

Scholarship Interrupted: How Unsettling Compartmentalized “Normal” Can Inspire Wholehearted Insight

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I sit alone in my home office as the morning sun filters through the window and birds chatter in the trees. I watch a young family walk by, the mother and father lag while their toddler—head down and leaning in—pushes her empty stroller forward. Wind chimes sound in the distance. I “shush” my barking dog, face the computer screen, and settle into my writerly self.

My computer is arranged on a makeshift shallow desk against a back wall: a thick slab of recycled wood balanced on two IKEA file cabinets. Disheveled stacks of paper and books jostle for position around the base of the monitor. My real desk, the one tagged as a desk at the consignment shop, sits between me and the door. It holds potted succulents and a vase of colored pens. I swivel between the two workstations in an oversized black leather chair: a Mother’s Day gift from my sons. All three pieces of furniture are too large for me. Signs of misfit are everywhere: a squatty stool for my feet, volumes of *Best American Short Stories* and old textbooks propping up the monitor, and a lumbar pillow declaring “Home” forced into the crook of my chair.

The work taking place within my home office has changed dramatically in the space of several weeks. It is no longer a private space where I retire to study, write, or prepare lesson plans. It has become more public and fluid. It is a space where I move my Comprehensive Exam notes out of the way in order to conference with students. It is where I meet with professors and committees while comforting my dog or speaking over video-game music emanating from the next room. It’s where I document a non-conference experience while isolated in my home on the other side of the country.

As a graduate teaching assistant, I jumped at the chance to attend and document the 2020 Conference on College Composition and

Communication Convention in Milwaukee. I looked forward to connecting with the fellow Documentarians and experiencing the phenomenon of memory-making: an act of establishing story and identity through a rhetorical assemblage of diverse personal experience. I also recognized how occupying the conference space would contribute to my own identity-construction as a graduate student and novice scholar. How exploiting the badge of “Documentarian” would provide me the excuse and the courage to network, glean, and contribute: all performances necessary for fitting into the large space I am trying to occupy.

I was to present my research on a study I had conducted at my university exploring the level to which student roles, and thus identities, are constructed by the rhetorical nature of syllabi; and, how this commonplace and unacknowledged act of audience construction can conflict with instructor pedagogical principles. In other words, I was attending a conference as a means of academic identity-construction to present research that questions how we influence and perpetuate the construction of student academic identity. The irony is not lost on me.

However, as I sit in my misfit Arizona home office documenting my interrupted conference experience, I realize the story has become much more intimate and self-reflective than it would have been otherwise. I am no longer documenting a conference, but my feelings concerning a conference denied. I am no longer constructing an academic identity but negotiating an uncharted chaotic juncture where sorted identities have converged.

Not being able to step into different spaces and become that which I have learned is appropriate for that space lays bare my tendency to compartmentalize and prioritize identities. I suppose compartmentalization is my vain attempt to hide rough and unsightly insecurities behind a strategically constructed front of academic ethos. Of course, this shaky facade immediately cracked once my compartmentalized identities became sequestered to the same space. Since the home/personal and campus/professional dichotomy no longer applies, I am left feeling ungrounded and exposed.

I knew the role I was to play at 4Cs. I was acclimating to my role on campus as an instructor; and I was familiar with my roles as a writer, as a student, as a mother, and as a daughter and a friend. But, as I now swivel back and forth in my home office experiencing these roles simultaneously from within a common space, the lines separating my

seemingly disparate identities dissolve. I am left feeling incomplete and insufficient no matter which direction I turn. It is an uncomfortable, yet familiar sensation, as if it has always hovered in the back of my mind or just under my skin but has now pushed to the surface. Perhaps the dissolution was only a matter of time: an inevitable crumble of cosmetic embankments against currents prone to shift, fluctuate, and deviate. Yet, perhaps this unsettling can also do more than shake my confidence. Periodic interruptions of normalized practices, spaces, and identity-construction can serve productive purposes. They can bring into relief the situations and expectations that necessitate such compartmentalized performative constructions. Because of this, compelled introspective documentation of these unsettled roles and practices end up being much more uncomfortable and riskier to write. Yet, it may also be the intimate level where authentic, full-bodied, and multidimensional stories and histories must begin.

I was to make my presentation at 4Cs at two o'clock, Saturday afternoon. Instead, I passed the afternoon sitting on the floor of my bedroom sifting through a cardboard box of decomposing creative-writing notebooks. At least an hour was spent exploring the thickest of the stack: its Mead cover stiff with Mod Podged words ripped from magazines and rearranged to form inspiring quotes and writing directives. As I leafed through its pages, I was surprised at my lapse of memory. While I had taken such artistic care to create a space worthy of them, I had thought of neither the stories, essays, and poems nor the person who compiled them in years. It was almost as if I was discovering them for the first time. Not fitting my current context of academia, this artist-writer had been shelved and left behind. Yet, this afternoon, I sat in a haze of filtered sunlight and read and remembered. I also began to wonder at the ways my concentrated academic performance had constrained my full-bodied authenticity and wholehearted engagement. When and why did I determine these different writerly identities could not co-exist? What fruits could inquiry and writing yield if both my creative and analytical selves were invited to the table and working in tandem?

It is easy to get lost contemplating the idea of wholeheartedness when it comes to intellectual inquiry and pedagogy. While the metaphor of the whole heart is commonly associated with emotion, it also suggests an optimal way of knowing that connects mind and emotion. After all, how common is the triumphant proclamation of knowing

something “by heart?” Wholehearted knowing and acting is the opposite of compartmentalization. It acknowledges the different identities, perspectives, and interpretations available, and recognizes each as having the potential to contribute something valuable to the whole. Such wholeness in mind and body suggests not only authenticity but integrity. Compartmentalized parts working under the guise of separation can never lead to honest, accurate, and complete insight and inquiry.

The box of notebooks remained open in the corner of my bedroom for several days. Its presence seemed to fit my unsettled disposition. Even as I looked past it, it continued to serve as compelling evidence that this creative artist-writer may still exist and perhaps have something to contribute. It continued to resurrect long-forgotten thoughts, voices, and definitions of writerly success. It reminded me of a portion of myself that had been misplaced: an identity stored away because I was conditioned to believe it no longer fit, an identity whose loss was significant. And, like a young girl frantically pedaling a two-wheeled tricycle, handle-bar streamers whipping in the air, I began to wonder if momentum alone had kept me upright and moving forward. Since my trajectory had now been interrupted, the quotidian muscular strain and fatigue of overcompensation could no longer be denied.

I know my thoughts on wholeheartedness didn't originate with me. While I couldn't immediately name the source, I knew they were traces of something that I had earlier encountered. It took several days before I remembered bell hooks's *Teaching to Transgress*. Returning to the book and leafing through the heavily annotated pages, I was surprised to see how my academic situation and partitioned identities were playing out a very narrow sliver of hooks's rich inquiry of compartmentalization and wholeness: “Educational structures,” hooks suggests, “seem to denigrate notions of wholeness and uphold the idea of a mind/body split, one that promotes and supports compartmentalization” (16). At some point, I had determined my creative writer identity to be academically detrimental or at least too immature or philistine to risk within the academic structure in which I was hoping to fit.

What physical, mental, and emotional work does it take to separate, compartmentalize, and choreograph our individual selves? What possibilities reside in that overlooked, wholehearted liminal space where—as students of writing, creators of writing, instructors of writers, and artists—identities overlap? What energy can be produced and applied with all cylinders firing in coordinated effort rather than in measured

bursts and guarded application? Can we draw insight, empathy, and knowledge from recognizing and inviting nonacademic identities into our work without apology or rationale? Do we encourage this compartmentalization of identities within our students thus limiting their creative potential in order to fit the narrow academic norms to which we have conformed?

After shifting to remote instruction, I spent a good portion of my time Zooming with students. It was an odd sensation to glimpse into their private world and invite them into mine as we spoke from our relative living spaces. One student in particular seemed aware of the influence of space on her student-identity. She had returned home after the transition and sat on her unmade bed as we discussed the importance of credible sources. Rows of white teardrop lights covered the wall behind her, interrupted here and there with intricate charcoal sketches of cacti, birds, and flowers. Yes, she was the artist. No, she didn't have much time for art these days. After stumbling over the language of her academic research and writing, the student half-laughed and proclaimed her need to be in a classroom to "think like a student." "My brain works different when I'm home," she explained. I smiled, told her she was doing great, and we moved on.

What part of her whole self does this student leave behind when she travels to the university? What makes her consider her home identity as competing or at odds with her academic identity? What can be induced about wholehearted pedagogy from the commonalities between her experience as a student and mine as an instructor as acted out from our respective homes and private spaces? How can this nontraditional use of space and interaction invite a recognition of complex wholeness and how we may be influencing students or even requiring them to compartmentalize their separate ways of knowing? What would a class environment look like that questions partitioning constructs of traditional pedagogy and "allows us to be whole in the classroom, and as a consequence wholehearted" (hooks 193)?

Taking the time to pause, reflect, and document these types of personal experiences within the shared societal phenomenon of COVID-19 offers a rare glimpse of shared norms being unsettled in real time. As a writer, a student of writing and a teacher of writing, a mother, a daughter, and a creative person, being called on to act out compartmentalized identities all within a single space is forcing a reconciliation of estranged identities of academic, student, teacher,

and artist. My struggle to negotiate, conform, and perform my traditional academic identity in an untraditional space brings into relief the uncompromising rigidity of those spaces that do not value the artistic or creative language I once prized. No matter how hard I have worked to compartmentalize, build up, and establish a persona fitting of academia, the efficacy of such fragile, half-hearted constructions become apparent as soon as the ivory structures within which they were enacted are physically off-limits. Perhaps the common sensation of misfitting suggests something deficient in the construction of traditional academic spaces and practices rather than in our inability as teachers and students to comfortably fit and productively employ all our “parts” from within those spaces.

What can be done with this fresh perspective? Traditional academic paths and identities have become so ingrained that other ways of doing and being are often considered impossible, illogical, or at best immature imaginations of an unlearned mind. Seeing beyond entrenched practices is difficult for those of us who have worked hard to successfully navigate them. Do we scramble back to our familiar and well-worn paths at the first sight of any semblance of normalcy, or do we take the chance to pause, look, and consider landscapes previously hidden from our view? Circumstances have changed. Perspectives have changed. The self-protective, elitist, clinical relationship between me and my students has been shaken, and I am left feeling exposed and vulnerable yet also curious and hopeful. This may be the perfect opportunity to reconcile the separation of my past writerly self and my present writerly self to more fully engage a wholehearted writerly self. This may also be a perfect opportunity to invite students to utilize all their creative identities in exploring and writing a more full-bodied truth of their lived experience and their unique ways of knowing.

As I sit in my home-office, I realize I have more questions than answers. Yet, documenting my experience has produced a desire to question and to explore the latent possibilities of wholehearted, multidimensional scholarship and pedagogy where complex identities are fully present, valued, and contributing. It has kindled a curiosity in the potential of inviting our whole selves and the whole selves of others—including students—around the table to contribute. Based on my personal experience of documenting an unsettled conference and its unsettling effects, I am excited to see what can be gained from an archived collection of the diverse perspectives of scholars and students

concerning this shared exigence. I am eager to see how archiving our stories can create a new type of collaborative reflection and inquiry; and, how these insights can lead to more complex and wholehearted pedagogies that not only allow for but celebrate our multidimensional identities as instructors, students, and artists.

WORK CITED

hooks, bell. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*.
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