

DEVELOPMENT OF SELF, ORGANIZATION, AND COMMUNITY:
CHRONICLING A PEDAGOGY OF CONNECTION

by

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DEDICATION

My research is dedicated to my mom, Cheryl, who was my first teacher and showed me the power of unconditional love, and my wife, Rachel, who inspires me and feeds my development every day through conversation and by example.

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ABSTRACT

Building on the work of Guajardo, Guajardo, Janson, and Militello's *Ecologies of Knowing* (2015), this study seeks to define a pedagogy of connection to bridge ecological layers—self, organization, and community. Through a multi-sited ethnography, the researcher's autoethnographic storymaking served as a body of literature which informed and verified the embodied understanding of pedagogy, as demonstrated through the post-ethnographic form known as a messy text. The messy text highlights the author's role in planning and facilitating a Community Learning Exchange (CLE) event, which is put forth as an exemplary model for the development of self, organization, and community. Insights about the pedagogy of connection were gleaned from the CLE process and were validated by the author's life experiences, as illustrated in a catalogue of life stories. High-level findings are five: (1) Vulnerable conversations build trust; (2) Higher learning is a team effort; (3) Connect through play; (4) "Treat people like people"; and (5) Embrace ambiguity. Educational leaders can benefit by embarking on a similar research process to understand the self, connecting their past with the future to inform their identity, mindset, and methods.

PREFACE

Take heed, dear reader.

The ensuing pages may offend your sensibilities. Those here looking for hard facts, bits of technical data, or a school improvement instruction manual will be sorely disappointed. My work is about connection—to myself and the world around me. That includes connecting to YOU.

I wrote my life into these pages. Should you proceed, you will find accounts of my most intimate and human moments. I pull no punches because, through writing, I bear witness to myself. Equal parts: emotionally exhausting and transformational—my research examines stories where I found connection and others where I was starved for it.

Some of my stories laid buried, festering in the darkness for decades—stone by stone and word by word, I unearthed myself, letting in air and light to create the possibility for healing. I (re)constructed my stories as a proxy of *me*, and my research is *self*-study. Along the way, some painful and many joyful realizations bubbled to the surface. I unpacked forgotten traumas that silently poisoned my relationships through the years. Early drafts of my stories were not always kind to myself or forgiving others. So, I (will continually) revise my stories and myself with an assets-lens. I'm finding peace in who I am and immeasurable gratitude for the great teachers (both inside and outside of schools) that have made a difference in my life. I (re)membered stories of shame and transformed them into lessons of love, connection, and triumph.

I frame *myself* as the author of a story that is still unfolding—a process of becoming that flows seamlessly from my earliest memories to form consistent narrative

of me. However, my *self*-study challenges traditional definitions of *self*. For, how would I differentiate my story from my mother's, or from the communities that cultivated my development? I am a part/whole. And that *whole* includes you, dear reader.

Since you and I are already connected, I'd like to grow that bond. This dissertation took shape through dialogue with family, mentors, friends, and colleagues. As our conversations (*pláticas*) grew deeper, those categories and roles began to overlap, then eventually fade out of mind. Whether huddled around a dinner or conference table, on a stroll, or in a cross-country van ride, I inhabited a space of love, vulnerability, and connection with those special souls. Their perspectives broadened mine and brought awareness to blind spots. I am better because of them, and they live in this work.

And so, I invite you to step into my circle. Let's have dialogue! Below, I share the questions that helped me make sense of my stories. My findings are anything but generalizable, and these questions can help you find your own meaning in my text. After reading my work--please, I beg, share your ideas with me. YOU might spur my next transformation. My central research questions are:

- What skills and mindsets are practiced (by individuals) through pedagogy of connection?
- What systems and climates are present (in organizations and communities) where pedagogy of connection is practiced?
- How are self, organization, and community transformed through pedagogy of connection? (I.e. the purpose of education?)

Through storytelling and analysis, Chapter I of my document lays out the problem that animates my study—our collective need for a pedagogy that builds and strengthens

social bonds while . In lieu of a traditional literature review, I attempt to draw from the literature selectively, as needed, to support my storytelling. In orienting my study I reviewed the scholarly dialogues relating to:

- The purpose of education
- Understanding self/identity
- Ecologies/environments

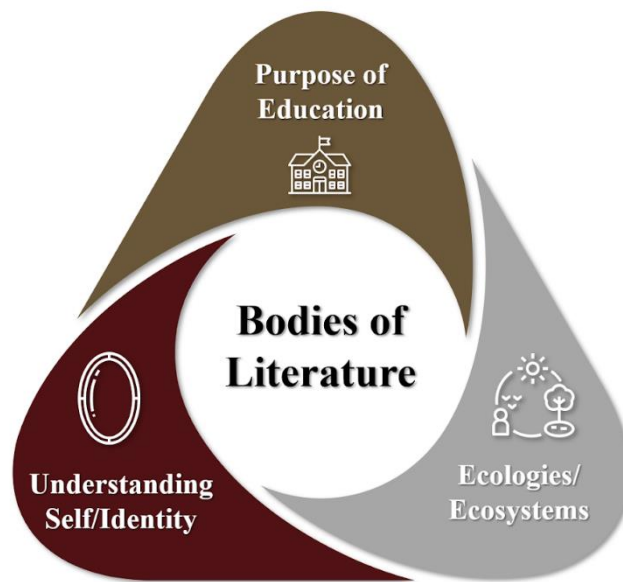


Figure 1. Bodies of literature surveyed

In my Chapter II, I struggle to answer the question: *who am I?*, and thus provide a discussion about my ontological position. Chapter III outlines my conceptual framework. My social identities include being an college educated straight, CIS-gendered, white, man. I was well-taught to think like a straight, CIS-gendered, white, man—and I learned that this is the only correct way of understanding the world. To liberate (decolonize) myself from white male supremacy, I constructed my meaning-making framework by looking to theories and ideas from People of Color. This chapter also contains a

discussion of my research methods which fall under the umbrella of multi-sited ethnography. Using post-ethnographic methods and a dynamic process for analysis, I examine two sets of observables (aka data sets):

- My catalogue of life stories (included as an appendix)
- My messy text (included in Chapter IV)

In Chapter IV, I present my messy text--a detailed account from a recent Community Learning Exchange (CLE) that I helped to organize and convene. Upon reflecting on the CLE, I distilled a pedagogy of connection by weaving lessons learned from the CLE, with wisdom from my catalogue of life stories, supported by scholarly literature. Finally, in Chapter V, I present a summary of the study, implications for action, and recommendations for further study. I have included my catalogue of stories as an appendix, not to marginalize their importance, but to emphasize their role as a body of literature that undergirded and informed my study.

And now, dear reader, we find ourselves at a crossroads. You must choose to turn back or move forward. Those craving connection: read on...

THE NEED FOR A PEDAGOGY OF CONNECTION

(CHAPTER I--PROBLEM STATEMENT)

Sandra sat beside me at a long table at the front of my first-grade classroom in East New York, Brooklyn. She was a tall, striking, Black woman with a bright smile and kind eyes. The walls of the room were colorful and alive, with representations of student work, sight words, and posters that outlined the norms of our classroom culture. It was the first parent-teacher conference of the year. Laid out in front of us were drawings and work samples by her daughter, Tiffani. Sandra and I looked over each of Tiffani's work together. I showed her each project's objective and the rubric that was used to guide and assess her daughter's work.

Tiffani earned high marks across the board. She processed information quickly and methodically. Her hand was always among the first to shoot up when the students were asked to share their thinking, and she was a conscientious citizen of our class who loved to socialize. After discussing academics, I thanked Sandra for raising Tiffani with good manners. I understand kindness as a skill, and it was clear to me that Tiffani learned kindness from her mother.

Our eyes met, and together we held a brief moment of connection and appreciation for one another. Then, Sandra's eyes began to well up with tears, and she reached into her purse for tissue. After taking a deep breath, she thanked me for sending notes home to celebrate Tiffani's good days. Then, she told me that her evening was about to get much worse. After meeting with me, Sandra was headed to see the dean about her son's (re)occurring behavior issues. Isiah was in the 4th grade but had been held back a year. He had already been suspended once that year for shoving his teacher,

Ms. Morgan. Sandra said, “You think Ms. Morgan has ever sent a nice note home about Isiah? Kids just need love. They need somebody to believe in them. Isiah is a good kid, just like Tiffani is a good kid, but the school doesn’t believe that. And now he thinks he’s bad too.” In her face, I could see years of mounting pain and frustration. She had a wish for her son’s educators to see the same potential that she sees—the good. Instead, she painted a picture of educators that viewed Isiah as a problem to be solved. Educator expectations are known to have a powerful effect on self-image and student achievement (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Sandra believed that Isiah’s teachers were at the root of his behavior issues and negative self-image.

I sensed Sandra’s energy toward me shift from congenial toward disgust when I suggested that she meet with the principal to discuss her concerns. It seemed that she had been down that road several times, finding only frustration and blame pointed at her. Suggesting that Sandra’s problems could be negotiated through institutional channels reminded her that I was part of the problem. “You wouldn’t understand,” she said.

In that moment, something powerful happened. Without explicitly naming it, Sandra pointed out the elephant in the room to which I was oblivious—my White privilege. I trusted in institutions, like public schools, because I credited my professional opportunities and newfound financial security to my education. I was shocked and disgusted to learn that public schools represent oppression, not hope, for many Black and Brown families. Worst of all, I felt myself to be part of the problem.

Sandra’s story cracked open my critical consciousness. Her perspective challenged my understanding of schools and my place within them. That day I began to see myself within a larger social, cultural, and historical context. I increasingly

recognized that our school was mistreating students—practicing and reinforcing systemic racism. I was not well-prepared to make learning relevant to my Black and Latinx students. Compounding the issue, our district-adopted a White-washed curriculum, which largely ignored the local history and assets of the surrounding neighborhood (Guajardo, Guajardo, Janson & Militello, 2016).

Further, our school’s disciplinary policies were punitive, exclusionary, and sometimes cruel. In a vicious cycle, students like Isiah were removed frequently from class for minor disciplinary infractions (such as *talking back*), causing them to fall behind academically, making it more likely for them to misbehave on subsequent days. Perhaps the most fundamental problem was that Sandra, and other parents like her, lacked influence over school practices, which they viewed as harmful to their children.

A few days later, I followed up with Ms. Morgan to get her side of the story. Predictably, she blamed Isiah (and Sandra) for his “out-of-control” behavior. When I shared how Sandra had shown me kindness, Ms. Morgan, a veteran teacher, rolled her eyes and walked away. I assume Ms. Morgan found the questions from a newbie, male colleague, as challenging or condescending.

As the school year progressed, I began to notice unjust practices all over campus. Test prep often trumped genuine opportunities for learning. Students were expected to sit silently in their seats, listening to lectures, or working independently for hours on end. Each day in the school cafeteria, staff members behaved like drill sergeants yelling at young children through bullhorns. Sandra was right. The school was not a loving or nurturing environment for students. Surely these conditions would never be permitted in a wealthy, White neighborhood school.

As a teacher, it was difficult for me to keep my focus inside the walls of my classroom. I felt increasingly disillusioned and powerless—like a pawn facing the larger political, economic, and social forces that dominate public education. Where before I saw *individual* problematic practices, I began to see a complex and dynamic system working to marginalize whole communities. I felt enraged but constrained to make a difference from my position. My developing critical awareness (and deeply-ingrained White savior complex) inspired me to impact change on a broader scale. I decided to leave the classroom and pursue a graduate degree in public affairs. Having failed to save the world as a teacher, I was determined to right all wrongs through policy. And so, I left New York City for Austin, Texas, with much to learn.

The Making of a Model Educator

My mother's story is inseparable from mine. She was my first, greatest, and most loving teacher. Her sacrifices for me are beyond counting, and her development as an educator began at an early age. Throughout her childhood, pedagogies of connection were modeled for Cheryl by her parents, and sister-figure, Denise. After leaving home, she learned to be an educator through experience by persevering for her family while under adversity. She was a teen-mom to my older brother, Jeremiah. Pregnant at 17, by then-boyfriend (and future-husband) Kevin. The school district barred her from attending class with her peers while being pregnant. Despite being ostracized, she was determined to finish high school. Cheryl attended night classes and kept pace to graduate with her peers.

A few weeks before graduation, Cheryl received notice from the Owosso Public School Board that would not have the privilege of walking the stage at graduation. She

would not be afforded the chance to celebrate her accomplishment among lifelong friends and peers. “Afterall,” the school board must have thought, “what kind of message would it send to celebrate a pregnant teen graduate?” Owosso’s school leaders judged my mother and painted with her a scarlet letter. At the time, the town’s only ethnic diversity existed among European Anglos—Owosso was then, and is today, near all-White. Ethnic identities were reminders of non-Whiteness—used more often as insults and put-downs by outsiders than by families preserving tradition. Already carrying the explicitly Polish, and seemingly unpronounceable last name, Frankowiak (Fran-koh-vee-ack)—the school board’s decision further robbed my mother of dignity within the community. Cheryl’s formal educators treated her as a sinful, poor, Polish girl, destined for no good.

She was crushed. Neither of her parents nor any of her blood-siblings had graduated high school. Cheryl wanted to give her family a reason to be proud. So, she fought. She wrote letters to each school board member pleading her case. The board voted and narrowly allowed her to walk at graduation, but they had one last humiliating surprise in store. Upon walking the stage, my mom found that she couldn’t present her diploma to her parents. While other students received their official high school diploma, she was handed a blank piece of paper. The principal explained that because of her “circumstance,” her diploma would be mailed at a later date. These educators blatantly marginalized Cheryl. They wanted her to know that because of her “immoral choices” that she deserved less than the rest of the students. For some students, a diploma represents a promise fulfilled, for Cheryl, it is a reminder of rejection, shame, and perseverance for the love of her family.

My Question of Purpose

Knowledge is power (Foucault, 1980). And so, education is inherently political. Who should be educated? What will be taught? For what purpose? Who decides? And finally, who will pay the costs and receive the benefits? These questions point to schools as a powerful mediating body (mezzo) at the convergence of micro and macro spheres (Guajardo, Guajardo, Janson, & Millitello, 2015). In the macro sense, education is a tool—a means of obtaining a larger social purpose. Micro-level actions of educators should align with a shared vision for the future. The collective work of all educators is diffused into the values, ideas, and abilities of future generations. *So, what is our shared purpose as educators?* Most educational mission statements are technical in nature. Posters hang in hallways across America, trumpeting the charge to prepare students for the 21st century workforce. But is there a greater, forgotten purpose of education?

Pedagogies of Connection

Stop.

Slowly draw air into your lungs until they feel fully expanded.

Next, gently let it drain out like a balloon—whooooooooooooooooosh.

Now, close your eyes and picture your *favorite teacher*—this person may or may not have been a formal teacher in a traditional classroom setting.

X

X

X

X

X

X

If you played along, you're probably smiling right now, at least on the inside. Because, chances are, your favorite teacher touched your emotions. They made you feel something. Maybe they made you feel loved or validated? Perhaps their passion for learning rubbed off on you? Or maybe, they were the role model that you emulated. More than any fact or piece of knowledge, you likely remember the way that teacher made you feel. Countless studies point to the teacher-student relationship as the biggest leverage point for improving student success (Hanushek and Rivkin, 2010; Kane and Staiger, 2008; Kane, Staiger, Rockoff.; 2008; Rivkin, Hanushek, Kain, 2005; Rockoff, 2004). In the scholarly dialogues, the importance relationship between the teacher and parent is also underscored as an important factor in supporting student success (Barton & Coley, 2009; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007; Redding, Meyer, & Sheeley, 2004). Given the importance of relationships in learning, an educator's ability to *connect* to students, self, colleagues, and community comes into focus as a pillar of practice. *Throughout my study, I refer to methods of teaching and learning that build human connection as pedagogies of connection.*

I draw from my own experience—for five years, my colleagues and I provided the official training and guidance for thousands of school leaders identified for improvement by the Texas Education Agency. I've visited dozens of K-12 schools from Amarillo to Brownsville, El Paso to Beaumont. Statewide policymakers and school improvement specialists too often view students through a bird's eye with a clinical, deficit lens by treating humans as numbers and comparing children to standards—begging the question: what is a standard child? The idea seems preposterous. We would never ask, what is a standard tree? Trees will not grow faster or larger through the act of comparison to an

ideal tree. The strengths of a student or a tree are inherent, needing only the right conditions to emerge and mature.

As policy trickles down into classroom practice, teachers tend to focus on what students lack. The banking model of education rules the educational landscape (Freire & Bergman Ramos, 1970). Test prep routinely robs students of meaningful learning opportunities. The cultural capital of our Students of Color is routinely ignored, and we are *all* worse off for it (Yosso, 2005).

From Pre-K through high school, student success is measured by performance on individual standardized assessments. As a result, the learning experience lacks relevance, depth, and offers little opportunity for creative expression, collaboration, or collective sensemaking. Maturana Romesin and Verden-Zoeller (2008) frame the issue well by writing, “we no longer know what happens with our children as they grow socially disconnected in a meaningless co-existence or as they become unhappy beings with no sense of participation in the world in which they are supposed to be. Nor do we see that we depersonalize them as we project them to a future that is supposed to fulfill our desires, not theirs” (p. 86). Under the current paradigm, students are treated as candidates for humanity with nothing to offer the world until after graduation.

As a field of educators, we have lost our way because as a people, we have forgotten who we are. Since we were cave dwellers and nomads, people have been living and working together. Humans are the great collaborators of nature. But we have lost touch with our tribal nature. Each day we grow more isolated and fragmented. Instead of looking to one another for connection, we seek comfort in material things and virtual friendships. Denying our nature is making us sick (Maturana Romesin and Verden-

Zoeller, 2008).

Alienation and depression are inseparable threads of a growing mental health crisis facing young people. Researchers from the World Health Organization surveyed nearly 14,000 college freshman and found that 35 percent struggled with a mental illness (Auerbach et al., 2018). The factors for the mental health epidemic are many. Among them, the role of schools deserves scrutiny. Schools stifle development through isolation and standardization. Then, after so-called *commencement*, our young people lack experience in co-creating significant change with peers and mentors. In conflict with our communal nature as a species, most American schools shape our youth to be impotent social actors (Maturana Romesin & Verden-Zöller, 2012).

Schools should help us remember who we are. The field of education needs to re-humanize the learning process. For the survival of our species, we must create the atmosphere in which intelligence and co-generation of knowledge can flourish. Our capacity to see and learn is enhanced within a context of trust, intimacy, and cooperation (Maturana Romesin & Verden-Zöller, 2012). A curricula steeped in pedagogies of connection enables educators, students, and community members to assume both the roles of teacher and learner. Through a dynamic and dialogical process, schools should enable people to live together better (Guajardo & Del Carmen Casaperalta, 2008; Maturana & Varela, 1998). Racial and economic tensions facing our youth scream out for more compassionate ways of relating to one another. Pedagogies of connection honor the assets of each individual, facilitate the co-creation of knowledge and enable collaborative action toward shared priorities. Margaret Wheatley (2002) wrote, “Social change starts with a conversation” (p. 3). For the sake of humanity, we must learn to talk

with one another and live together more justly.

In my life, I've been lucky to encounter many great teachers, both inside and outside of the classroom. These people are a part of me. I carry them with me, and they have made all the difference in my journey. I use this study as a platform to share their wisdom and examine the pedagogies of connection that each educator practiced.

THE ONTOLOGICAL PUZZLE OF SELF: SITUATING AMBIGUITY

(CHAPTER II—ONTOLOGY, EPISTEMOLOGY, AND POSITIONALITY)

Norman Denzin tells us that, “Interpretative research begins and ends with the biography and self of the researcher” (1986, p. 12). Taking Denzin’s lead (and since all research is interpretive), I launch my dissertation with an examination of the stories that speak to the development of me. But what do I mean by *me*? A name is only a label, so what is my true identity?

On its face, it seems obvious. Every self is a person. However, this definition gives no additional insight into self; we have only substituted the word *person* for the word *self*. Interesting to note: the word *person* originally meant *mask* (Watts, 1995). When searching for meaning, a historical context can offer valuable insight. In Greco-Roman drama, the *persona* (which gave rise to the idea to our *person*) was a megaphone-shaped mask. The phoneme *per*--meant that through which. *Sona* meant sound passed. So, the *persona* was the mask through which the actor spoke. At the beginning of a play script, you would traditionally find the *dratamis personae* or the list of the masks that the actors will wear. So we arrive at the idea that the self is simply a mask or an image that I constantly create and perform (Anzaldúa, 2015).

While we seem to be making progress in defining self, this only leads to more questions. For example, if a person is a mask, then who lies behind the mask? And, when I ask who I am, who is the self-behind-the-self, the observing-self? Can I watch that one too? This puzzle brings to mind a never-ending matryoshka doll (see Fig 7). In other words, who will guard the guards and the guards of the guards? And so on. I feel dizzy already, but we’ve only just begun peeling the layers of self.



Figure 2. Image of a matryoshka doll. A methaphor for the self (own image).

Am I just an ego trapped within a bag of skin (Watts, 1995)? If so, when did I begin? Does my story unfold from the moment that I exited the womb, or was it at conception? Maybe I started out as a scandalous gleam in my father's eye or his father's eye before him? Hardly. Billions of years ago, there was a big bang. From nothing came everything. The elemental building blocks that later formed the stars and the earth were strewn across the universe, setting the dance of existence into motion. I am that stardust (Maturana & Varela, 1998). It's like a jar of ink was hurled at a giant canvas (see Fig. 3).



Figure 3. Illustration of the Self (own image)

The pattern of ink is concentrated in the middle, and off to the edges, you will notice a lot of tiny flecks. Like the flecks, you and I are way out on the edge of the big bang—on the

outskirts of dimensional space and far along in the span of time. That bang has been ongoing since forever. When I ask who I am, it's as if one of the flecks has mistaken itself for being its own separate entity. With the blot, it's clear that the fleck only exists as part of the whole. Then, why do I feel completely isolated from what exists outside my body? The experience of I-ness seems a kind of hallucination. Or a partial truth, at best.

Any definition of self is dependent upon perspective. To a sociologist (like my wife), I exist as a constituent of a larger unit of analysis called society. A biologist would study the interdependent and transactional relationships between the behaviors of my organism and my surrounding environment. A doctor of internal medicine would see me as a collection of organs. A physicist would define me as a mass of carbon molecules. Who is right? None of them? All of them? All-encompassing definitions of self elude us just as a knife can never cut itself, and teeth can never bite themselves.

Definitions are symbolic representations of things in the real world. Definitions are meant to be tools for understanding--a good servant but a bad master. Placing too much faith in definitions is like valuing menus over dinners or maps over the lands their meant to represent. Defining something is a way of drawing a border around it. Definition produces the illusion of certainty and knowledge. Knowledge of this sort is fool's gold. As T.S. Elliot questioned, "Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?" Fig. 8 below illustrates that the concept of self is commonly understood as everything inside the circle.

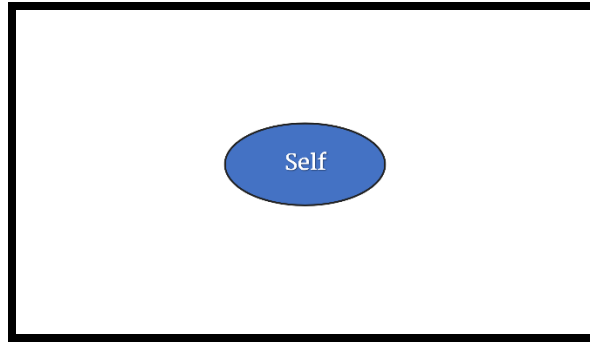


Figure 4. Illustration of the boundaries of self (own image).

Within this framing, I limit myself to only that which happens inside the boundary of my skin. Therefore, the outside world is understood as alien and hostile, and to survive, I must impose my will upon it (Maturana & Varela, 1998). Cutting oneself off from the rest of the world may seem like a fact of nature, but civilizations have flourished without this artificial distinction (Anzaldúa, 2015). Ancient wisdom invites us to problematize the borders of self (Anzaldúa, 1999). A sense of self-ambiguity allows for one to see the interconnected nature of being. Negotiating the borderland of self spurs the possibility of a harmonious existence which nourishes the self as part-whole within organizations, community, and planet.

For the life of me, I can't fathom a concept of self with impermeable borders. My idea of self is fluid. Through the constant processes of digestion and respiration, the outside world becomes one with my physical body (Maturana & Varela, 1998). Further, my mind contains an ever-flowing stream of consciousness—never holding the same thought twice. The fluid nature of self is best captured through story. *We are what we do.* A collage of stories from different stages of development brings the idea of me into focus.

Despite conventions, I resist invitations to border my concept of self. Where this is not possible, I strive to inhabit the borderland of ambiguity. Does this spell doom for my study? Nah. Countless other qualitative researchers have proceeded without a water-

tight, all-encompassing definition of self. I'm no different. Denzin provokes us to struggle with issues of identity and positionality in qualitative research. Key is the constant and active struggle with identity—journey over destination. When peeling an onion, one never finds a core because it is made only of peels. Peeling the onion of self allows me to examine layers of my identity and better understand how I fit into the scene being studied.

Ontological/Epistemological/Conceptual Framework for Decolonization.

In this section I discuss the ontological and epistemological grounding of my study. In doing so, I deliberately draw from literature that speaks to non-White male ways of knowing. My intention is to celebrate and learn from People of Color and stretch the conventions of my mind. In particular, Gloria Anzaldúa's work on *nepantla* and the *mestiza* consciousness was hugely influential on my thinking. My research is a genuine effort to learn from those that can expand my understanding past traditional white ways of knowing. My intent is to respect and celebrate, not colonize or whitewash. However, good intentions are not enough and I am far from perfect. As covered in my findings, higher learning is a team effort. Through my journey, I will continue to listen to those with life experiences that I could never understand firsthand.

Despite my best efforts to eradicate it, White-male-self-righteousness lives inside me. It feels like stubborn conviction. Sometimes during a disagreement, I'm amazed that someone else might not see how right I am. My instinct is to correct them—to change their mind and make them right...*like me*. I'm embarrassed to admit that I have been times in my life where I avoided seeing others points of view because that was a hint that my ownership of the truth was a lie—a discomfort that stems from a lifetime of

lessons. I was well-taught by systems of White male dominance. However, my ontological/epistemological/conceptual framework allows me to view positivism as a useful lens...not a set of Truths to be collected. Cada cabeza es un mundo.

I want to stretch my mind and bring awareness to the hidden racist assumptions that were implicitly taught to me over the years through a White-male-dominant culture. My framework was purposefully inspired by theory created by People of Color and Indigenous ways of knowing. My ontological, epistemological, and conceptual framework represents my quest for decolonization. I purposefully (and imperfectly) (re)construct my outlook based on ideas from eastern religious traditions and other forms of indigenous wisdom.

As a CIS-gendered, straight, White man, I struggle with the concepts of cultural and theoretical appropriation. My challenge is to heal my sick mind by looking to the ideas of others while being respectful that those ideas were not meant for me. I respect the ideas within my framework as paths toward emancipation, as opposed to mere tokens. However, my blind spots complicate the exercise of expanding my awareness through non-White-male-ways of knowing, ways of being, and concepts of self. The best I can do is try and to respect the consequences of my shortcomings as lessons in my decolonization.

Many ancient Eastern and Indigenous traditions view the self as a concept that transcends subject-object duality. Most of the early writings in the Buddhist traditions come to us in the form of anecdotes about Zen masters and their students (Watts, 1995). These stories are called *mondō*, which fittingly means question-answer. Mondō is meant to inspire an *a-ha!-I-see-it-now* reaction, leading to enlightenment, or a breakthrough in

consciousness called *Satori*. One of the earliest examples of mondō is the story of Bodhidharma, who is credited with bringing Buddhism to China. According to legend, one day, a student named Eka came to where Bodhidharma was meditating and said, “Master, I have no peace of mind. Please pacify my mind.” The Chinese word for mind is more inclusive than the Western concept because it accounts for all cognitive, emotional, and psychic activity. So, Bodhidharma said, “Bring out your mind here before me. I’ll pacify it.” And Eka said, “When I look for my mind I can’t find it.” Bodhidharma said, “There, it’s pacified.” Eka was enlightened by realizing that his mind (aka ego, self, identity) was a construct. Thus, any quest to find peace of mind is as futile as chasing smoke. For Eka (and for me as a researcher), a practical implication of this realization may be to reframe the divide between self and other. My worldview frames each individual as an inseparable outgrowth of its family, organization, community, ecosystem, biosphere, planet, galaxy, universe, and so on.

The Yin-Yang symbol (Fig. 3) is central to understanding the Buddhist concept of self. The Yin-Yang is said to represent a mountain (Rolf Stein, 2010). The north side of the mountain (Yin) is dark and barren. The southside (Yang), which receives more sun is alive with vegetation. Thus, Yin and Yang represent light (self) and darkness (other).

These polar opposites also depend on one another to exist. Just as there are no one-sided mountains, darkness wouldn’t make sense without light. They stand in opposition and contain one another (as represented by the small circles within the larger circle).

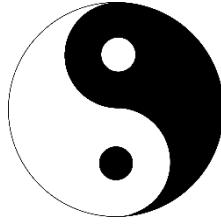


Figure 5. Yin-Yang symbol (own image).

Similarly, *self* and *other* are co-dependent and arise mutually in a way that philosopher Alan Watts (1995) calls *goes-with*. *Self* goes-with *other* in the same way that *back* goes-with *front* and *bees* go-with *flowers*. In nature, you will not find flowers without bees or bees without flowers. In a way, bees and flowers could be considered a single organism.

Similarly, *self* goes-with *other*, and together those concepts comprise what the Chinese call *Tao*. *Tao* translates roughly into *all that there is*. According to Eastern thinking, the self contains all the universe, and the universe contains the self. I am in it (the universe), and it is in me, and we go-together. A good analogy for the relationship between *self* and *other* might be a Klein bottle (pictured in Fig. 4), which can either be seen as having insides but no outside or an outside but no inside.

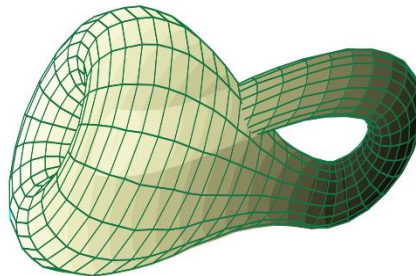


Figure 6. Image of a Klein bottle. Retrieved from:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Klein_bottle

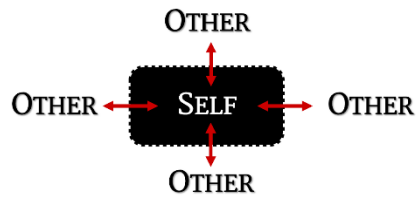


Figure 7. Illustration of self (own image).

Westerners tend to think that our skin separates us from the outside world, but we could just as easily view the picture in reverse. In other words, our skin joins us to the outside world through our nerve endings and pours. The objective world does not exist apart from the subjective experience. Our role is not to be an independent observer but rather an active participant in the whole of the scene. The outside world that we experience is shaped by our human sense organs. Vibrations in the air become sound when they interact with an auditory nervous system. Similarly, our eyes create color and images from certain wavelengths of light energy. In a manner of speaking, all the outside world is created inside of our heads.

If apples emerge from an apple tree, then people must be an expression of the universe (Watts, 1995). Each one of us is an aspect of the *Tao* manifesting in a unique and beautiful way. In other words, my *self* is an integral part of all that there is. A broadened understanding of self frames the subject-object divide as an act of violence that alienates us from our higher Self. In *Borderlands=La Frontera* (1999), Gloria Anzaldúa tells of a people robbed of their spiritual sense and ability to transcend the ego. She wrote,

“We have been taught that the spirit is outside our bodies or above our heads somewhere up in the sky with God. We’re supposed to forget that every cell in

our bodies, every bone and bird and worm has spirit in it. Like many Indians and Mexicans, I...let my inner senses atrophy. I allowed White rationality to tell me that the existence of the 'other world' was mere pagan superstition. I accepted their reality, the 'official' reality of the rational, reasoning mode which is connected with external reality, the upper world, and is considered the most developed consciousness--the consciousness of duality...White anthropologists claim that Indians have 'primitive' and therefore deficient minds, that we cannot think in the higher mode of consciousness--rationality. They are fascinated by what they call the 'magical' mind, the 'savage' mind, the *participation mystique* of the mind that says the world of the imagination--the world of the soul--and of the spirit is just as real as physical reality. In trying to become 'objective,' Western culture made 'objects' of things and people when it distanced itself from them, thereby losing 'touch' with them. This dichotomy is the root of all violence (p. 58-59).

In this passage, Anzaldúa dropped the mic and placed the spiritual dimension of knowing (possessed by Indigenous Peoples) on equal footing with rational (White) ways of understanding the world. Having established the subject-object divide as the root of all violence, Anzaldúa brought the ego into focus. In other words, the genesis of all violence is the idea that we are separate from the universe, and White men have been spreading this rational worldview like a virus for hundreds of years. When I frame myself as a separate, objective observer, I cut myself off from the world. For Anzaldúa, peace is achieved by transcending the ego and connecting to a greater sense of identity. She grants permission to blur the lines of Self.

Many Eastern traditions seek to blur the lines of Self through the practice of yoga (Watts, 1995). There are many different types of yoga. Yoga means union. Each discipline of yoga is an attempt to realize our union with the universe. Yoga has the same meaning as the English word *yoke*, which comes from the Latin word *yungari*--meaning to join. In this vein, Jesus said, “My yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:30, The New King James Version). In Sanskrit, the term *Dhyāna* is the state where one realizes their union with the universe. In *Dhyāna*, the chattering of the ego is silenced. Rather than symbolizing to oneself with words or images, one simply feels and experiences the world as it is (opposed to how it is described by the mind). In *Dhyāna*, concepts such as self, other, and time disappear because they only exist in the mind. Concepts can’t exist when the mind is silent because reality is not an idea. Polish philosopher Alfred Korzybski (1933) theorized in a clever double-entendre that the real world is unspeakable. In one sense, unspeakable can mean *too horrific for words*. The double meaning refers to reality as a multi-dimensional, wave of infinite variables, interacting and happening all-together at once. Our linear consciousness processes only a few variables at once and is incapable of distilling the richness of *being* into words or symbols. Symbols are representations of other things. So, reality, by definition, is not a symbol. The *Tao* is unspeakable.

But is it possible to attain this mindset? If so, can/should it be maintained indefinitely? Anzaldúa told of her ability to connect with a higher Self and her struggle to navigate different modes of consciousness. She wrote,

“I’ve always been aware that there is a greater power than the conscious I. That power is my inner [S]elf, the entity that is the sum total of all my reincarnations,

the godwoman I call *Antigua, mi Diosa*, the divine within, *Coatlicue-Cihuacoatl-Tlazolteolt-Tonantzin-Coatlalopeuh-Guadalupe*--they are one. When to bow down to Her and when to allow the limited conscious mind to take over--that is the problem” (p. 72).

In this passage, Anzaldúa acknowledges her ability to mediate the physical and spiritual dimensions of reality. In doing so, she pondered when to identify as the supreme goddess that is one with the universe, and when to wear the mask of her alienated ego.

Anzaldúa’s work on straddling multiple layered identities is crucial for my understanding of Self and my approach to research. Anzaldúa reframed the concept of *border* from a finite dividing line to a multi-dimensional physical terrain to be occupied--away from an either/or conception of *me* and toward a both/and identity. She called this the *Mestiza* consciousness or borderlands consciousness. The *Mestiza* was a cosmic race created by the confluence of all other races. Rather than being seen as an inferior hybrid, the *Mestiza* is celebrated as a highly-adaptable species with a rich gene pool. Anzaldúa rested her hopes for the future on those with *Mestiza* consciousness because of their ability to inhabit two or more realities and break down existing paradigms.

Rather than attempting to occupy the identity of either the ego or the greater Self, Anzaldúa provided a framework for negotiating liminal identities. As I set out to conduct research that benefits the world (and myself within it), I take Anzaldúa’s charge to heart. She wrote,

“The work of *Mestiza* consciousness is to break down the subject-object duality that keeps her a prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the images in her work how duality is transcended. The answer to the problem between the white

race and the colored, between males and females, lies in healing the split that originates in the very foundation of our lives, our culture, our languages, our thoughts. A massive uprooting of dualistic thinking in the individual and collective consciousness is the beginning of a long struggle, but one that could, in our best hopes, bring us to the end of rape, of violence, of war” (102).

As a researcher (and human), I’m working to connect to a *Mestiza* consciousness that bridges self, other, and the multiple and overlapping social identities which make up my ego.

The ecologies of knowing.

The work of Guajardo, Guajardo, Jansen, and Militello (2015) represents another key pillar in the theoretical framework of my study. Consistent with the *Mestiza* (or *borderlands*) *consciousness*, the *ecologies of knowing* challenges the subject-object divide and dynamically frames our understanding of self. Within Guajardo et. al’s framework, we transcend the ego while still accounting for the experience of *I-ness*. Micro, meso, and macro spheres provide structure and promote sensemaking. The authors assert that the concept of *self* is nested within an organization, which exists within a broader community (see Fig. 5).

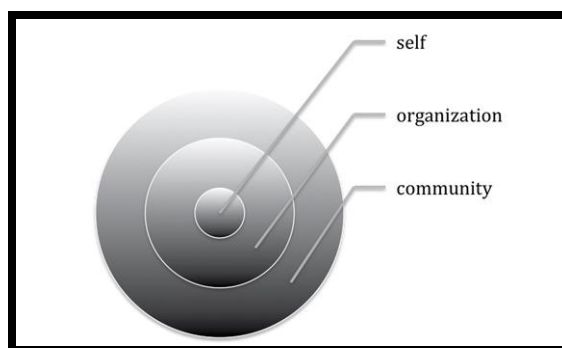


Figure 8. Ecologies of Knowing (Guajardo, et al., 2015).

Figure 7. *Ecologies of Knowing* (Guajardo, et al., 2015).

It's as if self, organization, and community together make up the greater Self. The Self is both an *I* (micro sphere) and a member of an organization (meso sphere). Similarly, we exist simultaneously as individuals and members of a community (macro sphere). The boundaries between each layer are permeable and allow for a fluid, spiraling process of de/re-centering identity. The *ecologies of knowing* transforms one's understanding of community from an external entity to a part of oneself that must be nurtured in pursuit of a healthy and integrated life.

When applying the *ecologies of knowing* (Guajardo et. al, 2015) begin with the Vygotskian (1978) assumption that learning is first social, then cognitive. In other words, before the mind (or *observing-self*) makes sense of experiences, the learning is experienced within the meso and macro spheres. As a result, the authors highlight pedagogical strategies designed to transcend the self, which facilitate what the authors call Community Learning Exchange (CLE). CLE pedagogies are rooted in five axioms which guide thinking, practice, and relationship building, giving rise to a holistic lifestyle. The CLE axioms are (See Fig. 7):

- *Learning and Leadership Are a Dynamic Social Process*--Learning is an act of leadership and is best done when others can dynamically contribute their knowledge, skills, and experience to the CLE.
- *Conversations Are Critical and Central Pedagogical Process*--The climate, spirit, and interaction between CLE participants and learning environment must facilitate safe spaces for honest conversation and storytelling.

- *The People Closest to the Issues are Best Situated to Discover Answers to Local Concerns*--The CLE empowers local communities to collectively engage and create action on issues that matter to their lives.
- *Crossing Boundaries Enriches the Development and Educational Process*--The willingness and ability to experience a world that is outside of our own in terms of geography, economic background, age, culture, race, gender, faith, ability, etc.
- *Hope and Change Are Built on Assets and Dreams of Locals and their Communities*--CLE participants must be allowed to tell their own story and define the assets within their community and their hopes for the future.

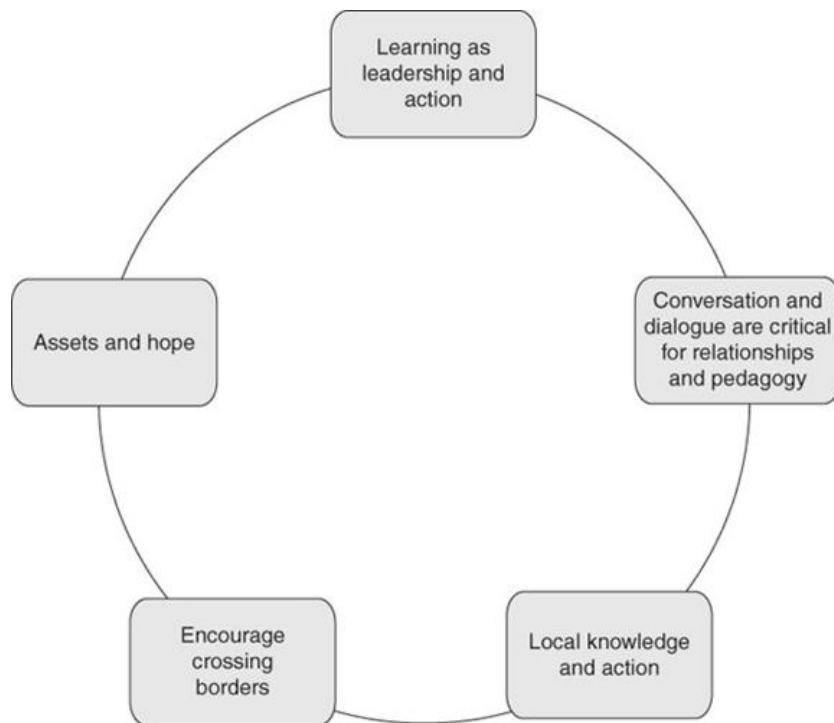


Figure 9. Axioms of the CLE (Guajado, et. al, 2015)

CLE pedagogies are social technologies which aim to create opportunities for storytelling, reflection, and collective sensemaking. As a learning inquiry, I seek to embed these axioms into the DNA of my dissertation (and my life beyond it). The CLE

is both an ongoing process and a culminating event. In Chapter IV, I provide an in-depth discussion of the CLE process that I helped to plan and the event that I helped to facilitate.

My Conceptual Framework

“Interbeing is the understanding that nothing exists separately from anything else. We are all interconnected. By taking care of another person, you take care of yourself. By taking care of yourself, you take care of the other person.

Happiness and safety are not individual matters. If you suffer, I suffer. If you are not safe, I am not safe. There is no way for me to be truly happy if you are suffering. If you can smile, I can smile too. The understanding of interbeing is very important. It helps us to remove the illusion of loneliness and transforms anger that comes from the feeling of separation” (Nhat Hanh, 2017, p. 73).

The conceptual framework for my study is informed by Eastern philosophy, Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Mestiza consciousness*, and Guajardo et. al’s *ecologies of knowing* and *CLE pedagogies*. Here, the space beyond the rings of the ecologies invites one to envision role of the human species within the ecosystem, planet, and universe. The Yin-Yang symbol represents the non-dual nature of reality and provides the context for understanding self and Self. For my conceptual framework, I have replaced the smaller white circle of the traditional Yin-Yang with a spiraling circle to represent a sense of vertigo that results from the fluid process of de/re-centering identities. The smaller black circle has been replaced with the *ecologies of knowing* which facilitate sensemaking in and between identities of the Self. I have also replaced the borders of Guajardo et. al’s framework with Ouroboros serpents. Ouroboros depict a serpent eating its tail--

representing the cycle of life, death, and rebirth, leading to immortality. This image speaks to the dynamic, cyclical, and infinite inquiry of identity that takes place within and across the *ecologies*. Adding to the symbolism, Anzaldúa frequently celebrated the serpent as an image of the borderlands.



Figure 10. Ontological framework (own image).

Epistemological Positioning of Research(er)

In my view, *objective research* is an oxy-moron. I treat all texts, including this one, as fiction and acts of (re)membering (Anzaldúa, 2015). In studying pedagogies of connection, I employ multi-sited ethnography, a post-ethnographic qualitative research method (Marcus, 1995). In doing so, I envision the research process as a form of public pedagogy, aiming to write my story into text. In the process, I connect the past with the future to guide my future actions as an educator, organizer, and family man. As a researcher, I position myself as a weaver of story which unfolds all around me (Guajardo & Del Carmen Casaperalta, 2008). I rely on the reflective process as a strategy for

putting myself in the middle of the text. The main data in my study will emerge from the dialogical process that I engage with my co-research partners at each research site and ecology of knowing (Guajardo M. A., Guajardo, Janson, & Millitello, 2015).

UNDERSTANDING HOW TO LEARN, LEARNING HOW TO KNOW, AND FEELING HOW TO BE (CHAPTER III--METHODOLOGY)

This section is to prepare you for the messiness ahead. Here, I describe my research methods, their roots, and purpose. My study is situated within the expanding interdisciplinary discourse about ethnographic representation. As Marcus (1994) notes, we currently inhabit what Denzin and Lincoln call ethnography's "fifth moment" (1994, p. 576). In the following discussion, I trace the genealogy of ethnography from the roots of the field to the current age of post-ethnographic or "messy texts."

Post-ethnographic texts, such as my study, are defined by their "open-endedness, incompleteness, and an uncertainty about how to draw a text/analysis to a close" (p. 567). "New writers" of ethnography discover there are other ways of knowing, other ways of feeling our way into the experiences of self and other" (Denzin, 1997, p. xviii) expressed through performance, rather than an objective or linear account. Through construction of messy texts, scholars question and expand the borders of ethnography.

As Heaton (2002) said, "Messy texts, like messy children, may come from very clean and traditional ancestors (p. 3). Traditional forms of ethnography can take the form of structural, symbolic, organizational, and interpretive (Jacobson, 1991) using well-known tools of qualitative research such as participant observation, in-depth interviews, and artifacts to support "thick descriptions" of the "Other." Ethnography's first moment, "the Traditional Period," emerged in the early 1900s and lasted until World War II. Ethnographers within the first moment attempted to objectively study people as objects, often a foreign, "primitive" "Other" (Denzin, 1997, p. 16)

The second moment, "the Modernist Phase," last from World War II into the

1970s, and its influence is still evident in various ethnographic scholarship of today. The “Modernist Phase” pushed for rigorous, qualitative studies of important social phenomenon involving deviance and social control (Denzin, 1997).

Ethnography’s third moment, “Blurred Genres,” lasted from around 1970-1986. A leading figure of the third moment was Geertz (1973; 1983) who critiqued all anthropological scholarship as “interpretations of interpretations” where the observer ostensibly had no privileged voice (Denzin, 1997, p. 17). Until the end of the third moment, the ethnographer was not explicitly or critically implicated in the text.

According to Lincoln and Denzin (1994), the fourth moment arose in response to the “crisis of representation,” wherein scholars questioned “Who is the Other?” and sought to create methods that include the Other (p. 577). During this period, the ethnographer’s social identities, such as race, class, gender, came into view within the construction of cultural representations.

My work speaks to the moment that we currently find ourselves--Lincoln and Denzin’s (1994) fifth moment of ethnography, which is quickly moving toward its sixth. The fifth moment is distinguished by the ways that ethnographers respond to problematic issues of the previous moments, such as “issues of textual authority and validity, who has the right to speak for whom, an ethnographic text’s ability to accurately portray the world (verisimilitude), and the political implications of assuming responsibility for one’s ideologically embedded sense of culture, within a contemporary, multinational, postmodern world context” (Heaton, 2002, p. 4).

Multi-sited Ethnography

Within the fifth moment, George Marcus is credited with advancing multi-

sited ethnography--an emerging tool of post-ethnographers (1995). Traditional ethnographers focus on a single site of observation. The distinguishing element of multi-sited ethnography is the deconstruction and (re)construction of space as a social construct. Marcus invited ethnographers to zoom out from single units of analysis “to examine the circulation of meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-space” (p. 96). In other words, the post-modern paradigm shift allowed researchers to study places or spaces of their own creation. The ethnographic account is a constellation, whose outline is drawn by the ethnographer—bound together by the common thread of the research questions. In multi-sited ethnography, we blur the lines between local and global, place and space.

Comparison between data observables emerges by applying questions to “an emergent object of study whose contours, sites, and relationships are not known beforehand but are themselves a contribution of making an account that has different, complexly connected real-world sites of investigation” (Marcus, 1995, p. 102). Such a study is inherently dynamic and multiply sited, giving rise to a comparative dimension in the form of juxtapositions of phenomenon that are otherwise “worlds apart.” The global is collapsed into the local and made an integral part of the juxtaposed elements. This move toward comparison embedded in the multi-sited ethnography positions my research as an exploration and mapping of unexplored territory for which there are no developed theoretical concepts or descriptive models.

I set out to weave a tapestry of wisdom about human connection. My job was to assemble nonlinear, autoethnographic texts (described below), my own experiences of connection, and scholarly discourse about human development and learning theory.

Artifacts enabled the recollection and re-framing of events. These artifacts may include photos, artistic representations, maps, historical timelines, and other archival data--I include them when possible to elicit emotion and bring contextual details to life, enhancing the experience for the reader.

Autoethnography

My style of writing also incorporates "autoethnography" (Flick, 2002; Maso, 2001; Richardson, 2000; Ellis, 2007; Van Maanen, 1988; Plummer, 2001; Bochner and Ellis, 1996, 2000; Pavlenko, 2002, 2007; Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Freebody, 2003; Fiske, 1990). During the 'crisis of representation' period (the mid-1980s), autoethnography arose in response to "the calls to place greater emphasis on the ways that the ethnographer interacts with the culture being researched" (Holt, 2003, p. 18). Autoethnography is a qualitative research method focused on studying the self, its context, and its connection to others. This research method has three distinctive qualities: it is qualitative, self-focused, and context-conscious. First, autoethnography is a qualitative research method (Chang, 2007; Denzin, 1997; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). This intentional approach to the socio-cultural understanding of self distinguishes autoethnography apart from other self-narrative forms such as *memoir* or *autobiography*. Second, autoethnography is self-focused. The researcher is simultaneously "subject" (the researcher who performs the investigation) and "object" (a/the participant who is investigated). Autoethnographic study yields a picture of how the world is viewed by the author. Third, autoethnography accounts for the context of the "object." Rooted in ethnography (the study of culture), autoethnography examines the connections between self with others and self within its social, organizational, and community contexts (Reed-

Danahay, 1997; Wolcott, 2004).

A Description of My Research Process

Narrative inquiry.

Under the umbrella of multi-sited ethnography, *my research began with narrative inquiry--authoring a sense of self through through the cataloguing life stories*. I selected stories based on the urgency that I felt to tell them. The stories that I wrote were the ones with the most pressure behind them to be released--aching to be expressed through the bottleneck of my fingers on a keypad. For every story that was written, there were three in the ether, with more and more fresh storymaking material waiting to be mined each day. My catalogue of incomplete and stories can be found in Appendix

Dialogical research questions.

My research questions emerged during narrative inquiry as the result of hours and hours of dialogue with myself and my stories. Add to that numerous conversations with my advisor--Dr. Guajardo, my writing group--Orlando, Sascha, and Sara, my wife, her students--Maria, Dez, Heyden, Jose, and Darius, my brother--Kyle and his wife--Ariel, my other brother--Jay, my aunt NeeNee and Uncle Craig, and my mother, Cheryl. These people are the characters (the stars) of my ever unfolding story. A piece of each one (and many others) lives in this work.

With my research questions as a guide, I returned to my catalogue of stories in search of wisdom that might shed light on my research questions. Meaning making required stepping in and out of the text and was fed through the milieu of a rich and supportive network. Over time, the insights of my organic research have become embodied knowledge about creating connection between/among self, organization, and

community (Guajardo, et. al, 2015).

Reflexivity and authoring the self.

Writing myself into text challenged me to be in dialogue with myself and hold myself accountable. For example, I forced myself to (re)frame and (re)vise stories involving my father to stay consistent with my values as an educator. Revisions of my written stories spurred changes in my internal dialogue about my dad and motivated me to take steps in mending our long estranged relationship. Through an embodied process of learning, I've improved my relationships with loved ones and colleagues and discovered a sense of community and purpose--this was truly higher learning (Guajardo, Guajardo, Salinas, Cardoza, 2019).

Messy text.

Applying my embodied knowledge about personal, team, and community development, I present my messy text in Chapter 4. There, I give a detailed account of a CLE that I helped convene for the *Central Texas Network for Education and Community Development (CT Network)*. Through a lifetime of experience, including two years of observing mentors like Dr. Guajardo, Dr. Ramirez, and Dr. Vazquez, I developed a schema for an embodied pedagogy of connection. My embodied learning allowed me to serve as a member of the CT Network CLE design team--a role that I couldn't have fulfilled at the start of my research process, despite my technical skills for training and facilitation. I documented everything--from early planning conversations to the debrief platica--as an artifact and testament to my development. By planning and participating, the design team modeled a pedagogy of relationship building that is rarely practiced in traditional institutions. We aligned the curriculum of the CLE to inspire higher learning

through deep conversation (Guajardo, Guajardo, Salinas, Cardoza, 2019). The design team wanted to create moments of self-transformation, similar to when my brother Kyle changed my understanding of myself when he thanked me for holding the family together after my parents divorce. For Chapter 4, the proof is in the pudding of my messy text and the learning is communicated through the actions of my becoming.

Reflections and connections.

In crafting a pedagogy of connection, I responded to my research questions by weaving reflections from the CLE with wisdom from my catalogue of stories, interwoven with references to seminal literature about human development and learning theory. I consider the CT Network CLE a pinnacle meta-learning experience because participants learned about themselves, their teams, their students, and their communities through open and vulnerable dialogue. My problem statement highlighted the problem of the current state of education--wherein the unit of analysis is at the student level when an ecological understanding of schools would better support the socio-psychological needs that are foundational to learning (Piaget, 1964).

As a convener, the CT Network CLE was an opportunity to practice and demonstrate the skills and mindsets that facilitate connection, within the context of a supportive organizational and community climate. The event allowed me to co-create the ideal educational experience for participants (with a team of colleagues and mentors). I present my messy text as a demonstration of my becoming, to make sense of the schema that I constructed over a lifetime of study--to create the pedagogy of connection.

Data Analysis

Since putting the first word to paper, I've been engaging in analysis of my

stories. Before sharing my stories with anyone, each draft went through countless revisions. My storymaking is an *iterative* pursuit to understand what my life means, to sync up my thoughts and actions with the cosmic order, and to translate this struggle into a constantly evolving piece of art. By stepping into and out of the data, I come to view myself as both subject and object (Anzaldúa, 2015). While the ontological framework laid out in Chapter 2 underlies my concept of reality, my Framework for Analysis organizes epistemological knowledge. In other words, it allows me to make meaning. The framework for analysis and my research questions emerged symbiotically--intertwined together and rooted in the wisdom of our ancestors and the Ecologies of Knowing (Guajardo M. A., Guajardo, Janson, & Millitello, 2015). My Framework for Analysis is described below (Fig. 9):

Framework for Analysis:



Figure 11. Framework for Analysis (own image).

The elemental forms of my Framework for Analysis are the circle and the cross-- which are symbols found in the myths of civilizations throughout history and across the globe. As they have done for centuries, these forms will help make meaning of my observables. My Framework for Analysis allowed me to organically distill the Pedagogy of Connection from the analysis of my messy text, viewed in relation to scholarly dialogues, and my life experiences (as documented in my catalogue of stories found in the appendices).

The Circle:

Humans use symbols and stories to explain the world and our place within it (Campbell, 1997). The circle is one of the great symbols of the human species. In a seminal work chronicling Native American legends, music, and lore, a chief from the

Pawnee tribe is paraphrased: the Pawnee people make camp in a circle. The horizon stretches out forever in a circle. When the eagle builds a nest, it builds a circle (Curtis, 1994). For centuries, the omnipresent symbol has been a sacred tool of organization and meaning making.

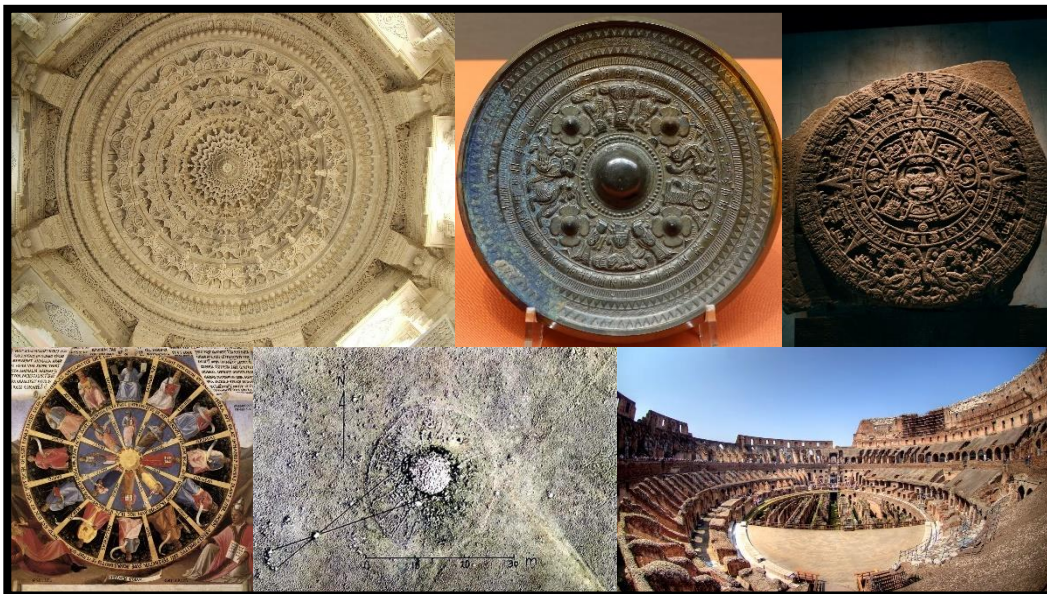


Figure 12. Collage of ancient circle symbols. Clockwise from top left: Akshardham Temple (India), Ancient Chinese Bronze Shield, Piedra del Sol, Roman Colosseum, 5,000 year old Sun Temple in Carla, Depiction of Ezekiel's Vision of the Wheel in the Sky (own image).

According to Joseph Campbell, comparative scholar of myth and literature, the circle has been widely used to represent the self (1997). The center of the circle represents the place from which we come and back to which we each will go. In a spatial dimension, the circle is a *complete*, enframed space. From a temporal aspect, the circle represents the source and the end--the alpha and the omega. Being is the ultimate

circle/cycle: the snake eating its tail--birth and death. Time itself is experienced in a circle, which allows us to organize our understanding of time using circular clocks. Cycles of the seasons and the moon repeat in a circular, cyclical fashion. The circle suggests completed totality, whether in time or space.

The circles within my Framework for Analysis are derived from the Ecologies of Knowing--self, organization, and community (Guajardo M. A., Guajardo, Janson, & Millitello, 2015). As explained in Chapter II, the three nested spheres should be considered parts of a greater whole. When each individual (s)elf realizes their union with organization and community, a transformation occurs--the individual assumes a new identity as the greater, universal (S)elf. The key insight here is the interdependent nature that we all share. The well-being of the community depends upon its constituent parts and vice versa. The imagery of the Ecologies demands that the circle of self be coordinated with the circles that make up the rest of the world. Smaller circles (selves) make up larger circles (organizations and communities), as our cells constitute our body. At once, the individual's duty--to live a good life--demands an alignment of circles which creates an *intersection* of self and universe. The intersection of self and universe gives rise to the second elemental symbol of my Framework for Analysis, the cross.

The Cross:

Myths contain wisdom from our ancestors about how to live a good life in harmony with the world. The symbol of the cross is a powerful representation of our duty to balance (even sacrifice) the interests of the self with the interests of (all) others (Campbell, 1997). Joseph Campbell's *Hero's Journey* represents the struggle of each self to live a good life--**inspired by the stories of our ancestors**. He wrote,

“We have not even to risk the adventure alone; for the heroes of all time have gone before us; the labyrinth is thoroughly known; we have only to follow the thread of the hero-path. And where we had thought to find an abomination, we shall find a god; where we had thought to slay another, we shall slay ourselves; where we had thought to travel outward, we shall come to the center of our own existence; where we had thought to be alone, we shall be with all the world.”

In explicating the Hero's Journey, Campbell highlights the wisdom contained in the Navajo image of the Pollen Path, which contains the figure of a cross (Fig. 11).

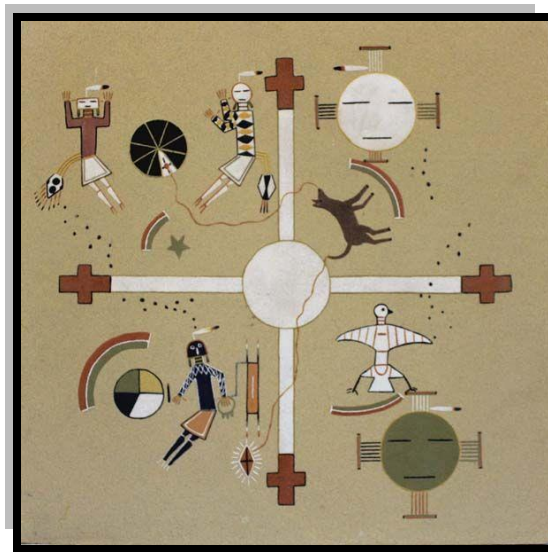


Figure 13. The Pollen Path. Retrieved from: BillMoyers.com/content/ep-6-joseph-campbell-and-the-power-of-myth-masks-of-eternity-audio/

Pollen is said to represent the transcendent life source. The self lies at the center of the Pollen Path. The Navajo saying that accompanies the image is, “Oh, beauty before me, beauty behind me, beauty to the right of me, beauty to the left of me, beauty above me, beauty below me, I’m on the pollen path” (Campbell, 1997). So, the little cosmos of one’s own life and the macrocosm of the world’s life must be brought into balance.

Toward this aim, the Navajo used ceremonies with sand paintings on the ground. The

hero was to kneel in the center of the center intersection of the painting. During the ceremony, the individual identified with a greater mythological power source. In so doing they shed their identity as an individual self and understood their nature as the greater (S)elf.

The cross formed by the hero's journey, or intersection of self and universe, is akin to the Piagetian idea of an *equilibrated state* (1977). Within an equilibrated state, there cannot be parts of the self (or Self) warring amongst themselves, because the individual harmoniously weaves their nested identities together into a coherent identity that accounts for the past, present, and future. My research (and life mission) is a journey towards a state of equilibrium--to live in harmony with the universe. The *cross* of my Framework for Analysis emerges from the intersection of my four research questions:

- What skills and mindsets are practiced (by individuals) in creating connection?
- What organizational systems and climate promote connection?
- What systems and climate within the community promote connection?
- How are self, organization, and community transformed through a pedagogy of connection?

Observables:

My data observable include the following:

- **My Catalogue of Life Stories:** My stories represent a significant set of observables in my study. I began by creating a list of keystone events in my life, then drafted each story. The continual process of analysis helps me to understand who I am and who I'm becoming.

- **My Messy Text:** An in-depth description, reflection, and analysis of my involvement in a Community Learning Exchange (CLE).

Ethical Considerations

Due to its emphasis on the self, autoethnographic research carries potentially problematic ethical considerations (Ellis, 2007). As I developed my narrative, the context began to include key figures--family, friends, colleagues, and acquaintances (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). My self-disclosure through autoethnography includes the description of sensitive issues and the people in my life (Wall, 2008). Due to this, special considerations have to be taken into account when referring to loved ones, such as family members, partners or close friends. I've shared my research process with all members of my family, except my long-estranged father--who I am taking steps to contact. I particularly appreciated my older brother, Jay's response, who likened my process of becoming to his own story of being born again as a Christian. Through that process, he made peace with the emotional baggage that previously held him back from connecting with family, friends, and colleagues.

Despite my disclosure to those in my life, there are ethical concerns to the work of any autoethnographer. Through self-disclosure, the author Ethnographers bear responsibility for any unpleasant feelings evoked in readers, since the connections readers make to narratives cannot be predicted (Bochner and Ellis, 1996). As Ellis (2007) wrote: "The bad news is that there are no definitive rules or universal principles that can tell you precisely what to do in every situation or relationship you may encounter, other than the vague and generic 'do no harm'" (p. 6).

Despite the many ethical considerations to bear in mind when engaging in

autoethnographic work, Ellis (2007) contends that "...autoethnography itself is an ethical practice" (p. 26). Autoethnographic research demands being ethical and honest about the events described as well as the content of words expressed by all the people involved in these events. However, I do not present my stories as objective accounts. Rather, they are the subjective memories that inform my understanding of self.

MY MESSY TEXT: THE ONGOING PROCESS OF AN EMBODIED PEDAGOGY

(CHAPTER IV--ANALYSIS)

In this chapter, I give a detailed account of a CLE that I helped convene and then reflect upon my meta-learning to synthesize a pedagogy of connection. Through two years of observing mentors, I developed a schema for an embodied pedagogy of connection. My embodied learning allowed me to serve as a member of the CLE design team--a role that I couldn't have fulfilled at the start of my research process, despite my technical skills. I documented everything from early planning conversations to the CLE debrief as an artifact and testament to my development. By planning and participating, the design team modeled a pedagogy that stands as a response to the problem outlined at the outset of my research--a pedagogy of connection that would honor the assets and aspirations of a concerned Black mother in Brooklyn, New York. A pedagogy that would embrace, enable, embolden, and empower a scared, White teenage mother in rural Michigan.

The design team aligned the curriculum of the CLE to inspire higher learning through deep conversation (Guajardo, Guajardo, Salinas, Cardoza, 2019). We wanted participants to experience raw emotion and moments of transformation, similar to when my brother, Kyle, said that I was the only reason our family stayed together after my parents divorce. In an instant, my self-concept was transformed into that of a leader through a vulnerable conversation. Our relationship deepened and strengthened through genuine and open dialogue. Similarly, in the CT Network CLE, we sought to create an environment with the necessary time, space, and climate for transformative dialogue and higher learning.

My messy text contained in Chapter IV is an artifact of meta-learning. For me, it was a demonstration of a lifetime of learning about human connection. The product of my learning was to co-create a deep, meaningful group learning experience resulting in stronger relationships and sense of self--for me and the other participants. I spend the first part of Chapter IV documenting the CLE, from the point of view of convener/participant/researcher. I step in and out of the text to share dynamic analysis--thoughts or feelings that I was experiencing in the moment. Having produced an account of the event, I take advantage of it as a rich observable (aka data set). Adding additional layers to the meta-learning, I respond to my research questions by weaving reflections from the CLE with wisdom from my catalogue of stories, and references to scholarly literature to create a pedagogy of connection.

Learning the Rhythm of the CLE

Since 2017, I've studied pedagogy and community development with Dr. Miguel A. Guajardo--one of the founders of CLE pedagogy. As described in Chapter II, CLEs are a platform for leaders, activists, educators, youth, elders to convene for deep learning, culminating in collective action. CLEs provide time and space for citizens/learners to participate in enlightening and purposeful story sharing. Bonds between participants are created through dialogue. Stories about the participants' lived experiences illuminate otherwise invisible connections among the group, and a common purpose is defined. Through CLE pedagogy, community members openly examine their common challenges and collective gifts to be called upon in enriching the lives of each participant, their organizations, and communities.

Like the snake eating its tail, the CLE is a never-ending process (Guajardo et. al,

2015). However, within the dynamic and ever-unfolding nature of the process, a distinctive rhythm is present. According to Guajardo et. al (2015), the rhythm of the CLE consists of (1) *preparing for the CLE*; (2) *engagement* (i.e. dynamic/critical pedagogy); then (3) *planning for impact*, which should include a call for further action. The call for future action creates a cyclical feedback loop aimed at bringing the group's shared aspirations to life (see fig. 1).

In *preparing for the CLE*, conveners should account for the topic of discussion, the place, the people, an invitation, and hospitality. *Engagement* during the CLE allows for participants to make meaning through *thinking, reflection, and action*. A fourth element of "Engagement" is presence. During the CLE, there is nothing more important than the CLE. Conveners and participants should be fully present in mind, body, and spirit, for the length of the CLE. The momentum of the CLE feeds into an *action plan*--informed by the shared values and aspirations within the group. Action plans should include opportunities for future CLEs, thus beginning a new cycle.

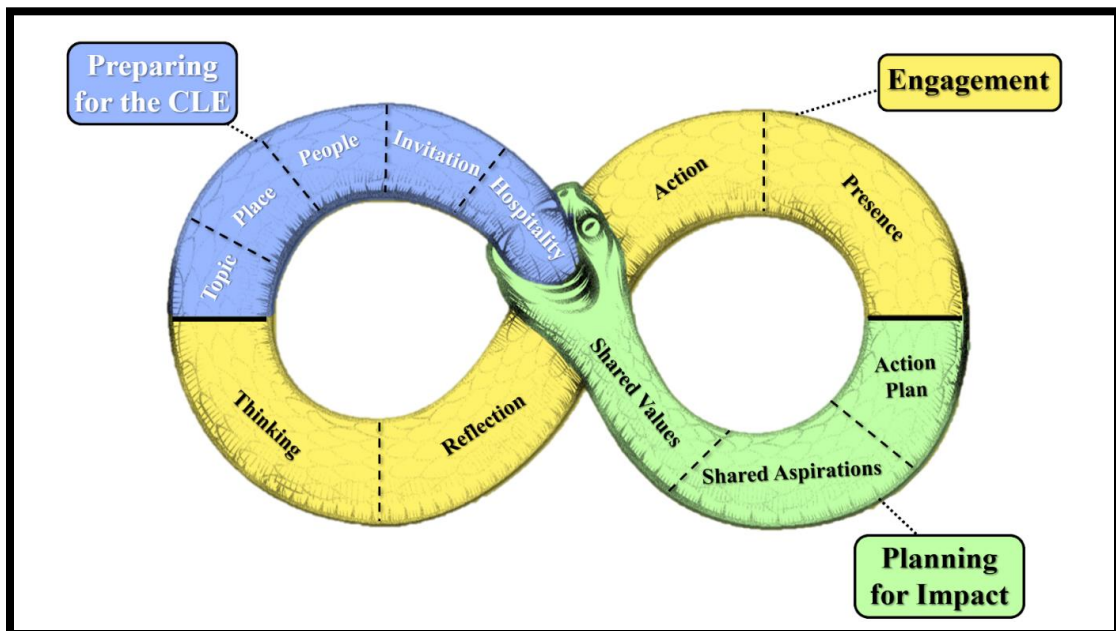


Figure 14. The Rhythm of the CLE (own image).

In the following section, I illustrate each piece of the snake through examples from the CT Network CLE. The text of the subheadings has been color-coded as follows:

- Blue headings represent work that occurs in the “Preparing” phase of the CLE
- Yellow headings represent the work of “Engagement”
- Green headings indicate work that falls under “Planning for Impact”

Dissecting the snake: Context of the CT Network CLE.

The CLE snake does not exist in a vacuum. It’s life force is supported within a diverse ecosystem. Similarly, each CLE arises from a specific cultural, historical, and geographic context (Guajardo et. al, 2015). Over two days (8/8/2019-8/9/2019), a CLE was convened in La Mesa, Texas, that brought together K-12 educators from three independent school districts located in Central Texas—La Mesa ISD, Sheppard, and Altona. This particular CLE was the inaugural meeting of the interdistrict collaboration, known as the *Central Texas Network for Education and Community Development (CT Network)*.

The districts within the CT Network share similar demographics among students and staff and a social DNA that traces to the milieu of educators at Texas State University. Key leaders from La Mesa ISD, Sheppard, and Altona grew as educators, leaders, and human beings while immersed in the curricula of Texas State’s College of Education. Faculty in the Educational Leadership and School Improvement programs shape and influence the mindsets, methods, and moral compasses of countless educators--including many serving in La Mesa ISD, Sheppard, and Altona. Notable among the faculty, for the context of the CT Network, is Dr. Miguel A. Guajardo. Dr. Guajardo has

a wealth of knowledge about personal, organizational, and community development, which was put to good use on the design team of the CT Network CLE.

CLE pedagogies--developed by Guajardo, Guajardo, Janson, and Millitello (2015)-- influenced the development of numerous educators in La Mesa ISD, Sheppard, and Altona. The social DNA of CLE pedagogy has many roots--among them the Highlander Folk School. At Highlander, Myles Horton, a student of Reinhold Niebuhr, has trained activists and organizers such as Rosa Parks, Hollis Thomas, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Dr. Miguel A. Guajardo, and Dr. Julia Ramirez, lead convener, or design team organizer, of the CT Network CLE. Dr. Ramirez earned her master's and Ph.D. from Texas State, while also serving as Dr. Guajardo's research assistant for four years. Dr. Ramirez is the new Director of Dual Language Services in La Mesa ISD. Dr. Ramirez, along with Dr. Guajardo and Dr. Santiago Vazquez have organized a series of CLEs with parents, community members, and local experts to promote public pedagogy and relationship-building within the community of La Mesa ISD's dual language program.

In Altona ISD, Mario Sanchez, School Improvement and Community Engagement Officer, is a doctoral candidate at Texas State University's School Improvement (SI) program, where Dr. Vazquez, new principal of Aurora Middle School recently earned his Ph.D. Dr. Vazquez previously led the Dual Language program in La Mesa ISD and worked closely with Dr. Ramirez, who previously held the role of Lead Parent and Community Liaison. Dr. Vazquez's wife, Alejandra, is currently a doctoral student at TSU's SI program and currently serves as assistant principal at Rodriguez Elementary in Altona. All three: Mario, Dr. Vazquez and Alejandra earned a Master's degree in Educational Leadership at TSU. With Mr. Sanchez and Alejandra already

entrenched as strong advocates for the community, Dr. Vazquez's arrival contributes toward a critical mass of leaders in Altona committed to honoring the power of place and the wisdom of people (Guajardo et. al, 2015).

Finally, Sheppard ISD is led by Superintendent Juan Soto. No coincidence, Superintendent Soto earned his master's degree from Texas State University's Educational Leadership program. Superintendent (Supt.) Soto joined Sheppard ISD six years ago as principal of Plum Creek Elementary, earning increased responsibilities and leadership roles. Supt. Soto's experiences at Texas State have influenced his actions and mindset that underlie his leadership. Before his tenure as superintendent, Sheppard ISD never had their own Parent Teacher Association (PTA) chapter. Today there are over 100 active parent members of Sheppard's PTA. In part, the CT Network CLE is a result of Supt. Soto's continued commitment to parents and community.

Leaders from La Mesa ISD, Altona, and Sheppard invited teams of educators from their respective districts to come together as a network and develop as individuals and teams through the practice of CLE pedagogies. The CT Network CLE was an attempt to expand the reach of CLE pedagogies throughout the region--a domino effect of change radiating outward from the campus of Texas State. For many participants, this convening was their first exposure to CLE...but almost certainly not their last.

Dissecting the snake: Preparing for a CLE.

The logistical coordination and programming of a CLE is led by the design team. Members of the design team should be representative of the CLE participants that are expected to attend the event. The role of the design team is to be a community catalyst--

to help organize and amplify the group's potential. The tasks of the design team are bulleted below. Note that these responsibilities are listed in no particular order, as they may occur simultaneously or develop non-linearly, as conditions demand.

- Identify *key participants* (from diverse perspectives). Key participants are often leaders or influential figures from the school or community. They have their finger on the pulse of the organization or community, and their word carries weight. Key participants should be identified as soon as possible and invited to contribute to the design team's planning efforts. This responsibility corresponds to the portion of the path labeled *People* and *Invitation* in Figure 1.
- Probe for pressing issues of the moment through dialogue with key participants. This responsibility corresponds to the portion of the path labeled *Topic* in Figure 1.
- Use pressing issues of the moment to frame the topic of discussion for the CLE. This responsibility corresponds to the portion of the path labeled *Topic* in Figure 1.
- Extend a genuine and welcoming invitation to all CLE participants. This responsibility corresponds to the portion of the path labeled *Invitation* in Figure 1.
- Align the curriculum for an exchange of learning to take place between participants--this lays the groundwork and creates the container for *Engagement* in Figure 1.
- Create a setting that invites meaningful dialogue. This responsibility corresponds to the portion of the path labeled *Hospitality* in Figure 1.

The design team members for the inaugural meeting of the CT Network were Dr. Julia

Ramirez—La Mesa ISD, Dr. Santiago Vazquez--Altona, Mario Sanchez--Altona, Juan Soto--Sheppard ISD, Dr. Andrea Alvarez--Sheppard ISD, Dr. Miguel A. Guajardo--Texas State University, and myself--Texas State University. Dr. Ramirez, Dr. Vazquez, Dr. Guajardo, and I met several times from May until the CLE in August to discuss programming possibilities and logistics. Dr. Guajardo, Dr. Ramirez, and Dr. Vazquez had many preliminary conversations with other key participants in each district, as well as contacts from other local districts ultimately unable to participate. As time drew nearer, conversations developed across multiple channels, and the design team's plan came clearer into focus.

Dissecting the snake: Identification of topic.

The design team aims to bring people together to learn from one another about a topic of shared relevance to act toward a shared purpose (Guajardo et. al, 2015). To ensure relevance, the CLE should be planned by, for, and with the people closest to the topic of discussion. The topic for the CLE should relate to pressing issues of the moment, according to key participants. For these planning talks, face-to-face discussions over coffee and pan dulce are highly encouraged because relationship building and dialogue are foundational to the CLE. Email or conference calls should be used as last resorts for planning purposes.

Similarly, chatting, catching up, and chisme will not appear on any meeting agenda, but these activities are an indispensable part of the creative milieu. Time invested in creating interpersonal connection bears fruit through productive relationships (Vygotsky, 1978). To that point--the design team is more likely to inspire deep and

meaningful dialogue for CLE participants when the spirit of hospitality, presence, and relationship building is embodied throughout the planning process.

A week before the first meeting of the CT Network, Dr. Ramirez, Dr. Vazquez, Dr. Guajardo, and I drove to Sheppard, TX, for a planning plática with Supt. Soto and Dr. Alvarez. We discussed Sheppard's pressing issues of the moment and defined the type of learning experience they wanted to create for the teams in attendance. Supt. Soto and Dr. Alvarez sought to spark conversations about relationship building and community development. They believed their most pressing need was for collective leadership--to amplify the voices of parents, community members, and educators. In closing, we discussed future meetings of *CT Network*. Supt. Soto expressed interest in Sheppard ISD participating and hosting future interdistrict CLEs.

Later that day, Dr. Ramirez, Dr. Vazquez, Dr. Guajardo, and myself drove to Altona for a similar discussion with Mario Sanchez and Dr. Vazquez. In recent years, Altona ISD has seen high rates of staff turnover throughout the ranks. Adding to the air of change--the district is currently undergoing significant renovations to their facilities. Altona's leaders expressed a desire to expose their teams to CLE pedagogies and create genuine dialogue around the *art of change*--which was a pivotal concept for the design team throughout the planning process. Like Sheppard ISD, the leaders of Altona ISD committed to participating and hosting future meetings of the *CT Network*.

Informed by conversations with key participants, Dr. Ramirez, Dr. Guajardo, Dr. Vazquez, and myself discussed the overlapping needs of the three districts. The topic that emerged from planning team's process focused on *the arts*:

- The Art of Teamwork
- The Art of Pedagogy
- Teaching through the Arts

The design team purposefully aligned the CLE agenda to encourage dialogue around these three guiding principles. The event was a celebration of the humane arts of education with each agenda item representing an opportunity to discuss or practice “the arts.” Of note, the CLE included a performance by *Ballet Nepantla*, a troop that blends contemporary dance styles with Mexican folklórico to explore new interpretative ways of exploring topics of cultural, historical, and political in-between-ness. Finally, Dr. Ramirez and Dr. Guajardo secured sponsorship for the event from local non-profit Centro Cultural Hispano de San Marcos--the CT Network CLE modeled the art of community building through an inter-organizational partnership.

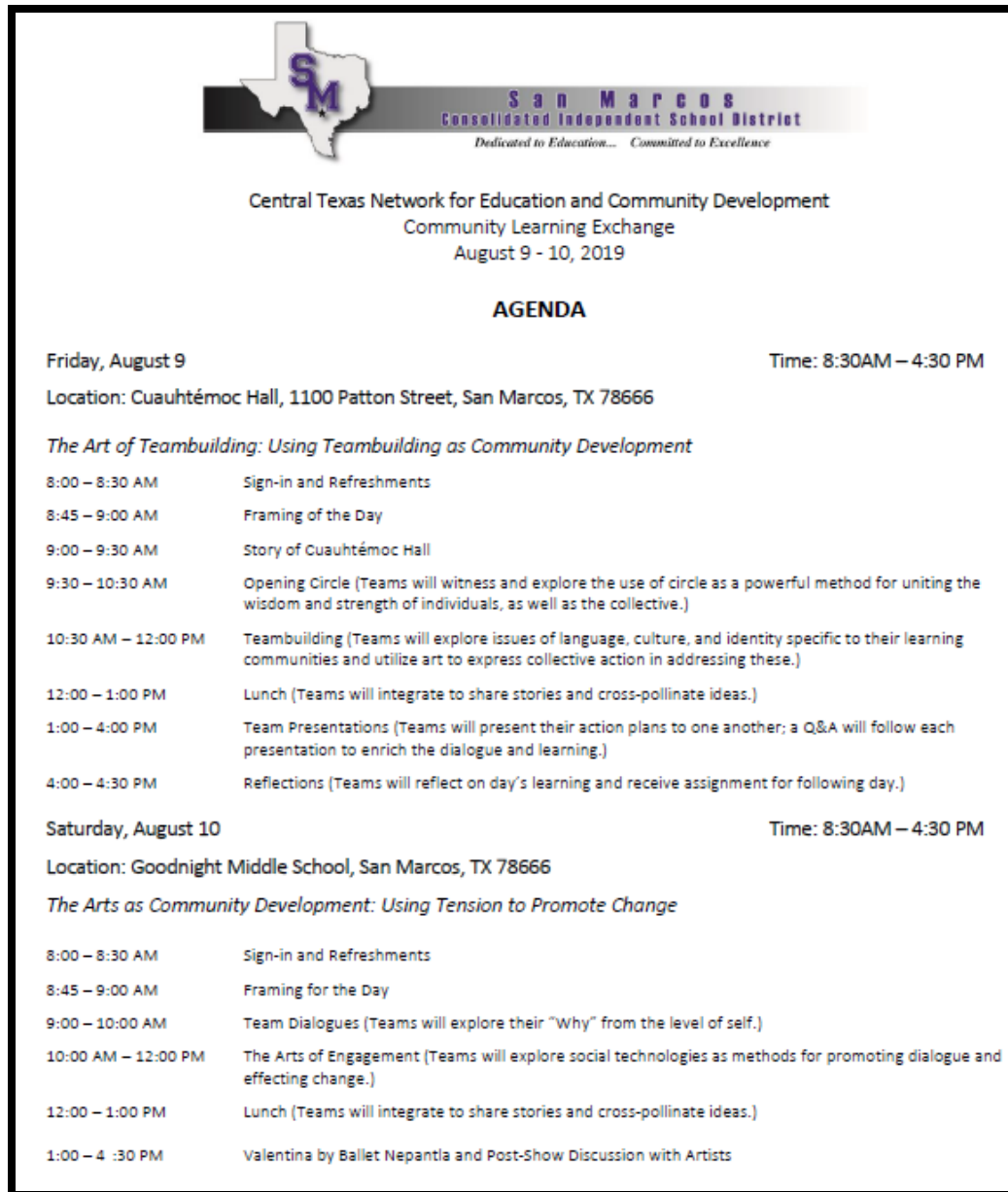


Figure 15. Working Agenda For CT Network CLE (own image).

Dissecting the snake: Place.

Context is critical to the pedagogy of the CLE (Guajardo et. al, 2015). The geographic and historic uniqueness of a place is foundational to its collective identity. Place binds people together through a common history of lived experience from which their present conditions emerged. To ensure that the learning exchanged during the CLE

is relevant, the local context must inform the selection of the topic and the invitation of participants.

Community is the backbone of CLE pedagogy. In coming together through CLE, communities find space to exercise voice and agency to collectively respond to local conditions. The gifts that exist within the community are boundless (Guajardo et. al, 2015; Block and McKnight, 2010). The role of the convener is to organize the will of the community and mobilize their collective gifts toward a common purpose (Guajardo et. al, 2015). The joining of gifts creates synergy, amplifying benefits through a network of symbiotic relationships. We welcome strangers into the circle of the CLE because we value their gifts. In nature, diversity is key to a healthy ecosystem. We depend on those that are different from us to teach us things that we can't see from our own perspective. Conveners should foster a sense of mutual respect and curiosity about what we can learn from one another as participants in a CLE.

Local context and a democratic spirit for community inspired the formation of the *CT network*. The three districts share a common geography and are experiencing similar socio-cultural dynamics. Gentrification in Austin has forced many families to move to neighboring cities in search of a welcoming community and a lower cost of living. The region of Central Texas is experiencing rapid population growth--in particular--a dramatic increase in Latinx students and English-Language Learners (ELLs). In Sheppard ISD, 2018 student demographic data indicates that Hispanic students make 74.6% of the student body, an increase of 18.5% since 2015 (LBB, 2018). In addition, 20.8% of Sheppard ISD students are ELLS, a figure that is projected to increase. La Mesa ISD currently serves a student body that is majority Hispanic (71.9%), and 9.8% of

its students are ELLs. Altona ISD's demographics are comparable, serving a student body that is 70.1% Hispanic, and 9.5% are ELLs. Changing demographics demand a different way of responding to the needs of students, families, and community.

The inaugural meeting of the *CT network* was hosted in a town in Central Texas, that will be referred to as La Mesa. Within the community, two hosting spaces were chosen purposefully: Cuauhtémoc Hall and Goodnight Middle School. The hosting space should meet the logistical requirements of the event and carry significance within the community. Past CLEs have been held in locations such as community centers, libraries, museums, beachfront hotels, ski resorts, Native American reservations, public parks, schools, universities, homes, folk story centers, non-profit organizations, and organic farms. These hosting spaces all stood as fixtures within their community ecosystems. The role of the hosting space within the greater cultural-historical context of the local community should inform the programming of the learning exchange.

Day 1 of the inaugural meeting of the *CT network* convened at historic Cuauhtémoc Hall, located in the heart of the neighborhood known as La Victoria. La Victoria was founded to segregate the Brown citizens of La Mesa, in the aftermath of World War II. The neighborhood is still nearly all working-class Latinx families, and the streets there still bear the names of (White) military leaders like Patton and Nimitz. Since 1968, Cuauhtémoc Hall has been a place of joy and celebration for the local community. The historic dance hall has hosted countless weddings, Quinceañeras, and concerts for Tejano music legends, such as Selena, Little Joe y La Familia, and Sonny and the Sunliners to name a few. One CLE participant shared that her grandparents met at Cuauhtémoc Hall--a story likely shared by many residents of La Mesa.

The outside of the building is known to locals for its distinctive archway. The physical structure of Cuauhtémoc Hall began as a humble platform for tejano band performances and a dirt lot for convening. Food vendors would line up along the outside of the path, and the young people would walk around the perimeter, buying snacks and socializing (CLE, 2019). Today, the stage is located inside a great hall with ample seating for large family and community events.



Figure 16 and Figure 17. The entranceway to Cuauhtémoc Hall.



Figure 18. Spacious interior of Cuauhtémoc Hall



Figure 19. Trophy case at Cuauhtémoc Hall. Filled with artifacts relating to its history.

Cuauhtémoc finds its origins in the mutualist society tradition of collective thought, wisdom, development, and service to the community, which reaches back hundreds of years. The venue's namesake is a reference to its indigenous roots, values, and social DNA. Cuauhtémoc was a philosopher-poet and the last ruler of the *Tenochca* or *Mexica* people (pejoratively known as Aztec) (Guajardo, E., 2019). Legend has it that when Hernan Cortés and the Spanish colonizers came to loot and destroy his city, known as Tenochtitlan, Cuauhtémoc fought fiercely for his people, by every means possible. Venerated as a hero, Cuauhtémoc was defiant in the face of death. He vowed to Cortés that the Spanish would never defeat the spirit his people which had already infiltrated the religious symbology and value system of the colonizers. The spirit of Cuauhtémoc is critical to the CLE's commitment to collective thought development and action in its educational endeavors.

Through the years, Cuauhtémoc Hall has stood as a cultural touchstone and a site

of community organization. For example, when La Mesa instituted a poll tax on its Brown citizens, Cuauhtémoc Hall organized fundraiser dances to mobilize the vote. The cultural significance of Cuauhtémoc Hall to the community of La Mesa can not be understated.



Figures 20, 21, 22, and 23 Artifacts Relating to Cuauhtémoc Hall's Mutualista Origins.

Day 2 of the CLE was held at Goodnight Middle School, named for the winningest football coach in SMHS history. This hosting space was chosen to coincide with an already scheduled performance of Ballet Nepantla's new program *Valentina*. *Valentina* is a collection of stories that convey the strength and resilience of women during *Revolutionary* Mexico. The performance was incorporated into the CLE as a model for teaching through the arts.

Dissecting the snake: People.

After identifying the stories and sites relevant to the topic, the design team should invite the people most impacted by the topic of discussion within the participating organization or community. Participants should be prepared to engage with each other through sharing their individual and community stories relating to the CLE topic. They should display a sense of curiosity or concern about the topic, and a readiness to act. Participants should understand that attending the CLE represents a willingness to take ownership of the issue, and they should commit to attend the CLE from start to finish. Their engagement and commitment to sharing informs the content of the curriculum. The CLE lays out the structure for the systems, but the local personal, community and institutional stories provide the relevant content for the engagement.

The participants of the first meeting of the *CT Network* were invited by the leaders of each district and are picture below.



Figure 24. The participants of the CT Network CLE on Day 1.

Dissecting the snake: Invitation.

The invitation is key to the CLE. For many participants, this may be their first exposure to community dialogue, which can be quite intimidating. To ensure that the invitation is well-received, it should come from someone trusted. Invitations should include a heartfelt explanation as to how their knowledge would benefit the group and an invitation to make a difference. The invitation should demystify the CLE process by providing as much information as possible. The hosts where the CLE will be held should inform the invitation and logistical details to be shared. For example, the staff of Cuauhtémoc Hall and Goodnight Middle School informed the design team's outreach efforts, including the flyer below.

Central Texas Network for Education and Community Development

August 9th-10th
 Both days: 8:30am-4:30pm
 Goodnight Middle School
 1301 TX-123, San Marcos, TX

Featuring Performances by:
Ballet Nepantla
www.balletnepantla.com

Facilitation by: Local Educators

A Community Learning Exchange on the Arts, Culture, and Language

Cost Info:

- \$250/Person for a team of 5
- \$150/Each additional person

Event Signup:
<http://bit.ly/CTNECDsignup>

Art as Pedagogy: Teaching through Art
 Experience culturally-responsive teaching and learning as we explore the arts as a celebration of place, people, and wisdom. Engage in dialogue about the performance with:

- Parents
- Students
- Community members
- K-12 & university educators from across Central Texas

Pedagogy as Art: Honing Our Craft
 Engage in professional development through:

- Learn and practice the art of relationship building to improve the lives of students, parents, community members, colleagues, and ourselves
- Explore opportunities to use the arts as engagement in your classroom & community through dialogue with educators from across Central Texas

Art as Development: Living Our Purpose
 The Central Texas Network for Education & Community Development practices a public pedagogy for the common good.

- Explore opportunities for future collaboration
- Develop systems of support for network partners
- A field trip to a local historic site to highlight the pedagogical power of place and the role of arts in developing local economies

A Collaboration Among Regional Partners

Healthy Children—Responsive Schools—Strong Communities

Figure 25. CT Network CLE Invitation Flyer. Created by the design team.

Dissecting the snake: Hospitality.

Hosting a CLE requires thoughtfulness, artistry, and care. The social experience is at the core of *engaged* pedagogy, and the design team is responsible for creating an

atmosphere of trust and comfort conducive of story sharing. The design team should consider refreshments (especially coffee), seating arrangements, greeting, working the crowd, and ensuring that participants feel welcome. On the day of the event, the design team should be present in eyes, heart, and mind. Being fully invested in each interaction contributes toward a gracious space of learning in public (Hughes, 2010).

The design team recruited hospitality experts--local district and community staff who have a wealth of talent and skills in this regard who themselves are keepers of the local talent, skills, stories and history of the community. La Mesa ISD Parent liaisons Mary Ann Silva and Alice Saledo helped with set up, serving, greeting, and “day-of” logistics. In addition, Dr. Vazquez’s children helped serve refreshments and added to the family atmosphere of the event. The participation of children is common and speaks to the level of community, inclusivity, and integration of CLE.



Figure 26. Hospitality of the CLE. Mary Ann Silva and Alice Saledo, parent coordinators in La Mesa ISD, set up a festive spread of agua fresca, pasteries, cookies, coffee to welcome participants. Mary Jane and Barbara’s generosity and positive energy were contagious and helped create the climate for learning and genuine dialogue.

Figure 27. Setup for the CT Network CLE. Chairs are arranged in a circle, in preparation for the opening circle discussion.

Dissecting the snake: Engagement.

Engagement is a fancy way of saying, “coming together through dialogue.”

During engagement participants engage in individual and group **thought** and **reflection** about their daily **actions** and lived experiences. A group identity is embodied through the process of engagement, which can take numerous shapes--all aimed at sparking genuine, reflective conversations. Margaret Wheatley (Block, Community: The structure of belonging, 2009)2002) said, “conversation is the natural way humans think together.” In CLE, participants think critically together through *engagement*, ultimately leading to action.

Engagement can be thought of as a sacred practice that transforms individuals into a collective entity--alive with *mind*, *body*, and *spirit*. The collective *mind* draws wisdom from diverse experiences and perspectives of participants. The group’s *spirit* reminds the individual that they are responsible for contributing to the well-being of a larger ecosystem, and empowers them to bring about change together. Their collective *body* enacts change in the world--inspired by a shared vision and values.

Much like the folktale *Stone Soup*, the magic of CLE manifests through the unique gifts that each participant contributes to the collective. Planning for *engagement* is crucial, but the learning that will occur can not possibly be predicted because the CLE is dynamic in nature. Perhaps the most important job of the design team is to pose good questions (or prompts) to the group. CLE questions should serve as the gravity that holds

together a deep, reflective, and free-flowing dialogue. According to Block (2008), a good question is:

- Personal--requiring the participant to make connection from their own lived experience to the CLE topic.
- Provocative--the question should push the participant to see the topic and/or their experiences in a new light.
- Ambiguous--the question should invite engage in an open-ended search for meaning. Questions that can be answered with a “yes” or “no” will not inspire rich dialogue, create opportunities for learning, nor facilitate border crossing among participants.

Engagement for the inaugural meeting of the *CT Network* stretched purposefully across the two-day CLE. Every activity in Friday’s agenda tied into the principle of *The Arts of Team Building: Using Team Building as Community Development*.

Day 1: Sign-in & refreshments--8:30am-9:00am.

Participants and conveners started to arrive at Cuauhtémoc Hall around 7:45am. However, we weren’t able to access the building until 8:30am because Cuauhtémoc’s volunteer staff was stretched thin. When the doors opened, participants signed-in, and enjoyed the generous spread of coffee, bananas, strawberries, melon, pineapple, pastries, and agua fresca infused with fresh fruit--this touch was provided by Mary Jane and Barbara. The heart of hospitality lives in the details.

The design team’s plan came to life because greeters were fully present and invested in creating a gracious space for participants. Among the greeters was Dr. Ramirez--focused in mind, body, and spirit on setting the tone for good learning. She worked the crowd, connected with old friends, and introduced herself to new faces.

Likewise, many participants caught up with colleagues who they hadn't seen all summer. Others, like Dr. Vazquez, hugged and joked with colleagues from his old post at La Mesa ISD.

Indeed, the CT network is built on relationships. Existing connections within the network helped mitigate the awkwardness of coming into a foreign space for a pedagogical event. In such an environment, anxieties of participants may run high because they are unsure of expectations. Easing tensions, a welcoming environment enabled participants of the CT Network CLE to be vulnerable and share their genuine feelings with one another. The gracious space fostered by the design team and greeters required intentionality, thoughtfulness, and presence.

Day 1: Framing for the day/opening circle--9:30am-10:30am.

Dr. Ramirez said a few words to formally welcome participants and asked teams to have a seat around one of two sets of chairs--both sets were arranged in a circle formation. Not only a shape, the pedagogy known as *circle* draws on ancient practices and modern processes to create trust, goodwill, belonging, and reciprocity. It offers a way of being together that embodies gracious space (Hughes, 2010). Participants sit in a circle. Symbolic objects are used to remind participants of values shared among those in the circle. A talking piece ensures that each participant will have the opportunity to express themselves. The talking piece is passed from person to person within the circle. Only the person holding the piece may speak. The facilitator of circle should explain the symbolic significance of the talking piece and its relevance to the guiding principles or topic of discussion.

Circle has become a prominently featured among restorative practices. The

lineage of circle is connected with indigenous ways of being and knowing. The pedagogy is a versatile community-building tool frequently used to open and close CLEs. Opening circle should give each participant a chance to check-in and be acknowledged by the group.

The facilitator of circle should thoughtfully pose a check-in question to put a frame around the learning experiences to come. The check-in question should set the tone for the day, warm up the mind, center the body, and awaken the spirit. The facilitator must listen carefully during shareouts to raise up points of connection or inspiration. There can be no canned talking points--the facilitator must dynamically process the information being shared and create connections to the guiding principles of the CLE. When done well, facilitation is an incredibly complex mental exercise in public pedagogy, and Dr. Ramirez does it very well--often validating life experiences that are shared and connecting them with theory to provide depth and additional pools of meaning. During the CT Network CLE, Dr. Ramirez made connections from participant dialogue to the scholarship of Gloria Anzaldúa and Mauricio Miller, who writes about poverty through the lens of a social worker.

Due to the number of participants, we broke the group into two opening circles. Time was a factor, and the agenda was packed with purposeful activities. Creating two circles allowed for the opening check-in to move twice as quickly. Dr. Ramirez facilitated one circle, and I convened the other, with the help of my close friend and colleague Sara Torres, another student of Dr. Guajardo's from the Texas State SI doctoral program. Because the two circles would be having two different conversations, Dr. Ramirez and I positioned ourselves within our respective circles so we could be within

each other's line of sight. We needed the conversations of each circle to wrap up at approximately the same time, so Dr. Ramirez and I signaled to each other to speed up or slow down the conversation--requiring additional mental processing and tremendous focus.

As facilitator, I chose my family cookbook as the talking piece. My family shows love through food. In a grand gesture of love, my mother gave each of her sons hand-written recipes because she wanted to maintain a sense of family identity. Recently, health concerns motivated me toward a restrictive diet and away from some of the traditional ingredients used in my family's recipes. The cookbook represents the tension that can arise in the negotiation of identity, organizational traditions, and change. As the talking piece, the cookbook carried the spirit of the art of change--a guiding principle of the CLE.

Each participant was invited to introduce themselves through a check-in question: "What are you bringing with you today, and what do you hope to take away?". Note, the question was *personal, provocative, and ambiguous* (Block, 2008)--it required each person to share insight into their current psycho-emotional state and their personal framework of expectations for the CLE while still being loosely worded enough to invite interpretation.

The opening check-in allowed me to be model vulnerability and share that I was feeling a little nervous and rushed by the morning's circumstances, but that I was excited to get to know each team over the next two days. Others around the circle shared excitement about the school year or to build bonds among their team of educators. From

opening circle, participants rejoined their respective campus/district teams to prepare for the next activity.

Day 1: Story of Cuauhtémoc--10:30am-11:00am.

To anchor the conversations for the day, teams were invited to walk the grounds and surrounding neighborhood of Cuauhtémoc Hall. Community walks are a CLE pedagogy allow for the staff and community to get to know one another and present a great opportunity for dialogue on assets/deficit thinking. Upon returning from neighborhood walk Emiliano Guajardo--a scholar of indigenous history and philosophy, shared the symbology behind the naming of Cuauhtémoc Hall (as relayed in the discussion of *Place* above).

Day 1: Team building dialogue: 11am-12pm.

Each group was presented with a handout containing two figures (see fig. 28): 1) a model from nature which illustrates how the individual organism is nested within a niche, which is provided for within an ecosystem; 2) Guajardo et al's (2015) nested Ecologies of Knowing: self, which is a member of an organization, which exists within a community. The teams were given a prompt for discussion: *how is the ecology a school similar to an ecosystem from nature, as shown on the handout below?* The groups dug in for roughly 15 minutes of lively discussion before sharing out highlights of their discussion. Themes from the group discussions centered on shared responsibility, finding a healthy balance, and interdependence. This initial conversation set the tone and framed the team-building dialogue that laid ahead.

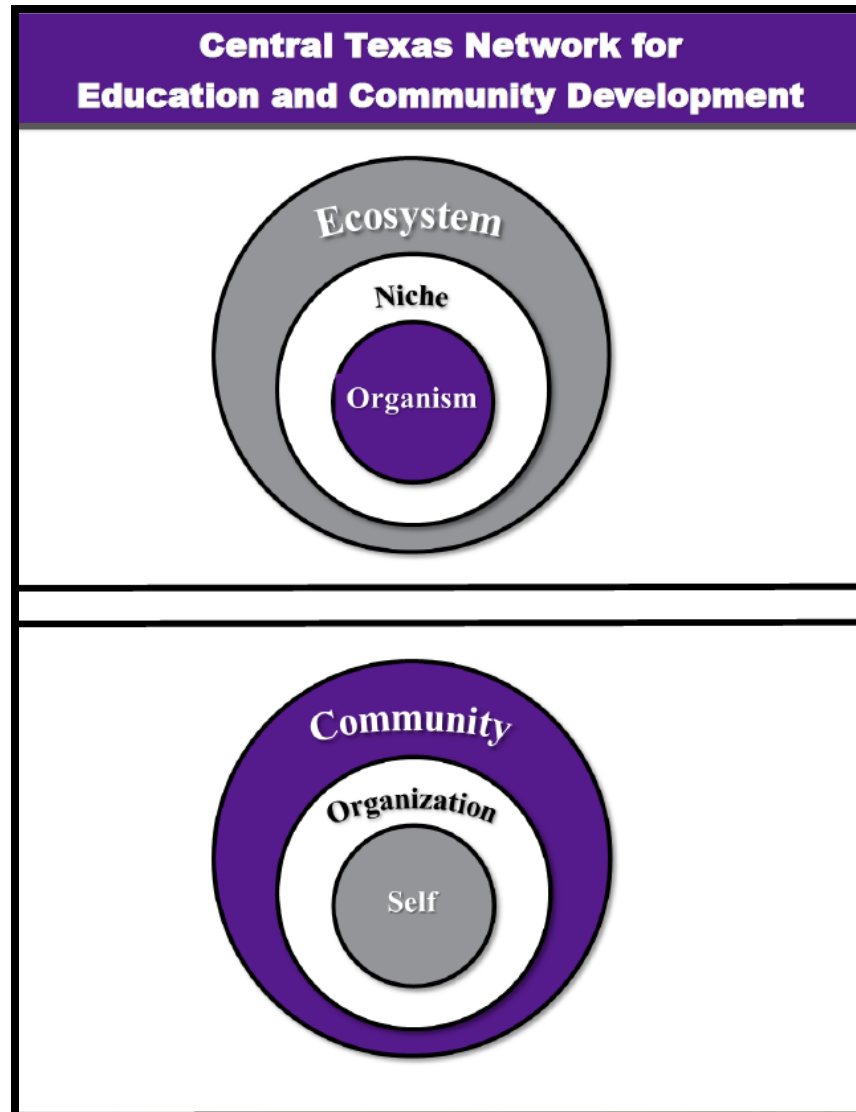


Figure 28. CLE Handout. This handout, created by the design team, was provided to each team to frame dialogues centered on team identity. The top figure is meant to represent the ecologies of nature, while the bottom figure is Guajardo, et. al's (2015) Ecologies of Knowing.



Figure 29. Team Building in Action. A team from Altona ISD discusses the parallels between the ecologies of nature and the ecologies of a community, school, and student.

Next, the teams engaged in dialogue aimed at forging a group identity. The discussion centered around the questions posed in a framework for meaning-making (see fig. 23). Each team defined the purpose of their work, their methods for organization and sensemaking, and their processes for implementation and sustainability.

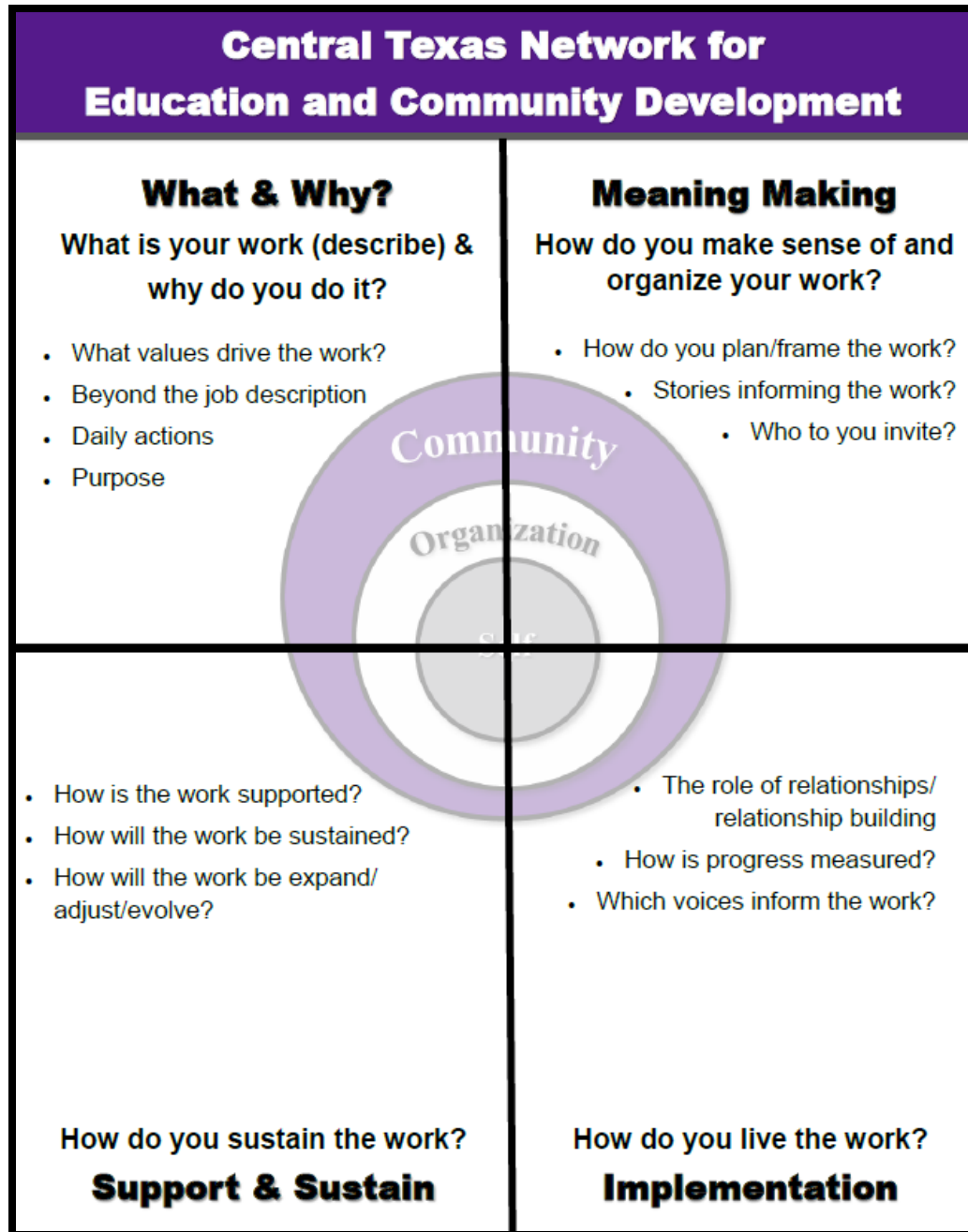


Figure 30. CLE Handout #2. This handout was developed by the design team and provided to each team of CLE participants. Each group used to generate conversation aimed at forging a group identity--a shared sense of purpose and a picture of how the work in implemented and sustained.



Figure 31. Team Building in Action #2. Dr. Ramirez in dialogue with a team from La Mesa ISD. Here, the team works toward defining the purpose behind their work.



Figure 32. Team Building in Action #3. A team from Altona discusses the role of relationship building in the implementation of their team's work.



Figure 33. Team Building in Action #4. A team from La Mesa ISD discuss their experiences and lessons learned from implementing CLE pedagogies last year.



Figure 34. Team Building in Action #5. Teams from La Mesa ISD, Sheppard, and Altona engaged in team building dialogue.



Figure 35. Team Building in Action #6. A team from Altona ISD discusses alternative forms of accountability based on the aspirations of students, families, staff, and community members.

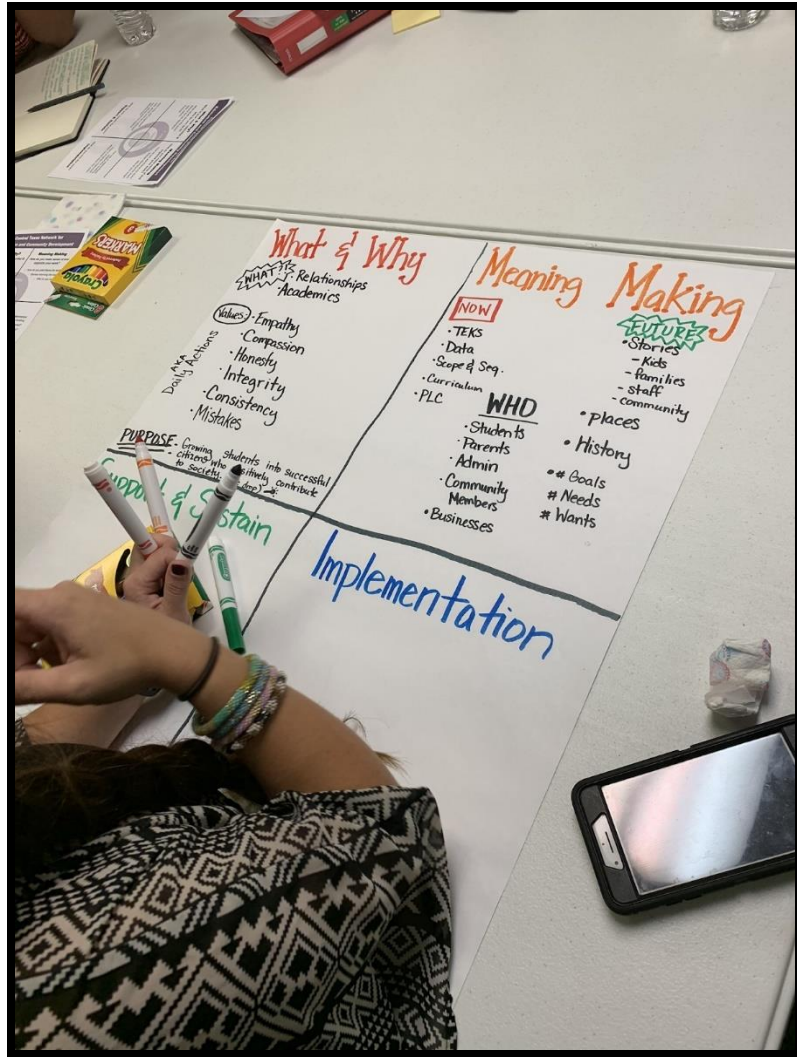


Figure 36. Team Building in Action #7. Teams captured their dialogue on chart paper to be referred in later activities.

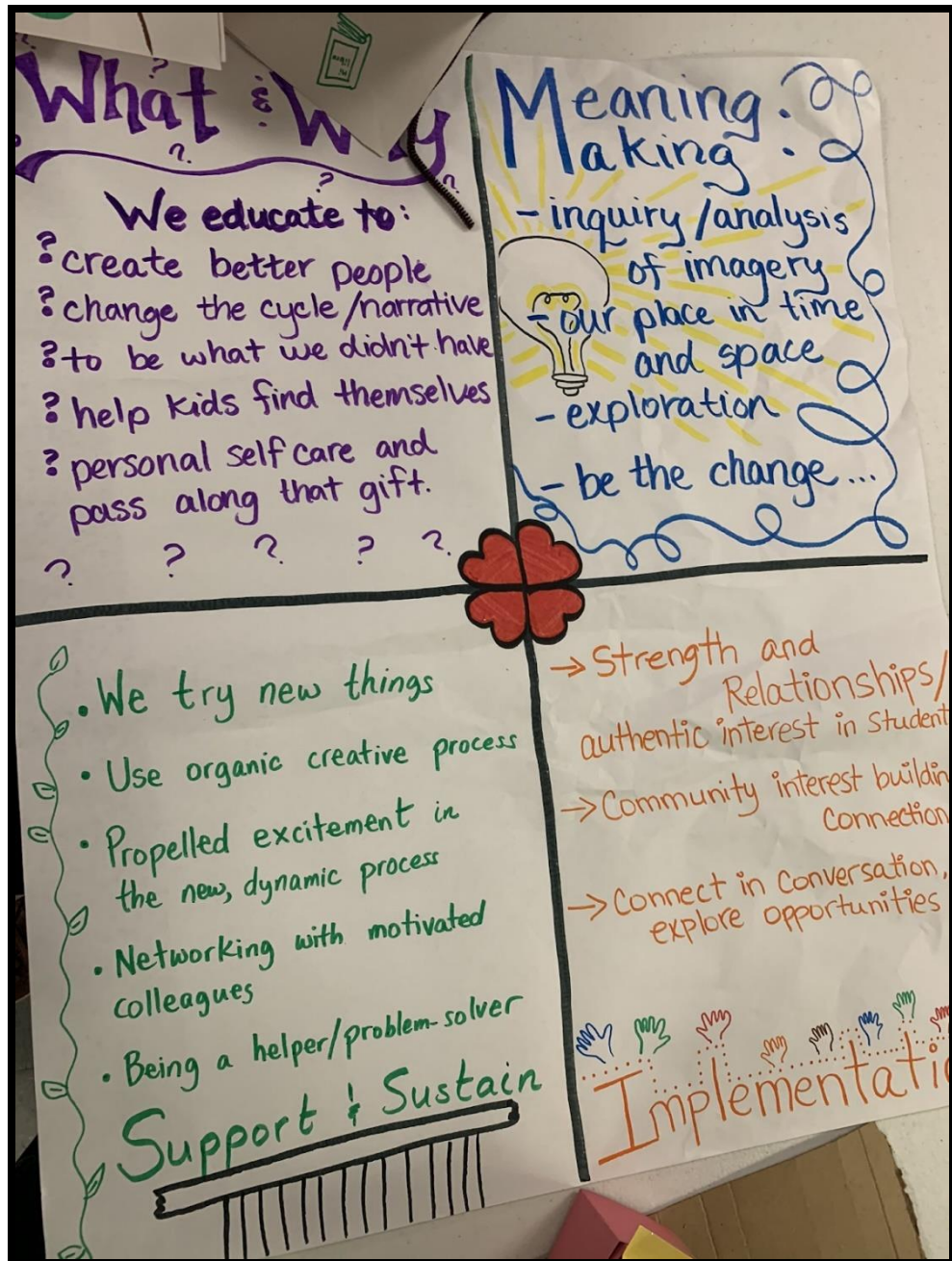


Figure 37. Team Building in Action #8. This team's dialogue framed their shared identity as agents of social change responsible for educating future citizens and stewards of democracy.

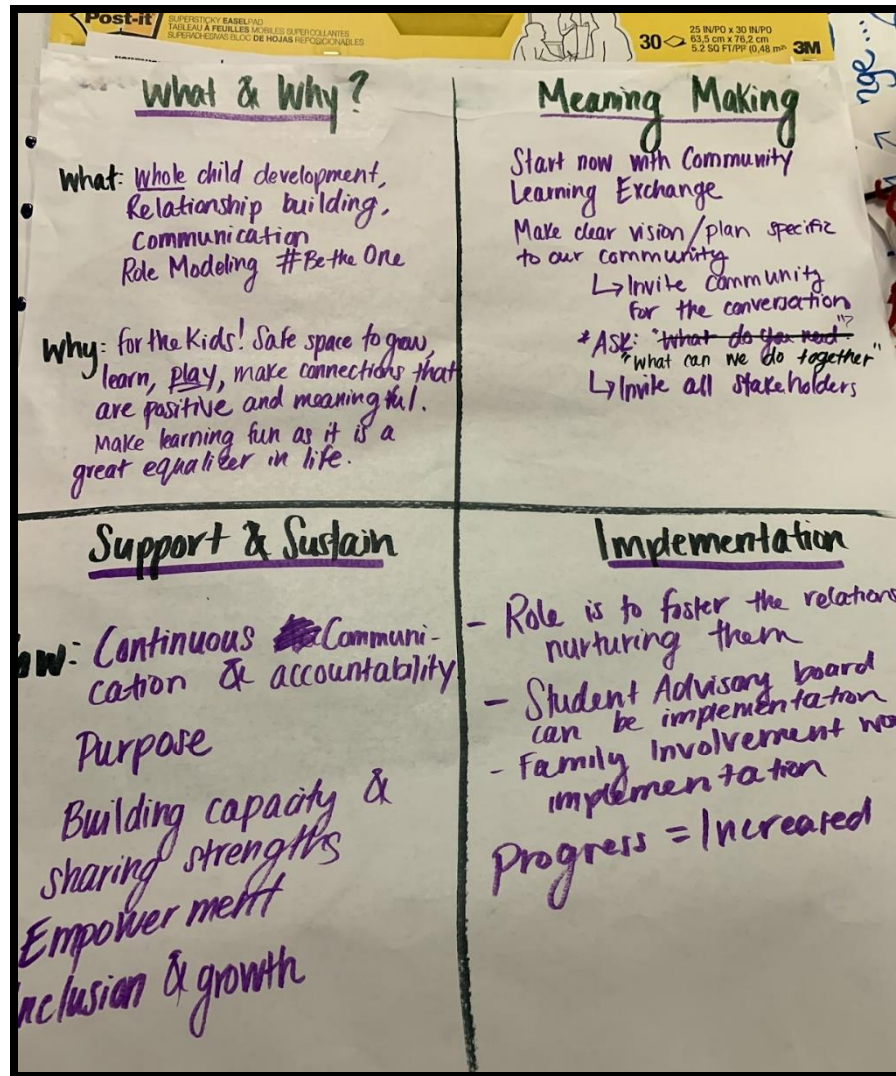


Figure 38. Team Building in Action #9. This team documented their commitment to using CLE pedagogies to invest in relationships throughout the community, constructing a rich social network that fosters the development of healthy children.

Day 1: Lunch & artistic synthesis--12:00pm-1:30pm.

Over a working lunch from Jason's Deli, the groups were tasked with creating artistic representations of Quadrant 1 from their discussion, which spoke to the purpose and definition of their work. For the activity, groups were provided with chart paper, markers, pipe cleaners, yarn, and other various craft supplies.

The design team chose Jason's Deli because their boxed lunches are budget and time-friendly while accommodating for dietary restrictions such as vegetarian, vegan, and gluten-free. Food service for a CLE can also be a great opportunity to highlight the assets of local small businesses.

The groups seemed inspired from their walk and team-building dialogue. There was a buzz of energy in the room as teams began to distill their group identity into an artistic representation. A guiding principle of the CLE was *teaching and learning through the arts* because of the rich potential in creative expression as a pedagogical tool. Artistic synthesis is among the most challenging and complex cognitive exercises--especially when meaning must be agreed upon by all team members and crystallized into a physical representation (Krathwohl, 2002). What may appear as "playing with markers and string" is actually a rigorous workout for the individual and collective team brain.

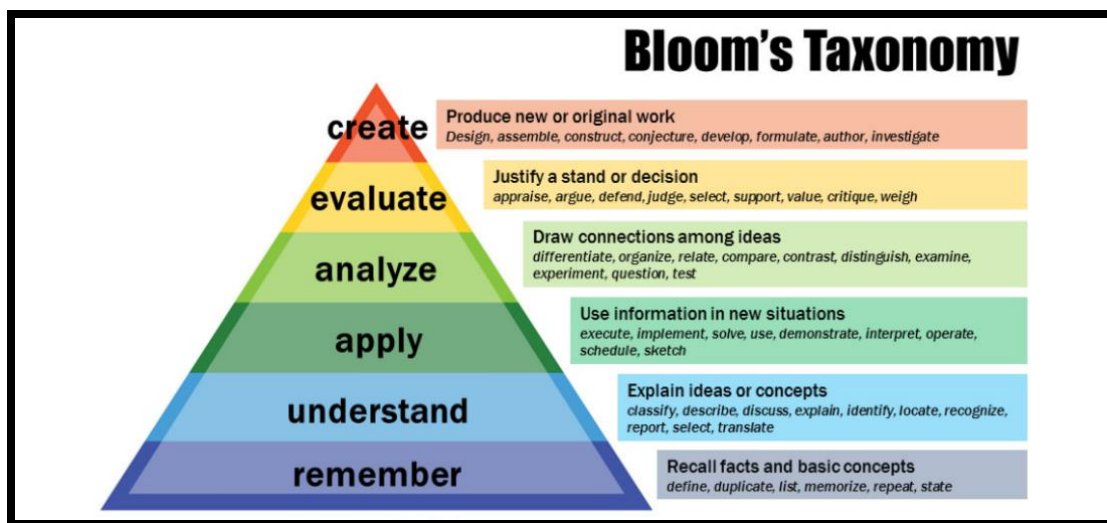


Figure 39. Bloom's Taxonomy. Retrieved from: <https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/blooms-taxonomy/>



Figure 40. Artistic Synthesis of Team Identity #1. A team from La Mesa ISD synthesizes their team's purpose (quadrant 1 from their previous discussion).



Figures 41, 42, and 43. Artistic Synthesis of Team Identity #2, #3, #4. Teams from Altona and La Mesa ISD work to construct their artistic representations of their team identity.

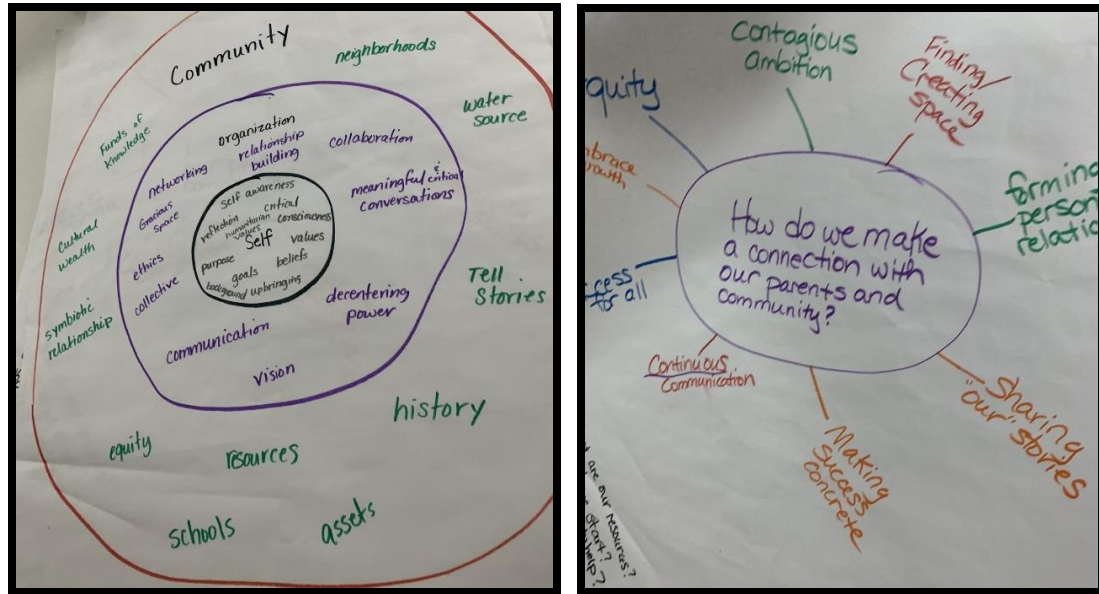


Figure 44. Artistic Synthesis of Team Identity #5. A team from La Mesa ISD works to create an artistic synthesis of their team identity.

Figure 45. Artistic Synthesis of Team Identity #6. The final product of Altona ISD's artistic synthesis.



Figures 46, 47, 48 Artistic Synthesis of Team Identity #7, #8, #9. Closeups of each team's work product gives insight into the quality and content of their dialogue. Here on the left, we see a team using imagery from nature to communicate a student-centered philosophy. Center and right, are products of educators attempting to foster whole-child development through relationship building and genuine dialogue.



Figures 49 and 50. Artistic Synthesis of Team Identity #10. A team from Sheppard ISD used Guajardo et. al's (2015) Ecologies of Knowing and a concept map to organize and make meaning of their team dialogue

Day 1: Team presentations--1:30pm-4:00pm.

After lunch, teams presented and explained the symbolism of their artistic representations, pictured below. Following the presentations, participants in the audience were encouraged by Dr. Ramirez to ask good probing questions that would push the thinking of the artists, resulting in a rich discussion around each group's art piece--a symbol of their team's identity and purpose constructed through dialogue and shared (creative and pedagogical) imagination.



Figure 51. Team Presentations #1. A team from Sheppard ISD present their work. They began by describing the local context: population growth and demographic change is occurring in Sheppard due to the effects of gentrification in Austin. Their team identity is built around community outreach and staying relevant to the needs of a rapidly changing community.

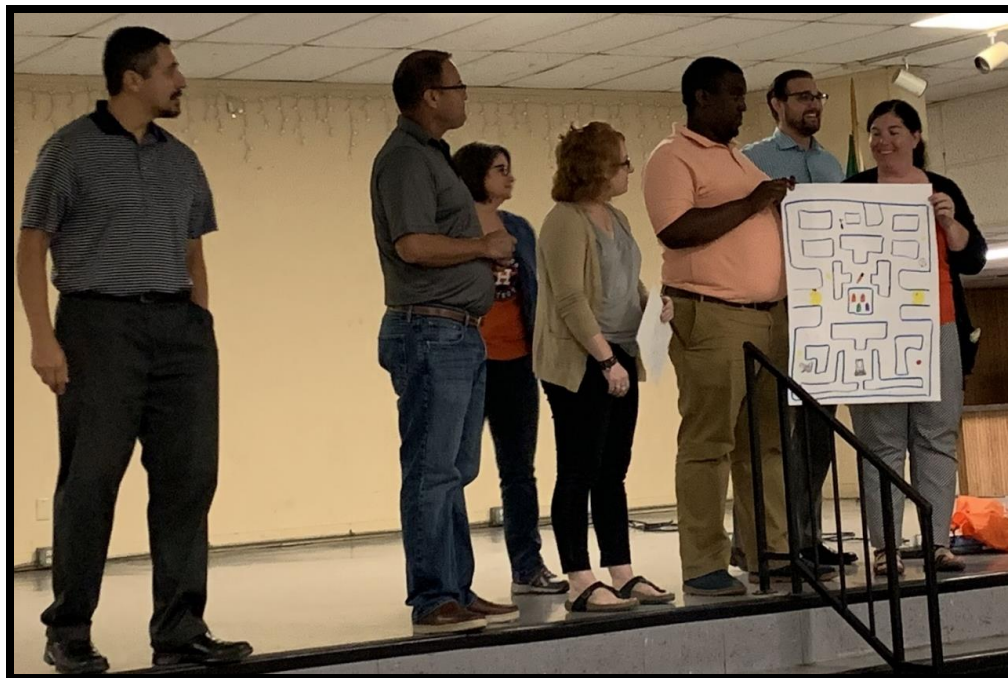


Figure 52. Team Presentations #2. A team from Altona ISD likened their task as educators to a game of Pacman, designed to set up challenges and rewards for their students in a safe but rigorous learning environment.



Figure 53. Team Presentations #3. A team of Special Education staff from La Mesa ISD presents their art piece: a team identity built on the values of student advocacy, transparency, fostering student independence, and empathy. The team drew comparisons between a healthy school and a healthy ecosystem to emphasize the interdependence of school and community relationships for positive student outcomes.

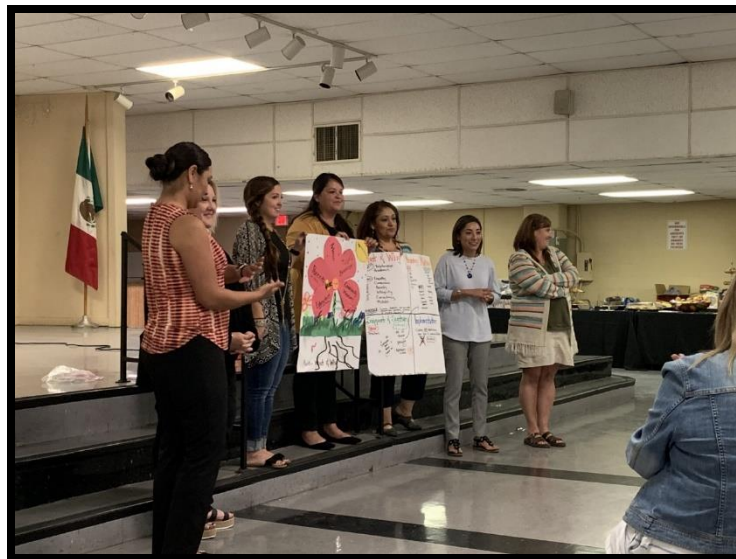


Figure 54. Team Presentations #4. A team from Altona ISD present their art piece representing the identity of their team. They started by discussing the roots/purpose of their work--to help raise healthy and productive students. The stem of the flower represented the support from educators to lift up students. They emphasized organic growth for each student at their own pace.



Figure 55. Team Presentations #5. A team from La Mesa ISD explain their art piece: The chairs arranged in a circle communicate a shared sense of identity. The yarn creates interdependence between members of the school or community ecosystem. On top of each chair, except one, is a colored piece of construction paper representing strength through diversity. One chair was left open as a gesture and invitation to welcome the stranger.

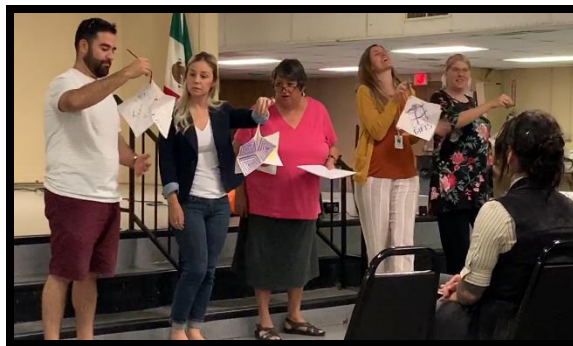


Figure 56. Team Presentations #6. "Team Estrella" from La Mesa ISD presents their art piece: a team identity centered on creativity, loving relationships, inclusiveness, and connection. The team opened with a bilingual poem, with verses presented in both Spanish and English.



Figures 57 and 58. Team Presentations #6 and #7. A team from Altona ISD presents their art piece, which emphasized the power of place. The team from Altona ISD incorporated geographical elements such as the Guadalupe River and mastering the art of change.

Day 1: Closing Circle--4:00pm-4:30pm.

One large closing circle was held for the group to summarize emotions, insights, and lessons learned from the day. Before dismissing, participants were reminded that we would be meeting in a different location the following day. In addition, they were asked to bring an artifact that spoke to their development as an educator. The artifact would be used to generate conversation during Saturday's engagement.

Day 2: Sign-in and Refreshments--8:00am-8:30am.

La Mesa ISD Parent liaisons helped with set up of the same beautiful breakfast, generously served, and greeted participants with a warm smile. Once again, the young Vazquez helped serve refreshments and added to the family atmosphere of the event. Myself, Dr. Ramirez, and Dr. Guajardo were present to greet participants as they arrived. Today the mood was much lighter to start. Deep and genuine conversations on Day 1 allowed participants to walk in feeling more at ease.

Day 2: Framing for the Day--8:45am-9:00am.

Dr. Ramirez welcomed participants back, celebrated their vulnerability and hard work on Day 1, and framed the day ahead. While Day 1 of the CLE focused on team building. The morning of Day 2 was more introspective--with a focus on the self. She explained that we would be delving into our personal stories to understand our own development as educators and people.



Figure 59. CLE Participants on Day 2.

Day 2: Artifacts of Our Development--9:00am-10am

Participants were asked to bring an item that somehow relates to their development as an educator and their personal “Why.” During this conversation, participants shared the stories behind the artifacts that they brought. Teams were given about an hour for this dialogue. These conversations were deeply emotional. Walking around the room, I noted times that entire teams were in tears or laughing out loud.

The artifacts discussion had a profound impact on participants. Weeks later, during the CLE Debrief (described in detail on pg. 55), Alejandra Vazquez shared how one of the teachers from her team has come out of her shell and grown as a leader, since their artifact discussion. The previously withdrawn teacher, shared a photograph of her family on their first day in the United States after immigrating from Mexico on the bustling streets of Chicago. The teacher shared that even then her whole family looked out of place. The emphasis was on the words “even then”--implying that she still felt out of place. The team cried and comforted each other--recognizing and respecting each other’s humanity. Since that conversation, Alejandra said that the teacher seems more confident and has been excited to take on new responsibilities during the new school year.



Figure 60. Sharing Stories. Participants share stories from their development as educators.

Day 2: Open space technology--10:00am-10:30am.

Open Space Technology (OST) is a powerful tool for engaging large and small group discussion to explore particular issues (Owen, 2008). OST can be used with groups of nearly any size. It enables people to self-organize and connect through dialogue. The Four Principles of OST are:

- 1) Whoever comes is the right people;
- 2) Whatever happens, is the only thing that could have;
- 3) Whenever it starts is the right time;

4) When it is over, it is over (Owen, 2008).

The first principle of OST underscores the quality of the interaction over the number of people that participate. Good conversation does not require a large group. The second principle is a reminder that higher learning requires us to move beyond our set agendas and expectations and be open to new possibilities that arise through group dialogue. The third principle is necessary because creativity occurs beyond the bounds of time--it can't be commanded to appear on cue (Owen, 2008). During OST, schedules and agendas take a back seat to learning and conversation. The final principle invites us to honor the natural momentum of the group's curiosity. When the conversation has run its course, there is no need to linger. When it's over, it's over. This brings us to the *Law of Two Feet*, which says that during the course of the gathering any person that is neither learning nor contributing can use their two feet and go to a different gathering. Learners are expected to take ownership of their own learning.

To begin the activity, members of the group are invited to propose a topic for discussion (Owen, 2008). Anyone proposing a topic will convene a gathering to discuss the topic--though they do not hold special privileges within the conversation. Once the time for discussion begins, participants can show up to any gathering that interests them, for as long as they wish. Gatherings can combine, dissolve, or transition to a new topic--depending on the desires of those in the gathering. During our CLE, participants gathered through OST to discuss topics such as race, class, language, accountability and standardized testing, and community involvement.

Day 2: I Am poems--10:30am-12:00pm.

Participants were challenged to draft poems that spoke to their identity. The poems could be about any aspect of the author's choosing. The only restriction was that the poems had to include the phrase "I am ____." Many participants expressed that they found the exercise of introspection challenging¹. Others wrote as if the floodgates of expression were thrown open--as if they were waiting for an opportunity to process thoughts, feelings, and experiences from their past. After writing, volunteers were asked to share their work. Below are some images and excerpts from the participants' "I Am" poems that were shared.



Figure 61. I Am Poem #1. "I am here to show you the rules to this game of life, play with you until you get better at it, and maybe even show you how to break the rules one day. I am here for you when something goes wrong, or nothing seems right, and you don't want anything to change because you're scared, and you don't want to be alone. I am here for you."

¹ It can be difficult to face the stranger within--internal border crossing.



Figure 62. I Am Poem #2. "I am Mother Moon. I pretend to be the Lion. I feel that my roar is not loud enough. I reach for the stars for strength and courage. I worry that I will not make a difference. I cry when I feel the hearts of others. I am Mother Moon. I understand that I must be brave and join the sun. I say love is the answer. I am Mother Moon."



Figure 63. I Am Poem #3. "Yo soy two languages and all that encompasses..."



Figure 64. I Am Poem #4. "I am a lioness hear me roar...I am a fighter, I fight everyday for my students to someday have the chance to say, 'I did it, Ms. Aguilar, you were right along. I'm doing what I love and I feel I belong.' I know its all worth it--the tears and the fraught. So don't mess with my kids or I'll meet you in the parking lot."



Figure 65. I Am Poem #5. "I am an educator."



Figure 66. I Am Poem #6. "I am my mother's struggle to survive in this cruel world. I am my mother's pain, suffering, and challenge. I am my mother's inspiration to fight cancer. I am my mother's justification and affirmation that her struggles, pain, suffering, challenges, dreams, and aspirations came true.

I am my father's lost soul. I am my father's guilt and hurt. I am my father's dust in the wind, never to be claimed again. I am my father's blood and body but not his spirit.

I am my wife's soul mate, companion, and best friend. I am my wife's pain and confusion. I am my wife's push to see beyond the outer limits of our comfort zone. I am my wife's partner in raising four beautiful children. I am my wife's witness in life's spirit, place, and soul. I am my wife's 'it'

I am my children's father and sense of direction. I am my children's claim to earth. I am my Jaja's (points to oldest son) spirit and quest for knowledge and justice. I am my Titi's (points to oldest daughter) spirit and connection to the arts. I am my Becky's comfort and discomfort, and aspiration to dream. I am Santi's (my little one--7 months old) light and hope for a better tomorrow.

I am my mother, my father, my children, my wife, my community. I am my family, my community, my work--my past, present, and future."

Day 2: Lunch--12:30-1:00 pm.

Pizza was provided for lunch on Day 2. Dr. Ramirez displayed hospitality by making special arrangements for vegetarian pizzas, as well as salads for gluten-free eaters. After lunch, participants began walking to the auditorium for the performance of

Ballet Nepantla.

Day 2: Performance of Ballet Nepantla--1:00pm-3:00pm

Ballet Nepantla offered an exclusive performance to our CLE participants, which was the second act from their show *Valentina*--a collection of stories that speak to the strength and resilience of women during the Mexican Revolution. Drawing inspiration from Gloria Anzaldúa's borderlands theory, Ballet Nepantla's mission is to create performances that touch on "in-between" qualities associated with borderlands. *Nepantla*--a Nahuatl term of the indigenous people of Mexico--provides a historical, intellectual, and artistic framework to explore the liminal spaces of history and culture through a fusion of genres--classical ballet and traditional Mexican folklórico.



Figure 67. Ballet Nepantla #1. Photo from Ballet Nepantla's Valentina, retrieved from: <https://www.balletnepantla.com/>



Figure 68. Ballet Nepantla #1. Photo from Ballet Nepantla's Valentina, retrieved from: <https://www.balletnepantla.com/>



Figure 69. Ballet Nepantla #2. Photo from Ballet Nepantla's Valentina, retrieved from: <https://www.balletnepantla.com/>

Day 2: Q & A with Ballet Nepantla performers--3:00pm-4:00pm

Following the performance, CLE participants engaged in dialogue with the performers. Questions touched on issues such as collaboration and the creative process, the art of teamwork, negotiating conflict, race, and cultural appropriation. In the transition from the performance to the Q & A, Dr. Ramirez framed the session for learners with the following remarks:

“The engagement was not only about an entertainment quality but about an exploration of universal experiences that we have experienced, loved ones may have experienced, surely, ancestors have experienced throughout history. And I recall the conversation that Emiliano had yesterday, when he talked about our social DNA and how we carry the experiences, the strength, and the wisdom and

the knowledge of generations before us. And whenever I see the arts, I think that's the closest that I've experienced personally, to really connect to that something-- It's almost like something wells up inside you. And you wonder where does that passion and that love and inspiration and dynamism come from. And it almost you have that sense that it has been built up over centuries and into your grandparents, great grandparents, parents and now into you and us into future generations. And so you begin to appreciate the power that we have as educators and educational leaders in our communities.”



Figure 70. Audience Reaction. "That was one of the coolest things I've ever seen! I'm so glad I came...I almost stayed home. How long did it take ya'll to make this show?"
Answer: "About a year."



Figure 71. Q&A #1. "We traveled the whole world touring, and dance--like music and other forms of art--It's this multicultural language that kind of erases all the borders...And the amount of people that we connected with through just our bodies as an instrument is pretty outstanding...so you don't always have to have a literal conversation with someone to to change their mind about something...and I think that a show like this kind of gets that point across...So it's nice to see art and dance being this language intertwining around the world, that's really what's bringing people together."



Figure 72. Q&A #2. "Part about being a member of Nepantla is to push yourself even though you feel like you can't. And sometimes I do cry in the studio, I cry in the corner, I go home and cry because I can't do one step all rehearsal. [So its about] the vulnerability and also learning how to ask for help."



Figure 73. Q&A #3. "Something that's really beautiful about the company is that we all have different strengths...I came from a ballet background, and I thought I knew I knew dance. And then I joined Ballina Nepantla. I'm learning so much and learning styles of dance I never thought I would get to do and it's amazing. And Machi, and I have a little thing where, I help you with ballet and push you with ballet. And she's kind of helping me learn more of the folklórico and that's where it's really beautiful, to be vulnerable with each other and admit like, I don't know this. Can you help me?"



Figure 74. Q&A #4. "First: Can give us a little bit of background for those of us who are not familiar with the concept of Nepantla? And 2: how do you as a team negotiate the crossing of boundaries?"



Figure 75. Q&A #5. "Nepantla translates to the in between this or the in between spaces. And so we couldn't think of a better name for the company because my vision for the company was to fuse, not only styles of dance but cultures. And well, actually, one kind of side effect is it's exposing wider audiences, just to dance in general, because we

have a show that people are going to want to see come see for the Folklorico who would never go to the ballet, and they're being exposed to ballet, and you know, it might be the first time ever, and they're leaving just like blown away by it. And then we have others who are coming because they see that we have dancers who are Ailey or Juilliard or

Purchase grads to see this like ballet and then they've never had been exposed to Folklorico, which is such a beautiful representation of the Mexican culture which people need to see this day and age as much as possible. So they've been exposed to this for the first time. So and then they want to, they want to keep being exposed to it. So it's doing that, but what we do also that when communities and cultures and races, ethnicities, and backgrounds come together, the most beautiful art can be produced. Because there is no other company who really do what we do. And it's, I mean, it's, I'm biased, but it's beautiful."



Figure 76. Q&A #6. "Something that I always think about as a member of this company who is not of Mexican heritage is that if I am entering into this work, and if I am entering into this art and this culture, then it is my responsibility to make sure that I am informed that I'm educated, that I am representing the fullness and the beauty and the depth of this culture and of its people and of its history. In my dancing. It's a lot. There is a lot, but there is like we've talked about this is a company where there is an environment of learning and an environment of sharing...The inspiration that we take from each other is what provides that. It allows everything to mesh and to fuse together and I think why it's successful as a as a company as a production."



Figure 77. Q&A #7. "Something that I always think about as a member of this company who is not of Mexican heritage is that if I am entering into this work, and if I am entering into this art and this culture, then it is my responsibility to make sure that I am informed that I'm educated, that I am representing the fullness and the beauty and the depth of this culture and of its people and of its history. In my dancing. It's a lot. There is a lot, but there is like we've talked about this is a company where there is an environment of learning, and an environment of sharing. The inspiration that we take from each other is what provides that. It allows everything to mesh and to fuse together, and I think why it's successful as a as a company as a production."



Figure 78. Q&A #8. "We all relate to the idea of the fusion. Mexico wasn't Mexico before the Spanish came. Mexico is Mexico because of the blend that happened of everything, you know, like native, native Spanish, African slaves, all of the cultures that came to the country through the path of history. And that's what what's made Mexico...but it doesn't stay there. It doesn't remain there. Mexico itself and its culture, just like every other country, continues to evolve, and what was traditional from 100

years ago? Yeah, it is traditional, but it keeps evolving keeps growing keeps adding.
'Evolving' is a word that I like."

Day 2: Closing circle--4:00pm-4:30pm.

We closed the CLE with a call to action. The reflection for closing circle was, *"What do I take from our time together, and what can I commit to doing as a result?"* One-by-one, participants shared their take-aways from the CLE--several became emotional while reflecting about their experience. I created an image (Fig. 80) to capture some of the most powerful quotes from closing circle. Many participants expressed appreciation for the space to have genuine dialogue and to be vulnerable with each other. Others were excited to try out the CLE pedagogies they experienced--such as circle or OST. Another common sentiment was the desire to share what they learned with colleagues--to create a movement of educators within La Mesa ISD, Sheppard, and Altona committed to honoring the power of place and the wisdom of people (Guajardo, et. al, 2015).

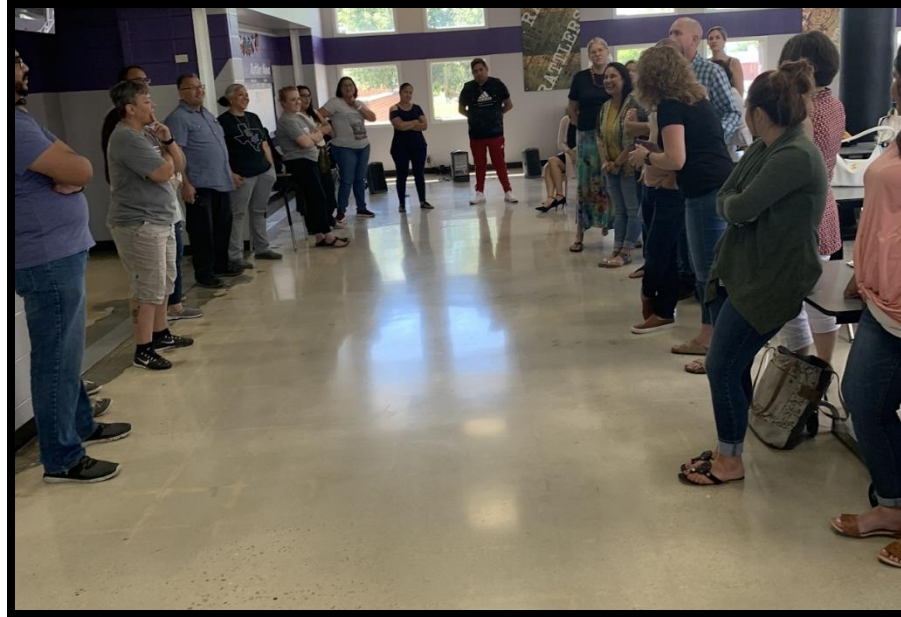


Figure 79. Closing Circle. Participants gather for closing circle--each person committed to further action inspired by their learning at the CLE.

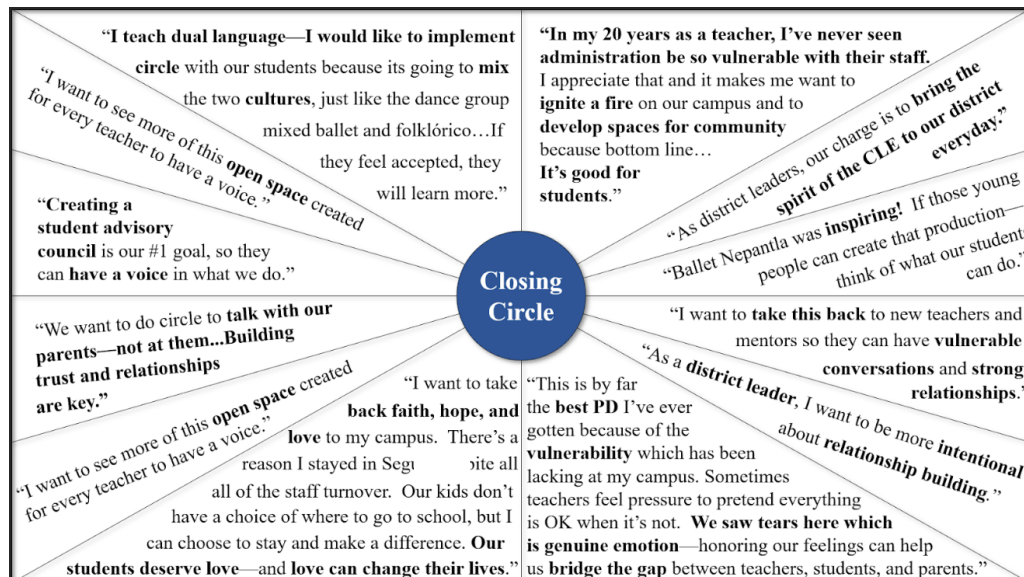


Figure 80. Closing Circle Quotes. The illustration captures a handful of the most powerful reflections from closing circle (own image).

Dissecting the snake: Planning for impact

It is important to note that while Fig. 14, illustrates the process of CLE as a continuous

linear process, that *Planning for Impact* can occur at any stage of the process. For example, the leaders of Altona ISD and Sheppard ISD committed to hosting and participating in future CLEs with the CT Network. Then during closing circle, every educator committed to changing their practice (in varying degrees) as a result of their experience at the CLE.

Dissecting the snake: CLE debrief plática:

Once the typically chaotic start to the school year had passed, participants from the three districts came together to debrief the CT Network CLE and discuss possibilities for future CLEs. On 9/22 (Sunday morning), Eva Martinez, Alejandra Vazquez, and Mario Sanchez were already scheduled to meet at this time for their dissertation writing group at Bonham Pre-K, where Eva serves as vice-principal. Dr. Alvarez, Dr. Ramirez, and I offered to meet during this window. Dr. Ramirez supplied coffee and breakfast tacos for the plática aimed at discussing the August CLE, as well as looking ahead to next steps for the CT Network. Dr. Santiago Vazquez couldn't attend the debrief conversation because he was taking his kids to catechism.

The illustrations below include selected quotes from the debrief plática. The purple circles are representatives of La Mesa ISD, black circles work for Altona ISD, Dr. Alvarez's maroon icon is the color of Sheppard ISD, and my circle is gold as a representative of Texas State University.

What did we take away from what we experienced together in August? And, what are the insights that you've had and some connections to the work that you do every day?"

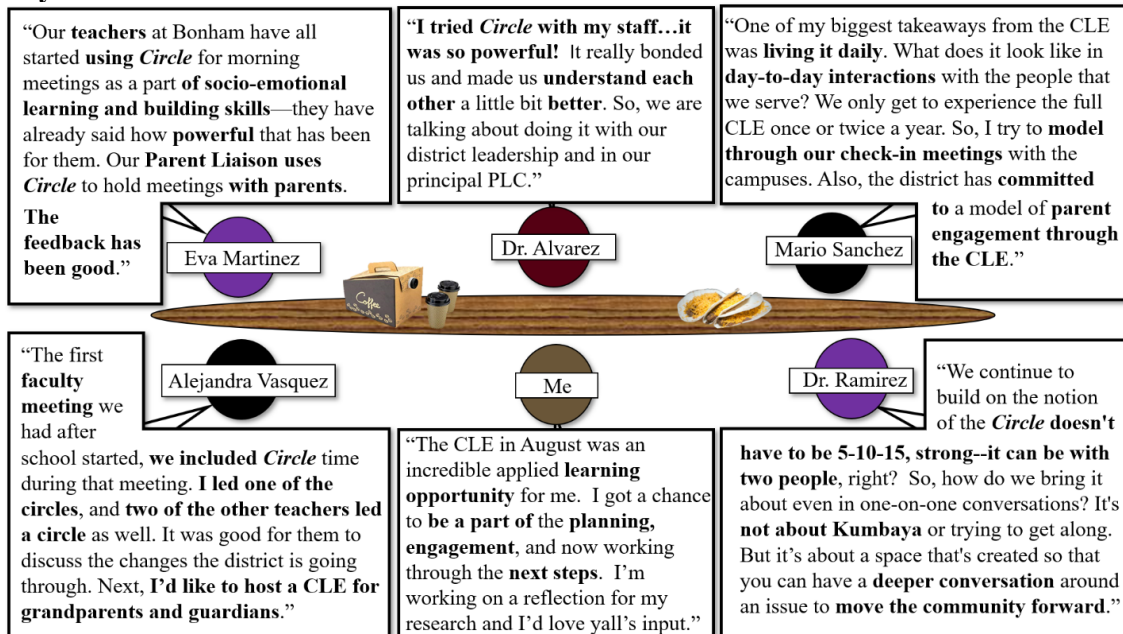


Figure 81. Debrief #1. The illustration captures quotes from the Debrief Conversation about takeaways from the CT Network CLE.

Plática on August CLE: The Power of “Treating People Like People”

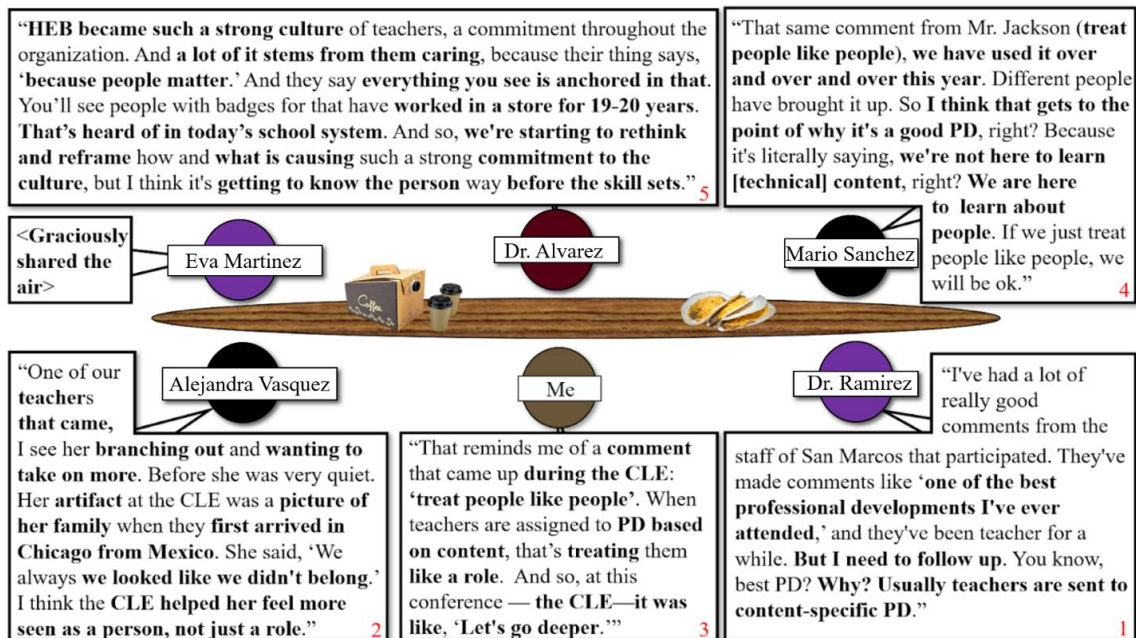


Figure 82. Debrief #2. The illustration captures quotes from the Debrief Conversation about Altona ISD's new motto that originated from the CT Network CLE

Plática: Planning for the next CLE

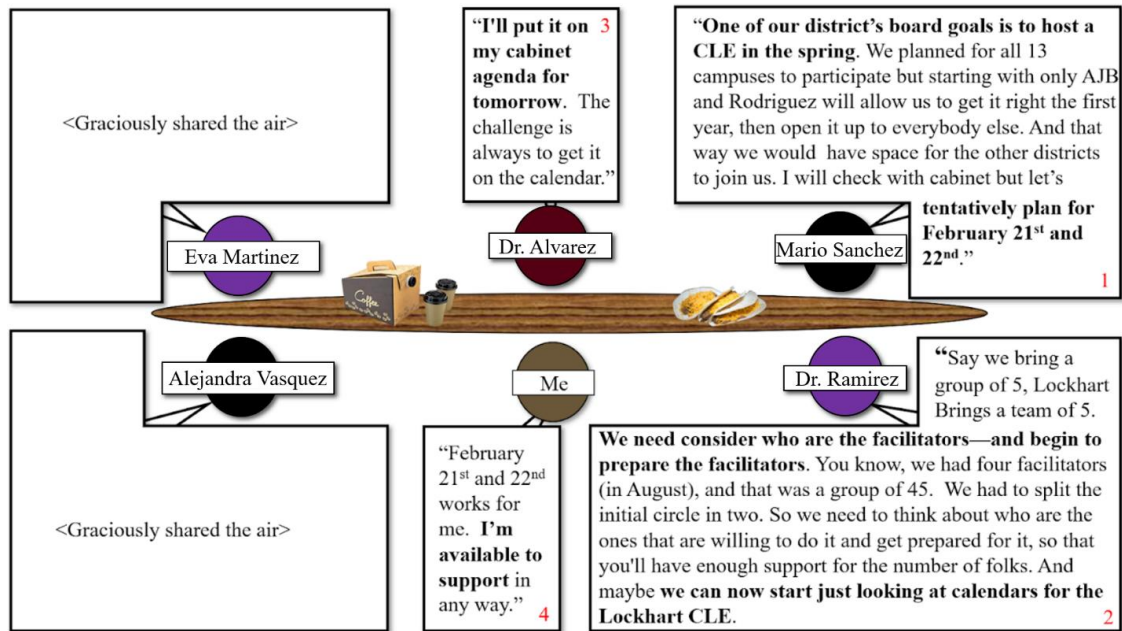


Figure 83. Debrief #3. The illustration captures quotes from the Debrief Conversation about planning for the next CT Network CLE.

Plática: A Network of Support--Tips for Doing a Community Walk with Staff

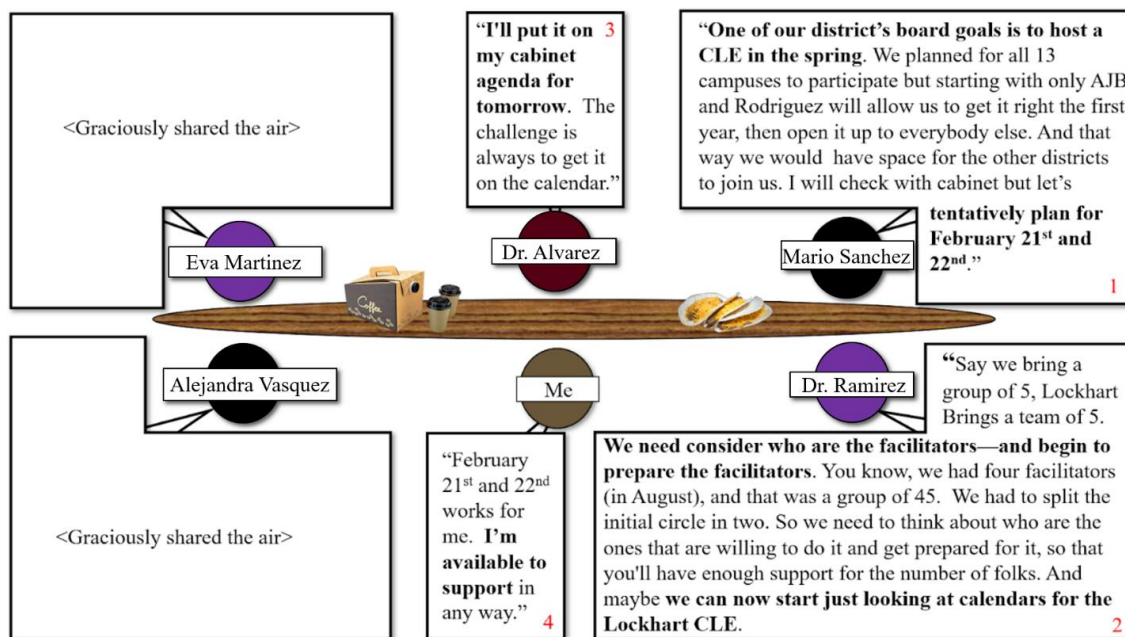


Figure 84. Debrief #5. The illustration captures quotes from the Debrief Conversation during a conversation about how to do a community walk with a staff of teachers.

Synthesizing my Learning: The Pedagogy of Connection

Myself and the design team of the CT Network CLE aligned the curriculum around three guiding principles:

- The Art of Teamwork
- The Art of Pedagogy
- Teaching through the Arts

Participants engaged in dialogue that was purposefully framed to inspire reflection

around these guiding principles. As both a participant and a convener of this CLE, I offer my own reflections and lessons learned on each of the CLE’s guiding principles, weaving lessons learned from my catalogue of life stories, with support from classic scholarship about learning theory and human development. To help the reader conceptualize each finding, I outline a table for each finding to highlight connections to the CT Network CLE, my life story, scholarly literature, regarding CLEs, and my research questions. Tables communicate a fixed, stagnant nature and give the illusion of permanence to the information contained within. Despite my use of tables for pedagogical purposes, my findings are to be understood as dynamic and ever evolving. The following findings from my research comprise my pedagogy of connection:

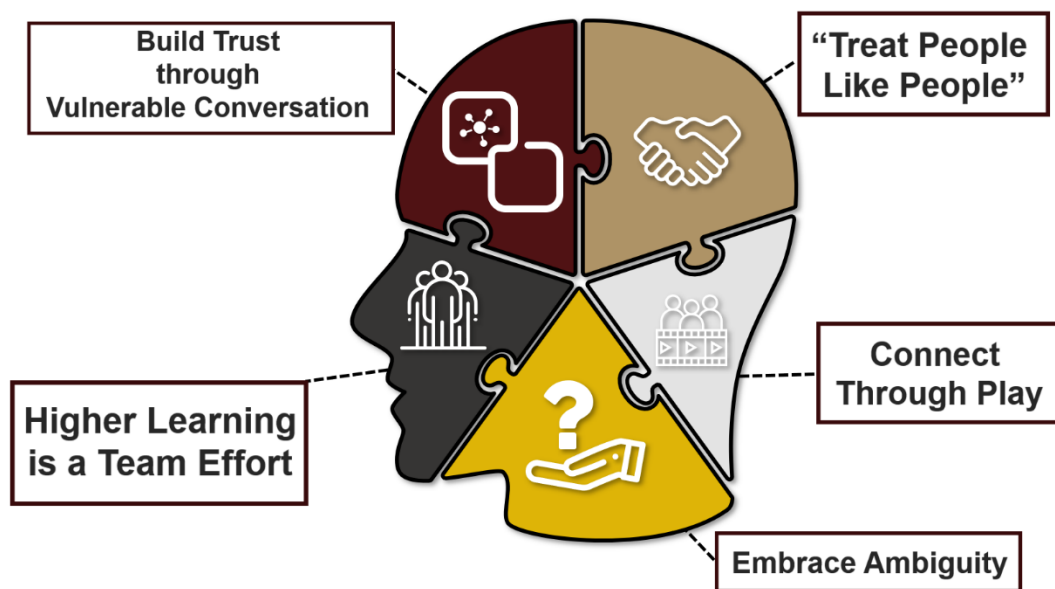


Figure 85. The Pedagogy of Connection.

Build trust through vulnerable conversation.

| Connection to CT Network CLE | Connection to Catalogue of Stories | Connection to Literature | Research Question(s) & Ecologies of Knowing | Axiom(s) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants negotiating team identity • Participants sharing <i>I Am</i> poems—particularly Dr. Vazquez | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sandra’s vulnerable honesty from <i>A Curiosity is Born</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guajardo, et. al, 2015 • Vygotsky, 1978 • Rogers, 1977 • Brown, 2012 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Skills</i>—individual (self) • <i>Climate</i>—Organization and Community • <i>Systems</i>—Organization and Community | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conversations are critical • Learning and leadership are a dynamic social process • Crossing boundaries enriches learning |

The theme of vulnerable conversation came up repeatedly during the transcript of the CT Network CLE closing circle reflections. One inspired teacher shared that in twenty years of teaching that she had never seen school leaders be so vulnerable with their staff, as a result, she wanted to create a gracious space for her students and their families. Vulnerability scholar Brené Brown (2012) defines vulnerability as “uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure.” Brené says that the risk comes with great reward: “vulnerability is the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy and creativity” (pg. 1). From the moment we open our mouths or create a mark on a blank canvas, we make ourselves vulnerable (Reynolds, 2003)².

In Chapter 1, I shared the story of Sandra, who was brave enough to make herself vulnerable to me. She gave me the gift of honesty, despite her lack of trust for the institutions of public education. Sandra’s genuine communication showed me that public

² This is a picture book that I would read to my first grade students about a reluctant artist who is empowered by to become and grow by her teacher’s assets lens.

schools represent oppression, not hope for many Students and Families of Color. Her vulnerability changed the course of my life and spurred a transformation of identity.

Trust facilitates social connection and prosperity for individuals and communities (Brown, 2012; Landes, 1998). Through sharing our raw, unfiltered experiences, we can heal wounds, forge social bonds, and invite the best in one another to step forward into being (Rogers, 1977; Guajardo, et al, 2015). Strong, symbiotic relationships with friends, colleagues, or family members radiate positive ripple effects throughout a social ecosystem (Vygotsky, 1978; Guajardo, et. al, 2015). As educators and nodes in a vast social network, our (individual and collective) potential to influence change is infinite.

CLE participants modeled vulnerability and trust when discussing their team's shared purpose. They trusted one another enough to share the driving motives behind their work as educators. As a team, they negotiated a shared understanding of purpose and created a symbolic representation of their team's identity. Once each art piece reached completion, the teams bravely shared and explained their work with the whole group. On *Day 2*, participants shared artifacts and stories from their development. Tears flowed, laughter roared, silence was held, and hugs were given. Later on, some participants recited their *I Am* poetry and bared their souls for all present to see. While the artists shared their poems, we went through a transcendent metaphysical experience. Each word illuminated aspects of the artist that were previously hidden, perhaps even to themselves. In coming to know these poets, the group identity came clearer into focus, and our own life experiences were brought into perspective. Over the course of the CLE, we became more connected with each other and with ourselves, largely due to the trust and vulnerability displayed by participants.

Higher learning is a team effort.

| Connection to CT Network CLE | Connection to Catalogue of Stories | Connection to Literature | Research Question(s) & Ecologies of Knowing | Axiom |
|---|--|--|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants negotiating team identity • Participants sharing <i>I Am</i> poems—particularly Dr. Vazquez • Dancers of Ballet Nepantla | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The support displayed in <i>A Rich Social Fabric</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guajardo, Guajardo, Salinas and Cardoza, 2019 • Block and McKnight, 2010 • Maturana & Varela, 1998 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Skills</i>—individual (self) • <i>Climate</i>—Organization and Community • <i>Systems</i>—Organization and Community | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conversations are critical • Learning and leadership are a dynamic social process • Crossing boundaries enriches learning • Hope and change are built on local assets • The people closest to the issue have the answers |

As mentioned, participants spent most of *Day 1* engaged in team-building activities to build group cohesion. Activities on *Day 2* were geared towards developing an understanding of self. However, during *Day 2*'s share outs of the *I Am* poems, the Vazquez family provided a touching lesson in teamwork, unity, and support.

At one point, Dr. Vazquez (Santiago), a known jokester and pot-stirrer, volunteered his colleague Kristin to read her poem. She shook her head reluctantly but eventually conceded after Dr. Vazquez egged her on in front of the group. Kristin was a great sport, and after reading her poem, she looked squarely at Dr. Vazquez and said, “your turn!” He initially refused, but then the crowd began chanting his name began, led

by his kids who were working the refreshment station. From there I knew that Dr. Vazquez wouldn't disappoint the crowd or shrink from the moment in front of his children. The chanting grew louder and louder until Dr. Vazquez stood and walked to the front of the cafeteria holding his notebook with the hand-written poem scribbled inside.

He opened by saying, "I need to give some chronology to this piece." Then came a long pause...maybe four or five seconds, which felt even longer as the tension in the room mounted. "Umm," he said as he looked down at his notes, shook his head, and tried to pull himself together. His voiced audibly cracked as he read the first line of his poem. "I am my mother's struggle..." He paused to choke back tears before finishing the line, "to survive in this new world." Just then, Dr. Guajardo, who was standing near the Vazquez children, whispered to them, "Your papi needs you." They all sprung from their seats and ran to their dad, hugging him tightly as he continued. "I am my mother's pain, suffering, and challenge. I am my mother's inspiration to fight cancer." With that line, the dam broke--Dr. Vazquez could no longer hold back the tears. The emotion in the room was raw and contagious. Nearly everyone was crying or choking back lumps in their throats.

My own emotions reached a fever pitch when Santiago described himself as his father's *guilt*, *hurt*, and *dust in the wind*. I thought of the estranged relationship that I have with my father and wondered what I represent to him and his life. Dr. Vazquez's words cracked open old wounds that laid dormant inside me. I wept. The emotion behind my tears was equal parts sadness and inspiration. Without his father in his life, Santiago developed into a strong leader for his family, school, and community. As I think about the next chapters of my life story, I draw hope and wisdom from the

symbiotic example set by Santiago and the Vazquez family.

I'm also reminded of the rich social fabric that nourished my development--a community-wide safety net to catch me when I needed it most. After my parents divorce, my family drew strength from one another. My mom, younger brother--Kyle, and I became closer than ever before...having emerged together from the brink of chaos. We relied on the humor and emotional support of Aunt NeeNee and Uncle Craig. My grandparents provided love through meals rides, home from basketball practice, and bonding time playing BINGO. Teachers and camp counselors provided additional support and presence of positive role models. My upbringing was a team effort.

As Dr. Vazquez continued to recite his emotional tribute to his family, he seemed to draw strength from the presence of his kids and wife, Alejandra. He signaled to each of them as they took center-stage within his poem, and they smiled warmly to each other--lifting the collective mood in the room. The image of Dr. Vazquez and his children brings to mind an art piece constructed by the team in La Mesa, incorporating chairs, construction paper, and yarn. Each member of the Vazquez team (including Alejandra) supports one another with their unique gifts--they are interconnected and interdependent. Their strength comes from the collective. Dr. Guajardo also pointed out the moment's similarity to *The Storyteller*, a famous clay figurine representing the importance of oral tradition, made by the Pueblo people of New Mexico (Guajardo, 2019). In figure 77 below, we see *The Storyteller* holding and being held up by a future generation of storytellers.

In a recent publication, Guajardo, Guajardo, Salinas, and Cardoza's (2019), declare their intent to rehabilitate the purpose of education, grounding the field in

interdisciplinary, interorganizational, multicultural, and multi-generational work aimed at improving the social fabric of communities. The authors call their craft *higher learning* because of its focus on individual, organizational, and community development. During the CT Network CLE, the Vazquez family offered participants a bonafide experience of higher learning.



Figure 86. Synchrononous Images. Synchronous images from the CT Network CLE, and a representation of the Storyteller—made by the Pueblo people.

Connecting through play brings out the best in people.

| Connection to CT Network CLE | Connection to Catalogue of Stories | Connection to Literature | Research Question(s) & Ecologies of Knowing | Axiom |
|--|---|--|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants creating artistic representations of team identity • Participants creating <i>I Am</i> poems | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • My mother's playful creativity in the kitchen • Playing sports in the yard | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Piaget, 1964 • Guajardo, et. al, 2015 • Csikszentmihalyi, 1975 • Maslow, 1970 • Gray, 2011 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Skills</i>—individual (self) • <i>Climate</i>—Organization and Community • <i>Systems</i>— | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conversations are critical • Learning and leadership are a dynamic social process • Crossing boundaries enriches |

| | | | | |
|---|--|--|------------------------------|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants having free dialogue through Open Space Technology (OST) | with my dad and brothers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NeeNee's playful spirit | | Organizational and Community | learning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hope and change are built on local assets The people closest to the issue have the answers |
|---|--|--|------------------------------|---|

Jean Piaget (1964) believed that emotional, moral, and cognitive development emerge from states of *play*--a lifelong process beginning in infancy which continues through adulthood. In other words, the games we play as children incrementally evolve into the social games we play as adults. Piaget's point may seem counterintuitive because we tend to think of games as trivial. However, all social interactions necessarily emerge within a bounded, rule-governed space--which can be understood as a game. Our country's legal, economic, and political structures are games, set up by White European men, primarily for the benefit of White European men. Women and People of Color have been historically subjugated within these socially-constructed spaces to the detriment of all humanity. For perspective, one might imagine the intricate (and sometimes cruel) social games played by packs of wolves, colonies of bees, or flocks of birds. Indeed, some games are serious...at stake are the life and death of individuals, species, and ecosystems.

According to Piaget (1964), during the first stage of development, learners don't understand the rules when they initially encounter a game. The next stage of development allows for the learner to play the game without a conceptual understanding of the rules. Here, the learner can "get" the game in an embodied sense without being able to articulate their understanding. In the stage that follows, the rules are understood

and defined by the learner, but only after they've intuitively grasped how to play.

Finally, the highest stage of development occurs when we understand that we are not only players of games and followers of rules, but we also producers of rules and the creators of new games.

A CLE is a game, whereby the objective is for all participants to operate at the highest level of Piagetian development (Guajardo, et. al, 2015; Piaget 1964). Within a CLE, we are empowered to discuss, negotiate, and create the rules that govern our collective and individual behaviors within agreed-upon bounds. Together we may not be able to overthrow capitalism, dismantle white supremacy, or phase out standardized testing overnight. However, we can begin by deciding how to hold a meeting or share space with one another. The CLE is a container for citizens to practice democracy by collaboratively advancing to the highest stage of Piagetian development. Throughout the course of the CT Network CLE, we co-created the rules and expectations for when we convene as an organization. In addition, each team worked to build implicit and explicit expectations around their roles and identities--to be revisited and reshaped dynamically over the coming school year, and beyond.

At the CT Network CLE, *play* was important in another sense. Participants had ample time to engage in a state of play with one another through open space technologies (OST) and while collaboratively creating artistic representations. Play--which involves exploration and free expression--is crucial to social, emotional, and cognitive development at all stages of life (Gray, 2011; Piaget 1964). Play exists in infinite forms across nature. Neuroscientists have even discovered evidence for defined circuitry within the brains of all mammals which govern states of play (Panksepp, 1981). The prevalence

of play across species speaks to its evolutionary importance. Yet, among educators (and most other adults) play has a bad reputation as a waste of time. Neoliberal influences and *best practice* push classroom teachers to “maximize instructional minutes,” resulting in less and less time for children to play throughout their development. A linear relationship exists between the decline of play in our society and increased rates of anxiety and depression among youth (Gray, 2011). Today, youth feel less empowered to make a difference and experience higher rates of narcissism than ever before, which has been attributed to a lack of social development through play.

From my personal story, I think about spirit of play that my mother brought into the kitchen--as evident by the family cookbook included in the appendices. We did not have a lot of money, but we always ate well because my mom is creative. She approached cooking with the spirit of play. Each day her game was to make the most delicious and nutritious meal possible for her family while investing the least amount of time and money possible. She involved her three sons in the game as sous chefs, and we have all grown to love cooking. I’m also reminded of playing catch with my Dad in the yard until the sun would go down, and it would become too difficult to track the ball’s path into my well-worn mitt. Hours would melt by, in fact all time seemed to stand still while in such a state of play. Through play we enter what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1975) calls the flow state. Flow is the experience of being fully immersed in the enjoyment of a process of the activity. Flow is characterized by the complete absorption in what one does, and a resulting loss in one's sense of space and time, even one’s sense of self. Through play, we *become* the task. Athletes call the sensation “being in the zone” though the concept has been well-understood by Buddhists and Hindus for

thousands of years. It has been called presence, stillness, enlightenment, and Buddhanature. In Sankrit it's called Śūnyatā--which means voidness or emptiness.

Developmental psychologist Abraham Maslow (1994) called the set of phenomenon “peak experiences.” Maslow wrote, “The peak experience: the mystic experience, the oceanic feeling, feelings of limitless horizons opening up to the vision, the feeling of being simultaneously more powerful and more helpless. And whatever was before the feeling of great ecstasy and wonder and awe, a loss of placing in time and space...” (1970, p. 164). In his research, Maslow noted that peak experiences were triggered by a huge variety of stimuli. They came from experiences of profound love, or from being on top of the mountain, or from being taken over by a beautiful piece of music. On the other hand, peak experiences (or flow) can't be accessed voluntarily. We can't command ourselves into flow; it only comes through a surrender or letting go of the self.

Flow is accessible in a variety of settings, but I've experienced it most often while *playing* sports (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). I was not a great athlete, but growing up I spent a lot of time playing pickup basketball at the YMCA. I can vividly recall the sensation of flow that I experienced on certain occasions. My mind went totally quiet, I moved with grace, the hoop seemed as big as Lake Superior, and the stroke of my jumpshot became an effortless, out-of-body sensation. It felt like I was standing outside of myself, watching myself perform. I couldn't miss. In these flow states, I performed perfectly...yet, I felt like I had no control in the thing whatsoever. Think of the dancers from Ballet Nepantla, they don't think of how to do each step before they execute it. Their knowledge is embodied, and it overtakes them during their performance. I contrast

flow to the paralyzing feeling of anxiety that I’ve felt watching the third strike go by in little league, in front of my jeering dad--frozen with fear not to disappoint him. In moments like these, I was no longer in a state of play, more like fight, flight, or freeze. Trying excessively to control an outcome manifests in a tightness...the imposition of structure that kills flow because the mind gets in the way of becoming the task. In those moments, my thinking mind, or ego, was overactive and interfered with the task--the antithesis of flow. Through *play*, we enter *flow*, and in flow we are at our best (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Maslow, 1970; Piaget, 1964).

If we want more flow, we must have more play and less standardization. As educators, we need to rehabilitate the role of play in education--for students and adults alike. Play for adults is generally considered acceptable only within the narrow bounds of recreational time. However, the benefits of play extend to all ages of life. Play among adults relieves stress, boosts creativity, exercises the mind, and can improve our relationships with family, colleagues, and community members (Piaget, 1964; Gray, 2011).

“Treat people like people.”

| Connection to CT Network CLE | Connection to Catalogue of Stories | Connection to Literature | Research Question(s) & Ecologies of Knowing | Axiom |
|---|--|---|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This comment emerged during the team presentations of artistic representations of team identity • Dialogue | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To illustrate my growth as an educator, I included the agenda from a compliance-driven | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sergiovanni, 2004 • Habermas, 1984 • Guajardo, et. al, 2015 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Skills</i>—individual (self) • <i>Climate</i>—Organization and Community • <i>Systems</i>—Organization and | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conversations are critical • Learning and leadership are a dynamic social process • Crossing boundaries enriches learning |

| | | | | |
|---|--|--|-----------|---|
| throughout the 2-day CLE encouraged self exploration—including topics of race and social identity | training that I helped to plan and facilitate from before enrolling at Texas State University. | | Community | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hope and change are built on local assets • The people closest to the issue have the answers |
|---|--|--|-----------|---|

During the presentation of their team’s art piece, Mr. Anderson--a teacher from Altona ISD--crystallized his team’s philosophy in the phrase: “treat people like people.” That comment emerged from a conversation about our responsibility as educators to honor the humanity of every student, parent, colleague, and community member. According to Mario Sanchez, Mr. Anderson’s comment has since turned into a district motto, of sorts. Different people throughout the Altona ISD have used the saying as a touchstone to remind them of their team identity and values. Implicit in the motto is the idea that each person is a sacred being. The idea is akin to the values that uphold the concept of human rights. We all deserve human rights and respect because human life is considered sacred.

Mr. Anderson’s comment carries resonance because the field of education is dominated by what Sergiovanni (2004) calls the *systemsworld*. Building on the work of Habermas’ (1984), Sergiovanni wrote that the systemsworld uses “instrumentalities” (e.g. policies, processes, procedures) intent at increasing effectiveness and efficiency of education. The lifeworld, on the other hand, is reflected in culture, values, and relationships. In a school, the lifeworld is a landscape of "culture, meaning, and significance” (p. 4). According to Sergiovanni, the ecosystem of a school is in balance

when the systemsworld works to serve the lifeworld. Systems should work for people, but too often in the field of education, people work for systems. An ecosystem oriented toward the systemsworld loses perspective of humanity and risks choking out the dynamic nature of life through excessive structure. There is tremendous pressure on educators to submit to the demands of the systemsworld.

When I worked for a state agency, my team provided mandatory technical training to school leaders identified by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) whose campuses scored ‘improvement required’ through standardized measures of accountability. In Appendix C, I include the agenda from a statewide training that I helped to plan and facilitate. The agenda stands in stark contrast to the agenda of the CT Network CLE. My experience working in state accountability taught me that it is an extremely difficult challenge to create policies for a state as large and diverse as Texas. In taking on that task, TEA has adopted the bird’s eye view to assess teaching and learning. Each community’s unique gifts, collective effort, and infinite potential are boiled down into a letter grade label. Letter grades are calculated through a complicated algorithm based on standard measures of accountability. Test scores determine the types of learning experiences our students receive. Students are transformed into numbers.

While employed at the state agency, we trained school leaders to rely on “instrumentalities” or tools of the systemsworld (Sergiovanni, 2004). There, I learned under many great mentors and worked with soulful educators who understood that education is a people business. However, our roles demanded an emphasis on strategies, evaluation mechanisms, and control systems. We often taught educators to think like clinicians--diagnosing the weakness of each student or colleague and prescribing a

standardized, research-based treatment. Within this paradigm, people are easily reduced to cogs in the machine of the systemsworld--understood primarily through roles and responsibilities. “Treat people like people” is a rallying cry for educators to stay grounded in their humanity and resist acting in the service of the systemsworld.

During the CT Network CLE, participants focused their discussions on growing organic systems to serve students, staff, parents, and community members. An emphasis was placed on getting to know each other and ourselves as people, not in relation to each others’ roles on an organizational chart. Participants explored their own development, with dialogue centered around an artifact that spoke to their unique story. The *I Am* poems challenged participants to define themselves--a form of storymaking (Guajardo, et. al, 2015). We bonded through storytelling and came to understand our commonalities and shared purpose of enriching the social fabric of communities, families, and schools. Together, we committed to organically growing systems in the service of, and in response to, the will of the humane lifeworld (Guajardo, et. al, 2015; Sergiovanni, 2004). The CLE can be understood as a living, dynamic amalgamation of the systems and lifeworld.

Embrace ambiguity.

| Connection to CT Network CLE | Connection to Catalogue of Stories | Connection to Literature | Research Question(s) & Ecologies of Knowing | Axiom |
|--|---|--|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants engaged in dialogue through loosely structured activities to allow for organic, | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NeeNee shared her love of the arts with my brothers and I • The arts have been a significant | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anzaldúa, 2015 • Guajardo, et. al, 2015 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Skills</i>—individual (self) • <i>Climate</i>—Organization and Community • <i>Systems</i>—Organization and | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conversations are critical • Learning and leadership are a dynamic social process • Crossing boundaries |

| | | | | |
|---|--|--|-----------|---|
| dynamic learning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dancers from Ballet Nepantla shared the power of art on their personal development • The dancers of Ballet Nepantla discussed the role of art in the evolution of society | influence on my development, thinking, and social networks | | Community | enriches learning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hope and change are built on local assets • The people closest to the issue have the answers |
|---|--|--|-----------|---|

Art enables us to find order and chaos (and vice-versa), and we live in chaotic times. With school districts around the country slashing budgets for the arts, it begs the question: how does art fit into the pedagogy of connection? In other words, how does art contribute toward the development of individuals and of society? And, while we are at it-why did the conveners of the CT Network CLE align the agenda with the arts in mind, culminating in a performance by Ballet Nepantla? The answer lies in the group's name and the potential for artists to spark change in the world.

As Ballet Nepantla co-founder, Andrea Guajardo, explained during the Q & A session following the dance troop's performance, Nepantla is a Nahuatl word which means "in between-ness." The concept of Nepantla carries great significance in the works of Gloria Anzaldúa. Anzaldúa compared nepantla to a mystical (or metaphysical)

space of liminality where consciousness is transformed, and order is made from chaos through the power of the artist's imagination. She wrote,

“The nepantla state is artists’ natural habitat...Nepantla is the site of transformation, the place where different perspectives come into conflict, and where you question the basic ideas, tenets, and identities inherited from your family, your education, and your different cultures...[Nepantla is like] the *dark* cave of creativity where (the bat god, Murciélago), hang[s] upside down, turning the self upside down to see from another point of view, one that brings a new state of understanding. It is in nepantla that we write and make art, bearing witness to the attempt to achieve resolution and balance where there may be none in real life” (2015, p. 57, 127, 21).

Inspired by Anzaldúa's description of Nepantla, I created Fig. 77 below. The three-dimensional sphere of light is the pool of knowledge that is illuminated within the public's imagination. The illuminated territory of known things is surrounded by what is ambiguous and unknown, or the land of Nepantla (illustrated by the question marks). Beyond Nepantla is the infinite landscape of the unknowable (shown as the vast sea of darkness). Towards the center of the sphere, the light is brightest, and our collective knowledge is most secure. However, at the epicenter is a pinhole of intense darkness which represents the transcendent source of all knowledge--beyond any concept that can be grasped. As light emerges from darkness, all knowledge springs forth from an unknowable source.

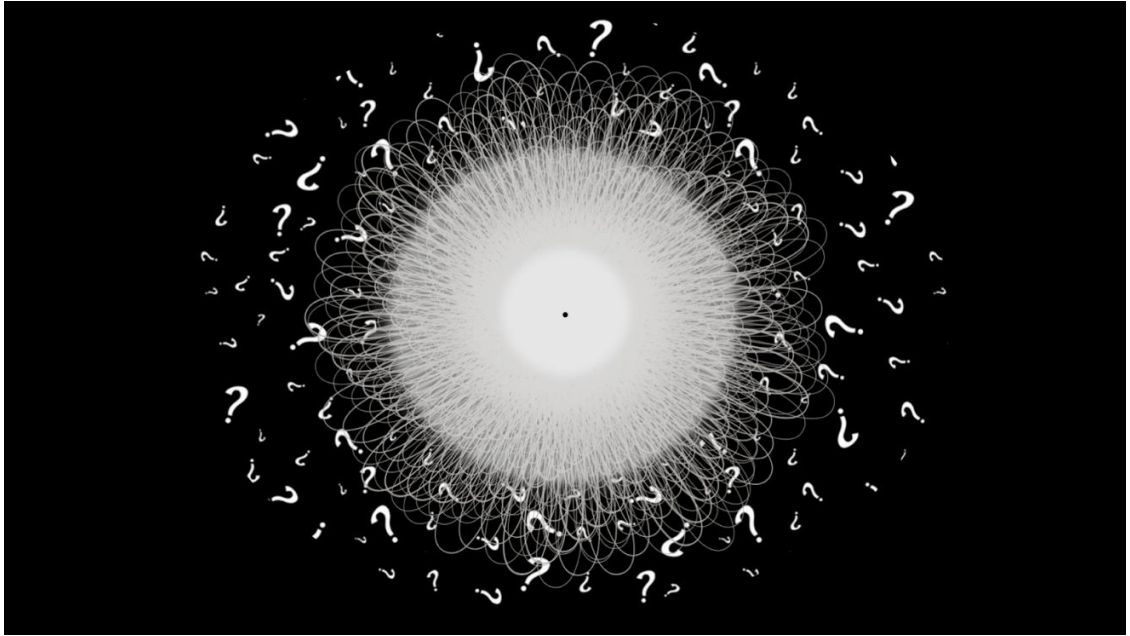


Figure 87. The Light in the Darkness. My representation of the role of artists in society—the light in the darkness (luz en lo oscuro).

Most people spend their time inhabiting the familiar confines of illuminated territory. The artist is the pioneer of knowledge (Anzaldúa, 2015). They make art as a byproduct of a process--a venture into the darkness to contend with ideas that call to us from beyond the realm of understanding. As the precursor to fully articulated knowledge, the artist translates what they learned from their journey into the *Nepantla* lands. In doing so, they blaze a trail for others to follow into the darkness through their images, stories, dance, and crafts. Art fuels a metabolic process, which transforms darkness into light--giving way to the *ever-expanding* landscape of our ravenously curious collective consciousness. Art is a bridge that moves society forward into the infinite possibilities of the future.

The art of Ballet *Nepantla* confronts issues emerging from the borderland between cultures. Andrea Guajardo teamed with co-founder Martín Rodríguez to forge an innovative form of expression combining classical ballet and contemporary dance with

traditional Mexican folklórico. In doing so, they created a new artistic space, a border mestizo project whose objective is to reread, (re)interpret, (re)imagine, and (re)construct the past and present of their respective/combined cultures. (Anzaldúa, 2015). For example, Ballet Nepantla's latest show, *Valentina*, is a collection of stories highlighting the strength and resiliency of Mexican women during the Mexican Revolution--a period of history traditionally understood through the lens of male accomplishments (CLE, 2019). The resulting aesthetic has much to teach us about the historical, cultural, and social realities of being Mexican, Mexican American, immigrant, trans-cultural, and beneath it all--human. With the terrorist shootings in El Paso occurring less than a week before the performance, the group's message is timely given tensions that exist along the US-Mexican border and beyond.

During the Q & A, Andrea spoke about the effect that Ballet Nepantla has had on audiences through their public pedagogy:

“We are exposing wider audiences to dance. We have a show that people are going to want to see come see for the folklórico who would never go to the ballet, and they're being exposed to ballet, and it might be the first time ever and they're leaving blown away by it. And then we have others who are coming because they see that we have dancers who are Ailey or Juilliard or Purchase grads to see...ballet, and then they've never been exposed to folklórico, which is such a beautiful representation of the Mexican culture which people need to see, *in this day and age*, as much as possible. So, they've been exposed to this for the first time. And then they want to keep being exposed to it. So it's doing that, but it also shows that when communities and cultures and races, ethnicities and backgrounds

come together, the most beautiful art can be produced. Because there is no other company who really do what we do. And it's, I mean, I'm biased, but it's beautiful. It is” (Ballet Nepantla, 2019).

Like Andrea, Anthony Bocconi, another performer in Ballet Nepantla, has seen audiences, including his own family, leave the show feeling empowered and inspired to learn about the rich history and culture of Mexico. During the Q & A he said,

“When we were performing in New York, my family came and I'm a Brooklyn Italian. They all left just as empowered as someone watching the show of Mexican descent, you know? They had no idea of any of this history and it made them want to go and do some research. So, it's up to us to make the audience want to leave and learn something new. And I think that this show really does that. I would have never learned half of this information if I wasn't in the room with these people <motions to the cast> for the last two years. So it's more than just the literal story. It's trying to stand up for what we believe is right in this world today, and where the world needs to go” (CLE, 2019).

Fellow performer, Rafa, echoed Anthony's sentiments about the responsibility they feel as artists to make the world a better place through their example to young people. He said,

“Adding to what Anthony was saying--two main ideas crossed my mind...One of them is the huge responsibility that performing artists and artists in general have of educating and raising their voices and speaking through their work. I think that the responsibility of performing on the stage is huge. Especially when you're in front of kids because you're showing them a lot of things. A story. What is to

work hard for something. You know how easy it may look, later they find out how much work...there is behind something like that. And I thought number two: is that boys dance too. A lot of times, when I've worked with kids, the boys don't wanna dance. Or they feel like, 'No, that's for girls.' Or like, 'I'm not into that, I want to play football.' And I'm like, 'Sure. I think girls should play football and boys should dance if they want to. Because at the end of the day, [dance is] something that's going to add discipline. It's healthy for them. It's, it'll keep their minds and their bodies busy" (CLE, 2019).

There was a real sense of passion and *plática* when the topic came to the role of dance in the lives of young people. Anthony shared that dance saved him from periods of darkness in his life and helped him blossom as a person--giving him confidence, and an ability to connect with people from across the world. Anthony learned to change hearts and minds without saying a word. He said, "Dance is a multicultural language that erases all borders, intertwining people around the world--I see it really bringing people together..." (CLE, 2019).

Juxtaposing my own story: my Aunt Nee Nee intentionally exposed my brothers and I to the arts, taking us to see plays and serious films³, to expand our imaginations past the bounds of a rural Michigan town. I developed a sense of identity in high school centered around art, music, and film. My closest friends were self-described film snobs. Because of art, I found a sense of self and friendships that stand strong to this day. Nee Nee instilled in me a love for the arts that opened up my world.

The arts (as a form of play) bring out the best in people, build community, and

³ And silly ones when we needed them most--see the story from my catalogue of the sleepover where Nee Nee brought a movie starring Fabio to cheer us up.

facilitate border crossing of race, class, sexual orientation, gender, and ethnicity.

Neoliberal influences lead many school leaders to cut funds for the arts because its value is difficult to quantify. After all, schools aren't held accountable for the depth and diversity of their art programs. But the arts teach ambiguity--an increasingly useful skill in today's rapidly changing world. Anzaldúa provokes us to develop a tolerance for ambiguity in order to shift society out of "habitual formations; from convergent thinking, analytical reasoning that tends to use rationality to move toward a single goal (a Western mode), to divergent thinking, characterized by movement away from set patterns and goals and toward a whole perspective" (p. 101).

Ambiguity is a defining characteristic of Ballet Nepantla that requires their cast to navigate tensions regarding race and ethnicity. During the Q & A, Dr. Miguel A. Guajardo pushed the cast to discuss why they had anglos and asians playing the role of Mexicanos. Piper, a white American performer, shared her perspective--saying,

"Something that I always think about as a member of this company who is not of Mexican heritage, is that if I am entering into this work, and if I am entering into this art and this culture, then it is my responsibility to make sure that I am informed that I'm educated, that I am representing the fullness and the beauty and the depth of this culture and of its people and of its history."

Piper voiced a deep desire to respect the culture and history of an artform unfamiliar to her own, showing awareness that she may be perceived as a colonizer or cultural appropriator. Anthony, her Brooklyn Italian castmate, rejected the label of "cultural appropriation" and emphasized the vital role of

artists as agents of change--luz en lo oscuro.

“I do think it's a little bit of a fine line, but it works so beautifully in art and dance that I think...we should be able to pick and choose parts of cultures that inspire us for the good and we should be able to dive into that without being looked down upon or being called, you know, like cultural appropriation and things like that. If it's not done in a negative, derogatory way, we should be able to pull from each other's cultures to learn and to grow. Right?

I think that's why fusing all these different genres in a dance company is so important to really bring art to the next level as well. Someone asked a few tours ago, why I felt that it was important that we took folklórico to the next level and not just kept it traditional. And the only thing I can really think of was in the Renaissance, if it wasn't all of this new forward way of thinking and all this art, the world wouldn't have gotten to where it goes, right?

So, we're still paying homage to the traditional background, but we also want to take it to a new place to keep it growing because you know, maybe people 150 years from now people aren't going to want to see a strictly folklórico show, you know what I mean? Things have to keep evolving for people's minds to evolve and the world to keep turning, you know, so it's a constant snowball effect, if we just all stayed, how things were 100 years ago, it wouldn't evolve as quickly or maybe where we want it to go” (CLE, 2019).

The artists of Ballet Nepantla pay respect to the tradition while moving the artform forward. Those in the troop without formal training in folklórico have spent hundreds of hours learning from their castmates who are steeped in the dance, traditions, and culture of Mexico. The philosophy of Ballet Nepantla is in line with Dr. Cornel West's position on cultural appropriation in the arts. According to West (2017), it's vitally important to respect what he calls the *roots* and the *routes* of art. The roots of an artform are local--grounded in the history and culture of a particular people or place. From the *roots* grow the branches, whose *routes* are global. The artist has a responsibility to pay homage to tradition, but without allowing for art to evolve, it can stagnate all of society.

Finally, the conversation turned to perhaps the most important topic: what do children think about Ballet Nepantla? When discussing the value of the arts in education, it's important to consider the opinion of young people. Younger audience members typically have a limited attention span for theater and dance, but that hasn't been the case during Ballet Nepantla's tour of *Valentina*. The performers said that for every show so far, children of all ages have been dancing in their seats, in the aisles, even twirling out into the lobby during intermission. According to Andrea, children have been smitten with *Valentina*'s action packed scenes and beautiful costumes. The kids in attendance on the day of the CLE agreed. One audience member, pictured below, had this to say: "That was one of the coolest things I've ever seen! I'm so glad I came...I almost stayed home" (CLE, 2019). Hearing this, I take away hope. When youth are inspired by the arts, we can never predict how the world might change for the better.



Figure 88. Inspired Youth. An inspired young audience member after Ballet Nepantla's performance of Valentina.

Artistic representation of embodied learning.

Over two years ago, I picked up a copy of *Reframing Community Partnerships*, which provides the theoretical grounding of the CLE, paired with illustrative stories from the authors' lives. The content was informative, and the stories helped provide depth and the wisdom of lived experience to their theoretical framework. However, CLE is difficult to capture in words. When fully grasped, the CLE is *embodied*. In the course of my development, Dr. (Miguel) Guajardo challenged me to "*become the CLE*," which speaks to a metaphysical transformation of self. Knowing the theory is not enough. To understand a way of being, it must be *experienced* through *examples*. Thus, exposure to CLE conveners has been crucial to my development.

I have participated in large and small CLEs in geographies such as Texas, Colorado, Louisiana, Ohio, and Mississippi. In working with Dr. Monica Valadez, Dr. Miguel A. Guajardo, Dr. Francisco J. Guajardo, Dr. Chris Janson, Dr. Mathew Militello, Dr. Benjamin Grijalva, and many others I have observed the traits, behaviors, and

mindsets embodied by a CLE convener. Observing CLEs in different locations, with communities convened by a variety of facilitators enabled me to develop a schema of what it means to *become the CLE*.

Art can help us say what can't be said. During the following reflection, I go beyond words to help communicate my learning. In capturing the essence of a CLE convener, I synthesized my learning in an image. In a similar exercise to the participants of the CT Network CLE, I created an artistic representation for the anatomy of the CLE Convener, to include their context and purpose. Each component of the illustration is described below, along with examples to bring them to life.

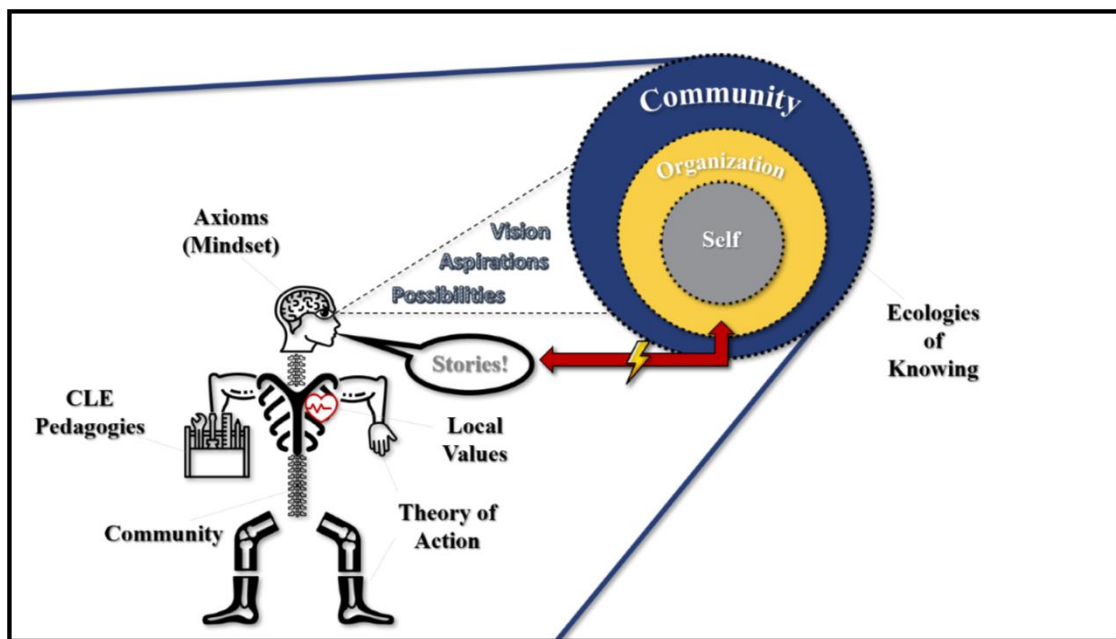


Figure 89. The Anatomy of a CLE Convener. My illustration representing my schema of a CLE convener—capturing the embodied knowledge that transcends language.

- Axioms: A mindset is a set of assumptions that shape our thinking and actions.

The axioms of the CLE are a set of assumed truths that have emerged from best practices in community-building over the last thirty years. Paired with the local

vision and values, the axioms guide the daily actions and decisions of a CLE practitioner.

- **Ecologies of Knowing:** The ecologies make up the landscape where the CLE practitioner operates and the site(s) where their efforts will be focused. During the CT Network CLE, participants worked to understand and improve the self, their school and/or family (organizations), and communities.
- **Theory of Change:** As the hands, feet, arms, and legs of the CLE, the Theory of Change illustrates how the work of CLE gets done...theory in action.
- **Local Vision & Values:** Each CLE responds to the local needs, assets, conditions, and opportunities. The local vision and values are critical to making the work relevant, responsive, and sustainable. During the CT Network CLE, participants supplied (and generated) values, talents, aspirations, and wisdom which feed and direct the group's collective efforts.
- **CLE Pedagogies:** The *tools of the trade*. The pedagogies used during the CT Network CLE include *circle*, *plática*, and open space technology (OST).
- **Community:** Community is the backbone of the CLE—it is the ecosystem that supports both the organization (SAISD) and the self. During the CT Network CLE, participants drew wisdom from nature to understand the ecologies of a school. Through *pláticas*, we identified community as the context and purpose that feeds our work as educators. A healthy school is provided for by its community. A strong community is supported by its schools. Both the schools and its community are comprised of individuals who contribute to and benefit from the collective's success.

- Stories: In CLE, we share stories to integrate the past with collective action for the future. We shape and share stories—our stories inform who we become.

Participants worked to define their team and individual stories during the CT Network CLE. These stories will inform the work we do and how we engage with one another.

SO WHAT?

(CHAPTER V--CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS)

This chapter presents a summary of the study and my key takeaways from the findings presented in Chapter 4. Here in Chapter 5, I provide a summary of each chapter and a discussion of the implications for action and recommendations for future research.

Summary

In Chapter 1, I introduced the central focus (aka problem statement) of my study through two stories. First, through open and vulnerable dialogue, Sandra--the parent of my student, Tiffani--collapsed my previous conceptions about the altruistic principles of public education and my identity as a public servant. Where before I saw myself as an altruistic force for good, Sandra's story positioned me as an unknowing agent of a racist and unjust system. She opened my eyes to her struggle for agency, voice, dignity, and a humane educational experience for her children. Due to Sandra's lesson, a new critical consciousness was born that led me to leave the classroom--changing the course of my life. As a compliment to Sandra's story, I pivot across the country to an earlier moment in time: my mother, Cheryl's high school graduation experience. Framed as an extension of my own story, Cheryl was a pregnant high school senior from a low-income family of polish immigrants. Rather than supporting her education and development, her educators judged, marginalized, and tried to humiliate her.

Through my stories, the problem statement comes into focus: our school system treats students like products on an assembly line. Those passing inspection standards are sorted onto paths for college and career. Others like Cheryl, Sandra's son--Isiah, and

millions of others viewed as substandard by the educational system are labeled as failures, castoffs, and dropouts--devaluing their potential and disrespecting their assets. Students and families are blamed by educators and policymakers for failing to fit into standardized boxes. These two stories illustrate the problem lies with educators and their boxes, not children or their families. Labels such as Tier 3, ELL, or SPED are boxes made of socially-constructed borders (standards) that often act as barriers to relationships with peers, mentors, and the broader community (Anzaldúa, 2012). In response to this problem, I sought to define a pedagogy of connection that builds and sustains relationships among and across social ecologies (Guajardo, et. al, 2015). With the root of the problem in sight, my research questions grew out of curiosity for the conditions that build and maintain relationships. They are as follows:

- What skills and mindsets are practiced (by individuals) through pedagogy of connection?
- What systems and climates are present (in organizations and communities) where pedagogy of connection is practiced?
- How are self, organization, and community transformed through pedagogy of connection? (I.e. the purpose of education?)

Bucking tradition, I devoted Chapter 2 to outlining my non-dual ontological framework. Within this framework, the self is understood as an expression of the universe, rather than an isolated organism cut off from nature. Through an integrated paradigm, the invisible bonds among all people become illuminated and the border separating self and other (subject and object) fades from view. In place of a traditional literature review, I drew from scholarly literature selectively, as needed, to support my

storytelling and meaning making. In orienting my study I reviewed the scholarly dialogues relating to:

- The purpose of education
- Understanding self/identity
- Ecologies/environments

Also, in Chapter 2, I position myself as a researcher within the current socio-historical context. I'm a straight, CIS, white man in a society whose institutions were built to serve people like me at the expense of others. I'm also the product of a specific time and place, so I can't unlearn the values or mindsets that have been ingrained in my being throughout a lifetime of experiences. Instead, I practice awareness building and reflexivity by stepping in and out of the self--through respectful study of alternative models of thought, such as those held by (non-white) eastern and indigenous cultures. I close Chapter 2 by constructing a conceptual framework using the pillars of eastern philosophy, Guajardo, et. al's *Ecologies of Knowing* (2015), and the work of Gloria Anzaldúa (2012; 2015).

In Chapter 3, I discuss my research methods. Under the umbrella of multi-sited ethnography, my research began with narrative inquiry--authoring a sense of self through by cataloguing life stories (Guajardo, Guajardo, Salinas, Cardoza, 2019). My research questions emerged during narrative inquiry. Fed by the milieu of a rich and supportive network, I returned to my catalogue of stories in search of wisdom that might shed light on my research questions.

From there, I lay out a messy text meant to capture the meta-learning of a CLE that I helped to convene. Documenting the CLE was an artifact of my development that spoke to embodied learning. I make sense of this rich meta-learning experience, through the

wisdom of my lived experience (as referenced in my catalogue of stories), with support from scholarly literature to distill my pedagogy of connection.

Chapter 3 also includes my framework for analysis, which helped me to make meaning of my stories. The framework for analysis is a synthesis of my research questions combined with the ancient indigenous symbols of the cross and circle--meant to symbolize a symbiotic way of being. I used the framework as a tool for processing my stories--ruminating on the individuals, organizations, and communities that have made up the social fabric that has supported my journey of becoming. Multi-sited ethnography, in the form of a messy text, allow the flexibility to capture an organic process of higher learning, where traditional methods often force the learning to be expressed in standardized and sanctioned formats--robbing them of their profundity (Marcus, 1995; Guajardo, Guajardo, Salinas, Cardoza, 2019). The CLE Axioms and Ecologies served as an additional layer of meaning making (Guajardo, et. al, 2015). I coded my stories and the messy text for examples of actions, mindsets, climates, or systems that related to the Axioms and Ecologies. Within the messy text, the codes are noted by comments.

Chapter 4 is typically populated by tables and figures that clearly and directly communicate the findings of the study. The learning embodied through my journey is difficult to contain within the borders of an APA table. Traditional methods of research lack the power to penetrate alternative ways of knowing. Research is an art, and the purpose of art is to communicate meaning beyond the constraints imposed by Webster's dictionary and the standards of formatting outlined by the American Psychological Association. A process of higher learning demands that findings be embodied through action (Guajardo M. A., F. J. Guajardo, Salinas, & Cardoza, 2019)!

In my Chapter 4, I give a detailed account of a CLE that I helped convene. The resulting messy text was an artifact of meta-learning. I synthesized my reflections on the CT Network CLE, interwoven with wisdom gleaned from my catalogue of stories, with support from scholarly dialogues to distill my understanding of the pedagogy of connection. My pedagogy of connection is rooted in and inspired by CLE pedagogies and is a dynamic crystallization that will guide my practice as an educator and community builder. Just as the world is constantly evolving, my pedagogy of connection requires constant recalibration as I accrue additional wisdom and life experiences. Finally, it's worth noting that since the pedagogy of connection entails an embodied knowledge, that I could not possibly communicate all of my learning through words alone. As it such, I created art to express myself and make order from chaos.

Key Findings

As it stands, below is a summary of the findings of my study whose spirit is expressed through the pedagogy of connection:

- **Vulnerable conversations enable deep learning:** Participants of the CT Network CLE repeatedly expressed gratitude for the space to have vulnerable dialogue. Participants were vulnerable in sharing their personal why and while crafting a team identity. On Day 2, participants shared insight into the layers of each others' identities and personal development. While sharing their artifact stories and *I Am* poems, participants displayed heroic vulnerability. I juxtapose the vulnerability of CLE participants to Sandra's raw honesty that sparked the birth of my critical consciousness.

- **Higher learning is a team effort:** The Vazquez family modeled a masterful lesson in teamwork during the performance of Dr. Vazquez's *I Am* poem. Through his art, he celebrated the meaning that each member of his family bring to one another. In his moment of need, his children ran to his side and gave him the strength to proudly share raw emotion in front of his new staff and colleagues. I connect the symbiotic support of the Vazquez's to my own experience of being supported by a rich social network throughout my years of development.
- **Connecting through play brings out the best in people:** During the closing circle of the CT Network CLE, multiple participants commented about their gratitude for the opportunity to engage with their teammates in loosely structured activities. I felt part of an atmosphere of free play and exploration of ideas, particularly when teams constructed their art pieces. Here, I provide a discussion on the role of play in personal development, team building, and policymaking through my stories and connections to the work of seminal thinkers such as Piaget, Maslow, and Csikszentmihalyi.
- **“Treat people like people”:** This lesson is a reminder never to lose sight that I am a servant for humanity and what Sergioivanni (20014) calls the lifeworld. In so doing, I diligently work to ensure that systems serve people and not vice versa. In this section, I tie in my experience training educators with an emphasis of instrumentalities of the systemsworld. In

my past career, I underemphasized the central importance of the lifeworld in education. No more.

- **Find order in chaos through ambiguity:** This piece of wisdom is representative of the Art of Change--a guiding principle of the CT Network CLE. Change is the process of transforming the chaotic terrain of the unknown into something that is intelligible. As individuals, organizations, and cultures change over time, they will benefit by the ambiguous spirit of the artist. The artist moves society forward through a personal exploration of meaning--their art is a window into their process of meaning making. By embracing art in our schools and our hearts, we can learn to operate skillfully in the fog of change and become *luz en lo oscuro* (Anzaldúa, 2015).

Markers of Personal Growth

In the following section, I identify indicators of my growth over time to give a sense for my development through the process of research. Within each Ecology of Knowing, I provide insight into my growth that can be linked to the embodied application of my research findings (Guajardo et. al, 2015).

Self

Over the course of my dissertation journey, I have experienced a radical change in attitude and mindset, resulting in a different way of being in the world. My paradigm shift began with a transformation of identity—from an isolated agent to an integrated member within the physical ecosystem and sociocultural timeline. Through my research, I peeled the onion of self to examine the context of my life story, my social identities

(and the privilege they carry), and the connections that contributed toward my development. In Chapter 4, I laid out the CLE as a continually developing process. Similarly, my research on understanding self will not cease upon earning the letters Ph.D.

My research is continuous, performative, pedagogical, and political. Through writing and becoming, I enact my pedagogy of connection in response to the problems facing the field of education. The pedagogical is always moral and political; by enacting a way of seeing and being, it challenges, contests, or endorses the official, hegemonic ways of seeing and representing the other (Denzin, 2006, p. 423). I teach through example—engaging in self-inquiry, which challenges the subject/object divide. I work to expose the hidden connections between/among the Ecologies of Knowing--never losing sight of the organizational and community context of student achievement (Guajardo et. al, 2015).

In peeling the onion of self, I explored and processed long-suppressed pain, trauma, and joy. I have found that sharing my memories of these stories with family, friends, and colleagues has been a bonding experience that brought us closer. I have let go of grudges and am healing old wounds. I've even taken steps to repair my relationship with my long-estranged father. Through my research, I hope to reach others through a chain reaction of vulnerable openness (Chang, 2008). My research holds potential to strengthen connections between self and others across socio-cultural borders and “motivate [readers] to work toward cross-cultural coalition building” (p. 52).

Organization

My research informs who I want to be, the work I will do, and the methods that I will use.

Upon entering the doctoral program, I held a positivistic worldview and practiced models of school improvement rooted in instrumental practices of the systemsworld (Sergiovanni, 1999). My vision of school improvement was driven through a traditional top-down hierarchy. In my past worldview, the school improvement leader was drawn as the expert whose opinion mattered most.

Through the coursework at TSU and my experience in community organizing, I have learned how little one can understand from their (my) isolated perspective. Organizing allows people to learn from each other's life experiences and see the world in added dimension. On this notion, there is an ancient Zen parable about a group of blind monks who came upon an elephant for the first time and set out to identify the strange creature. The first monk felt the elephant's trunk and was certain they had discovered a giant boa constrictor. The next monk touched the elephant's giant leg and pictured a large stone pillar. Another thought the tusk was the tip of a spear. Lastly, the monk in the rear imagined the elephant's tail as a rope that was beginning to fray at the end. Through sharing of perspective, each monk's wisdom contributed toward their collective understanding. The sum is greater than its parts, and together they know more than any single individual. This parable speaks to my transformation from an agent of the top-down systemsworld into a grassroots organizer for schools and communities (Sergiovanni, 1999). I now frame my role in schools as a community catalyst and force multiplier. My mission is to organize the infinite potential of students, staff, families, and community toward their shared aspirations.

Community

Before entering the dissertation journey, community was an afterthought in my

consciousness as a well-meaning agent of the systemsworld (Sergiovanni, 1999). Now, my worldview demands that I account for the community context and the lived experience of each individual when organizing school improvement efforts. For example, the design team of the CT Network CLE looked to the area's local history and cultural capital to inform the meeting location and agenda. Examining the community context allows for ample opportunities to explore organization/community partnerships and study the sociocultural influences on each person's life story. Participants of the CT Network CLE drew the comparison between a healthy, diverse ecosystem and a symbiotic school/community partnership which together provides a nourishing environment for students. Their emphasis on the interaction between the macro, meso, and micro spheres resonated with me and my mission as a community organizer. My work is to grow systems that are responsive to the needs and aspirations of the community, their families, and their children.

Recommendations for further research

The pedagogy of connection is a dynamic understanding for how to conduct myself in all social and personal respects. As such, it will be crucial for me to constantly work to expand my awareness and capture new reflections about my experiences. New experiences carry the potential to completely reshape or reframe my understanding of myself and the world around me. I have experienced enough paradigm-shifting breakthroughs to understand that I must leave room for my schema to evolve. Afterall, ambiguity is a key feature of the framework.

Other possibilities for future research includes inviting the friends and family members from my stories to offer reflections or counternarratives for additional depth

and perspective. Through a dialogical process, the stories could incorporate different, conflicting, and harmonious accounts.

Finally, I invite others to investigate their life story through emancipatory discourse. As Rogers said, "...those being emancipated are representing themselves, instead of being colonized by others and subjected to their agendas or relegated to the role of second-class citizens" (2008, p. 1724). A research process like mine represents the right to tell your subjective truth as experienced without waiting for others to express what they really want to be known and understood.

**APPENDIX SECTION:
(APPENDIX A: OBSERVABLES)**

To aid in sensemaking, I frame each narrative as one that speaks to the development of my understanding of either *self*, *organization*, or *community*. Each keystone experience contributed to the development of my whole being, which contains my organizational and community identities.

Stories of Self as Pedagogy

Yin and Yang: The womb and the open wound.

I was born and raised in outskirts of a town called Owosso, Michigan. Mid-Michigan is bountiful—from its fertile soils grew a social network of family, guardians, and community organizations which nourished my development. Named after Chief Wasso, of the Chippewas, whose name allegedly means “one bright spot” in honor of his mother who was killed by a poisoned arrow. Bright light casts a dark shadow and Owosso’s shadow side must be examined to understand this place (Herman, 1999). Owosso is the site of my primal wound which is linked to the area’s rarely-acknowledged history of hate and fear. The community’s trauma festers and multiplies in the shadows (Maturana Romesin & Verden-Zöller, 2012). Families in a state of *deconociemiento* pass down emotional scars *through the generations* and individuals (like me) unwittingly spread trauma like a virus (Anzaldúa, 2015; Maturana & Varela, 1998).

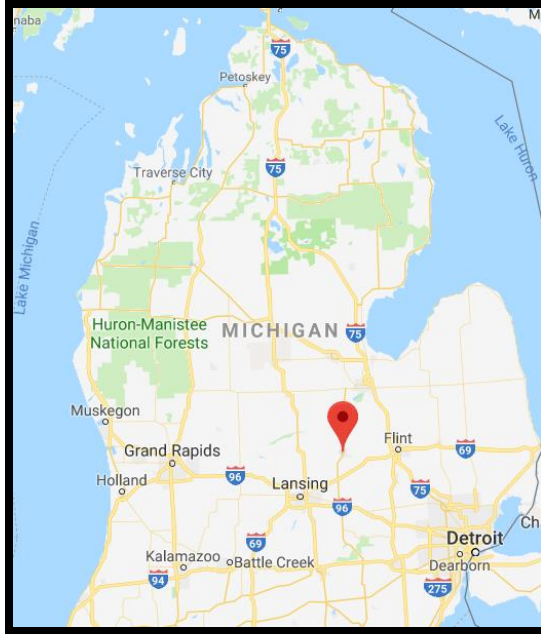


Figure 90. Map of Mid-Michigan. Owosso is pinned. Retrieved from MapofUS.com

Despite the region's rich Native American history, Owosso's culture can only be described as White-dominant. In Owosso, grit and hard work are celebrated, while diversity is found in short supply. The community is tightly-knit and skeptical of outsiders. Growing up, my teachers were White, the school principals were White, the school bus driver was White, the school custodians were White, the bank tellers were White, the lady who delivered the mail was White, our family doctor was White, the nurses were White. I could go on. Until I moved away from Owosso as an adult, I had very few interactions with People of Color. Add to that, there were scarcely any People of Color role models featured on the network television that shaped my understanding of social dynamics. In my world, being White was normalized.

Even today, Owosso is 95% White and decidedly blue collar. Election records show that the area served as a stronghold for Donald Trump's base in 2016's Presidential Election. Trump easily topped Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton by over 10 points

among voters of Owosso's Shiawassee county. Many Owossoans work from an early age and forgo higher education in favor of crafts and trades. In terms of formal education, 10% of adult residents have earned a bachelor's degree, compared to the national average of 30%. Traditionally, the local economy in Owosso, like much of the Midwest, was powered by the auto industry. The big three manufacturing plants of General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler were located within a 40-mile radius. Add to that, several small machine shops in Owosso supplied parts to the big three.

Agriculture was common on the outskirts of town—or “the country”, as locals call it. This is where I grew up--on an unpaved, two-track road, surrounded by soybean and corn fields. Our family did not farm then, but the land was affordable, and my parents valued privacy. Out in the country, our nearest neighbors were the stray cats living in an abandoned farmhouse down the road. The air was clean, and the stars shined bright without any light pollution. On country nights, cricket choruses echoed loudly, and luminous waves of yellow-green fireflies danced in velvety formation across the black canvas of the horizon.



Figure 91. Grain Elevator near Owosso. Grain elevator located about three miles from the house I grew up in, retrieved from: <https://lostinmichigan.net/michigan-bean-elevator-henderson/>

The people of Owosso often wear their feelings on their sleeves and tend to stress function over form. Speaking of attire, due to the popularity of hunting, camouflage is considered appropriate for any occasion, including weddings. In a town of 14,000 people, many families in Owosso have been in the area for generations, having enjoyed a common upbringing and shared values. They've suffered financial hardships together when the area's factories closed. They've watched the physical structures and social fabric of their community decay. More recently, area residents have shown resiliency by engaging in beautification efforts, and a faction of residents tout the importance of shopping locally. Early progress has been encouraging. Several small businesses have returned downtown. Owosso seems headed toward economic recovery. However, the area's history of racism and collective trauma remain in need of attention.



Figure 92. Owosso's Beautification. A photo depicting Owosso's downtown beautification efforts, retrieved from: <https://lostinmichigan.net/downtown-owosso/>

In my experience, Owossoans rarely discuss race. Perhaps the topic raises too many painful memories? The area's original French and British colonizers took the land from the Ojibwa (Chippawee) the Ottawa, the Missauga, and Potawatami tribes, whose worldviews could not comprehend land ownership (Davis, 1964). The Europeans (both knowingly and unknowingly engaged in biological warfare) wiping out entire villages of native tribes. Without their land, many tribes became nomadic and eventually warlike—paid by the British to hunt American scalps in the war of 1812. Since the town's inception, Owosso has been a place of deep trauma, for both the colonizers and the area's Native Peoples. The hierarchal dynamics of colonialism poison the minds of all parties involved (Fanon, Sartre, & Farrington, 1961).

This story is not unique to Owosso, Michigan. The fate of the Native Americans in mid-Michigan was much like the fate of Native American communities elsewhere in the United States. Many of our landmarks and football teams bear Native American

names but we segregate their communities onto reservations and systematically devastate the lands they hold sacred.

A fear of the other—the Non-White—has persisted within the region over time. In 1871, the town expelled all Black residents, except for a Black barber who was allowed to stay (Leuwen, 2005). Since that time, there has been a history of Klu Klux Klan (KKK) activity in the area. In 1924, many of the local businessmen were said to be Klansmen. After boasting about high literacy rates and home ownership, the 1936 Owosso county directory proudly announced, "There is not a Negro living in the limits of Owosso's incorporated territory" (Carlson, 2006). For decades, Owosso was referred to as a Sundown Town. Sundown Towns were all-White municipalities that enforced restrictions to keep People of Color out through discriminatory local laws, intimidation, and violence. The term originated from signs mandating that People of Color leave by sundown, or else. Owosso's racist and hostile climate was captured in Malcolm X's autobiography when he wrote, "I remember...the town of Owosso, forty miles from Lansing, which the Negroes called "White City." ...No Negroes were allowed on the streets there after dark-hence the daytime meeting. In point of fact, in those days lots of Michigan towns were like that" (1965, p. 7).

As an Owossoan, I perceive our town's racist history as one swept under the rug by locals. Instead of dealing with our collective trauma, the townspeople understandably focus on points of pride, such as local author/conservationist James Oliver Curwood. Each year during, the first weekend of June, Owosso hosts a festival in Curwood's honor. However, our unacknowledged history of prejudice has prevented residents from embracing those who are different and from owning our collective story. Without

opportunity for healing or closure, ripple effects of trauma have radiated in every direction.

Though dedicated to a region of the U.S.-Mexican border, Gloria Anzaldúa's passage below vividly captures my hometown, where the diversity of surrounding urban cities is confronted by a socially-structured border—a wall of Whiteness.

“[Here] the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms, it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country — a border culture. Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition...The only "legitimate" inhabitants are those in power, the whites and those who align themselves with whites. Tension grips the inhabitants of the borderlands like a virus. Ambivalence and unrest reside there and death is no stranger” (1987, p. 3-4).

As Anzaldúa points out, the trauma of the open wound, or *una herida abierta*, grips all residents of the borderlands, even those considered “legitimate”.

In Owosso, fear-based mindsets remain and manifest in different shapes and spaces—including in the community's schools. According to a former Owosso High School teacher, "When teaching *To Kill A Mockingbird*, most of the freshmen...wrote in their journals about family members being racist. At one point a class discussion brought up questions such as, 'Is it true [B]lacks have lice?' 'My uncle says they can't speak good because they have smaller brains.' 'How come [B]lacks go to church like regular

Christians?’ ‘My dad says they're gonna make [B]lacks come to this school’” (Leuwen, 2005). Without addressing the community’s traumatic history, *fear of the stranger* persists.

During my time at the school, students frequently used homophobic slurs as jokes and insults. Those at the fringes were meant to feel more marginalized, and not just by a few bullies. Toxic masculinity was pervasive, including in my circle of friends. I made my share of insensitive and dehumanizing jokes (countless “playfully” directed at my younger brother), despite knowing the pain of being demeaned. My actions are mine. They are also an extension of Owosso’s social milieu. Figs do not grow from thistles. Owosso is a part of me, and vice-versa. My story is informed by both the light and shadow sides of this place. As I reconcile my own story, I frame Owosso as having played the roles of both womb and open wound (Anzaldúa, 1999; Maturana & Varela, 1998).

The fight to not fight.

Throughout my school age years, I was painfully shy--an introvert by nature. Add to that, in the 8th grade, I broke one of my front teeth playing basketball on the playground. My parents didn’t have money have it fixed. So, all through high school, I did my best not to smile or talk too much. I was awkward, and not just because of my broken smile. As a teenager, my build was a gangly 5’ 10”, 115 pounds. Out of self-consciousness, I didn’t engage in class discussion, participate in extracurricular activities, or flirt with girls. Unlike most other male students, I didn’t hunt, fish, or play organized sports. Some bullies at school assumed I was gay and harassed me for being different. Most of the time, I wanted to fade into the background. I had a small group of friends, all

outsiders in their own right. We were “anti-mainstream”. We listened to 70’s funk and developed a refined palate for campy horror movies. I’m thankful they were in my life, and I’m still close with most of them.

About half-way through my junior year, my friends began thinking about their post-graduation plans. They were better students than I was, and they aspired to attend local universities. I remember feeling panicked. My only friends were planning to leave in search of more open minds, on a mission to become someone new. I wanted to leave too but college didn’t seem like a realistic option. I knew that college was expensive, and my mom lacked the funds and life experience to help me navigate higher education.

Then one day in the hallway at school, I was stopped by a recruiter for the Army Reserves. Traditionally, a great number of mid-Michiganders--including my father and my grandfather--have gone into the military. The recruiter was charismatic and probably picked me as an easy target from a mile away. His pitch was simple: Serving my country would help others and help me. The Army will pay for my college and help me get into a good school. All I needed to do was sign on the dotted line, go to bootcamp, and serve one weekend per month, two weeks during the summer. “Easy money,” he said. “Plus, girls go crazy for the uniform.” With early enlistment and my mother’s permission, I could sign up at 17 and start earning money right away.

At the time, this morally complicated decision seemed like a no-brainer. I understood the military as my ticket out of Owosso and to a better life. I wanted to serve my country and for the army to help me grow into a “real man.” At 17, I was right to think of myself as a child. At that age, I was unable to weigh the gravity of that decision. But, with the stroke of a pen...I became property of the U.S. government for the

next eight years. I didn't fully comprehend that I was pledging to give my life and to take the lives of other people, if necessary.

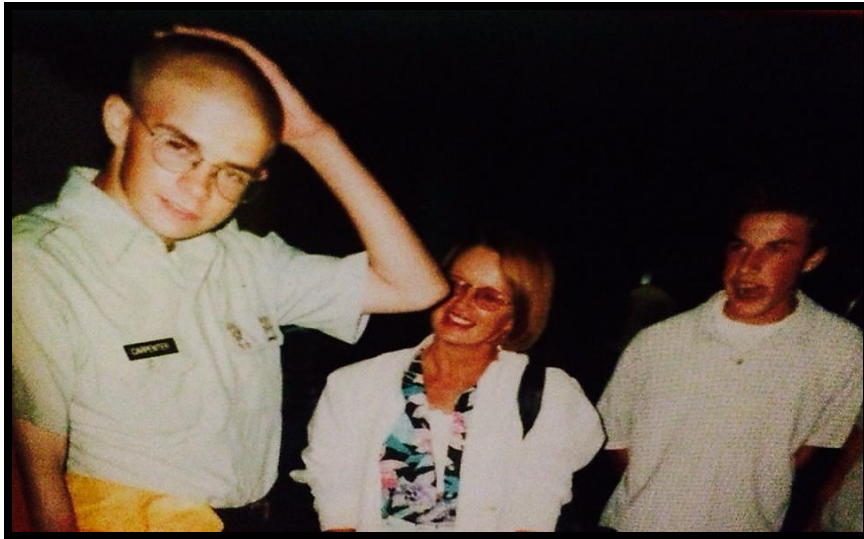


Figure 93. First Day Home from Bootcamp. Cheryl (mom) and Kyle (younger brother) pick me (age 18) up from the airport after basic training. Present but not pictured: Larry (mom's partner), Jay (older brother), NeeNee ("aunt"), Craig ("uncle").

After high school, I began studying at the local community college and eventually transferred to Michigan State University. There, I was introduced to Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* (1980). I have always loved history because I love stories—but Zinn told a different side to the stories of American history. Zinn described state sanctioned crimes and injustices of which I was unaware—a history of marginalized peoples. Zinn painted war as a tool of American imperialism instead of celebrating it. He argued that we have paid for our conquests with the blood of marginalized peoples, both at home and abroad. This book made me question my decision to join the military. Eventually, I came to question any violence, whatsoever. My moral awakening came to a head during one military exercise, changing my life dramatically.

We, soldiers, were to crawl across a field under barbed wire with constant machine gun fire overhead. Once to the other side, target practice was to commence.

Human silhouettes were set out at distances of 50 meters, 100 meters, 250 meters, and 500 meters. Each human figure sported a series of concentric circles with the heart at the center of the target. I had completed this drill countless times before but, in that moment, the exercise became real. I understood this act in a new way. I stopped playing G.I. Joe and realized that I was practicing to kill humans. I was preparing to kill someone that I'd never met—whose only crime was being born in another country. Someone poor; like me--a pawn. The sound of gunfire rang out all around me like hard rain on a tin roof. I laid in prone position with my sights center-mass on the target. I felt my heart race. My breath became shallow and quick. My vision blurred. I dropped my rifle and went numb. The range attendant came to check on me and diagnosed me with heat stroke. Heat stroke my ass; I had a panic attack. Human life is the most precious thing imaginable, and that day I was confronted with the responsibility of extinguishing it.

In the following weeks, my anxiety level did little to dissipate. Geopolitical tensions at the time pointed toward a second Gulf War with Iraq. The possibility of taking another person's life became more real by the day. Back home, I was losing sleep and had trouble focusing on my studies. Something had to give. I wrote an email to my platoon sergeant, Master Sergeant Baker, requesting an appointment to talk at the next weekend of reserve duty. In preparing for the conversation, I envisioned several possible scenarios--none of them were pleasant. In my life, there have been times where I built situations up in my mind to make mountains of molehills. So many dreaded events turned out to be harmless, or even pleasant. My conversation with Master Sergeant Baker was *not* such an occasion.

The morning of the next military drill, I walked into duty feeling sick to my

stomach. My uniform was neatly pressed, and my boots were perfectly polished, as usual. I knocked on the Master Sergeant's office door. "Yep," he said. I opened it a crack and stood at parade rest, waiting for permission to enter. "Come on," he said. The Master Sergeant was a man of few words. He was an African American man with a deep voice. He stood about 6'4" and was in peak condition for his age--early 50's. Competing with soldiers half of his age, he always scored at the top of the platoon on assessments of physical fitness. He was a serious man. He thought of himself as a man of God and a patriot. His actions were consistent with these identities.

I sat in the chair across from him. He was busily sorting paperwork and looked up at me over the rim of his reading glasses. "What can I do for you, Specialist Carpenter?" My hands shook. My mouth was dry, and I felt my voice crack as I tried to find the words. I said, "Master Sergeant, I've been doing a lot of soul searching and feeling really conflicted about violence. It's really weighing on me. Is there someone I can talk to about this?" There was a long pause. He asked me to repeat myself. And I did, word for word. After another tension-filled pause, he finally said, "You don't want to do this. I'm going to pretend like you never came in here. Go on." I sat there frozen in the chair. He raised his voice and said, "Are you trying to turn conscientious objector?" I'd heard the term before, but I wasn't totally sure what he meant. He paraphrased, "Are you trying to tell me that your beliefs will prevent you from taking a life in the line of duty?" I told him, "I don't know what I would do. It's very possible that a survival instinct might kick in--that I would do whatever it took to protect myself and my platoon. But I don't believe in killing other people. People with families and stories just like me."

The Master Sergeant (MSG) sighed out a long breath. He was upset. Situations like this were rare in the military, and he knew that this would be a distraction to his missions. He again asked what I wanted to do. I said that I wanted to talk to someone. I wanted to know my options. He told me that if I was serious that he would file the paperwork but that he didn't recommend it. "You know this won't be popular. I'd be worried how the rest of the troops will react." I told him that I was losing sleep over the idea that my doubts would put the lives of my brothers and sisters in jeopardy. In battle, any hesitation could be deadly. The MSG told me that he send some information and that we would discuss the decision another time.

About a week later, I received a manila envelope stamped priority mail. Inside were blurry photocopies of the military code handbook. The MSG sent me the official regulations for conscientious objector status application. I learned that conscientious objectors in the Army can apply for one of two classifications. The first option allows conscientious objectors to be honorably discharged from their service contract immediately upon receiving CO status. While the Army doesn't publicize the statistics around conscientious objectors (CO), most CO seek to be discharged immediately. The second option allows the soldier to continue to serve but without carrying a weapon.

Given my feelings, the first option made sense, but it felt like the easy way out. I took my service commitment seriously. I hated the idea of abandoning my brothers and sisters in the platoon by walking away. So, I formally applied for CO status and a change in job assignment. If granted, I would continue to serve in my existing unit in a medical role which wouldn't require me to carry a weapon. Though, I made the decision out of a sense of duty--it was not well-received by my fellow soldiers. In the years following, I

found notes left on my car windshield and doorstep that threatened my life and received disturbing prank phone calls. There is an unspoken code in the military, a familial bond-- and at least some of the soldiers thought that I had broken it. I don't remember what any of threats said specifically--I think I've blocked them from my memory. I tried not to take them seriously, but I started to become paranoid. I would look over my shoulder when walking alone. I began screening my phone calls. The MSG warned me that he had heard rumors that violence would be used against me. He documented what he heard and had me sign something. The Army was concerned about liability if something were to happen to me.

After a lengthy application process, I was granted CO status and received a job re-classification. Along the way, the Army sent me to Fort Knox, Kentucky for a full psychological evaluation. I'm not sure if that was part of the protocol or an intimidation tactic. I filled out countless forms and explained myself to dozens of high-ranking officers. The Army officially determined that I was not crazy and that I legitimately met the specifications of a CO. I received a re-classification of my responsibilities, some basic first aid training, and prepared for the possibility of deployment. Our platoon was a detachment and provided support to any short-handed sister units. Every so often, a handful of soldiers would be deployed to supplement already deployed units, while the rest of us stayed behind. Every time that I was not chosen to be deployed, I received threats.

When the war was in full-swing, I received notice to be on standing orders-- meaning that I could be deployed at any moment. I was required to keep my bags packed and records up to date. I was twice called to report to deployment centers without

indication if I would return home that day or be directly sent off to war. The last years of my military service were spent in this mode of uncertainty and high-alert. Ultimately, I was never deployed overseas. Other soldiers figured it was because I was considered a danger to group morale. Only one other soldier in my platoon was never deployed (due to medical issues). At least three of my brothers-in-service lost their lives in Iraq.

Though I fulfilled my service commitment in full, followed every order, and eventually received an honorable discharge, I still carry grief and guilt from this period of my life.

A transformational trip to Jackson.

In Spring of 2018, I enrolled in Dr. Guajardo's *Schools, Community, and Race* course at Texas State University. The course was a transformative experience which expanded my critical consciousness and probed concepts of race in relation to personal identity, organizational dynamics, and the tenets of community building (Guajardo et al, 2013; Guajardo, M.A., Guajardo, F., Janson, C., Militello, M., 2016). Dr. Guajardo's course privileged the power of place as a pedagogical tool. Class sessions were held at historic sites of trauma and healing in San Marcos, Texas and those able took a field trip to Jackson, Mississippi to attend a conference for educators, artists, activists, historians, authors, scholars, and students on racial and social justice, culture, class and community activism. Conference activities were organized around Jackson's Civil Rights Museum, and other historical sites such as the home of Medgar Evers, a key civil rights leader. Evers was shot by a sniper in front of his family at their home in 1963.



Figure 94. Medgar Evers Home. Monument in front of Medgar Evers home in Jackson, MS (own image).

My reflection centers on Saturday evening, the second night of the three-day conference. After dinner, the conference organizers planned celebratory festivities including an auction of donated items for charity. As participants finished their meals, Carl, the conference's lead organizer, started to make an announcement. Carl was visibly upset. He said that the evening festivities would be cancelled due to the behavior of some White conference participants. Carl let loose. On stage in front of the participants, he paced back and forth and unleashed his tirade for over an hour. He said that over the course of the conference White participants had disrespected him, the civil rights leaders that came to share their wisdom, and the sacred ground of Jackson, Mississippi. He cited examples like a White woman requesting to touch a Black man's hair and non-vegetarians taking meals reserved for vegetarians.

Once the People of Color were dismissed to the hotel, the White folks stayed

behind, cleared the tables from dinner, organized the chairs into a large circle, and took an awkward seat. The tension in the room was thick. Noah (one of the conference organizers) took on the task of facilitating the discussion. He began by asking us all to take a moment to process our feelings before verbalizing anything. He asked us to be true to our feelings but to frame them from a place of understanding and a desire to grow, rather than to react out of fear or pain. Many around the circle (including myself) stared blankly. I began replaying scenes from the week in my head, trying to decipher what role I may have played in provoking Carl's tirade. I also felt frustrated that in this group of educated, well-intentioned White people, that we were still so collectively unaware. I thought to myself, "If this was the best we, White folks, could do, how could justice ever be possible?" In a different place, space, and time, unanswered questions that I began to struggle with as a TFA corps member violently resurfaced.

After several moments of silent processing, Noah opened the floor for people to share their feelings (reserving thoughts and opinions for later). It felt like a long pause before the first person volunteered to share what was on their heart. Bob, another conference organizer, spoke up and shared that he was grateful that Carl gave us all the gift of honesty. Several people around the circle nodded. Others shook their heads in disgust. Bob went on to say that he felt ashamed and that we had failed, which prompted a few groans. Another participant argued that we would fail only if we don't learn from this experience. I wasn't sure what they each meant by "failing" but I didn't ask. The entire group offered relatively few comments during this initial share-out. I felt that the energy in the room was closed off--guarded.

After allowing a chance for everyone to share their feelings, Noah asked us to

divide up into groups of around six to discuss our thoughts. The small groups must have felt safe to share because the room erupted in conversation--the awkward and pregnant silence burst like a faulty dam. In my group, an elderly woman spoke up immediately and said that she was too tired for all this talk and wanted to go back to the hotel. A middle-aged White woman agreed and complained of feeling weak from a lack of food. She explained that she had not eaten in two days because she did not like the meals that the conference provided. As she spoke, I recognized something ugly in myself. I judged her. Harshly. She reminded me of someone that I might have known from my hometown. When this lady opened her mouth, I expected unintelligent and ignorant comments. She met my expectations--saying that only those that misbehaved should have been required to stay behind. She felt that since she didn't steal anyone's vegetarian meal and didn't touch anyone's hair, she had been unfairly scolded. She crossed her arms and sat silently for the remainder of the discussion. She rubbed me the wrong way—that much was certain. But was it because she completely missed the point, or because she reminded me of my redneck roots? I thought to myself that she probably only came to the conference out of professional obligation. It seemed to me, she lacked any desire to examine her Whiteness, privilege, or entitlement.

Pam, a woman in her 40s, was quite upset. She was a guidance counselor from Portland, Oregon and looked like she had just seen a ghost. She began to cry. She talked about coming to the conference to better serve her students of color and sobbed harder as she described how powerful her experience in Jackson had been. Pam acknowledged that many of the things Carl mentioned were necessary to raise but questioned his tone. She thought that Carl went too far in his critiques and seemed to enjoy shaming us. “After

all,” she explained, “many of the people in the room are trying their best and doing good in their communities.” The counselor likened the experience of White folks at the conference to walking through a mind field. Carl criticized the White affinity groups for not digging deep and having vulnerable conversations. Pam attributed this to a lack of safety and trust at the conference. She feared that White folks would stop attending the annual conference and that without more compassion we would never feel safe enough to openly reflect on White privilege and co-liberation. I wish that I had the presence of mind to push back on Pam’s comments. I would wager that many People of Color feel as though they are walking through a minefield in America *every day*. The work of educators and community organizers is high-stakes and it must continue...safe place or not.

Greg, a man in his late 30s, agreed with the guidance counselor about the way that Carl addressed us, White folks. “Shame is bad pedagogy,” he said. Greg held the opinion that the behavior of many Whites in the group was indeed shameful, but that Carl’s message would get lost due to his abrasive tone. Greg explained, “you have to talk to people so that they can hear you.” As I quickly connected Greg’s comments to the oblivious, ~~trashy~~ hungry woman sitting across from me, he went on to say that we (the White folks) all had work to do, even if we weren’t the ones that committed blatant offenses.

When it came time for me to share, I said that I didn’t take issue with Carl’s comments for two reasons:

1. As a young scholar and activist, I came to the conference to learn. Say what you will about shame as pedagogy; Carl’s rant was instructive to me. I don’t know if I

did anything that week to piss Carl off, and it doesn't really matter. If not now, there have been and will be other times when my social programming overshadows my awareness. In Jackson, Carl confronted me with the same truth that Sandra brought to my attention over a decade earlier in Brooklyn.

Even at my best, there are things that, as a straight White man, I can *never* understand and that's ok. I don't need to have all the answers. Genuine collaboration requires sharing perspectives. As a straight, cis-gendered, man leadership begins with *listening*.

2. My feelings were not hurt because I'm not seeking Carl's approval. I hated that our group communicated disrespect to this sacred place and the heroes of the civil rights movement. Having said that, the fight goes on and the movement is not dead. 63 million people voted for Trump (and mentioned above, many of them live in my Michigan community). The struggle for social justice depends on each of us (especially White men) developing our own awareness and personal moral compass. Shame and guilt are distractions of the ego. The key questions are: what do I believe is right? And, how am I working to make things better? But the work cannot stop there. A moral compass is like a conceptual framework--each of these tools can guide the work but without constant calibration, they are bound to lead one off course. I look to Carl (and many others) to inform my work but I won't let anyone's opinions distract me from my purpose

After we each shared, Noah called us all back to the whole group circle. Each member of my small group thanked one another for the conversation. All of us, including the tired and hungry among us, said that talking together helped somehow.

Back in the whole group, Noah thanked us for our conversations and invited us to continue thinking as he dismissed us for the night.

Post-conference, I continue to reflect on my blind spots. Many of the White people at the conference lacked the courage and/or awareness to own their privilege, actions, or lack thereof. Am I guilty of this too? No one in the circle owned up to Carl's critiques. It's possible that everyone in the room (including me) thought that someone else was the problem. It's easier to point a finger than to turn inward for reflection. The theme of the conference was "Emancipation, Equity, and Excellence." Probably due to White male savior tendencies, I first interpreted "Emancipation" as something that I should help others achieve. With reflection, it's clear that I'm sorely in need of emancipation. I need to continually peel back the onion (of myself) and work to liberate my mind. To live up to my ideals, I must overcome a lifetime of conditioning from a sexist and racist system. The institutions of society were created to benefit me and to brainwash us all with the myth of meritocracy. In Hollywood and in the workforce my "type" is typically cast as the star of the production. How can I believe my eyes in a world like this? Do I earn my opportunities or are they handed to me out of privilege? It is difficult for me to grasp all the ways that the game is rigged in my favor...but I need to try. The work of community organizing requires that I continuously struggle with concepts of self. Through self-knowledge, I will be more effective in working with others toward organizational and community goals.

Stories of Organization

My first teacher.

Over the years, my mom, Cheryl, worked many jobs to pay the bills. But the truth is, she would rather have been home with her kids. She worked to support us, and we gave her the strength to carry on each day. She has been a server at fast food restaurants

and diners. She worked as a receptionist, a book keeper, a senior care giver, and a cleaning lady. For Cheryl, the side hustle was a way of life. When my parents split up, money--a chronically sore family subject, became even tighter. So, a family friend pulled some strings to get my mom a job working the night shift on the assembly line at one of the town's few remaining factories. This new factory job was no walk in the park, but she would be making \$15.00/hour with insurance and retirement benefits.

After getting home from her night shift, my mom would lovingly prepare a meal for my brother and I to be re-heated for dinner. Then, she would go to her second job cleaning houses. She didn't find much time to rest. The daily grind took their toll, and Cheryl's build was not well-suited for factory work. Standing around 5'2", one hundred pounds, Cheryl looked like she would get blown away by a stiff country wind. But for ten hours each night, she would drive a fork life and work the line. Unpack a box of parts. Sort the parts. Assemble the parts into a motor. Seal the motor with disgusting grease. Pack the motor for shipping. Repeat. On a given night, my mom might perform the same tasks hundreds of times on a loop. Her frail wrists couldn't hold up to the repetitive stress. Even after an expensive surgery to address carpal tunnel, Cheryl now struggles with tasks like opening jars and experiences painful arthritis. She dedicated her life and sacrificed her body for her family.

Let me be clear. Cheryl is no charity case. She is a strong woman. Together, with her partner Larry, she lives a simple, self-sustaining lifestyle. They grow most of their own vegetables on a 1-acre garden. After harvest, Cheryl cans food to preserve it throughout the year. Larry hunts and fishes to keep meat in the freezer. They even grow their own grapes for winemaking. If they can't make it with their own hands, they likely

don't have much use for it.

Cheryl's lessons for me are like stars in the Milky Way. Countless. And beautiful, both individually and in constellation. Most often, she would teach without a lesson plan. *Sometimes* it was messy but it was *always* the best she had. Her explicit lessons were simple, like "stick to the golden rule". Her lived example is rich. Cheryl's life path says everything about her. Her journey deserves a dissertation of its own. If Cheryl's lessons are celestial bodies, below are concentrated bits of stardust that shine through me:

- Family is worth any sacrifice.
- Even at your most broken, you are always enough.
- You are not alone. In tough times, look to those you trust and huddle together until the storm passes.
- Your job doesn't define you.
- Your body (and its limitations) don't define you.
- You are always becoming something, but it doesn't seem like it at the time.
- You have infinite potential and possibilities to re-invent yourself, everyday...but you must be open to seeing it.
- Abundance exists all around you. With vision, skill, and patience, you can turn a patch of dirt into a pantry full of food.

Tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner (To understand all is to forgive all).

Kevin has always done things his own way. Many fathers read to their children. My dad, Kevin, told stories about Fred Bear—a local hero and bowhunting pioneer. Fred Bear, Ted Nugent, Bobby Crockett—these hyper-masculine outdoorsmen were the kind of men my dad admired. Kevin would spin stories of them as larger-than-life, Paul Bunyon-

like characters. To his core, my dad is a naturalist. His values and philosophies were influenced by observing the behaviors of wildlife for thousands of hours while bowhunting from a tree stand. To Kevin, nothing could be wiser than nature—though he didn't realize that his worldview shaped the lessons he gleaned. From a young age, he taught me that in herds of deer, there can only be one leader—the alpha male. He thought that the family structure of deer (and people) existed to serve the alpha. Later in life, I learned that the herd dynamics of deer are more complex and matriarchal than my dad understood them to be.

Kevin took his alpha-male identity very seriously. In nature, he observed that alphas are bound to face challenges by younger bucks. So, he viewed his three sons as potential challengers to the family throne. He demanded respect but would settle for fear. As it turned out, he valued authority over the family's unity. One summer evening in 1991, at ten years old, I heard a loud crash and shouting come from downstairs. My dad and older brother, Jay, were arguing, again. Jay, 17 at the time, questioned my dad's drug use.

Kevin snapped. He picked up my brother and forced him out of the house. Jay, a skinny teenager, was physically overpowered. Kevin threw all Jay's belongings onto the front lawn—breaking picture frames and scattering his clothing to the wind. I came downstairs to see about the ruckus. Cheryl, beside herself and bawling in horror at the scene, screamed at me to go back to my room. Kevin shouted to Jay, “if you can't live by my rules, get the fuck out of my house!” This traumatic event forever scarred each member of the family. Jay went out on his own and never turned back. The rest of us were expected to carry on as if nothing happened.

It was a harsh realization that my older brother's exit from the family put my father's cross-hairs firmly on me as the next threat. But, I was disinterested in hyper-masculine games of dominance. Since birth, I was sensitive and silly—the kind of kid who liked to wear his Halloween costume year-round.



Figure 95. My Halloween Costume. Me in my Halloween costume. <Picture probably was not taken on Halloween.>

Ironically, Kevin wanted the kind of son who would grow up to challenge him. So, my father was harsh with me. He often said that I needed to toughen up. An example of this came for me at a young age. Kevin had little patience for bed-wetting. No son of his would wet the bed! I have a vivid memory of my father grabbing me by the hair and rubbing my nose in urine-soaked bed linens. He said, “You should be ashamed of yourself! If you are going to act like a dog, I’m going to treat you like one!”

For Kevin, enforcing discipline served two key functions. First, the offense (often arbitrarily defined) was addressed. Second, and most importantly, through discipline and intimidation, Kevin reinforced the hierarchy of the family and announced his status as

patriarch. Family etiquette allowed physical violence when an underling in the hierarchy mis-stepped. More frequently, family justice was served in the form of microaggressions--looks that cut like daggers or a cold tone that could chill your blood. We all knew that love withheld hurt more than backhands or belts—but these were all tools at his disposal. Some dads meant it when they said, “this will hurt me more than it will hurt you”. Not Kevin. I know this because I too enjoyed the “duty” of bullying my younger brother, of maintaining the family order. From a place of insecurity, I loved reminding him that I was bigger, stronger, better at this meaningless task or that one. With reflection, I see that the competitive, hierarchical culture of our family ultimately tore us apart. I’m reminded that our parents are our first teachers. And, I’m challenged to reflect on the responsibility of teachers, students, fathers, and sons.

At 11 years old, I told my dad that I wanted to be a professional athlete when I grew up. In this moment, I was at my most vulnerable—communicating my love of something and a dream to become *great*. Without blinking, he told me that I would never make it. My father’s words tore me in half. He did not see greatness in me. Kevin’s words of affirmation fell on my ears as rare as the desert rain. In such conditions of drought, I grew hard and convinced myself that water was for the weak.

Painful memories of my dad come easier than pleasant ones. Not because there are more bad ones than good, but because the good ones are confusing. I remember listening to him play the guitar for hours until it was time to go to bed. Playing guitar made him happy, and he would kiss me goodnight. His beard would scratch my cheeks and it smelled of sweet smoke and light beer—which I liked very much. On many other occasions, Cheryl would break up a game of catch or HORSE between Kevin and his

boys to announce that dinner was ready. These memories complicate the narrative that I have of my dad. They remind me that, like Cheryl, Kevin was doing his best. He was a man-child attempting to raise children of his own. Painful memories make it easier to justify writing him off. Learning by his example, I judge him and put him in his place. And in the process, I condemn myself, because he is in me.

After my parents' divorce, I have been out of touch with Kevin, by choice. Some might call that *cutting off your own nose to spite your face*. It's hard to say what's right. In Kevin's absence, I have developed an independent and formidable mind—an unlikely outcome had he been there to “remind me” of my place within the family structure. Even in his absence, he is always with me. In moments of self-doubt, I feel Kevin's disapproving glare over my shoulder. When my voice shakes while public speaking, it is in anticipation of being dismissed—a reflex established over many impressionable years. He is my anxiety. He is my self-loathing. He is lurking behind every corner to point out my failures. Except he isn't. In my psyche, I have made my father into a monster. It's not fair. I don't know the man that he has grown into, but I assume he would see me differently now. He might even see some greatness.

Understandably, Kevin's story has been challenging to probe. My deepest scars can be traced to this man. My re-authoring of self has been heart-wrenching and healing, life-changing and life affirming. This work never ends. As you read this, I continue to process Kevin's influence on my development and how to make sense of our story. Having said that, he has been a teacher to me, even while estranged all these years.

*For centuries, Japanese practitioners of kintsugi have repaired broken ceramics using lacquer brushed with gold to emphasize the object's imperfections, rather than hiding them. Through careful attention and great care, the broken object is rehabilitated. Once **whole again**, the piece is considered even more beautiful than before, revitalizing it with new life.*



Figure 96. Kintsugi Bowl. A Kintsugi bowl—which represents resiliency and self-acceptance.

Driving home from delivering my mock dissertation proposal, I began to feel extremely fatigued. The exhaustion was no surprise. I had trouble sleeping the night before and had to be up early for a meeting in La Mesa ISD before heading to campus later in the afternoon. I pulled in the driveway and turned off the car. I took a few deep

breaths to decompress and calm my body before going inside to greet my family (wife, Rachel; dog, Rufus; and cat, Ollie) after the long day. Doing a quick mindful scan of the body—I felt something odd. I was very tired but there was something else troubling me—a deep and desperate anxiety. But why? I should have felt great! After a dress rehearsal of my research proposal to my peer-mentoring group (mi familia)[1], I was closer to another milestone in my journey. Each member of mi familia took time from their full schedules and gave me their undivided attention for nearly two hours as I explained my study. They praised me and pushed me. Built me up and protected me by pointing out critiques that others might make. My delivery was clumsy, but the ideas were compelling. With a bit more chiseling and smoothing, my research proposal could be something that would make me proud. But the sickening feeling inside me would not allow me to celebrate.

In greeting Rachel with a kiss, she immediately knew something wasn't right. I asked her about her day but could not focus on her reply. I was feeling weak and fading fast. I usually eat well but the day had been so busy that I had only eaten a smoothie (bought with a gift card from Sascha) and some pan dulce. In my hangriest state, I tried to make a quick meal—breakfast for dinner (huevos y papas). While cracking the eggs, I felt awful and had to sit to gather myself. I caught a glance of myself in the mirror—yikes. I looked pale as a ghost...not good. Through dinner, I could tell that Rachel was worried about me.

The food tasted of nothing. I expected to feel better but instead the calorie bomb that I ingested made me crash harder. I wanted to go to bed and sleep for a month, but I couldn't. I promised Laura, from La Mesa ISD that I would send her transcribed notes

from the district's last Community Learning Exchange (CLE) before the end of the day so that she could include parent quotes in an upcoming professional development session for teachers. I sat on the couch with my laptop unopened--staring at me, almost taunting me. There was a strong feeling of NO! inside of me.

I looked over at my sweet wife. After eating dinner, and trying to comfort me, she was back to work—writing letters of recommendation for her students. In fact, she was working all day—planning lessons for her innovative Social Inequalities seminar and organizing our finances in preparation for filing our taxes. My boo inspired me to open the laptop and crank out the transcription, sending it off to Laura. Normally, I would have slammed my computer shut and done a victory dance to celebrate vanquishing a tedious task. This time I felt no satisfaction. This was not like me at all...

In times of trouble (and times of joy), I get on the mat. Rachel and I have a nightly yoga ritual which started around two years ago. It is the bedrock of my physical, spiritual, and mental wellness practice. The routine comforted me, but I had trouble focusing on my body awareness while in the poses. On my good days, I embody the poses without engaging the thinking mind—I flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). On this night, flow was elusive, but I did manage to tap in for a few brief moments during a hip-opening pose. My body felt weak, but I gave my best throughout the sequence. The medicine of movement eased the anxiety but I still found my mind racing over details from the day. I brushed my teeth and collapsed in bed, hoping to pass out immediately. Instead, I tossed and turned for several hours before nodding off to white noise playing through my iPhone speaker.

I woke in the morning after another shallow rest and took Rufus for a walk. Normally, this bonding time with Rufus makes me feel realized. I think of him as a son, and our walks are sacred. Often Rachel joins our pack for a stroll, but today she was off to work. And today the walk felt hollow. I scanned my body. I was less exhausted than the day before but still weak. The pit in my stomach? Still there too. I ran a few errands, came home to fix some lunch, and tried to make edits on my proposal. Again, I did not want to open the laptop. My body said NO! But this time my muse was not around. Rather than confront my procrastination, I rolled over on the couch and pulled a wool blanket over my head. I quickly faded off into a deep, disorienting sleep that escaped me the night before.

I awoke groggily to Rachel arriving home from class. She looked beautiful and smiled at me nervously, hoping to see improvement in my mood and energy level. She knows me better than anyone, and she knew that my current condition was concerning. Rachel often jokes that I have the boundless energy of a twelve-year old.

We sat together on the couch for a while, holding each other...just breathing. Then we talked about our days. I was able to stay present and connected. We briefly discussed some logistics for our impending trip to North Dakota Study Group (NDSG), a conference for activists and educators, held this year in Jackson, Mississippi. Then I said that I wanted to feel better. I began talking out reasons why I would feel this way. Maybe I was sick? Maybe I was emotionally drained from the mock proposal, revisiting the emotions of my stories, and from other recent social activities. Maybe I was feeling stress about finishing revisions on my proposal?

Just then, my mind flashed to an intense memory from the day before which had been lost in the hectic shuffle. Its impact hadn't risen to my consciousness, but my emotional body would not forget it. I arrived to the mock proposal early and took advantage of 1-on-1 time with Profe to ask for some direction. We began talking about the evolution of my dissertation. And the evolution of me. Profe told me that when I first began working with him that he did not know Blaine. I told him that until I began this work with him, *Blaine* didn't know Blaine. He was moved. Then, he told me that when he found out that I was assigned to work with him that he was disappointed. He did not want to work with a White man. He questioned if that was why he did this work. Then he said, that now he knows that my transformation *is* why he does the work. Just then, mi familia arrived one after another for my practice proposal. A powerful moment passed without recognition but instead of fading away, it tore open an old wound (la herida abierta) and begged for care—for healing.

I began to unpack this extremely loaded moment with Rachel. Among many things, I felt validated by my mentor. Profe has invested so much in me. He fought so that I could keep my assistantship for a second year—which gave time and space for growth and helped put food on our table. He nominated me for an award to build up my non-existent CV. He's believed in me and invited me to shadow him in professional environments where his reputation was on the line. He's inspired and guided my metamorphosis...toward becoming the CLE (Guajardo, Guajardo, Janson, & Militello, 2015).

And still, I felt another strong emotion: shame. I hung on to the part of Profe's

story where he did not want me. I was triggered—even though he values me *now* and tells me so often. Growing up, my father would occasionally tell me that I was an accident (which I read as mistake). At times, he was impatient with me and looked at me with disgust. I often felt unwanted by my father, and that pain resurfaced while Miguel was giving me a beautiful compliment. [BC1]

Through a sea of tears and my partner's embrace, I realized that I'm re-learning how to relate to a father figure through Miguel. Miguel, who teaches with the wisdom of his ancestors (Guajardo, Guajardo, Janson, & Millitello, 2015). **A wisdom that runs contrary to the ways of White male supremacy.** [BC2] In a flash, my emotional flood gates opened. The NO! inside of me softened. Like air rushing out of a balloon I began to feel better. In becoming the CLE, I am excavating memories and rehabilitating them—which has been healing and transformational, all at once.

As I wrap up this reflection, it is after 4am. Rachel noticed that I was missing from bed and has come to remind me to get my rest ahead of tomorrow's long drive to Jackson. I promise her that I will be to bed shortly. I scan the body. No more anxiety. I breathe easy and feel **whole again** (Anzaldúa, 2015).

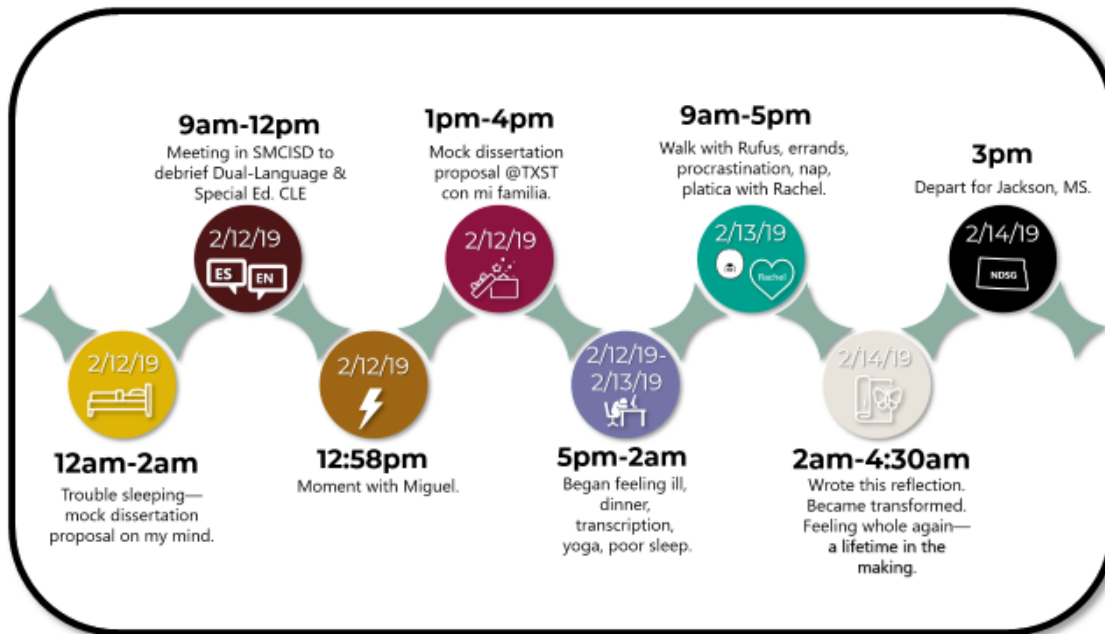


Figure 97. Timeline of Events. Timeline of events from this reflection.

Stories of Community

A community safety net and social capital.

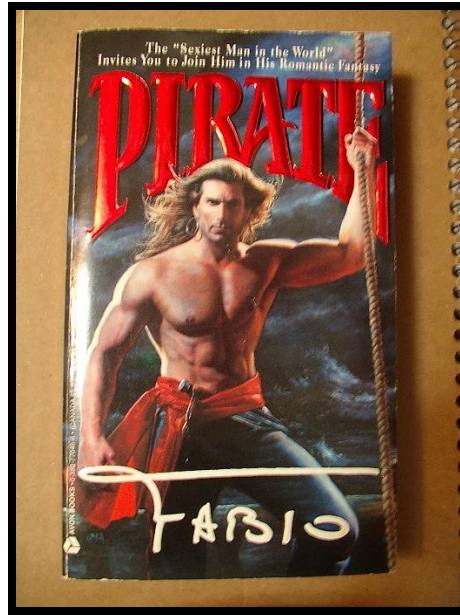
After the divorce, Cheryl faced a crisis. At 42, she was now making autonomous decisions first time. She went from living under her parents' supervision to living with my dad, who unilaterally made decisions for the family. The newfound weight of responsibility, stress, and grief overwhelmed her. Kevin was the breadwinner. He made a living wage as a switchboard operator at the local phone company, General Telephone. Without my dad's income, Cheryl feared we would lose the house. She became so depressed that she couldn't get out of bed. When my family began to crumble, our community of support stepped up to help us get by.

When Cheryl was twelve years old, she met her best friend for life, Denise. Ever since Denise has been there for Cheryl. Eventually, she became a second mother figure

for my younger brother—Kyle, and me. We call her Aunt NeeNee or just NeeNee.

NeeNee and her husband Craig helped us through our darkest days, and their influence on my development can't be understated. They were role models from a higher social class who introduced Kyle and me to new and interesting experiences. Craig was a banker, and so, they didn't have to scrape by. They took us to see plays and movies, and afterwards wanted to discuss our thoughts! They cared what *I thought*. They showed up in support to every little league game, school play, and birthday party. Each year, they hosted a Halloween party at their beautiful colonial style house, which Craig would transform into a haunted mansion—complete with spider webs, creepy motorized crawling hands, and a bubbling witch's cauldron (using dry ice). NeeNee would take us shopping for school clothes. She gave me *the talk* about drugs. It was NeeNee that got my mom the good-paying job at the factory after the divorce. When Cheryl was going through depression, it was NeeNee that got her into therapy. Through it all, NeeNee was there.

One Friday night, shortly after my dad left, NeeNee came over for a slumber party. To cheer us up she brought pizza, ice cream, and the entertainment for the evening. Cheryl, Kyle, NeeNee, and I sprawled our sleeping bags out on the living room floor to watch a B-movie starring Fabio. NeeNee chose the movie because my mom loved romance novels, and Fabio was the iconic cover boy of the genre. The movie was so corny and hilarious that my family still quotes its cheesy lines. We laughed a lot that night. NeeNee's slumber party was healing—it was exactly what we needed. NeeNee and Craig brought love, culture, consistency, and humor into my life. They were and still, are, pillars of my family's support network.



***Figure 98. Fabio VHS.** VHS cover of B-movie starring Fabio that helped our family heal through laughter.*

It's also important to acknowledge the love and support of my grandparents—Cheryl's father, Robert and Kevin's mother, Marge. Cheryl's mother and Kevin's father each passed away before my first birthday, so I don't have memories of them. But Robert and Marge were very loving and supportive grandparents. They were fixtures next to NeeNee and Craig at little league games. They took turns picking us up and dropping us off from school or summer camp. When my mom wasn't around, Robert and Marge made sure Kyle and I ate dinner and that our homework was done. My grandparents were key members of my community support network.

My family was fortunate that the YMCA provided affordable child-care options in Owosso. Growing up, I attended summer day camp run by the YMCA, called Camp Shiawassee, while my parents worked. I loved summer camp! In this place, I was free to be playful and silly. We played games, bonded with friends, and made crafts all day. There was even a zipline. In addition, to creating a space for development, summer

camp also provided positive role models. I looked up to the camp counselors as friends and mentors.

My admiration for camp counselors led to me becoming one. From age 17 to 21, I worked as counselor at Camp Shiawassee. Being a camp counselor is still the best job I've ever had, and I was good at it. On my own, I went to the library to research games and team-building activities to turn any stretch of down-time into an opportunity for fun. I made up funny call-and-response chants for the campers to sing as we marched from activity to activity. Like the counselors from my childhood, I taught campers about the importance of fun, kindness, and group cohesion. Later in life, working as a camp counselor at the YMCA laid the foundation for my career as an educator.

Good intentions are not enough.

I was a senior in college when I first learned of Teach For America (TFA). My sociology professor gave a TFA recruiter 15 minutes of air time before class. The recruiter began by sharing passages from Jonathan Kozol's book *Savage Inequalities* (1991), about the disparities between schools of different classes and races. The recruiter raised statistics relating to teacher shortages in Title I schools. Title I, Part A (Title I) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) provides financial assistance to school districts serving high percentages of children from low-income families. The TFA recruiter explained that a startling number of teachers in Title I schools lack certification to teach their content area and that this was a social injustice much like Kozol described.

TFA's answer was to fix the problem from the outside-in. TFA identified research-backed skills and character traits of teachers most likely lead low-SES students to academic gains, as measured on standardized tests. They were looking for 'high-

achievers' to join the movement to close the achievement gap. In other words, she challenged us to use our privilege to make a difference in a needy community. I found the pitch compelling.

After passing an initial screening phase, I was invited for an interview. I spent weeks designing and preparing my mock lesson. I'd even practiced it in a live classroom setting, at the after-school program where I worked. When I learned that I'd been accepted and would be heading to New York City, I was over the moon.

So, I went to teach in Brooklyn, armed with plenty of good intentions. But, as Lewis and Diamond (2015) illustrate, good intentions are not enough. At the time, I lacked life experience and awareness. I didn't know what I didn't know. I was unprepared to challenge the problematic nature of TFA's mission. The organization is built on the idea that marginalized people can only be saved by outsiders—indicative of a deficit-mindset. The following story illustrates the point.

I was working in small groups in my first year of teaching. We were practicing subtraction skills using manipulatives—some buttons that I picked up at a dollar store. Lakiy sprang up out of his chair and announced, “Carpenter, I bet you...” His face was serious, and he gave a dramatic pause for effect. He cracked a huge smile before continuing, “I’m going to marry Halle Berry!” I said, “Lakiy, I asked you how many buttons you’d have left if I took four away. And, I don’t want to rain on your parade, but I think Halle Berry is married.” I tried to carry on unphased, but Lakiy beat me to the punch. He said, “Man! Nobody cares about buttons! And, she’s only with that fool because she’s never met me!” I was dumbstruck and outwitted by a 6 year-old. His classmates loved it when Lakiy cut up. I had to admit, Lakiy was legitimately hilarious.

I felt myself fighting back laughter to maintain a stern teacher presence, eventually losing the illusion of control that I had over the lesson. The morning did not go as I planned, and I thought to myself that I would have my hands full with Lakiy in the coming year.

That day at lunch, I went to the breakroom to vent to my colleagues about what happened. I told Theresa, a mentor teacher, what happened with Lakiy. Theresa came from a family of educators and seemed to have an intuitive sense for pedagogy. Theresa's response to my story shell-shocked me and transformed my philosophy of education. I was complaining about a student being disruptive and she told me three powerful words. She said, "Wow, he's talented!" I said, "What do you mean?" Theresa said, "Well, he's a natural performer. Can you command a room like that? He is a ham, but you have to admit that he's got talent. You should try to honor and develop his gifts. Otherwise, he will become frustrated, and he will find less productive ways to be in the spotlight." Theresa elegantly framed an assets-based pedagogy. This approach plays to the strengths and experiences that each person brings. Along these lines, Einstein said, "If you judge a fish by its ability to climb trees, it will live its whole life believing it is stupid." An assets-based approach also allows outlets for each person to develop their gifts. In the case of Lakiy, his gift was his personality and voice. Attempts to silence him would be a form of violence against his nature. Thanks to Theresa, I understood that my task for the remainder of the year was to channel and develop Lakiy's voice.

Theresa taught me that good pedagogy builds from assets. The job of a teacher is not to socialize students or to impart knowledge. Great teachers develop the best of what already exists within each student. My reflection about Lakiy also highlights the tension that I feel about my identity as a TFA alum because of the organization's deficit-minded

mission. As my current mentor, Dr. Guajardo likes to say, I am a recovering TFAer.

CREATING SPACE FOR NEW THINKING

(APPENDIX B—ACKNOWLEDGING HABERMAS)

I could easily argue that Habermas's theoretical contributions belong in my conceptual framework. However, my personal and professional development plan are rooted in decolonization. For this journey, I'm chiefly interested in non-White, non-Male ways of thinking. Having said that, I do want to give Habermas credit—his work was key to my understanding of the humanist school of thought that led me to the Community Learning Exchange way of being (Guajardo, Guajardo, Janson, & Millitello, 2015). However, Habermas does not fit the profile. And so, I present his thinking at the margins of my work—here in the appendices.

Habermas and Undistorted Communication

Across the humanities, Habermas's (1973) Theory of Communicative Rationality is considered a seminal work. His thesis aimed to bring people together through clear (i.e. undistorted) communication. He sought to create deep connection—a connection that I now understand as synonymous with Anzaldúa's conception of *conociimiento* (Anzaldúa, 2015). Habermas (1973, 1990) theorized that the human species has three inherent interests. First, Habermas contended that humans have an interest to reproduce the species through labor. Human labor should create environments suitable for human reproduction and advancement of the species.

The second fundamental human interest, according to Habermas, is in communication (1973, 1990). Habermas argued that the drive to be understood is a necessary condition for language to exist. Built into every expression is the desire for communion of thoughts and feelings with other people. This begs the question--if

humans have an inherent interest in communication, why are so many voices silenced or misunderstood? Habermas reasoned that systematic distortions of communication prevent humans from hearing and understanding each other. Power dynamics inherently distort communication. Communication between an employee and supervisor is warped by positional authority. Thus, power differentials can be counted among factors that systematically distort communication. *Pedagogies of connection work to erode systematic distortions of communication.*

The final inherent human interest, according to Habermas, is in the liberation from unnecessary constraints to human freedom (1973, 1990). In other words, humans cannot achieve peace without social justice. Social justice depends on laboring humanely and communicating clearly across divides of race, gender, class, etc. Habermas proposed that systematic distortions in labor and communication can be avoided through communicative rationality and pedagogies of connection such as the *symmetry principle*. The *symmetry principle* requires that each person have an equal right to speak and be heard, to question and answer, to command and obey. The symmetry principle acts to flatten hierarchies of power, enabling clear communication and the ability to problem solve through honest dialogue. My study will examine pedagogies of connection in various spaces and moments in my personal history in order to understand their impacts.

ARTIFACT: TRAINING AGENDA FROM PAST TRAINING

(APPENDIX C—ARTIFACT FOR COMPARISON)

SUMMER TRAINING AT A GLANCE

| WHAT? | WHY? | HOW? |
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| SUMMER TRAINING KICK-OFF | <u>OPENING KEY</u> <u>NOTE SPEAKER-</u> TO CREATE EXCITEMENT AROUND THE WORK AND SET THE STAGE FOR MOVING FORWARD | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• DEMONSTRATE THE CONNECTIONS AMONGST PERSONAL AND TEAM CORE VALUES, CAMPUS VISION AND MISSION, CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT AND CULTURE AND CLIMATE.• MAKE CONNECTIONS BACK TO CLASSROOM INSTRUCTION, STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT, AND THE IMPORTANCE OF ANALYZING, ASSESSING, ALIGNING AND ACTIVATING FOR SUSTAINABILITY AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT. <hr/> |

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| | <p>TO BRING TOGETHER PREVIOUS AND CURRENT WORK AND ESTABLISH A FOUNDATION FOR HOW CAMPUSES WILL MOVE FORWARD</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PROVIDE A CYCLE 2 GRANT OVERVIEW • REVISIT THE TAIS PROCESS • CONNECT TO PREVIOUS WORK, SITE VISITS, AND PREVIOUS SUMMER TRAININGS • CONNECT ALL OF THIS TO THE KEYNOTE SPEAKER’S POINTS ON THE IMPORTANCE OF ANALYZING, ASSESSING, ALIGNING, AND ACTIVATING THE WORK FOR SUSTAINABILITY AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT • SHARE TRAINING OBJECTIVES <hr/> |
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| <p>CORE VALUES</p> | <p>TO ESTABLISH THE CONNECTION OF CORE VALUES WITH WHAT MATTERS MOST TO PARTICIPANTS IN REGARDS TO CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT, MOTIVATE PARTICIPANTS FOR THE WORK AHEAD, DEMONSTRATE PERSONAL AND TEAM CONNECTIONS TO THE WORK, INVIGORATE PARTICIPANTS</p> | <p>PARTICIPANTS WILL:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • REVISIT AND REFLECT ON PERSONAL AND LEADERSHIP TEAM CORE VALUES AND HOW THEY DRIVE THE WORK • ANALYZE AND ASSESS LEADERSHIP STRUCTURE • PLAN HOW TO ACTIVATE TO ENSURE POSITIVE OUTCOMES BY CREATING AND UPLIFTING PERSONAL AND TEAM CORE VALUES <hr/> |
| <p>CAMPUS VISION AND MISSION</p> | | |

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| | <p>TO REVEAL HOW</p> <p>CORE VALUES</p> <p>IMPACT HOW</p> <p>PARTICIPANTS ARE</p> <p>BEING AND THE</p> <p>IMPACT OF THEIR</p> <p>ACTIONS ON</p> <p>MAKING THE</p> <p>CAMPUS VISION</p> <p>AND MISSION A</p> <p>REALITY</p> | <p>PARTICIPANTS WILL:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ANALYZE AND ASSESS PERSONAL AND TEAM CORE VALUES ARE ACTUALIZED IN THE VISION/MISSION • ALIGN CORE VALUES TO VISION/MISSION • PLAN HOW TO ACTIVATE TO ENSURE POSITIVE OUTCOMES BY ALIGNING CORE VALUES TO THE VISION/MISSION <hr/> |
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| <p>PREPARATION FOR THE WORK AHEAD</p> | <p>TO ESTABLISH A MINDSET FOR HOW PARTICIPANTS NEED TO BE AND WHAT THEY NEED TO DO TO INCREASE MOMENTUM AROUND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT</p> | <p>PARTICIPANTS WILL:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • UNDERSTAND WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A PRIORITY CAMPUS • ANALYZE AND ASSESS **** WORK OUTCOMES • ALIGN **** WORK WITH ESEA TURNAROUND PRINCIPLES • ACTIVATE FOR POSITIVE OUTCOMES BY ALIGNING CORE VALUES, VISION/MISSION, AND THE EXPECTATIONS FOR FUTURE WORK (INCLUDING ESEA TURNAROUND PRINCIPLES) <hr/> |
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| <p>CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT</p> | <p>DATA ANALYSIS AND NEEDS ASSESSMENT- TO SHOW THE CONNECTION OF THE WORK AROUND THIS TOPIC TO LAST YEAR’S SUMMER TRAINING, RECENT SITE VISIT AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT IN ORDER TO SERVE AS A LAUNCHING POINT FOR THE OTHER QUADRANTS OF THE CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT PROCESS</p> | <p>PARTICIPANTS WILL:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ANALYZE HOW THIS WORK LOOKS ON THEIR CAMPUS ASSESS IF THE “RIGHT” NEED WAS CHOSEN ALIGN PRACTICES TO CORE VALUES, VISION/MISSION, CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT, TURNAROUND PRINCIPLES, INSTRUCTION, AND STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT ACTIVATE FOR POSITIVE OUTCOMES BY DEMONSTRATING HOW LEADERSHIP AND TEACHERS CAN USE THIS TO BETTER UNDERSTAND CAMPUS AND INDIVIDUAL STUDENT NEEDS REFINE PLAN |
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| | <p>IMPROVEMENT</p> <p>PLANNING- TO</p> <p>CREATE A BETTER</p> <p>UNDERSTANDING</p> <p>AROUND THE</p> <p>PURPOSE OF AND ,</p> <p>THE COMPONENTS</p> <p>OF IMPROVEMENT</p> <p>PLANNING AND</p> <p>DEMONSTRATE</p> <p>HOW TO DEVELOP</p> <p>AND EXECUTE A</p> <p>GOOD PLAN</p> | <p>PARTICIPANTS WILL:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ANALYZE AND ASSESS QUARTERLY GOALS, STRATEGIES, AND INTERVENTIONS • ALIGN PRACTICES TO CORE VALUES, VISION/MISSION, CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT, TURNAROUND PRINCIPLES, INSTRUCTION, AND STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT • ACTIVATE FOR POSITIVE OUTCOMES BY DEMONSTRATING HOW TO DEVELOP MEASURABLE INDICATORS • ENGAGE IN THE KITE ACTIVITY <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • REFINE PLAN <hr/> |
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| | <p>IMPLEMENTING</p> <p>AND</p> <p>MONITORING- TO</p> <p>ENHANCE</p> <p>PARTICIPANTS’</p> <p>ABILITY TO</p> <p>MEASURE FOR</p> <p>FIDELITY AND</p> <p>PROGRESS AND</p> <p>MAKE MID-</p> <p>COURSE</p> <p>CORRECTIONS.</p> | <p>PARTICIPANTS WILL:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ANALYZE AND ASSESS FIDELITY, PROGRESS, COMMUNICATION, MAKING MID-COURSE CORRECTIONS, AND STAFF EFFECTIVENESS ALIGN PRACTICES TO CORE VALUES, VISION/MISSION, CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT, TURNAROUND PRINCIPLES, INSTRUCTION, AND STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT, AND KITE ACTIVITY PLAN TO ACTIVATE TO ENSURE POSITIVE OUTCOMES THAT CREATE A CULTURE AND CLIMATE FOR IMPLEMENTING AND MONITORING WITH FIDELITY REFINE PLAN <hr/> <p>DEFINE IMPLEMENTATION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •CREATE A CULTURE FOR IMPLEMENTING AND MONITORING |
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| | | <p>–How? ----- BY CREATING BUY-IN</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •IMPLEMENTATION & MONITORING COMMUNICATION PLAN •PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES FOR TRAINING ABOUT IMPLEMENTING AND MONITORING •IDENTIFY ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES •REMOVE ORGANIZATIONAL BARRIERS <p>MAYBE WE CAN GUIDE TEAMS THROUGH A PROCESS THAT WILL HELP THEM WITH HOW TO IMPLEMENT AND MONITOR? WE WOULD NEED TO DISCUSS WHAT THAT PROCESS LOOKS LIKE. SOMETHING PRACTICAL AND USER FRIENDLY.</p> <p>READ/UTILIZE THE FOLLOWING ARTICLE ON THE FOLLOWING SITE:</p> <p>:HTTP://WWW.BIRNBAUMASSOCIATES.COM/MONITORING.HTM</p> <p>COMMUNITY TOOL BOX HTTP://CTB.KU.EDU/EN</p> <p>WILL BE AN EXCELLENT TOOL IN HELPING US DEVELOP OUT OUR CONTENT</p> |
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| <p>TEA UPDATES</p> | <p>TO PROVIDE WAIVER UPDATE, DUE DATE, AND TEA EXPECTATION INFORMATION</p> | <p>TBA</p> |
| <p>EMPOWERING AND INVIGORATING OTHERS (TRAINING WRAP-UP)</p> | <p>TO EMPOWER AND INVIGORATE LEADERSHIP TEAM AND DEMONSTRATE HOW TO EMPOWER AND INVIGORATE THEIR STAFF FOR THE WORK AHEAD.</p> | <p>PARTICIPANTS WILL:</p> <p>BRING KEY CONCEPTS TOGETHER AND ENHANCE SKILLS AROUND HOW TO CREATE BUY IN AND EXCITEMENT AROUND THE NEXT CHAPTER OF CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT</p> <hr/> |

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| <p>FINAL CELEBRATIO N CEREMONY</p> | <p>TO CELEBRATE CAMPUSES' JOURNEYS AND ACCOMPLISHMENT S THROUGHOUT THE COURSE OF THE **** GRANT.</p> | <p>TBA</p> |
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