

Holding Space for Each Other's Stories: A Phenomenological Study of an Adolescent

Story Slam

by

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## ABSTRACT

This research features a phenomenological investigation of the interactions between adolescent storytellers and audience members during a live storytelling event. The researcher partnered with an English teacher in an urban Southwest high school and a spoken word poet from a youth nonprofit to produce a storytelling workshop and corresponding story slam event for high school students. Fourteen participants, including seven student storytellers and seven student audience members, participated in extensive follow-up interviews where they described the experience of their respective roles during the event. Utilizing a phenomenological design (Moustakas, 1994; Vagle, 2014) and drawing from reception theory (Bennett, 1997; Hall, 1980) as a framework, the researcher used participant descriptions to compose a textural-structural synthesis collectively describing the phenomenon of interaction, connection, and transaction between storytellers and audience members during the live event.

The textural-structural synthesis of participants' descriptions comprises four major essences of the transactional phenomenon. These include 1) the relational symbiosis of storytellers and audience members, 2) the nature of the story slam as a planned and produced event, 3) the storytellers' inclusions of specific, personal details which resonated with specific, personal details in audience members' lives, and 4) the storytellers' intentional style and content choices which corresponded with reactions from audience members.

These findings provide a platform for fostering conditions for interaction, connection, and transaction in curricular and extra-curricular secondary contexts. For a classroom teacher, they may be helpful in creating principles for optimizing interactions

between teachers and students in instruction and between students in collaboration. In extra-curricular contexts, these findings provide a platform for consideration of how to hold space for creative performance once spaces for creative expression have been made for youth.

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my late father, Gregory Gordon Griffith, who was easily both the hardest worker and the most generous person I've ever known. While I don't measure up, I do aspire to his ideals of hard work and generosity, and I hope that my attempts (along with my recognition of being fortunate at receiving the hard work and generosity of others) are on display in this manuscript. My grief at his sudden passing while I was working on this dissertation is tempered only by the lessons and examples he shared with me throughout my life, and one of those is that you persevere to finish the task at hand, especially when your family is counting on you. I am grateful to both of my parents for their perpetual support and for the hard work, generosity, and careful planning which fostered the conditions for me to be able to continue my studies at the graduate level, culminating in this dissertation. I do not take the notion of legacy lightly, and I hope that I can continue to embody and pass on the lessons embedded in my father's memory to my future students, friends, family, colleagues, and research partners.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The show *Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee* has a simple premise revealed in its name; Jerry Seinfeld invites another comedian to join him for a ride to get a cup of coffee, and on the way, they tell stories of their comedic adventures and compare notes on the craft of live comedy. What's interesting in many of these conversations is the level of respect the comedians have for the audience.

For example, Bill Burr told Seinfeld (2014), "There's never going to be anything better than standing in front of a live audience that's going nuts laughing, or if you're playing in a band singing a song, or if you dunk a ball..." Burr suggested that for a comedian, musician, or athlete, the payoff comes from performing a given talent in front of a live audience who can react approvingly in the moment.

In another episode, Lewis Black (2017) told Seinfeld, "You want to write a book? I want to hear a laugh." Black added the dimension of instant gratification and immediate validation from the live audience. As opposed to a writer who may have to wait weeks or months to receive critical feedback, the comedian can judge the success of the joke immediately from whether their audience laughs. Black even mentioned that he made modifications to his act, specifically his wardrobe, based on the reactions of the audience. Black said, "When I started as a comic, what I found, since my act was kind of bordering on being mildly psychotic, is the nicer my clothing was, the calmer the audience, because they were like, 'Yeah, but he can tie a tie. He's insane, but, boy, what a wonderful Windsor'" (Seinfeld, 2017).

The legendary comic Steve Martin also admitted making strategic decisions based on the potential reactions of the audience; “When I first started, I decided to fake confidence. Because I thought it was important that they sensed I believed. If I was the slightest bit nervous, they could smell it, and they would become judges” (Seinfeld, 2015).

Martin also suggested a sort of an immediate moderation and refinement of comic content that couldn’t be done without the presence of the live audience. He said, “You get to know exactly how much [your material is] liked. It’s a real reading of the audience listening to it and all these moments sink into your head, and you’re going, ‘I see a new way now of structuring this thing.’” Martin reflected that he was able to conceptualize how to revise the sequence and structure of his material from reading how his audience was receiving it from the stage.

Finally, Steve Harvey noted that, as a matter of survival, comedians only perform material that audiences find to be funny. If a comedian crosses a line and offends an audience, they can hear it through the audible reactions (or lack thereof) from the crowd. In this way, audiences moderate the types of jokes being told with the amount and intensity of their laughter. And if an audience doesn’t find a comedian to be funny, they won’t have a job for long. As Harvey put it to Seinfeld (2015), “The audience is the only police we need.”

Each of these examples showcases the comedians’ respect for the presence of the audience, generally, and their recognition of how elusive an audience’s laughter can be along with how sweet the reward is after working for the laugh. These comedians’ reflections suggest that there’s something created between the audience and the

performer in the context of a live performance. In a performance setting, it's not just the choices, behavior, characteristics, and attitude of the performer that create meaning, but the choices, behavior, characteristics, and attitudes of the audience also contribute to meaning-creation. Both sides of the performance equation are dynamic, and together, they demonstrate a symbiotic relationship.

This phenomenon of interaction, connection, and even transaction between performer and audience isn't limited just to live comedy. Spectator sports, musical performances, and even doctoral defenses involve the same equation of performer and spectator with some sort of transaction occurring between. This past fall, I took the opportunity to attend many home games of the Arizona State University football team during a rollercoaster season where they defeated ranked opponents one week only to fall to unimpressive teams the next. As the offense would build momentum toward a score, the collective noise level of the audience would grow in response, but as soon as a receiver dropped a pass or an offensive drive otherwise stalled, the noise level would instantly drop, almost live Sun Devil stadium itself let out a collective exhale. The players visually seemed to respond in turn. Frustrated gestures of disappointment came often during the low moments, but when big plays were made, the players would turn to the crowd and pump their arms in a signal to crank the volume.

It seems that an audience can support and empower a performer in a live context, so the opposite must also be true. Recently, I attended a colleague's dissertation defense where I sat behind one of the committee members. For the duration of the candidate's presentation, the committee member scrolled through messages, emails and social media on her phone, and I could see she already had posted comments on the candidate's



dissertation draft, which was visible on her laptop screen. As a fellow audience member, I judged the behavior as slightly rude, aloof, and disconnected, but on a deeper level, I wondered if and how the committee member's lack of attention and failure to hold the space for the candidate affected the performance. If one of the key judges involved in the defense wasn't even paying attention, what does that lack of connection signal to the candidate and how might it affect her presentation?

Considering the phenomenon of interaction between performers and audience members is relevant in educational research, too, because of the nature of classroom management and teachers interacting with students in an instructional context. During my 12 years as a middle and high school English teacher, I could tell almost instantly whether my presentation was connecting with a given class on a given day or not. Sometimes, the whole class was totally engaged, which they signaled through constant eye contact with me and the presentation media along with respectful verbal interactions among classmates. Other times, students seemed not to notice me at all as they shouted back and forth across the classroom at each other with no regard for the instruction or my attempts to redirect. And some classes on some days were so disengaged and nonparticipatory that the period felt like it dragged on for an eternity.

Sometimes, engagement (or lack thereof) was communicated with clear gestures, like eye rolls or the nodding of heads, or with verbal cues like, "Awesome class today, Mr. G!" or (more often than I'd like to admit), "This is so boring! Why do we have to learn this?" And sometimes, there seemed to be more of an ethereal energy; I could feel when the class was engaged and content was clicking, and I could sense when the class

grew restless or bored. Like with the elusive laugh for the comedian, I considered the reaction of my students and moderated my delivery accordingly.

Beyond teacher and student interaction, there's also value in exploring interactions, connections, and transactions between students. Especially as current educational policy tends to value collaboration, so much that the Common Core State Standards Initiative includes speaking and listening standards like, “[p]repare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively” (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.1), it stands to reason that there's value in studying effective collaboration and in considering how and when students connect during speaking and listening as well as how and when they don't.

One specific genre which holds promise for such study of adolescent interaction is that of storytelling.

### **The Power of Storytelling**

Currently, a search through the rankings of top podcasts in Apple's iTunes Store includes titles like *Invisibilia*, *This American Life*, *TED Radio Hour* and *TED Talks Daily*, *Freakonomics*, *S-Town*, *Radiolab*, and *The Moth*. What each of these top-ranked podcasts has in common is that they all feature an element of live, true, personal narrative. True stories are the heart of their popular content. In addition to podcasts, bestselling memoirs continuously get adapted into big-budget feature films which Gutkind (2012) labeled as “BOTS” (or based-on-a-true-story); recent examples include

*Sully* and *The Glass Castle*. Along with their podcast spin-offs, TED talk videos are a popular genre melding personal story, information, and sometimes argument.

As I wrote in *From Me to We: Using Narrative Nonfiction to Broaden Student Perspectives* (2017):

The modern literary landscape includes an incredible overlap of pop-culture, new and old media and mediums, and real events. Books, films, blogs, podcasts, YouTube clips, TED talks, and more mesh together, complement and inform one another and the main roads of intersection are story and truth: narrative nonfiction. (p. 10).

Or, as Mendelsohn (2010) put it, “This experience of being constantly exposed to other people’s life stories is matched only by the inexhaustible eagerness of people to tell their life stories.”

Such insatiable hunger for true, personal narratives is addressed by a variety of scholars in several fields. From a literature studies perspective, Campbell said, “[w]e all need to tell our story and to understand our story. We all need to understand death and to cope with death, and we all need help in our passages from birth to life, and then to death” (Campbell & Moyer, 1988, p. 4). Campbell suggested that it’s our common plotline of mortality which generates a need to share and understand stories. Campbell’s perspective is echoed by Foster (2003), who argued, “there’s only one story... It’s about everything that anyone wants to write about... about ourselves... about what it means to be human” (pp. 185-186).

From the perspective of educational research, Lewis (2011) wrote, “[s]tory is central to human understanding—it makes life livable, because, without a story, there is

no identity, no self, no other” (p. 505). San Pedro (2015) echoed, “our stories allow us to make sense of our continued and constantly emerging identities. Our stories are never isolated from the world and the world is never isolated from us” (p. 135). San Pedro and Lewis together argue that creating and sharing stories is a way to both craft and interpret our emerging identities as well to contextualize those identities among the stories of others. Beyond that, San Pedro and Lewis suggest that there’s a need and a place for storytelling in both education and educational research.

The storytelling genres and subgenres mentioned so far include both written and oral stories, but oral storytelling bears further mention. As with the general popularity of personal nonfiction, opportunities for oral storytelling abound as well. In the Phoenix Metro Valley alone, there are seven separate brands offering live storytelling events including Bar Flies, the Arizona Storytellers Project, Yarnball, The Storyline, Spillers, Uptown PEN, and the WordPlay Café. On the other side of the country, near my hometown in Pennsylvania, the Lancaster Story Slam started a monthly series in 2015, which is open to anyone interested in telling a true, 5-minute story on the night’s given theme. Lancaster Story Slam grew out of the West Chester Story Slam (which started in 2010) and has since spawned the Lehigh Valley Story Slam and the York Story Slam as well as associated events in Harrisburg and even a storytelling event specific to entrepreneurs. If these two sites that I’ve lived in are reflective of the rest of the country, then it’s fair to say oral storytelling communities are blooming.

Much of the credit for the spread of live storytelling is due to the New York City-based storytelling nonprofit The Moth. According to themoth.org, The Moth launched in 1997 and has since “presented thousands of stories told live and without notes.” The

anchor program of The Moth brand is its weekly NPR broadcast and corresponding podcast featuring recordings of live storytellers on various themes. The Moth Radio Hour podcast is currently ranked 35<sup>th</sup> among top-downloaded podcasts on the Apple iTunes store, and, according to themoth.org, is “heard on over 400 stations worldwide” and “is downloaded over 30 million times a year.” The program has garnered a Peabody Award and has also spiraled into other related mediums including *New York Times* best-selling book compendiums displaying print text translations of popular recorded stories.

The Moth also hosts live storytelling events in cities across the country. These events range from small, local storytelling slam competitions which help producers to identify notable stories and storytellers worthy of development to a national tour of events called The Moth Main Stage at larger venues.

The hallmarks of The Moth’s story slam competitions include having a theme for the event, which storytellers consider as they develop and present a story which relates, along with a 5-minute time limit, judges selected from the audience who score the night’s stories on content and delivery to determine the event’s winner (though the competition aspect is often downplayed with judges being playfully booed for giving low-scores, similar to the interaction in spoken word poetry and poetry slam communities), no notes or props allowed, and a requirement that stories have to be true to be best of the storyteller’s memory. These hallmarks are often copied or reproduced for local storytelling events, which is where I encountered them.

I first tried my hand at live storytelling during the inaugural season of the Lancaster Story Slam in 2015 during an event with the theme of “Good Vibrations.” As I shared the story of how a giant, shirtless hippy stranger pulled me into a bear-hug during

a music festival that my trail crew had volunteered at, I was hooked by the interplay between me and the audience. First, it was a fun challenge, when I first heard of the event, to try to recall a true story that matched the theme.

I was markedly nervous on the night of the slam (much more so than I get for teaching a lesson or even giving a conference presentation) because I had little margin for error, and the event's protocol and time limit didn't allow for banter, conversation, or sidebars (which are hallmarks of my presentation and teaching style). Under bright stage lights, the MC announced my name, and after a round of polite applause, the audience settled into silent anticipation and the clock started running. Adding to the pressure was the advertised fact that they recorded each story for distribution on YouTube and that selected audio recordings would also be featured on their podcast.

Throughout my performance, I was constantly aware of the audience. As I began my story, the silence and anticipation were palpable, and I had to intentionally hold myself back from speaking too fast. Once I peppered in a few jokes and received light, polite laughter in return, I started to gain confidence and built my momentum. When I arrived at the climax of the story which was the hippy giant lifting me into the air, members of the audience were laughing so hard that I knew I had to pause to give them time to catch up for a well-crafted line. So, as I delivered loudly, "And he whispered in my ear..." I paused, waiting for the audience, and once they grew quiet, I whispered what he said; "I'm glad you're here, man." When I heard gasps, "ahhs," and even "wows" from the audience, I knew I had nailed it. As described by others in the opening contexts, my live performance had been both moderated and validated by the response of the audience.

While I never used oral storytelling in my own secondary English classroom, I believe that a teacher's passions and personal literacy practices can be a generative educational gateway for pedagogy. From my own interest in creative nonfiction reading and writing, for example, I developed a potential unit plan (Griffith, 2017) and a sequence of activities to engage students in the same in English class. Following this model, I remained curious about the possibilities for oral storytelling in secondary English classroom and curriculum and in expanding my previous work on narrative nonfiction.

Furthermore, based on my storytelling experiences, I sought to further understand the interaction between storytellers and audience members, especially for adolescents in an extracurricular context. Tying together the general power of storytelling, the prevalence of oral storytelling, the interaction between performer and audience member in a live context, and an educational context brings us to the purpose of the research presented in this study.

### **Purpose/Significance of Study**

As a storyteller and as an educator, I seek to use this study to both harness the power and current popularity of live storytelling and to use it as an opportunity to explore the interactions between adolescent storytellers and audience members during a live storytelling event. I focus on adolescent participants so that the findings from this work may be useful to secondary educators who want to better understand or improve classroom dynamics between teachers and students in an instructional context and between students in a collaborative context. Outside of the classroom, the findings may

also be useful for educators and youth advocates looking to create spaces and opportunities for creative expression.

A detailed description of the phenomenon of connection within a live storytelling event and drawn from adolescent storytellers and audience members themselves can provide educators with a clearer perspective on the qualities and conditions they should strive to foster in student-to-teacher, student-to-student, and student performer-to-audience connection. This perspective may in turn guide educators in developing instructional principles for fostering such qualities and conditions.

To conduct this investigation, I partnered with Mr. Markus\*, a 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grade English teacher at Southwest Academy High School\*, a public charter located in the downtown of a major city in the Southwest United States. With the help of Joaquin\*, a spoken-word poet and youth workshop leader with a local nonprofit organization, we produced an extra-curricular story slam event for Southwest Academy students, borrowing from the guidelines and rules of The Moth and the Lancaster Story Slam (\*all names in this study are pseudonyms). Additionally, students interested in developing a live, true story to perform at the event were invited to a 2-hour workshop to develop content and practice sharing in front of an audience.

While the total participation for the story slam event and accompanying workshop, including students, teachers, family, and friends numbered between 50 and 60, among this group were 14 adolescent participants, 7 storytellers and 7 audience members, who provided the data which generated the detailed descriptions of the phenomenon of connection between performers and audience members in a live storytelling event.



During a reflective interview, Mr. Markus offered perspective on the significance of the story slam event by distinguishing it from other types of typical performer-audience interactions in a school context. He said, “The audience was way more into it than I expected. I think everyone was like this is kinda one of those recital things where my kid's in it and we have to go to it, but then they came and [the response shifted to] this is something we need to try to do more of if we can.” Mr. Markus suggested that the story slam broke the mold of a “recital response” which, he noted, is rooted in obligation.

When I pressed him on the differences between audience response at our story slam and those at a typical school recital, he noted several. He felt the encouragement for students to write expressively and the opportunity to share their original, creative work distinguished the event from a recital where students performed work by other composers and authors. Furthermore, he noted that the event just felt different: more authentic and less like school. As Mr. Markus put it, “It felt more like things they'll get in the real world. It felt more like a coffee shop or that sort of thing.”

Parents, too, appreciated the opportunity and experience for students to participate in the story slam and workshop. Jewlianna is a journalist and the parent of an 8<sup>th</sup> grader at Southwest Academy. When her daughter's teacher told her about the event and recommended that it would be a good opportunity for her daughter, Jewlianna asked if parents could attend the workshop as well. She told me, “I'm a writer, but it's totally different than this creative writing, and I don't ever get the freedom to write like this. It's hard for me. This kind of writing is hard, and I write every day for a living. So I was like, ‘Can I go check [the workshop] out?’”

Jewlianna described the value that she saw in working on creative writing skills to polish her journalism skills:

I feel like if I could do this on a more regular basis it would make me a better writer... obviously you have to keep truth and accuracy [while writing the news], which I think you do in [personal narratives] as well, but you're able to throw in a lot more abstract language, and colorful language, which you can't do on the news side of things. But I think there's so much value in making yourself a better writer, to write in different types of formats.

Finally, Jewlianna shared what she saw as the benefit of the story slam workshop and experience for students like her daughter:

I felt like even though there were some adults sprinkled throughout the [workshop space], that it didn't really hold [students] back. They were kind of like, "Yeah this is what I'm feeling." They were running it more than like ... the adults were more quiet, which I thought was a good thing. And it was an environment where [students] were kind of able to express and students are typically sitting there just listening [in a classroom setting]. This was kind of a little bit of a role reversal for them I feel like. They had more opportunity to express themselves in kind of a different aspect of things.

Both Mr. Markus and Jewlianna respected and appreciated that our story slam event put students' experience front and center, relegated adults in the space to the role of partner or facilitator rather than administrator, and shifted the atmosphere from typical "school" or "recital" events to something that felt like an authentic or real-world environment like a coffee shop. Contextually, these interviews helped to give me

confidence as a researcher that the partnership I created with Mr. Markus and Joaquin along with our corresponding workshop and story slam event fostered conditions for which examining interactions between adolescent storytellers and audience members would be generative.

### **Theoretical Frame**

From the field of theater studies, Brook (1968) described the difference between what he labeled as “bad houses vs. good houses” (p. 140) during a theater performance. A bad house includes spectators who are passive and expect the actors alone to do the work while they sit and stare. A good house includes “an audience... that brings an active interest and life to its watching role—this audience assists” (p. 140). Brook (1968) noted that when an audience is active and interested, it transforms the experience for both spectator and performer; “Then the word representation no longer separates actor and audience, show and public: it envelops them: what is present for one is present for the other. The audience too has undergone a change” (p. 140).

Brook’s perception of the power of the audience in shaping a theatrical performance relates to Seinfeld’s conversations with fellow comedians and my opening thoughts on other contexts for performer-audience interactions in live contexts. Reading Brook (1968) and considering theater studies led me to Bennett (1997) and reception theory (Bennett, 1997; Hall, 1980), which I draw from as a theoretical frame for this dissertation.

Hall (1980) described a quality of reception theory as “encoding/decoding;” the performer encodes meaning in a performance which the audience decodes through their

interpretation. Hall's notion of encoding and decoding implied a transaction between performers and audience, and it reminds me of Rosenblatt's (1978) transactional theory of reader-response where "[t]he finding of meanings involves both the author's text and what the reader brings to it" (p. 14), with the difference being the type of text. Rosenblatt mainly referred to how a reader interpreted a piece of literature or print text (what she called "the poem"), whereas Hall addressed how an audience received and interpreted a live theater performance.

Coincidentally, I used Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reader-response as a guiding principle during my early conceptualizations of this research. As I considered my experience as a storyteller and the phenomenon of connection between performer and audience, I wondered if there was a way of thinking about a transaction between performer and audience in a similar way to Rosenblatt describing the transaction between poem and reader. When I discovered that Bennett (1997) drew from reader-response theory in conceptualizing her version of reception theory, I knew that reception theory could be a valuable lens through which to frame my work.

From Bennett (1997), we can classify a story slam as a "non-traditional theater" (pp. 18-19) by having a flexible performer-audience relationship as well as a participatory role for both the performer and the spectator. Furthermore, Bennett (1997) clarified the role of the audience in live interactions like story slams; "the audience becomes a self-conscious co-creator of performance and enjoys a productive role which exceeds anything demanded of the reader or the cinema audience" (p. 21). The co-existence in space and time of the performer and the audience during a live event allows

for an interaction and co-creation of performance and meaning which is not possible while reading or watching a film.

What I especially appreciate about reception theory is its focus on the active role of the audience and, therefore, the audience's responsibility in shaping and empowering a performance. As Brook (1968) stated, "good theatre depends on a good audience" and "every audience has the theatre it deserves" (p. 21).

### **Research Design**

This research utilizes a phenomenological design (Moustakas, 1994; Vagel, 2014). As Marshall & Rossman (2016) noted, "Phenomenological approaches seek to explore, describe, and analyze the meaning of individual lived experience" (p. 17). The phenomenon in question as the focus of this dissertation is the connection between storytellers and audience members during a live storytelling event. Just like Seinfeld's discussions with fellow comedians about the moderating influence of the audience and the hard-earned value of audience laughter, or Arizona State University's football team dropping a key pass and noticing a resulting deflation in audible fan support throughout Sun Devil Stadium, or a live musician gaining confidence from the attention and applause of the crowd, live performance seems to revolve around a sense of connection (or lack thereof) between performer and audience members. This dissertation seeks to explore, describe, and analyze adolescent storytellers' and audience members' lived experiences of when a story connects in the context of a live storytelling event.

As Moustakas (1994) stated, "In phenomenology, perception is regarded as the primary source of knowledge" p. 52), so this design allows for treating participants'

described accounts of their experiences preferentially, and, therefore, interviews with adolescents who have taken part as a storyteller or audience member in a live storytelling event will serve as the core data source for this study. Because phenomenological design relies so heavily on participant interviews, it's limited by the potential for subjectivity; however, "phenomenology is committed to descriptions of experiences, not explanations or analyses" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 58), so the purpose of this research is to generate a detailed description from multiple adolescent participants on both sides (storytellers and audience members) of the phenomenon of stories connecting during a storytelling event.

Like other forms of human science research, phenomenology embraces the qualities of "focusing on the wholeness of the experience rather than solely its objects or parts, searching for meanings and essences of experience rather than measurements or explanations, [and] obtaining descriptions of experience through first-person accounts in informal and formal conversations and interviews" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 21). My hope is that by utilizing a phenomenological design to generate a thorough description of how and when stories connect in a live context between adolescent storytellers and audience members that such a description will have a dual purpose: 1) being applicable to educators in considering pedagogy and best practices for the secondary English classroom or situated, extra-curricular literacy contexts, and 2) being a sound platform from which to launch complementary research from other theoretical perspectives, and using both qualitative and quantitative designs.

## **Research Question**

Utilizing a phenomenological design (Moustakas 1994; Vagel, 2014) and drawing from reception theory (Bennett, 1997; Hall, 1980) as a theoretical framework, I've developed one main research question for this dissertation.

My research question is:

How do storytellers and audience members experience the phenomenon of interaction, connection, and transaction when live, true stories are shared in the specific context of an adolescent story slam event?

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Because the power of storytelling and the universal appeal of story, many fields have perspective and scholarship which provide useful context. These include, but are not limited to psychology (Bruner, 1986/1990; Cole, 1996); literature studies (Foster, 2003; Campbell & Moyers, 1988); educational research and qualitative methods (San Pedro, 2015; Lewis, 2011); pedagogy and teaching practices (Kittle, 2014; Newkirk, 2014); creative writing (Gutkind, 2012; Goldberg, 2005; Lamott, 1994), the writing process movement (Tobin & Newkirk, 1994), and more. My reading on story and storytelling has been wide in scope, and this literature review attempts to categorize some of these interdisciplinary sources into the categories which were most useful for situating my phenomenological investigation of adolescent interactions within a live storytelling event; however, there is, admittedly much more scholarship on story and storytelling to be connected.

One general note is that the literature I reviewed, cited, and categorized does not draw from just oral storytelling or just written storytelling but rather draws from both sources. As Minock (1994) noted, “[w]e find that speech and writing are continually displacing each other” (p. 171), and that especially holds true in an era where written and spoken or performed work are often complementary through coordinated mediums like blog posts and accompanying videos, etc. This is not to say that written stories don’t differ from spoken or performed stories, but for the purposes of my dissertation, I found



it useful to consult with sources which provide perspective on both. Both written and oral stories require consideration of audience, context, and genre, which tie into my research.

Another general note is that, while much of the scholarship I include celebrates story and narrative and especially its value for youth audiences, I do recognize that all storytelling isn't positive, and that narrative can be harnessed for ill or manipulative gain. I was reminded of this fact recently when I encountered a free downloadable e-book, published by the Network for Good (2014), titled *Storytelling for Nonprofits*. The guide details strategies for using narrative to pull at potential donors' heartstrings so that they give more money. While I'm not making a judgment on this specific organization or on charitable giving to non-profits, the guide does indicate the use of story for audience manipulation, and there's little doubt that for-profit corporations likely utilize similar strategies to attract customers and generate revenue. As Ramage, Bean, and Johnson (2016) noted, "[a] particularly powerful way to evoke *pathos* is to tell a story that either leads into your claim or embodies it implicitly and that appeals to your readers' feelings" (p. 110).

Lindemann (2014) also recognized the potential for story to be misapplied, especially when narrative is used to provide a moral model, when she wrote:

[S]tories don't just represent situations—they can also *mis*represent them. They can distort the moral contours, provide faulty explanations for how the situation came about, feature the wrong collateral events and circumstances while papering over the relevant ones, and depict ways of moving forward that would be morally disastrous. (p. S28)

However, the fact that story and storytelling can be used for manipulative purposes is a further argument for its need to be studied, considered, and included in both curricular and extra-curricular literacy experiences. Not only should students be exposed to all the positive applications and benefits of narrative, but by better understanding how story works, they can also be more critically aware of when they become the target of rhetorical use of narrative.

In addition to these introductory notes, I've organized my review of literature into five categories: the value of storytelling for students; situated learning; creating space; holding space, and the pendulum swing between New Criticism and the Writing Process Movement.

### **The Value of Storytelling for Students**

Sharing, hearing, and considering storytelling has a variety of benefit for youth. First, Newkirk (2014) pointed out in *Minds Made for Stories* that, rather than being a separate writing mode, narrative is used to make arguments and deliver information. "Narrative is a form or mode of discourse that can be used for multiple purposes... we use it to inform, to persuade, to entertain, to express. It is the 'mother of all modes,' a powerful and innate form of understanding" (p. 6). Considering this intersecting role of narrative, it deserves to be a focal point of study for adolescents.

Furthermore, Adichie (2009) recognized that we are "impressionable and vulnerable in the face of a story, especially as children." Adichie encouraged expanding youth exposure to narratives to many perspectives, and she especially warned against narrowly applying a limiting narrative to another person or group of people. She claimed,

the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.” Adichie’s claims offer strong backing for youth taking opportunities to own, take responsibility for, and to share their stories through events like story slams. Joaquin, the MC and spoken word poet I worked with for this study often reminded students that they needed to tell their stories or someone else would, which echoed Adichie’s warnings.

A large study of New Zealand adolescents (Reese, et. al., 2017) on narrative identity seemed to build on Adichie’s cautions. When hundreds of personal essays were scored on “causal coherence,” or autobiographical reasoning, the researchers found that adolescents with higher causal coherence reported greater well-being while those with lower causal coherence reported poorer well-being. This study provided evidence that youth who can reflect on their stories and make sense of them experienced an increase in or correlation with overall wellness.

Furthermore, Reese (2013) claimed that family storytelling helps to both build narrative development in children (children who hear more stories can later tell more complex stories themselves) as well as being a vessel for communicating family legacies and values. No doubt Reese’s claims are on display through Flores’s (2017; 2018) work with family literacy and creating spaces for intergenerational reading, writing, and story-sharing among Latinx families.

Blei (2017) even stated that participating in a storytelling community can help young people foster empathy in several ways. First, the workshop space offers a chance for an audience to listen together as a community while being supportive of the person who’s talking, and helping others with a story draft builds connection. Furthermore, the

delivery of adolescent stories, Blei claimed, is a chance to show someone life through [students'] eyes.

Flanagan (2017) also mentioned that part of the goal of an adolescent storytelling space is building community between storytellers and listeners. Bell & Roberts (2010) have combined the community aspect of Blei's and Flanagan's work while also providing a framework which heeds Adichie's (2009) warnings in using youth stories to critically counter racist narratives.

My own work (in press; 2017) has shared student perspectives on the benefits they report from writing personal narratives, which include therapeutic benefit. Seminal creative writing texts like *Writing Down the Bones* also suggested therapeutic benefit from sharing stories. Natalie Goldberg (2005) wrote, "Don't stop at the tears; go through to truth" (p. 10), suggesting that, by writing about our experiences, we come to understand our roles in them better.

Anne Lamott (1994) echoed Goldberg in *Bird by Bird*; "[a]s we live, we begin to discover what helps in life and what hurts, and our characters act this out dramatically. This is moral material" (p. 15). And once we've discovered our "moral material," we can share it through writing to help others; "But a writer always tries, I think, to be a part of the solution, to understand a little about life and to pass this on" (p. 107).

Lee Gutkind (2012) even suggested that writers can use true storytelling as a vessel for change:

Experiencing the lives of other people, watching them in pain, indecision, and triumph, is incredibly rewarding and stimulating—and this intimate knowledge

provides the opportunity to have a purpose in life, a goal beyond being a great writer. The creative nonfiction writer with a big issue or idea can wake up the world and make change happen. (74)

Evidence from the field of psychology support the claims of these creative writers. Timothy Wilson (2015) posited in *Redirect: Changing the Stories We Live By* that we can better understand and benefit from our lived experience by writing it down. “The better we can understand and explain negative events such as relationship breakups, business failures, or medical problems, the faster we will recover from them” (p. 54). Wilson based some of his conclusions on the work of Pennebaker and Evans (2014) who claimed, “[e]motional writing... can positively affect people’s sleeping habits, work efficiency, and their connection to others” (p. 3).

A study by Soliday, Garofalo, and Rogers (2004) confirmed the therapeutic value of personal writing, specifically for middle school students. The authors reported that, “our results show promise for emotional disclosure as a preventive intervention with young adolescents... students find expressive writing an acceptable means for disclosing and effectively processing emotions related to normative adolescent stress” (p. 799). Additionally, Ludwig (2016) presented evidence that storytelling can be effectively used with adolescents within the field of social work, and that such narrative therapy can help youth to externalize and create distance between them and their problems.

While educators would be remiss to take on the work of therapists without proper training or licensure, the evidence for therapeutic benefit joins the personal, social, and academic value, and together, it can be argued that story and storytelling in a variety of forms are important for adolescents to study and to consider.

## **Situated Learning**

Another body of literature which informs this exploration of an adolescent storytelling space is that of situated learning. As Wenger (2000) notes, “[d]eveloping an identity as a member of a community and becoming knowledgeably skillful are part of the same process” (p. 65). The concept of Communities of Practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) is useful to consider when looking at extracurricular storytelling spaces in terms of the roles and characteristics that community members take on.

My own experience with the space of the Lancaster Story Slam suggests that Gee’s (2004, 2014) concept of Affinity Spaces also comes into play regarding storytelling communities. For the Lancaster Story Slam space, membership was more fluid with some storytellers only coming for one event and others returning month after month. Furthermore, some folks enter the story slam event space as both storyteller and audience member (as previously considered), while others just come to listen, and others come to serve as judges and/or support the event as MCs, audio technicians, video recorders, etc.

Gee (2004) notes:

The idea of “community” seems to bring with it the notion of people being “members.” However, “membership” means such different things across different sorts of communities of practice and there are so many different ways and degrees of being a member in some communities of practice that it is not clear that membership is a truly helpful notion (p. 70).

While both Communities of Practice and Affinity Spaces are concepts related to situated learning, that is learning taking place in a specific context, Communities of Practice seems to place more value in the social norms and interactions of the members within a given community while Affinity Spaces focuses more on the collective interest, or affinity, which draws the community together. Both concepts should provide an interesting perspective to consider while gathering and analyzing data from the adolescent storytelling space.

Furthermore, situated learning connects well with the field of Contemplative Education. From a Contemplative Education perspective, Palmer (1998) calls for a “subject-centered classroom” (p. 115), or one in which a teacher and students are working together towards a subject or common interest. Subject-centered classrooms sound like an affinity space situated specifically in the classroom, therefore, this contemplative concept connects well to situated learning.

These situated learning concepts are important groundwork for the notion of creating, making, or providing spaces and sites for adolescent creative expression.

### **Creating Space**

In the context of Latina family literacy spaces, Flores (2018) argued for the need to create spaces for youth narrative that reflect and incorporate experiences to push back against dominant and limiting policy. She wrote about “the possibilities that exist when we create spaces with and for youths to utilize writing and performing as a tool to break silence and amplify their voices while examining and challenging their worlds” (pp. 1-2). Flores identified additional studies modeling such creative spaces for youth expression

including ones engaging with curricular world poetry (Jocson, 2010), a writing institute for black adolescent girls (Muhammed, 2012), an extra-curricular reading and writing workshop for Latina adolescent girls (García & Gaddess, 2012), and a year-round writing program for youth in grades 6-12 (Haddix & Mardhani-Bayne, 2016).

In a 2018 keynote address at SXSWedu, Micaela Blei, the Director of Education for The Moth, echoed Flores's call for creating space for student expression through storytelling. She said, "[a]ll [education initiatives from The Moth including teacher education and student workshops] are sharing stories... making space for sharing the stories of our lives and what that can do" (Blei, Cruz, Duckert, & Manley, 2018). Blei, like Flores, highlighted the importance of making or creating space for creative expression by youth, and she also called upon adults and educators to be the ones who made those spaces.

In addition to Flores and Blei, Gentry (2014) also called for creating space for student storytelling, and Williams (2015) argued for making space for spoken word poetry for adolescents.

I agree with this recent scholarship and these well-delivered calls for creating spaces for creative expression by youth. In this dissertation, I have demonstrated my support for this principle by partnering with a high school teacher and youth spoken word workshop leader to provide a storytelling space for adolescents. However, the question remains as to what happens after the creative spaces are made for youth and before they deliver their performances or showcase the products developed in those spaces? What interactions, procedures, guidelines, etc. ensure the space will be welcoming and safe for



participants and productive and successful to the specific goals of the group? In addition to creating or making space, the concept of holding space is important to consider.

### **Holding Space**

Contemplative Education (Brown, R., 2002 & 2011; Asrael, 2011; Palmer, 1998), also called Contemplative Pedagogy, draws from spiritual traditions (notably Tibetan Buddhism and Quakerism) to consider secular applications for teaching and learning through the lenses of mindfulness and presence. In the context of Contemplative Education, holding space was first described to me physically through the metaphor of meditation posture; a rigid back signals support and awareness while an open chest, soft belly, and relaxed breathing signal an open and receptive heart (Asrael, 2011). From a contemplative standpoint, such posture is also considered an ideal for an audience supporting a performer. By sitting up straight and being alert but also being physically open, we demonstrate receptive presence and “deep listening” (Scharmer, 2009) to a performer. In this way, the audience “holds space” for the performer and the performance.

The opposite can also be true, a distracted and disinterested audience can disempower a performance, too. On an overt level, proof of this resides in calls by MCs for audience members to turn off cell phones and electronics before a performance, and there have been a number of editorials by music teachers and conductors on teaching young audiences concert etiquette (see Sabatino, 2016).

Since I first encountered the concept of holding space, I have also heard it in the context of mainstream psychology (Brown, B., 2012; Platt 2017) as in counselors holding

the space for the emotions and issues of their clients and patients, and there are several theater studies scholars (Bennett, 1997; Brook, 1968) who have addressed how an audience can hold space (or not) for a performer/performance. Casually, holding the space is used by general mindfulness practitioners (as in a yoga teacher asking a class to “hold the space” for their practice).

A tentative definition of “holding the space,” then, becomes the characteristics and behaviors of audience members which performers report as being empowering and supportive to performance. These may include presence, posture, gestures, facial expressions, signs of active listening, and other factors which allow audience members to support and empower performance.

### **The Pendulum Swing Between New Criticism and the Writing Process Movement**

A final category from which to consider background literature on story, storytelling, and the interaction between performers and audience members during a live event is the pendulum swing between New Criticism and the Writing Process Movement. Lad & Tobin (1994) described that the Writing Process Movement came about in response to the strict text-centered formalism of New Criticism and allowed more for the subjective choice and personal expression of authors. Furthermore, Tobin (1994) noted that the Writing Process Movement didn’t just focus on following a process to write, but rather that it was a theoretical movement, of which the fundamental beliefs included: “that writing should be taught as a process, that writing can generate as well as record thought, that students write best when they care about and choose their topics, that good

writing is strongly voiced, that a premature emphasis of correctness can be counterproductive...” (p. 7).

Moffett (1994) added the fundamental Writing Process movement belief that, “The best way to way to achieve exposition and essay is to cultivate personal writing first” (p. 20), which ties the Writing Process Movement to personal storytelling. Each of these principles from the Writing Process Movement is pedagogically alive and well through the National Council of Teachers of English, the National Writing Project, and student-centered teacher-authors like Kittle (2008), Gallagher (2011), and Burke (2013).

However, though scholars like Gee (2014) consider a New Criticism lens to be passé for contemporary literacy research, pedagogical principles from New Criticism are also resurgent, especially in the Common Core State Standards (CCSS)’s call for the importance of close reading, and some of the CCSS’s proponents’ criticism of personal expression.

For example, in a notorious speech to the New York State Education Department in 2011, College Board president David Coleman (2011) criticized personal writing:

[P]eople don’t really give a shit about what you feel or what you think. What they instead care about is can you make an argument with evidence, is there something verifiable behind what you’re saying or what you think or feel that you can demonstrate to me. (p. 22)

Penny Kittle (2014) labeled Coleman’s sentiment and the resulting minimization of narrative writing as “narrative disrespect” (p. 4). As previously established in this literature review and introduction, story, storytelling, and personal expression have tremendous value for several reasons, yet narrative disrespect abounds.

It could be argued that situated and story-related sub-genres, like those presented in this dissertation, are yet another pendulum swing back towards the Writing Process Movement and in response to the recent pedagogical applications of New Criticism. By teaching and encouraging specific genres like storytelling, spoken word poetry, personal essay writing, family literacy practices, etc., and connecting these genres to their real-world context and importance, educators are again affirming the broad and overlapping importance of narrative for adolescents.

### **Gaps and Context for this Dissertation**

Each of these authors, studies, and essays shared provided valuable perspective for this dissertation; however, the main gap which my research addresses is that between creating space and holding space for adolescent creative expression. In the context of this research, I partnered with a high school teacher and a youth workshop leader to create a space for adolescent storytelling; however, the data drawn from this study and the resulting analysis went mainly to studying how space was held.

By using participants' reports to fully and completely describe the phenomenon of storyteller-audience member interaction, such description may prove useful in considering how an audience can hold a space for a performer in other contexts, both curricular and extra-curricular.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODS

Students trickled in through the double doors to Southwest Academy High School's media center one and two at a time during the late morning of an early December Saturday. They made their way past me, the researcher and a stranger to them, as I set up pizza and soda on a table to the side. Some stopped to say hello to Mr. Markus, the teacher-sponsor who hovered near the door with a sign-in sheet, while others carried their conversations to one of the round tables where Mr. Markus had set out composition books and pens. Joaquin, a spoken word poet and youth workshop leader, sat behind the circulation desk, going over his notes and offering occasional greetings to students who looked his way.

The space settled into a brief period of quiet awkwardness until Joaquin explained that we'd start the session with a working lunch and invited students to help themselves to pizza. As they often do, the food and drink served as effective social lubricants, and conversations started growing in volume and frequency until Joaquin stood and cut through the voices by spitting crisp lyrics from memory to a spoken word poem he'd composed. Students listened respectfully until the end when they started to offer polite applause. Joaquin interrupted and invited students to snap rather than clap, as participants often do to show appreciation in spoken word communities. Joaquin explained that he always starts workshops with a poem of his own to show that he would never ask participants to do what he is unwilling to do himself. He then asked participants to agree to several terms of an oral contract: to have respect for ourselves and for others during the

workshop, to participate in the activities as much as we felt comfortable, and, if we felt like it, to share our work (which, he repeated, was not mandatory).

Next, Joaquin invited all participants (in addition to twelve students, the group included Mr. Markus and another Southwest Academy teacher, a parent who had requested to take part, and myself) to write a brief list which mixed both frivolous and serious items including our names, favorite colors, adjectives to describe ourselves, biggest fears, things we don't like to remember, and things we know to be true. After a few minutes of writing, Joaquin invited participants to share all or part of their lists, and many students and adults took turns reading. Not everyone shared out during this first round, but the space never again lapsed into the awkward quietness that preceded the workshop, and as Joaquin led the group through increasingly longer writing prompts ("show an abstract concept through a small story," "List five 'first times' and select one to write about," etc.) as well as more structured sharing opportunities (share first with a partner, then with the whole group, etc.), participants rotated their responses and everyone shared at least once, though Joaquin continually reminded the group that they didn't have to share if they didn't feel like it.

As the two-hour workshop unfolded, the energy of the group clearly changed. What had been awkward and quiet at the start gave way to more frequent verbal responses, more formal and informal interactions between participants, more smiles and laughter, and a shift in postures which started as slouched and reserved and ended as open and engaged. Participants seemed to enjoy the workshop and appreciate the chance to participate.

This opening vignette details some of my observations from a Saturday morning storytelling workshop that I arranged for students at Southwest Academy High School with the help of Mr. Markus, a 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grade English teacher at the school, and Joaquin, a spoken word poet and teaching artist who often partners with schools and extra-curricular youth programs. The main purpose of the workshop was to generate interest, confidence, and content for a story slam which participants would be invited to take part in the following week; however, there were also some interesting things happening in the workshop space including twelve students willing to come to school on a Saturday, the intergenerational sharing between the adults in the space alongside the high school students, the modeling of both content and delivery by the workshop leader, and the energy that creating and sharing live, true stories generated in the group.

### **Overlapping Goals for the Workshop, the Story Slam, and the Study**

Having outlined the difference between “creating/making space” and “holding space” in Chapter 2 as well as stating my interest in exploring the latter, there is a catch, which is that, in order to study how space is held by an audience during a live storytelling event, first, a space has to be created for such a storytelling event to take place.

Early in the planning stages of this study, I considered studying existing youth storytelling spaces, but I ran into the problem of access. I found workshop leaders in several existing youth storytelling spaces to be interested in and appreciative of my research question and purpose, but they also worried how my presence in the space might affect participants’ group dynamics, story development, and willingness to share, particularly if I was requesting permission to observe, video and audio record sessions,

and interview participants after workshop sessions. To their credit, workshop leaders were more interested in preserving the storytelling experience of their participants rather than allowing the possibility for interference by allowing research to take place.

However, the question remained as to how to find a site which would allow for a less-intrusive exploration of storyteller-audience interactions.

The answer which emerged was to co-produce a high school story slam myself. Partnering with teachers and administrators at a local high school would create a quid pro quo scenario; if I could provide a professionally-produced storytelling event for the school and its students (which I hoped they'd find both curricular and extra-curricular value in), I'd create a rich site for researching adolescent storyteller-audience interactions, in turn. Furthermore, if the goal of my research was transparent from the beginning, I'd run less risk of corrupting the group dynamics of a previously-existing storytelling space.

So, two complementary goals became apparent for both the story slam event and the corresponding study: 1) to produce and provide an extracurricular storytelling event for a partner high school, and 2) to use the event to generate and gather data to answer my research question on the interactions between adolescent storytellers and audience members. This two-part goal also increased my confidence as a researcher asking for access since, now, I was offering something in exchange for my data collection. Furthermore, if this type of partnership proved successful, it could serve as a model for future projects where I could work with local schools, teachers, and students on instructional initiatives while also collecting data for research, analysis, and academic



publication. Such a partnership model demonstrates the kind of “reciprocity” (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, pp. 125-126) I hope to achieve in future research partnerships as well.

With these goals clearly formulated, I developed corresponding plans for the event’s production along with my data collection. With the help of my advisor, I identified Southwest Academy High School as a potential site for research, and I reached out to administrators there with a brief proposal to outline my intentions for research and my offer to produce an extra-curricular story slam for their students. After I offered further clarification in response to several of their questions (see Appendix A), Southwest Academy administration gave me initial approval and put me in touch with Mr. Markus, who’d expressed interest in serving as the teacher-sponsor for the event.

Mr. Markus told me during an interview why he was interested in the story slam proposal; “we run a pretty regular curriculum [which] doesn't really give itself openings for poetry [or storytelling, so the event seemed to be one of those] exciting moments that are what I think is missing from a lot of the way we approach our curriculum.” Furthermore, Mr. Markus felt that curricular mandates forced his students to produce prescribed texts in prescribed genres rather than having to respond to an authentic situation and select an appropriate genre for composition. As he put it, “[T]here's not a lot of students analyzing a situation and saying, ‘This is the kind of text I should produce,’” and the story slam would expose students to a genre that was not typically included in the curriculum through an authentic, extracurricular context.

Mr. Markus also considered practical curricular applications. Southwest Academy uses the Cambridge Curriculum which has a portfolio among its culminating assessments. One of the possible Cambridge portfolio entries is a narrative nonfiction piece, and Mr.

Markus figured that students who participated in the story slam could polish their written work from the corresponding workshop for use as a Cambridge portfolio entry.

Finally, Mr. Markus saw the story slam as something to build on. He mentioned that if the event were successful, he would be interested in doing it again or continuing it as a series and/or as part of an extracurricular club. Mr. Markus predicted that even if we only had a small number of participants the first time, word would spread if those participants had a positive experience, and the number of participants would grow for similar events in the future.

To collect data to answer my research question, I only needed the story slam portion of the event to take place in which a group of student storytellers would deliver true stories in front of an audience. There are plenty of story slams for adults that run their events open-mic style by advertising a theme a few weeks in advance and hoping folks will sign up on the advertised night to share. However, considering the high school context, and from my background as a former middle and high school teacher, I predicted we'd have a more successful turnout for the story slam as well as better-developed and delivered stories if we put on a workshop prior to the slam.

My original idea was to do the workshop and the slam on the same day, with the workshop happening for participants on a Saturday afternoon with a short break for dinner, and then a public performance in the evening; however, Mr. Markus suggested storytellers would be more confident if the workshop took place a week before the performance so students could generate some content during the workshop and spend a week polishing and practicing prior to the slam. Furthermore, Mr. Markus envisioned participating storytellers reading snippets of their stories on the school's morning

announcements between the workshop and the slam to encourage other students to come to the performance and watch. This timing shift was one compromise Mr. Markus and I made during our collaborative planning meetings following my proposal. Another compromise was dropping the competitive aspect of the slam. I had originally proposed selecting volunteer judges from the audience to score student stories with the highest score receiving a prize (as is common in adult story slam spaces), but Mr. Markus felt that including the competition might hinder participation rather than encourage it, and the competition might be something we could work into future events after students grew more comfortable with the story slam format and genre. In this way, Mr. Markus and I were able to work together to craft an event that would best work for his students while also serving my research needs.

When Mr. Markus and I had agreed on the details of the workshop and of the performance, we were ready to recruit student participants, and I reached out to Joaquin, who I'd recently met at a local conference where he conducted a spoken word poetry workshop for secondary English teachers. Not only did I get a taste of the kinds of activities Joaquin used as a workshop leader with students to generate creative content, but I got to know him further as an event MC when I started participating in a monthly storytelling open mic that Joaquin oversaw. With the help of a grant from Arizona State University's Office of Knowledge Enterprise Development, Graduate Professional and Student Association, and the Graduate College, I was able to hire Joaquin to conduct the student workshop and to MC the story slam event with the assistance of a DJ/sound technician to ensure a professional event.

## **Researcher Positionality**

I came to this research having previously taught middle school and high school English for twelve years in a public district in a small town in Pennsylvania. During my time as a teacher, I shared a similar perspective to that which Mr. Markus shared during his interview: our traditional curriculum lacked opportunities for creative expression by students and there were genres for reading and writing which weren't represented in our curriculum. I addressed these gaps by bringing nontraditional genres into the classroom, by integrating creative assignments into traditional units, and by creating extracurricular literacy opportunities.

For example, during an 8<sup>th</sup> grade poetry study unit, I taught students poetic elements like rhythm, rhyme, meter, alliteration, simile, and metaphor by having them write lyrics to a 12-bar blues song, and then students had the opportunity to perform their song on stage for their classmates, accompanied by me playing guitar during a songwriters' assembly (see Griffith, 2012). Each year, I also held an Open Mic event for students to play original music, read stories, recite poetry, or perform any other original work. In addition to these in-school creative opportunities, I organized poetry readings at local coffee shops throughout the school year for students to recite original work in front of family members.

Many of the opportunities I produced for students involved students choosing whether to participate; choosing the topic and genre of their pieces; performing for friends, family, and classmates; and re-shuffling traditional student-teacher roles. I would often perform alongside students and share a part of myself not typically on display in

regular English class, and, in turn, I frequently saw demonstrations of talents from my students that they hadn't previously shown in traditional English class contexts.

This part of my background and approach to teaching certainly inspired this research design, and specifically my idea for partnering with a local school and teacher; I set up for Mr. Markus and the students of Southwest Academy the sort of event I'd produce for my own students when I was still teaching. At the same time, I recognize my bias for students writing and performing in creative genres, and I must remain aware of these preferences during data analysis and interpretation of findings. By utilizing bracketing (Moustakas, 1994), or clearly stating, remaining aware of, and attempting to set aside my preconceptions and preferences from participant data, I will attain more objective results (or be more aware of when I'm being subjective).

Another part of my positionality which is relevant to the study is that I'm a storyteller myself. I participated several times in competitive story slams while still teaching in Pennsylvania, and, as I mentioned in prior reference to Joaquin, I have participated in a monthly storytelling open mic series in the urban southwest while conducting this research. Because of my experience telling stories, I've experienced a variety of interaction with the audience and have thoughts and assumptions on how the audience shapes and moderates my storytelling experience. Since I'm interested in studying how adolescent storytellers interact with an audience in the context of a live storytelling event, bracketing out my experiences to focus on theirs and allow room for variance from my own is important.

Being a storyteller influenced my choice of a phenomenological design. As Moustakas (1994) noted, "In a phenomenological investigation the researcher has a

personal interest in whatever she or he seeks to know; the researcher is intimately connected to the phenomenon. The puzzlement is autobiographical, making memory and history essential dimensions of discovery...” (p. 59). My experiences as a storyteller coupled with my successful past integration of creativity and performance into secondary English classes led me to the idea for this study. “In phenomenological research, the question grows out of an intense interest in a particular problem or topic. The researcher’s excitement and curiosity inspire the search. Personal history brings the core of the problem into focus” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 104). So, while not letting my own experiences and assumptions as a storyteller overshadow the perceptions and accounts of participants is important, I must also honor that my background as a storyteller and interactive educator is precisely what brings me to this work and well-qualifies me to conduct the inquiry.

Finally, it’s important for me to identify my perspective as a white, straight, 38-year-old male from the East Coast. Considering that Southwest Academy High School has a majority Latinx population and that many of the youth involved are native to the Southwest, it was important that the story slam workshop and event be open and welcoming to a variety of perspectives and identities, and I attempted to maintain this open and welcome attitude while analyzing participant data.

One way that recognition of my positionality impacted my research design is that I initially conceived of and created the story slam event and workshop, but I deferred leadership of the workshop and MCing duties at the story slam to Joaquin, a 38-year old Latinx man, who is both a Southwest native (and alum of Southwest Academy High School) and who has 10 years of experience working with local youth as well as

experience as a performer, workshop leader, and MC, so he's knowledgeable about and comfortable with local norms and has a lot of confidence in working with local youth.

Also, partnering with Mr. Markus, 30-year old, white man, and a 4-year veteran teacher at Southwest Academy High School who has built up some clout by advising multiple clubs and keeping his classroom open to students to work after school helped me to generate an easier, quicker, and more comfortable rapport with participants. Because students seemed to trust Mr. Markus, and he demonstrated trust for me, student participants quickly opened up to me during our interactions.

### **The Workshop and the Story Slam Event**

As described, the program leading up to data collection for this study involved a workshop and then a story slam performance which would, finally, be followed by participant interviews for data collection. The purpose for the workshop was to generate content and confidence from potential participants who might choose to take part in the story slam event, where data would be collected during (through video/audio recordings and surveys) and after (through participant interviews).

Prior to my proposal to Southwest Academy High School or my meetings with Mr. Markus and Joaquin, I drew from the rules from the Lancaster Story Slam ("Rules-Lancaster Story," 2018), a story slam community that I had performed and competed with several times while living in Pennsylvania, to envision what the story slam event would look like. Lancaster Story Slam patterns itself on the events of the popular NPR storytelling podcast *The Moth*, and the specific rules that I outlined included that, "stories should fit into the theme of the night, stories should be true as you remember it, and

stories should be under five minutes in length.” After collaborating with Mr. Markus, we decided not to include the competition aspect, so we also waived the “no notes” rule, allowing participants to read written stories or refer to notes if they chose.

I selected the theme of “I Should Have Known Better” as I thought it would be both a broad enough topic for lots of variation and interpretation as well as a generative topic for general interest. I also hoped the reflective nature of the topic might encourage participants to include lessons they’ve learned through personal experience, which I thought would be both valuable for the storyteller to consider and an enjoyable topic for the audience to hear stories about.

With the rules and guidelines set, I met with Joaquin to talk through details of both the workshop and the story slam event. Joaquin had a standard workshop sequence focusing on spoken word poetry techniques that he used for groups, and he adapted this format to include more narrative examples and a focus on storytelling. As described in the opening anecdote, Joaquin blended brief writing prompts for content generation with opportunities to share and practice performing. The workshop was held in Southwest Academy’s media center, and it lasted for two hours. The first hour was devoted to general writing prompts and ice-breaker style sharing opportunities, and the second hour moved towards the theme of the slam and gave participants longer chunks of time to write and share. Throughout the workshop, Joaquin provided sample texts in written form from past students and also orally, through his own performance. At the end of the workshop, Joaquin, Mr. Markus, and I went over how the format for the story slam event, and we invited participants to consider signing up to perform by following up with Mr. Markus during the following week.



The initial 2-hour workshop took place during a late-morning on Saturday with the story slam scheduled for the following Friday, giving participants almost a full-week to continue polishing and practicing their 5-minute “I Should Have Known Better Stories” prior to the slam. While our original plan included only the one workshop session and then the slam, Joaquin offered (at the completion of the first workshop) to hold a second one-hour workshop focused on performance techniques and public speaking practice. Joaquin held this performance workshop after school the day before the story slam, and it helped the 7 storytellers who signed up for the slam to build confidence for their performances at the slam.

The story slam was held on a Friday evening in Southwest Academy’s auditorium. As the auditorium’s capacity is 500, we risked having a big empty room if we didn’t draw a sizable crowd; however, I felt that having the stage and the professional sound system would contribute to a professional atmosphere for the event. Mr. Markus added that he “didn’t want [the event] to feel like school,” so he agreed that the auditorium would be a better venue than the media center or a large classroom. About 50 storytellers, students, parents, and friends attended, so while the auditorium was far from full, there were enough people to generate audible snaps, claps, and yells of support during the stories, and palpable applause after storytellers finished.

Joaquin added to the professional atmosphere of the slam by demoing a spoken word poem to begin the event, giving each storyteller a personal introduction including their favorite animal and flavor of ice cream, and offering words of reaction after each storyteller finished to hype the crowd. Joaquin could also be heard in the audience during

the stories with audible snaps, laughter, and yells of support. Joaquin helped to put the audience at ease and modeled how they could interact with storytellers.

Joaquin also brought a DJ who set up a computer and speakers on stage behind the storytellers. Before, after, and in-between storytellers, the DJ filled the silence with upbeat hip-hop, rap, and pop, and many of the storytellers danced on and danced off the stage, signaling that the music helped to put them at ease and fill potentially awkward silences as storytellers made their way to the stage. The DJ often matched the content and themes of the music to the content and themes of the stories. For example, when one participant finished delivering a touching story about her mom, the DJ played her off with Tupac Shakur's "Dear Mama."

While the phenomenological design of this study is more focused on the storytellers' and audience members' perceptions of telling or listening to a true story during a live event, and therefore does not include analysis of the storytellers' narratives, it would be a disservice not to mention the brave topics that participants developed and shared during the slam. Three of the storytellers told stories about parents, which included the disappointment and confusion caused by absentee fathers along with admiration for hard-working mothers. One brave participant detailed an incident of sexual aggression where a boy pushed her up against a locker after she had asked him to back off. Several stories referenced the tenuous immigration status of family members. The seven stories were personal and individual but taken collectively, they touched on issues which are troubling many in contemporary society, especially in the urban Southwest. This story slam was yet another demonstration of the power of narrative nonfiction and personal writing and performing for young people, and again it became

clear that, “[i]f we ask them to, and they trust us, students will write bravely” (Griffith, 2017, p. 86).

A final notable feature of the story slam is that two teachers, including Mr. Markus, also developed and shared true stories. During our initial planning, I asked Mr. Markus if he’d be willing to participate as I thought teacher participants would set a positive example for student participants, and I thought that teacher participation would also be an additional draw for audience attendance.

Mr. Markus shared on a vulnerable topic as well, revealing some dark family secrets as well as his attempts to break free from the influence of his family.

Mr. Markus told me in an interview that:

I can't in good faith tell these kids to put their pen to paper... whatever comes out we don't apologize. That's what I say in my classroom. I can't in good faith say that and then not do it myself. As I started writing it, one of the students mentioned the therapeutic quality of [writing and sharing a vulnerable story], it felt that way. I definitely felt that way. I felt like this [experience] is helping me conceptualize these things that I still don't really understand.

Besides reporting personal, therapeutic benefit from writing and sharing his story, Mr. Markus also demonstrated a “walk-the-talk” attitude which generated further rapport between him and the students who participated, and it contributed to the special atmosphere of the event.

## **Site, Participants, and Recruitment**

Southwest Academy is an urban, public charter school serving grades K-12 and located in the downtown of a large, southwestern city. Southwest Academy is classified as Title I, with 75% of students receiving free or reduced lunch. 80% of Southwest Academy identify as Latinx with the remaining students identifying as African-American, Asian, Caucasian, and other races. 1500 total students attend Southwest Academy with average class size starting at about 120 students and graduating senior classes averaging between 70-80 students. Mr. Markus explained that when families move away and leave the Academy, the open student enrollment slots for the upper grades tend not to get filled since students close to graduation tend to stay at their home institutions. By contrast, there is a waiting list at Southwest Academy for the elementary grades. As a public charter, Southwest Academy has open-enrollment and is open to any students without prerequisite other than space and order of applications. Despite this open enrollment policy, Mr. Markus reports that most students are local and live within a few miles of Southwest Academy.

After Mr. Markus and I collaborated and compromised on the details, dates, and times of the workshop and the story slam event, we set about to recruit student participants in a variety of ways. First, I created a flyer (see Appendix B), and Mr. Markus printed copies and posted them on doorways, bulletin boards, and throughout the hallways of Southwest Academy. Additionally, Mr. Markus wrote an announcement which was read during the morning announcements each school day for two weeks leading up to the workshop. An additional announcement ran during the week following the workshop to invite students and their families to attend the story slam. Mr. Markus

shared information on the workshop and story slam with fellow teachers and encouraged them to personally invite students, especially ones who might be interested in writing, storytelling, or performing, to attend. Clearly, the most effective recruiting method was Mr. Markus reaching out to his current and former students who he thought might be interested or might benefit from participating. Most of the participants were invited personally by Mr. Markus with the other participants attending after the encouragement of other teachers.

Our goal was to recruit 15-30 students to attend the workshop with the hope that 10 of the workshop participants would choose to participate in the story slam; however, both events were completely voluntary as well as extracurricular and outside of regular school hours. Mr. Markus clearly communicated to students that they could come to the workshop and elect not to participate in the slam, which was a choice we reiterated at the beginning of the workshop. Ultimately, we fell short of our goals, but only by a few students and still with a solid sample size (14 total) for data collection within a phenomenological research design.

As stated in the introduction to this chapter, 12 students attended the workshop (along with a parent and two teachers), and 7 of those students elected to tell their stories on stage during the following week's story slam. Though the workshop and story slam were open and advertised to all Southwest Academy grades, most workshop participants (except for two 8<sup>th</sup> graders) were 9<sup>th</sup> graders, and all 7 storytellers were 9<sup>th</sup> graders.

For data collection, I invited all 7 storytellers to participate in follow-up interviews after the slam. Since I was researching the interactions between storytellers and audience members, I also recruited an equivalent number (7) of audience members

(some of whom had participated in the storytelling workshop) to bring the total number of participants in the data collection portion of the study to 14. Mr. Markus helped me recruit audience members by distributing a brief survey (see Appendix C) to all students who attended the slam as audience members, and he facilitated my follow-up communication with seven students who had completed the survey in a legible and coherent fashion. Figure 1 includes participant-selected pseudonyms for each of the 14 participants.

**Figure 1:** Pseudonyms of all participants in data collection.

<b>Storytellers</b>	<b>Audience Members</b>
Alex	Skyler
Cloud	Esme
Ember	Neptune
Skye	Night
John	Philippina
Mariah	Penelope
Rain	Steve

As Roulston (2010) suggested, “it is essential that the interviewer has identified participants who have both experienced and are able to talk about the particular lived experience under examination” (p. 17). Each of the selected participants fit these criteria, and the balance of storyteller and audience member participants assured that I’d be able to gather perspectives on both sides of the phenomenon of storyteller and audience member interaction.

Because of the cumulative nature of a phenomenological research design where, “the experiences of... those who have had a similar experience... are analyzed as unique

expressions and then compared to identify the essence [of the phenomenon]" (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 18), I did not collect exhaustive demographic information from participants since their responses would be combined into a single textural description and then interpreted into a composite structural description. However, some general demographic details include that all participants were 9<sup>th</sup>-grade students; 5 participants identified as male with 9 participants identifying as female, and twelve participants identified as Latinx with one participant each identifying as African-American and Caucasian. The racial makeup of this sample of participants was a similar ratio to Southwest Academy's overall demographic break-down, while the gender ratio skewed slightly towards female identification. The grade level ration was completely homogeneous to 9<sup>th</sup> grade with no other grade levels represented.

### **Data Sources and Data Collection**

Data sources for this study included video and audio recordings of the storytellers' performances, audience members' completed surveys (see Appendix C), and audio recordings and transcriptions of the follow-up interviews with the 14 research participants.

As "[e]vidence from phenomenological research is derived from first-person reports of life experiences" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 84), the main source of data collected were the participant interviews; however, the video and audio recordings, as well as the audience member surveys, were used as memory aids and guides during the interview process.

Video and audio recordings of the 7, 5-minute performances were taken during the night of the story slam and then saved as separate individual video files for ease of access and use. Audience member surveys were also distributed to 7 participants prior to the start of the slam and collected right after the slam event ended. The purpose of these surveys was to serve as a sort of cue sheet during follow-up interviews; audience members could draw from their notes as they recalled their experiences during the interviews.

Interviews with the 14 participants (including 7 storytellers and 7 audience members) took place on weekdays after school in Mr. Markus's classroom, with 2-4 interviews taking place on a given afternoon during 5 separate interview dates. All interviews were completed within one month of the story slam event. Interviews ranged in from 7 to thirty minutes long, depending on how much detail each participant offered.

Though they were not included in data analysis, I also conducted and recorded informal interviews with Jewliana, the parent (and a professional journalist) who attended the workshop with her daughter, about why she wanted to attend the workshop and with Mr. Markus about both his interest and participation as a partner in producing the event as well as his experience in telling a story in front of and alongside his students. I interviewed Jewliana after the completion of the workshop, and I interviewed Mr. Markus after I completed student participant interviews. The ancillary interviews helped to provide me with broader context on the significance of the story slam event for the Southwest Academy community, and they are what I draw from when I quote Mr. Markus and Jewliana throughout this dissertation.



## **Interview Protocol**

Considering that “hearing research participants describe their experience of the phenomenon being investigated” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 22) is the main purpose for the interview being the paramount form of data collected and analyzed in phenomenological study, the challenge is the temporal distance from the phenomenon. The more time that passes, the more difficult it becomes to accurately recall the nuances of an experience. It is impossible to ask storytellers to offer live, behind-the-scenes narration of their experience while they are simultaneously telling a story. And, while it might be possible to ask audience members to narrate their experience while actively listening to a story, doing so would no doubt distract their attention from the story, which would corrupt the experience. The best that’s possible is to ask storytellers and audience members to recall their experience of telling or listening to a story.

I considered asking storytellers and audience members to interview right after the story slam performance, while the experience was most fresh in their minds, but there were two complicating factors. The first was logistical: without the help of a research team, it would not be possible for me to interview all 14 participants and still be respectful of their time on a Friday evening. If I did employ a research team, the possibility for variance in the team’s interviewing styles might come into play and corrupt the data. The second complication was experiential for the participants. After experiencing the exhilaration of participating in or watching a professionally-produced storytelling event where some of them took the stage in front of their friends and family, I worried that asking them to stick around for an interview (rather than going on to

celebrate and spend time with their friends and family) would kill the buzz generated from the event.

The video recordings of the story slam performances provided an alternative to interviewing directly after the event as they allowed for participants to, in a sense, re-live the experience or at least receive an exact visual and auditory reminder of their experience. Moustakas (1994) wrote, “Intentionality refers to consciousness, to the internal experience of being conscious of something” (p. 28). The video recordings served as a sort of consciousness-cue for storytellers and audience members, giving them the chance to remember how they felt during the event. I incorporated showing the recorded video performances to participants into interviews where I asked them to describe their experience of being a storyteller or audience member.

Before I showed the storytellers their videos, I explained that I was interested in what it was like to tell a true story in front of a live audience, and I wanted to hear about their experience. As I showed them the video recording of their performances, I asked them to pause the video when there was something notable they recalled thinking or feeling at a given moment. For each storyteller, I paused the video right after they were introduced by the MC, and I asked them what they were thinking and feeling as they took the stage, and I’d also pause to ask similar questions anytime there was audible audience reaction (clapping, snapping, laughter, etc.). After I paused the video and asked these kinds of questions once or twice, most participants took the lead, pausing the computer themselves or asking me to stop at moments they deemed important.

For the audience member interviews, we started with their completed surveys from the event (see Appendix C), which I gave back to them to let them read over their

responses before we began. The survey asked students to identify one story which personally connected during the slam as well as one that did not connect as much. I also provided space on the survey for audience members to record any notes or keywords which would remind them why the selected stories did or didn't connect. I started the follow-up interviews with audience members by asking them to briefly describe the story they identified which didn't personally connect as much. After they shared any commentary about why their identified story didn't connect, I showed them the video of the story they identified that did connect with them. Like I did with the storytellers, I asked them to describe their experience as a listener. What were they thinking and feeling as they listened to this performance? Like with the storytellers, the audience member participants would pause during notable moments to explain what they were experiencing.

For example, Figure 2 includes an excerpt of an interview transcript where Steve points out a notable moment for him as a listener as he watches a storyteller's video performance.

**Figure 2:** A transcript excerpt showing an audience member identifying a notable moment.

Steve:	Can you pause it here?
Interviewer:	Sure.
Steve:	When he said that, it connected to me because I'm the son of someone that has been screwing up a lot of her life, and that just created turmoil within me. All I could think was, "That could be me right now."

While interviewing both storytellers and audience members, I adhered to Moustakas's (1994) guidelines for a phenomenological interview as an "informal, interactive process... utilize[ing] open-ended comments and questions" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 114), and I attempted to maintain "a neutral but interested stance...[while]... refraining from evaluating or challenging the participant's responses" (Roulston, 2010, p. 17). My basic, overarching question to all interviewees was, "What was your experience like [telling or listening to] a story?" I added additional variations like "What was going through your head?" or "What were you feeling?" and when participants described a note-worthy detail while watching the video clips, I asked them to go deeper into their explanation with the help of "probes." As Roulston (2010) described, "Probes frequently use the participant's own words to generate questions that elicit further description... perhaps the simplest probe is: tell me more about that" (p. 13).

For example, Figure 3 shows an excerpt from a transcript demonstrating the audience member Penelope responding to a probe.

**Figure 3:** A transcript excerpt showing an audience member responding to a probe.

Penelope: Cause I could connect with her through her voice. Her voice kind of like, triggered me. It made me feel like "I know what you're going through. I can feel your pain in your voice and all of the things that you want to say but you can't. I can feel that. It was a good thing.

Interviewer: Okay. So tell me about that. Why was it a good thing?

Speaker 4: I bet no one likes to feel anxiety, but this is one of the few rare moments that I feel comfortable with it, cause it's like ... losing your dog. The dog knows where you live and knows your scent, and knows where home is.

All interviews were conducted in Mr. Markus's classroom after school, and they ranged in length from 8 mins to 28 minutes in length with most taking about 20 minutes. I scheduled 2-4 interviews a day and completed all interviews over five separate days. After I provided a range of dates to Mr. Markus, he considered his own schedule and then checked in with participants about their calendars in order to schedule the interviews.

Finally, Marshall & Rossmann (2014) discussed the importance of "rapport and interpersonal considerations" (p. 124) between researchers and participants. I benefitted in building quick, easy, and comfortable rapport with most participants during their interviews thanks to their pre-established rapport with Mr. Markus. Most participants seemed to know and trust Mr. Markus, and he kept his classroom open every day after school for students to stay and work on homework or group projects. Participants would often come into Mr. Markus's classroom and observe us talking in a friendly way, which would usually segue into a casual conversation including the participants before I began interviewing participants in a quiet corner. The familiar and friendly atmosphere of Mr. Markus's classroom, as well as the casual conversation prior to the interview, seemed to generate a productive and comfortable rapport which carried into the interviews.

### **Data Analysis**

Broadly speaking, I considered Vagel's (2014) guideline for phenomenological data analysis to, "Read and write your way through the data in a systematic, responsive manner" (p. 121) as I approached my participant interviews for analysis. More specifically, my systematic manner for reading and writing through data drew from Moustakas's (1994) procedural stages of epoche, phenomenological reduction,

imaginative variation, and synthesis (pp. 84-102) to describe, analyze and interpret the phenomenon of connection between adolescent storytellers and audience members during a live, storytelling event. By working through these stages, I produced three narrative descriptions including a composite textural description, a composite structural description, and a textural-structural synthesis, which are each included in their entirety as part of my findings shared in Chapter 4.

During the first stage of epoche, I attempted to “set aside [my] prejudices, biases, and preconceived ideas about things” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85). Part of this epoche was achieved through the neutral, nonjudgmental stance I took while interviewing participants with open-ended questions and follow-up probes. The next step I took to achieve epoche was to audio record the participant interviews and then have the audio recordings fully transcribed. With the help of my grant funding through Arizona State University’s Graduate and Professional Student Association and Graduate College, I was able to have my audio recordings transcribed professionally. With full and complete transcripts of my participant interviews, I could ensure that “every quality [that participants report] has equal value... [n]othing is determined in advance,” which Moustakas (1994, p. 87) considered being a key component of the epoche stage. Everything my participants reported was included and placed on the table for consideration at the start of analysis.

After interviews were completely transcribed, I began the process of phenomenological reduction, which involved identifying the “horizons of a phenomenon” or notable reported features and “angle[s] of perception” (Moustakas, 1991, p. 91). Moustakas defines a horizon as “the grounding or condition of the phenomenon that

gives it a distinctive character” (p. 95), and the process of horizontalization as eliminated any textual description which doesn’t directly relate to the phenomenon. For me, that meant pulling up a copy of my research question for reference, as I worked through each of the 14 transcripts and deleted any text that did not directly relate to answering the research question. What remained in each of these cleaned versions of the transcripts were the horizons that my participants identified for our selected phenomenon of storyteller-audience interaction.

The next step of phenomenological reduction involved “theming and clustering” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 97) the horizons. To do this, I worked through each cleaned transcript and separated the remaining horizons into meaning units, or separate participant expressions of the storytelling or listening experience. I developed a separate, 2-column chart for themes and clusters, and as I copied a meaning unit into the column on the right, I gave it a thematic name on the left. Each new category of meaning unit on the right received a new theme on the left while similar expressions of meaning were added as additional horizons on the left. As I worked through each of the 14 transcripts, I continued in this manner of adding the horizons from the separate interviews into a collective theme and cluster chart. Appendix D includes my list of ordered themes and excerpts from participant responses for all 14 themes, with the named themes on the left and the corresponding horizons, or transcript excerpts, from participant interviews on the right.

The next step of phenomenological reduction was to “organize the horizons and themes into a coherent textural description” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 97). Moustakas (1994) defined a composite textural description as “an interweaving of person, conscious

experience, and phenomenon... [in which]... qualities are recognized and described; every perception is granted equal value, nonrepetitive constituents of the experience are linked thematically, and a full description is derived” (p. 96). Put simply, the composite textual description is taking the themes and corresponding, collective horizons and putting them into paragraph form to collect a composite description of the phenomenon as the participants reported. As the composite textural description, arguably, is the first significant step in reporting my findings as well as the launchpad to the findings and meanings derived from the following stages of imaginative variation and synthesis, I’ve included my full composite textural description plus a further explanation of engaging in imaginative variation to create a composite structural description as well as combining the textural and structural descriptions into a textural-structural synthesis in Chapter 4.

However, an intermediary step between completing my theme and cluster chart to composing a composite textural description involved ordering my identified themes. After I finished theming and clustering the horizons from all 14 transcripts, I had 14 total themes which I had named. As I considered organizational relationships among and across the 14, time and temporality emerged as a clear way to organize and order the themes, and I was able to separate themes into the three categories of “Before performing the story, during the story slam performances, and after the story slam,” and within each of these three categories, I further ordered the themes, where possible, in terms of what occurred sequentially during the story slam event. In addition to excerpts from my theme and cluster chart, Appendix D includes my full outline and sequential order of the 14 identified themes under the three headings of Before, During, and After. This outline formed the skeleton for my composite textural description which is included in Chapter 4.



### **Limitations of the Study**

While I did my best to thoughtfully plan and execute this study, there are some obvious limitations. As all research designs are limited in their own ways, some of my limitations are based on my selection and application of phenomenology, others are due to the logistical constraints of my particular situation, and some are the sort that I imagine plague all researchers in progress of the “should’ve, would’ve, could’ve” kind which emerges as we’re collecting or analyzing data and realize an alteration that could have made to a previous step to generate more intriguing results, but the process is too far along for such a change without starting over. While I’ll outline each of the limitations which I’ve identified, I won’t dwell on the last category too much except to note which of these involve the potential for follow-up study.

One limitation of my choice in phenomenological design is that the featured story slam and correlating workshops and follow-up interviews were a one-time event. This single occurrence is in line with many other phenomenological investigations since this methodology focuses on participants’ descriptions of a particular occurrence of phenomena, but as such, phenomenology inherently suffers from similar limitations to case studies in that it’s not possible to draw broad generalizations from my findings to apply in other situations. As an English Education researcher with an eye towards practice, I am always looking to translate research findings into useful possibilities for practice. I don’t seek to offer prescriptive solutions which apply to all teachers in all contexts but rather principles to consider which might prove useful after a teacher’s critical consideration. As such, this design and its limited findings can still prove useful.

A related limitation of this study, which is more logistical, is that my sample involved all 9<sup>th</sup>-grade students. Though Mr. Markus and I advertised to all Southwest Academy High School students and reached out to other teachers for promotion, my hypothesis is that participants signed up for the workshop and slam for two main reasons: 1) because Mr. Markus reached out to them personally, and 2) because they had friends who were also attending. It's not a giant assumptive leap, considering my background as a middle and high school teacher, to recognize that social factors impact the extracurricular events that students choose to attend. I am fortunate, then, to have had a respected and liked teacher partner in Mr. Markus who was able to cultivate a significant group of participants, and those who attended generated interesting and useful data. However, I must also recognize the homogeneous grade levels of participants as a limitation and consider in reflection and during follow-up study that a heterogeneous sampling of participants might have changed data and affected findings.

Perhaps the most significant “would've, could've, should've” limitation of my research design is choosing not to analyze the storytellers' narratives for specific content that affected audience responses and connections. Considering my research question and previous inexperience with phenomenological study, I purposefully decided to “zoom-in” and just focus on the interactions between storytellers and audience members with the storytelling event as the context. However, as I listened to the brave topics of student stories and listened to storytellers further describe intimate moments from their stories in a “behind the scenes” fashion during their interview, such description made it clear that a lot of potentially interesting and useful data can be gleaned from the narrative content generated during this study. The good news is that, while I didn't analyze narrative

content in the context of this study, I did collect it, and I plan to do further analysis with these participants' stories during follow-up study (which I'll discuss further in Chapter 5).

I agree with Marshall & Rossman (2014) that:

[N]arrative approaches have burgeoned... [and that]... one could argue that narratives and analyses of text and talk are interdisciplinary work with links to psychology (Bruner, 1990) and literature (Polkinghorne, 1998) that blends a focus on individual lived experience from phenomenology with the analysis of expressions of self found in narrative inquiry. (p. 18).

Such interdisciplinarity involving phenomenology and narrative inquiry together is something I'd like to work towards in future work.

Additionally, I found in my interviews that stories generated more stories. Audience member participants, specifically, tended to share specific stories from their backgrounds and experiences which related specifically to points that the storyteller mentioned. While I factored in the relating of specific narrative points between storyteller and audience members during my analysis, many of the ancillary stories were bracketed out of this analysis. Again, the good news is that I still have the fully transcribed interviews, and noticing that audience members repeatedly wanted to tell me stories about their own lives as they listened and responded to a live storyteller sets up an interesting premise for follow-up research (which I'll address further in Chapter 5).

Finally, the ancillary interviews I conducted with Jewliana, the parent who attended the workshop, and Mr. Markus, the teacher-sponsor, capture something interesting, valuable, and special about what this extra-curricular storytelling experience

meant to the Southwest Academy High School Community. Again, content from these interviews was bracketed out of this particular analysis, though I've been able to include excerpts for context, and, again, noticing inter-generational participation and role-shifting between parents, teachers, and students during this storytelling experience validates situated literacy experiences as valuable sites for study and generates ideas for further study.

Despite the stated limitations of this study, the collected data and corresponding analysis generated interesting and useful findings. Chapter 4 will present these findings, beginning with the complete textural description and moving through the interpretive work of the phenomenological stages of imaginative variation and synthesis.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

Adorned with oversized headphones, the DJ bobbed his head to the beat as he cued up the first 90's hip-hop tune in his playlist: Mark Morrison's "Return of the Mack." A tall, thin man dressed in a fedora hat and black horn-rimmed glasses climbed the stairs and took the microphone. The music faded out as Joaquin, the MC, launched into a spoken word poem and crisply corresponded syllabic emphasis with punchy gestures, waves, and fist-bumps, in the air. As he wrapped up, he called out to the audience, "How's everybody doing? Can I get a what-what?" initiating a call and response and warming up the audience.

Joaquin explained how the night would work. He'd introduce student storytellers who'd share with the crowd the 5-minute narratives they developed and practiced over the last week based on the theme of "I Should Have Known Better." Joaquin encouraged the audience to let the storytellers know if they heard something they liked. "Don't wait 'til the end. Show them some love!" he encouraged.

He brought up the first storyteller, applauding her bravery for volunteering to go first, and then telling the crowd about her favorite flavor of ice cream and her favorite animal. "Let's give it up for her!" he shouted as he moved off the mic, and the DJ fired up Blackstreet's "No Diggity," head-bobbing again to the beat. Joaquin helped the storyteller adjust the microphone before moving out of the way. The DJ faded down the music, and she began to tell her story.

It was late afternoon on a Friday in the Southwest Academy High School Auditorium, and one-by-one, seven 9<sup>th</sup> grade storytellers climbed to the stage to share their stories. In between, the DJ, who was set up on stage with a computer, moved through more 90's hip-hop like Arrested Development, the Fugees, Tupac Shakur's "Changes" and "Dear Mama" along with old-school funk and soul like Stevie Wonder. He faded the music in and out seamlessly, allowing the students to dance into their stories and then begin and end them without interruption. When students finished, he nodded his head or pointed at them in support as if to say, "Good job! You did it," and he'd clap or snap in applause.

Joaquin fired off each of the storytellers' favorite ice creams and animals and kept the crowd hyped by reminding them, "This is a dialogue! A call-and-response. Keep the energy up!" The audience responded, audibly snapping at moments they liked in the stories, clapping and crying out at more intense moments, and breaking into unfettered applause at the end of each story. Parents, family members, classmates, and a handful of others made up the 50 or so members of the audience.

The storytellers took up the prompt of "I Should Have Known Better" with odes to hard-working mothers, castigations of absentee fathers, reflections on encountering sexual aggression by others, explanations of why storytellers acted differently than others, and plans to move beyond the influence of negative friends and family members. Some danced to the microphone while others seemed shy, crossing the arms or slouching. Most smiled at the end of their stories, while some hurried off stage as the music took over.

This opening anecdote illustrates the story slam event at Southwest Academy High School which followed the workshops described in Chapter 3 and which generated the data analyzed for this dissertation. Along with the seven storytellers, I followed up with seven student audience members who filled out surveys as they watched and listened to indicate one story which especially resonated and one that did not connect.

To share findings from this phenomenological study, I have to more explicitly share some of the constructions from the later stages of my data analysis. Specifically, I'll start with my composite textural description (Moustakas, 1994, p. 96), which involves combining the participants' descriptions into a coherent, complete narrative which stays close to the terms that participants used. Next, I'll present my composite structural description which "is a way of understanding how the [participants] as a group experience what they experience" (Moustakas, 1993, p. 142), and I'll end with the textural-structural synthesis, which "requires an integration of the composite textural and composite structural descriptions, providing a synthesis of the meaning and essences of the experience" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 144).

While the composite textural description and the composite structural description could each arguably still be considered data analysis (and therefore might have been included in Chapter 3), the textural-structural synthesis is a narrative expression of my findings, so it makes sense to me to present the preceding two completed descriptions. The stages of writing the textural description to writing the structural description to writing the textural-structural synthesis move from descriptive to interpretive, so having the first two descriptions helps to justify the synthesis and show how I arrived at it.

To start, what follows in the next section is the composite textural description which was created after I themed the participants' horizons and then put those themes in temporal order (see Appendix D) to include descriptions from before the story slam, during the story slam, and after the story slam. I took each theme, and I re-read the corresponding horizons from the participants' interviews, and I wrote these out in narrative form to both combine and order the participants' described horizons.

### **Composite Textural Description of Participants' Experiences of a Live Storytelling Event**

Storytellers' and audience members' reported experiences could be organized temporally into three categories of before, during, and after the story slam performances. Experiences described as taking place before the story slam began included having a clear purpose for participating, feeling nervous for various reasons, and lacking enough planning or preparation.

#### *Before the Story Slam*

Many participants reported having clear purposes for choosing to participate in the story slam event. One participant saw the experience as therapeutic since he was able to get what he was thinking and feeling out of his system in a venue where people were listening. Another participant used the story slam as a chance to directly address his family, who were in the audience, about his perspective on a personal dispute. A third participant wanted to use the negative experience detailed in her personal story as a



lesson for the audience and a chance to prevent something similar happening to a listener in the future. Getting to choose the topic and having that topic be of a personal nature were also reported as being draws to the event and in contrast with most curricular writing assignments.

Both storytellers and audience members reported a sense of nervousness and anticipation before the story slam event began. Two audience members reported mild nervousness because they had never attended a story slam before and didn't know what to expect. Many storytellers reported nervousness for various reasons. The presence of the audience spurred nervousness for several participants with some mentioning the size of the crowd, the fact that there were strangers there, and the fact that specific family members involved in the stories were present, as specific sub-factors. One storyteller worried her piece would be too short, and several storytellers mentioned a lack of preparation as contributing to their nervousness.

Lack of preparation was mentioned frequently enough to merit its own description. One participant reported having completed half a script and winging the second half of the story. Another participant reported having close to nothing before the performance and almost totally winging it. A third storyteller mentioned having nothing more than a rough outline. Frequently, the specific descriptions of a lack of planning or preparation were followed by a sense of heightened nervousness.

### *During the Story Slam*

The bulk of participants' reported experiences could be categorized as taking place during the story slam performances. These themes included comparing stories to those of others; appreciating the event's atmosphere including the MC and the DJ; wanting to slow down time at the beginning; seeing, hearing, and feeling the audience; the contradiction between exhilaration and vulnerability; gaining confidence and getting used to the experience; connecting with the audience; making intentional stylistic choices; and incorporating emotion and vicariously experiencing emotion.

Storytellers comparing both their stories and their performances to other storytellers was a common mention. One participant mentioned recognizing that professionals in any field can always do it better, which keeps him humble. Two participants worried that their stories wouldn't be as good as the others that were told during the story slam. One participant worried his content was too revealing until he heard more confessional topics from other storytellers.

The story slam event's atmosphere and specifically the presence of the MC and the DJ were prominent in participant's reported experiences. Two audience members told me that the DJ and the presence of music helped to make the auditorium feel welcoming and to dissipate anxiety at the start. Two storytellers noted a specific thematic connection between the song the DJ played at the conclusion of their performances and the content of their stories. One storyteller reported a sense of comfort and partnership in that the DJ was onstage behind the storyteller and paid close attention to the timing of the stories so as not to cut off the storyteller.

The presence of the MC was another significant component to what participants reported about the event atmosphere. Charisma, a sense of humor, and kindness were some of the attributes participants reported about the MC, but beyond his personality, participants also reported on a deeper role. One participant described how she took his invitation seriously to not let anyone else tell your story, which impressed upon her the personal importance of a story slam. Two participants noticed that the MC reinforced the educational value of some of the stories by confirming the storytellers' lessons and applauding storytellers' bravery in his follow-up remarks on stage.

Two separate participants noted their desire to slow down time at the beginning of their performance with one reporting that she was actively stalling before beginning and the other reporting that he was mentally asking the MC to go slower in his introduction.

The most frequent descriptions from participants which took place during the story slam performances involved experiencing the audience, and, more specifically, seeing, hearing, and feeling the audience. Reports of storytellers hearing the audience were conflicted. Several participants told me they didn't notice the snaps, claps, or audible response to their stories because they were so internally focused on their performance. Other participants told me that audible responses like snaps, claps, laughter, etc. affirmed intentional content or stylistic choices they made during their performances and gave them confidence or made them feel supported. Audience members reported that they were moved to snap and clap to demonstrate general support for the storytellers when a specific moment from the story connected personally, and when they noticed the storyteller making a stylistic move like making a joke or changing their tone. Audience

members also reported that the vigor of their response, like moving from light snapping to loud clapping, was moderated by the intensity of their emotional response to the story being performed.

Some storytellers also reported seeing the audience as part of their experience of telling a live story on stage. Two storytellers intentionally looked to their friends and family as visual targets during their performances because they anticipated a familiar and friendly response, which was comforting. Two other storytellers reported noticing specific facial expressions, gestures, or visual responses from audience members in response to parts of their stories. One participant mentioned trying to ignore seeing the audience because its size made him nervous.

In addition to seeing and hearing the audience, two storytellers reported feeling the audience. One storyteller described this feeling as an air or an atmosphere; though she didn't see or hear anything specific, she felt that the audience had an air of concern for her and her story. Another storyteller mentioned feeling the comforting and supporting presence of her grandmother, who she knew was in the audience, though she couldn't specifically see or hear her from the stage.

Both storytellers and audience members connected a sense of vulnerability from telling true, personal stories on stage with a sense of exhilaration. One storyteller described it as a weird contradiction that she worried how strangers would judge her or interpret her story, and that such an experience was also exciting. A different storyteller described being excited that no one could interrupt his story to contradict him, but he also felt nerve-wracked. A third storyteller said it felt awkward to spill a slightly dark secret in

public. One audience member said she felt like she was intruding by listening to such personal stories and that some of the content she shouldn't have known as a stranger to the storyteller. Another audience member described the experience as feeling intimate because of the personal nature of the topic, but also that the personal nature of the stories fostered her admiration of the storytellers.

Several storytellers reported gaining confidence as they got used to being on stage. One participant reported a point in the story where she stopped being nervous and just went with it. Another storyteller described forgetting some of his plans for intentional stylistic delivery which made it easier to speak naturally. A third storyteller described how, as her performance went on, she got into it because she grew invested in her content and delivery, especially hearing supportive noises from the audience.

The most frequent and notable description from both storytellers and audience members came from the inclusion of specific details and specific points of connection in the stories told. Many audience member participants mentioned that they connected to a storyteller when details from the story aligned with those in their own life. Specifically, participants mentioned story details about hard-working mothers, absentee fathers, having Hispanic heritage, sharing rooms with brothers and sisters, having family members with tentative immigration statuses, and recognizing both the strengths and flaws in parents as aligning with details in their own lives, which enhanced their sense of connection to the storytellers and their stories.

Furthermore, audience members reported feeling a lack of a sense of connection when they couldn't connect to specific story details. One audience member participant

reported a sense of disconnect because a storyteller was vague and confusing. Another participant reported that a storyteller told about a fight, and since she had never been in a fight, she couldn't relate. Finally, two additional audience member participants reported that one story was about an abusive relationship and being in love, and since they've claimed not to experience either, they didn't connect with the story being told.

Participants reported that the inclusion of specific stylistic choices was also significant to their experience. Storytellers frequently referenced intentional stylistic choices that they made, which were included both in the content and delivery of their stories. Examples of reported stylistic choices in content include infusing jokes into serious parts of the story to break the tension for listeners and using poetic word choice and even profanity so that the listener would take notice. Storytellers reported intentional choices in their delivery, which sometimes matched their choices in content. One storyteller reported intentionally stuttering because he felt it made him seem more vulnerable and it helped to diffuse his nervousness. Another storyteller reported intentionally building the volume of her delivery to match the intensity of that moment in her story. Two storytellers reported making use of pauses to emphasize certain key moments in their stories and to acknowledge audience reaction. One storyteller said that she intentionally sped up and talked in a higher tone because she wanted to make the audience feel anxious, which corresponded to a specific moment in her story.

Many audience members also reported responding to specific stylistic choices from the storytellers. When one audience member detected a confident and defiant tone from the increased volume of a storyteller's delivery, it prompted the audience member to

clap loudly and cheer because she wanted to show support. Another audience member said that a storyteller's strategic use of humor made her trust the storyteller more because the humor made her more relatable.

The incorporation of emotion into storytelling was a separate and significant category reported by participants. One audience member reported that a storyteller put a lot of emotion into her delivery, which helped the audience member receive the message. Another audience member reported that, while she understood that a storyteller was trying to communicate sadness at one point, the fact that the storyteller read with a flat delivery diminished the emotional impact of the story. Furthermore, when emotion was incorporated into storytelling, audience members reported being able to experience similar emotions vicariously. One audience member reported that an anxious delivery by the storyteller triggered a sense of anxiety for her as a listener. Another audience member reported feeling empowered when a storyteller delivered lines with a confident tone. A third audience member reported that seeing a relative cry caused her to cry in return.

Sometimes these vicarious emotions fostered a sense of protectiveness from audience members towards storytellers. Three separate audience members expressed feeling anger at characters who storytellers mentioned in their narratives as having hurt or belittled the storytellers. One audience member felt nervous for a speaker at how the audience would respond to the storyteller sharing such private and personal content as well as a sense of relief when the audience applauded the storyteller. Another audience member reported wanting to reassure a storyteller after the storyteller shared how his father had talked down to him.

### *After the Story Slam*

Finally, participants reported reactions to the story slam after it had finished including the subcategories of immediate reactions and enduring reactions. For immediate responses, multiple storytellers reported a sense of relief that their story was over, and they could leave the stage and return to the audience. This relief was often accompanied by a sense of pride that they had been willing to get in front of a group and share a personal story. Several storytellers also reported that audience members approached them after the story slam to congratulate them on a job well done or to follow-up personally on specific notes of content shared in the story.

Correspondingly, audience members reported a sense of admiration for storytellers for being willing to get up on stage in front of a live audience as well as to publicly share vulnerable, personal details. Several audience members expressed that they felt compelled to talk with storytellers after the event to reassure them that they had performed well and had made an impact on the audience. Specifically, audience members reported that they admired the storytellers who were most confident and revealed the most personal details, and audience members recognized the courage or guts it took to be so publicly honest.

These immediate reactions to the story slam event were coupled with more enduring reactions. Several storytellers talked about plans for the next time, should an additional story slam be held in the future. One audience member told me that he had wanted to participate in this story slam and didn't have time to prepare, but he planned to participate if there was a future event. A storyteller hoped that there would be another



slam, so he could write a second entry to continue the story he shared during the first event.

Participants also distinguished the story slam from other types of performance or reasons for being on stage. One participant said that it was the first time she had been on stage with the other occasions just being to receive an award and not to say or do anything. Another participant had experience performing in front of an audience, but it was all content that other people had written, and it was a unique experience for her to perform content she had created, which made the experience more intense.

Two storytellers reflected that the story slam format gave them a unique platform for their ideas. One participant described it as being on his territory where no one could interrupt him, which he said frequently happens in his life offstage. Another participant said she felt like she was used to taking orders and instructions and that this was a chance for her to say how she felt without anyone else being willing to take the microphone to give her instructions.

### **Moving from the Composite Textural Description to the Composite Structural Description**

In order to move from the participants' words and identified horizons, which were used to make up the textural description of how they experienced a live storytelling event, to generate the composite structural description, Moustakas (1994) recommended engaging in "imaginative variation" (p. 97-100), which involves imagining "possible

structures of time, space, materiality, causality, and relationship to self and others” (p. 99). The purpose of imaginative variation is for the researcher to interpret possible meanings from participant data by organizing textural descriptions into structures (like time, space, causality, etc.).

By organizing the themes temporally into “before, during, and after” categories, I already did some of this interpretive work with the structure of time; it’s clear that participants experienced the storytelling event sequentially, which is an interesting general connection to narrative plot; readers experience most narrative plot through sequential fashion (or intentional stylistic deviation from sequential plot on the part of the author), too. The sequential order of the description likely also comes from the way I conducted the interviews by asking participants to describe their experiences while watching the video recordings. As the video recordings unfolded in a sequential manner, it makes sense that the themes and participant responses can be organized that way as well.

Additionally, the temporal markers of “before, during, and after” indicate categorical viewpoints or attitudes from the participants. The descriptions which were categorized as occurring before the story slam were tied to expectations, anticipation, and prediction. The descriptions categorized as occurring during the slam were mostly procedural; a sort of “here’s what was happening” play-by-play. The descriptions categorized as occurring after the slam were reflective in nature and considered the lasting significance and meaning of the event. This reflective stage also hinted at starting over at the anticipatory “before” stage as participants made plans for their next opportunity to take part in a story slam.

Besides time, two additional structures which generate useful interpretations are those of causality and relationship.

There are several moments in the composite textural descriptions where I notice causal connections. One of these connections occurs between nervousness and preparation. The storytellers who reported being ill or underprepared also reported a heightened sense of nervousness, whereas some participants expressed confidence from having written lines that they predicted would generate a positive response from the audience. The latter group reported being less nervous because they were more prepared.

There were nervousness and anticipation expressed from the audience the audience, too, which ties to a lack of preparation. While it's less common to think of audiences (as compared to performers) as having to prepare for a performance, several participants reported feeling nervous, curious, or a heightened sense of anticipation because they had never been to a story slam before and didn't know what to expect. A lack of familiarity with the norms and procedures of how such an event would unfold created tension for some audience members.

Another notable point of causality evident in the textural description is between the stylistic choices of storytellers and the reactions of audience members. By organizing descriptions from storytellers about the intentional choices they made in their delivery, like incorporating intentional pauses and stutters; altering volume and tone of their voices; and speeding up or slowing down their delivery, alongside descriptions from audience members about when and why they reacted, a clear causal connection between the two can be seen. Audience members reported that these stylistic choices from the storytellers cued the timing and intensity of their reactions. Furthermore, the

incorporation of emotion of the part of the storyteller seemed to foster a feeling of vicarious emotion on the part of some listeners.

Storytellers reported manipulating their delivery to generate a sense of anxiety or confidence, and audience members, in turn, reported feeling anxious or confident in response to storytellers' delivery. Furthermore, audience members suggested that more emotional delivery helped them connect more whereas flat delivery dampened any emotional content the written piece might have had. Use of emotion by the storytellers caused the reported experience of corresponding emotion in the audience members.

Beyond these instances of meaning interpreted through the structure of causality, there were meanings which could be gleaned from considering the structure of relationship.

Specifically, some themes showed interaction between storytellers and audience members by having descriptions from both categories of participants attached to the theme. For example, some themes only had descriptions from storytellers, including comparing stories to those told by other stories and gaining a sense of confidence as their performance went on. But, some themes, like the incorporation of emotions fostering reciprocal emotional reactions of the audience described previously under the causality structure, had descriptions from both storytellers and audience members, which indicated moments of exchange or transaction between storytellers and audience members.

One of these transactional moments was under the theme of the contradiction (and correlation) between vulnerability and exhilaration. Storytellers reported feeling vulnerable from revealing personal, confessional details but also excited or exhilarated by doing so in front of a live audience. Audience members, in turn, reported feeling like they

were eavesdropping on a private conversation, which was interesting and exciting. An audience member labeled the experience as intimate, which has always seemed like a loaded term to me when applied to performance. Considering intimacy is also used to describe private transactions between lovers in a relationship, it seems like a stretch to describe a solo acoustic musical performance in front of an audience of hundreds as being intimate; however, the collective participant descriptions give some credence to such a metaphor. The key component to intimacy is vulnerability. By the storytellers willing to share vulnerable content publicly in an honest way, and audience members appreciating and recognizing that willingness, “intimate” is an apt metaphor.

Another moment of transaction is that audience members reported feeling worried for and protective of storytellers, especially when they shared vulnerable content. While some audience members reported this protectiveness as an internal dialogue, others channeled theirs into outbursts of support like snaps, claps, and applauding cries. Both internally and externally, audience members wanted the storytellers to know that they were heard and appreciated.

Perhaps the most significant occurrence of transaction between storytellers and audience members occurred with the sharing of specific, personal details by the storytellers which connected to personal details in the lives and experiences of the audience members. Over and over, audience members gave separate reports of feeling like “that could have been me” when storytellers shared specificities including family details like missing absentee fathers, having hard-working mothers, needing to share bedrooms and chores with siblings, thinking of relatives with tenuous immigration statuses etc. By contrast, audience members reported not being able to connect when they

felt that storytellers were vague, and they also lacked connection with storytellers who told stories with specific details that were unfamiliar to the audience members.

This last point about disconnect brings up a transaction I expected participants to report from their story slam experience but was absent from participants' descriptions. In English Education and with reader-response, we frequently talk about the "windows and mirrors" (Sims Bishop, 1990) concept, which is that readers want to see characters like themselves (mirrors) in the books they read, and that readers want to vicariously peek into the lives of characters who are different from them (windows) in the books they read. As Tschida, Ryan, and Ticknor (2014) suggested, students need to encounter literature beyond just a single perspective, which relates to Adichie's (2009) warning about the "danger of a single story." Sims Bishop (1990) wrote, "[l]iterature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience." The hope is that exposing students to literature featuring perspectives different from their own positionalities and cultural assumptions that students will better understand a multiplicity of perspectives.

However, participants in my study reported much more mirror than window; they reported a strong sense of connection with any transaction between storytellers and stories offering specific details that audience members could relate to. This isn't to say that audience members didn't understand stories told from differing perspectives, but not being able to relate was the most frequent description of not being able to connect, while descriptions connecting to specific, relatable details were frequent and enthusiastic.

To craft my composite structural description, I stated these analyses and meanings gleaned from considering the structures of time, causality, and relationship into paragraph form. The next section includes my complete, composite structural description.

### **Composite Structural Description of Participants' Experience of Live Storytelling Event**

The experience of the story slam event unfolded in sequential, temporal manner for both storytellers and audience members. Participants experienced the story slam in terms of what happened before, during, and after, with their perspectives and attitudes shifting accordingly. Before the start of the event, they looked to what would happen in the future. When the slam started, their attention focused on what was happening in the present, and after the slam completed, participants shifted into a state of reflection, further considering what happened in the past.

Prior to the start, participants focused on expectations, anticipation, planning, and predicting. As neither audience member nor storyteller knew quite what was to expect, there was a collective sense of nervous excitement. As the slam started, attention shifted to more of an experiential “now;” participants focused on what stories were being told and how they were being told from the stage as well as how the audience was responding. After the slam concluded, participants reflected on the significance of the event and further considered their interactive roles as storytellers or audience members. Then, the temporal sequence started over with participants looking ahead to the future of what they'd do “next time” during their next opportunity to attend a story slam.

In addition to a temporal structure, there were clear moments of cause and effect during the telling of live, true stories in front of an audience. A lack of preparation amplified nervousness in both storytellers and audience members. Storytellers who didn't finish writing their stories or didn't practice them out loud enough felt more nervous, while storytellers who had crafted lines and moments they felt proud of had confidence taking the stage. Audience members, many unfamiliar with what to expect at a story slam, felt anticipation and nervousness about what would happen during the event.

Storytellers made intentional stylistic choices which caused reactions from audience members. When tone and volume of voice, as well as speed of delivery, were altered, and when storytellers used techniques like intentional pauses and stuttering, especially to reflect emotional states like anxiety or vulnerability, audience members moderated their applause and audible responses accordingly. Some audience members even experienced vicariously, to an extent, the emotions that storytellers described and communicated from the stage.

When storytellers gave an emotional delivery, audience members felt more of an emotional response than storytellers who delivered emotionally flat presentations. Furthermore, the inclusion of emotion and particularly the communication of vulnerability on the part of the storyteller fostered a sense of protectiveness on the part of the audience members. While some audience members just experienced this protectiveness internally, others vocalized it through applause and shouts of support.

In addition to time and causality, the structure of relationship gives meaning to participants' experience of a live storytelling event in front of an audience. There were moments of evident transaction between storytellers and audience members. An



atmosphere of intimacy was created by storytellers sharing personal and vulnerable content on stage, a willingness which audience members admired and appreciated. Like overhearing a private conversation or listening in on a secret, audience members felt both privilege and significance in hearing the personal accounts of the storytellers. The storytellers, in turn, balanced concerns with how they might be perceived by listeners with the excitement and exhilaration produced by sharing a personal story with an audience.

The vulnerability and honesty of storytellers also generated a feeling of protectiveness from audience members. Some audience members experienced this protectiveness as an internal reaction while others were compelled to applaud or vocalize their support of storytellers during vulnerable moments in the stories.

A significant moment of transaction between audience members and storytellers came when storytellers included specific details in their stories which personally resonated with audience members. Specific mentions of family background and experiential details in stories elicited a “that could have been me” response from audience members, and these specific moments were one of the main factors in whether a story connected with listeners. Correspondingly, when storytellers were vague or when they shared experiences which were not familiar or relatable, these stories often didn’t connect with audience members.

## **Moving from the Composite Structural Description to the Textural-Structural Synthesis**

The final stage of Moustakas's (1994) sequence for drawing findings from phenomenological data is the textural-structural synthesis. Moustakas (1994) defined the textural-structural synthesis as "the intuitive integration of the fundamental textural and structural descriptions into a unified statement of the essences of the experience of the phenomenon as a whole" (p. 100). In this stage, I took the composite textural description, which is closest to participants' own words and the most descriptive of the stages and melded it with the composite structural description, which is more interpretive and draws meaning from considering the data in various structural forms like time, causality and relationship.

The textural-structural synthesis is the most interpretive and subjective stage, and as Moustakas (1994) noted, it "represents the essences at a particular time and place from the vantage point of an individual researcher following an exhaustive imaginative and reflective study of the phenomenon" (p. 100).

In reconsidering my composite textural description along with the analytic work I did as I developed my composite structural description, I've identified four essences to the experience of how storytellers and audience members related during a live storytelling event. These include 1) the relational symbiosis of storytellers and audience members, 2) the nature of the story slam as a planned and produced event, 3) the storytellers' inclusions of specific, personal details which resonated with specific, personal details in members' lives, and 4) the storytellers' intentional style and content choices which corresponded with reactions from audience members.

The next section includes my complete textural-synthesis, elucidating these four essences and drawing from my composite textural and composite structural descriptions into a final interpretive narrative.

### **Textural-Structural Synthesis of Participants' Experience of a Live Storytelling Event**

The experience of a live storytelling event involved a symbiotic perception between performers and audience members. Performers considered their experience based on the presence and reaction of the audience, and, in turn, audience members regarded their experience in relation to what the performers did on stage. This sort of co-existence and co-consideration between performers and audience members created the experience of a live storytelling event, and if either group of participants was absent, the experience of the live storytelling event would be radically different.

Storytellers reported feeling nervous, making plans and preparations for delivering their stories, making intentional choices on stage, and feeling relieved and happy at hearing applause at the end of their performances, all of which are related to the presence and perceived reaction of the audience. On the flip side, audience members reported a sense of nervousness and protectiveness for storytellers, especially when vulnerable content was shared, and they also reported reactions to various stylistic and content moves that they observed storytellers making. Each of the reported experiences of the audience members is in relation to what storytellers shared as well as how they shared it.

In addition to the symbiotic perception between storytellers and audience members, storytellers are aware of the performances of other storytellers, which prompts reflection and comparison between performers. Many storytellers felt their stories weren't as good as the others told. Audience members were also aware of the behavior of other audience members, which sometimes influenced their behavior. For example, audience members reported sensing the energy of the rest of the crowd, with applause generating more and louder applause.

Another essence of the experience of a live storytelling event was that it was a planned and produced event. The presence of a DJ fostered a lighthearted and welcoming feeling as the music filled the silence of the auditorium and welcomed storytellers to the stage. The DJ, as well as the event's MC, provided physical support to storytellers by being on stage with them as well as by using physical cues like pointing, high-fives, and fist-bumps. Additionally, the MC prepared listeners to support storytellers with a personalized and high-energy introduction. The MC also served as a model for audience member support as he snapped, clapped, and yelled his support for storytellers throughout their performances. In some cases, the MC reinforced the content of storytellers' narratives by following up with his own supportive comments on the microphone.

The storytelling event being held in the performance space of the auditorium on a Friday evening and advertised and open to the public also factored into the experience. The space and timing contributed to storytellers feeling more nervous if they were less prepared and more confident if they'd composed stories they felt proud of. Audience members, too, reported both nervousness and anticipation at not knowing what to expect

at such an event, having never attended a live story slam before. Another aspect of the event essence is that the performance was voluntary, and both storytellers and audience members could choose to take part. Storytellers appreciated the freedom of the format, and audience members respected the bravery of storytellers willing to take the stage in front of an audience.

A third essence of the experience of a live storytelling event involved the sharing of specific, personal details. When storytellers shared personal details that resonated with audience members, it generated a sense of connection and a feeling of, “that could have been me.” Especially when the personal details were perceived as vulnerable, they also generated vicarious emotion. Audience members reported feeling anxious when storytellers delivered anxious moments, and audience members reported confidence when storytellers delivered confident moments. Furthermore, such details sometimes generated protective emotions as audience members reported feeling angry at characters who were said to have hurt the storytellers, or audience members wanted to show support to bolster the confidence of storytellers when they communicated vulnerability or insecurity.

While the inclusion of specific, relatable details generated a sense of connection between storytellers and audience members, the opposite was also true. Audience members experienced a sense of disconnect from stories that didn’t include specific details or from which specific details were not relatable. Audience members reported feeling lost or confused when stories were vague, and when situational details were shared that the audience hadn’t experienced, they reported feeling less of a connection.

A final essence of the experience of a live storytelling event included intentional stylistic choices by storytellers and corresponding reactions from audience members. Storytellers planned and executed deliberate moves in both their content and delivery, and audience members moderated their responses in return. Intentional pauses emphasized certain lines and allowed for applause. Intentional stuttering or posturing communicated vulnerability, opening the door for audience support. Moderating the volume or speed of the story's delivery corresponded with moderated applause and audience reaction; louder volume and faster speed generated louder applause and more intense reaction. The inclusion of jokes and humor produced trust between the storytellers and audience members and lightened the mood, especially after darker or more vulnerable content.

### **Moving to an Additional Textural-Structural Synthesis of Holding Space**

I feel confident that the four essences I identified and their description in my textural-structural synthesis well-captures my participants' general experience of engaging in a live storytelling event; however, I elected to do an additional, separate textural-structural synthesis to specifically describe the concept of "holding space" in the context of my participants' experience. As I described in the introduction and literature review, many educators and educational researchers rightfully call for us to create or make spaces for students' creative, original, and honest expression. However, once those spaces are made, how are they held?

In other words, what happens in those creative spaces to ensure positive and productive results? Especially in an era where we debate trigger-warnings for sensitive literature and have an increased focus on the mental health of students, making sure that students are safe and supported if they are encouraged to express themselves creatively must be paramount. During a performance event like a story slam, the audience has an active and catalytic role in empowering and supporting the performance just as the performer does in offering an honest and dynamic presentation.

To further explore the concept of holding space in the context of my participants' live storytelling experience, I again considered my composite textural description and composite structural description, but this time, I looked for essences related to holding space for creative performance. What I noticed is that the audience alone can't hold space, but rather the performer and the audience must enter into a negotiation or a contract with both sides being willing, giving, and open. The three key essences of holding space that I identified from my descriptions were both storytellers and audience members coming to the space with something to give, storytellers and audience members communicating during their transaction, and participants refraining from abusing the space for selfish purposes.

What follows is my textural-structural synthesis of holding space.

### **A Description of Holding Space**

When both storytellers and audience members came to the performance space with something to give, it created the conditions for the space to be held for storytellers during a live, storytelling event. For storytellers, this meant delivering an honest and

sincere performance by demonstrating a willingness to be vulnerable through the sharing of true, personal details. For audience members, it meant coming to the space ready to hear and support true, personal stories. There was a negotiation between the willingness to share and the readiness to hear and support. When both sides voluntarily came to the space with a mindset prepared for recognizing the significance and importance of sharing true stories, it fostered the conditions for connection, exchange, and transaction.

Holding space was also evident through communication between storytellers and audience members. When audience members offered verbal reactions including laughter in response to jokes, snaps and shouts in support of well-crafted lines or particularly vulnerable admissions, and applause at the end of a performance, it communicated support to the storytellers. In addition to hearing audience members, storytellers could see and even feel the presence of the audience, which allowed them to moderate their performance accordingly, working in pauses for effect, and smiling and gesturing in reaction to applause. By moderating their tone, volume, and stylistic delivery, storytellers could communicate emotion, which moderated the audience's emotional reaction in turn.

Finally, space was held when neither storyteller nor audience member abused the space for selfish purposes. Storytellers appreciated the platform of the story slam to share their stories without interruption, but they did not go beyond the format of the event, which meant sticking to the five-minute time limit and offering a story based on the night's theme. In turn, the audience didn't interrupt or engage in behaviors which distracted from the storytellers because they appreciated storytellers who were respectful of their time and they admired the bravery of storytellers willing to demonstrate vulnerability and share true stories on stage.



## CHAPTER 5

### IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

In *The Open Hand*, Kroll (2015) wrote about teaching physical Aikido stances alongside argumentative stances in rhetoric. Kroll's premise is that by physically seeing and shifting our stance in relation to our opponent or audience, we can mentally and better metaphorically see or shift our stance in argument. For example, what does it communicate to a listener when we argue with a closed fist versus an open hand, and how do those physical gestures suggest about the mindsets and attitudes with which we are approaching those we're arguing with?

Additionally, Kroll asks his students to shift their physical relationship and body position to consider similar questions. To reframe argument from oppositional to conciliatory, Kroll first positions his students face-to-face (oppositional) as they might line up for an Aikido or boxing match, and they argue a given topic. Then, he asks them to shift to stand side-by-side (conciliatory) and continue arguing the topic while also considering whether standing side-by-side versus in an oppositional stance changes how they interact. The basic idea behind this instruction is to use physical gestures, postures, and interaction, to represent the argumentative interaction between people, and to showcase how argument doesn't all have to be oppositional, but when we stand side-by-side, even with different viewpoints or opinions, we can work towards shared solutions and compromises rather than just on countering one another's points. A conciliatory stance reframes focus from the opponent to the issue and creates a possibility for working together on a solution rather than just overcoming an opponent.

The implications and conclusions I draw from this dissertation research suggest that an invitation to hold space for the creative expression of others, especially among adolescents, is not to be taken lightly. A reframing and rethinking of roles and responsibilities from participants, both performers and audience members, in a performance space can lead to a greater sense of connection, interaction, and transaction between them. Furthermore, like Kroll suggests with participants in an argument, a more generative focus is one what's created between performers and audience members rather than focusing on either sub-group exclusively. This dissertation provides evidence and description that connection, interaction, and transaction are not one-sided, but rather they come from the co-creation and co-negotiation of the creative space for shared purposes.

To consider useful implications for this dissertation research, it's important to ask how we can encourage a sense of holding the space among students in both curricular and extra-curricular contexts?

One possibility involves re-imagining traditional teacher-student roles.

### **The Teacher as MC**

Participants frequently reported that the presence of the MC, as well as that of the DJ, positively influenced their performances and their reception of performances. It wasn't just that the MC and DJ were charismatic and funny, which participants reported, but it was also their stance, presence, behavior, and role at the story slam event. The fact that the DJ was onstage with the students gave them physical support, so they didn't feel like they were alone. And, his selection of music, which matched the content of their stories, as well as his paying close attention to their starts and stops in storytelling to cue

when to fade in or fade out the music, helped students to feel respected and less awkward on stage. The music and the relaxed presence of the DJ helped put the audience at ease, too, and make them feel welcome in the auditorium.

Joaquin, the MC, was also a significant presence in participants' reported experience. First, Joaquin put into practice Adichie's (2009) call to claim our stories by reminding students during the workshop that if they don't tell their stories, someone else will, and they'll probably get it wrong. With that invitation, Joaquin set the stage for meaningful content generation.

Next, Joaquin demonstrated a willingness to participate as well as to MC the event by opening the story slam with his own spoken word poem. This demonstration proved that Joaquin was willing to "walk the talk" and that he wasn't asking student participants to do something he would be unwilling to do himself. Joaquin also modeled support for the audience and engaging crowd reactions by visibly and audibly snapping, clapping, and cheering, which empowered other audience members to do the same.

Participants, both storytellers and audience members, found the MC to be welcoming, encouraging, supportive, and entertaining, but, most of all, he empowered their performance and positive experience. These findings regarding the role of the MC can serve as an instructional metaphor for the classroom in that a teacher can take the composite role of the DJ and MC to empower and enable student performance rather than control it, as sometimes happens in classrooms when a teacher takes more of an authoritarian role. By reframing the teacher as MC, it shifts the role to more of a guide than an authority, which opens the door to student expression. Such characteristics of an MC which translate well to teacher-presence and classroom management include setting

up a supportive environment; communicating expectations; demonstrating positive response; and being friendly and welcoming.

During our follow-up interview, Mr. Markus told me that he struggled during the workshop and story slam not to take charge. He said, “There were a lot of times I had to fight my urge to over plan and overdo it and just let people be authentic and let people play their roles.” Mr. Markus’s mindset is common among educators who want to control the conditions in their classroom and plan for any contingency with the thought that unexpected challenges are unproductive; however, Mr. Markus’s quote suggests that he sees value in allowing for authenticity, which means opening the door for unexpected possibilities and for student participants to interpret the opportunity as they see fit (within the guidelines of the event). Allowing for the myriad and potentially unexpected possibilities of authentic expression rather than planning, predicting, and carefully controlling the experience is one useful hallmark of an MC’s role that translates well to teacher-presence.

Furthermore, this explanation connects back to a previous quote by Mr. Markus where he contrasted what he called a stereotypical “recital audience” where the audience attends out of obligation and offers polite applause at predictable moments with the audience he experienced at the story slam, which more genuinely and spontaneously reacted to the content of performers. Shifting a teacher’s presence at such an event from keeping students quiet and focused and responding in a prescribed manner (the recital audience) to demonstrating genuine response which is appropriate to the context and allowing for unexpected expression could be a valuable reframing for teachers.

Of course, one of the popular rebuttals to the suggestion of allowing for less-controlled student-audience response is to point out the students who might abuse such a privilege and be disrespectful or disruptive, which leads to further curricular considerations.

### **Curricular Implications**

One dilemma inherent in the design of public education is that it's compulsory. While many perspectives, including that from the Writing Process Movement, celebrate student choice, freedom, independence, autonomy, and agency and suggest that students read more when they pick their own books and care more about what they write when they choose their topics, the compulsory nature of public school creates a challenge; students do not get to choose whether or not to come to school. Therefore, the "why do I have to go to school/ why do I have to learn this concept/ why do I have to do this task" type of complaint is among the most stereotypical of student responses to classes, school work, and assignments.

First, I should note that as a 12-year veteran public school teacher and a product of public schools myself, I am in favor of the compulsory nature of public education. I believe that strong public schools should be a right for all students and are a responsibility for a strong Democratic society to provide. Too often, the premise of choice is used to argue for shifting public educational funding towards charter or private schools which are often more restrictive and less-inclusive than public schools which must serve everyone. Furthermore, I recognize that there is a whole list of sociocultural explanations for why students resist school in general, certain classes, assignments, etc.,

and this dissertation is not positioned to delve deeply into those. The only point in bringing up the compulsory nature of school and the resistance it sometimes generates is to acknowledge how difficult it can be for a teacher to manifest the benefits of choice and autonomy while simultaneously requiring all students to participate.

More specifically, this study was conducted in a situated, extra-curricular context. Student participants could choose at all levels whether and to what degree they wanted to participate. Students who came to the workshop weren't compelled to take part in the story slam, and if they declined to take part in certain activities within the workshop, that was okay, too. Furthermore, the audience for the story slam was voluntary, too. While family and friends may have felt some compulsion to attend based on their relationships with the performers, fellow students, especially, had total choice over whether to attend the slam as an audience member or not. Those who did reported a sense of curiosity about the event which drew them in.

So, the question remains for classroom teachers how to take the reported findings from this situated, extra-curricular study and apply them in a curricular context. In other words, how do we offer freedom of choice, independence, agency, etc. within a framework which requires everyone to be there and, to some extent, to participate?

One possible takeaway from this study is that students could all be required to participate in the content generation portion of a similar project in the classroom and then given the opportunity to volunteer to participate in a performance portion. As explored in the literature review, writing a personal story has a variety of academic and personal benefit, and Mr. Markus identified that students could choose to use their written work from the story slam and workshop as one of their Carnegie portfolio entries in a

cumulative end-of-the-year assessment. Asking all students to respond to a personal prompt can easily be justified in a curricular context.

Then, once all students have generated creative content, a teacher can produce a performance opportunity in which students are invited to participate. Such an opportunity would give an authentic context to the work and allow for a public showcase. When I taught middle school English, for example, I used to teach a 12-bar blues songwriting unit as part of our poetry study (Griffith, 2012). All students created a 12-bar blues song, which satisfied the curricular requirement of studying and applying elements of poetry like rhythm, rhyme, alliteration, metaphor, etc., but then students were invited to participate in a songwriters' assembly where they performed their songs with live musicians and in front of their peers. Providing this performance opportunity gave students a chance to see their work come to life in front of an authentic audience, and it gave a greater purpose to the classroom work that we were doing. Even students who elected not to perform could watch their classmates' performances and see the live application of our learning.

Plus, the students who didn't participate as performers still had a valuable role; they held the space for the performances by serving as the audience. Recognizing the importance of the role of an audience member in a performance space and providing student audience members with active roles in giving feedback and encouragement ensures that everyone is participating on some level, even if they're not performing. Hip-hop educators (Travis, 2016; Irby, D., Hall, H., & Hill, M., 2013) have echoed the importance of the role of audience in performance by pointing out that not everyone has

the talent to rap, breakdance, sing, etc., but everyone has the capacity to watch and listen, and without an audience, there is no performance.

So, educating the audience on their important role within the performance space becomes another implication of this research.

### **Educating the Audience**

In an essay for the National Association of Music Education's blog, Sabatino (2016) argued for teaching concert etiquette. His frustration was from his perspective as a music director and included a list of grievances with the audience in the middle of school music performances including cell phones ringing, babies crying, and inappropriate shouts at inappropriate times from audience members. In response, he argued that "etiquette can and should be taught," and he suggested an audience announcement at the beginning of a concert in addition to a memo in the program asking attendees to adhere to a list of etiquette guidelines (turning phones off, refraining from shouting, etc.).

I understand Sabatino's point, and I agree with it to some extent, but I also worry that his definition of concert etiquette simply promotes more of what Mr. Markus labeled "recital response" in that audiences are trained to respond predictably and politely rather than authentically. Considering my findings from this dissertation, it seems a larger component to educating an audience than getting them to agree to a list of rules which will make sure performances aren't interrupted is to help an audience understand the importance of their role in co-generating the space and conditions for performance.

In both of my textural-structural syntheses of participant responses and my interpretation, the mental state of readiness that both performers and audience members



bring to a performance was foundational. Both performers and audience members expect something from one another. Audience members expect storytellers to be vulnerable, genuine, and honest; and, storytellers, in turn, expect an audience which listens openly and shows visible and audible signs of response. When both performers and audience members bring this sense of willingness and openness to engage, transaction occurred, and the performance connected.

Through classroom inclusion of performance opportunities where all students are invited, but not compelled, to perform and those who elect not to perform are educated on their important role as audience members for empowering and allowing the performance to take place, students can experience both the power and responsibility of being a good audience. As Brook (1968) noted a “good house” is one where the audience is engaged and interested in co-creating the performance whereas a “bad house” is passive and expects the performer to do all the work. He said, “good theatre depends on a good audience” and that “every audience has the theatre it deserves” (p. 21).

### **Less Window than Mirror**

While participant audience members reported that they were able to understand the perspective and intent of most storytellers, one finding from this study which prompts further reflection is the prevalence of the sharing of specific, personal details was one of the main components of connection between storytellers and audience members and that stories which didn't feature relatable details were reported not to connect.

Participants mentioned that the stories that didn't connect still generated reactions including admiration, respect, and shock at the vulnerability of the selected topic, as well

as understanding the intended messages, but the deepest connections were reported when audience members could specifically connect personal details from the content of the storytellers to their own lives. From the “windows and mirrors” (Sims Bishop, 1990) perspective of teaching literature that we want to see ourselves (mirrors) in the literature that we are exposed to, and that literature allows us to peek into lives we haven’t experienced (windows), mirrors were much more prevalent in my participants’ reporting of connection than were windows. In fact, it was windows, or hearing a story with specific details different from the lives of the listener, that prompted a sense of disconnect.

This finding is intriguing, especially considering Blei’s (2017) claim that storytelling fosters a sense of empathy among listeners by showing them a personal glimpse of an unfamiliar life. It should be noted that my research only represented one case of an interaction between storytellers and audience members and, furthermore, that my sample of participants represented a homogenous grade level. Before claiming definitive lack of windows in an audience’s experience of live storytelling, this claim bears further investigation with other sites and with more heterogeneous samples of students. However, the lack of windows in my participants’ responses does generate further consideration.

First, I wonder if being able to not just understand but also to connect to the life experience of a storyteller with significant differences is too complicated to occur without apprenticeship. Students might have a better chance of connecting with unfamiliar stories if they were familiar with protocols and had experienced work in their general literature study which allowed them to start building connections.

For example, Joseph Campbell described the importance of being able to draw from a large canon of stories including those from families, from religious communities and mythology, and from literature as instructive frameworks for later moments in life. He said, “When the story is in your mind, then you see its relevance to something happening in your own life” (Campbell & Moyers, 1988, p. 2). This quote recalls Reese (2013) who claimed that children who grow up hearing more stories develop better narrative skills themselves as well as having a better understanding for contextualizing family experience in the future. I wonder if a lack of exposure to a canon of similar stories is what didn’t allow audience members in my study to connect to unfamiliar details in some of the storyteller’s accounts. Furthermore, I wonder of protocols for building connection to unfamiliar perspectives is part of a broader consideration for educating the audience.

One possibility goes back to the study of fictional storytelling. Considering the context of this study, I’m a big fan of nonfiction and autobiographical storytelling, and I believe in its power to help us understand viewpoints and backgrounds different than our own. However, the advantage of studying fiction and the perspectives of fictional characters is that they can serve as a lower-risk proxy for considering unfamiliar viewpoints. Rather than judging or considering unfamiliar perspectives from a real-life person who we’re listening to and who has feelings, debating the intentions, motives, experiences, etc. of a fictional character (with no risk of hurting that character’s feelings) may provide us a framework for future, nonfiction analysis.

To go back to Campbell's quote, by having a rich reservoir of fictional stories to draw from, we'd have a point of reference to better judge, interpret, and connect to unfamiliar accounts by actual people in the context of an event like our story slam.

Further consideration of the lack of reported windows is a rich site for further research, first, to determine whether that lack was isolated to my sample or part of a larger trend, and, second, to consider potential interventions which could bridge unfamiliar experiences between storytellers and audience members to foster empathy during a storytelling event.

There are several other interesting paths for this research to build into for future work.

### **Where to Go Next**

Marshall & Rossman (2016) noted:

As narrative approaches have burgeoned and as an example of the increasing hybridity of the large field of qualitative inquiry, one could argue that narratives and analyses of texts and talk are examples of interdisciplinary work with links to psychology (Bruner, 1990) and literature (Polkinghorne, 1988) that blends a focus on individual lived experience from phenomenology with the analysis of expressions of self found in narrative inquiry (p. 18).

This inclusion of narrative analysis and bringing in narrative content in addition to the reported experiential content that I gathered through a more traditional phenomenological design is one of the interesting areas for me to build on these dissertation findings.

First, though I didn't include them in my current analysis, I did collect the narratives that participants shared during the story slam and completing a narrative analysis of the featured content may generate findings which would further complement the experiential findings in this dissertation study.

However, beyond the immediate further analysis of ancillary data from the participants featured in this dissertation, combining narrative inquiry and analysis methods with phenomenological methods will prove to be helpful in further exploring one discovery I made during the interview process of data collection which is that stories generated more stories. Especially when I asked audience member participants to describe their experiences of listening to a live, true story, often they digressed into specific stories from their own lives, and much of this content was bracketed out of my analysis as it didn't pertain to my specific research question. Furthermore, when I asked storytellers to describe their experiences of telling a live, true story, many preferred to tell me "behind-the-scenes" stories instead which included what happened before and after the slam rather than their immediate storytelling experience.

Noticing this pattern generates an interesting follow-up research question: what stories do adolescents tell in response to hearing stories of others? It would be interesting to trace a generative narrative train showcasing the patterns of how story generates more story between participants and a combined phenomenological design may allow for an interesting explorative methodology in relation to this question.

Another important next step to take with these findings and this research is to more fully consider the sociocultural perspective of participants and the sociocultural value in sharing stories. Marshall (1994) noted that, "[Writing Process Movement] has

often failed to acknowledge that those classrooms are nested within schools, those schools within communities, and those communities within larger networks of cultural and political life” (p. 54), and a similar criticism could be levied against traditional phenomenological design. By bracketing out the sociocultural characteristics of my participants, I likely lost valuable perspective on the investigated phenomena.

This realization became especially apparent during the interview stage of my data collection when I noticed repeated inclusions of sociopolitical issues like incarcerated and fathers, immigration statuses, under-appreciated and overworked mothers, and even direct participant correlations to ethnicity (like one participant who said, “She’s Hispanic and I’m Hispanic which is why I connected”); these trends in participant responses indicated interesting sociocultural data and information reflected in the backgrounds of my participants and the make-up of their school and community cultures which my research design wasn’t set up to fully collect or consider. While I believe my descriptions of audience member-performer transactions are valuable and have important implications, it’s also clear that future work will be well-informed by sociocultural theories and an expanded research design.

One possibility for further theoretical consideration is Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP). Paris wrote that, “Culturally sustaining pedagogy seeks to perpetuate and foster--to sustain--linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling” (p. 93). Storytelling in the context of a story slam is one student-centered way for adolescents to share cultural pluralism and to demonstrate details from their personal lives which challenge and develop the ways that the construct of youth is seen and defined.

Furthermore, Wong & Peña (2017) noted that, “CSP depends upon teachers rejecting deficit-oriented perspectives and consciously considering the layers, intricacies, and meanings that underlie students’ ‘performances of resistance’ and relationships to literacy” (p. 121). Storytelling, like hip-hop, spoken-word poetry, and other visual and artistic means of creative expression, is already a genre that students are engaging with outside of the classroom, and teachers interested in enacting CSP are called to consider how to bring these forms into the classroom and curricular contexts.

My work in this dissertation confirms that students value sharing stories about themselves and in participating in considerations of the dynamics behind how those stories are shared and what they co-create with audience members. My hope is that my findings give perspective on how to hold space for creative expression once those spaces are created and that research from making and holding space can be considered among sociocultural perspectives to continue generation education and educational research allowing for the celebration of cultural plurality and multiplicities among youth and culture.

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APPENDIX A  
STORY SLAM PROPOSAL AND FOLLOW-UP EXPLANATION



## Appendix A: Original Story Slam Proposal to Southwest Academy and Follow-up Explanation

**Event Proposal:** Story Slam Open to All High School Students

**Event Theme:** “I Should Have Known Better”

**Proposed Dates/Times:** Saturday, 12/2/17 or Saturday, 12/9/17

Storytelling workshop: 3-5 PM

Pizza! 5-6 PM

Storyslam: 6-8 PM

**Description:** Following the guidelines of the [Lancaster Story Slam](#), student storytellers will be invited to submit their name to tell a true story of no more than 5 minutes in length based on the event theme of “I Should Have Known Better.” During the Slam portion of the event, names of up to 10 volunteer storytellers will be drawn from a hat, and three judges from the audience will score stories from 1-10 on both content and presentation. The top total score of the evening will receive a small prize, but competition will be minimized in favor of a fun, storytelling environment. The event will feature a professional guest MC from [a local nonprofit]. Prior to the slam, there will be a storytelling workshop where students can develop and practice their stories for the evening’s event. Pizza will be provided for participants after the workshop and prior to the slam.

**Purpose:** This story slam event will serve the dual purpose of providing an open mic for young storytellers and also an opportunity to research the interaction between storytellers and audience members during a live storytelling event. Storytellers will be asked for consent to video and audio record their performances for the purpose of transcription and analysis, and select storytellers and audience members will be interviewed about their experiences following the event.

### 1. How will this project benefit [SOUTHWEST ACADEMY HIGH SCHOOL] students and teachers?

The major benefit to [Southwest Academy] students from this story slam project will be the opportunity to participate (either as storyteller or audience member) in a professionally-produced, live story-telling event (at no cost to [Southwest Academy] other than facility usage) specifically designed to highlight youth voices. Thanks to storytelling brands like The Moth (which holds live storytelling events across the country which are recorded for a weekly NPR broadcast and associated podcast), story slam competitions and other events featuring live, true storytelling have grown in popularity across the country. For example, such storytelling initiatives here in the Phoenix metro valley include Bar Flies, the Arizona Storytellers Project, Yarnball, The Storyline, Spillers, Uptown PEN, and the WordPlay Café. These initiatives, almost exclusively, are designed for adult participants, but one unique feature of live storytelling is that it doesn’t require a specialized skill set to participate. Unlike performing live music (which requires mastery of an instrument or vocals along with musical literacy) or performing stand-up

comedy or spoken-word poetry (which require knowledge of specific genre conventions and mastery of timing), storytelling simply requires having an interesting, true story which matches the evening's theme, a desire to tell the story on stage, and a basic knowledge of plot (beginning, middle, end). Therefore, a story slam event would potentially open the door to students with an affinity for performing and a lack of access to more specialized performance genres like music, theatre, and spoken-word/stand-up comedy. Furthermore, a story slam featuring mainly youth stories (except for a few exhibition teacher stories) will also display that youth also have powerful and interesting true stories to share and can enjoy and benefit from the kinds of storytelling venues that are currently and primarily serving adults. The primary goal of this project and benefit to students is creating a fun and engaging venue for youth voices and their stories.

[Southwest Academy] teachers may also find this project beneficial in that it provides a context for students to craft an oral text for an authentic audience. As a middle school and high school teacher, I found the speaking and listening strands of English Language Arts to be the most difficult in which to engage students authentically as our attempts were usually limited to the local audience of our classroom. I often sought opportunities for my students to speak or perform publicly for an authentic audience, which included open mic events, the Poetry Out Loud competition, and a Shakespearean monologue competition along with more traditionally available extracurriculars like the Shakespeare troupe and the school musical. No doubt [Southwest Academy] offers many authentic opportunities for students to engage in performance and public speaking, and this story slam would provide an additional opportunity as well as one that may appeal to students who don't participate in the other venues and/or one that allows a student proficient in another genre to further their repertoire into the genre of live storytelling.

Furthermore, [Southwest Academy] teachers may elect to tie this event to their teaching of curricular topics including memoir, personal essay, autobiography, and narrative nonfiction in the form of podcasts, TED talks, etc. This story slam would also provide opportunities to consider public speaking techniques, perspective and point of view (and specifically the benefits and limitations of first-person point of view), and other important genres (like the college essay) which implement first-person storytelling.

Finally, while this event will center on student voices and youth storytelling, I also hope to invite several teacher storytellers for exhibition (possibly one to begin the event and one or two to start the second half of the slam, after a break in the middle). My rationale for including teacher-storytellers is to generate shared investment and a sense of community around the story slam event. At the high school where I taught in PA, I had a good model for this shared community in the form of a Coffeehouse event featuring student poets

and acoustic musicians. The program of this popular event was devoted at least 90% to student performers, but there was also a small part of the program dedicated to teacher-performers. When these teachers demonstrated both vulnerability and shared affinity in their performances, a strong sense of community was generated between them, the student performers, and the audience. My hope is that something similar can occur at this story slam event and that it will foster a positive atmosphere for community building among participants (both students and teachers) and audience.

## **2. Is this Jason Griffith's dissertation project or one of his qualifying projects?**

This story slam event and the coordinated study will serve as my dissertation project. I have previously written about and conducted research on students' written storytelling in the form of personal essays through my book *From Me to We: Using Narrative Nonfiction to Broaden Student Perspectives* (Routledge, 2016) along with a follow-up study on the conditions which allowed two particularly successful students to write high-quality personal essays about vulnerable topics. Part of this study has been accepted for publication with minor revisions to the peer-reviewed journal *The Clearinghouse*.

My previous work has offered evidence as to the value of writing personally for young people, but the purpose of this study is to both consider personal storytelling in an oral context and also to consider the reaction of the audience to personal stories. As I will explain further in the "purpose" section, examining the transactions between storytellers and audience members helps to move beyond personal benefit and to consider the benefits of narrative nonfiction for audience members/listeners.

## **3. How many teachers and students will be involved?**

For the research portion of this event, I hope to recruit 20 participants. These participants will include 10 student storytellers who choose to participate in the slam and are asked for consent to video/audio record their performances along with invitations to participate in follow-up interviews about their interactions with and perceptions of audience reactions to their stories. The other 10 participants will come from pre-selected student audience members who are given a protocol to note reactions to stories and who are also invited to participate in follow-up interviews about their perceptions of and reactions to the stories told during the slam.

While not directly tied to the research portion of the event, I hope to invite 2-3 additional teacher storytellers to participate in the slam (as exhibition storytellers) to build interest, investment, and community around the event.

With the permission of [Southwest Academy], I hope to advertise the story slam portion of this event to any [Southwest Academy] students, teachers, and their families who would like to attend and watch/listen. The audience for the slam event will only be limited by the size of the space we hold it in. The storytelling workshop preceding the slam will be open to as many as 25 students who are interested in possibly developing a story for the slam; however, participation in the workshop does not compel participation in the slam (students may elect to participate in the workshop and not the slam). If there are more than 10 students interested in telling a story during the slam, 10 names will be drawn in random order (as per the rules of the Lancaster Story Slam).

To answer concisely:

- 20 student participants for the research study: 10 storytellers/10 pre-selected audience members.
- 2-3 invited exhibition teacher storytellers (not tied to the research component)
- (up to) 25 students may participate in the pre-slam storytelling workshop (potential slam participants will be recruited from this group, but participating in the workshop does not compel slam participation).
- An audience of as many [Southwest Academy] community members (students/teachers/faculty/staff/families) as would like to attend the slam portion (not tied to research component)

#### **4. What is the purpose of the research component?**

As touched on in my answer to #2, this study would build upon my previous inquiry into the value of narrative nonfiction for secondary students. To build upon evidence that personal storytelling has value for the teller, I am interested in extending my research to consider the value of personal stories for the audience. By examining the interactions and transactions between storytellers and audience members, I hope to use participant data to consider what conditions in a youth storytelling space empower or disempower the telling of a live, true story. This qualitative study will use a phenomenological design to explore when/how a live, true story really connects with an audience. Data sources will include video/audio recordings of the storytellers (to consider audible/visual cues from the audience in reaction to certain moments in the stories) and follow-up interviews with storytellers about their perceptions of audience reaction/interaction as well as follow-up interviews with pre-selected audience members about their reactions to/perceptions of the stories delivered. The potential significance of this study is that by better understanding the role of the audience in this live storytelling context,

findings might be useful in/transferable to other situated contexts (live writing groups, other live performance genres) or even in classroom interactions and group dynamics inside a traditional classroom setting.

APPENDIX B  
STORY SLAM FLYER

# STORY SLAM

"I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN BETTER"



## YOU'RE INVITED!

Develop and tell a true, 5 minute story on the event theme: "I should have known better."

- Workshop (open to all [REDACTED] Students):  
Saturday, 12/9: 12-2 PM (free pizza!)
- Performance (Storytellers, Family, and Friends):  
Friday, 12/15: 5-7 PM (featuring [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] as MC)

APPENDIX C  
AUDIENCE MEMBER SURVEY



## Appendix C: Audience Member Survey

**Name of Listener:**

**Note: Please keep your responses to these questions private since even a story that doesn't connect had value to the storyteller. Please return these sheets to [...] after the event.**

1. What's one story that really connected with you as a listener?  
(Please identify by storyteller name and/or subject of story)

Why did it connect?

(List any keywords or phrases which will help you remember why this story connected in a few weeks)

2. What's one story that DIDN'T really connect with you as a listener?  
(Please identify by storyteller name and/or subject of story)

Why didn't it connect?

(List any keywords or phrases which will help you remember why this story didn't connect in a few weeks)

APPENDIX D  
FINAL LIST OF ORDERED THEMES AND EXCERPTS FROM THEME AND  
CLUSTER CHART

**Appendix D:** Final list of ordered themes and excerpts from theme and cluster chart

**Outline of Organized and Ordered Themes**

**Before Performing the Story:**

1. Having a Purpose for Telling Stories
2. Getting to Choose/Personal Nature of Selected Topics
3. Planning/Preparation
4. Identifying Reasons for Nervousness

**During the Story Slam Performances:**

5. Comparing performance to others
6. The event atmosphere
  - a. Having music/DJ
  - b. Having an MC
7. Wanting to Slow Down the Start
8. Experiencing the Audience
  - a. Hearing the Audience
  - b. Seeing the Audience
  - c. Feeling the Audience
9. Contradiction between being exhilarated and feeling vulnerable
10. Getting used to the Experience/Gaining Confidence
11. Connecting with the Audience
12. Making Intentional Stylistic Choices
  - a. Incorporating emotion
  - b. Feeling like you were there/vicarious emotions
  - c. Having specific details
  - d. Having specific points of connection
  - e. Feeling protective of the speaker/providing support

**After the Story Slam:**

13. Immediate Reactions
  - a. Feeling relieved afterwards
  - b. Audience responding after the event
  - c. Admiring the storyteller
14. Enduring Reactions
  - a. Having a Platform
  - b. Comparing storytelling to other types of performance
  - c. Planning for Next Time

Theme	Transcript Excerpts
Having a Purpose for Telling Stories	<p>My poem was mainly directed towards my family, because I have ... they don't know this, cause we don't really talk about it ... I have problems with them. I don't really like to be around them as often as I used to. I guess that poem was just a way for me to tell them, but they didn't really get it. I felt like I was talking to my parents.</p> <p>I wanted to share how I felt about it and why I thought it was real, and maybe we could prevent it I guess. I just try not to normalize trying to force people to be your friend, or to like you. Because this kid, he liked me for years, and I was "no thank you" but he would still try to date me. If I said no, I didn't want to, he would just spread rumors about me. It was not cool, and a lot of guys do that sometimes, where they try to roast people if they don't accept them, and I just want people not to think that way because it's okay that people don't like you. You don't have to try to force them to kiss you or be your friend. I think it's super creepy that the media is "that's so romantic." I wanted to say that people in general shouldn't do this because on social media you see all these girls, and they're like, "My boyfriend can't talk to other people or see other people." It's super not okay. And then sometimes I see girls and boys do it here when they're in relationships or friendships, and they get jealous over super weird stuff. They just try to force people to like them. Or they try to hurt them if they don't, and I it bothers me a lot. Because I see it and it seems so normal but it shouldn't be normal.</p>
Getting to Choose/Personal Nature of Selected Topics	<p>I really enjoyed doing this. I really like to write, but usually nobody ... I usually keep it to myself. But this was like, this was like a nice thing to do, and it was like sort of new to me, because it was like my own story that I was telling instead of an assigned project and I was like, nervous but that's normal.</p>
Planning/Preparation	<p>In the beginning, it's kind of awkward because I was winging it. It's a mess in the beginning. I did it right on the spot. I thought of a basic outline before I started, and then I just went with that. It was really random and all over the place.</p> <p>Okay, ima be honest with you. Sure, be honest. I had close to nothing before this. We had a pep rally that day at school, and I was writing some of my story at the pep rally. Even then, I got distracted and when I went home, I had 30 minutes to write it and I was already late to the thing. So, I was just ... That's why my story was so jumbled and so messed up.</p>
Identifying Reasons for Nervousness	<p>And I was thinking, "Is this gonna be long enough?" Because I was like, finishing it up. And that's why I sort of became more quiet afterwards.</p>

	<p>[During setup] I was like go slower. I was really nervous, I'm used to being in large crowds, I guess it doesn't really affect me, but it's because my parents were there. My poem was mainly directed towards my family, because I have ... they don't know this, cause we don't really talk about it ... I have problems with them. I don't really like to be around them as often as I used to.</p> <p>I felt nervous. I wouldn't have felt as nervous if I had better prepared myself</p> <p>I'm scared 'cause I don't public speak, ever, in front of a big audience. I was just really scared because there were people there. I tried to ignore them and pretend that they weren't there.</p>
<p>Comparing Story to Others</p>	<p>I was nervous but then I was telling myself, "Well, it's normal to be nervous." I was thinking, "Oh, man, my story's not good enough. It's not as good as everybody else's," And then I started. I was the last one.</p> <p>I'm not normally proud of the things I do, because I know people can always do better than me. Then I'm like, I don't wanna get a big head over things that a professional could do in seven minutes.</p>
<p>The event atmosphere</p>	<p>I felt good, especially the music too. [The DJ's] actually pretty good. I think with [another student's] story, He played a Tupac song about a mom. I don't remember, but it was so good because it perfectly matched the moment. I liked how he was reading the mood and he wasn't just pulling whatever he felt like. He was reading the atmosphere. He did a pretty good job. I think that maybe some people might have been able to connect with certain parts of it.</p> <p>[The MC] was motivating too. He was, like, mainly just telling me, like, you have to get your story out there because no one else is gonna tell it but you. And it just made me, like, okay, I'm gonna tell my story now cause it's a good thing to do.</p>
<p>Wanting to Slow Down the Start</p>	<p>[During setup] I was like go slower. I was really nervous, I'm used to being in large crowds, I guess it doesn't really affect me, but it's because my parents were there.</p> <p>I was kind of stalling a little. I didn't really stall as in ... I guess I said ["I might cry"] to get it out there before other people thought of it or said it. That's why I kind of gave that little warning.</p>

<p>Experiencing the Audience</p>	<p>I was surprised that the audience took it in well. I heard the snaps and the, "Mm." (laughs) I did hear a couple, "Mm-hmms" at the immigration part or at the cancer free, the celebratory or something ... Maybe that connected with them.</p> <p>I invited my family. My parents and my brother. I had some of my friends who were the performers. I even saw one of them crying, I think. I was so ... Confused. I felt bad that they were crying, I was like, "Oh no." I cried a little. Just because I was just saying something that I had never really talked about to other people. That's why I was kind of crying and it was because it was a story that was kind of hard to talk about because it brought up some other memories that I didn't include in the story that were related. With my mom, I mentioned her in the story with her cancer that she had. It was nice having her there. I skipped a part about my dad, which I felt really bad about because he was included in too, but I skipped it out of nervousness. I mentioned my family and it was nice to have them there because they were kind of like ... I looked for them in the crowd and they were kind of like the person I was staring at. Not a whole lot because I know when I mentioned my mom and her illness, if I had looked at her during that, I actually would have broken down, you know? Yeah, I just looked in that direction. I was like yeah, okay, those seats. (laughs) I saw [people I didn't know]. It was kind of hard to see because of the lights, but I did notice them. Some of them were nodding their heads, I guess. I don't know. I kind of tried avoiding their stares. Just out of the corner of my eye.</p> <p>Because, like, I had my friends in the crowd. I had my mom. I had my grandma who I love the most out of everybody. Don't tell my mom that. She'll get mad. But, like, knowing that she was there, I was, like, okay, I can do this. She'll be happy of me. I could see her. I knew she was there. Like, like her ... I want to say, like, the air around her just, like, is calming. So I could feel her there. Like, I just knew she was there</p>
<p>Contradiction between being exhilarated and feeling vulnerable</p>	<p>I felt vulnerable because I was just telling my story, or my point of view, to people that I'm not very close with or just a lot of people at one time. That kind of made me a little like, okay, I don't know what these people are gonna think. It was very exciting, I liked it. It's a weird contradiction, I guess.</p> <p>[Being on stage] was kind of exciting because I could just tell a story and people wouldn't be able to tell me that they didn't believe me at that moment. So that was a bit exciting, and I was so nervous. Nerve-wracking.</p>

<p>Getting used to the Experience/Gaining Confidence</p>	<p>At that point I wasn't nervous. Because in the beginning, you're usually nervous, but as you go on, it's usually like you're getting used to it so you feel less nervous. There was this one point, I don't remember, but I just stopped being as nervous and just went with it.</p> <p>I was starting to get into it. There was still some nervousness, but I was starting to feel better about it. The deeper, or the more I read out, I guess the better I felt. Or the confidence I felt just performing, the more comfortable I got. I guess I felt happy that other people were happy. Sorry, I can't describe it. At that point, I guess I was getting happier because I was reaching the end. Even though to me, it seemed so cliché and typical, I was happy because I was reaching the end. That I was finishing and that I got through it without messing up too badly. I felt good that I was getting to the end and people were actually responding.</p>
<p>Connecting with the Audience</p>	<p>[I connected to the speaker] because she's Hispanic and I'm also Hispanic. That's what made me connect with that poem. Sort of like your roots I guess. Personal. Okay, I can relate to this part because I have four other siblings and it's a small house. That's also how I can relate. Yeah. My mom, she's a single mom. She had to raise us by herself. I guess she can relate. They lived in one room. That could also relate. I've never had my own room. Which, hopefully I will in the future. But, it's a pretty big deal. I can relate to this. My mom also had to work two jobs at a time. She has to work very hard to provide for us. I can relate to that a lot. Having your parents to work hard. Being tired constantly. Okay, I can relate to that part. Since I'm Hispanic, part of my family is in Mexico at the moment. My mom, she's a resident. I forgot what it means. It's paper and she can get deported at any time.</p> <p>The performer mentioned anger, and I believe she also mentioned getting into a fight. I don't think I've ever really gotten into a physical fight. I certainly have gotten into many verbal fights, but I couldn't really connect with much as I thought I would, but I did understand some.</p> <p>I can relate to that with his name. I don't know. I'd prefer to be called by my first name than my middle name because I used to called my middle name, and my middle name I feel is just ... I don't know. My entire name just feels like it's not right, so with my last name, I have two last names. With my first last name, that's my dad's last name, and that's something I wouldn't want to keep. I also have a history with a certain part of Mexico when</p>

	<p>we go to, whenever they hear that last name, it's not a good ... It doesn't have a good reputation, so that's something I don't really want associated with me, so that's what I relate to and what I connect with because I also have a thing with my name too.</p>
<p>Making Intentional Stylistic Choices</p>	<p>I stuttered. That's what I do when I'm scared. I stutter a lot because I'm either nervous or I don't know what to say, and it really affects how I say something. Sometimes I either try to do it to lighten the mood or just to appear as someone who can't put up a fight. (stuttering, connects to nervousness)</p> <p>When we were rehearsing it, I was actually getting louder and louder. That's what I was trying to do, I was trying to give that effect, but immediately when I got up there I was like, "I'm not gonna be able to do that because of the mic." It was just too loud already, so I figured ... Actually, I forgot. I forgot that I was gonna say it loudly because I was so intimidated by the microphone, so I just said it normally I guess. (Changing volume)</p> <p>I tried to also speak faster because like I said I have anxiety, and during this it was getting higher because, oh my gosh, I'm freaking out. To explain it, anxiety, it makes everything feel a lot faster and harder to comprehend at one point. It just makes everything feel super fast, and I was trying to speak a little faster, partly because I was super nervous and partly because that's how anxiety feels, that everything's super fast. It was partly [intentional so the audience would feel it too] [But] I was also super nervous. [I don't like that scene] because it really was exactly how it felt, and that feeling, there wasn't really any better word I could use because it really was like that (mirroring style and emotion) (Changing pacing, creating sense of anxiety, Connects to nervousness)</p>
<p>Immediate Reactions</p>	<p>I felt a little relieved and like more like, I don't know the word. It's like, I don't know the word at the moment. It's like relieved and then like you have a little bit of mixed fear up in it and then you have more relief afterwards.</p> <p>When I sat down people were saying stuff. But I mean ... that was mainly after, because someone else right after me, it was after the fact because then they would come up and talk to me about it. Honestly, people who I was surprised came up and talked to me about this. Like someone's mom came up to me and said, oh, it's all right, you'll get through this, you know, talking about the suicide part. And I'm like, I don't know how to respond to that. It didn't really feel real, honestly. Like, that's what an adult's supposed to say. That's what they're supposed</p>



	<p>to say, you know? Didn't really expect my words to create much emotion. I didn't really expect ... I wrote this because it was emotional to me, I didn't intend for it to be emotional to other people.</p> <p>I liked how he was able to tell his story so naturally, so confidently. Maybe because if I had told a story like mine without my notes or something, I just would've completely just shut down. I admired how he was able to get that out and share his story.</p>
Enduring Reactions	<p>When I was on the stage I was on my land, I was on a place where I can definitely have power. I felt like they were on my world when I was on that stage, I wasn't on theirs, I actually had a say. They couldn't just go up on stage and pull my ear and say, "That is not correct." It's like being ruler of your own world that you made up. It was like that. It felt amazing. I could say what I wanted without being punished for it and without anyone retaliating.</p> <p>[I had been on stage before] but just to receive an award. It wasn't to say anything. Telling a story is super personal and made me feel more connected to the audience, whereas if I was just telling, "Oh, tomorrow we're gonna go do this at this place and you can come," If it's just a Public Service Announcement where I was reading from something that wasn't my work, I would be a lot more comfortable because I could just read it and get it over with and it wouldn't be attached to me in any way. [Telling a story] felt harder, yeah. It was more valuable because it was from something that's an experience in their life, or for example, if you're just a Public Service Announcement like, "Tomorrow we're going to go to this place," that's just an announcement for you to go somewhere to do something. It's not really a story that's personal or anything. Somebody else told a poem and kind of a song in a rap, and I think that it was very similar. Because it's still personal and it can still be a story, so I think it can be just as scary.</p> <p>I hoped that there was another story slam so that I can continue off that last part into another one, so that each poem is like a story. I'm always hoping that there's gonna be another story slam so that I can actually finish what I had to say. I also have another plan for if there is going to be one, I wanna do another poem and end it with a statement cause my parents are definitely going to record this, I definitely want to state it in the obvious so they can understand how I feel.</p>