

# FLOATING ON THE SURFACE, DELVING BENEATH, & LETTING GO: A POETIC CURRERE EXCHANGE

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### PROLOGUE

I (Hilary) supervised Susan during her Master of Education program when she wrote a major research paper entitled, “Living in the Skin that I Am: An Organizational Autoethnography of an Adult Educator’s Plight to Survive the Stigma of Invisible and Episodic Disability in an Academy of Administrativa” (Docherty-Skippen, 2014). In her autoethnography, Susan acknowledged her own vulnerability, as a student, teacher, and person with mental illness, which paved the way for her to recognize her shared vulnerability with others and the pitfalls of organizational structures, policies, procedures, and attitudes that propagate conditions of inequity. Upon completion, Susan made the decision to pursue a PhD, inviting me to supervise her academic journey.

It was at this intersection, when Susan began to transition from student to scholar, that we examined the unique supervisory provisions that students engaged in emotionally sensitive research sometimes require. We explored this topic through a two-month dialogue via e-mail (Docherty-Skippen & Brown, 2017). What emerged from our discussions was a *currere* exchange steeped in stories from our past and present that provided a compass for our future supervisor/supervisee academic relationship.

To disentangle the complexity of the stories we shared, from our e-mail transcripts, I repositioned our text in the creation of “found-poetry.” According to Grisoni (2007), “The power of poetry lies in its ability to focus not only on events but also on behavioural and affective elements embedded in the episode” (p. 344). Essentially, this is what writing the poem did. It enabled us to view the intimacy of each other’s lives in a way that the writing of the e-mails, alone, did not. The culmination of our exchange is the following found-poem entitled: “Floating on the Surface, Delving Beneath, & Letting Go: A Poetic *Currere* Exchange.” It is a heteroglossia of our lived, embodied *currere*. Methodologically, to distinguish between our voices, my voice has been textualized in italicized Times New Roman font (i.e. *Times New Roman*), and Susan’s voice has been textualized in Calibri font (i.e. *Calibri*). Throughout our poetry, we dip in and out of our living-breathing curriculum and move seamlessly between Pinar’s (1994) notion of the regressive, the progressive, and the analytical, and arrive below the surface at the synthetical.

Our arts-based approach presents what Sawyer (2017) describes as an aesthetic *currere*, one that focuses on discontinuity to “examine the breaks in our epistemological insights and epiphanies—the way history unfolds not as a continuous narrative, but as a discontinuous one—and, thus, how thought changes, as opposed to remaining the same—through history” (pp. 90-91). For example, we tried to insert headings into our poem based on Pinar’s method; however, the discontinuity of our stories did not allow for a continuous narrative to emerge. Instead, we present a poem that begins on the surface and delves past the ugliness that entangles body and mind, allowing a fusion of horizons that creates a positive “in-dwelling” between the supervisor and supervisee.

**FLOATING ON THE SURFACE, DELVING BENEATH, & LETTING GO:  
A POETIC CURRERE EXCHANGE**

Clothes conservative, restrictive—body modest.  
 Heavy wool kilts, blouses buttoned to the neck.  
 A vest over top.  
 Hair pulled back and pinned.  
 Church was my performance destination.  
 Patriarchy my domain.

*No expectation to wear certain attire,  
 hair was never “done,”  
 I never wore dresses,  
 no make-up, no nail care...  
 suffice to say I wasn’t a “girly girl!”  
 ~ I was told Church was not my destination  
 Two Mom rearing was my domain.*

Strict religious upbringing.  
 Morals and ethics tied to church rules and community.  
 Everyone connected to my parents and their church.  
 The Minister and his wife.

*I was taught not to judge—  
 I was explicitly taught to be open to all people of any race,  
 colour, religion, sexuality, income...  
 An ethics of nonconformity and care was modeled.*

Body constricted—not an articulating body—my body was not my own.  
 I had a body supposed to do what others expected.  
 It became a body dissociated from my “self”—from my mind.

*I was not compelled to adhere to any kind of “bodily” code—  
 I was a physical being.  
 I excelled at sports and expressed myself kinesthetically  
 on both the athletic arena and academic stage.*

Even into my teenage years—I was not sexually aware of my body.  
 With awareness—I felt awkward.  
 Awkward of my body—but not awkward of my “self”—my mind.

*I never shared stories of my sexually aware body—  
 Did I feel shame from adventurous explorations during my teenage years?  
 Or did I not want to make you feel like you missed out?  
 I never felt awkward in my body—  
 I felt vibrantly alive especially in the presence of another.*

*Openly sharing stories is at the center of both my ontology and epistemology  
 When you shared an experience  
 I did not pass judgement*

*I led my thinking with an open heart.  
Thinking and the heart in the same sentence....,  
Susan, you must be asking yourself how can this be?*

Through my questions and your responses—  
I can tell you are very much a person of strong conviction and sincere integrity.

I like that a lot about you.  
It helps me feel safe.  
It helps me believe that you mean what you say.  
It helps me learn to trust.  
It helps me open up and dare to delve beneath the surface.  
It helped set the stage for me to engage in deep learning.

Memory—[anxiously sitting at the coffee shop]  
I remember the very first time I showed you some of the photos.  
Photos that I wanted to incorporate into my paper.  
Photos that were evocative in the sense that they conjured strong emotions—  
For me—alongside the words that I wrote.

*When I pushed you into those,  
what I call “autoethnographic” spaces,  
I did not know at the time that I was “pushing” you per se.  
I would never have asked you to do anything I would not do myself.  
That is my guiding principle, my compass.*

I was nervous to share “Bloodline” and the photo of what I interpreted as—  
A bleeding woman floating in water.  
I thought you might think that I was morbid.

*My invitation to explore unexamined spaces was offered with  
love, care, integrity, and honesty.*

*I was with you every step of the way  
ready to catch  
ready to encourage you  
to go deeper*

Perhaps my thinking was too “messy.”  
Fear my work would not fit into the neat little “academic boxes.”  
The ones I was accustomed to using.

Neat little boxes that  
were “safe,”  
were “aseptic,”  
and stayed safely afloat on the surface—  
so that I didn’t have to look or feel what was below.

*When supervising students undergoing self-work,  
my ethical oath is to do no harm  
to be present  
mind—body—spirit  
Does that make me unique? I do not know.*

*I was open for you to express yourself differently  
 You felt I was different from the norm  
 I see it simply as the way you needed to make  
 meaning from your lived experiences.  
 It felt natural to me.*

When I got my period, I was scared to tell my mom.

*When I got my period, I did not tell my mom.  
 I was embarrassed.*

I didn't want to be seen as weak.  
 I didn't want to be vulnerable.  
 I felt being a woman was a disadvantage.

*We need to write about our periods; however,  
 I fear that people (especially academics) will judge us harshly, even though  
 it reveals such an important story in our personal struggle as females.*

As a kid, I always felt in competition with boys.  
 It was easy for me to get top marks in school.  
 I always “beat” the boys in math, science, but it was embarrassing.  
 Teachers always made such a big deal of it.  
 I guess back then girls weren’t supposed to be good at math and science.

*On my Kindergarten Report Card, the teacher wrote, “Hilary is popular, especially with the boys.” I was always a physical being...athletic. Regardless of gender, our energies complemented each other.*

*I live in this wholehearted state of knowing  
 It is not an easy place to reside.  
 I want to share what my heart is experiencing  
 Societal norms resist this way of knowing*

*At times, I silence myself—sit in frustration—while others dutifully play the game.  
 Hearing you say that it is refreshing to hear someone speak from the heart is affirming.  
 Is silencing myself doing more harm than good  
 both personally and communally?*

I had your permission to let go of my previous way of thinking.  
 Start trusting the instincts and knowledge I felt within my body.

*Diving, going beneath the surface is not easy.  
 It requires a huge level of trust and a modicum of courage, too.*

The constructs of who I am,  
 Who I once was,  
 And who I am learning to become—  
 I am able to explore myself as a teacher,  
 And in a totally different light.

*When I was encouraging you to explore  
 Photographs—it was because I  
 acknowledged the academic in you,  
 the embodied creative knower in you,  
 and I knew you could connect the  
 two and find your Way.*

Without listening and learning from your stories,  
 Would I have felt safe enough and free enough to tell my own story?  
 I had to let go and get “dirty” in solitude, darkness, and uncertainty.  
 I had to learn how to “let go” of preconceived ideas and images—  
 Of myself as someone who was a strong learner.

*Letting go is a dominant theme in both my  
 personal and teaching lives.  
 Guiding students to let go of preconceived knowledge through an  
 embodied process is challenging at best.*

I had to allow myself to be vulnerable—  
 To understand what it means to be a warrior.  
 Perhaps you may not have realized that the way you “let go”—  
 Taught me to do the same.

*Letting go provides space for  
 Reconceptualization of previous beliefs  
 Makes room for new ones to emerge.*

You made me feel comfortable.  
 You helped to push me to explore emotionally sensitive topics.  
 The push was more of an impetus to share.  
 The more you shared yourself, the more I felt safe to share myself.  
 How do you let go of situations where—  
 Student learning outcomes were not positive?  
 Where students were disengaged?  
 Where students were disheartened or even disgruntled?

*My offer for students to go in deep is only an invitation.  
 Many do not accept the Call.  
 I hope our communal experience provides students with the courage  
 to undergo a self-exploration.  
 This is what I hope.*

*For the people who accept the Call—  
 I become a catalyst in that particular moment in their lives.  
 It is an enormous responsibility.  
 I allow a person’s story to surface.  
 In that moment, they can rest assured  
 that I am there to support them  
 as they begin to submerge themselves into the unknown  
 and delve beneath the surface.*

### EPILOGUE

From surface to depth, over the last few years of her doctoral studies, Susan has cycled full-circle. Although the composition of this poetic *currere* exchange started just after Susan was accepted into the joint PhD program at Brock University, it wasn't until after she completed her comprehensive portfolio defense that we were ready to submit this work for publication. Both Susan and I felt that "something" was missing. On paper, the evolution of our academic student/supervisor relationship appeared too "neat" and "tidy," like a straight-forward progression of learning-teaching-learning experiences. And so, we left the draft to gestate, as written, for nearly two years. It was only during the preparation of Susan's comprehensive portfolio, after which time we had furthered our experiential understandings of how our pedagogical framework reflected the progression of our artistically lived, embodied, *aesthetic currere* (Sawyer, 2017), that we were able to locate that "missing something" and finish this poetic composition. For us, the key to our understanding was that the development of our academic identities was something we formed not individually, but rather dialogically, in relationship through and with each other. This reciprocity of teaching-learning/learning-teaching offset the potential for power-imbalance sometimes prevalent in the academic supervisor/supervisee relationship. As Susan's supervisor, I created the conditions in which she could experience dialogue as a mode of curriculum inquiry. As my student, Susan embraced the challenge and embodied what it means, metaphorically, to delve past the ugliness that entangles body and mind in the development of her scholarly identity.

Often, teachers and students encounter emotionally painful issues in their learning, as teaching is a deeply personal vocation. The context and subtext of any teaching experience is performed on a stage at many levels, each inspiring the subtle equilibrium that is played between teacher and student. This dynamic is sometimes underscored by the interchange that is characterized by the student having to present and prove themselves in front of their peers, mentors, and supervisors. Combine this dynamic encounter with the social, cultural, and political factors at play in any academic supervisor/supervisee relationship, and the stage is set for an interchange of strengths that are often discovered over the course of the supervisor/supervisee relationship. Although we are limited by the brevity of our words, in an attempt to highlight the multiplicity of voice within our text, exemplifying in our unique language and rhythm how the reciprocity of our academic relationship evolved, we have entwined the *currere* of our past, present, and future through Pinar's (1994) notion of the regressive, the progressive, the analytical, to *float on the surface, delve beneath, and let go* at the synthetical.

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