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Where Can the PhD Take You? Lessons from Diverse Career Paths

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LESSONS FROM DIVERSE CAREER PATHS



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This chapter is about uncertainty: the kind of uncertainty that is inherent in the teaching profession; the kind of uncertainty that is, at once, liberating and exciting and confusing and educative. This chapter is also about becoming, the kind of becoming that results from bringing existing realities into the simmering cauldron of new ideas, quests for significance, and desires for action. We base our chapter on three stories of the coauthors' unfinished journeys as educators, although not all of us label ourselves as English educators. We are all White, female, middle-class professors who are teaching in university-based Colleges of Education. Sharon and Wendy worked with and for Renée while in graduate school. We vary in full-time secondary school teaching experience and in university teaching experience. We are united by a belief that teachers are important, that preparing successful teachers and preparing successful students depends, in part, on educators' commitments to social justice, and that higher education should be accessible to all. We also believe that policies and people who have views that are different from ours as well as people who share our beliefs all continuously shape the contexts of teaching.

Some would argue that teaching is best understood as deeply embedded in the identity of the teacher as a whole person (Goodson). Reducing the teacher to a specific element of practice, as opposed to looking at the individual as a whole can be demeaning and will ultimately provide an inaccurate picture. We agree with this but we also feel that teaching is a political process occurring in an environment that is anything but neutral.

It is also a pragmatic process. Teachers and administrators continuously struggle to balance scarce resources, competing demands, compelling needs, personal commitments, and time constraints. As English educators, accidental or intended, we work for our students, their students, our selves, and our institutions. As the following stories show, we are continuously learning what our work is, what it means, and how to accomplish it. Understanding who we are as English educators, teacher educators, and educational researchers only makes sense in the context of the stories we tell—

stories of events that moved us to various points in our careers, stories of others who influenced us, stories of how we wrestled to find significance and meaning in theory and practice. We are borrowing from narrative inquiry in this chapter because this process is able to encompass a greater complexity of teaching by contextualizing practice in the multiple nuances of our more holistic identities (Carter).

Over the last two decades, research designed to increase understanding of the practice of educators has benefited from an increasing use of narrative and its larger focus on the educators' life stories (Carter; Clandinin and Connelly). Pulkinghorne described narrative inquiry methodology as the extraction of data from a storied account that "combines a succession of incidents into a unified episode...an account that preserves the complexity of human action with its interrelationship of temporal sequence, human motivation, chance happenings, and changing interpersonal and environmental contexts" (6). In the three narratives that follow we each discuss our evolving identities as we moved from undergraduate to graduate studies and our ongoing work in higher education. We explain how our career trajectories are guided by rational and less-than-rational choices, opportunities that made some choices more palatable than others, and demands placed on us by our work settings. We each experience this iterative process in unique ways, but we are all aware of the ways in which others define us are not always in synch with how we would choose to be defined. Furthermore, we are all continuing to acquire the knowledge, the skills, and the temperaments that match our identities—as we perceive them. Our work promotes certain identities, and, at the same time, we seek to modify or transform our work settings so that our contributions and talents are allowed more full and complete expression. We begin with Renée, who has been in higher education the longest, followed by Wendy, who received her degree in 2000, then Sharon, who graduated in 2002.

RENÉE, THE GENERALIST (?) TEACHER EDUCATOR.

I grew up in a southern university town, raised by middle- to lower-middle-class parents whose thoughts differed on the necessity of a college degree for girls. They did agree, however, that I should be encouraged to pursue paths that were important to me, and they attended all of my choir concerts and high school plays, whether I had a solo or one or two lines or served as student director. They, along with my grandmother, taught me that arguing a point is a good way of clarifying one's own thinking—a value that I now try to pass on to my children and both my undergraduate and graduate students.

I became a teacher by virtue of good test-taking skills and no money for college. The State of Florida guaranteed me four years of tuition and books if I would

become a teacher and would teach in public schools for four years. My high school forensics experience and my fascination with the magic that theater creates were my base for majoring in teaching—my English classes were not. Oh, I did well enough in English, but I didn't really like it. Literature was okay, but analysis... why? True/false recall tests? Give me a break. Writing research papers...for whom? What does it matter? But, having English certification would help me get a job and the University of Florida would let me concentrate on speech and theater, with only a few required courses in language, composition, and literature. So, I became an enthusiastic stagehand and an ambivalent English student.

One aspect of my education had a major impact on my view of what teaching was and should be. I attended segregated schools until junior high, when the schools slowly began to integrate African American students into formerly all White institutions. I became confused when people I respected did not want racial integration and talked about genetic inferiority. I became even more confused when both my university English curriculum and my education courses did not help me understand literature from across races, not to mention literature from authors or countries in which English was not the first language. So, I became an underprepared first year teacher in a racially and socioeconomically diverse high school. I was not underprepared in terms of lesson planning or classroom management, but in terms of knowing how to relate to people who did not share my home culture and in terms of knowing how to choose curricular materials that would be varied, interesting, and relevant for my students. I was very fortunate, however, to be teaching in an era in which thematic instruction was the norm and teacher choice regarding curriculum was paramount. I read a lot; I learned a lot. I became an okay teacher of literature; I knew nothing about teaching writing, but I developed a flair for encouraging a wide range of students to participate in successful drama productions and to write and perform their own scripts.

During this time, I also picked up a master's degree in school administration. At the time, it was the only graduate level option in education at the university closest to me. I learned in this administrative course of study that I never, ever wanted to be a high school principal. I also learned that I liked reading organizational theory and educational philosophy and I liked arguing ideas. So, taking a giant risk, I asked for a leave of absence from my high school teaching job and drove across the country to California and a Stanford University doctoral program in curriculum and teacher education, with a minor in psychology. There, I earned an assistantship supervising student teachers in English and assisting with their methodology courses. I became resigned to the fact that those research papers I hated so much in high school were going to become my way of life, from then until now. BUT I was very happy to learn that research meant more than hours in the library. Research meant posing questions that mattered to me and to others,

collecting and analyzing data, and arguing about the insights into those questions that were prompted by the data. Race mattered; teachers and their effectiveness mattered; teaching writing as a key to literacy development mattered. And around all these questions, disagreement among smart and concerned people made me realize that searching for answers was a never-ending quest.

I immersed myself in learning. In my psychology courses, I studied cognitive and social development. In my education courses, I studied curriculum design and evaluation and the relationships among instruction, learning, and individual differences. My assistantship evolved into a research assistantship on a project that would eventually produce and explicate the concept of “pedagogical content knowledge” (Shulman). I studied with wonderful people who taught me how to do research and how to be a mentor to graduate students. I also worked with a cadre of graduate students who taught me how to argue politely and who helped me begin to think more and more deeply about issues of social justice. For my thesis, I studied the ways secondary student teachers could design and implement dramatic activities across the curriculum. As the completion of my degree grew near, I realized that I would not go back to a high school classroom as a full-time teacher.

A doctorate incorporating developmental and social psychology with curriculum design and instruction; a master’s in administration; experience supervising prospective English teachers; and experience teaching high school speech, drama, and English. With these varied credentials I sought and obtained a job at the University of Houston that was best described as generic teacher education. The actual job required me to draw on my background in administration, curriculum development, social justice, evaluation, and teaching and learning, but not psychology and not anything related to English education. The research agenda I first began, however, kept me in touch with the process of learning to teach English in addition to thinking through issues of teacher leadership.

When I moved to the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign, I thought I was developing a graduate program in teacher education and continuing professional development. Some days, as I work with a state-wide project to provide support to new teachers, I still think that. But I have become an English teacher educator. When the university implemented an experimental, school-based, secondary teacher education program they needed an instructor. They needed me to teach because of my commitment to linking school-based and university-based teacher education. And so I called my former graduate school colleagues for their course syllabi and began teaching English methods. Today, as I write this, they still need me to teach the methods courses. And I now identify myself as an English educator. I am refreshed and renewed by the enthusiasm of our talented undergraduates and by the commitment and thoughtfulness of our graduate students. I still depend heavily on my English education colleagues here to teach me. They make me read

biographies and literature I would not read on my own; they share resources and syllabi. And I share resources with them. Indeed, my current research project, a longitudinal study of graduates from our program is becoming a resource for continuously improving our curriculum (Clift, Mora, and Brady).

While my graduate studies did not prepare me in terms of content for my work in English education, they did prepare me to be resourceful and they connected me with people who can and do help me learn and act. Some days I wonder if, and when, I will be labeled a fraud. On other days, I know I belong in several worlds and that they synthesize to help me become a better and better teacher of doctoral students, some of whom will become English educators.

WENDY'S QUEST FOR SOMETHING MORE

As a White, upper-middle-class female who attended an elementary and middle school within walking distance of my safe neighborhood, I took many things for granted about school and learning, and about all that I was provided to help me succeed in school. I didn't have to think much about learning specific skills such as reading, writing, or listening that were necessary for my having a successful start in school. I looked and sounded like other students who were successful in this school culture. I never worried about the stability of my home life or my family's economic future.

An event in my sophomore year of high school began to change my "taken-for-granted" approach to school. I read three works by John Steinbeck and wrote a report on common themes, issues, and questions that emerged across the texts. This assignment pushed me to think more about analyzing an author's work while creating new connections between my own understandings and the commonalities among the three pieces. I realize now that this was, in some ways, my first experience in behaving like a scholar. I saw that I loved to explore my own questions and ideas independently, and throughout my years of schooling, the English/language arts classroom was one of the few that ever facilitated this kind of learning. I learned how to find my own voice and to begin the process of valuing it as a critical dimension of my own educational becoming. Yet coupled with these positive experiences was a nagging feeling that, up to this point, I didn't have to strive too hard to meet others' demands of me. I often privately wondered if I was able to "get by" because I was relatively likeable and worked to be pleasing to the teacher. Such fears followed me throughout my experiences in school and continue to be difficult to share.

I enrolled as a chemistry major at the University of Illinois in order to pursue a medical degree and become a psychiatrist. To my dismay, many required courses served to "weed out" those who were mediocre or unsuccessful. I found that I was no longer one of those students who easily got the As and Bs in math and science

classes, but I did continue to excel in my English, literature, and writing classes. Thus I eventually pursued an undergraduate degree in the teaching of English at the secondary level with a minor in women's studies. Even though I failed to complete my initial degree plan, I still felt enough a part of the system that I didn't see myself as a failing student nor as a student who could not finish college.

As I learned to become a teacher, it became clear to me that the power of the individual teacher is measured by her ability to negotiate a balance between what is critical for her students to learn and know and what is viable within the system. I often felt as a teacher, and now as a teacher educator, that I periodically must prioritize my goals for my students, the class, and myself in the immediate sense of time and the given context or I run the risk of feeling an overwhelming sense of despair, hurriedness, and leaving too many aspects of my work unfinished. That I feel I am not doing all that I can to enact my beliefs about how to instill passion for learning and teaching is a quality that I am working to embrace as the motivation to continue to be educator in today's political climate. The professors and graduate students who most profoundly motivated me taught me how to use language and ideas to further understand others' experiences as well as my own and to think of my role as an agent of change. It was through connecting to others in my classes, their ideas, and the literature that my vision of community became clearer, multilayered, and multicultural.

Like many beginning teachers, I was hired late in August, just a few days before the school year began. As I took a hard look at what I was supposed to teach to three "average-tracked" sophomore English classes, one junior-senior "remedial" English class, and an elective speech class, it became profoundly clear to me that I was a long way from knowing how to choose appropriate materials for the assigned age groups, let alone having the ability to structure my teaching in terms of teaching strategies, essential questions, and, most importantly, student learning. At the time, however, I didn't think much about how I would know what students were learning. I simply knew that the only way I could hope to become the English teacher I had envisioned as my ideal was to get to know others in my department, strengthen links with my professional organization, and search for and read as much as I could about the teaching of English.

Beginning in my second year of teaching, I was asked by several members of my department to become a member of the School Improvement Team. At the same time, I decided I needed more "intellectual stimulation" to further support and enhance my teaching. I took advantage of the State of Illinois' offer of scholarships for women and people of color interested in becoming administrators and entered the University of Illinois' master's program. These two experiences greatly broadened my understanding of school politics, policies, and organizational leadership. The master's program offered some degree of flexibility and a terrific

opportunity to focus on school reform and the role of teacher leadership. I wanted to become part of a community to think more about how to instill a sense of passion, intellectual curiosity, and joy within the teaching community and serving on the School Improvement Team seemed to offer that community. But, as a teacher in this school community, I felt isolated and at times a little bored by the routines, and I could not seem to make an impact on changing policy or practice in the ways that I knew would be necessary to enact the theories to which I was now deeply committed.

I realized that I needed to create a new direction for my career and personal life. So, even though the thought of becoming “a researcher” was very foreign to me as a person who never identified with the profile of “scholar,” I decided to take a tremendous leap of faith and pursue a doctorate in curriculum and instruction at the University of Illinois. I quickly came to understand that I was entering a culture that was different from my master’s program. In the doctoral program, the curriculum and instruction was much more co-constructed by the professors and the students. Individual interests were proudly worn on each person’s sleeve and these interests gave voice to one’s identity in the academy.

Because of my interest in administration, leadership, and school reform, I studied the relationships among teacher leadership and school improvement. During my doctoral program, I also held several graduate assistantships that added to my journey as a teacher educator. I taught several generalist undergraduate education courses, supervised student teachers, helped to manage external reviews for a journal, and assisted with the state review of our certification programs. These experiences helped me connect my own experiences as a teacher with my affinity for asking questions and investigating the interaction of multiple variables. They also allowed me to continue discovering what motivates people, including myself, to engage in meaningful learning and teaching.

When I completed my degree, I began working at Eastern Michigan University. I became very involved in working within our teacher education program with other faculty members as we focused on better addressing K–12 learning in our teacher preparation program. Each semester, I work to create a learning community that inspires and stimulates teacher candidates to find their voice and understand their own development as teachers of all students as intricately linked to their own becomings as human beings. I also have worked closely with in-service teachers to further link their own pedagogical decision making with student learning and achievement. As an outgrowth of this work and because of the evidence of the impact diversity has on student achievement, I have pursued addressing my own cultural competency. Now as a teacher educator, my work with beginning and practicing teachers reflects this strong commitment to diversity, student learning, and school reform.

SHARON AND HER THREE CAREERS

My position as a teacher educator at Marquette University, helping prepare future English teachers, is my third career. In the early stages of my career development, I would never have anticipated finding myself here. My early educational experiences were fairly uneventful. Growing up in a small midwestern community, with White, middle-class, college-educated parents, I always enjoyed school and did well. I consistently leaned towards English and social science classes and becoming an English teacher seemed like a very reasonable path. Studying English literature in college, however, never felt satisfying or particularly relevant to real life issues. While I could do the work and at times enjoyed it, this academic pursuit seemed more like a game and clearly did not engage me. I found myself regularly asking, "So what?" Exploring the "So what?" factor began to drive me.

Classes with a linguistic emphasis engaged me more; I was drawn to the study of language itself, with all its intricacies, its dependable patterns, its living variability and evolution, and even more, its powerful role in both forming and negotiating the social relations of life. While I frequently left my English literature classes feeling frustrated, I left these language classes with a sense that they promised significant answers to my "So what?" question. I experienced a similar positive response to my education courses as I learned more of the art and science of teaching. I loved grappling with concepts to discover the best arrangement and the most compelling presentation to engage students in gaining understanding, constructing personal meaning, and developing reading and writing skills. I loved teaching and, even more, I loved that it offered a significantly meaningful career. My "So what?" question seemed to be satisfied.

And so, my first career was teaching middle school language arts in public schools in a small, racially homogenous midwestern town. For the next eleven years, I taught seventh and eighth graders and thoroughly enjoyed the experience. One conversation with my middle school principal during that time stands out now. We were discussing how much I enjoyed teaching and he commented that I would be good as a teacher educator. It was just a shame, he said, that being allowed to do that work required "jumping through so many educational hoops." I remember agreeing, thinking that I would enjoy the work of teacher education but the thought of pursuing a PhD was a remote, unlikely impossibility. Whatever he meant by the comment, I was convinced that I could never do the work required to earn that degree.

My second career began when my second child was born and I chose to stay home to raise my son and daughter. That eight-year hiatus from full-time teaching did not stop all my teaching involvement, however, as I did substitute work in my children's school and held a variety of volunteer and part-time positions, where over time, I experienced teaching all ages from preschool to adult. In that process,

I discovered that neither the content nor the age of student was as significant as the teaching/learning process itself. While I loved teaching language arts to young adults, I realized that my greatest pleasure came simply from teaching—whatever the content, whatever the age of the student.

In the context of staying at home with my children the “So what?” question emerged again with Marcus, an African American boy in my son’s kindergarten class. Marcus, and soon his younger sister, Mikela, frequently came to our house to play, making a positive connection with me that continued when I was the substitute teacher in their classrooms. I enjoyed getting to know the children and their mother and, as a teacher, I appreciated their eagerness to learn and her determination to support their educational experience. Yet, over the next few years, I was frustrated and confused as I watched both Marcus and Mikela fall further and further behind academically. Marcus, in particular, struggled, and I was nagged by the question of what caused this struggle. Eventually, I wondered if Marcus and Mikela’s home language, African American Vernacular English and not the Standard English expected in classrooms, was interfering with their academic success. Puzzling over the experiences of these two children brought me back to graduate school and the pursuit of my PhD. I wanted to gain the knowledge needed to help end the achievement gap I had watched develop over the years, and so I focused on the specific language issues of African American students and the impact of those issues on literacy learning. This area of study held enormous “So what?” implications and I was eager to explore the topic and, in doing so, began preparing for my third career as a teacher educator.

Yet, stepping back into college life was not an easy task. I still felt the pull of traditional gender expectations that looked askance at pursuing such full-time work while my children were still at home. The voice of my principal, implying that perhaps I was not cut out for the academic requirements of a PhD, still echoed in my head. And finally, I hadn’t done any serious academic work for over twenty years. I clearly remember the first course, looking at the readings and assignments and thinking, “I can’t possibly do this.” Fortunately, my instructor encouraged me to stay and later provided excellent mentoring and support. My classmates and I formed a study cohort that evolved into a wonderful social cohort with me as the adopted “mother-in-residence” to my younger peers. I slowly discovered that the world of academia, while requiring a lot of work, suited me well, and my family actually grew stronger as my own strength developed.

As my study and research progressed, my understanding of the issue of racial academic disparity was also transformed. I realized that my own and other White teachers’ unexamined racism, as well as school institutions of curriculum, pedagogy, and policy that are built on White norms, required as much, if not more, attention than any concerns related to the language spoken by students of

color. My dissertation eventually focused on well-intended White English teachers' unexamined racism that produces lowered expectation and uncritically supports institutional policies that marginalize and disadvantage students of color. The "So what?" question was enormously pertinent and preparing for my third career was supplying some meaningful answers.

The School of Education at Marquette University with its emphasis on social justice, particularly in urban contexts, seemed to be a good match for me. The job included one English education class each year with the rest of the teaching load divided between more generalist undergraduate policy and introductory courses and graduate-level teacher research courses. In all the courses, the embedded emphasis on social justice is prominent. I am fortunate to work in the company and encouragement of colleagues who love teaching and share my passion for the "So what?" answer that teaching for social justice affords. And once each year, I teach my English education class, the class that brings together all my interests and talents, the class I enjoy the most. Every once in a while, I step back in surprise to see myself here, a professor of education. I would not have predicted this when the path started so many years ago, but I'm glad to be here.

SO WHAT? A COMBINED DISCUSSION

In 1977 Shuman encouraged pursuit of doctoral degrees in English education with an eye towards a broader variety of jobs beyond college training of preservice teachers. He recommended that doctoral programs provide flexible, individualized programs tailored to the interests of students in order to enhance those varied job possibilities. Our narratives would support such flexibility and would go well beyond the recommendations of the Conference on English Education's Commission on Graduate Programs in English Education, which defined program constituencies as, "[s]tudents who are increasing their knowledge of literature, language, and learning for their roles as English teachers; and students who are developing, directing, and evaluating literature, language and learning programs for their future responsibilities as English teacher educators" (246). They went on to specify content including knowledge of the discipline and interactions with related programs in "composition, literature, drama, speech, linguistics, psychology, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, bilingual, and English as a Second Language" (248).

This focus on content with no corresponding, specific attention to the nature of the students who populate P-16 classrooms, the political environments in which some thrive and others do not, and the troubling issues of wide variations in equity and access inadvertently implies a static program content, one which may be immune to the influence of the diverse constituents who are drawn to the field by

intent or by other forces. Now, in 2008, we wonder how that panel would respond to our narratives and our career paths. Would they still maintain the focus on content as primary and seemingly immutable? We would hope not.

While we are different people who arrived at our varied professional experiences through diverse paths, our combined narratives reveal some interesting commonalities that might speak to an emerging definition of what comprises an array of possibilities for graduate programs in English education and the role the constituents play in that process. Our learning began with privileged environments that supported learning, although the nature of our privileges is quite different. We all took some financial and emotional risk in working toward the doctorate. Each of us came to our graduate programs through less-than-direct routes. Thus, we recognize that many of the attributes and qualities that we cultivated as learners are results of far more than coursework—especially coursework in literature. For Renée, the high school English classroom was a vehicle to support a love of theater, but her graduate work was an eclectic blend of experiences and learning that coalesced around a clear identity as a scholar engaged in critical inquiry. Wendy turned from an initial dream of psychiatry to English education, only to find her graduate interests piqued more by school reform and teacher leadership than literary devices. Sharon's English classroom was a forum for linguistics, and her entry into doctoral work focused on the relationship of language and race to achievement issues.

Because we all have been able to create our own doctoral programs, our programs vary widely from what might be considered as emphases in English education. They supported our risk taking and heightened our tolerance for ambiguity while, at the same time, impelling us to seek answers. Those answers did not always lead to English education, as a career choice. They enabled us to interact with many educators within and outside of English education, thus enabling us to create a resource base that continuously expands as our need to learn more increases. We are clearly products of praxis—the recursive interplay of old and new, of theories and experiences interwoven in mutually shaping ways. That process of becoming continues in the doing of our professional work. Woven throughout each of our narratives and the reflection that supported the formative process is a consistent drive for significance—for the formation of questions that matter, for reform of schools and empowering of teachers, for antiracist work that will improve the learning experiences of children of color and for curriculum and teaching that can create a more equitable access to higher education. Our professional practices are shaped by that drive for significant work and an activist stance towards the field. Our experiences in learning and work further shape our understanding of the nature of that significance and activism.

In looking back at these commonalities, we would argue against any definitions of programs in English education that would deny the individuals who enter such

programs an opportunity to explore a wide range of ideas and to interact with people from a variety of backgrounds, motivations, and desires. We would also caution against programs that marginalize people who are not focused on research-oriented careers in graduate-degree-granting institutions. For us, the educational experience, particularly at the doctoral level is not about prescription. Rather, it is about following passions and gifts, tracking down answers to questions that matter, and being willing to wrestle with issues and content in order to find a semblance of meaning from which to act. And, finally, it is about learning to impose meaning on events and experiences in the midst of uncertainty, with the courage to revise that meaning on an ongoing basis.

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