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Newly Betwixt and Between: Revising Liminality in Learning to Teach.

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Abstract

Through an analysis of a contemporary rite of passage—the final stage of teacher preparation—the author develops a new theory of liminality that both builds on and extends Victor Turner's enduring insights. The analysis focuses on how pre-service teachers in an undergraduate education program engage in a process of identity formation within an asynchronous, non-dimensional liminal space made possible and shaped by email and with the support of experienced mentor teachers.

Key Words: liminal, transition, teacher preparation, identity formation, self

"Betwixt and between" is a phrase Victor Turner used to capture the essence of his theory of "liminality," a central feature of the framework he developed in the late 1960s to analyze rites of passage within tribal, sociocultural systems. Borrowing from the work of Arnold van Gannep (1960), Turner used liminality to refer simultaneously to one phase of the multi-step transition process effected through a rite of passage, the place within which that transition takes place, and the state of being experienced by the person making the transition. The liminal phase is one of separation from a previous status or social state (Turner 1981:154); it is a period of seclusion during which "initiands" are "submitted to ordeal by initiated seniors or elders" (1981:154) in order to support a transformative process from one state or social position to another—"a becoming" (1995[1969]:94). The place within which the transition unfolds is an "in-between" place that bridges "what is" and "what can or will be" (1981:159)—a "symbolic domain that has few or none of the attributes of [the initiand's] past or coming state" (1974:232). The state in which the initiand finds himself during this transition is "ambiguous, neither here nor there, betwixt and between all fixed points of classification" (1974:232); he is neither what he was nor what he will become.

Within this liminal phase, place, and state, according to Turner, initiands are afforded the rare opportunity "to contemplate for a while the mysteries that confront all men," including societal as well as personal difficulties, and to learn from the ways in which their "wisest predecessors" have attempted to make sense of these mysteries and difficulties (1974:242). One important condition of such contemplation is a reversal of "hierarchical orderings of values and social statuses" (1981:162)—a reversal that puts initiands and elders outside their "everyday structural positions" (1974:242). This contemplation of mysteries and reversal of hierarchies is, Turner contended, critical to the process of becoming that novices undergo during their rites of passage.

Researchers of contexts as disparate as graduate programs of sociology (Deegan & Hill 1991), the Fourth World Congress of the International Drama/Theatre in Education Association (O'Farrell, Garcia & McCammon 2002), and contemporary organizations (Garsten 1999) have taken up the phrase "betwixt and between" to illuminate the in-between period, location, and experience of transition within more contemporary cultural and community contexts. Some researchers focus on the spaces and processes intended either to facilitate transitions into educational institutions and normative states within those (Bettis 1996; Irving & Young 2004; Manning 2000; Mannis 1997; Rushton 2003) or to promote resistance to those normative states (Anfara 1995; Huber et al. 2003). Others focus on the transitional state of the passenger—the ambiguous positions within an organization of temporary employees (Garsten 1999) or consultants (Czarniawska & Mazza 2003) and the networks and temporary teams that cross organizational divides (Tempest & Starkey 2004).

Like these scholars, and with the "newly" I append to this phrase, I acknowledge that our ways of understanding the contemporary world are conditioned by past theories but also that with changes of times and technologies, we must renew those theories, preserving what remains resonant and recasting what no longer fits. Approaches to theory building that both preserve and revise previous interpretive frameworks are a central feature of educational studies, within which an acknowledgment of conceptual and practical legacies co-exists with a commitment to renewed understandings and constructive changes of practice. Thus, I offer in this discussion a new theory of liminality reflective of and responsive to early 21st century rites of passage.

Preserving some of the premises but recasting some of the particulars of Turner's formulation, I analyze here one phase of the process of becoming a teacher as it is supported in

the final two courses required for secondary teacher certification through the Bryn Mawr/Haverford Education Program. This phase, which includes an intense study of educational theories and methods as well as student teaching, is the most concentrated period of the rite of passage that teacher preparation encompasses—a time of intense "formation and transformation" (Britzman 1991:8; see also Eisenhart et al. 1991; Head 1992; McNamara et al. 2002; White 1989). The place within which this transition unfolds is constituted by both literal and virtual spaces: actual, face-to-face, weekly meetings in the college-based seminar I teach in collaboration with experienced mentor teachers, and virtual spaces constituted by a 9-month, weekly exchange of emails between the pre-service teachers and the experienced mentor teachers with whom I collaborate. The virtual space, upon which I focus in the present discussion, is an asynchronous, non-dimensional space made possible and shaped by the modern, technological advent of email communication. "On the threshold of 'teacherdom'" (McNamara et al. 2002:864), "marginally situated in two worlds" (Britzman 1991:13), the pre-service teachers enter this space in a state of being "no longer just students but nor are they fully teachers" (Head 1992:94). The mysteries of individual and social existence the pre-service teachers contemplate are various, but I focus here on the process of identity formation—the process of becoming a "teacher self" (Allender 2001). And finally, a reversal of hierarchical orderings of values and social statuses is fostered by the medium of email itself as well as enacted through the dialogue between the pre-service and experienced teachers outside of their everyday, structural positions.

The dimensions of Turner's framework upon which I focus here both illuminate and are illuminated by the experiences of the particular groups of initiands and elders with whom I have worked. My hope is that others will take up and continue to reshape this new theory of liminality through focusing on other aspects of Turner's theory or applying the theory to other contexts and populations. I offer the present discussion as a beginning of a process of analysis and revision to be continued.

Methods and Participants

Wilson & Peterson (2002) suggest that the new communicative practices and communities made possible by internet technologies "very properly demand the attention of anthropologists" (462). Although Turkle (1995) contends that "virtual reality poses a new methodological challenge for the researcher" (324), Wilson & Peterson (2002) argue that

anthropologists need not "invent completely new analytical approaches to virtual spaces" but should rather "bring to bear our existing expertise on human communication and culture…[through]…adapting ethnographic methods to new technological environments" (462, 461). Given these recommendations as well as recent arguments for reconceptualizing the "field site" as no longer bounded within literal, far-away, foreign places but rather constituted in cross-contextual, nonlocalized spaces within which meanings are investigated and made (Appadurai 1991; Gupta & Ferguson 1997), I take as my field site the virtual space of the email exchange between initiands and elders maintained throughout the culminating certification courses in the Education Program at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges, two selective, liberal arts institutions in the northeastern United States. A good field site is made in part "by its suitability for addressing issues and debates that matter to the discipline" (Gupta & Ferguson 1997:10). This discussion addresses just such an issue by offering a new way of supporting and interpreting the identity formation of pre-service teachers in the final stage of their transition from student to teacher within an undergraduate teacher preparation program.

The population upon whom I focus in this discussion is a subset—five experienced teachers and eight pre-service teachers—of the larger group of ten experienced and 76 pre-service teachers. Both groups have been both participants and informants in my 10-year project of at once redefining, supporting, and studying teacher identity formation within the context of the Bryn Mawr/Haverford Education Program (see Cook-Sather 2006 and forthcoming). The experienced teachers in this subset are all white and middle class, four female and one male, three of whom have taught in public, suburban schools and two of whom have taught in private, suburban schools. These "elders" were selected to participate in this project because of their excellent reputations at their schools, because I have worked with many of them before on a more informal basis, and because they were available and interested. I co-design and co-teach the methods courses with these experienced mentor teachers, and each one of them works throughout the year with one or more pre-service teachers in his or her subject area on subject-specific pedagogical approaches. These experienced mentor teachers are paid for their participation as Subject Area Specialists through the Bryn Mawr/Haverford Education Program. They are not the classrooms-based teachers with whom pre-service teachers work once they embark upon student teaching.

The eight pre-service teachers upon whom I focus are also all white and middle class, seven female and one male. These "initiands" are part of the larger group of 76 pre-service teachers who have been certified over the last ten years, who were 80% female and 90% white and who majored in a variety of subjects at the same time as they sought certification to teach at the secondary level, most commonly in social studies, biology, math, Spanish, and English. The eight pre-service teachers upon whom I focus sought certification in chemistry (1), Latin (1), math (1), biology (1), and social studies (4). At the time of this analysis, they were at various points in their preparation and teaching practice. A returning student after many years in industry, the male chemistry major had been teaching math for one year in a suburban public school; the Latin major had been teaching for three years in a private school; the math major for one year in an alternative school; the biology major in another alternative school for three years; and the four seeking certification in social science were completing their final year as undergraduates.

Like the pre-service and experienced teachers, I am white. A woman in my early 40s with privileged socioeconomic and educational backgrounds, I have been a teacher for 20 years, a teacher-researcher for 15 of those, and both a faculty member and director of the Bryn Mawr/Haverford Education Program for 11 years. In some ways, my various sources of privilege position me well to question and challenge established ways of thinking and being, but they also constrain me and limit my perspective. Working with small cohorts of teacher certification candidates within the larger context of a liberal arts college, I have significant freedom to structure a teacher education program according to "social progressive" (Oakes & Lipton 2003:xv) or even radical principles, but in doing so I struggle with the increasing tensions between such an approach and the current, more conservative emphases in U.S. schools and federal policy. Within my program I deliberately complicate my identity and sources of authority both to model and to support a particular kind of teacher identity formation. I draw on my authority from having taught in the high school classroom, but I explicitly share this source of authority with the experienced mentor teachers; I draw on my authority from having both studied and generated educational theory, but I frame that source of authority as one of many; and I draw on my authority as a faculty member at a prestigious institution of higher education, but I re-position myself as one among multiple knowers about education. The creation of a separate space within which pre-service and experienced teachers maintain a dialogue—an exchange in

which I do not participate and that I do not read—is one particular embodiment of these commitments. These approaches clearly inform the new theory of liminality I present here in its emphasis on working across contexts, developing complex teacher identities, and complicating power and authority between and among elders and initiands.

Because I do not read the actual email exchanges between pre-service teachers and experienced teachers, I take as my data my informants' "constructions of what they and their compatriots are doing" (Geertz 1973:9) within the email exchanges as articulated in participants' annual feedback and their responses to two questions: What do you see as (1) the beneficial, useful, productive, engaging, or otherwise positive and (2) the problematic, difficult, inconvenient, or otherwise negative aspects of the email exchange you maintained with certification candidates/experienced teachers? These are data I gathered for a larger study of participants' experience of using email (see Cook-Sather forthcoming). While analyzing these data for that study, I discerned themes that suggested an analysis of the pre-service and experienced teachers' responses within the interpretive frame liminality offers; conversely, the informants' descriptions illuminated and pointed to the need for revision of that interpretive frame. I include in the present discussion answers from all five experienced teachers and all eight pre-service teachers who responded to the two questions listed above. I acknowledge, however, that my analyses are my "own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are doing" (Geertz 1973:9).

Like the population Turner studied, this relatively homogenous group of elders and initiands illustrates in particularly vivid ways some of the most basic qualities of the specific rite of passage upon which I focus here. At the same time, however, although all these pre-service and experienced teachers are white and middle class and have in common the commitment to developing a particular professional identity, because contemporary, metropolitan life entails membership and participation in multiple cultures, the process of identity formation that teacher preparation entails is a more complex one than the rite of passage upon which Turner focused. Further complicated by the fact that some of the pre-service teachers plan to teach in urban contexts, the rite of passage I study here offers an illustration of a common phenomenon in the wider U.S. sociocultural context: experienced white teachers from suburban contexts helping inexperienced white teachers learn to teach both white students and students of color in both suburban and urban contexts.

The application of this new theory to other populations in other contexts might foreground different aspects of liminality that need further redefining, or it might substantiate and expand upon the points I offer here. In the following sections, I begin the process of engaging in this redefinition by presenting an analysis of (1) the email exchange as a liminal space; (2) the opportunity the email exchange affords initiands to contemplate the specific mystery of teacher identity formation; and (3) the way the email exchange and the particular process of identity formation it fosters are both premised on and supportive of a reversal of hierarchical orderings of values and social statuses.

The Email Exchange as a Liminal Space

The liminal space constituted by the email exchange between the pre-service and experienced teachers is asynchronous and non-localized, and it is a potential as well as an occupied space. In addition, it is entered by interlocutors who move in different contexts when they are not occupying the space but have developed or are developing the same professional identity—that of teacher. Furthermore, this liminal space allows the pre-service teachers to craft individual experiences of transition as part of their larger group rite of passage. And finally, the liminal space exists parallel and in addition to the spaces in which the pre-service and experienced teachers live their daily lives. In all of these ways it is a newly defined "in-between" place (Turner 1981:159).

As a domain outside of linear time and actual place, the virtual space created by email does not require that interlocutors come together in any literal location. Communication can happen any time and anywhere—as needed for individuals/pairs—rather than be limited to unfolding within set, finite frames (such as weekly class meetings in particular classrooms). Both elders and initiands identify these qualities. One experienced teacher explains: "[My pre-service teacher partners] would email just as a problem/question/need arose and we were able to engage in dialog right away." And a pre-service teacher states: "we could communicate about any problems that came up in class and I could count on a quick response within a day or so." Not literally secluded but rather afforded a space outside of regular place and time, initiands are able to interact with elders in immediate, ongoing ways. The immediacy is in part a function of the potential quality of the space: Even when pre-service and experienced teachers are not occupying the liminal space, they know they *can* enter it at any time.

This asynchronous, non-localized, potential, and periodically occupied space allows interlocutors to interact with people to whom they would otherwise not have direct access but who are engaged in the process of sharing and developing a particular body of cultural knowledge. An illustration of the contemporary reality of an expanded community—a phenomenon that prompts some anthropologists to challenge the picture of the world as made up of discrete, separate cultures (Gupta & Ferguson 1997:35)—this virtual space makes possible the coming together of members of a shared professional culture separated by literal context. As one pre-service teacher explains: "I often [leave] the [school] site wanting to debrief my experiences with someone who has both the patience to listen and the interest and experience to share his or her insights. Having the ability to jot these thoughts in the form of an email provides some of this connection that I seek."

Although in this teacher preparation program a particular group of initiands engages in the same rite of passage during the same period of time, because each pair of initiands and elders creates its own asynchronous and non-localized space within which to enact the transition, the process of transformation can be individualized rather than having to accommodate all initiands' needs and move all of them along at a relatively uniform rate. As an experienced teacher points out:

> … the total flexibility and personalized approach of the email interaction … allows each student one avenue to explore and pin-point the questions and anxieties of most specific interest to [her]. It also allows me the opportunity to bring up items that I feel are critical but specific to [our specific subject area] but which may not come up at all in the seminar or which students may not think to ask or notice on their own.

The liminal spaces thus allow for differentiated learning (Gregory 2002; Tomlinson 1999) and accommodate the diverse learning styles of individuals (Checkley 1998; Gardner 1995, 1993; Hatch 1997) as a traditional classroom context and a mass rite of passage alone cannot.

The liminal space constituted by the email exchange does not exist *instead of* the regular time and space in which participants live and move, as it did for Turner's initiands, but rather *in addition to* them. In Turner's world, the rest of life stopped when people entered liminal spaces; in this world, life goes on and people move in and out of the liminal spaces created by the email exchange. Thus, the transformations the liminal period aims to effect must take place during as

well as in between moments of continued life in the present. This quality is also reflective of the contemporary world, which consists of multiple, simultaneous spaces in which young people engage, particularly through technological media.

Moving back and forth from immediate, embodied interaction to interaction within the email exchange allows for repeated shifts of perspective and the addition of further information and experiences from the "real" contexts in which pre-service teachers move. It thus supports a unique kind of transformation. Simultaneously in time and out of time, suspended and ongoing, individual and shared, the liminal space I discuss here partakes of but also goes beyond the qualities of liminality Turner described, thus echoing but also significantly changing the kind of transition passengers experience and effect as they move through it.

Contemplating the Mysteries

The liminal space within which pre-service and experienced teachers maintain their dialogue allows for a kind of contemplation of mysteries particularly appropriate to contemporary times. Rather than impart through myth and symbol the essential cultural knowledge that traditional, tribal rituals do, a sharing of cultural knowledge is accomplished within the email exchange through dialogue between the pre-service teachers and the experienced teachers: through a conscious as well as subconscious, deliberate as well as undetermined, co-constructing as well as initiating process. Although pre-service teachers contemplate a wide variety of mysteries central to teaching, I focus here on the process of identity formation undertaken by their evolving selves (see also Cook-Sather 2006).

Identity formation is a widely analyzed process (see Rodgers & Scott forthcoming) complicated by a persistent lack of clarity regarding the relationship between "identity" and "self." For the purposes of this discussion, I define a self as "the sum of an individual's beliefs about [her] attributes such as [her] personality traits, cognitive schemas, and [her] social roles and relationships" (Zaff & Hair 2003:236) and identity as "multifaceted and dynamic," a collection of versions of self created "as people position themselves and are positioned in relation to varied social practices" (Nasir & Saxe 2003:17; see also Curdt-Christiansen & Maguire forthcoming and Ivanic 1998). These definitions are in keeping with Rodgers & Scott's (forthcoming) assertion that "self" is the meaning maker—"an evolving yet coherent being, that consciously and unconsciously constructs and is constructed, reconstructs and is reconstructed,

in interaction with the cultural contexts, institutions, and people with which the self lives, learns, and functions"— "identity/identities" are the meaning made.

The selves that moved from one state or social position to another in tribal societies have been cast as more essential and fixed than contemporary selves, and thus the process of identity formation was seen as more clearly bound by and within fairly fixed identities within a hierarchical system. In contemporary times and cultures we see the self that occupies various simultaneous and successive states as always both self-defined and "crafted through linguistic exchanges with others" (Harter 1996:3), and we think of "selves in the plural" (Kondo 1990:48). Furthermore, we embrace the very "slipperiness of identity" as a "powerful means through which we can 'denaturalize' ourselves and embrace change" (Orner 1992:75).

As pre-service teachers contemplate and engage in a process of identity formation and the development of teaching selves, the experienced teachers—the pre-service teachers' "wisest predecessors" (1974:242)—share their wisdom regarding this process. But because of the nature of the liminal space in which the dialogue takes place, the pre-service teachers can work through their own thinking and development *before* their elders offer their own perspectives. Both pre-service teachers and experienced teachers identify these qualities of the email exchange. One pre-service teacher explains: "While [my experienced teacher partner] may not receive my email at that moment, I am still able to effectively 'talk' to her in real time, as I process reflections from course readings, or more commonly, to think through (in written words) an experience at my student teaching placement site." The experienced teachers confirm, from their perspective, this quality. One writes:

> The [pre-service teachers] are forced to generate a certain amount of material in the form of description (telling me what they are seeing in their placements, for example), speculation (analysis of those placements or of other topics they are thinking about), and direct questions (asking why certain things seem to be working or not and why the observed teacher or observed students may be acting/reacting in certain ways). Putting this material in writing requires some distance for reflection and judgment, so I feel that even before I get involved in the interaction, an additional step in the thought process has been undertaken by the [pre-service teachers].

The processing both the pre-service and the experienced teachers describe above is focused on thoughts, observations, and experiences, not on identity formation per se. However, through reflecting on what they read, think, see, or experience, pre-service

teachers must consider how they will position themselves and be positioned by what they think and see, and they must actively engage in the process of becoming selves able to take on the identity and responsibilities of a teacher.

The pre-service teachers thus have far more responsibility and agency in their identity formation and in the development of their selves than they would were they simply told by elders what to think and do or how to be. Drawing on the work of Cruickshank (1984), Silberman (1970), and others, Head (1992) suggests that more emphasis in teacher preparation should be placed on "helping students discover their own personal educational philosophy and existential meaning for their teaching and their lives" (101), rather than simply accept traditional roles and responsibilities passed down to them. Such a personal philosophy is intricately connected with identity and sense of self.

Excerpts from an exchange between one pre-service teacher and her experienced teacher mentor (shared with me by the experienced teacher with the pre-service teacher's permission) present one example of the process of working to discover a personal philosophy as it interfaces with identity formation and development of sense of self. The exchange revolves around the pre-service teacher's contemplation of how she, as a white teacher-to-be, can construct an effective teacher identity that is both responsive to students of color and congruent with her sense of self. After reading an assigned text that dealt with understanding and knowing the backgrounds and identities of students different from her and responding in appropriate ways, she wrote to her experienced teacher mentor:

> For class tonight [at the college], each of us had to find two different approaches to classroom management. One I found dealt with understanding and knowing the student's background and responding in ways that she is used to based on her culture. Then I read this sentence: "white teachers are unable to discipline black children because they do not 'connect' culturally; the teachers do not behave as black children expect authority figures to behave....It seems that when white teachers practice the disciplinary techniques they are taught in college, black children 'run over them.'"

After reading this selection, the pre-service teacher explained to her experienced teacher mentor, "I thought this very well defined my situation. I think when it comes to behavior, I'll have a soft touch. I am not a yeller. But how will kids respond to this?" She continued in her email message: "Then we watched a clip from the movie 'Dangerous Minds.' We compared the first two times Michelle Pfeifer enters her classroom. The first time, when she was herself, she

couldn't get their attention. But the second time, she changed her look, her attitude, and even her language—she became a lot tougher. I saw that, and thought: am I going to have to change that much in order to get through to the kids?" Presented with a clear instance of shifting teacher identity, albeit in a popular and romanticized iteration (see Ayers 2001 for a critique of such representations), this pre-service teacher critically reflects on her own process of identity formation as a teacher and its relation to her sense of self.

In response to her own question—"Am I going to have to change that much in order to get through to the kids?"—she writes: "That does not sit well with me. I like who I am and am just hoping that who I am will be enough to show these kids that I care and that will get through to them. I agree with understanding and adjusting to their culture, but I want to retain my own, too. I want to create that mixture that provides perspective on life and the world. What do you think?" In response to the pre-service teachers' reflection and question, her experienced teacher mentor shared some of his own process of identity formation and how it has interfaced with his sense of self: "My own experience is that I try to merge who I am with what I perceive the 'culture' of [the school where I teach] to be. That process took quite a while because the school's culture wasn't immediately obvious and I also hadn't developed a classroom style that was my own yet." Although this teacher works in a very different context (a suburban private school) than the context in which the pre-service teacher works (an urban public school), he is able to support her process of identity formation by offering parallels to his own experience, confirming the theory she has read, validating her own analysis, and also pushing her beyond the quandary she poses.

He confirms the theory she read this way: "I think it's safe to say that African-American kids expect stricter discipline and clearer guidelines than you might find in another setting." Then he links that assertion to the pre-service teacher's process of identity formation as it connects with her sense of self: "By 'trying on' some of that demeanor, I don't see you giving up anything of yourself, rather you are adding to your experience as a teacher. If you think about it, teaching is one of the rare professions where your personality/demeanor is actually a major component of the job." This experienced teacher encourages the process of analysis in which the pre-service teacher is engaged by posing a question to her in return: "I suppose it comes down to how you see your role as teacher. Is it to maintain every aspect of how you perceive yourself or is it to be effective in the classroom and meet the kid's expectations so that good learning takes

place?" He also provides an alternative course of consideration and action: "Another option is to start with a style that is in line with the school's culture and, once the students are comfortable with you, you can begin to experiment with your own style. In doing that, you may find hidden strengths you didn't know you had—I know that has happened for me here at [my school]." He concludes his message with an assertion of his own philosophy—one that models an ongoing process of identity formation: "Teaching to me is an on-going experiment, so you continually 'try on' new ideas/techniques and then absorb them into your style."

The pre-service teacher writes back to her experienced mentor teacher with excitement: "My favorite line of that email: 'rather you are adding to your experience as a teacher.' That really hit home for me. I don't have to give up anything of myself, but I just get to add more and more and see what I develop into as the years go on. I really like that." She also focuses on the notion that good teaching needs to be about learning above all else: "it comes down to how effective my teaching style is to ensure good learning. I did a tiny bit of teaching on Friday, and I think it will definitely be a challenge molding into their culture, but as you said, there are hidden strengths that I don't even know about yet!"

From within her liminal stage, place, and state, this pre-service teacher is able "try on identities in real/unreal ways" (Rouzie 2002:6). Through her dialogue with her experienced teacher partner, she reflects on the process of contemplating and experiencing this process—a complex, layered, recursive as well as linear process made possible by the asynchronous, non-localized space within which the dialogue occurs. Through this dialogue and contemplation, this pre-service teacher realizes it is not enough just be "herself"; rather, she needs to re-imagine herself in new ways as she prepares to take on formal teaching responsibilities.

As the above excerpt illustrates, the kind of contemplation the liminal space supports helps pre-service teachers learn to engage in what Rodgers (2002) calls "the reflective cycle"—the process through which teachers alternately slow down their thinking enough to allow a shift of attention from their own action to student learning and then a shift in focus back to acting on what they attend to. A revision of the powerful notion of reflective practice (Schön 1980; Ferraro 2000; Richert 1990; Zeichner & Liston 1987), Rodgers' theory, with its emphasis on cyclicality, is particularly appropriate to contemporary times. The pre-service teachers who exit the liminal space that supports their transition into teaching leave with more not less complex understandings (White 1989), experience with and a commitment to engaging in an ongoing

process of identity formation, and a sense of self as extending but also changing over time (Nelson 2001).

A Reversal of Hierarchical Orderings of Values and Social Statuses

Turner suggested that "our basic model of society is that of a 'structure of positions'" (1967:93), and he described the period of liminality as "an interstructural situation" (1967:93) characterized by a "play of *meanings*, involving the reversal of hierarchical orderings of values and social statuses" (1981:162). The processes of identity formation that unfold within the liminal phase, space, and state I study here are possible in part because of the reversal of hierarchical orderings of values and social structures fostered by the email exchange and the contemplation within it in which the pre-service teachers engage.

The medium of email itself can complicate hierarchical orderings and social statuses. One pre-service teacher explains: "there's a certain feel of anonymity to words traveling out in cyber-space, even when they're not anonymous." And an experienced teacher writes: "I think that email allows for thoughtful exchanges that may not occur in face-to-face exchanges because they are essentially disembodied, so I think both sides are freer to brainstorm, take risks, etc." The anonymous, disembodied quality of the exchanges puts members of this culture "outside their everyday structural positions" (1974:242) and contrasts sharply the day-to-day life of teaching, which is extremely public, embodied, and both implicitly and explicitly structured by hierarchical relationship. Rouzie (2001) suggests that power relations between initiator and initiands can be fluid, "in many ways under continuous negotiation…especially…in electronically mediated interchanges" (3). The email exchange prepares pre-service teachers for their future, embodied exchanges by giving them a chance to try out their perspectives and personae in a space that is less strictly regulated by the dynamics, hierarchies, and statuses that structure the daily lives of teachers.

Pre-service teachers' comments point to the difference between the dynamic of the email exchange and the power relations that characterize day-to-day educational relationships. One pre-service teacher writes that it was great to have "an experienced teacher to go to for advice who didn't judge or grade or otherwise evaluate." Relatively free of the fear of judgment and consequences, pre-service teachers feel they can bring up issues that they might not feel comfortable raising in the standard contexts that constitute teacher preparation. Another pre-

service teacher explains: "One of the best parts of my correspondence [with my experienced teacher partner] is knowing that there is a teacher whom I can vent my stories to and who is open to just lending an ear or responding to those venting sessions when need be." Another pre-service teacher expands on this point:

> Emailing with [my experienced teacher partner] has provided me with an outlet for my more off-the-wall questions. I have a lot of questions that I would never ask my [classroom-based cooperating] teacher, because I feel the need to retain her respect and trust. But if I want to know about teaching methods, or if I am questioning some of my [classroom-based cooperating] teacher's practices, it is helpful to have a professional in the field who can answer my questions.

An experienced teacher confirms this benefit from her perspective:

> In learning to teach there is an immediacy to many of the issues that come up on any given day. Depending on the relationship the student teacher has with the cooperating teacher and the context of the teaching, immediate feedback isn't always possible. The email exchange provides a place where the student teacher could engage another professional quickly and get a quick reply. There were several occasions where one of my student teachers needed an answer to a question about a student or class they were about to encounter that day. I could provide my opinion and suggestion right away. I think that having this sort of guardian angel on hand at any given moment is invaluable.

The liminal space of the email exchange gives pre-service teachers a forum for exploration outside of the hierarchical structure within which their actual, real-time, practice is unfolding and with elders who do not judge them. Furthermore, the pre-service teachers address the issues they have when they are ready and in the ways they need. If such exchanges were to take place in face-to-face exchanges, the experienced teacher might cut short the pre-service teacher's exploration to offer support and suggestions, trying to help but actually hindering the pre-service teacher's own process of analysis and development of a teacher self. Furthermore, if I were to read the email exchanges, the pre-service teachers might feel monitored and constrained, conscious of the hierarchy within the college context from which the email exchange provides them an alternative space and dynamic.

Discussion

Turner asserted that a liminal space is "a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise" (1995[1969]:97) because "the cognitive schemata that give sense and order to everyday life no longer apply but are, as it were,

suspended" (1981:161). Like the liminal spaces Turner analyzed, virtual spaces created by the email exchange I discuss here release "liminal energies" (Rouzie 2001:3) and provide a space within which "new meanings…can be introduced" (Turner 1981:161). Participants in this suspended space are released to imagine and enact the otherwise unimaginable or impossible, and through such imagining they can transform themselves in unique and powerful ways.

The approach to and analysis of the final transition in teacher preparation I describe here represents a "cultural innovation" and a "structural transformation" within a "relatively stable sociocultural system" (Turner 1981:161). Through their weekly exchanges of email, these initiands and elders model an approach to teacher preparation that constitutes "a cultural change" (Reiman & Thies-Sprinthall 1998) in teacher education—a re-imagining and re-organizing of power dynamics, relationships, learning processes, and the development of a teacher self. The pre-service teachers' processes of becoming are facilitated within the email exchange through dialogue, not delivery or simple initiation, through significantly active thought on the part of the pre-service teachers, not simply reception, and through a relationship established and maintained one step removed from the standard educational hierarchy.

These kinds of revisions to the transformative process of teacher preparation are necessary in a world within which ritual transitions from one *position* in society to another are not enough. In the contemporary, fast-paced, highly technological, multi-identitied world, we experience a different relationship of individual self to society and to institutions that constitute that society than the people Turner studied. Within rites of passage such as teacher preparation, rather than groups of neophytes moving from one kind of collective state into a new collective state, we must reckon with and nurture a more complex, individual, and contextual sense of self developed through a more complex, multiply-informed process of identity formation. This is not to say that teacher identity formation is not a social process—it very much is, and that social process is supported in various other forums and ways within teacher preparation. But the potential for individual as well as group development is what makes this way of thinking about teacher education generative. The premises of needing to transition still apply, but the particulars of what that transition looks like and how it is effected are and must continue to be revised.

Focusing on the liminal space created by email not only helps us revise the particulars of a contemporary transition, such as from student to teacher, but also opens up new possibilities for reconsidering who might be appropriate elders and fellow travelers in this rite of passage.

One constituency that is systematically excluded from taking an active role in teacher preparation is school students, and yet positioning them as experienced knowers who can serve as guides and fellow passengers greatly enhances the preparation of teachers as well as the experiences of those students themselves (Cook-Sather 2003, 2002a, 2002b). Others who could be included as fellow passengers and guides include parents, administrators, community members, or fellow pre-service teachers. (For discussions of this last possibility, see Bowman & Edenfield 2000; DeWert et al. 2003; Lapp 2001; Rasmussen & Johnson 2002; Sernak & Wolfe 1998). The relationships forged among these participants within the liminal spaces email creates have the potential to transform the selves and relationships teachers, students, administrators, parents, and others negotiate in daily life.

The new theory of liminality I present here and the changes in participation structures, professional relationships, and identity formation it fosters have implications beyond teacher preparation. Two of the qualities of the asynchronous, non-localized space I discuss that have the potential to help us rethink other liminal spaces within other rites of passage include the fact that passengers can enter and leave the spaces as they will (as opposed to passing through a set phase during a set time as part of a group of initiands) and the fact that those spaces are constituted by writing. Both of these qualities afford a flexibility, a slowing down and a speeding up, an individualizing, and a demand (and opportunity) for reflection that other fora and media might not as readily afford. Because participants move through and among multiple spaces, visiting and dwelling, experiencing simultaneity rather than only linearity, they engage in perspective-gaining and reflection *while* they have their transition experiences. The process of writing in particular allows participants to examine a concept or issue critically "through the act of making meaning using text written for another to understand" (Sernak & Wolf 1998:321). Because it involves composing thoughts in the mind and either simultaneously or subsequently composing them in writing, the liminal space created by email exchange can foster particularly rich, individual reflection and analysis and particularly rich processes of identity formation.

Conclusion

In the realm of teacher education and in all realms in contemporary times, we need to re-understand rites of passage in part because we have no clear map from tradition, as the peoples Turner studied had, and yet transitions remain a central feature of our culture. Rather than be

prescriptive in regards to these transitions, we need to be dynamic and responsive, letting those in liminal phases, places, and states catalyze revisions that those accustomed and even inured to the old ways might not consider challenging or even notice as antiquated. Although the purpose of traditional rites of passage is to persuade initiands to assume the values of a culture (Moore & Myerhoff 1977; White 1989), rites of passage that do not simply reproduce traditional power dynamics, social practices, modes of participation, and fixed senses of self, but rather create spaces within which to question these, have the potential to transform not only individuals but also educational institutions and, perhaps, society.

A revised theory of liminality that can help support and analyze transitions within formal educational contexts but also in relation to education more generally is particularly necessary in the contemporary world, when life is constituted by multiple liminal phases, places, and states overlapping as members of a society move from one culture, context, and role to another, often repeatedly throughout a single lifetime. Those committed to progressive, feminist, and multicultural theories and approaches are particularly well positioned to take up and extend this revised theory because it invites analysis of a common experience (rite of passage) in new terms, through newly defined lenses, that, like those approaches, question dominant relations of power and dominant forms of knowledge. And finally, the role of technology in particular in facilitating—or hindering—rites of passage is in need to further investigation, and I hope that this discussion provides impetus for other studies focused on the uses of technology.

Although email has become normative, a medium through which many communicate for multiple purposes and with facility and for which other media were previously used, it nevertheless has the potential to reshape our lives and relationships in ways worthy of attention. While some argue that email, like other information technologies, is "continuous with and embedded in other social spaces [that] happen within mundane social structures and relations that they may transform but that they cannot escape" (Miller & Slater 2000:5), if we think of email exchanges as constituting liminal spaces, they may afford us opportunities temporarily to move beyond if not escape mundane social structures and relations and thus to re-imagine what those might look like. As Wilson & Peterson (2002) suggest, "the ability for groups and individuals to interact at great distances raises interesting questions for those investigating the construction of identity, social interactions, and collective action—political or otherwise" (461-462).

Given Geertz's (1973) definition of culture as constituted by the webs of significance that people have themselves spun and in which they are suspended, liminality remains a powerful framework for understanding and structuring transitions, which are necessary within and because of the cultures we create. But in the ways I have suggested, and no doubt in other ways as well, liminality as a theory must be revised to serve both similar and different analytical and lived functions to those Turner described in the 1960s. The "states" in and out of which we pass are more complex and fluid than they have been before, as are the media through which the selves in those states communicate. The selves we construct and the media through which we communicate both change and are changed by the passages we imagine and undergo, and particularly in the realm of educational studies, within which we work to intermingle old and new paradigms and ways of analyzing, we need to continually revise and renew profound theories of change.

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