warning was there, but falling into the role of harried teacher-assessor was too easy, and from it indeed came feelings of operating under oppression. Mindlessly adopting that role turned assessment into a kind of performance, from the purchase of the requisite red pens to the attempt to mimic the comments I had received myself from my own teachers and professors. The idea of performance then lent itself to a summative way of thinking: too often, my teacher-commenter's words were not the opening of a dialogue or process to learn or improve, they were just the final words that justified the final grades. The students' essays were never quite given the chance to be vehicles of any kind of communication: somewhere between the printer and my book bag, they became merely documents on which to write comments, and obstacles to my weekend.

This is not to say that I don't enjoy teaching. I do. Working with students, engaging in conversations, planning lessons and units are all activities that I look forward to, and I am happy to go to work every day and welcome my students at the beginning of a lesson. My late father was a band teacher, and he spent hours running concerts, sorting music, cleaning and repairing instruments. He loved it, and he was good at it. As the daughter of a teacher, my familiarity with the space of education likely played a role in how I chose my degree and career. In fact, teaching is my family trade. My sister, father in law, mother in law, sister in law and husband are all teachers, and we all seem to approach it with the same pedagogical philosophy: teaching is an act of service, and the needs of the students must be met first. Through my studies as a graduate student, I have come to recognize such philosophy as the embodiment of an ethic of care.
In this project, I aim to draw together the lessons I have learned throughout my masters' journey: lessons of mindfulness, of the ethics of care, and of tensionality. I do this by examining the places of ethical indwelling of my own practice while considering the Alberta curriculum documents to which I am professionally bound. I call this the work of transposition, a concept I explain later in this paper. Through this work, I seek to illustrate those opportunities for care and mindfulness in assessment as I practice it as a Senior High English Language Arts teacher in Alberta.

In this section I have introduced myself and my general interests and concerns. By drawing from curriculum, I seek to highlight the ways my colleagues and myself can care-fully and mindfully care for our students. By examining my past teaching experiences, I intend to identify missed opportunities or misunderstandings with the goal of being better and more mindful in the future. In the next section, I will describe how I became familiar with mindfulness and the ethics of care, two areas I draw from while completing this project.

Mindfulness and the Ethics of Care

As a teacher and a graduate student, I have struggled with the question of how to consider the ethics and morality of education in relation to the unspoken aspects of curriculum: not just how and what we teach, but also the reasons why. Through various classes, readings and intuitions on my own part, I have begun to turn to a more mindful way of life. In a yoga class, the teacher speaks of practice, never performance. Each movement is an opportunity to practice the breath, the stretch, the deepening of a sensation. Each movement is a chance for compassion, to allow the moment to pass without commenting on its success or effect. Is it too much to suggest that the opportunity to grade is also the opportunity not to pass judgement, but instead to show love for that student, to show patience, wisdom, and understanding? In the past, I chose to make grading the work of performative categorization and measurement, as opposed to that of mindful listening.

Through my studies of contemplation and wisdom, I am learning to pay attention to the feelings of disappointment, powerlessness, and frustration that emerge while grading. They are real, and signal an urgent message. In my attempt understand that message, I have begun to believe that assessment (as it is summatively, or traditionally performed) can be a relationally destructive as well as a self-damaging act. It can be and is often a deliberate and steady tearing down of student and teacher agency and empathy. I now believe that without compassion, every judgement made is a step away from the student and away from the opportunity to care properly and pedagogically. This movement away from the pedagogical obligation of caring for the whole student, academically and emotionally, became a source of conflict for me that I could not reconcile. Throughout this project, I turn to the words of Pema Chödrön (1997) as a reminder of the importance of compassion and of truly listening to one's feelings and experiences.

The ethics of care is an approach to moral philosophy that plays a part in psychology, education, political science, library science, business, nursing, religion and bioethics (Noddings, 2012). Virginia Held (2006) identifies five distinguishing features of the ethics of care: 1) the moral obligation of attending to the needs of those for whom we are responsible; 2) the valuing of emotions; 3) the rejection of objectivity as the pinnacle of reason and morality; 4) the troubling of the notions of public and private; and 5) the conception of the person as relational. This ethical approach attempts to reframe relationships in a way that recognizes human interdependence, while dismantling traditionally oppressive relationship roles to make space for relationships that are moral and caring.

That this ethical framework came from a history of feminist scholarship speaks to its roots as an academically countercultural movement (Held, 2006; Noddings, 2012); however, the practice of a care ethics is not bound to or more natural to any particular gender. It is not the fact of having feelings that is uniquely female, but rather, the public expression of what was once considered private that brings the legitimizing of emotion into the feminist and political realm (Boler, 1999). The scholarship of care has to defend itself against being described as "mushy" (Noddings, 2006) or "fuzzy" (Rabin & Smith, 2013). Academic behaviour, like professionalism, is bound up in the idealization of the performance of the white male (Boler, 1999) who is "rational, curious, engaged, 'balanced,' [and] well-behaved" (p. 140), an image that is restrictive for all genders and identifications: men have as much right to emotional expression as women have to academic spaces. I believe it is important to acknowledge the feminist work that created the space for this ethic to grow, but my project is not meant to appeal to any specific gender or worldview.

In this section I have indicated that I will take up the ideas offered by care ethics and mindfulness in this project. I also briefly introduced the origin of care ethics. In the next section I will introduce the idea of tensionality in order to underscore the fact that this conflict I feel is not something that can be resolved instantly or easily, or even, perhaps, at all.

Tensionality

For a time, I felt that abolishing assessment altogether was the only way forward. I wanted to abandon the numbers, and to abandon descriptors, to completely abolish report cards and grades. Why should a student have to ask me how much they understand about the subject-shouldn't they know? But swinging to the abolitionist end of the grading discussion only seemed to prolong the argument within myself, it did nothing to address those feelings. Besides, I work with students whose eyes are on the future, and whose grades represent ways forward for them, towards scholarships, towards entrance applications, towards their parents to whom they present their report cards. In those directions, my feelings really don't matter, and though I appear as the source of the grades, they do not always seem to belong to me.

Ted Aoki's tensionality (2005) describes a practice of dwelling between the two worlds of curriculum-as-plan and curriculum-as-lived (p.161) as a challenge faced by all teachers and curriculum developers alike. The notion of tensionality offers that the conflict between caring and grading is meant to be lived, not resolved. To elaborate on this idea of indwelling, I find myself compelled to explore the tensionality of teaching between assessment-as-plan and assessment-as-lived by contrasting two imagined scenarios that typify each situation.

The Tensionality of Assessment.

In this imagined assessment-as-plan situation, I consider the beginning of the new term. In a diploma level course, the final exam looms large in the mind of the teacher. The importance of final exam results are emphasized at the beginning of a term with a district mandated regression analysis of results, which involves examining the provincial data concerning the previous graduates' performance on their provincial exit exam. If the previous graduating class under delivered in their results on test items concerning interpreting modern drama, for example, then teachers are asked to refocus their instruction to prevent that from happening again with the current year's graduation class. The planners involved in the regression analysis are typically the teachers of the department, as well as the department head, the curriculum consultant, and an administrator.

These planners make several assumptions. They may assume that the data provided by the province is meant to be acted upon, as opposed to simply received. They also may assume that the students of the current year will have the same needs and results as the year previous, even before the teacher meets those students face to face. Finally, they may assume that the teacher is even able to manoeuver her or his teaching in a way that can produce those desired results. Teachers become "installers" or "doers", and, as Aoki (1991) predicts, the plan tends towards a forgetfulness that "teaching is fundamentally a mode of being" (p. 160). In essence, the planners forget that teaching and assessment is fundamentally practice, rather than performance.

The imagined assessment-as-lived situation proceeds another way. Formatively, within the daily transactions and discussions that make up the classroom activities, the assessment is experienced and personal; it is lived, as opposed to assumed. In the lived lesson, feedback takes

on the subtle forms of facial expressions, slight pauses, laughter or silence, and through a sensitivity to these cues, the teacher establishes rapport and trust. Though she understands which of her students are involved with the material and which are not, the teacher struggles with how to communicate this understanding numerically through the online reporting program utilized by her school district.

As the months go by, the emphasis suggested during the regression analysis meeting all but fade into the background of the teacher's mind, the foreground now occupied with upcoming lessons, deadlines, supervision schedules, and the demands of home. While planning the Drama unit, the teacher may understand that an effective and immersive way to engage with Drama is to enact it – to bring it to life – but the undertaking seems too time consuming for the English classroom. Besides, report card marks and comments are soon due, and the gradebook spreadsheet looks alarmingly empty when compared to the number of tasks completed by the science teacher across the hall.

The teacher may reason that perhaps the best way to see whether this year's students will perform well on the reading comprehension exam would be to assign the students genre specific reading comprehension questions. After cobbling together a quiz whose duration is long enough to last the entire block, without being so long that too many students won't finish on time, the teacher administers the assessment and grades it by hand, as many of her colleagues have warned her that the electronic scanning machine is unreliable. By the time all the quizzes are graded, the assessment has taken so much of the teacher's time it seems a shame to leave it a formative one, one that has no influence on the numerical average of her students. Though she has also assigned and collected an essay concerning the selected play, she is unlikely to complete grading and comments before the report card deadline.

While this example of assessment-as-lived represents a slightly exaggerated amalgamation of my own experiences, it nevertheless calls to mind the harried and oppressed teacher described by Milner and Milner (2003). The day to day encounters with students embody Aoki's original "mode of being" (1991), but the choices made by the teacher do not "flow from who [the teacher is]" (p.160), but instead from the deadlines and pressures of the work that the teacher is compelled to respond to. Aoki (1991) is right in stating that the teacher "knows that wherever and whenever she can, between her markings and the lesson plannings, she must listen and be attuned to the care that calls from the very living with her own … pupils" (p.161). However, having lived and worked in that tension for over 10 years, I am repeatedly drawn to question why those spaces for care are not more deliberately designed.

Aoki's own illustrations of tensionality (1991), like my own experiences, remain unresolved – as they must. Tensionality is not a solution or path to resolution, it is a way of thinking about what it is to dwell in paradox. In this section, I have introduced tensionality and provided a fictional example of what assessment as lived and assessment as plan would look like in a school year. In the next section, I will present the reader with the concept of the paradox inherent in my research problem and formally state my research question.

Dwelling in tension: A joyful trouble

Dwelling in tensionality means to work and live deliberately in the present moment, even while enduring the stresses of time and expectation; however, in this tension it is vital to make the distinction between what is challenging and acts as provocation, and what is harmful and needs fixing. In the play *Macbeth*, Macduff names the obligations to one's king "a joyful trouble" (Shakespeare, 2010, 2.3.48). Shakespeare uses this term to describe the pleasure taken from that labour we do in the service of something meaningful. In Macduff's case, any chance to

serve Duncan, his king, is an opportunity to prove his loyalty and his love. The paradox of the term is one I find fits very well with Aoki's notion of tensionality. Yes, the work of teaching is emotionally demanding, but the satisfaction derived from that work is also emotionally rewarding. The trouble with traditional, widely practiced norms of summative assessment signaled is that it often offers no emotional reward or satisfaction, and instead is simply an emotional burden, always unresolved and without joy.

I am sure that I am not alone in the feelings of dread and failure that this situation brings about. Steinberg (2008) distinguishes emotional reactions such as nervousness, anxiety, and defensiveness as fear-based, and annoyance, irritation, and frustration as anger-based emotions related to the act of teaching and evaluating (p. 50). Though fear and anger aren't emotions that I would like to bring to the classroom, or to inspire in my students, they frequently emerge during the act of grading, the explanation or defense of a grade or exam key, and other assessment related activities that the teacher initiates in order to appear objective and accountable.
What happens between the initial excitement at the collection of student work and the development of negative emotions as the task of assessment progresses? When Hargreaves (1998) writes that "good teaching is charged with positive emotion" (p. 835), it follows that the negative emotion stemming from the unbalanced pressures of assessment may create the possibility of bad teaching. As a mindful educator, I consider it my obligation to be aware of those possibilities so that I can better guard against them.

In this project, I contend that the continued use of traditional forms of testing in the classroom must be questioned, in order to focus instead on the positive relationships that can be fostered in the classroom. However, I understand that because of the ways that grades are used in the education system, it is not possible to dismantle or disregard them outright. My only choice

as an educator is to find the path that navigates carrying out my professional obligation to assess with my ethical obligation to properly care. The research question that guides my work is thus as follows: What does it mean to ethically and mindfully dwell in the tensionality between assessment-as-plan and assessment-as-lived?

In this section, I have broached the difficulty in attempting to find balance in a paradoxical state of tensionality and formally stated my research question. In the next section, I will explain my research methodology.

Chapter 2 – Methodology

Autoethnography

Upon my initial introduction to narrative and life writing as a form of curriculum inquiry, I could not conceptualize how one's stories could legitimately figure into any kind of research mode. When I consider my own writing, my childhood diet of parables - even my current job - it now seems incredibly obtuse that I so carelessly dismissed the importance of story. Autoethnography developed in the 1980s in the academic field of anthropology. James Buzard (2003) indicates that as an understanding grew among anthropologists of the colonial influence of their work, researchers were confronted with the possibility that their efforts to understand and express culture other than their own may be compromised because of their inherent biases and inability to speak without the accents of their authority. Today, autoethnography is a qualitative research method that deliberately seeks to avoid categorization, perhaps as a means to escape being used as an unconscious tool of oppression. Though it may still be used as part of anthropological study, its methodological uses have extended to sociology, psychology, and education. It is described as a genre of writing (Holt, 2003), a form of methodological protest, and a way of knowing through troubling of the self (Kuby, 2013). Naturally, this multiplicity can

lend itself to confusion and disorganization, and critics of the methodology dismiss it as too self-indulgent and narcissistic (Holt, 2003).

Culture cannot exist solely within the individual (Wall, 2006), but a group cannot be qualitatively studied anywhere but at the individual level. The main and perhaps insurmountable limitation of this methodology is that "by using self as a source of data, perhaps the only source, autoethnography has been criticized for being self-indulgent, narcissistic, introspective, and individualized" (Wall, 2006, p. 8). Therein lies the source of the argument: the post positivist sees the individual as not enough, and the constructivist sees - within the individual - the world entire. The validity of the inquiry then "depends on the epistemological and political commitments of the researcher" (Caine, V., Estefan, A., & Clandinin, D. J., 2013). The reliability and repeatability of the results (and not the methodology itself) depends on the process of the researcher.

Interestingly, though the methodology itself originated in a turn away from traditional and colonialist ways of thinking, "so strong is the positivist tradition that researchers who use even well-established qualitative research methods are continually asked to defend their research as valid science" (Wall, 2006, p. 2). An example of this may be the expectation that the researcher employ data in the form of artifacts or physical evidence, or as Sarah Wall (2008) puts it, "the need for 'hard' evidence to support 'soft' impressions" (p. 45).

One alternative to the use of "hard" evidence would be the use of memories of lived experience. Unsurprisingly, though, this use of memory is a difficult limitation for many critics to see past, and Wall (2006) asserts that there is often a privilege given to the objectification of data. Cynthia Chambers (2004), when writing about the related field of autobiographical research, writes about "the uneasy relationship between truth and research" (2004, p, 5).

Essentially, we do not trust one another with the facts of our own lives or the lives of others, since we are still so dominated by the positivistic (and futile) attempt to evade the subjective. Expert knowledge is socially sanctioned in a way that common sense or personal knowledge is not (Wall, 2008). Consider the following example:

> Sparkes (2000) related a story about the use of his published autoethnography in an Undergraduate class, explaining that his students do not consider his autoethnography to be research. However, when asked whether it would be research if someone else had interviewed a man named Andrew Sparkes; collected his medical records, diary excerpts, and newspaper stories; analyzed the collection, and written it up, the class says yes. (Wall, 2008, p.45)

What is it that causes the doubt in autoethnography as a sound methodology? Perhaps we are so used to silencing those individuals whose narratives and memories do not agree with our own perceptions of history and normalcy that once we can no longer dismiss the importance of their stories, we can still dismiss the mode of their telling.

The word that surfaces most often when discussing the validity of the autoethnographic methodology is rigor. Sparkes (2000) wrote of the difficulty they experience being published in academic journals, citing the publisher's concerns with their works being appropriately grounded in a theoretical framework, thinly described methodological and analytic procedures, an audit trail and reproducibility (Wall, 2006). It is unclear to me, however, how anyone would be more rigorous and reflective with the details of someone else's story than they would their own. I wonder if it is again that remaining whiff of positivist tradition that sees personal reflection and a focus on reflexivity as the opposite of rigorous, worthy work.

The process of autoethnographic reflection "aids in encouraging educators [...] to know their histories, ideologies, and how their life experiences might influence pedagogical decisions before entering into conversations with children about social injustices" (Kuby, 2013, p. 4). In academia, theory cannot simply be created or pursued without attentiveness to the people and personalities among whom we live. Perhaps it is this intrinsic feature of autoethnography that I appreciate the most in the field of education: the call to authentically know oneself before entering into any kind of pedagogical relationship with another. By writing my narrative, I add my voice to the culture of compassion and care that confidently asks that all teachers take stock of the emotional effects of traditional grading practice.

In this section, I have discussed the methodology of autoethnography and how it is suited to my research question. In the next section, I will explain the concept of transposition and the subjects of my research.

The Work of Transposition

When I was an undergraduate student, I took several creative writing courses in poetry, and a theme that emerged rather quickly from those writings was that of transposition. My understanding of performance, and of transposition, both come from my experiences as a musician, where to transpose on sight means to read the music in one key but to play it in another. Poetically, I took it to describe the act of moving through or across (*trans*) space, place and concept while still preserving an original theme or intention.

For a musician, the ability to transpose on sight is a sign of adaptability and skill. As a metaphor, the notion of orchestra does well in curriculum: it is an ecosystem of its own, but one whose creation points towards art, and whatever transcendence or enjoyment could come of that. As a verb, transposition is a moving through place, of taking one's knowledge, experience and

selfhood and living it authentically in all places. It is the act of reinterpretation of myth, or theme, or image, or lesson. The movement of transposition is my root metaphor, which according to Ted Aoki (1979) guides our daily lives and helps us to interpret and act upon the world around us (p.346). In curriculum, transposition is praxis.

When I draw together the space of the classroom with the metaphor and resonance of transposition, I begin to see and discover how I transpose myself. I see it in the recollection of my own lived experiences as a teacher, and so I take the time to reflect, to reimagine, and to record those moments, no matter how small or insignificant. As a researcher, I transpose again into the theories, thoughts and scholarship of others, the teachers and academics whose work directs or counters my own. Finally, as a teacher I transpose myself into curriculum, the track upon which I have been mandated to run (Pinar, 2005, p. 22), and I see where I have succeeded and where I have failed.

My own exploration of the space and culture of grading will involve examining and reflecting upon the *Alberta Senior High English Program of Studies*, and *Senior High English Language Arts Guide to Implementation* as well as my own experiences and memories of encounters with others as an educator and assessor. My research has unearthed a number of past stories, experiences and artifacts that embody in some way the tensionality in assessment. The ones I bring in to discuss include an examination of my participation in standardized testing, my own first grade report card, a recollection of my early experiments with technology to provide meaningful feedback, and the witnessing of a principal's learning to speak a new language.

In this section, I have described transposition as I envision it and how it will look in this project. Before I move on to the examples themselves, I will explain and describe *the Alberta*

Senior High English Program of Studies, and *Senior High English Language Arts Guide to Implementation*.

The Course We Run

A 2011 study reported that when asked, most Alberta teachers responded that "focus on the provincial curriculum" was the most important purpose of large scale assessments (Klinger & Rogers, 2011, p. 134). In Alberta, the course we run stems from two mandated government documents, the *English Language Arts Program of Studies* and the accompanying *Guide to Implementation*.

Where am I in this landscape as set out by the curriculum documents to which I am bound? Where among the instructions and directions is there a place for pedagogy and thoughtful listening? In order to answer these questions, I read and re-read the two main curriculum documents made available on the Alberta Education website: the *Program of Studies for Senior High English*, as well as the accompanying *Senior High ELA Guide to Implementation*. While reading, I took notes to keep myself attentive to the words and ideas that resonated with my own educational concerns as outlined in the literature review: the tension between personal and numerical feedback, the problem with accountability measures, the effect of emotion, the sound of the female voice, and finally, paying attention to places where compassion could take root.

The *Senior High English Language Arts Program of Studies* outlines the five general outcomes necessarily in the curriculum for students over a period of three courses. Most students take one course a year, beginning in the 10th grade and concluding in the 12th, but I have taught students who complete English 30-1 or 30-2, the diploma level courses, as grade 11 students. The five General Outcomes are, in order: 1) explore thoughts, ideas, feelings and experiences; 2) comprehend literature and other texts in oral, print, visual and multimedia forms, and respond

personally, critically and creatively; 3) manage ideas and information; 4) create oral, print, visual and multimedia texts, and enhance the clarity and artistry of communication respect; and 5) support and collaborate with others. The expected division of attention to these outcomes, are one third to General Outcome 2, one third to General Outcome 4, and one third distributed among the remaining General Outcomes. Published in 2003, this document includes the aim and intentions of the curriculum creators, as well as the expectation that students will, throughout the completion of the course, listen, speak, read, write, view and represent in order to meet the specific outcomes, of which there are 33.

The *Senior High English Language Arts Guide to Implementation* is a sprawling, 573-page document also published in 2003. It includes a guide to unit planning and assessment, strategies for achieving the outcomes outlined in the Program of Studies, and a 200 page appendix that includes templates, teaching tools and samples of student work. For my project, I chose to focus on the sections regarding assessment of student work and progress.

While looking through these curriculum documents, I wanted to take care to not read with an overly critical lens. First, as a practicing teacher I am legally bound to these documents, and so nothing productive could come of fostering anything resembling contempt or resentment. Second, I do not believe that either the *Program of Studies* or the *Guide to Implementation* were written with any kind of ill intent or thoughtlessness; much to the contrary, I know how seriously the curriculum creators and teacher researchers would have taken their work. Indeed, I know a few of the authors personally, and respect them as colleagues and people. Instead, I sought to balance the themes that emerged from my own inquiry and the language of the documents with recollections of my own teaching experiences and pedagogical encounters. In this way, I'd like

to better situate myself in the landscape of curriculum of the subject of English Language Arts in the province of Alberta.

In this section, I have described the *Alberta Senior High English Program of Studies*, and *Senior High English Language Arts Guide to Implementation* in order to inform any reader who is unfamiliar with the documents. These curriculum documents explained, I will now present four attempts at transpositional work. I will present the lessons I have learned, my autoethnographic subjects, and I will attempt to explain their relevance to assessment and care.

Chapter 3 – Transposition

Assessment and negative emotion

The importance of recognizing assessment as an emotional burden for both students and teachers is vital in understanding the emotional and pedagogical implications. Even though Andy Hargreaves (1998) assured us that "emotions are at the heart of teaching" (p. 835), Carola Steinberg (2008) points out that "the two fields of education and assessment are not yet talking to one another" (p.47). Jennifer Harding (2009) suggests that this may be because emotions are considered too personal, or even too feminine to be considered quantifiable, where Parker J. Palmer (2007) suggests that emotions are often seen as unworthy of attention. Placing the importance of un-measurable feelings and emotion above that of measurable facts and data may be dismissed as catering to feelings, being "touchy-feely" or "mushy". However, as Noddings (2006) says, "There is nothing mushy about caring. It is the strong, resilient backbone of human life" (p. 175). Megan Boler (1999) goes even further, declaring emotions a site of political resistance and liberation (p. 108).

The relationship between teachers and their work is deeply emotional (Carlyle, 2002; Hargreaves, 1998, 2000, 2001; Steinberg, 2008), and, in fact, the frequency and intensity of negative emotions has led Chris Kyriacou (2001) to name teaching as one of the "high stress professions" (p.29). While a teacher's emotions may vary, it is often the experience of negative emotions - such as anger, anxiety, tension, frustration or depression – that lead to teacher stress, and sometimes burnout (Kyriacou, 2001). I recall a particularly tense staff meeting one afternoon where a group of teachers rather urgently wanted to discuss student lateness, late homework, and poor attendance- all, of course, brought up under the umbrella of "respect". If the students truly respected us and the school, they insisted, we wouldn't have to deal with these issues over and over again. A few hours later, when I brought up the conversation to a more experienced teacher (who had conveniently missed the meeting), he just smiled. "Report cards must be due soon," he said. He was right. While the pressures of reporting, assessing and producing artifacts of learning may certainly be expected, when actually lived, these are rarely joyful experiences. For many teachers, the act of dwelling in tension involves negative emotion.

In assessment in particular, some of the negative emotions surrounding assessment comes from the perception of assessment as the work at the end of a unit: "As teachers, we are familiar with the sudden coming to the end of a unit, and with the sometimes belated realization that it is time for us to construct a unit test" (Carruthers, 1958, p. 339). I'm not sure what I find most troubling about the above passage: that I am quite familiar with the situation described; that I, like Carruthers, have been so out of touch with what it is I was teaching that the end of the unit felt "sudden"; or, that a statement first published in 1958 still rings true over fifty years later. Students and teachers alike often view the final exam as a source of stress and apprehension. For students, the large numerical value assigned to the tests creates an emotional situation of

uncertainty, and the length of the examination session itself is difficult to mentally and physically prepare for. When the test itself becomes the driving force behind the class, test performance itself is more highly valued than the substance of what is actually being learned (Black, 2003; Stiggins, 2002). As for teachers, they often feel negatively about the exam because of its undermining nature, its secrecy and its weight (Stiggins, 2002; Steinberg, 2008; Boldt, Salvio & Taubman, 2009). That ultimate assessment, it appears, cannot be trusted to the responsibility of teachers in the Alberta classroom, it is natural that many teachers do not see the exam in a positive light.

In this section, I have outlined the negative emotions associated with assessment and final exams in particular. In the next section, I will reflect on how despite my devotion to an ethics of care, I am a part of that system that contributes to this problematic process.

Confessions of a Standardized Test Marker

> *In education, the question "How do we assess (kids, teachers, schools)?" has morphed over the years into "How do we measure…?" We've forgotten that assessment doesn't require measurement — and, moreover, that the most valuable forms of assessment are often qualitative (say, a narrative account of a child's progress by an observant teacher who knows the child well) rather than quantitative (a standardized test score).*
> (Kohn, 2012, p. 36).

In the particular context of Alberta, how does a teacher find balance and space to flourish in this tension between emotional life and the appearance of emotionless professionalism? For myself, I feel torn between the ethical demand to listen and be present with my students and the

demand to administer or be complicit to the English 30-1 exam, a standardized provincial exam worth 30% of their final grade. It is a common tension (Webber et al., 2014), but also an inescapable one, and teachers the world over often identify standardized testing as a source of tension and stress (Harris & Brown, 2009; Klinger & Rogers, 2011; Perreault, 2000; Peterson & McClay, 2010; Scott, 2008; Slomp, 2008).

The problems inherent in standardized testing are many, especially in terms of emotional compromise. For example, quantitative comparisons between children were of concern as they were believed to create winners and losers (Harris and Brown, 2009), and as Black (2003) points out, those people who believe themselves losers cannot erase their track records, and see little point in trying. Further to the risk of demotivating students, there is also the risk of motivating teachers in a troubling direction, in that comparing their students' test results to those of other teachers, schools, or school districts, often lead to higher stress levels (Perreault, 2000) or even the manipulation of data in order to appear competitive (Harris & Brown, 2009; Sarrio, 2011). There are practices that are disrespectful to both teacher and student because they imply mistrust of both the student's understanding and of the teacher's teaching (Blair, Wyburn-Powell, Goodwin & Shields, 2014): "It may seem like the worst kind of disrespect and exaggeration to imply that test makers and test users are scarring their students in similar ways. But testers, like doctors are inevitably [emphasis in original] prone to lose their tact when they rely primarily on their technical expertise and theory" (Wiggins, 1993, p. 111). Standardized testing is notorious for this lack of tact, especially as the scoring process removes the relationship between teacher and student from the situation entirely.

I began marking diplomas with Alberta Assessment seven years ago, and I am not shy about lauding it as among the best professional development of my career. As I became more

familiar with the written portion of the English 30-1 Diploma, I found that it changed my practice immediately, and still continues to do so. Here is another source of tension: the attempt to teach students compassionately while being a complicit and active participant in standardized testing. It was through that very exam that I first encountered the words of Louise Rosenblatt, because of the inclusion of the following quote on the assessment rubric of the Alberta English 30-1 Diploma:

> The atmosphere in the classroom, the relationship between teacher and pupil, and among the pupils, must permit [emphasis in original] a personal response to what is read. […] Frank expression of boredom, or even vigorous rejection, are more valid starting points for learning than are docile attempts to "feel what a teacher wants." (Rosenblatt, 1982, p. 64)

In this approach, the reactions and rejections to literature, which we must accept as valid, extend also to the reaction or rejection of our feedback and, shocking though it may be, our assessment. It is an irrefutable truth that assessment involves relationship (Harris & Brown, 2009; Steinberg, 2008). What I discovered when I began to mark diploma exams with the government, was that I was able to cultivate relationships with other teachers who were in the same position of caring and tension that I was. Steinberg writes that "teachers need to work collaboratively and express their emotions as part of their work" (2008, p. 60).

In 2011, I wrote a blog post in an online journal that mulled over this tension that I was feeling. One particular question that I grappled with was whether my enjoyment of the camaraderie I felt at these marking sessions in some way amounted to a betrayal of my students. After some reflection and thought, however, I see room in the design of the Part A side of the English 30-1 Diploma for students to develop into creative people, full in their intention and

awareness of their powers. To help a student care about her or his own writing is perhaps as simple as allowing him to hear his own voice and watch its effects on his readers. This possibility, of course, is very dependent on how willing the teacher is to acknowledge the pressures of the exam while working towards the needs of the voice of the student. For an English teacher, teaching students involves not only teaching curriculum but also teaching students to trust themselves, their voices, and their feelings. Reducing that student's voice, at the beginning of every year to nothing more than a number on a results report reinforces that division between person and object, and "when caught in the prison of separateness, we forget that our actions affect the whole and we forget that this whole also includes us" (Wilde, 2013, p.95). This experience creates tension in me because I find grading those exams emotionally fulfilling; therefore, it feels like I am benefitting professionally and personally from my students' stress.

So often teachers behave as if the curriculum rightly subsumes their work and purpose in the classroom. Noddings writes that in the aim of education is almost explicitly and solely to gain high test scores (2012, p.777), and so it is no surprise that the teacher attentive to the broad social mandates of achievement and numeracy would consider it her or his obligation to push students in that direction. What I understand now about the English diploma in particular, is that I can dwell safely and ethically in the tension of its application because, though it is a standardized exam, it also provides the teacher with the opportunity to listen. We must learn to listen fully, and to trust ourselves to understand what we hear (Chödrön, 1997; Mipham, 2013). For me, listening to my feelings of tensionality are what tell me that I am fully alive in my being assessor and carer. It is because I enjoy the work of grading that I know I can do so attentively. It

is because I worry about my students' emotions being addressed that I know I can do so thoughtfully.

In this section, I have begun to transpose the importance of emotional work in assessment onto the place of working as a standardized test marker. Through examining that tension I come to understand that feeling unresolved is vital to proceeding mindfully and with care. In the next section, I will explain the idea of assumed and expressed needs as a lens through which to explore the tension inherent in giving feedback, another facet of evaluating student work.

Assumed vs expressed needs

The ethics of care arise directly from heeding one's needs (Noddings, 2005, p.147). In school, the teacher is the carer, the one who must remain attentive to the expressed needs of the cared-for: the student (Noddings, 2012, p.772). Assumed (also called inferred) needs are those things that the teacher predicts a student will want and appreciate before is it asked for. Assumed needs may take the form of homework lateness policies, or classroom rules regarding respect or discipline. They are created for the students, but not specifically asked for by the students themselves.

Expressed needs are both more explicit and more difficult to identify and address (Noddings, p. 147, 2005). An example of expressed need may include a requests to get a drink of water, or for an extension on an assignment. This type of need is easy to respond to, and often fulfilled as soon as it is expressed. However, assessment as lived brings out expressed needs that are more complicated, and at times, impossible to fulfill. A specific example from my experience would be the occurrence of a student handing in a written assignment that contains a sexual fantasy. This is something has happened three times thus far in my 10 year career. In these cases, I understand that the student is searching for someone to talk to about their sexuality, whether it

be to answer their questions, to reassure them that they are normal, or to simply be heard. Noddings suggests that, in many cases, the need may not be explicitly clear to the person who has it (2005, p. 150). As a compassionate person, I accept these needs as normal. But as the teacher, it feels inappropriate to engage with the student around that subject. I am at once pulled between the weight of the students' trust and my professional expectations to maintain distance (a tension I will elaborate upon later in this project). Further, it seems insensitive to assign a numerical grade to work that is clearly meant to express a question or that exposes the student's vulnerability. Put another way, those pieces were not submitted in order to be graded.

Summative assessment has very little to do with need: a student who does ask for help or voices her confusion is not asking to be measured or judged, she is asking to be attended to. This idea echoes Aoki's (1991) idea of the mode of being: our focus as teachers should be on maintaining ourselves as teachers, not performing the actions that make us appear to be teachers. It's also important to remember that expressed and assumed needs are of secondary import to the caring relation itself. In a situation where a student hands in work that could be considered inappropriate, the best response is perhaps not to respond at all. In a situation where the work is completely acceptable for the assignment, the same could be true: the validity of the response depends wholly on the relationship between teacher and student, not the assignment itself. This becomes muddied, however, when considering that the practice of giving students personalized feedback on their work is encouraged in the *Guide to Implementation*, and, in some schools even considered department policy. It is this idea of feedback that I will explore further.

Feedback

An example of the tension between assumed and expressed need that I would like to explore lies within the idea of teacher feedback. Grant Wiggins' (1993) explanation of feedback

is simple and direct: “Code is not feedback; praise and blame are not feedback ... Real feedback tells [the student] that he is off track without labeling or judging his effort. Feedback is purely descriptive [emphasis in original], in other words” (p. 185). He suggests feedback as something constant and neutral, like the electric current from which our practice derives its metaphorical name.

These are difficult words for a teacher to hear who has dedicated countless hours to marking student assignments, dutifully circling spelling errors, possessive apostrophe errors, drawing arrows between subject verb disagreements, or even going so far as to circling errors in diction. That was a favourite of mine: "WW" which stood for "wrong word", meaning I'd judged the student's word choice lacking in accuracy or complexity. The problem that arose from these little squiggles was simple and universal enough - after all my editing work, as I’ve mentioned before, a student was more likely to take one look at the grade and discard the paper before checking all the work I’d done, a common experience for teachers the world over (Black, 2003; Blair, Wyburn-Powell, Goodwin & Shields, 2014). But how could I blame the student? After all the work they put into the writing the paper, and the emotional risk they were forced to take in submitting it, all I offered in response was the chance to decode my criticisms. In a situation like that, no one’s needs were met. Unfortunately, I have had several experiences of this kind. I will write about a specific experience in the following section.

Attempting meaningful feedback

Aoki (2005) speaks of the tool of technology, and how mindless adoption and adaptation to technology brings with it the risk of the user becoming merely an extension of the tool. To an extent, I do think that the software we are mandated to use shapes our assessment in the direction of valuing numeracy over feedback, especially when it comes to communicating with students

and parents. This is a problem because it is well documented that constructive feedback is meaningful to students and teachers alike (Blair, Wyburn-Powell, Goodwin & Shields, 2014; Peterson & McClay, 2010; Shields, 2015).

Five years ago, in an attempt to simultaneously integrate new technology and provide more effective feedback to my students, I began the practice of recording feedback aloud with my smartphone, and emailing it to the student in the form of an .mp4. Instead of sitting at the desk with the pile of papers, I instead sequestered myself in the quietest room in my house, sat on the couch and read. When an idea or suggestion came to me I would verbally indicate which paragraph or section I was reading, and then offer my thoughts and suggestions for improvement. The recording technology was smooth enough that creating the audio files took much less time than scribbling down my suggestions and shorthand in the margins of the students' essays. The feedback was quite popular with the students, though it had two unintended effects. The first was that my unnamed files sometimes found their way into my students' musical playlists, and more than one student told me of being startled by my voice in their ears while riding the bus home or out for a jog. The second came in the form of a rebuttal.

A few days after I sent out my audio files, a reply from a grade 10 student appeared, unbidden, in my inbox. The student had not only taken the time to listen to my comments, he had actually typed them out in a contrasting colour (red, naturally) between the lines of his original text. For some reason, I was taken aback. It was strange to see my words typed out like that. Though I recognized my own words and tone, I also knew that I never would have typed them out in that way. They seemed too conversational, too open ended. At some points, I would trail off, ending a sentence with "I don't know". What's more, the student also added, in a new font, his own responses to my comments. He argued in defense of his original choices, he speculated

on possible ways to achieve the effect he was going for. A few of his own sentences also trailed off, or ended with “I don’t know.” His language was freer, less restrained than I was used to hearing from electronic exchanges with students. Perhaps for the first time for me, a student was plainly expressing his needs in a most honest way, free of polish or formality.

In that moment, I failed to listen. I typed back that the audio feedback wasn’t meant to become a back and forth exchange between him and I, but that hopefully my comments could be applied to his future work. After all, I thought to myself, I had nearly 30 students in that class, and I couldn’t spend my time debating language in an email thread with all of them. The audio feedback had accomplished what I had intended for it: the student had listened to me and my voice had been heard. In that moment, I made clear who had the power in that conversation. The boy remained an engaged and interesting student in my class, but he never emailed me again.

My defense of audio feedback was not as grounded in compassionate pedagogy as I would have otherwise liked to believe. Yes, it did a better job of engaging the student but it did not transform the task from summative to formative. In failing to take advantage of listening to my student’s expressed need for a conversation, the experiment amounted to little more than an elaborate, high tech justification of a numerical grade.

My early attempts at engaging students through recorded feedback was not authentically care-full. My plan was to find a way to provide feedback more effectively, but the lived practice illustrated that my understanding of effective had everything to do with how quickly I could return my suggestions to students. I was addressing the inferred need of timely feedback over one student’s expressed need of a personal conversation. My egoistic attempt at technology integration became a way of dismissing a student’s need, and cementing our relationship as structurally unequal, a concept I will explain in the next section.

Structurally Unequal Relationships

Parent-child, teacher-student, patient-practitioner: all point to traditional situations of power, but these relationships are also contextual, reversible and changeable - as subject to situation as any other aspect of life and teaching. The parents who provide care eventually call on their children for that same provision, physically, medically, and emotionally. The one relational pairing that does not undergo that eventual reversal is the teacher-student relationship, making it distinctly emotionally unequal, or, "structurally unequal" (Noddings, 2012, p.235). In many cases, it is a matter of school policy that the teacher and administration remain at the top of the power hierarchy at all times, and this stationary positioning creates in the teacher a permanent state of assuming student need. Wiggins (1993) speaks of the "inescapable [emphasis in original] moral dimension […] to the assessment relationship - a dimension that we ignore. In school testing as we have always known it, that relationship is inherently tilted in favour of the tester" (p. 8). Though we may cover over this disparity through policy, it is impossible to ignore it emotionally. That feeling of a teacher's dismay or exhaustion that comes about from the work of grading may well be the aversion to the inequality inherent in the assignment in the first place, as it places the student permanently in a state of vulnerability, and therefore permanently subject to feelings of disappointment, powerlessness and helplessness (Steinberg, 2008).

The prolonged fostering of this kind of relation in the classroom must stop in order to balance that uneven experience, for it does not only damage the relationship, but also the people involved in it. For Grant Wiggins (1993), "We might see this potential harm more clearly if we thought of the test maker (and test user) and the test taker as in a relationship. The question to ask, then, is whether or not the tester is respectful and tactful in this relationship" (p. 111). In my

previous example of audio feedback, I did not see the need for tact in my exchanges with students. In my own self-congratulations at incorporating technology into my practice, I failed to see the opportunity for fostering conversation and a genuine exchange of ideas. As Wilde (2013) notes, "Perhaps the most difficult aspect of practicing care involves overcoming our own personal afflictions and delusions, including unhealed wounds, emotional/mental distress and unconscious conditioning" (p. 74).

When a student reached out and expressed the need to be listened to in turn, I rejected him. I hold myself accountable for that in equal measure as I understand that I was acting in the interests of self-protection in respect to time and ego. I understand, too, that I may have been conditioned by habit and tradition to excuse this behaviour, but now that I am aware of it, I am morally obligated to speak out against such damaging practice in the future (Palmer, 2007). When the teacher takes on the task of empowering and listening to the student, there is risk. Teachers and students would benefit from understanding the harm that ignoring unequal power relationships may cause.

Currently, measures are taken to try to address this inequality. Students are asked to participate in the creation of scoring rubrics, care is taken to assure that students know the material and criteria they are being scored on. The *Guide to Implementation* contains a page long bullet list meant to ensure that assessment is valid and fair. However, is this truly an attempt at balancing power, or are we only serving to make students complicit in their judgement? If we are truly helping students to develop skills, we must prepare for them to use those skills to voice their needs, especially if those voices threaten the power imbalances they perceive and experience. We must listen to our emotions and be especially attentive to the places in our classrooms where the power is explicitly or implicitly tilted in our favour and do what we can to

turn assessment into a conversation about and involving learning (Boler, 1999; Palmer, 2007; Taubman, 2009; Wiggins, 1993). We must also listen to the voices of the students in front of us as well.

Wiggins (1993) describes the practices that he would see replaced as those that demonstrate and unthinkingly fortify mistrust between the tester (often, the teacher) and the student. Such practices include secrecy about the material to be tested, or trick questions meant to manipulate or deceive. The dilemma that Wiggins identifies that denotes the teacher's obligation for compassion is that of "the need to probe and the obligation to be respectful" (p. 40). To keep our respect for the children and parents we work with is fundamental to an ethic of care, as it allows us to preserve our own dignity as we develop as moral people (Noddings, 2012, p.777).

I recall a conversation I had last year, where a student wanted to discuss an essay that I had returned. Our conversation lasted the better part of half an hour, and in the end, amounted to little more than affirmations of 'because I said so' on both sides. I pointed out a line that appeared incomplete or obscure to me, and the student explained what the particular line or section "actually" meant. "That's not what is says," I argued. She replied, "That is what it says. You just don't understand it."

As Carola Steinberg (2008) writes, in the summative model, "Any feedback given by teachers is doing students a favour" (p. 52). This student, however, who would not settle for my criticisms and instead criticized my own observations as inaccurate, or an example of not reading her work deeply enough, was speaking from a place of defense, as was I. As a result, neither of us was being heard. A student normally had to come to see me to have me explain all my cryptic markings, but because of the already assigned grade, my 'feedback' became more akin to blows

or insults than anything else, a common feeling that Blair et al. (2014) would call miscommunication, but in the moment feels more like crisis.

In this section, I have explained Noddings' concept of structurally unequal relationships and illustrated how the assessor-student relationship fits that category with one of my own attempts at engaging my students with digital audio feedback. My previous beliefs and actions stemmed from a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of my relationship with students, as well as a misunderstanding of how to properly communicate and interpret my students' needs. In the following section, I will continue to highlight what I believe to be similar misinterpretations.

Misinterpreted Values

The *Program of Studies* implies that students produce texts for varied audiences, and though it mentions the need for students to identify the context and intended audience, and the effect of texts, the *Guide to Implementation* acknowledges that the audience for most student work is often made up of other students, or the teacher. Essentially, the texts that they produce are only ever for one reason: teachers tell them that they must.

The language of the *Guide to Implementation* is much more conversational than that of the *Program of Studies*, bordering on conversational and at times, briefly poetic: "the grading of work in progress or of activities that support final goals should be more global than precise, more verbal than numerical, more part of a learning plan than of a learning record" (p. 23). The *Program of Studies* itself is sparse, more imperative in tone, and repetitive. Outcomes begin with verbs meant to direct student action in a productive way, pervaded by subtle themes of production in such words as "form," "construct," "respond," as well as that of consumption in such words as "expand," "connect," and "improve" (p. 12).

The word “appreciate” appears in the *Program of Studies* no less than 29 times, and, in each case, the action the verb relates to is assumed to be carried out by the student alone. It is a difficult word to work with, since appreciation is easily conflated with or mistaken for enjoyment or liking something or someone. Also, as a feeling, being able to recognize something or someone’s full worth objectively is impossible. It is easy and efficient to be able to assess the value of something with a number. To appreciate something, must we give it a grade out of 100? I doubt such a conclusion is what the authors of the *Program of Studies* intended.

Assessment as plan assumes the student needs to be taught appreciation. Assessment as lived shows us that we end up trying to tell students what to appreciate, instead of how. Teachers misunderstand what the word appreciation signals to us: does it ask us to do, or does it ask us to be? Because the guide is full of verbs commanding us to get our students to produce, we somehow assume that everything produced should therefore be measured. To repeat a quotation, “We’ve forgotten that assessment doesn’t require measurement” (Kohn, 2012, p. 36). But what is it that has compelled us to forget?

Perhaps the answer to this lies in the origin of the word “appreciation” itself, which is rooted in numerical understanding of value. It means, literally, “to set a price”. Even though the *Program of Studies* aims to cultivate thought and comprehension, it suggests a valuing of literature as inherently numerical and thus tied to the capitalist relations of production and organization (Scott, 2008, p.141). We assume that our students need to produce in order to demonstrate their understanding, and we direct that production to grow ever outward: grades must go up, district averages must go up, and high school completion rates must go up.

In this section, I believe I have identified a problematic misinterpretation of the language of the *Program of Studies*. In the next section, I will discuss how this misinterpretation extends to the lived understanding of formative and summative assessment.

Formative and Summative Assessment

The *Guide to Implementation* is explicit in pointing out that formative and summative assessments exist on a continuum, and that one is not inherently better than the other (p. 23); however, it also states: "The results of summative rather than formative assessments should be the principal basis for report card marks or grades used for promotion or placement" (p. 26). This is the embodiment in print of the tension between the ideological belief and the conflicting practice that I feel all the time.

In my experience, the words formative and summative become signals to students of assignments that either count, or don't. Students visibly relax when informed that an assignment is formative, signalling to me that, at least to them, one type is certainly more comfortable than the other. There is an unspoken certainty that "testing that teaches what we ought to value is technically difficult, time-consuming, and dependent upon the kinds of sophisticated task analysis that teachers have little time for" (Wiggins, 1993, p. 42), and in a school culture where time is a type of currency, and credits and grades are awarded for the amount of time spent in a classroom, the prevalence of the hurried teaching and hurried assessment. However, as Nel Noddings (2002) explains, "the ethic of care dismisses the old distinction between is and ought as a pseudo problem (p. 232). Protests about time, resources and the cost of what must be invested in properly testing what is worth testing do not dominate compassionate discourse: "We do not have to construct elaborate logical rationales to explain why human beings ought to treat

one another as positively as our situation permits" (p. 232). Once we abandon the need for those rationales, and the energy devoted to them, space is created in which we can teach, learn and love the way we should.

At its shallowest, grading creates busy work that becomes our focus instead of the students behind the work (Taubman, 2009). Bemoaning the piles of paper seems justified because it is simply paper, but this focusing on the object instead of focusing on the student allows us to feign an objectivity that cannot exist when looking into someone's eyes. There is consumerism in educational practice: objects like technology or vandal proof desks, methodologies and textbooks that fall away in obsolescence after only a few years. It seems fulfilling to produce and create, and so we number, sort and calculate objects, but these take us even further out of reality, away from our inner, true selves. It takes us further away from the chance to trust one another, and to listen.

The tensionality the assessor dwells in here is to resist the demand to constantly and mindlessly produce and consume. For me, this means to keep the number of evaluated assignment as low as the students and administration are comfortable with. It means to begin conversations about the value of assignments in terms other than numerical. As with any mindful practice, it means to deliberately slow down the pace of a lesson to truly understand its purpose. Unless teachers consider that our grading systems are materialistic (Eppert, 2010; Scott, 2008; Seidel, 2006), we are unlikely to ever rise above it and have classrooms where we can assess without measuring, or appreciate without implying a numerical value and ranking.

In this section, I have explained that the language of curriculum and assessment practice reveals a misunderstanding in how students and teachers alike think about formative and

summative assessment. I believe it is essential to consider approaching this problem with the intention to do and make less, but that teachers are often dissuaded from acting in this way because of such concepts as accountability and professionalism. In the next section, I will talk about the tension inherent in professionalism and how it relates to emotionally handling students` academic failure.

Professionalism

Professionalism is a paradoxical concept in terms of what it does and how it looks. Steinberg (2008) suggests that it is assessment that gives meaning to the teacher's professional sense of purpose, aided by what she terms the "external goods" of teaching: those tangible positive rewards available to teachers after the teaching itself has passed, such as numerical results, awards, or the act of passing a student on to another grade or program (p 45). Contrastingly, Noddings (1996) suggests that the appearance of professionalism in education – the business-oriented, traditionally male appearance of control and sophistication – is typically grounded in a fear of being seen as irrational, or as a protection from emotional burnout (p.436). Put another way, we strive to appear professional so that those around us do not see how afraid we are. A question that naturally comes from this idea would be, "afraid of what"?

The conflict over the way teachers display emotional responses compared to the source of said emotions is a symptom of fragmentation, a result of the effort to simplify in order to understand. We would like to appear in one way, even if we can't help feeling another, and the appearance of control matters more than the feelings that motivate our actions. Appearance, however, even though it can be measured, monitored and reported, may remain a false front: emotion is what we

truly experience. Emotion may well be what those who strive to appear professional are afraid of.

For teachers, summative assessment is the least emotionally demanding kind of assessment, because the feeling of administering and grading a test leaves teachers with a sense of accomplishment. Moreover, if a student fails, summative practice allows teachers to let the responsibility fall solely and squarely on the student's shoulders: it "works on the premise that students are responsible for their results, particularly their failures" (Steinberg, 2008, p. 52). From the teacher's perspective, it is emotionally plausible for the student's summative achievement to be his alone, because as Steinberg (2008) says, "Summative assessment assumed a culture of 'teach first, then test,' which means the more pleasurable interactions around learning can be separated in time from the less pleasurable emotions evoked by assessment" (p. 52). Though the emotional distance established for the sake of the teacher's comfort may be detrimental to the student-teacher relationship, the alternative would be emotionally damaging and exhausting for the teacher. If a student fails an assignment, the teacher fails along with him. If five students fail, the teacher feels that failure five times over: "When students fail despite teachers' best efforts, such failure can generate feelings of disappointment, powerlessness and helplessness for teachers" (Steinberg, 2008, p.46). That emotional cost may be too high, even for the most compassionate teacher.

What does it mean in the case of the teacher-student relationship to withdraw one's compassion? As a response to feeling overburdened, the teacher must examine all the demands on herself and weigh them out according to the ethic she practices. For Wilde (2013), "[t]he practice of care in education is linked to caring about the world, caring about social issues, caring about mathematics, caring about literature, caring about poetry, caring about art, caring about

nature and so on." (p. 62) Even though I may teach in a classroom, sometimes isolated from my colleagues and the subjects they spend their days immersed in, it is my responsibility to accept the world in all its complexity and to see how that complexity may take its toll on the student and teacher alike.

From an ethics of care perspective this is not a signal of failure, but an absolute necessity. Dwelling in tension does not demand that teachers work to the point of emotional burnout. Mindfulness and care demand instead that when the teacher feels the need to withdraw, she does, in order "to preserve her capacity to care". (Noddings, 2012, p. 235). The imbalance created by professionalism is that the emotional protection it offers is illusive. It is damaging to the student-teacher relationship to ignore the emotional effects of a students' failures, and insulting to suggest that the student alone bear the weight of it. However, this is what I have found occurs over and over in high school classrooms of several subjects. Teachers and students produce lessons, assignments, homework, quizzes and projects at a very quick pace. In order to maintain the appearance of value, these items are summatively measured and added to a gradebook. As the year goes on and the assignments pile up, the teacher distances herself from the emotional effects of the endless measurement and consumption by using language and enacting policies that imply that the grades belong solely to the student. As a result, the teacher reinforces the structurally unequal relationship between the teacher and student, and the emotional needs of the student goes unaddressed.

Is it truly unreasonable to suggest that a teacher be involved in the emotional health of a student? I argue that teachers who assess already are involved. In this next section, I turn to the autoethnographic artifact of my first report card in order to illustrate this point.

My first report card

Recently, while going through a box of belongings from my mother's house, I found my first grade report card, tucked safely inside a plastic sleeve. I smile as I read my first grade teacher's name, and to see her handwritten comments in the appropriate boxes calls to mind the time it must have taken her to fill out these booklets for each of her young students. The inside cover bears my mother's signature, instantly recognizable, in the three places she was asked to sign it throughout the school year. They must have sent this document back and forth between teacher and parent as the year went on.

As I read through the booklet, I become aware of the differences and similarities that exist between reporting student progress to parents then and now. Now, teachers in our district use electronic gradebooks, stored online and accessed digitally, while at some school sites, no paper is sent home at all; however, the content of the report is by and large identical to the reports of today: it lists the subjects, the days a student was absent or late. The first reporting period contains information for only the subjects of Math and French (I attended a French Immersion school), and a box for teacher comments where the teacher has listed the units completed within that term. There is also a comment in French about my nice smile, although my non-French speaking parents would have had no way to translate or understand that.

The second reporting period page is structured quite differently. Now, beside each subject is a box for a letter grade, and at the top of each page is a small legend for what each letter means. A is excellent, B is very good, C is good, etc. The box for teacher comments is now about a third smaller than before. What would it have felt like for my mother to see these categories, and to use the legend to better translate how my days at school were spent? My second reporting period shows achievement grades of all As, and the teacher comments on my good work, but by

the third reporting period, I have somehow fallen behind in mathematics; my achievement grade is C. The teacher comments read: "Incomplete math tests have resulted in her mark dropping. Il faut travailler un peu plus vite, Erin!" (The French reads: "You must work a little faster, Erin!")

By the fourth and final report, I've somehow managed to pull my grades up to excellent in all categories, with the conspicuous exception of Art. Apparently my efforts there were only satisfactory. Sadly, none of my first grade art remains to either prove or disprove these results. The teacher comments wish me a pleasant summer vacation.

A flash of another memory springs to my mind of another encounter. I am in junior high, and I have begun to struggle with math and science in school. I bring my father my report card, and am so ashamed of my mark of 60% that I cannot stop myself from crying.

Pema Chödrön (1997) writes,

> We are told from childhood that something is wrong with us, with the world, and with everything that comes along: it’s not perfect, it has rough edges, it has a bitter taste, it’s too loud, too soft, too sharp, too wishy-washy. We cultivate a sense of trying to make things better because something is bad here, something is a mistake here, something is a problem here. (p.112)

Many of us, men and women alike, were categorized this way as students, and had our complexity and details erased, not through any insidious design, but through the fulfilment of professional obligation, and the thoughtless sorting and simplifying the behaviour of children into symbolic representation. Through categorization, we are subtly divided from our whole selves.

Some of us, now teachers ourselves, propagate this reductive categorization, sometimes out of thoughtlessness or misguided malice in the guise of performative discipline, also called

classroom management. However, discipline is not the use of proximity or raised voices to control behaviour. Instead, discipline is choosing to abstain from those practices that we know are damaging. We must find the confidence to return to those classrooms as teachers and right the wrongs, to not repeat the injustice of stolen agency in the guise of discipline. Sadly, students sometimes become used to it, and actually expect to be categorized and labeled (Scott, 2008); they even seem to crave it. After all, painful though it may be, criticism or judgement makes us feel acknowledged. Painful though it may be, there are teachers who only ever truly acknowledge their students with grades, or who only ever feel like their relationship can ever extend that far.

Assessment as plan seems to make no allowance for the pain that categorization and division can cause: in summative numerical assessment, the number supersedes all other information available about a particular student. The average becomes the student's history and future, all without taking into account what it is exactly that is averaged. The teacher becomes reduced to the 'giver of the number' above all else. In this way, assessment without care is dehumanizing for all parties. Instead of attending to the needs of our students, we espouse the belief "that physical things, because they can be mathematically measured with certainty, are more real than non-physical things" (Wilde, 2013, p. 17). Test scores and report cards are the currency of educational institutions, because they are widely considered less nebulous than anecdotal reporting or conversation. A sorry norm has developed in that the numerical representation of the lived experience of the classroom has become more important than the student or teacher's lived experience.

In my estimation, the ideology of division is the effect of trying to apply mechanistic science and Cartesian principles to our understandings of human behaviour (Wilde, 2013), which

creates a fragmentation in our thought, and makes it hard to recognize the necessity and potentially curative nature of wholeness. This fragmentation also lends itself to dichotomous thinking: an inability to recognize and dwell in the duality or multiplicity that gives life its wonder. Instead, we unreasonably divide and oversimplify our students and ourselves (Black, 2003): right and wrong; off and on; good and bad; and so on until we have reduced our students and ourselves to meaninglessness and frustration. What is lost is that interdependence and equality that characterizes life and community.

> As we become more whole hearted in this journey of gentle honesty, it comes as quite a shock to realize how much we've blinded ourselves to some of the ways in which we cause harm […] maybe we're causing some harm by the way we are or the way we relate with others. We've become so used to the way we do things that somehow we think that others are used to it too. (Chödrön, 1997, p. 39)

A sobering note: my favourite part of that old report card is the comment where my teacher writes in French that I have nice smile. It's warm, friendly, and humanizing. It reminds me that at the beginning of our year together, my teacher saw a moment of happiness in me, and took some delight from it. It has nothing to do with achievement or effort; it is an unscientific measurement of an emotion. Today, a report card comment like that would be dismissed as frivolous, perhaps even inappropriate. There is no place for emotion; in assessment today, happiness and joy cannot be measured, and therefore seem not to matter. We have forgotten along the way that happiness and joy are what should matter most. We have overlooked the fact that in attempting to appear efficient and dispassionate, our report cards and professional personas are hampering our capacity to care.

In this section, I have used the memories and thoughts evoked by an old report card to reflect on the imbalance caused by the emotional distance of professionalism, and how professional assessment seems to make no room for an ethics of care to flourish. In the next section, I elaborate on that imbalance, and describe some possible ways where the division and separation intrinsic to assessment may be repaired.

Division

An emerging concern of caring teachers is that quantitative comparisons that arise from numerical grading sorts students into winners and losers (Harris & Brown, 2009). This sorting has a troubling effect not just on the student-teacher relationship, but also on the school-parent relationship (Slomp, 2008; Harris & Brown, 2009). A degrading of dignity seems so natural to my experience in schools. Teachers-as-sorters don't value students as much more than numbers on a spreadsheet, or the parents of our students as anything other than the receivers of report cards, or one another as generators of averages, or our administrators as collectors of averages. Sometimes, assessment is not used as a tool or measurement of learning at all, but instead as a means of punishment, control or behaviour mitigation (Palmer, 1998; Harris & Brown, 2009). As teachers struggle to defend our traditional, patriarchal appearance of authority and professionalism, everything is an intrusion, every question an affront to our expertise.

We all have students who are hiding their lives at school, and whether succeeding or failing in their coursework, these are students who at the end of the year become numbers on our results report. In the interest of fostering an understanding of shared life experience, I believe that we need to face the fact, over and over, that the people we teach, work with and live with in

our community have stories, traumatic and disturbing, and that helping them to share these stories is part of our ethical obligation.

Mindfulness encourages us "to move toward difficulties rather than backing away" (Chödrön, 1997, p. 112). Conflicting though it may seem, exposing and examining the traumas and suppressions of the past and present is how we may begin to overturn them. In writing, our students may potentially face their challenges and their traumas and, in sharing them, those experiences to an extent become the student's own. In this way, the teacher becomes a witness to the lives and sufferings of her student, and in the framework of an ethic of care, the burden becomes her or his responsibility (Simon & Eppert, 1997). The practice of care in personal writing may also help teachers to recognize how and when they are part of larger institutional forces, and then to move in ways that acknowledge and soothe the disparity in power relations (Wilde, 2013).

In this section, I suggest that schools should be an ideal to talk about our emotions rather than distancing ourselves from them. Instead of assuming the emotional burden of our students' failures, perhaps a more wise position would be for teachers assume their vulnerability. In the next section, I will tell a story about watching my principal learn a new language and how witnessing her vulnerability taught me a powerful lesson about tensionality and compassion.

Vulnerability as an act of care

A few years ago, a new principal was assigned to my school, a French Immersion Catholic High School in Edmonton. A French Immersion School in Edmonton is a unique place to work, for the obvious differences in language and the culture that arises from that. For an Anglophone, it can be very alienating to not be able to participate in staff room conversations or

to understand the morning announcements. I am fortunate in that, even though I teach English, I speak French well enough to feel like an included member of the school community, but for that reason, staffing a school like that can be a real challenge for our district. When she first started at the school, this principal's French was, to put it gently, terrible.

My school is a K-12 school, and part of its morning practices are to include students as part of the announcements and prayer. Every morning, a student from a random grade would read the prayer, and every morning, this principal would follow with two minutes of appalling French, her words halting, mispronouncing almost every other syllable. Sometimes she would read the French word in English by mistake, seriously garbling the message, and leaving us, the listening audience, unsure of what the announcement even was. Still, every morning, despite the juxtaposing humiliation of speaking French worse than the six-year-old students in her charge, she persisted. And eventually, she improved, and as the entire school witnessed her learning, we all became witness to a very powerful act of care.

My principal's willingness to expose her inability to speak French struck me as so unusual for a leader in a professional setting. I can only call it a very radical act, to expose her weaknesses in such a public way. Incredibly, when I consider the growth in her ability throughout the years that she was my principal, I see that she was living formatively. The school was her audience, the feedback was authentic and immediate, and the emotional risks were real. She embodied the sensitivity and humility that Aoki (1991) identifies as the heart and she transformed the public space of the school into spaces of modeled failure and learning (p.160).

Making oneself vulnerable is not a part of today's accepted social behaviours. It seems instead we value strength and resourcefulness: surviving at all costs. When a student hands me his paper, he makes himself vulnerable, but not by his own choice. We demand, schedule and

record these moments of vulnerability as numbers in a column, without attending to the damage, the loss or the questions that went unanswered. What might it mean to teach and to assess with vulnerability? In the same way that students are coerced into a position of vulnerability, teachers too, are forced into the role of aggressor under the pretext of professionalism.

In searching for opportunities for vulnerability in the curriculum documents, I was largely unsuccessful. Here is where my final attempt at transposition from lived experience to curriculum ultimately cannot be completed. There is no space provided in the curriculum for the teacher to make herself vulnerable, or to model failure, humiliation, lack of knowledge. Though the language in both documents assumes that students are learning, growing and developing as they progress throughout the course, there does not seem to be any such room made for the teachers or administrators that walk alongside those students. There is no mention of modeling humility or deliberately erring in order to teach or acquire a skill. There is no call to put aside one's ego and to take a very personal or emotional risk. This, I feel, is one area where the curriculum should go, but does not. This is where I feel the curriculum fails.

With this last anecdote, I submit that one of the most important practices of dwelling in tensionality as an educator and assessor is maintaining one's vulnerability. When I pull together the ideas of misinterpretation that clouds assessment practices with this lived experience of watching a school leader allow herself to be publicly and authentically evaluated, I see that not only did this leader learn well, but she turned her community into a community of teachers. Unencumbered by spectrums of evaluation, codified professional behaviours or the work of assigning a numerical value to the process of her learning, she merely humbled herself, over and over, and painstakingly acquired a genuine skill. This is the end of my autoethnographic work. In the following section I will revisit my original research question and review my findings.

Chapter 4 – Closing

Assessment as a mode of being

> The path with heart is good and the journey along it will be joyful. Like all paths, it leads nowhere, but it will make you strong. If you find yourself on a path, then you must stay on it only if it has heart, and it is only your heart that can tell if it so. (Chambers, 2004, p.6)

In this project, I have attempted to illuminate the tensionality that exists in the daily enactment of assessment as plan and assessment as lived in my own experiences as a Senior High English Language Arts teacher in Alberta. What does it mean to ethically and mindfully dwell in the tensionality between assessment-as-plan and assessment-as-lived? It means to attend to the needs of both teachers and students, to not shy away from being open and vulnerable, to search out the curriculum documents for opportunities to practice car and compassion and to make every effort to communicate with our students in meaningful ways that are not limited to grades and report card comments.

When the assessment of the student is disconnected from the very real and vital work of feeling care and being cared for, the relationship and learning between the teacher and student suffers and cannot grow. It takes what is already an unequal relationship and tilts it further in favour of the assessor, allowing for an emotional distance where there should be none. The curriculum that guides my practice is not so far removed from the lived experience of teaching practice that it is moribund, but space must be made for the moments of emotional encounter that characterize life, both inside and outside of the school walls.

There is much we have to let go of for assessment to be a truly nurturing practice. I am not advocating the shirking of responsibility of teachers to assess their students. Instead, I am pleading for the responsibility we have to our gentle selves to be patient and disciplined enough to withhold judgement as long as we need to. That we do allow students to assign themselves grades, that we do resist grading every assignment that we check in every day, that we allow ourselves "to be", and not always "to do".

We must understand the time spent whiling away at a small task, and the appreciation of what naturally appears is teaching, is also an important part of life. Teaching this way might instead be a type of exploration, of togetherness and discovery. We can delight in that discovery with our students, instead of the deadly repetition and drone of the timeworn lesson and pre-weighted gradebook, and not to allow the fear of loss of control or the fear of difference to paralyze us to repeat ourselves without understanding. Or at least, without trying to understand, because thoughtless judgement, in so many ways, is also a form of dismissal.

Why transposition? As a musician, it is taking the words and language of another and speaking it in one's own voice. It is an act of simultaneous relocation and preservation of the heart and the joy that guides our best choices. There is joy in spending one's days teaching and engaging with the material and people in a way of care and from a place of love. Even though "in this very results driven world, it is easy to forget the power of joy and the relevance of aesthetic experience in relation to work" (Wilde, 2013, p. 87), this power is one that once fully experienced cannot be ignored. As ethical teachers we must find ways to bring student and teacher concerns back to the foreground and the place of significance that our moral characters deserve (Seidel, 2006; Webber et al, 2014).

It is frustrating to be told to simultaneously serve two opposing masters, and unfortunately, we encounter it over and over in education: the public and the private, the policies and the exceptions, the planned and the lived; Aoki's (1991) tensionality spirals down forever and pulls teachers between it as they go. If teachers are to ever reconcile the usefulness of assessment with its emotional demand, we must also recognize and acknowledge the validity of the emotional effects of our practices on our relationships. Equally, we must also examine the paradoxical elements so inherent in our profession, and to dwell within those tensions: to seek out those currents and to allow ourselves to also be energized by them. Attending to my own feelings is what tells me that I am fully alive in my being assessor and carer. It is because I enjoy the work of education that I know I can do so attentively. It is because I worry about my students' emotions being addressed that I know I can do so thoughtfully.

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