

**TOWARD A THEORY OF THE EDUCATIONAL INTERRUPTION:
A CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF THE TELLING BREAK**

BY

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ABSTRACT

TOWARD A THEORY OF THE EDUCATIONAL INTERRUPTION: A CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF THE TELLING BREAK

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Classroom experience for students and teachers alike is dictated by bureaucratic structures and curricular requirements and interruptions are something that teachers are expected to eschew. However, recent research reveals that the “interruption is at the heart of the educational matter” (English, 2007, p. 138). This study sets out to define the teacher-generated interruption and to determine the nature of the space it opens for learning.

This philosophical investigation analyzes phenomenological data in two textual forms: student interviews and excerpts from six autobiographical novels about teaching. The model of the educational interruption resulting from this analysis is called “the telling break.” The dimensions of this conceptual model are derived from the philosophical literature on interruptions and applied to the data to offer a more complete picture of the role interruptions play in the educational process. This dissertation argues that the telling break is a phenomenon that, far from being on the periphery of the learning experience in classrooms, is at its core.

A telling break is almost always a spoken interruption in a school classroom. Everyone in the room feels it as a break in the continuity of instruction and learning. The single most defining feature of the telling break is that it opens up a space in which everyone involved, both the teacher and the students, exists in a new state of

“perplexity,” (Dewey, 1910/1997, p. 117). Teachers and students alike realize that a “genuine perplexity” has “laid hold of their minds,” (Dewey, 1910/1997, p. 207). The telling break “pulls us up short,” creating the space in which existence becomes shared presence (Kerdeman, 2003, p. 294). We wake up and are reminded that we are alive and open to growth.

This model is intended to help educators think deeply about the ways telling breaks rupture the classroom experience; we can consider how the space changes, depending upon the nature of the interruption that creates it. The model is intended to inspire discussion among educators about the ways we can break through the “manacles” of “inflexible bureaucratic standards” (Garrison, 2009, p. 76). Teachers who open themselves up to possibilities that the telling break can render will be better able to integrate the symbolic universe of the school with the real life experiences of those it is designed to educate.

DEDICATION

To my father, Dr. Richard M. Heavers, ever the Teacher Man,
who told me his stories and sang me his songs.

And to my mother, Dr. Barbara A. Heavers, artist in the classroom and on the canvas,
who taught me to dream and to create.

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“Music is the space between the notes.”

- Claude Debussy

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

It takes great courage to stand in front of twenty-five teenagers and talk about something they should know in such a way as to cause them to want to know it, and hear it, and take it in. It takes even greater courage to look out at them and actually catch their eyes. In an instant, you can tell whether it is all a farce, or that you somehow miraculously, inexplicably have captured their attention. If you have their eyes this can tell you that there are minds behind those eyes waiting to find out whether you know this.

At the start of my teaching career I was simply an agent for the transmission of knowledge. I was not capable of being anything more at that time. As a young woman just four years older than her students, in order to preserve some semblance of safety in this frightening process of becoming a “teacher,” I could not yet look at my students and truly see them.

Only when I began looking at them did I begin the act of *telling*, that is, of engaging in telling breaks. I *listened* to the way my students listened to me, and I did this by looking at their faces and summoning the courage to look straight into their eyes. When I was brave enough to really look at them, to look out and wonder *what are they thinking?* I found that I had never actually seen, nor had I listened, to them before. English (2009) tells us that prospective teachers must “learn to understand that listening involves becoming open to another person” (p. 76). When I became open to my students, when I opened myself up to them, I began to really listen to them. And when I really listened to them, when I was receptive to both the way they were feeling and the way they could listen to me, I began to tell them things about me and about my life.

When I began to tell, a remarkable thing happened. Each time I looked out to the class, I saw that their eyes, rather than glazing over, had become focused. I saw the muscles around their mouths relax and I saw them breathe sighs of relief. I saw the tension leave their shoulders before they became still in a peaceful perch upon their seats. I saw them poised, intent, and focused. They seemed to hang on my every word. This transformed my way of thinking about who I was to them. I realized that I was *someone* to them, and as I grew into being that *someone*, they started being who they were, too. But I had to do it first. I had to pave the way. I had to show them who I was before they began to be themselves. I could tell that my students were seeing *me*, at least the person who I was when I was doing this telling. This changed the way they greeted me, and answered my questions, and spoke up to share their thoughts.

What was this telling? I did not have a name for it all those years. I only knew that there were times, moments in time, when I captivated my students; these events, though few and far between, left a mark upon them and me. I would hear from current students that they had learned from former students about my childhood experiences on a sheep farm in Rhode Island, or as a young research biologist following the lemurs in the deciduous rainforests of Madagascar. I realized my taking the time to tell about my own life experiences had stayed with these people. They had gone forth from my classroom and taken with them something of me. I had given them something of myself.

In the spring of 2009, after twelve years of teaching, I decided to analyze the phenomenon. I interviewed eighteen juniors and seniors at the high school where I teach, and began asking them to tell me about their reactions to teachers' "interruptions": moments when their teachers interrupt themselves to tell anecdotes and stories. They

knew exactly what it was to which I referred, and they overwhelmingly found these interruptions to be some of the most thought-provoking learning experiences they ever had. They told me that while they may forget the facts of lessons taught, they remember for years the unique episodes that stand out when a teacher veers off the beaten curricular path.

The students' perspectives added to my own memories of the classroom. I remember vividly the anticipation and joy I experienced when my teachers told us stories. I remember deciding a teacher was merciful when he saw that we, his students, needed a break. I savored the times when Doc Thompson, my eleventh grade French teacher, told us about his adventures in the forests of "Nouvelle Caledonie" (New Caledonia) and when Mr. Donovan, our tenth grade English teacher, told us about his prowess on the baseball fields of Providence before he was drafted and sent to the trenches in Korea. I enjoyed every moment Mr. Sterrett, our fifth grade science teacher, told us about his bird-watching trips, and Mrs. Rosenbaum, our sixth grade science teacher, told us about her many car and skiing accidents (she had a habit of looking at her passengers, or skiing partners, instead of the road, or the slope). Mrs. Heckman, our sixth grade English teacher and seventh grade Latin teacher, told us about using the "Heckman Hold" (grabbing a student by the cartilaginous part of his ear) on many a truant in her day (before physically disciplining students became forbidden) and we shuddered in feigned fear. Mr. Smith, our twelfth grade physics teacher, told tales of playing the electric guitar in his own rock 'n' roll band.

I remember also the teachers who never told us anything and therefore never became real people for me. I remember wondering whether Ms. Boyden ever talked or

even thought about anything other than seventh grade science, and whether Mr. Andrew, our eleventh grade English teacher, ever did anything besides read and write in his signature blue ink on our papers (it seemed he did not). I wondered why Mrs. Chiapetta, our tenth grade algebra teacher, had gotten braces in her forties (or was she in her fifties?). Of course, she would never say. She never told us a thing about herself.

The teachers who spent time *telling* were the teachers we knew loved us. We could see on their faces they were happy to be right where they were, right there with us, sharing themselves with *us*. The teachers who never told us anything were the ones who always seemed far, far away, in a distant place, in another dimension. They stood at the board, or by our side in lab, but either way, there was an invisible wall that kept them distant and separate from us. We could never scale that wall because it had infinite height and width. We could never penetrate the invisible fortress. They existed perpetually in their role of *teacher*, thereby keeping us locked in our place as *students*.

These memories from my own experience of school remained hidden in the recesses of my mind long after I found myself, in the fall of 1996, in the position of pedagogue at the age of twenty-two. At this time, all I could do was make sure that I actually understood biology and find ways to explain it intelligibly to my students. I existed from hour to hour, day by day, struggling to keep up with the grading, figuring out how to set up labs I had never dreamed so complex or time-consuming, somehow surviving one stressful Sunday night after the next.

There came a day when I began to have time to think about what I was doing and the person I was to my students. Once I became a graduate student I began reading Dewey. I wondered how I could have missed the fact that my students were just like me,

and needed what I needed as a student myself. I started thinking about myself not just as a transmitter of knowledge, but also as a human being, and I wondered if my students perceived me as such. I began considering what sort of lasting impression I was making upon my students, particularly through my telling.

This study is born directly from the heart of my own teaching and learning. Its conception stems from my synthesis of two sources of knowledge: experiential through teaching in the classroom and theoretical through studying psychology and philosophy.

As van Manen (1995, p. 46) says:

...My practical knowledge 'is' my felt sense of the classroom, my feeling who I am as a teacher, my felt understanding of my students, my felt grasp of the things that I teach, the mood that belongs to my world at school, the hallways, the staffroom, and of course this classroom.

This study will provide an argument for why engaging in telling breaks *matters*. Its purpose is to "make this practical knowledge available" to teachers in such a way that is "attuned to the lived meanings of the forms of life of teaching" (van Manen, 1995, p. 47). This is a phenomenological study that explores the roots of good teaching: "the tact of knowing what to do or not to do, what to say or not to say" (van Manen, 1995, p. 47). Just as Dewey says, when teachers interrupt to tell, it is "at this point where communicated matter stimulates into fuller and more significant life" (1910/1997, p. 224).

New teachers are told to minimize interruptions in their teaching. This study seeks to provide a conceptual model of this phenomenon. It is a call for teachers to engage in "critical-reflection-in-action," and arises from my conviction that "the ultimate success of teaching [relies on]...the personal space, mood and relational atmosphere in which teachers find themselves with their students" (van Manen, 1995, p. 48). Thus, this

dissertation seeks to define the telling break, determine the nature of the space it opens up, and examine the possibilities for those who dwell in it.

Statement of the Problem

Teachers learn in teacher preparation programs, and later from supervisors and colleagues, that it is important to maintain focus in the classroom. They are warned to keep their students on task. Efficient use of time is the highest priority, and time spent “on task,” for students and teachers alike, is hailed as the secret to maximizing the students’ learning experience. All this we teach and pass on as accepted pedagogy. No one dares question it; it seems so obvious. We take pride in our well-designed, efficiently implemented curricula and our “authentic” assessments that we hope allow students to apply this knowledge that, in reality, we teach them in large part so they will pass the test.

When a teacher takes time during class to talk about something other than the immediate task at hand, perhaps to tell a brief anecdote or to share a short personal story, rather than plowing through the particular lesson planned for the day without taking a moment’s pause, he or she is taking a risk. If a supervisor or fellow teacher overhears this event, he or she may make an assumption about the effectiveness of that teacher who is veering away from the curriculum and taking away from “teaching” time. It is understandable, and expected, that teachers and their supervisors, in general, want to maximize the time students spend learning. A good deal of research suggests that interruptions of all kinds should be minimized to ensure that the time a student spends engaged in learning can be maximized.

However, there is a growing body of work in the philosophy of education that seeks to define what matters most in teaching. Rather than working to continue to find evidence to support that educational interruptions are a plight to be eradicated, these thinkers have begun to look at interruptions in an entirely new light. They offer the perspective that, far from being a negative event and something for teachers to eschew, the educational interruption is actually a positive occurrence that, according to English, is “at the heart of the educational matter” (2007, p. 138).

The philosophical literature provides justification for an alternative understanding and a new conceptual model of the educational interruption. This might be the moment in a classroom setting when a teacher interrupts herself to tell one or more students something about herself, whether in the context of subject matter, as an emotional outburst in the heat of conflict, or as advice that has arisen out of some need.

Research Questions

The research is divided into three components. The first is to describe a specific kind of educational interruption - the telling break - and generate a model, to distinguish the features of the model, and to decide what types of conceptual dimensions should be included in the model.

The second task is to determine the nature of the space that the telling break opens up. This is directly following the premise as stated by English that “the space that opens up when our experience has been in some way interrupted” is “the space where we dwell between old and new experiences and where new thoughts and ideas emerge” (2007, p. 133). The results of this second task, in turn, influence the conceptual dimensions in the model of the telling break itself.

The third task is to determine the possibilities the telling break and its space create for the teacher and students who experience it.

Methodology

This is a philosophical investigation that uses interpretation and analysis of phenomenological data in two textual forms: students' interviews and novels about teaching. The purpose is to define and refine a model of an alternative theory of the educational interruption as a phenomenon in the classroom. To accomplish this, students' interviews and novels about teaching are analyzed and interpreted in order to determine the appropriate conceptual dimensions for the educational interruption, and, specifically, for the telling break.

Researchers have explained the positive impact interruptions can have on various aspects of learning. This study will examine these sources and use them to develop the theory of the telling break and its pedagogical implications.

A philosophical analysis was conducted using vocabulary gathered from the following textual sources: (1) transcripts of interviews of eighteen eleventh and twelfth grade high school students and (2) six novels about teaching: *The Freedom Writers Diary*, *Teacher Man*, *To Sir, With Love*, *Bridge to Terabithia*, *Dangerous Minds*, and *The Great Expectations School: A Rookie Year in the New Blackboard Jungle*. These texts were analyzed to provide a detailed description of the telling break. Next, these thick textual descriptions helped to provide an analysis in relation to a vocabulary of interruptions compiled from the theoretical literature.

The object of inquiry for this study was the space the telling break opens up and the possibilities of what occurs in it. In order to develop a conceptually coherent model

with possibilities played out of what might occur, the novels about teaching were chosen based upon the examples of telling breaks they contain. In different ways, each novel addresses educational interruptions that fit the definition of a telling break and provide a description of the space in the classroom that is rendered through the event. Following a thorough review of the literature from which the relevant vocabulary and phrases were gathered, an analysis of eighteen student interviews provided in vivo vocabulary and phrases. Finally, phenomenological descriptors from both sources – the literature and the interviews - were combined to serve as a means with which to describe and analyze the telling breaks as they appear in the six novels. The analysis of the spaces opened up and the possibilities of these spaces gave rise to a conceptual model of an alternative theory of the educational interruption.

Significance of the Study

This dissertation seeks to spotlight and illuminate the telling break. The telling break itself supplies light to the classroom, opening up a space where the teacher reveals something of who she is, and, in doing so, brings new things to light for her students. This dissertation will make an argument that the telling break is a phenomenon that, far from being on the periphery of a student's experience of learning, is at its core. Until now, a name has not been put to this phenomenon. It has been "void" and "undefined," as Shulman (2007) says. Shulman (2007, p. 8) calls shedding the light on a phenomenon a "positive, aggressive, assertive act that gives meaning, that makes it possible to see" (Shulman, 2007, p. 8). Far from a negative phenomenon, the telling break is a particular kind of educational interruption that opens up a powerful, illuminating space in the classroom.

The literature tells us that interruptions are negative events and that teachers should remain focused upon teaching the subject matter assigned to them as much as possible. Yet teachers constantly engage in educational interruptions, some of which are telling breaks, and some much more than others, perhaps knowing that this is something that teacher preparation programs do not necessarily encourage, but knowing, too, that it can be *good*. These teachers possess an intuitive knowledge that educational interruptions can be positive and so they engage in them despite the potentially negative consequences they have been told will occur when they spend less “time on task.” A new model of the educational interruption is needed - one that allows for the possibility of its creative and positive moral power.

It is possible for teachers to engage in educational interruptions in an effective and meaningful way. Upon reflection, teachers may realize that educational interruptions may be some of the very best “tactful actions” they can take (van Manen, 1995, p. 44).

Hopefully, one consequence of this study will be to bring awareness and affirmation to teachers. In bringing the educational interruption into the light in a positive way, teachers will have a better understanding of how their actions affect the minds and lives of their students as they dwell in the environments these teachers create. Teachers will be better able to understand why the educational interruption has the potential to be a positive event in their classrooms and why they should continue telling, or, if they never have been brave enough to do so before, why they should begin. I hope that this dissertation will serve “to deepen our understanding of the peculiar mark that school life makes on us all” (Jackson, 1990, p. 11).

Hansen advised me in June 2008, to “make space for surprises” (D. Hansen, personal communication, June 19, 2008). The educational interruption called the telling break does just that. The interruptions that give rise to these spaces are “at the heart of the educational matter” (English, 2007, p. 133) because they hold in them the potential to give way to “great leaps of progress and motivational awakenings” (Jackson, 1990, p. 136). Hansen says that there are areas we can always reach into and in which we should be prepared to find that which we do not yet know (D. Hansen, personal communication, June 19, 2008). He says that one of the most important things that researchers can do is “learn to be thrown.” Being “thrown” is not different from being “pulled up short” (Kerdeman, 2003, p. 304), and this description of the experience of the unexpected event of a telling break turns out to be an important way to convey the possibilities of a teacher’s educational interruption for her students.

Scope and Limitations

In the spring of 2009, I interviewed eighteen eleventh and twelfth grade students. They were all students who attended the high school where I teach in New Jersey. I chose this site for my study so I could conduct the interviews during my prep periods. Consequently, there is the possibility of bias in the data drawn from the interviews as I had already met about half of the students I interviewed and was familiar with most of the teachers they mentioned. I believe this possibility is somewhat offset by the large overall size of our school (1500 students and seventy-five teachers).

Research Participants

I chose to interview eleventh and twelfth graders because I believed they would likely be able to articulate clearly their observations and perceptions of adults. My

experience of teaching students in grades eight through twelve over the fourteen years I had by that time already spent in the classroom informed this decision. All names of teachers and students who participated in, or were mentioned by, participants in this study, will remain anonymous.

As a teacher in the district now for nearly fourteen years and as a teacher at the high school for almost twelve, I am known in the school community and most students and teachers are aware of my interest in studying teaching. My principal granted me permission to conduct the study and the teachers from whose classes I asked for student volunteers were happy to help me. Most of my colleagues expressed mild interest, asking how things were coming along from time to time. The students seemed to be most excited by it and some of my own students expressed dismay that I was not interviewing them. I explained the sampling process to them and then they understood why they were excluded from the study. Everyone I interviewed seemed to trust me as well as my promise to maintain his or her anonymity. I think it was important that the students knew I was legally bound not to disclose what I they told me. I also believe that this portion of my study was perceived as a natural extension of the interest I have demonstrated in the work of my colleagues and the learning experiences of students.

Student Interviews

Before meeting with any student volunteer for an interview, I obtained the written permission of at least one parent of every student who volunteered. I also obtained the written consent of every student interviewed. I interviewed each student one-on-one – usually in the commons area - for about ten to fifteen minutes using a standardized, open-ended interview guide.

Limitations

Validity and Ethical Issues

My principal granted me formal permission to conduct the interview portion of my study under the specific parameters I provided. I revealed to him my purpose of study in December 2008, when he granted me permission. He suggested that I not reveal my purpose to the students. I decided to tell all those involved that I was simply studying how students perceive their teachers. That is what I did. The most important ethical issue I faced in gathering data about my colleagues is that, in the wrong hands, the information might be used against them. The results of my study could be questioned if the student volunteers tempered their answers to my interview questions for fear that they might get their teachers “in trouble.” However, I believe that my promise to keep all of the information anonymous and secured on my home computer and not on the school server was enough for students to tell me as much of the truth as possible; that is, what they remember their experiences to have been.

There is the possibility of bias in that some of the students, though not my own students, knew of me before I interviewed them. While I made it explicitly clear that there was nothing I expected anyone to say or anything in particular that I was looking for, it is still possible that students withheld telling me certain things because of their degree of familiarity with me as a teacher in their school. To offset this, I explained that I was just exploring, like taking a walk in the forest and seeing the plants that line the path. I simply asked them to tell me the truth as they perceived it. This did not entirely remove potential bias, but I hope that my keeping the objectives of the study unspecified diminished it.

In this component of my study, I have assumed that what students reported to be their perceptions were honest. I believe that the results are trustworthy representations of students' reported perceptions of their teachers. I do not believe that this study caused harm in any way to the students. I will never share the results of this study with the school community. No one who works in this school will know my findings. The contents of the interviews will never be shared with the teachers or anyone else associated with the school in any way.

Sources of Telling Breaks in Novels

I researched well-known novels about teaching and found all but one of the novels I used as sources for examples of telling breaks. The one exception was a novel I read in seventh grade English, *Bridge to Terabithia*. This was the only one of the six novels that was not autobiographical, but strictly fiction. The novels are primarily teaching memoirs and are nearly all written from the perspective of the teacher, who describes his or her actions to the reader. In *Bridge to Terabithia*, we hear the voice of the fictional protagonist, Jesse Aarons, who tells us about his teacher, Mrs. Myers. In *The Freedom Writers Diary*, a compilation of Ms. Gruwell's students' journal entries, we hear the anonymous voice of one of her students. These are the two novels of the six that offer the voices of students rather than teachers. The textual sources from all six novels provided examples of telling breaks from which I was able to identify conceptual dimensions of the model.

Conclusion

Chapter 2 will show how this study is situated in a larger study of interruptions in the philosophical literature. The review of the literature will provide sources of some of

the vocabulary I have used in developing the model. Chapter 3 will present the student interviews. Chapter 4 will present the excerpts of telling breaks from the novels. Finally, Chapter 5 will provide a synthesis of the conceptual dimensions from the literature and the interviews, followed by a presentation and explanation of the conceptual model of the educational interruption, and specifically, of the telling break.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this chapter is to show that my study of the educational interruption is situated in a larger conversation about interruptions. This review will present some of the empirical research of management scholars followed by the conceptual research of educational philosophers. The explanation of the philosophical literature will explore some of the conceptual dimensions that will be used in Chapters 3 and 4. In Chapter 3 the vocabulary will be used in an analysis of eighteen interviews; in Chapter 4 the vocabulary will be used in an analysis of nine telling breaks from six novels. In the fifth and final chapter, the vocabulary will be combined to build a conceptual model of the telling break and the space it opens.

A number of studies address the negative implications for interruptions, particularly in work settings, but also in classrooms. In a study that bridges management and education, Jett and George (2003) define interruptions as “incidents or occurrences that impede or delay organizational members as they attempt to make progress on work tasks,” (p. 494) and assert that there are also positive implications for interruptions. From this study, I was first inspired to classify one particular kind of educational interruption, the telling break. Another set of studies in the broader literature goes beyond the identification, definition, and classification of the telling break to offer a new set of approaches to studying the implications for interruptions. These studies focus on interruptions in education, not management, and offer the phenomenological approach I wish to follow in my study. While the management research purports that interruptions

cause inefficiency and waste, the philosophical research offers a different set of possible implications. These will guide the present study.

Interruptions, where one person interrupts another, have been classified in the management literature in a number of different ways. Menz and Al-Roubaie (2008) studied doctor-patient communication to correlate the doctor or patient status of an individual with interruptions classified as supportive or non-supportive. Smith-Lovin and Brody (1989) also classified interruptions as supportive and demonstrated that gender affects interruptions in group discussions in the workplace. They found that group composition is an important indicator of the degree to which men and women interrupt with supportive comments. Men interrupt with more supportive comments to a group comprised entirely of men and offer fewer supportive comments as the ratio of women to men increases.

Another study by Karakowsky, McBey, and Miller (2004) classified interruptions not just as supportive, or rapport oriented, but as neutral, or intrusive and negative. Like Smith etc, they examined verbal interruptions in a group context, but they focused on intrusive interruptions. They found that “interruption behavior is a mechanism of power and dominance” (2004, p. 431) and that indeed, an interruption can be classified as a “gender-based power display” (2004, p. 433).

From a managerial standpoint, interruptions are not only a source of gender and social inequality, but also a detriment to individual performance. Seshadri and Shapira (2001) developed a model to analyze the behavior of a manager in terms of time allocation and effort, and classified interruptions as “costless” or “costly.” Fisher (1998) classified interruptions as external or internal, and found that external interruptions to a

simple task reduced feelings of boredom while internal interruptions (thoughts not related to the task) increased boredom at work.

Growney (1982) designed a mathematical model to estimate the effect of interruptions upon the total time required for the completion of a task. She supposed that interruptions would occur randomly and that they would be independent events. In her analysis, she states that, “the frustration associated with being diverted from a task that requires sustained concentration makes a later return to the task almost like starting over” (p. 215). Growney further states, “the assumption that interruptions are devastating is not unreasonable” (p. 215). Thus, time and sustained focus are the important requirements for completing a task and interruptions have the power to derail.

Similarly, Dodhia and Dismukes (2009) examined the aspects of interruptions that cause them to increase what is called resumption failure, or a person’s inability to resume an interrupted task. They found that if a person is not clear when an interruption has ended, they are less likely to resume the task that was interrupted in the first place. All of the aforementioned findings have been specific to the workplace; overwhelmingly, the implications for interruptions are negative. In school settings as well, interruptions during teaching time are reported to be detrimental (Glover & Miller, 1999). Grover and Miller (1999) conducted a study of the average day of a “subject leader,” or a teacher who also assumed administrative duties. They noted, timed and classified every interruption that occurred and calculated the time lost in total each day. On some days, as much as an hour of teaching time was “lost” to interruptions.

However, not every study paints such a grim picture of interruptions. Leonard’s 2001 study of the perceived impact of interruptions brought to light the fact that one

teacher “felt that outside encroachments were ‘welcome breaks.’” Leonard (2001) states that “simply increasing the amount of instructional time available may be insufficient, and equal attention may need to be given to the actual use of that time” (p. 104). While not commonly investigated, there is room for a study of interruptions that investigates their potentially positive implications.

Jett and George (2003) identify four interruption types: intrusion, break, distraction, and discrepancy. They ask what positive consequences of these events might be possible. Their attention to “interruptions as breaks” has particular bearing on my question. George and Jett (2003) define breaks as “planned or spontaneous recesses from work on a task that interrupt the task’s flow and continuity” (pp. 497 - 498). They compare a break to an intrusion, which they define as “an unexpected encounter initiated by another person that interrupts the flow and continuity of an individual’s work and brings that work to a temporary halt” (p. 495). These breaks, called “spontaneous recesses” and “unexpected encounters,” come close to describing the interruption of specific interest to me. While these terms stem from a managerial perspective, they are transferable to education. In a high school classroom, just as in a workplace cubicle, there is no “recess,” but, as George and Jett (2003) point out, a break, just like an intrusion, “entails anticipated...time away from performing work to accommodate personal needs and daily rhythms” (p. 498). Just what this time away entails, or what these needs are, certainly differs from workplace to classroom.

Regarding breaks and intrusions that have the potential actually to enhance performance (George & Jett, 2003), Gibson (2005) studied a very specific type of interruption, which falls under the category of “successful” interruptions. He calls it an

“opportunistic interruption” and states that its defining characteristic is that “the interrupting utterance is made possible by the precise sequential environment in which it occurs” (p. 318). He suggests, “listeners are able to anticipate the likely form of a turn,” and are “able to make educative guesses about the turn’s likely substantive trajectory” (p. 318). In other words, the opportunistic interruption is relevant and occurs in a moment from which it naturally arises.

The language used by management scholars and educational philosophers provides the foundation for a conceptual model of one kind of interruption that has not been studied: teacher-generated educational interruptions. That is, no one has studied the implications of interruptions that teachers cause to their own teaching. However, a number of educational philosophers maintain that the educational interruption is positive for the student witnessing it. Their work offers some conceptual dimensions with which I will build a conceptual framework of the educational interruption. Thus, there is a growing body of literature that points to a different way of looking at experience in the classroom and the ways in which it is interrupted. There are a number of researchers working to determine just what occurs during those spaces that arise from interruptions. Though business-focused researchers study interruptions in order to minimize them, a number of noted philosophers maintain that the educational interruption is a positive occurrence. While no one has studied the phenomenon of teacher interruptions, that is, interruptions generated by the teacher herself, the literature offers valuable perspectives on both the interruption of experience and what happens in the space that results. The combination of some of the vocabulary used to classify interruptions in the managerial studies with conceptual dimensions of interruptions from the philosophical literature will

provide a useful heuristic set of phenomenological descriptors that will be used in the analysis and interpretation of both the student interviews and the novels. While managerial hypotheses point to inefficiency and time wasted, this study seeks to demonstrate that the educational interruption has positive potential for good. The educational interruption itself is under-theorized space; this dissertation seeks to explore the nature of the telling break as one type of educational interruption and what happens in the space that it creates. The rest of this chapter will provide a review of philosophical literature and the language of the interruption that has emerged.

Continuity

Continuity is a long, smooth wall of separation, whether separation between teacher and student, free and imprisoned. Students experience an endless series of lessons. Often each is designed to build upon the last, slowly but steadily teaching them the contents of a curriculum. Frequently this learning can often become monotonous and tedious, and limit their range of thinking. It is this ground that is most fertile for interruptions. It is the long wall of continuity through which the teacher is eternally delivering information that begs to be broken. Floden, Buchman, and Schwille (1987) state, “unless students can break with their everyday experience in thought, they cannot see the extraordinary range of options for living and thinking” (1987, p. 1). They say:

A salutary shock is no simple discontinuity, but rather a turn that leads in a new and worthwhile direction. Its intrinsic worth does not depend on what comes before or after; still, it connects centrally with the development of a person’s self and powers. (1987, p. 2)

Holes in the Wall

Garrison (2009) says, “any finite structure...must exclude the infinite plenitude of existence” (2009, p. 73). If this “finite structure” is the “wall separating the role of

teacher from that of student,” then this wall necessitates a door, a way out or through. As Garrison says, it is the “trickster prophet” who “finds openings” or “portals”

(2009, p. 73):

...the trickster finds gaps, openings, windows and doors into other worlds closed off by the categories of ‘correct’ thinking, the moral structures of ‘right’ action, and aesthetic construction of ‘good’ taste. (2009, p. 74)

He expands this idea of the “finite structure” and explains further:

What closes doors and manacles the minds of students and teachers are fixed and inflexible bureaucratic standards, norms, and averages. Trickster teachers unlock these doors and stand in the liminal space to keep them open. (2009, p. 76)

Garrison (2009) says that the closed off worlds must be penetrated or exposed to find “new outlets for our energies that lead to the plenitude of existence” (2009, p. 74). As he reminds us, “trickster teachers like Madame Esmé despise closure, while seeking the world of endless flux and possibility” (2009, p. 77). How do they do this? They find seams. If they cannot find these, they use dynamite to blast holes in the wall that is the “thickest of school constructions,” the separation of teacher and student.

Garrison (2009) tells us that “all structure excludes something” and that “the structure of schooling is no exception” (p. 79). He says that it is only the tricksters who “work to renew individual and cultural vitality by restoring some of what society discards,” that it is the tricksters who “creatively locate ugly imperfections in supposedly perfect structures, thereby letting in beauty and light” (Garrison, 2009, p. 79). The holes in the wall, those chinks in the brick - and the teacher who notices and exposes these, and takes out her chisel to hammer away at them until they are obvious ways out - these are the “link between two or more worlds and a *poros* through which possibility pours” (Garrison, 2009, p. 82).

Interruptions

Haroutunian-Gordon (2007) studies interruptions of listening and the subsequent shifts in that listening. She maintains that the positive potential is in this power to cause change in the action of the teacher's listening (2007, p. 144). A responsiveness on the part of a teacher who is willing to be open to new perspectives can cause the interruption to be fruitful for the teacher. It is her listening to her students, and not the other way around, that is interrupted.

English (2007) also studies the significance of interruptions, again, in terms of what they mean for the teacher; she suggests that the educative meaning lies in the "breaks in the teacher's experience" (p. 133). For English, the most worthwhile consequence of interruptions is the "space that opens up when our experiences have been in someway interrupted" (2007, p. 133). Thus, it is not just the listening itself, nor the interruption itself, but the space that is opened up because of it, that holds what English calls "the heart of the educational matter" (2007, p. 133).

The decision to allow oneself to heed the interruptions to one's listening in the experience of teaching is an example of van Manen's (1991) "phenomenology of tactful action," which means that teachers "'thinkingly act,' and often do things with immediate insight" (p. 136). Both allowing one's listening to be interrupted and being open to new questions that arise as a result, and allowing one's teaching to be interrupted, whether by another person or one's own mind, are examples of being pedagogically tactful. Telling breaks, the educational interruptions I seek to describe and explore, fall into the phenomenology of tactful action (van Manen, 1991).

Space

English speaks of the space that emerges from interruptions this way: these “gulfs, gaps, and spaces gain educative meaning when we understand them as space for learning” (2007, p. 137). Though she is referring to listening on the part of the teacher, and not the student, a student listening to a teacher could find herself in a similar situation. As English says, “to listen to this space means we have consciously to choose to confront the limits of our own standpoint and listen to something new and unfamiliar” (2007, p. 140).

Another way of considering the space is to call it a “moment of influence,” as Dewey (1916/1997) does, or an “opening,” as Greene (1984) does. Kerdeman (2003) calls this space the “unexplored dimension” and says that it occurs as the result of being “pulled up short” (2003, p. 294). For Kerdeman, “being pulled up short” means that an “event we neither want nor foresee...interrupts our life and challenges our self-understanding” (2003, p. 300). Thus, though different philosophers use different language to describe the space created by the interruption, there is a consensus that it exists and potentially holds meaning.

As van Manen (1991) predicts:

The notion of education, conceived as a living process of personal engagement between an adult teacher or parent and a young child or student, may well disappear in an increasingly managerial, corporate, and technicized environment. How can educating and bringing up children remain a rich human and cultural activity? (1991, p. 4)

When van Manen (1991) has spoken to teachers and young people alike about the educational experiences they find most meaningful, they have spoken of experiences that “occur on the margin or on the outside of the daily curriculum experiences of the

classroom” (p. 4). If it is the case that most teaching has become managerial, then it is only in these times “on the margin” that there is “personal engagement.” It may be that these moments are caused by interruptions of experience, and that the result is an opening, a space, a “margin” where a “real encounter” can occur (L. Waks, personal communication, November 3, 2009).

Language Ruptures

An intrusion is an “unexpected encounter,” (Jett & George, 2003), and, as Waks (2009) says, the literature that now exists on interruptions “presupposes there is some space between the teacher and these learners where a real encounter is possible” (L. Waks, personal communication, November 3, 2009). Hooks (1994), in *Teaching to Transgress*, speaks of both the encounter caused by a disruption and the space for learning that emerges as a result. Her notion of the interruption is the disruption of language in the transmission of meaning through words:

Like desire, language disrupts, refuses to be contained within boundaries. It speaks itself against our will, in words and thoughts that intrude, even violate the most private spaces of mind and body. (1994, p. 167)

The disruption of which Hooks (1994) speaks is that of the “ruptured, broken, unruly speech” of black vernacular. She speaks of the space as a “location” and says that in that space, in that location, “we make English do what we want it to do” (1994, p. 175). Hooks (1994) later explains that the way that she establishes a “communal commitment to learning” in her classroom is to allow for “sharing experiences and confessional narratives” (p. 186). She calls these “narrative moments” and says they are “the space where [assumptions]...are disrupted” (p. 186). Finally, for Hooks (1994), this

space is not only one of disruption, but one of potential healing: “to heal the splitting of mind and body...we seek to make a place for intimacy” (1994, p. 175).

Thinking Action: Listening, Telling

Causing an interruption, that is, engaging in a telling break, may be an example of a “thinking action,” as van Manen explains. He says, “While they are involved in teaching, good teachers ‘thinkingly act’ and often do things with immediate insight:”

As teachers, we sometimes catch ourselves about to say something but then hold back before we have completely committed ourselves to what was already ‘on our lips’. Other times the situation we are in seems to ‘tell’ us as it were how we should act. (1995, p. 36)

The “upshot,” van Manen says, is that “teacher thinking and teacher reflection is a challenging notion that needs phenomenological, philosophical, conceptual and empirical exploration” (1995, p. 36). While I agree, it still appears that the dearth in exploration lies not in the experience of the teacher, but the experience of the student. Van Manen brings awareness to the fact that the teacher “does not have time to distance himself or herself from the particular moment in order to deliberate (rationally, morally, critically) what he or she should say or do next” (1995, p. 42). This means that what the student experiences is not necessarily a great social distance, if van Manen is right that “the normal teacher-student relation does not allow (artificial or critical reflective) social distancing” (1995, p. 42). He purports that “only aloof ‘detached’ teachers may be able to adopt a more or less calculating or rationally deliberative relational approach to their minute interactions with children” (1995, p. 43).

Van Manen (1995) offers an option that he believes transcends the “traditional theory-practice distinctions”:

...tact should neither be seen as a theoretical form of knowledge nor as a

pretheoretical social practice; and while the notion of tact is inherently a factor of personal style of individual teachers it is also at the same time inherently an intersubjective, social, and cultural ethical notion. To be tactful is by definition a moral concern: we are always tactful for the sake of the good of the other (the child). (1995, p. 43)

The question becomes whether the educational interruption called the telling break is a “tactful action” on the part of the teacher, and whether she “thinkingly acts” when she begins to tell. Van Manen says, “tactful action is instantaneous” (1995, p. 44). Is listening to one’s students an example of “thinkingly acting?” It very well might be. As van Manen asserts, a teacher who is tactful has the “ability of instantly sensing what is the appropriate, right or good thing to do on the basis of perceptive pedagogical understanding,” which no doubt includes listening as a very real part of the discerning - and split-decision-making - process (1995, p. 45). Finally, van Manen (1995) addresses the question of knowing when to act tactfully. If it is possible that engaging in a telling break has the potential to be a tactful action, then this explanation by van Manen (1995) makes it clear that the answers lie within and around us, and the teacher is indeed responding by heeding her students:

The ultimate success of teaching actually may rely importantly on the ‘knowledge’ forms that inhere in practical actions, in an embodied thoughtfulness, and in the personal space, mood and relational atmosphere in which teachers find themselves with their students. (van Manen, 1995, p. 48)

Gaps and Breaks in Experience

English looks at the way that the teacher’s experience is interrupted and the “role of interruptions in reflection and listening” (2007, p. 134). She uses the “negativity of experience” to describe the “interruption in experience which occurs when we encounter something strange, different or unexpected in our experiences” (2007, p. 136). This is one way that the results of the interruption of a teacher as witnessed by students could be

described, too. English says that not only is there a “pause in time” “when our experience breaks with itself,” but she references Bernhard Waldenfels and says that “a gulf opens up in action that needs to be crossed over” (2007, p. 136).

For English, the potential for these spaces is that when “we encounter the unexpected” it creates “gulfs, gaps and spaces” that “gain educative meaning when we understand them as spaces for learning” (2007, p. 137). English focuses on what the spaces mean for the teacher’s experience and the teacher’s learning. The same thinking can be applied to the analysis of the student’s experience as well. In short, the teacher-generated interruption of the telling break opens a space, as English (2007) points out, and this very well might be a place of the “twilight zone of learning” where we “dwell between old and new experiences” (2007, p. 137). For the teacher doing the telling, she is most likely telling an experience from her past; for the students listening, this could be a prophecy of their future. For, as Inchausti says:

When we look at students, we see through them into our pasts. But when they look at us, they see through us into their futures. Both acts of the imagination are fraught with the dangers of inflation and distortion. And yet, it’s important to know that very little of what takes place in the classroom takes place in the present. The classroom is the zone of imagination - a place of mind, not of fact. (1980, p. 160)

Thus, perhaps the spaces created are the only moments of real time that exist, the time that exists in the in-between, and whether a “zone of learning” or a “zone of imagination,” it is a place felt differently by all.

“Pulled Up Short”

It was English’s assertion that “to recognize the break in experience is to recognize the heart of the educational matter” (2007, p. 138) which gave me a most powerful pause and caused me to think deeply for the first time about the potential power

of the educational interruption. In other words, English caused me to be “pulled up short” (Kerdeman, 2003, p. 294) when I realized that there could be great power in the interruption caused by a teacher. Kerdeman (2003) calls the experience of “being pulled up short” an “overlooked dimension” (2003, p. 294). From my perspective, it is a dimension that may very well be an important one in the conceptual model of the telling break. The interruption, which is by definition “unexpected” (English, 2007), may cause teacher and students alike to experience a change in “self-understanding” (Kerdeman, 2003, p. 297). As Kerdeman says, “when we are pulled up short, an event we neither want nor foresee and to which we may believe we are immune interrupts our life and challenges our self-understanding” (2003, p. 300). A teacher likely knows what it feels like to have suddenly engaged in a telling break and realize that one has told too much. A student knows what it feels like to have heard just a bit more than one wished about a teacher’s life. In these cases, perhaps it is not the interruption itself that really causes one to feel that abrupt “pulled up short” feeling, but the contents of the telling break that force us to face that to which we would rather remain “immune,” as Kerdeman (2003) says. This immunity can also be thought of as “blind spots” or “deceptions” as she later explains, and the reason we feel “pulled up short” is because the events we have witnessed have caused us to face them. When one has an idea about who one’s teacher is and then, without warning, this image is changed, even shattered, an experience of the telling break that tells too much, perhaps, will be that interruption that “pulls up short” (2003, p. 305).

Interruption to Listening

The openness to interrupting oneself unexpectedly might be compared to the way that Kerdeman explains the openness a teacher can have for allowing herself to be “pulled up short” herself (2003, p. 308). She says:

Being pulled up short reminds us that outcomes can exceed and even defy what we plan and expect. Sometimes, teaching is a well-crafted leap...into the unknown. Nevertheless, teachers who are open to being pulled up short themselves can conceive that this experience might be a learning opportunity for their students. The range of options for teaching and learning is thereby enlarged. (2003, p. 308)

Rud and Garrison (2007) say, “the important thing to realize regarding interruptions is that some of them...cause one to stop in one’s tracks completely” (2007, p. 164).

According to them, “some arise because of a disruption in the coordinating of the organism-environment transactions that sustain human functioning,” (2007, p. 164), these interruptions, particularly the ones to which English refers, are unexpected happenings that intrude upon the plan” (2007, p. 164). While English (2007) calls the “negativity of experience” that “reflective space where teachers can step back and see what that interruption is ‘saying’ to them” (Rud & Garrison, 2007, p. 165), the very same stepping back must happen for students in the midst, and during the aftermath, of a telling break. While it may be quite a jump, Rud and Garrison (2007) claim that apophatic listening, that is, the listening that occurs “anytime we lack sufficient cognitive structure to formulate a question,” is often associated with experiences of the numinous and the sublime. They conclude, “all situations have some aspect of seizure about them along with some felt sense of binding relationship” (2007, p. 168):

Sometimes, it is not only the words that we say, but also the silences and complexities of who we are that, when listened to, open up new ways of being known by and of knowing another person. (Meadows, 2007, p. 116)

The question is, do telling breaks allow for this opportunity as Meadows describes it? She says it is possible, depending upon how someone listens, for a “person’s intellectual understanding and a person’s life...to both be changed in ways that the person experiences as meaningful” (Meadows, 2007, p. 118).

Haroutunian-Gordon (2007) studies the interruption that interrupts listening, specifically, the listening of the teacher to the student. She explains that the “nature of the interruption determines the direction of the shift” in listening (2007, p. 144). Depending upon the nature of the telling break, it may very well be that the way that the one listening hears it will then “determine the direction of the shift in her subsequent listening (Haroutunian-Gordon, 2007, p. 148). It is possible that students listening to a teacher’s telling break might very well open themselves up in this same way, perhaps in response to the teacher’s apparent openness and perhaps in response to the event itself and its contents.

English (2009) clearly distinguishes between the “listening of the teacher” and “the listening of the student” (2009, p. 69). She says that it is “interruptions in a teacher’s listening” that “open up unforeseeable possibilities for cultivating learning” (2009, p. 70), and I believe that this very same experience can be true in the event that a teacher interrupts a student’s listening with a telling break. This “encounter with the unfamiliar and unexpected” causes the ones listening to be “thrown off course” (2009, p. 72). While English defines “educative listening” as “being attuned to” and “engaging with” interruptions in order to determine how they suggest new ways of initiating the learning processes of others,” she is studying this from the perspective, primarily of the teacher (2009, p. 73). English (2009) now clarifies what she has meant two years earlier by the

“break in experience” that is the interruption, and asserts, “for the reflective teacher, interruptions in listening are the heart of the educational matter” (2009, p. 74).

Listening As Caring

The break in experience I wish to explore is the educational interruption I refer to as the telling break. Let us step back from the description English offers of the educational interruption and regard the telling break as a teacher-generated interruption that arises from the teacher’s *perhaps* having been in tune with her students’ degree or kind of listening. If this is at all the case then we see that the listening on the part of the teacher, that is, the teacher’s “being attuned to” her students, results in an interruption that alters the listening on the part of the students. The interruption begins in listening and ends in listening.

Garrison (2011) tells us that as teachers, we must be compassionate listeners. He says “to listen well to others is to join them in the joys of creation, while listening compassionately is to join them in the suffering” (2011, p. 5). He says that if students are to be truly cared for, their teachers must “listen attentively” and “answer the call of compassion with skilled care” (2011, p. 4). Perhaps this “skilled care” is the care to attend fully to one’s students and notice when an interruption is appropriate. Garrison believes that “when teachers listen carefully while providing instruction and merciful helping, they learn and grow cognitively, creatively, and spiritually along with their students” (2011, p. 4). He addresses the potential of the listening this way, and again, this may or may not be the listening that follows an educational interruption.

Nevertheless, potential may exist for all of these possibilities:

The classical Greek word for one who comforts is *paraclete*, which translates literally as ‘one who comes to walk alongside.’ There are moments, short or long,

in compassionate listening when all we may do is be copresent with the other, though creative moments may follow. Such occasions are sometimes a beginning, sometimes an end, sometimes both, often unachievable, and sometimes better avoided. Instead of seizing solace, succor may seize us. (Garrison, 2011, p. 5)

The compassion to listen and the willingness to attend fully and care for one's students requires an openness of which Freire (1998) speaks. He tells us, "to live in openness toward others and to have an open-ended curiosity toward life and its challenges is essential to educational practice" (Freire, 1998, pp. 120 - 121). He continues, "to live this openness toward others respectfully and, from time to time, when opportune, critically reflect on this openness ought to be an essential part of the adventure of teaching" (Freire, 1998, pp. 120 - 121). It is necessary, then, to be open oneself to all that life has to offer, and, in doing so, be open to one's students and one's self. An openness to share, and openness to listen, and an openness to care will all give rise to educational interruptions, because there is no continuity that must not, at one time or another, be broken for the well-being of both the teacher and students. As Freire (1998) says, "my openness to caring for the well-being of my students has to do with my openness to life itself, to the joy of living" (p. 125). What does this openness really mean? Freire explains that he must live in a "specifically human mode of action" (p. 125):

This openness to caring for the well-being of the students does not mean of course that, as a teacher, I am obliged to care for all my students in the same way. What it does mean is that I am not afraid of my feelings and that I know how to express myself effectively in an appropriate and affirming way. It also means that I know how to fulfill authentically my commitment to my students in the context of a specifically human mode of action. In truth, I feel it is necessary to overcome the false separation between serious teaching and the expression of feeling. It is not a foregone conclusion, especially from a democratic standpoint, that the more serious, colder, distant and gray I am in my relations with my students in the course of teaching them, the better a teacher I will be. (Freire, 1998, p. 125)

Openness can translate to what Noddings (1984) calls a “receptive state” (p. 30). She further states that, “the receptive or relational mode seems to be essential to living fully as a person” (p. 35). What she means by this “receptive state” is this: “I do not project; I receive the other into myself, and I see and feel with the other. I become a duality” (p. 30). Both Noddings (1984) and Freire (1998) speak to the fact that the way they see themselves in the world is an essential defining component of the way that they relate to others.

Smith (1985) takes us from receptiveness right back to openness when he says, “there is another virtue besides receptivity that should be at the center of the pupil-teacher relationship: that is ‘openness’” (p. 34). He says, “education is in part a concealing process, like art, leaving unsaid and unrevealed gaps into which a person can expand” (p. 35). English’s “gaps” (2007, p. 137) are not different from Smith’s, nor do these gaps differ from the “gap” to which Biesta (2004) refers. Biesta tells us that “it is precisely the in between that makes any communication and any existence of meaning possible” (2004, p. 20). His interpretation of a teacher’s openness means that teachers are willing to:

...acknowledge the existence of the gap as a space of enunciation that is brought into existence only as a result of the common effort of teachers and learners, a space that exists only in communication. To go into the gap, to ‘descend into that alien territory,’ entails both a risk and an opportunity. The risk is clear: The space of enunciation is in a very fundamental and practical sense unpredictable. Yet it is at the same time the space in which speaking becomes possible; it is the space, in other words, where people - individual, singular beings - can reveal who they are, can come ‘into presence.’ (2004, pp. 21 - 22)

Enunciation is “the action of giving definite expression to” (“enunciation,” *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. 1989). Thus, Smith (1985) says that receptivity leads to

openness, and Biesta (2004) tells us that openness must lead to an acknowledgment and awareness of the gap between the teacher and student (p. 20). The teacher's open recognition and acknowledgment of this gap will allow him or her to take the risk of real communication.

Creating Space

Greene (1988) is referring to freedom when she says that "spaces have to be opened in the schools and around the schools; the windows have to let in the fresh air" (p. 137). She reminds us of all the teachers who do not have the space and freedom to "reveal who they are," as Biesta (2004, pp. 21 - 22) says, but instead, who "see present demands and prescriptions as obstacles to their own development, or how many find it difficult to breathe" (Greene, p. 137, 1988). She asserts that, "there may be thousands who, in the absence of support systems, have elected to be silent" (Greene, 1988, p. 14). But it is up to the teacher to act, to open these spaces, to refrain from being silent, and to create space that allows for the possibility of communication. Greene (1988) tells us that, "we might think of freedom as an opening of spaces as well as perspectives, with everything depending on the actions we undertake in the course of our quest" (p. 5). If it is the quest of the teacher to pursue communication and meaning for herself and for her students, then it is "precisely the in between that will [make it] possible" (Biesta, 2004, p. 20).

Teachers must be responsible for making these spaces arise, as Greene (1978) says:

To find ourselves 'in delight of experiencing' requires a transaction with the world, an ongoing transaction with 'qualities and forms.' This kind of transaction may be thought of in terms of acts of consciousness, meaning a series of moments in which we *grasp* what is given, in which we thrust into the world. To be aware

of such moments is to be sensitive to the ways in which we originate them; it is to be conscious of the fact that we are the motivators of what is happening, that we are subjects responsible to and for ourselves. (1978, pp. 199 - 200)

Teachers, through their interruptions, make their own opportunities to “thrust into the world,” and teachers make the transactions possible. In these spaces created by interruption, it is then possible for “...the listener becomes united with the composer” (Greene, 1978, p. 200). Who is the composer? Who is the listener? It can be the teacher; it can be the student. The point is that the space provides opportunity for transaction. It provides opportunity for communication. It provides opportunity for student and teacher alike to “reveal who they are” and “come ‘into presence’” (Biesta, 2004, p. 22).

I imagine the space created by the interruption allows students to just *be*, and for the teacher to be himself. Perhaps the interruption of the telling break is a reminder of a shared present moment, shared presence, and shared existence. It may be that telling breaks provide the perforations that are otherwise not allowed for by the prescribed curriculum of the class. The “lost spontaneity” of which Greene (1984) speaks is perhaps something that the teacher can regain through her telling breaks and model for the student. Greene (1984) says “openings are what are needed, openings and a consciousness of multiple realities.” One of these “realities” includes the time when a teacher breaks to *tell*, and the space this break opens up. Greene (1988) says, “a teacher in search of his/her own freedom may be the only kind of teacher who can arouse young persons to go in search of their own” (p. 14). Perhaps this telling on the part of the teacher, this expression of her freedom, is exactly the space that is needed to provide for “enunciation” as Biesta (2004) calls it. Freire (1998) reminds us, “the freedom that moves

us, that makes us take risks, is being subjugated to a process of standardization of formulas and models in relation to which we are evaluated” (p. 102). Teachers who are “constrained by state action plans and testing mechanisms” (Greene, 1988, p. 14) may still be able to create space if they are willing to take the risk to tell. Teachers must be willing to risk, willing to tell, and willing to speak their truth. Freire says, “to teach right thinking is not something that is simply spoken of or an experience that is merely described. But something that is done and lived while it is being spoken of, as if the doing and living of it constituted a kind of irrefutable witness of its truth” (1998, p. 42). Thus, a teacher’s telling break may be the result of listening, receptivity, of openness, and of a willingness to speak his or her own mind: “...the space of the democratic-minded teacher who learns to speak by listening is interrupted by the intermittent silence of his or her own capacity to listen, waiting for that voice that may desire to speak from the depths of its own silent listening” (Freire, 1998, p. 104).

Conclusion

In this chapter I have explained that my study of the educational interruption is situated in a larger conversation about interruptions. I have described vocabulary from managerial studies and explored possible conceptual dimensions to use from the philosophical literature. In the next chapter, I will analyze the student interviews in light of the conceptual dimensions from the philosophical literature. This analysis of the interviews, in turn, will serve as yet another framework with which to see the telling breaks. In Chapter 4, I will combine the vocabulary from the student interviews with the vocabulary from the nine telling breaks from six different novels. In the fifth and final

chapter, I will present the theoretical model built from the conceptual dimensions of the telling break, as they will arise out of the analysis in Chapter 4.

CHAPTER 3

IN THE WORDS OF STUDENTS: TEACHERS' TELLING

In this chapter I will present my interviews with eighteen students at the high school where I teach. Hoping not to give away too much to them, I never asked them to tell me about interruptions their teachers make. Instead, I simply asked them to tell me about stories their teachers tell. In doing so, students provided me with a diverse set of responses, as the narrative of each interview shows.

At times I could not help but become curious about what a student might tell me, and I dug more deeply. At least two metaphors are the result. Ian creates the “interesting teacher switch” above the board that would light up if a teacher were telling a story, and James explains that listening to a teacher’s telling of a story is like taking a “sojourn” that “alleviates the situation.”

A spectrum begins to emerge, as you will see, in which teachers’ telling of stories ranges from the typical “tangent,” to personal narratives, to funny “little quips,” to “refreshing diversions.” Students use many different terms to explain their experiences listening to their teachers. Often they use the word “friend” to explain how they “connect” to their teachers who openly tell them personal things. They say that these experiences are a “link” into the lives of their teachers. On the other hand, some students experience deep frustration with the teachers they believe tell too much.

Interviews with Students

Ian

I say to Ian, as I say at the start of every interview, “Tell me about stories your teachers tell.” “Stories my teachers tell,” he repeats, and then pauses to think. He begins by telling me first about Mr. Taylor, then about Mr. Green:

Well, I guess the first story-telling teacher I can think of would be Mr. Taylor. Mr. Taylor has loads of childhood stories that he can tell us - little quips about everything from this first job to an interesting incident with his high school’s donkey basketball game where everyone was playing basketball riding donkeys. All of his stories kind of break up the class, but he’s good at getting back on topic after he’ll tell a story, whereas Mr. Green is kind of in the other spectrum. Green’s class is kind of based around him telling stories, but you take that class going into it knowing that’s what it is. Like, it’s a senior year class. You take that class because you want to have a good time and get to know Mr. Green.

“Tell me what you mean by a quip,” I say.

He explains:

Well, if someone says something in class, like someone will shout something out, make a joke, Taylor has a relevant story, then he doesn’t mind taking a break from whatever lecture we were on to give us a little story about something interesting that happened to him. It kind of makes class more interesting. I mean, that’s why everyone loves Mr. Taylor so much as a math teacher.

I decide to lead Ian into the next description by asking him very specifically to “tell me about that moment when a teacher is speaking in a teacher voice and teaching a lesson, and you’re taking notes, and it’s just going along, and then, all of a sudden there’s a turn, a change, a switch.”

His face lights up in recognition and it is clear he knows what I mean. He describes it for me this way:

I guess it would be like, you go into note-taking mode, where you kind of put all interesting thoughts out of your head, because...it’s really easy, for me at least, to just spend time in my own head, and just daydream and think about stuff, but if I want to actually take notes and learn, then I have to push all that away and focus

on like, pen and paper, little blue lines, like white space in between and all that, and then, you just kind of go into that. You write down everything on the board. You try to get it down as fast as you can and you like, 'cause you know if you get it done you can go over it and learn. So, you just go into straight up copying mode. And then, randomly, he'll be like, all right, let's see what's on the *New York Science Times* today, and everything's just like, Aw, Thank God. And you go back to being a person again, I guess, instead of just someone taking notes. And you still have all the knowledge that you just gained right there, but it kinda like breaks up the class. It makes the monotonous hour-long period a little bit more bearable. Although Taylor isn't like that every day. We do have a couple of very serious, hour long lecture periods. It sucks, but it is what it is.

Ian's description leads him to tell me more about Mr. Taylor, in general. I let him continue:

A lot of unfortunate things have been happening to him this year, also, with like his parents. We've had to see things him getting a phone call and going outside to take the phone call, and then he just opened the door and was like, 'My mother-in-law just died. It was very unexpected. I can't handle this. Ah, be good for the rest of class. You're bad people if you're not.' And then he just walked out. And we were all just like, dumbfounded, like jaw-dropped, looking at each other. We sat there like good people, though. No one dared do anything wrong after that happened. So, through that he kind of taught us that he was a trusting guy, that he, even when we were taking the final test of the year, the huge practice AP test - he's willing to leave the class and say that if you guys are going to cheat on a practice AP test then you're bad people. No one really cheats. Like, him trusting us kind of holds us honest in like a guilt way because he's likeable and personable. We wouldn't want to screw him over like that.

I ask Ian whether there are people who do not tell stories. He tells me there have been, but that they "don't really stand out in [his] mind."

"Why?" I ask. He says:

'Cause they just didn't make themselves available as a person. But, I guess some people see themselves like that. It's my job to be a teacher and not like their friend. I kind of feel like that's how a lot of teachers see it.

I say to Ian, "Earlier you said that you 'go back to being a person again.' What word is best to describe what you feel when that happens? How would you describe that moment when a teacher does make that change? I don't want to put any words in your mouth,

‘cause then it kind of ruins it, but what word describes best that time?” “Relief,” he answers. I continue to push him to describe the event and he says, “Let’s see, give me a second.” He tells me he will “come up with a good word,” and then he sits there, thinking. Finally, Ian says, “camaraderie.” I feel so sure that he is very close to describing the exact moment of the teacher’s interruption that I cannot resist continuing to pry this out of him, so I say:

So, you’re describing teacher action. Teacher speak, teacher words, teacher action. Mr. Taylor’s writing equations on the board. He’s just writing and teaching and writing and teaching and speaking and writing, and then, it stops. It turns. It shifts. It becomes something else. How would you describe that? It does catch your interest. It *is* that time when, as you say, you ‘go back to being a person again.’ What would you call it?

Suddenly on to what I am asking, and he says:

I think it’s easier to use even a metaphor rather than just one word. It’s kind of like flipping a light switch, almost. If one switch is teacher, and one switch is interesting teacher, flip it down for teacher lesson. Flip it back up when you’re about to go into story mode. Like, there’s a little light above the board that’s like, you’ll be interested when this light lights up, and Mr. Taylor would be writing on the board and just be like, ‘Did I ever tell you about my first job working in a pet shop when I killed this iguana?’

Then I ask him to describe how he feels when this happens. He tells me:

Well, I wouldn’t say that we’re exactly like friends, but we’re like, friendly with each other. It’s more than just, he’s my teacher. I think he’s a great guy, too, because of it. And I guess with other teachers, I’m actually good friends with them. It definitely makes them more personable. Someone that you’ll talk to in the hallway. Accessible.

I ask Ian to describe what he means by “accessible.” He says:

Well, there are teachers who see themselves as teachers, and then I feel like there are teachers who see themselves as more than that. Like, just educators in general. If someone views themselves only as a teacher, then they’re like, ‘I teach algebra to these kids,’ but if someone views themselves as an educator, then they don’t really care if it’s only algebra that they’re teaching them, as long as the people they’re teaching learn things. Like, Mr. Green teaches us more life lessons than he does anything about comparative politics or government. I mean, sure we

learn some stuff about government, maybe, but, we learn more about life in college, and what's going on right now, current events, stuff that actually has relevance to what we're thinking about and talking about.

I ask, "How do you feel in relation to him?" Ian says:

Like a friend. He's kind of like a father figure of the school, almost. Like, someone who is just known for, if you need advice, you come and talk to him about it. Because he'll have a few wise slash crazy slash hilarious words to put in on the situation...

Ian tells me that Mr. Green "still seems to understand being a teenager a lot, mostly 'cause I think, he kinda still wants to be one, but that's why he's a good teacher." He says, "I think he enjoyed being young a lot more than a lot of people do." "How do you know that?" I ask him. "'Cause he always tells us about things that he's done." Ian ends our interview by describing for me the way that Mr. Green held class on his fiftieth birthday:

His fiftieth birthday he gave us this hilarious speech and ended up quoting *The Graduate*. But he's like, being around kids all the time has kept him young, and I love that. Like, he thinks that if he hadn't been a teacher that he would be a completely different 50-year old man. Instead, it was his 50th birthday, so I came in with a party horn full of confetti and blew it all over him. He was okay with it because it was his birthday, saying, 'It's my birthday, I'll walk around with confetti all over me in my classroom if I want to.'

James

James tells me that Mrs. Creedon has many stories, and that they are "generally about her family." He says that they are "about certain events that have impacted her and that also relate to health." He says, too, that, "they always add to what we're learning." He compares this to another teacher's stories. "Ms. Copper talks about her daughter and her son a lot, not as much as Mrs. Creedon, of course, but she does talk about them, but those stories are never related to what we're learning." He says, those stories are "just there just for fun." He tells me:

And they add to the experience because um, they sort of provide a sojourn from the lesson, and what we're doing in class, all the work and everything. And they're funny, generally, and they, too, add to my view of Ms. Copper as a cool teacher.

"And how do you feel, during these so-called 'sojourns'?" I ask him. He pauses to think, and then says:

Sojourns. Well, they're generally quite funny, like uh, different stories about how her daughter used to lock the keys in the car and uh, wear all Ms. Copper's clothes, and things like that. So they're quite funny, and they sort of alleviate the situation if we've been doing lots of math and physics for a while.

I ask him for more, saying, "What do you feel like? How do you actually behave differently when this happens?" He tells me:

Well, instead of, like, in a lesson, generally, we're focused, all the students, on the board, on what she's teaching, and when she, ah, takes this sojourn, sort of, when we all take this sojourn, sort of sit back and relax and smile and just listen to the story.

"Can you describe that moment when you see that there's the turn?" I ask James.

From teaching to a story? Uh, well, you know, I sort of just sit back in my seat, and I know that something funny's going to happen pretty soon, because that's generally how Ms. Copper's stories are, and Mrs. Creedon, too, for the most part, so, I sort of set aside the work that we're doing at the time, and focus not on the lesson and on how my teacher is teaching, but on this other part of her life, or whatever the story's about, and so, you know, I feel quite a bit, much more relaxed, and, ah, I generally smile and sort of just enjoy the moment.

I ask him, "These moments, are there ever too many of them?" He replies, "No, not really." He tells me, "Definitely not in Ms. Copper's class." On the other hand, he says that in Mrs. Creedon's class there is a story "almost every day:"

And one may say that may be a little too much because a good portion of our class time goes to stories, but health is not really a subject where you have to learn equations and math and stuff, so the stories do add a lot of value to health class because they're usually related to health and they add to Mrs. Creedon's character which is just as important as...on the other hand in a physics class we don't need as many, well, it's not that we don't *need* as many it's just that we

don't have as many because we're more focused on learning the equations, or whatever we're learning.

"How does hearing these stories make you feel?" I ask James. He says, "By knowing more about her life and about her family, it sort of makes me feel more connected to Mrs. Creedon, because I know her more as a person, rather than just a teacher who's giving me notes and things like that." I ask James, "Why is it so important that you know your teacher as a person?"

Because knowing my teacher as a person makes me first of all, less afraid to ask questions and more inclined to listen to her while she's teaching and giving notes, whereas if I didn't know my teacher as well, then I would just consider my teacher as me going to class to learn things, not to have an enjoyable educational experience. Uh, in Mrs. Creedon's and Ms. Copper's class we have fun quite a bit because of the stories, because I know them as teachers and as people because I know how they laugh in their little funny ways and things like that.

He follows this by saying, "It seems as though the teachers care for me more and notice me more as a person even though it's really just me noticing the teacher, or, as more of a person." In light of this statement, I decide to ask James to summarize what he has learned from telling me about stories his teachers tell:

I have made this connection between teachers' telling me stories and me getting a better educational experience, even though I'm not the one sharing my stories to the teacher, the teacher still feels closer to me, even though it's not two ways, it's sort of just one way, I still feel closer to the teacher and therefore the educational experience is more fun and better.

Kim

Kim begins, "I think most of my teachers don't tell that many stories." She says, "Yeah, like I've had a lot of serious teachers." I ask her to describe these people who do not tell stories:

Well, none of my science teachers. Dr. Simon, it was just like strictly that, and then last year Ms. Johnson, who was only here for a year. She didn't, like, tell

anything at all. And she was just strictly like teaching and didn't relate to any of the students and had attitude toward all the students.

She describes how these teachers "don't show their personality...and you have no idea what they're like at home or what their home life is like." She adds, too, that "math teachers...just kind of stick to math." She uses Mr. Peters as an example of a math teacher who does not tell stories and she says, "he's just kinda like, you don't really know his personality at all." Kim contrasts this with a description of Ms. Rodriguez:

But then other teachers put their personality into it, like Ms. Rodriguez, like, her personal stories that she told like made the class more fun, but then you also saw that she's not just a teacher, she's like a real person, and you can like relate to her and like she all made us like cry from laughing. I really like that.

I ask Kim what she means by "personal stories" and she says, "Just like past experiences they have, like, maybe when they were younger that we could relate to and learn from." She goes on to describe Mr. Carpenter, who "doesn't really teach much history...but he just told all these crazy stories that really showed *him*, what he was like when he was our age, so then we just kinda related that to history."

Kim describes Mr. Taylor and explains to me that he, too, tells personal stories:

Mr. Taylor's different than a lot of teachers. He's like a less serious teacher and he'll go off on like tangents of random stories and it makes the class more fun and then we get back to statistics, but at the same time I can relate to him more than most other teachers 'cause he'll go into his own life and tell personal stories.

I ask what it feels like to be in a class when a teacher tells stories, when he "goes into his own life," as she says, and Kim tells me:

I *hate* the classes that are just pure like lecture and everything, and it just, gives you a little break from, like in that class, it's statistics, so you can break out. It just makes you feel more comfortable with the teacher and that class and you know that he's a real person not just like a teacher.

She explains to me that whether the story or the break relates or not, she still enjoys it:

Sometimes if it has to do with what we're learning than it's better to relate to what we're learning, so you can like learn it in a different way, rather than just like hear the facts. But even if it's not what you're learning, it's just - I just like it. It's like a good break.

When I ask Kim to clarify what she means by a "break," she tells me that it "calms her down." She says, "You're not like intensely worrying about copying and getting everything he says 'cause then you don't have to - if you miss a detail in his story it's not really a big deal." She repeats herself, saying, "So you're just kinda like, calming down..."

I ask Kim to describe for me what kind of relationship she has with the people who do not tell stories. She says that she has "not really any relationship." She says, "it's not as comfortable," that "it's just kinda like, 'I don't really know anything about you, so...'"

I ask her why it makes her comfortable to know something about her teachers. Kim explains, "Well, for me, I'm more comfortable around my friends than like strangers, so it's like the same thing with your teachers, they're more like your friends."

I ask Kim if she can relate "tangents" to friendship and she answers immediately:

Yeah. Like, I think the teacher going on a tangent is them like trying to open up to you and become closer and show their other side and that way you can become closer and realize that you can trust them or like be friends with them or relate to them.

Kim contrasts Ms. Rodriguez again with Mr. Carpenter when I ask her whether there is a difference in the way that teachers tell these stories, the way they follow these tangents:

Like, Ms. Rodriguez is really good at it with her stories and they're easy to relate to and other teachers tell crazy stories, like Mr. Carpenter's, that I could never even imagine happening, so I saw more connection with Ms. Rodriguez than I would ever see with Mr. Carpenter.

Finally, I ask Kim to describe the moment when a teacher stops teaching to tell a story and her whole face lights up as she says:

It's almost like, is it like reality, kinda? Like, the day Ms. Rodriguez told this rat story, when I was sitting in the front row, I was like falling, crying from laughing, I was like wow, am I in school right now, is that really a teacher telling us stories? She like acted it out. She got behind the desk and crawled on the floor. You don't normally see teachers crawling on the floor and stuff. I was like, oh, this is really fun, like I'm not just intensely taking notes. Like, it was exciting, I guess.

She laughs, remembering. "What do you mean by reality?" I ask her. Kim says, "When you're in class, you're taking notes, you're just kinda going through the motions, whatever, and then, you're laughing, you're interacting, it's like, real, like, it's not just, you're actually like, involved. I ask her whether she can anticipate this experience and she says, "It just comes up out of nowhere." I ask her whether a story is planned and she says, "Not normally, it just kinda happens."

Nathan

Nathan begins, "There's always stories teachers can tell." He proceeds to tell me the sorts of stories his teachers have told, beginning with, "I mean, you know, the usual ones you'll hear are stories they've had teaching, because they don't want to talk about their personal life, it feels like they're boxed up." He was my student the year before, and tells me, "I remember your stories." He says that the content of teachers' stories is usually about "accidents, or people they've seen, or stuff, you know, going on at home." He tells me that Mr. Thomas tells "funny stories about previous students from the years before that would do funny things."

I say, "Tell me about what it feels like to sit in somebody's class when they start telling a story." Nathan's face lights up at this and he leans forward to tell me:

I feel. It's good. It's good. And I mean, as a student with ADD, myself, I can't concentrate, but when there's something interesting and a teacher can sit there and tell a funny story, like, you know, I'll tell you this story that happened a couple years ago. Or, you know, then you're just listening. You know, it's like, you know, you know, you feel like you have something with the teacher.

Uninterrupted, he continues. I know this from having taught him the year before that

Nathan has strong opinions about school being a "prison," and teachers the wardens:

I mean, if I'm paying attention, it's just kinda like, you know, this is so boring, I got another hour of this. It feels like prison. You know, no one at this age understands, you know what, gosh, you know, I really gotta learn this because I'm taking it the rest of my life. Even though what, even if the teacher can be rambling on, it's important still. But it's hard for everyone - you know to like this to think, oh this is fun. You know, it's hard to wake up every morning and say oh, I want to do this crap, you know. So when a teacher goes to that, it's kinda like a spark, you're just like, I wanna listen now. You know, I'd rather get on something more interesting.

When he says that a "teacher goes to that," he means that a teacher is telling a story. I hear him say "it's kinda like a spark," and I ask him, "What does it feel like?" He smiles and laughs as he answers and says, as though I should know what he means already, "It feels kinda good. I get like a jump, kinda like...it's not like your heart's like, oh ho ho...you know." I encourage him to continue describing what it feels like to hear a teacher telling a story by asking, "What do you do with your body?" He describes it this way:

You just turn, you pull your head up and your eyes kinda open, and you just listen, and you're like, you know, just like, you know, just thinking about it, and then, you know, having a laugh after that, you know. I, I think, that, it all depends, because, you know, when a teacher tells a story there's always funny stuff and interesting stuff and you can, you can laugh. You know, certain classes are very lenient with that.

He explains that this leniency on the part of the teacher means that in response to the stories they tell the students can get away with "saying things, kind of inappropriate, you know," thing that they could "get in trouble" for. He cites Mr. Green and Mr. Taylor as

two teachers who “understand that students are also more mature,” and says, “They’re cool like that.” He is describing the classroom atmosphere that results from the teacher’s willingness to tell stories and “funny stuff,” and he continues by telling me how it feels when a teacher interrupts to tell a story:

That feeling, when teachers, specifically, you know, when they change the topic...you know it’s kinda like aw, something new, and you look forward to it. Not really looking forward to – oh I can’t wait ‘til next class, or you know, it’s kind of like you go in and you’re like, okay, I’m gonna pay attention in this class and it’s not like you’re telling yourself, you just do it. You know, you’re just like, let’s work together, or this is actually fun. You know, you start getting into it more.

As a student who has a very difficult time staying focused and paying attention, Nathan explains that he is able to listen with less effort when he knows he can “look forward” to “something new” from a teacher. This behavior on the part of his teacher is something that helps him “[get] into it more.”

I decide to ask Nathan whether his manner of relating to teachers, and the depth of his relationships with teachers, might be related to their ability to tell stories. He is passionate in his response, and very clear that some people tell stories and some people decidedly do not:

Yes. Yes. You can tell because some teachers are open with everyone. Some aren’t. Some aren’t open with anyone. And, I mean, there’s a few teachers that I know, that I’ve had stories with about their personal life that I’m sure that other people wouldn’t want to know. And you know it’s just, you know, sometimes you can tell when something’s on someone’s mind, or if they’re going through something, you know? And it’s kinda like, it bugs you, you know, you can tell if it’s affecting the way they teach. If they don’t want to tell stories, or if they’re kinda very, you know, locked on them, they tell them at a low base, plain and simple. It’s kinda like this person doesn’t trust anyone, doesn’t want everyone to know, they’re just coming here to teach.

Nathan describes how he is the type of student who will inquire of a teacher what is wrong if he perceives that something is bothering her, and, as he puts it, “affecting the

way they teach.” He tells me that he will ask a teacher what is going on in her life, just to give her an outlet to tell. He did not specify whether this is in front of the whole class, or whether it is one-on-one after outside of class. He is clear about stating that this is valuable because not only does it have the potential to “help the teacher feel better,” according to Nathan, it “helps the student feel like...this teacher’s human.”

And if someone can sit there and say to their student, you know, God Damn it, I just had a fight with my mom, my boyfriend’s giving me shit, you know, I’m sick, I think I’m gonna break up with him, I’m gonna do this, you know what, I’m...my little kids over there, they’re giving me a rough time, you know, this kid has big problems already, I don’t know what he’s going to do when he’s grown up, you know, there’s teachers that’ll talk to you about, I talk to teachers about, you know, I caught my kid with drugs, what am I supposed to do now. I have school to go to.

He gives the example of his teacher, Mrs. Creedon, and tells me about a conversation they had after class:

Like Mrs. Creedon. Mrs. Creedon had a problem with her daughter. I asked her after class. I was like Mrs. Creedon, you broke down, what’s wrong? You want to tell me what’s going on? She’s like nothing, my daughter’s having problems in school again, and you know, even though people may think that student’s advice isn’t great, but just having that conversation with a teacher, it, although you would assume it would help the teacher feel better, it helps the student feel like, you know, aw, this teacher’s human, and they actually talk to you and they have stuff going on. You know?

Mrs. Creedon does tell stories to her classes, as I know from having been her colleague for a decade and as I have confirmed through interviews now with students. Apparently, she once broke down to her class and it was this to which Nathan refers in the interview. He follows up with that time in which she showed her emotions to her class by asking her what is wrong. He felt comfortable to ask her what was wrong, in part because of the person he is and in part because of the tone she must have set, that willingness to tell students about what is going on in one’s personal life.

The final question I ask Nathan is this: “Why is that understanding on your part as the student that your teacher is human so important to your relationship with the teacher?”

Nathan relates the following:

Because it feels like you’re closer to them. And not even like you’re closer, it’s not like you’re trying to find, you know, your new best friend, teachers are adults. But I mean, it feels like they are, they can open up to you. And if they can open up, they’re also people, and you know, when they open up, they can open up more with you, and then more with the class, and if they open up, then they’re more happy. The positive side is when they open up, it’s great. They can open and discuss anything with you.

To Nathan, “when they open up, it’s great.” The openness of a teacher makes him feel “closer to them,” even though, as he puts it, he is not “trying to find” his “new best friend.” For him, the effort of paying attention is offset when a teacher stops to tell, and anything is easier to listen to than the curriculum. A teacher who “opens up” is “more happy,” and someone Nathan can handle listening to for the duration.

Tommy

Tommy tells me, “through the year [teachers] begin to tell you a little bit about themselves, like in like small conversations you might have with them, maybe about like their dog, or like their nephew, or something like that.” He says that as the year goes on he usually gets to know his teachers: “you kinda get to know them really well, actually.”

I ask him why this important and he says:

’Cause as you get close to your teacher, ‘cause like I mean in classrooms in an hour you’re not going to have like every single day an hour and you go straight to work and all that stuff so basically you have a lot of conversations about private life and about like...and through the stuff you can kinda infer about like who they are, what kind of person they are.

He gives the example of Mr. Pitt:

Like Mr. Pitt, you can tell that he’s like kind of taciturn, like, doesn’t really talk very much, but as the year goes on though he’s really, he’s actually kinda like my

dad, he has these subtle jokes that are really funny, so you kinda get to know that he's really an amiable guy, right, and you actually can have a nice conversation with him. And then you learn about - he has pictures of his daughter there, and then lacrosse, he talks a lot about lacrosse, and then uh, all sorts of stuff.

He relays a story Mr. Pitt once told:

Oh, yeah, yeah, he actually did tell us a story about one time, in his college, I don't know which one he went to, but uh, so it was like one time at a test he went, he woke up late and went there twenty minutes late and then he uh - he's a fast test taker so he took the test, uh, quickly, but then the professor told him that uh, just tapped him on the shoulder, 'Yeah, don't show up next time.' Something like that.

I remind Tommy that I have asked him to tell me about stories his teachers tell, and he tells me that the teacher "gets off on a tangent:"

Well, they're mainly about their lives outside of school. Basically like you'll be talking about something, and then your teacher will start like uh, your teacher will get off on a tangent and tell you about something that happened in their personal lives that relates to it.

I ask him, "What does it feel like when the teacher's doing this?" He tells me it's "really cool:"

Oh, it feels actually, it feels really cool. 'Cause like it's really interesting 'cause you're with your teacher like throughout the entire year and it's kinda like mysterious, 'cause like all the teachers are a figure of learning, like she's teaching you, and all that, so then like, it's tough to imagine, I mean like, I mean like well, you know that she has a life but it's like she has a life and pretty much isn't always with us. And does the same things as us. So when she tells us this it's like wow, that's really cool, they do that kind of stuff, so it's really cool, like the stories that they tell are really interesting.

I ask Tommy to explain more about why he enjoys the stories and he tells me that their stories make him feel closer to his teachers:

Oh, when they tell you stories it makes you, it brings you more close to them because you get more on a personal level with them. You know what I mean? So it's like, it's kind of like, um, like, it's breaking like the professional barrier, kind of like, more personal, and so you start to appreciate your teachers a little bit more, and you can have like, you have more conversations with them, and all

that stuff, so basically, it makes it less awkward, I think it breaks the tension, maybe, with a teacher, student relationship. It's actually two people talking to each other, not just a teacher and a student, they're people.

I ask him, "Is there ever a time when you wish it weren't happening?" Tommy tells me, "Not really, because when they do tell us these stories it's very rare, so then you're like ah, that's pretty cool, that they actually told you these stories so, it rarely happens, so then you uh, pretty much like when it does happen, you're not regretting anything, you know."

Tommy describes these events as he experiences them:

During the lectures, and once a teacher starts joking around - usually the stories they tell are funny stories, pretty much, right. So usually the teacher's joking around, so when the teacher's starts talking on a more personal level, stops lecturing and starts talking maybe as a person, I'm not saying teachers aren't people, but as like a personal level, and then all the students start like kinda tuning in a little bit more, they start laughing...

I ask Tommy whether he knows when this will happen, and what he feels when it does:

Well, the anticipation. You can kinda sense when it happens, 'cause when a student asks a question and the teacher kind of answers it but then she goes off onto a tangent, and then you kinda know, and also maybe at the end of a lecture, when she's done and there's some time left over, then she might start talking about something, maybe what she's doing over the weekend, or what's gonna happen, or something like that, so then uh. And then it's kinda like it goes immediately, like the atmosphere just completely changes. It goes from immediately, you're taking notes, like you're just paying attention and all that, and then like, something when she starts talking to you, you get like relaxed, and it's like a lot more fun.

I say, "Tell me why it's important that you know that your teachers really are people.

Why is that so important to you? You've said that a couple of times." Tommy tells me that "it's kinda like awkward being taught by a, a what's it called, like kind of a robot."

He says:

You know, as a kid, like when you were five years old you even thought that your teachers slept at school. And all that. And just like woke up and then all her life was school. But you kinda need to know that your teacher's life doesn't only revolve around the, uh, what's going on in the classroom.

I ask him how he feels about the teachers who do not tell stories and he tells me, “It’s not like I disrespect them or look down on them, it’s just that like I’m not as close to them so...they’re on a completely professional level with me - like, I just go in there, learn, and then I get out..”

I ask Tommy if there is a downside to teachers’ telling stories:

Well, maybe a teacher might tell a story that like I might not like, but then that’s about it, even though that rarely happens, or maybe a student might just be like annoyed - they run out of time. Other than that, I don’t think a student will come away after that worse than they were before, you know? The stories happen like, so - not incredibly rarely - but they happen like small, they rarely happen. So then when it does happen, it’s good for the student and it’s a time that they get insight on a teacher’s life, so it’s interesting to them.

Tommy finishes his thoughts by commenting upon the relationships that teachers form with their students. He admits that he is making an assumption, but for a moment he puts himself into the shoes of the teacher - his idea - and imagines how they feel and why they might tell their students personal stories. He tells me:

I’m just assuming this - I’m not sure - but when [a teacher] grows to feel really close, they build a relationship with these kids, and all that, so it kinda just happens for them, just like with your friends and all - you tell them your personal stuff ‘cause you’re close with them and you trust them. So teachers kinda like feel the same way, they start feeling close with [their students], not really about trust, but they start feeling more comfortable with the kids and all that, so then they tell the kids the stories. That’s why. That’s what I think. So I don’t think they tell stories knowing that after the story we know that they have a life or something like that, I think they tell us the stories for *them*...it makes them feel more comfortable with the students, and it makes them enjoy their job a little more.

Bill

Bill brings up Mr. Taylor and says that the stories he tells are “very unrelated to what we’re doing in the class.” He gives this example:

Mr. Taylor just starts off like saying, so I was driving this morning, and I saw some geese, and then one of them was mating with the other, and he compares them to other, like, insects and stuff. And that actually makes us laugh, the whole class, and then he told us a lot of side jokes in there...

In addition to the humor they provide, he says that the stories are a way to get to know about his teachers:

Well, I think we get to know a lot about them just by them sharing their life stories and experiences of what they have. Like when, during class, all of a sudden, out of nowhere, they just start a story and tell us what happened, how it happened, and it doesn't relate to anything we're doing but they just say it and that makes us get a feeling for their personality. So, it makes us understand who they are to us.

He remarks upon the suddenness of these life stories: they come "out of nowhere." But he also says that they enable him to "get a feeling for [the teacher's] personality." I ask him what he means by "out of nowhere," after this, and he says:

I mean, like we're doing a problem, and he sees that we're all bored, the teacher, so he just makes up a story to make us more excited, into the problem. So if it's a story, like about animals or something, he either makes up a story or he has a story so he'll just say it to us. Which will get us interested and not bored and into the subject.

He says that Mr. Taylor "sees that [they're] all bored." He says that when Mr. Taylor tells a story it makes them "more excited," more "into the problem." He adds that these stories are "very funny," and that "he does it very naturally." Bill makes a point to tell me, "it's not pre-planned or anything." I asked Bill whether he can ever tell that a story is coming, and he says:

It actually depends. Like if he's teaching something important and he has a serious mood. So, he, at the beginning of the class he goes, okay, we really need to get this done by the end of the class. So it's going to be a serious kind of lecture thing. So you know you're not in for much, when you begin the class, but then suddenly he goes off into a tangent, and, he starts making us laugh again.

I ask Bill, “And what does it feel like when he does that, when you say he goes off onto a tangent?” Bill tells me, “It feels good.” He explains, “Like, it feels exciting and makes us want to learn more.” I press him for more and ask “What thoughts do you have in your mind when that happens?” He continues, “It’s like, we’re studying and all of a sudden he starts, so, when he starts telling a story you just put your pencil down and relax. And listen for a bit.” I ask him how that makes him feel and he says, “Calm and relaxed, rather than concentrated studying.”

Bill tells me he gets to know Mr. Taylor better from his “narrating random experiences of his life,” and from the fact that “he just says things out of nowhere.” I ask him why he wants to know about his teachers and he tell me, “Because they’re the ones teaching you and you’d rather have a good understanding of what they are before they tell you the stuff that you need to know.”

Kyle

I ask Kyle to tell me about stories his teachers tell and he tells me this:

Usually teachers tell stories about their childhood, sometimes, to connect with us, or, they’ll tell us funny stories to make us happy, and funny, to make us laugh, ‘cause like sometimes, when teachers teach long lectures, sometimes, like, they try to tell us a funny story to try to get us back on track, sometimes, like, a relief, almost, like to get back working. Or, they tell funny moments, or like strange moments, like that.

I ask him, “What emotions and thoughts go through your mind when a teacher’s telling a story?” He says:

You actually, like, you actually connect with them. A lot of the time, like...friends. That’s a thing friends do a lot. They tell stories to each other, so that it’s actually like forming like a friendship, more than like your teacher-student relationship, it’s actually like a friend to friend relationship that you’re forming.

“And what do you *feel* when you’re listening to someone tell a story?” He tells me:

You actually feel like you feel, special that they're opening up and telling you something about them, something about their past, and you're like, oh wow. And most of the time, you connect to it, like you connect by like laughing, and making like a comment to it, stuff like that.

Then he adds, "Teachers telling stories - I think it's a very positive experience." I ask him if it is ever a negative experience. He says, "not that I've been through." He thinks for a minute and then continues by telling me, "it could be, I suppose, if it's some very personal story you don't really want to hear, but, usually, teachers won't even tell that to their students, so, I mean, if it's a regular story, that's mostly positive."

I ask him what his teachers have revealed to him through their stories, and he tells me all about Mr. Taylor:

I think teachers really reveal their personalities through their stories, and ah, like, for example, Mr. Taylor was telling me how, how he wanted to be like a rockstar his whole life, and that was his whole goal, and teaching was just a way of like, all right, I went to Princeton, I might as well get, like, a degree, so he got a math degree, and then he was like, all right, I might as well work, as I try to become a rockstar, and then now he's like, all right, forget about being a rockstar, and just focus on teaching.

Kyle continues about how he learns about his teachers as they tell stories:

And then, like, you learn more about the person rather than, 'cause, usually some teachers are just like, all right I'm gonna teach you, you're just gonna sit there, and you're just gonna listen. But then, when a teacher tells stories and stuff like that, you actually, like, want to go to class, not just for the learning, but for the environment. The environment's a lot better, 'cause you're thinking, all right, I'm learning, but there's still a chance that I might be entertained a little bit, still, I'm learning, I'm doing what I'm doing here at school, to learn, but still there's a chance he's going to tell a joke, or he's going to tell us a story. Some teacher's gonna...it's like crossing the path between just like teaching to a student and connecting to a student as well.

This causes me to ask Kyle the following leading question:

Tell me about that little switch that happens. So, your teacher is standing there, talking in teacher voice, giving his stat equations, or doing a derivative, or

whatever, school stuff, right? And you just know. What does it feel like? Describe that moment, that turn, you know what I'm talking about?

He answers:

Yeah, yeah, yeah. I feel it too, sometimes. You're sitting there, and you're like taking notes, you're like, oh, this is so much, and you feel like the burden on your head, and then, like, sometimes, you'd be writing something and he'll like stop, like look at us taking notes, and then he'll be like, he'll give us work, that's how he transitions - while we're working - he'll just like stop, and be like, oh, one day, and he'll just tell us. We go back to the concentration but it's not the concentration of taking notes, it's the concentration of listening to him telling the story.

I ask him what he feels when this happens in class and he tells me:

You feel relieved. You know you did all this work, and then you're like, oh let's listen to what he has to say, and then it becomes a story and you like get gripped onto it. And then, it kind of like, kind of helps to do the work afterwards, 'cause you just took forty minutes of notes. You don't necessarily want to do the next five problems, but the story clears your mind. It makes you settled. It makes you go back on task to work.

I ask Kyle, "Are there some teachers who never tell stories?" He says, "Yeah, I've been lucky it hasn't happened." I ask him, "Do you think there's a correlation between storytelling and how you feel about a teacher?"

I think so. I think that storytelling is basically becoming a friend with the student. It's like, forming this relationship. You know this teacher a lot better when he or she tells stories about their lives. 'Cause you're able to like connect. 'Cause that's what basically friends do. That's how you form relationships with friends. Like, oh, this happened to me that day, and you say, oh, this happened to me, and like oh we have things in common. Let's be friends. Like that. And so like the teacher relationship is gonna be a lot better if you, of course you're going to respect the teacher, that's just what you do, but you also like in the back of your mind, oh yeah, I can, he's a friendly, or is a friendly, nice person which I know a lot about and, you don't really think that about a lot of teachers, you don't really get to know your teachers in that way, and by them telling stories, you get to know them. 'Cause usually you won't go up to a teacher and ask them like oh what happened your freshman year? But when they tell you, when I was a freshman, this and this happened, you're like, oh, that's interesting. And that's the way you get to know them.

I ask Kyle, “Do you think people benefit from knowing personal details about their teacher?” He answers, “Kids get a greater respect for their teachers.”

One of my teachers, her parents are sick. I remember clearly that my attitude changed in class. I don’t want her to be upset because we’ve formed a friendship.

When I ask Kyle whether he has advice for teachers, he says:

If you’re the type of person that feels comfortable with trying to reach out, then go ahead and tell them stories, tell them things, and really try to connect with your students, ‘cause once you connect, a bond is formed with everyone and it’s a higher amount of respect, a higher amount of like, kids are not gonna purposefully cut your class, or do things to embarrass you. Usually the teachers that tell stories and connect aren’t the ones that people don’t like. They’re the teachers that students do like and they don’t make fun of them.

Annie

Annie begins by telling me that “Mrs. Watson doesn’t really get into her personal life at all.” She tells me, “Uh, she just teaches, and I actually really like that about her.” Then she tells me that that is because math “doesn’t really have anything to do with actually life - it’s just like numbers.” She continues:

And I think...I like when teachers tell stories because it makes them seem more like, like people, I guess, and not just like figures of authority, so I really do like when teachers tell stories.

On the one hand, she really likes that her math teacher does not tell anything about her personal life, and on the other hand she really likes it when teachers tell stories. She says that teachers who tell stories “seem more like people.”

I ask Annie to describe for me the moment when a teacher begins to tell a story, and here is how she describes it:

For me, that’s when I look from my paper and I want to look at their face. Like I know Ms. Bedford just lights up whenever she’s saying something and I really

want to make eye contact with her and see how excited she is about it. And then it'll make me excited. When we're just taking notes I just stare at my paper, I stare at the clock, I like, sometimes I draw, but I try and pay attention 'cause I know it'll be on a test and I just have to know it because it'll be tested, not because I want to know it.

Annie is sensitive to the look on the teacher's face who is telling the story and she feels excited from the excitement she says the teacher is expressing through telling. She describes the boredom of note taking and watching the time, doodling and trying hard to pay attention. She is moved by the happiness the teacher appears to express in her eyes and face:

But, I just think that the universal sign of when a teacher is saying something they're interested in - they just light up, you can just see it in their eyes, in their face, they just like look happy, like they want to be in school telling this, and they don't just like say it to say it.

I ask her, "What are you thinking when it's happening?" Annie tells me she "sees [her teacher] as a person:"

I'm thinking that it's like a link into their life, kind of, you see them as a person, like I said. I always get really interested and I'm really happy that they tell stories most of the time. I don't think I've ever heard a story from a teacher that was bad. That I was like, oh, they shouldn't have said that. I think it's mostly like good things that are relevant to the topic and they're important to share and learn and to relate.

I ask her to tell me about this "link" and why she wants it. She tells me that when she knows her teacher "personally," and "as more of like a friend," she is more excited about going to school:

I think when kids go to school, the majority of kids dread going to school, it's just like another boring day, but if you have a personal connection to your teachers, it makes it more fun. Like, oh, yes, I have this class next. Like, I love this teacher, and you want to go to that class and you want to learn. But if you have a teacher you don't like, you just dread it and you aren't motivated. But when you really know...you feel like you know someone personally, as more of like a friend, it makes you more willing to learn and to just not just be sitting there taking notes.

Annie looks straight at me says, “That might be something you should consider, because it helps you have a better relationship, I guess, with your teacher and makes learning easier.” I simply nod at this and she continues to tell me about the feeling she perceives of being cared for by her teachers who “say stories:”

Just by them talking about themselves, it shows you that they’re not afraid to be like vulnerable, I guess, and just by them talking you get like a sense of their like their sense of humor, and what kinds of things they like, and I think most of the time that helps you get to know them, and I don’t think I’ve ever been put off by something like a teacher said, personally, and just by them saying stories, it makes me feel like they care about us, too, and that they want us to genuinely do well and it helps us like to connect what they’re saying to what we should be learning.

Brian

Brian begins by saying that for him, “the teachers that tell the most stories are Mr. Bright and Mr. Taylor.” He adds, “and I would say they’re the funniest.” He explains that the reason they are funny to him is that “a lot of times, Mr. Taylor’s will include math humor and Mr. Bright’s will include physics humor...it’s kinda geeky, but, whatever, I like it.” I ask Brian to explain what it feels like when a teacher stops teaching to tell a story of one kind or another and he says, “I feel like you kinda get to know them a lot better through that.” For Brian, “it makes it feel a lot more personal and it makes the class more interesting, knowing that the teacher is willing to share stuff about themselves.” As a student who appreciates the humor of his teachers, he is also aware that they are sharing personal information about themselves. Knowing more about his teachers makes the class “more interesting.”

Brian mentions that his teachers who tell stories are more “approachable:”

Instead of perceiving them as a teacher, like head of the class, like, oh you gotta do what they say, it’s a lot more friendly and you feel like they’re more of a friend...and even though they’re there to teach you, it makes them a lot more approachable. And not a lot of teachers do that.

While he is aware that this is not a common occurrence, at the same time, Brian says, “knowing that there are teachers that are willing to do that...you don’t dread going to their class.” He brings up another teacher, Mr. Lewis, who “told a story about how his kids were naming their cat.” Brian is aware that while not relevant to the curriculum - “it didn’t have anything at all to do with what we were doing at the moment” - it brought humor to the class. He says, “it was so funny that we sort of dropped what we were doing and we were listening to him.” He concludes, “and I just thought that was really great.”

Sometimes, Brian says, the stories are hilarious and are somewhat related to the curriculum:

Mr. Taylor told us [a story] about when he went camping one time and ended up getting a bug bite right on his butt. Apparently when he sat on it, it made it worse and worse. So he slept on it one night and he woke up the next day and he had this huge red patch. And this was a total, total tangent away from our math class, whatever math course – I don’t even remember what it was. I think it was something about exponential growth – we were talking about the exponential growth of the mark. He gives us examples and it’s just hilarious that it makes whatever we were learning, it sort of makes a bigger impact just because of that. Just because of that story that he gave, that goes well with what we were learning.

Brian clearly appreciates the degree of relevance; more importantly, he appreciates the humor. I ask Brian how the stories make him feel and he concludes that it makes him feel like he’s “really friends with the teacher:”

It makes me happy. It feels like you belong more in the class. ‘Cause you can laugh along with what he’s saying. Like I said before, it makes you feel like you’re really friends with the teacher and not just another student in the class. And that, itself, makes the class a lot better.

Garrett

Garrett mentions Mr. Carpenter in his interview, telling me that if I haven't heard his "stories from his experience in Vietnam," that I "should sometime." He tells me that Mr. Carpenter flies helicopters and that he has "some really good stories." Garrett also mentions Mr. Taylor and asserts that "he won't tell us a story unless it comes to explaining some kind of method." But he adds that "it's usually really funny" and "he does it to entertain us." Finally, he says that Mr. Bright "tells good stories too:"

...the last one he told us was about how he threw a chicken breast outside a car window when he was driving in high school and it hit some person behind in the windshield - right in the middle. I don't know why he said it - it was totally random. Something came up and then he came up with this story, but he was trying to show us that you can do stupid things in high school. I don't know, something like that...I don't remember. But I remember the fact that he threw it and then he said that oh, the impact didn't actually break the windshield. Which was funny. It's just like interesting stories.

Garrett remembers the story, that it was random, and how funny it was. Then he explains that some people try to "draw" a teacher on a tangent. He says that "when you hear a story from a teacher it helps you better understand, just because you know something about the teacher..." It is not clear from this statement whether he means that a story helps him understand the curriculum better or understand the teacher better, but Garrett continues:

It's just interesting to know the person better. Like, um, yeah, like Mr. Bright, for example, he told us he spent his weekend trying to write formulas. It's just weird, so like, I mean he did it on Friday night, he said. I don't think he was that serious about it, but that's still interesting. Something which I wouldn't say I'd be trying, but something like, you know, from the past. I also knew that he worked as a computer tech guy and he was interested in that too. It's something which I can explore my possibilities in my future. At the same time I just know him better so if I have some problems I can just talk to him about it.

Even though Garrett does not explicitly state that Mr. Bright's openness and willingness to share details about his life with his students helps Garrett relate to him better, he does clearly say that not only is it "interesting" to know his teacher, he feels comfortable going to talk to him. Garrett concludes: "I should say that teachers should do that, once in a while, they should say a story, not a random story, but something that comes up when they think of it, they should definitely say it."

Evan

Evan tells me that "Mr. Taylor has stories that are just out of the blue, something connected to something that we were talking about, but they're always really interesting and then like, Mr. Bright always has physics stories to tell." In contrast, he says, "Um, Mrs. Brown doesn't tell stories." Then he clarifies this statement about Mrs. Brown:

Well, maybe once in a while, but she mostly tries to stay on track. And then, um, other teachers that I have don't really tell stories either. Like, every, like um twice a year maybe they'll come up with something that's like connected to what we're studying but they'll transition right into what we're studying.

He adds, "...teachers that are open to telling more stories are more open to debate and conversation."

Evan gives the example of Mr. Taylor as "a teacher that tells a lot of stories." He tells me that "it shows the students that, like, he's approachable" and that "it allows them to connect to him." I ask Evan what this means for him and he tells me, "I can connect to him - he's not on a separate plane." He tells me that he does not feel this with his humanities teachers, in general, because, according to him, "they kind of skip over the person to person part." His explanation of this is that "in the humanities courses you sit in a big group and talk or listen to a lecture, and you don't get the same person, one-on-one contact that you do in math and science."

Patrick

As soon as I ask Patrick to tell me about stories his teachers tell, he uses Mr. Green as an example and says, “Well, I know, for example, in Mr. Green’s AP government, we usually get sidetracked in that kind of open discussion classroom.” He calls it getting “sidetracked,” but when I ask him to clarify, to talk about *stories* his teachers tell, he tells me that it is in “language classes where [he] hears the most stories, ‘cause it usually kind of deals with the books or the readings that we have, that we’re doing.” He adds, “some of my best teachers have told stories that don’t relate to class but relate to life in general.” He continues:

My best teachers have taught me life lessons. Not necessarily, ah, just lessons about grammar, or science, or reading, so um, they kinda, I wouldn’t say get sidetracked, but usually tell something besides the core material of the class.

He uses “sidetracked” first to mean outside of the curriculum, but then he specifically says that a teacher teaching him a “life lesson” is not necessarily “sidetracked,” but that the material is not “core.” Patrick gives this example:

I had Ms. Douglass. She seemed like more of a human being and less like a teacher. She talked to us about her education, talked to us about her personal experiences, what she did, ah, what she was interested in, what she was applying to, and, ah, I felt like we became more like friends rather than students and teacher.

He explains that what makes her “[seem] like more of a human being” is her telling the class about her “personal experiences.” In this case, Patrick seems to believe that being “more human” means being “less like a teacher.” Because she tells the class about her life, he feels “more like friends” with this “human” person.

David

David mentions Mr. Green first. As soon as I mention teachers telling stories, he is the first teacher who comes to his mind. He describes Mr. Green's classroom environment this way: "So, in Mr. Green's class it's really easy to get off topic, so that makes the classroom prone to almost anything." He equates telling stories with "getting off topic," and he also says that this makes the classroom environment "kind of like carefree."

I ask him who is responsible for this and he says, "I *guess* it's the students, but at the same time I guess it's the teacher as well." I ask him to explain how it happens, and he gives this example:

Um, well, it's kinda like when you're reading something, but like, like when you read something, and see a word, let's say I read something and I see the word "car," I start thinking about cars. So then like if we talk about, if we're talking about the economy, and then AIG comes up, then we'll start talking about AIG CEOs and stuff like that and then it'll like, it'll just like jump all over the place. But if I were in a different classroom where, like, talking about Mrs. Sharp, then it would just be like, since no one is actually jumping, it's not like a classroom discussion, 'cause she's just talking, she's just lecturing the whole time, you don't have the opportunity to just jump off everywhere, everything just stays focused.

When David says, "It'll just jump all over the place," he means that Mr. Green does not lecture without allowing himself - as well as the students - to follow any path they choose for discussion. When he says that "no one is actually jumping" in Mrs. Sharp's class, he's contrasting Mr. Green's willingness to allow just about anything to become the topic of class discussion.

Next, David talks about Ms. Sweeney. She asked the class for advice about buying a new cell phone. He says, "I think she brought it up 'cause she was telling us that she wanted to buy a new phone and this was just to open the class. So then we just

started talking about phones.” I ask him what went through his head when this happened, to tell me all his thoughts as best he can remember them. He says, “I was thinking, why are we talking about phones? But, um, and then I think I just drifted off to my own little world and then when I tuned back in she was like, okay, that’s enough about phones, let’s start class now.” In this case, rather than following the path of the discussion on cell phones the teacher is having with the students, David “drifts off to [his] own little world.” He actually tunes out because this discussion is not drawing him in. He only “tunes back in” when Ms. Sweeney says “let’s start class now.”

I ask David, “And do you think that this is a beneficial thing?” He replies, “Oh, talking about phones?” I clarify, “No, telling stories to your students.” Despite the fact that he has just told me that he “tuned out,” David replies, “Oh, um, yeah, definitely, just cause it kind of makes the student-teacher relationship more personal.” “How so?” I ask. He explains:

Just ‘cause if we’re able to relate to our teachers then it makes it easier to, like, learn from them but also to, like, listen to them because, I guess, if your teacher is so uptight that she like can’t share anything with you, then you can’t relate to her and it just feels like you’re in different worlds. So, like, you’re not able to take what she’s saying... I mean, not that it’s not credible, just like it’s hard to listen to, you think it’s, like, too far away from where you are right now.

Somehow David jumps from having tuned out in his own example to explaining that a teacher who tells stories to his or her students is someone to whom he can relate. He explains that a teacher who is “so uptight that she can’t share anything” is someone with whom he “can’t relate.” I ask him what he means by “different worlds.” I say, “So you’re saying this idea of ‘different worlds’ and you’re saying somehow that stories...what do they do?” He replies, “Yeah, make them closer.” I press him further, “How? How does this bring the worlds closer, if that’s the metaphor you’re using?”

David uses the metaphor of “a little bridge,” trying to explain how the students were different, and how they “channeled” their energies, their attention, whatever it was they were sharing with Ms. Sweeney, into the lesson once the discussion about phones had ended. He tries to explain what he means by feeling “close to that world.”

Since we were able to relate to that we felt like closer to Ms. Sweeney just ‘cause we felt closer to that world. So it was kinda like a little bridge, I guess, the phone was, between like the teacher and the student. So, like, I guess, it was, it wasn’t really a segue into like what we were talking about that day, ‘cause I can’t really remember what we were talking about but it was like, it kind of um, since we were talking about phones it seemed like we, the unit that day, or whatever we discussed, the class seemed to discuss, everyone seemed more, they participated more and stuff like that just ‘cause we were all into the phone discussion and then we channeled that into whatever we were talking about.

According to David, being able to “relate” to his teachers means that the “different worlds” of student and teacher are “brought closer.” He says that the telling of stories is the “little bridge,” the means of bringing the two worlds a bit closer to one another. A discussion about cell phones is not a teacher’s telling a story, but it seems that in this case, it is not the story-telling, or lack thereof, that matters, but the willingness of Ms. Sweeney to “share,” or, as David puts it, to “share anything with you.” It is her willingness to share, and not the contents of the off-topic beginning to the class, that “brings the worlds closer,” at least to David, because while that very discussion is happening, he is self-admittedly in his “own little world” anyway. But when he “tunes back in” he can still feel the change that has occurred.

Bridget

Students frequently mention Mr. Taylor in their interviews. They extol him for his story-telling ability and for his willingness to stop in the middle of a lesson to talk about some random event in his daily life or tell a funny story from his high school days.

Students mention Mr. Bright in their interviews as well, citing him as a teacher who relates his “tangents” to the curriculum, but also sometimes just tells them things about who he is and the things he loves, most especially, his baby daughter. Few students give details about particular stories teachers told, but Bridget remembers and shares details from stories told by both Mr. Taylor and Mr. Bright:

I guess Taylor is like, the King of Stories. He tells a lot of stories. He has the most interesting stories about his high school days, about how he was teenager and what he did in his high school. And he also tells stories about his home life and about...I think he lives in like a farm-ish area, so he tells about, a lot of stories about that and about working on the farm and, uh, cutting trees down...he has very interesting stories like that, and then I guess Mr. Bright tells a lot of stories about when he was in college and those are always fun to hear.

She adds that she cannot call any other teachers readily to mind, that Mr. Taylor and Mr. Bright are the two teachers who tell stories and whose stories she can remember: “I don't know what other teachers tell stories, um, let me think. Yeah, that's it I think, Mr. Taylor and Mr. Bright. The stories that stick out in my mind, I guess, would be the two of them.”

As she speaks about Mr. Bright, it is clear that Bridget greatly appreciates having a teacher who is, as she puts it, so “comfortable in his own skin.” She contrasts Mr. Bright with “a lot of grownups” and says, “he’s very open about everything.” She says, “a lot of grownups you meet are very protective of their private lives and he’s very not.” She speaks of her perception of adults in general, implying that Mr. Bright has enabled her to realize that “they’re not as rigid and uptight as we perceive them to be and once they were just like us.”

Bridget is clearly moved by her perceptions of Mr. Bright as a caring and loving father. She states that the stories he tells tell a lot about who he is. She gives this

example:

I do remember that story about the constant versus accelerated kiss machine. I thought that was just the cutest thing ever. The stories? They just really tell me a lot about who they are. The fact that Mr. Bright is comfortable enough to like do something like that in front of us, he's very, I guess, comfortable in his own skin. Like, seeing him as a father figure, instead of as a teacher. It's very interesting to get the teacher's perspective on it and it just makes me just appreciate him all the more because he's not afraid to I guess be himself around us and just show his, um, fatherly side. Like, he talks about Suzy all the time, all the time, and it's so cute. And like you really see how caring he is of his daughter and how much he loves his family.

In addition to showing how much he loves his family, Mr. Bright, according to Bridget, is “willing” to tell. She says, “he loves sharing that part of his life with us. And I think that's very chill of him.”

Bridget admits that some of the stories that Mr. Taylor tells are “kind of shocking.” Just as she says that Mr. Bright is comfortable being himself around his students, Bridget notes how comfortable Mr. Taylor is, too:

And it's just interesting to see how comfortable he is sharing that with us because it shows us I mean, it makes us feel more adult being able to have that kind of relationship with our teachers that they're able to share such things with us. He tells really good stories like...how once this silverfish was stuck in his ear one day and it was so disgusting and ones about how like he caught a praying mantis having sex or something.

Bridget reveals how Mr. Taylor once told them how “he has had students who have, like, hit on him.” He once told them how promiscuous his high school was, she says, and sums it up by saying that he tells “shocking things that you wouldn't think teachers would tell you about.”

Joe

Joe describes the time when a teacher begins to tell a story:

There's a difference between...the actual lesson and when the story comes up. Um, yeah, because a lot of times the teachers, they would just get an expression

on their face like, oh, this is a good story, I have to tell you, and they just get really excited and just share the story.

I ask Joe about the relevance of the story to the curriculum and he says, “Well, it’s not the basic curriculum that we’re taught, but it’s the teacher actually sharing an experience that she had with us, so from person to person, instead of just from teacher to student.” I ask him how he feels when this happens, and explains:

I’m definitely more focused when it happens because it’s like a change from whatever we’re learning, like, I know Mr. Carpenter does it a lot...like if he’s talking about wars he would always go into a war story or something. And it’s just like okay you’re learning about the person like they’re sharing their life’s experiences with you, and it’s just like, you get to learn more about how they react to everything and learn some of their emotions. I don’t really know a better word to use for that.

Joe continues to tell me that he always tries to “learn as much as [he] can about people,” and that “the more [he hear[s]] stories about how they reacted to certain experiences or just what they have experienced” allows him to “make connections to that.”

I decide to ask Joe whether he recommends that teachers tell stories, and he tells me, “If it’s not too personal for them, then definitely, because it creates more of a friendship connection between the teachers and students.” He says that this is because “when teachers start sharing stories, they bring in a little bit of themselves and their lives into it.”

I ask him if there is ever a downside to teachers doing this, and he addresses relevance and duration:

It depends how much the story is actually related to the topic. And also, I guess like, well, obviously how long the story is, ‘cause if it takes up half the period, then it’s definitely going to take away from learning...but from all my experiences I haven’t really seen anything bad come from it except for a loss of time sometimes.

Joe tells me that a story can be like a field trip:

It's definitely a lot easier to connect to and understand and even believe sometimes 'cause like, we've learned about like different wars in textbooks all throughout the years, probably like the second you go to a field trip to the place you understand more about it and you feel like you can actually connect to it, and it's like, okay, this all happened here. So, it's the same thing with a story. If we just read something out of a textbook then it's like, okay, that happened, we've read this in like 50 other textbooks, but if we have someone standing in front of us actually telling it to us, it's just more effective, I guess.

Joe explains the possibilities of benefiting as well as "being worse off" for the stories told by a teacher:

If the stories are actually somewhat on topic and like can give examples and actually help you through the lesson, then it's, usually you get off better with the teacher 'cause you're still learning and you're progressing through the lesson. And if it's just kind of like a story that's off topic, sometimes it could be like worse off because then you're like, I'm not learning what I'm supposed to, and then come a quiz or a test you cannot do as well and then you'd not be as well off with the teacher.

In concluding, Joe offers his advice for teachers:

Definitely with like stories and experiences keep it related to the topic for sure, 'cause students will always find it more easily connected if they're like trying to do something and a teacher has a story about how they did it, like at the time, and it's much more easier to connect with the teacher.

John

When I ask John if he knows when a story is coming he says:

You don't. Teachers usually initiate. 'Cause when a student initiates a tangent, it's a tangent. So a teacher says, pay attention. But if the teacher initiates a tangent, then it starts a class discussion on whatever it's on.

I ask, "How do you know that it's teacher-initiated?" John replies, "Yes, Mr. Taylor's good with that." I ask him to clarify this by asking what he calls it and he responds with one word: "tangent." I ask him if there is another way to describe this and he says, "Conversation, off-topic conversation." "Is a tangent the same thing as a story?" I ask. He says, "Could be." I ask John, "Can you tell when a teacher has planned a tangent or

when it's off the cuff?" He says, "Never really thought about it," and pauses to think.

He continues, "I think they kinda just happen." I ask him to tell me what he is thinking

when it happens and he describes it this way:

I don't think there's really any conscious shift that you go through, like, oh, now I'm not a student, I'm just person having a conversation with another person. But, subconsciously, you're not thinking, what are they saying, how do I need to remember this and apply it to what I need to do for my work. It's just conversation.

I press him further by asking, "So what does your brain do? And what does your body

do?" He says, "Turns off the student instinct." He tells me, "I put my pencil down, and

then me and Mr. Taylor'll talk about the *Arctic Monkeys*, and then we'll get back to

class." "So who tells stories?" I ask him. John tells me:

Mr. Taylor. I mean, Mr. Taylor's not the, your usual teacher. He treats things a little different, he helps the spider out of the classroom. He'll stop and talk to his students about things that don't have to do with class, and I think it makes him and his students happier. I mean, if you can enjoy your job that much more, why not make the world a little brighter?

John describes Mrs. Creedon as another teacher who tells stories, who "gets on a lot of

tangents," which, according to John, "might be planned... 'cause hers always have to do

with the matter at hand:"

Every once in a while you catch her, and she definitely has things going on in her life, which I've heard about, and you'll see when she gets a little down, but for the most part, she's comfortable here, maybe a little bit too comfortable. Because she'll pull out like, dildos, in class. But, she's been doing it long enough that she's knows what's going on, so, she actually gets on a lot of tangents, too, and hers might be planned, 'cause hers always have to do with the matter at hand. Like, she always tells the story about some guy that like worked for her husband who got clap and she had to take him to the doctor to get tested, and then she bought him condoms, so he would always use condoms, so it really has to do with class, but it's like, all right, Mrs. Creedon, thanks for telling us that.

There is sarcasm in John's voice as he says that last line, and his "thanks for telling us

that" tells me that he might just feel that the last piece of this so-called "tangent" is a bit

too much. Clearly, he remembers this story because he can relay it, but he also thinks that her behavior means she might be “maybe a little bit too comfortable.” While it is not clear precisely what John means by this, one might infer that he feels she crosses a so-called line at times. John’s sarcasm as he finishes his telling of Mrs. Creedon’s story causes me to wonder whether he would, indeed, assert that a boundary has been crossed.

Nisha

I ask Nisha to tell me about stories her teachers tell and she tells me that Mr. Bright is “one of [her] best teachers.” She tells me that he is “approachable,” and that he has “a very attractive kind of force, if you will.” She continues for a long time about his teaching, describing how he is the kind of teacher “you feel like you can go talk [to] whether it’s about school, your personal life, anything.” She says that he is able to “understand, relate, and give you advice.” After explaining how he yells at people that there is “no such thing as a dumb question,” Nisha tells me, “that makes him very kind-hearted in my eyes.” Finally, she mentions the “tangent.” She says, “When he goes off on a tangent, it’s not a complete tangent.” She explains that, “It is always somewhat relevant to what we are learning.” This reminds her of Mr. Green, and she says, in contrast to Mr. Bright, “on that note, I just thought of another teacher - I’m sure lots of people would say this - Mr. Green will go off on tangents that are completely irrelevant to the subject material and as a result of that, I would think that the students feel that they have more of an ability to kind of take advantage of him as a teacher.”

I ask Nisha to describe what she means by “going off on a tangent” and she says:

I guess going off on a tangent – you know, when you’re on some sort of topic in the class, and then, either your mind all of a sudden goes on another train of thought, and you continue with that train of thought, or someone else brings up a

point that's somewhat relevant, but maybe it's not exactly on topic, like how far you choose to carry that train of thought.

"Who's this *you*?" I ask her. She replies:

Like how far the teacher, how far the teacher chooses to carry that train of thought, whether it be theirs or someone else's. If they carry it too far, it's, like, really detrimental to the whole schooling kind of class experience.

I ask Nisha to describe what it feels like when she feels a tangent coming on. She proceeds to describe a scenario from Mr. Green's class that causes her "a mixture of" "frustration, disappointment, resignation and indifference:"

I mean, usually when you feel it coming on in a class like Mr. Green's. It'll be like, you know, we're talking about China, and the next thing you know we're talking about the boys' basketball game. For me, as much as I want to hear about the boys' basketball game if I wasn't there, or, you know, as much as I want to hear what other people have to say about it, that's awesome, I mean, our school's great and everything, but I mean we have so much other time reserved for talking about that, the majority of the day we're not in school and even the time we're in school there's a lunch period, there's study hall, there's probably classes where, you know, you're not doing as much work, so you can socialize and work, but like, when you're in the middle of a presentation, it's really not the time to be talking about a basketball game, so for me, that feeling that I usually get in Mr. Green's class is that, you know, like oh, here we go again, you know, another tangent...

She tells me, "It's bothersome when Mr. Green chooses to continue the tangent, because that just shows me that he's lacking in focus a lot." Next, Nisha describes another class that is contrast to Mr. Green's and more in line with her description of Mr. Bright's:

Mr. Taylor's calc class is a really good example of when we get off onto tangents because I'm taking physics and calc, and I see a lot of the connections between the two. If we're in calc and I have a question about something we did in physics, like, integral-related, and that happens to be a tangent, 'cause you know, oh maybe we weren't doing differentials in calc, but all of a sudden I'm asking Mr. Taylor about it and like some of the others in class, some of my classmates are getting interested because they're also taking physics, or maybe they would like to know about differential equations, then, you know, that feels like a good tangent.

She returns to Mr. Bright one last time and tells me, “Every time we go off on a tangent in Mr. Bright’s class it always ends up being interesting, like, there hasn’t been one tangent where I felt like I just wanted to completely zone out.”

Nisha’s final statement about stories her teachers tell describes Mr. Taylor’s storytelling behavior: very frequent, not too long, unrelated to the curriculum, about his life, interesting, and very funny. She says:

Mr. Taylor tells stories *all* the time. Most of them are completely unrelated to math. But, he’s really good at storytelling. So, sometimes you know, he makes it a point to not be on the story for more than like 5 out of the 60 minutes of class. He generally only tells pretty good stories. Mostly life experiences, I’d say, that he’s had. Interesting stories with him and his wife, going on like vacations. He told us one about these alligators and crocodiles earlier this week, maybe just yesterday, or the day before or something, I don’t know. Like, it was just really funny.

Caroline

On the one hand, Caroline tells me, she sighs when Mr. Taylor gets ready to tell another story. On the other hand, she says, it “encourages the class to pay attention” and it “wakes [her] up.” She says that while “he sometimes does tell a story too often,” she thinks “it’s a good tool that he uses.” Her contrasting feelings are clear here:

Well, it depends on what teacher. If it’s Mr. Taylor, for example, um, sometimes I’m like, sigh, not a another story, but most of the time I’m like, oh, another story, because they keep the class interesting, and I definitely, you know, helps wake me up, and it encourages, everyone in the class to pay attention. And I think it’s a good tool that he uses, because even though he sometimes does tell a story too often, I mean once he tells a good story, everyone in the class is like paying attention, and then he is like, he is able to effectively move on and get the class’s attention and teach some more, so I think that’s good.

Caroline says that Ms. Herman tells stories too, but then reveals to me “honestly,” she “doesn’t enjoy her stories.” I ask her what a teacher’s telling stories tells her about the

teacher, and she reveals how important she believes being a “good person” as a teacher is:

It depends on how much, to certain degrees, the teacher’s willing to share, I mean, if the teacher is willing to share, I don’t know, some kind of embarrassing stories about himself, then I think it shows that he’s someone who’s very kind of like, I don’t know, open, I don’t know, if he tells a story that shows that he did something nice, that shows that he’s a good person, and I think that’s as important in a teacher as being a good teacher is.

She says that Mr. Taylor is a “good person.” “Mr. Taylor’s stories show that he’s open and willing to talk about things. I think that the fact that he’s a good person comes out more in his teaching and the fact that, he’s smiling all the time, which I think makes a big difference.”

While Caroline notices that telling a story is a “good tool,” she also notices that teachers are “willing to share” to different degrees. She equates a teacher’s willingness to share “embarrassing stories about himself” as being an “open” person. She believes a teacher can show he is a “good person” and that is “as important in a teacher as being a good teacher is.” Caroline clearly shows that while she herself might be frustrated by yet “another story,” she is quite aware of what a teacher’s readiness and willingness to share means to her.

Matthew

As soon as I ask Matthew to “tell me about stories his teachers tell,” he asks a clarifying question: “As relating to the curriculum and the things they’re teaching, or just personal?” He does not wait for an answer, but instead moves forward with his thoughts. He tells me that while “generally, they’re fairly irrelevant to the subject matter,” there are times when he finds “it’s sort of a refreshing digression from whatever we’re learning.” He gives the examples of teacher’s taking his child to a sporting event or a concert. Then

he explains that some stories might “have some bearing on what we’re learning, and then it’ll veer off to a another story, and ah, I don’t really enjoy it when we have an activity that should take about five minutes and then everyone in the class starts telling their own stories.” He describes when this happens in his classes with clear frustration:

...and it takes an hour and that’s the whole class, which happens, in some of my classes, and uh, I’m okay with a little short story and then back to the topic. But that could just be me, too, because I, like, on the phone, my conversations are always like three minutes, and yesterday I had a forty minute conversation, and that was so bad, because there was so much silence in the conversation, because, generally, if I don’t, if I’m gonna say something, it’s gonna be relevant, hopefully.

Matthew has a very specific understanding of relevance, and he is keenly aware of time, both time in the classroom and in his life outside of the classroom. His qualifying statement, “but that could just be me, too,” shows that he is aware that not all of his classmates are necessarily experiencing the same level of frustration. His desire for the teacher to tell a short story and then get “back to the topic” aligns with his statement about talking on the phone: “if I’m gonna say something, it’s gonna be relevant.”

Matthew expresses this frustration best when he describes Ms. Bedford’s class. He says that their “book discussions” would “turn into, like, how she met her husband.” He tells me, “the class would be consumed by her stories.” He tells the story that “consumed” their class this way:

It was um, I think in college she sort of swapped boyfriends with her roommate or something like that, like, they both dumped them and the miserable people got together with the other ones and then eventually got married or something. And like, everyone in the class was so interested in this, but, I don’t know why. It’s none of their business, but that was the class time instead of *The Great Gatsby*. And now, since she’s gone and we have Ms. Stevens, we do so much more work.

It is with great relief and happiness in his voice that he tells me Ms. Bedford is out on maternity leave and now Ms. Stevens is his teacher. He is clearly relieved to be learning

more about the curriculum and less about his teacher's personal life. I ask him, "Does Ms. Stevens tell stories?" Matthew replies, with relish in his voice, "She does, but she'll then, you know, she'll tell a story and then say, okay, back to work!" Since he admits to Ms. Stevens' telling stories before getting "back to work," and hoping to return Matthew to the topic of teachers telling stories, I ask him, "What emotions go through your head when you're enjoying a story?" Matthew tells me, "Just, uh, I guess the story sort of resonates with me, so, even if, I don't know if it would be sympathy, cause that sort of implies that I'm sorry for them, but..." I ask him if he means empathy and he agrees, "Maybe, yeah." He says, "Like I understand the teacher a little better." I ask him, "Why does that matter?" He responds, "I guess it's easier to listen to a teacher I understand than just a robot."

From the next example Matthew gives of a teacher's telling stories, it is clear that he prefers short to drawn out over the entire class period. He makes it very clear that he really does prefer doing the work there is to be done rather than listening to teachers tell their stories. If, on the other hand, as Matthew says, the teacher just shares "goofy things" it can "sort of make you like the teacher more:"

I guess it depends on the kind of story. Like, Mr. Tattersall, my chemistry teacher, his stories are always like, well, I like playing golf, and I like fishing, but I dimensional analysis the best.

He explains that he likes the brevity and the clear sense of purpose that Mr. Tattersall exudes: "I think it's good, because he knows there's work to be done."

I press him further and say, "Describe what you feel when it turns." Matthew asks, "When there's some diversions and stories?" He explains these "diversions" this way:

Well, if it's with just little small diversions, then I guess it helps sort of break up the learning, you know? Sort of, if there was all this focused science, or whatever, in one block, then that might get sort of boring. It's good to have little breaks in there. But if it's too long, then it gets kind of annoying. Like, we should be learning here, this is school.

Matthew expresses his feeling that the “diversions and stories” can alleviate boredom.

He is quick to state that a break can last too long and “then it gets kind of annoying.”

When I ask him what other emotions he has besides annoyance, he tells me, “impatience, exasperation.”

At the close of our interview I ask Matthew to sum up what he has said: “Little stories to break up a heavy topic are good, but when it gets out of hand that's not.” I ask him what he means by good and he says, “Professional - it might alleviate some of the boredom.” I ask him what he means by not good and he says, “I mean distracting and frustratingly irrelevant.”

Hannah

Hannah begins by telling me that the stories her teachers tell are “most of the time...related to their personal lives.” She says some teachers tell “more personal stories” and “based on them you can get to know them.” She follows that by saying that “other teachers keep more to themselves and the stories will kind of just be small talk kind of things.” Hannah says that she enjoys having a teacher who “kinda is like trying to relate with you on like a different level.” She adds, too, “it's always kind of nice to have a break from the regular curriculum.”

I ask Hannah what she means by a “break,” and she tells me that it is “just to have a teacher like talk to you, almost, like, it's kind of nice to get off topic sometimes.” She equates a “break” with “getting off topic.” However, she adds, “I don't really want to

know personal details or how they spent their weekend..." I ask her to continue with this and she pauses to think. Finally, she says:

I don't know, I guess in some ways it's kind of uncomfortable. I feel like there's - you do have that relationship with your teachers, and to have a good one it has to be beyond the classroom, but at the same time, you're still, like, a teacher and student, and I feel like I don't know, I feel like it's almost knowing too much, like, kind of crossing the line to being like a friend or something, I don't know, I feel like it's a little overstep, like, there should be...

I ask Hannah what it feels like when a teacher tells a story or "gets off topic," and she tells me about the "Charlie Brown teachers." I do not know what these are, but she explains:

It's kind of like, almost a relief, 'cause it's kind of like, I don't know, like whenever teachers do that, I always think of in my mind the Charlie Brown teachers, like raa raa ra raan raan raan...and it's like when they're kind of like oh, by the way, oh, good, there's a minute that I can spare just to relax...

Hannah continues and tells me that while the experience is a "relief," there are also the teachers who "tell too many stories." She says, "I know I've had at least one or two teachers, I'm trying to think of who, where it's like, they almost tell too many stories and it's like they don't really teach." As an example, Hannah tells me about a middle school language arts teacher who would "somehow get off topic and start talking about like whatever she felt like talking about." She says, with obvious frustration in her voice, that "that was just kind of like - I mean, I'm sure some kids in the class loved it and they were like, oh, we don't have to do anything, but it was kind of like, for me, it was like, all right, I just want to learn something."

Hannah tells me that one high school math teacher, Mrs. Sharp, "has a good balance:"

I mean, cause she's not necessarily someone who like tells a lot about her personal life, but she tells enough that like you kind of know that she's a real

person, and it's not the whole the teacher sleeps at school like she doesn't have a life thing, 'cause she talks about her grandson and all that, but it's like she's still, I mean, 'cause I had her sophomore year, and I always felt like there was that teacher-student relationship and she would always help me if I needed help or anything like that, but she still kind of talked to me like beyond just how are you doing in my class. And like I had more respect for her that way.

I ask Hannah what she means by a "real" person, and she says:

You know, kids always have that perception. Oh, the teacher always sleeps in school. She never goes home, and um, I mean, obviously, by this age, everyone knows it's not true, but I mean, I think just talking about her grandson every so often just kinda give her that like, relatable personable aspect that isn't just, 'This is what we're learning today.'

I ask her what causes her to respect her teachers, and she tells me, "I respect the teacher more when I know more about them." She adds, "not necessarily everything, but more than just like, they teach math, and whatever." She says, "I think when you know someone more, you respect them more and you I don't know what the right word is..."

She pauses again for a long time, thinking of the "right word." Finally, she resumes her explanation:

It's like easier to relate to. I don't know, I think it's almost like easier to do, not easier to do well, but it's almost like you want to do well because you have that relationship with them. And it's not just like, you know, whereas maybe in one class you're just like, oh, whatever, I don't care, you know, you blow off a test for whatever reason, but with them, because you have that relationship, you want to do well in their class because you want to, almost like make them proud.

I ask Hannah to tell me just a little bit more about the balance, the "crossing the line" or "overstep" she mentions early on, and she tells me:

I don't know if I would say that there is a definite line - I mean it is kind of a fine line kind of thing, but I think you know obviously the kids don't want to hear about those really personal things that you probably would only tell your close family and friends, but I think like if it comes up, telling a story about your mom, or your husband, or whatever it is, like, I think it's like okay, and it kind of adds to your relationship with the students, and that atmosphere of the classroom so it's not so tense and everything. I mean, I don't know if I could say do this and don't do that, 'cause I think it kind of depends on the teacher and the circumstances.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I presented the words of the students from my interviews with them. The students told me surprising things. Nathan's metaphor of school's being a prison is the most extreme, but nearly every student refers to the classroom experience as one in which relief and reprieve are welcome. This relief can come in the form of teachers' telling stories. Students seem to be aware of the separation between their teachers and them, as they make note of it quite often. The "willingness to share" some teachers exhibit seems to "bring them closer" to the students. As David says, the stories allow the worlds of teacher and students to be brought a little closer together, and the stories serve a "little bridges." Evan says that the teachers who tell stories are no longer "on a separate plane," and that a feeling of being connected to his teachers is then possible.

Teachers who tell stories to their classes, according to these students at least, "seem more like people." Two different students say that teachers who tell stories are less like robots and more like real people. The teachers who tell stories reveal personal details of their lives and share their life experiences. Often, students sense a palpable difference between a lesson and a story. They listen for their teachers to break out from the "lecture mode" and into a "willingness to share." They take their students on "sojourns," which, for a time, allow the students to be reminded that their teachers are people, people living lives. In turn, in the moments when they can take a break from taking notes and temporarily leave "copying mode," perhaps the students are reminded that they, too, are alive.

In the following chapter, I will share the words of six teachers who have written

memoirs or autobiographies of their lives in the classroom. These teachers share experiences of interrupting their teaching. From stories they tell to a broken blackboard, these telling breaks will provide another perspective of the way that teachers interrupt their teaching to tell. There will be parallels between the descriptions given by the students and those relayed by the teachers.

CHAPTER 4

IN THE WORDS OF TEACHERS: TELLING BREAKS

Part I: Introduction to Telling

In the previous chapter I presented my interviews with students. Their words introduced several conceptual dimensions of the educational interruption. In contrast, the first part of this chapter will present excerpts from six novels, five of which are autobiographies about teaching and one of which is a young adult novel. Each excerpt will provide an example of an educational interruption. These examples represent different aspects of the educational interruption. While at first these examples may seem in stark contrast to the descriptions provided by the students in their interviews, these excerpts have at their center some of the very same conceptual dimensions that arise in the interviews. In the remainder of this chapter, I will provide an analysis of the conceptual dimensions that arise from the two sources of data. The voices of the students with whom I spoke resonate with the voices from the novels. There are common threads that can be woven together: the warp from the words of students; the weft from the words of teachers in their novels. Each of the nine examples of educational interruptions will serve to illustrate the characteristics of a particular kind of educational interruption, the telling break, as each one represents a different place on the spectrum of the educational interruption.

Part II. Summaries of the Novels

To Sir, With Love

E.R. Braithwaite, 1959

Braithwaite, at the end of his autobiographical novel about teaching at Greenslade Secondary School in the East End of London in the middle of last century, receives a package from his students with a label inscribed, “To Sir, With Love.” The label has, beneath this message, the signatures of every one of his students. In her delivery of this gift to her teacher, on behalf of the entire class of students, Pamela says, “You’ve been good to us, Sir, and we’d like you to accept a little gift to remember us by” (Braithwaite, 1959, p. 188). It has been a long road to this day for Braithwaite - the entire novel, which spans one school year, tells the story. In the end, Pamela speaks for herself and the others: “We think we are much better children for having had you as a teacher. We liked best the way you always talked to us, you know, not like silly kids, but like grown-ups and that” (Braithwaite, 1959, p. 188).

This is the story of how Braithwaite comes, after having left the Navy only to be rejected from engineering positions in England for the color of his skin, to be a classroom teacher. In the beginning, he cannot reach the students, describing the experience of teaching as “trying to reach the children through a thick pane of glass” (Braithwaite, 1959, p. 66). But by and by, through great effort, many mistakes, and deep reflection, Braithwaite begins to figure out what can help him connect to his students. He puts it this way: “Next morning I had an idea” (Braithwaite, 1959, p.72). This is when he decides to enforce the addressing of one another in the classroom as “Miss” and “Mr.” and the students are, as he describes them, “interested, in spite of themselves” (Braithwaite, 1959,

p. 72). The novel is a series of one experiment after the next, one event after another, each of which brings Braithwaite closer to a place where he “finds [himself] liking them, really liking them, collectively and singly” (Braithwaite, 1959, p. 85). Braithwaite’s account of teaching himself to teach is open and honest. Of course he chooses what to tell the reader; this is a novel written by a teacher who learns to tell. As Braithwaite says, “I was making it up as I went along and watching them; at the least sign that it wouldn’t work I’d drop it, fast” (Braithwaite, 1959, p. 72).

Dangerous Minds

LouAnne Johnson, 1992

Johnson writes about a four-year period teaching in the Academy in which she teaches English to inner-city children. As she explains in the introduction of *Dangerous Minds*: “Students remain with the same teachers and the same classmates for three years, which allows a considerable amount of bonding to take place” (Johnson, 1992, p. 2). Johnson, a former U.S. Marine, seems to be able to identify with the violence that many of her students experience outside the classroom - both in the home and on the street. Not only does she identify with the violence, she harnesses the threat of physical force as a means of wielding power over her students. Before she can ever tell them she loves them, she threatens them: “I wouldn’t punch you in the arm, you little twit,” she says, “I’d punch you in the pants” (Johnson, 1992, p. 79). Johnson describes her precariousness: “At any moment, I felt, the class could careen out of control. I thought I could careen out of control too” (Johnson, 1992, p. 77). She portrays herself as walking that fine line of being nearly out of control throughout the novel. Some might argue that she does lose control on a number of occasions. For instance, she telephones her student

Durell to tell him that if he does not come to her class and pass his exams she is going to “come to his kung fu class” and “beat the shit out of [him] in front of all of his friends” (Johnson, 1992, p. 212).

Johnson freely admits to being what could colloquially be called a “hard ass” and she believes in her heart that her methods are best. I have included her story in my study because she is a teacher who learns to tell. She is open and honest when she wants to be, and willing to admit she is wrong. She tells two students whom she has humiliated in the hallway in front of their friends: “It’s my fault...I’m so stupid sometimes. I’m sorry” (Johnson, 1992, p. 222). Beneath her toughness, her body-as-a-weapon mentally, Johnson is deeply caring, loving, and passionate about teaching students. She says, “It took me a long time to accept the fact that I can’t help a child who doesn’t want to be helped. I still struggle with that concept every single day that I teach” (Johnson, 1992, p. 117). Whether her methods are questionable is not the point. By ordinary standards, of course they are. LouAnne Johnson is a teacher who opens her heart and bares her soul right out in the open for the students to see. She risks for them. She fights for them. To wake a boy who has fallen asleep in her class, she applies a new thick coat of red lipstick and kisses him on the cheek! She does wild things, many of which fall clearly into the category of the educational interruption and some of which fall into the category of telling break. Johnson provides an extreme version of what it means to be a classroom teacher - she paints the warrior model - but there are times when her telling is open and beautiful. She tells Emilio, who came from El Salvador to the United States in the trunk of a car when he was 12 years old, that “Things make [her] mad, too, like when things aren’t fair” (Johnson, 1992, p. 226). Johnson throws the “F” word around rather freely

and sometimes threatens to beat up her students, but she shares with her students the contents of her heart.

Bridge to Terabithia

Katherine Paterson, 1977

This is a novel written for young adults. I first read it when I was in the seventh grade. Of the six novels in my analysis, it is one of only two written from the child's perspective (*The Freedom Writers Diary* is a compilation of entries written by students). However, Paterson herself was an elementary school teacher before becoming a full-time writer, and this is evident from the vivid way she describes the two teachers in her story, Miss Edmunds and Mrs. Myers.

Written from the perspective of Jess Aarons, a fourth-grade student at Lark Creek Elementary, *Bridge to Terabithia* tells the story of two children who become friends and create an imaginary kingdom, Terabithia. Leslie Burke is the new girl in the neighborhood and at first Jess does not like a thing about her, especially when at recess she beats him in a race across the schoolyard for which he has been training all summer. When he recovers from having lost the title of fastest-kid-in-the-fourth-grade, Jess and Leslie become friends.

I chose this novel because of the telling break Mrs. Myers takes after Leslie's unexpected, tragic death. On a rainy weekend day, when Jess is in Washington, DC with his music teacher Miss Edmunds, Leslie drowns while attempting to cross the creek that is their "bridge" to Terabithia. Mrs. Myers, who never seems to do anything but "bark," takes Jess aside to tell him how sad she is at Leslie's passing. Because this passage has all of the components of the telling break, I have included it in my analysis.

The Freedom Writers Diary

The Freedom Writers with Erin Gruwell, 1999

The Freedom Writers Diary was initially inspired by Zlata Filipovic, a Bosnian teenager, who wrote *Zlata's Diary: A Child's Life in Sarajevo*. The Freedom Writers, the authors of this compilation of diary entries, are the students of Erin Gruwell, an English teacher at Wilson High School in Long Beach, California. She asks her students to read *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl* as well, which inspires them to write to Miep Gies, the woman who hid Anne and her family from the Nazis during World War II. The Freedom Writers' entries span the fall of their freshman year, 1994, to the spring of the senior year, 1998. Each semester begins with a diary entry from Ms. Gruwell followed by a series of anonymous entries from students.

Gruwell arranges the diary entries to tell the story of how she inspires this cohort of students from the "gangsta-rap capital" (as described by MTV, according to Gruwell) of Long Beach to read and write and tell their stories. I chose this book because the diary entries from her students describe telling breaks Ms. Gruwell takes. The entries in Ms. Gruwell's voice make no mention of these passionate outbursts, but her passion for teaching shines through, as does her courage to push on students for whom, in her words, "death seems more real than a diploma" (Gruwell, 1999, p. 49). It is she who chooses the curriculum to include Wiesel's *Night*, *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl*, and *Zlata's Diary: A Child's Life in Sarajevo*. She writes at the start of the fall of sophomore year: "I think they'll be surprised how life mirrors art" (Gruwell, 1999, p. 50).

Teacher Man

Frank McCourt, 2005

Teacher Man is a memoir. McCourt tells the story of how he becomes a teacher and how he learns to teach. He begins by teaching English at Stuyvesant High School. Not sure he wants to stay in the teaching profession, because “at the end of the school day you leave with a head filled with adolescent noises, their worries, their dreams,” he makes the commitment to keep teaching when his daughter Maggie is born (McCourt, 2005, p. 183). He spends “fifteen years in four different high schools - McKee, Fashion Industries, Seward Park, Stuyvesant - and the college in Brooklyn” (McCourt, 2005, p. 202). In total, he teaches for thirty years.

McCourt writes openly about the realities of being a classroom teacher. He writes about the struggle, the emotional investment, and the tragedy. He is fed up with teaching on the one hand; on the other hand, he is desperate to be in the classroom. McCourt closes his book with this description of being a teacher:

The classroom is a place of high drama. You’ll never know what you’ve done to, or for, the hundreds coming and going. You see them leaving the classroom: dreamy, flat, sneering, admiring, smiling, puzzled. After a few years you develop antennae. You can tell when you’ve reached them or alienated them. It’s chemistry. It’s psychology. It’s animal instinct. You are with the kids and, as long as you want to be a teacher, there’s no escape. Don’t expect help from the people who’ve escaped the classroom, the higher-ups. They’re busy going to lunch and thinking higher thoughts. It’s you and the kids. So, there’s the bell. See you later. Find what you love and do it. (McCourt, 2005, p. 255)

I chose McCourt’s teaching memoir because his voice rings true to me. When I read his writing I feel as though I am reading descriptions of my own days in the classroom. He knows what it means to live in a classroom with teenagers. McCourt provides stories he tells to his students and telling breaks he takes, too. He confesses to

his reader all kinds of mistakes and missteps on his part. He shares his doubt about his effectiveness, his pride in reaching kids, the great and small successes, and the angst that accompanies trying to do well something so important, yet incredibly inexact and hard-to-pin-down. McCourt's description of the "building bridges" is invaluable to my analysis:

They were building bridges where we could travel back and forth. I answered their questions and didn't give a damn anymore about giving them too much information. (McCourt, 2005, p. 146)

Teacher Man demonstrates how, in the end, it is indeed "doggedness" a teacher needs to keep going. McCourt says he "gives himself credit" for the "virtue of doggedness" (McCourt, 2005, p. 2). He says it is doggedness that "got [him] through the days and nights" (McCourt, 2005, p. 2). He does not publish *Angela's Ashes* until 1996, when he is 66 years old. He explains, in the introduction to *Teacher Man*, that he had no time until he had retired:

When you teach five high school classes a day, five days a week, you're not inclined to go home and clear your head and fashion deathless prose. After a day of five classes your head is filled with the clamor of the classroom. (McCourt, 2005, p. 3)

McCourt is open, honest, and willing to tell. His memoir is filled with account after account of interruptions to his teaching - nearly all brought on by him - and provides more stories and telling breaks than I could ever include in my analysis.

The Great Expectations School: A Rookie Year in the New Blackboard Jungle

Dan Brown, 2007

Brown writes a teaching memoir that documents his first year in the classroom teaching fourth grade at P.S. 85 in the Bronx. Having studied film at the Tisch School of the Arts at NYU, Brown becomes a New York City Teaching Fellow and his friends

“look at him as though [he’s] just enlisted for the war” (Brown, 2007, p. 4). He has studied “storytelling in academia” he says, but he never imagines that the experience of teaching will be a “life-altering tilt-a-whirl ride, all of it more vivid and twisted than anything [he] could have concocted in fiction” (Brown, 2007, p. 5).

Like all the other novels I chose, with the exception of McCourt’s *Teacher Man*, *The Great Expectations School* is written by a first-year teacher who has a difficult time adjusting to the shock of what teaching actually entails. Just as Braithwaite, Johnson and Gruwell must do, Brown faces administrators who are not supportive of his measures and pedagogical tactics. He speaks candidly about his own failures in the classroom as well as the ways that he is not backed up by the principal, Mrs. Boyd. In fact, she seems to do as much as she can to undermine his success. *The Great Expectations School* does anything but glorify teaching. In fact, upon first reading it, someone who is not already teaching might wonder why anyone in his right mind would consider it as a profession.

I chose this teaching memoir because Brown is so forthright. He holds nothing back and tells openly of his own actions of which he is deeply ashamed. In fact, he begins the book with a prologue in which he says he does not expect his fist to go through the blackboard when he punches it. Brown describes his book as “the journey of a teacher and the life of a classroom: an intersection of youth and experience, energy and discipline, empowerment and failure” (Brown, 2007, p. ix). Just like the other teacher-authors before him, he writes about the life of a classroom and the inextricable way his own life is tied to it. He is honest about his outbursts, the stories he tells, and his triumphs. He is open about his doubt and despair, and, in the end, his hope. He ends with a description of his fellow teachers at P.S. 85:

Some teachers...are warrior-poets. They will fracture every part of their lives, because they can withstand anything in the name of helping kids. They get tired and disgusted, but they do not slow down, quietly blooming into supernovas behind classroom doors. (Brown, 2007, p. 265)

Part III. Exploration of the Educational Interruption: Learning to Tell

Using a combination of the words of teachers from the novels and the words of the students from the previous chapter, I will present a discussion of the breaking of the continuity that happens through the experience of the telling break and the space that opens. This chapter will lead directly to the revealing of the conceptual model of the educational interruption, and, specifically, the telling break, in the final chapter.

One quality that readily becomes apparent in the teacher who engages in these educational interruptions is some degree of openness. In the case of each telling break I will present, the teacher, while possessing varying degrees of openness initially, either remains open or becomes even more open as a result of her telling. Notably, in my research I do not have an example of a person whose telling has caused him or her to close up and be *less* open.

What does it mean to be open? As Dewey aptly says, “few grown-up persons retain all of the flexible and sensitive ability of children to vibrate sympathetically with the attitudes and doings of those about them” (1916/1944, p. 43). In other words, a professional teacher has a more difficult time being open and aware to those around him. Both agenda and curriculum make it difficult to be open to just being with one’s students. Not only is it a challenge to be fully present with one’s students, it may be a greater challenge still to have such an openness of mind that one can share openly at any time. Dewey defines “open-mindedness” as “retention of the childlike attitude,” contrasting it with closed-mindedness, which he equates with “premature intellectual old age”

(1916/1944, p. 175). He suggests that teachers should try to maintain an “openness of mind,” which means “accessibility of mind to any end and every consideration that will throw light upon the situation that needs to be cleared up, and that will help determine the consequences of acting this way or that” (Dewey, 1916/1944, p. 175).

In keeping with this aim of openness, Inchausti says that once he learned to “rest in the presence of things as they were,” he was “at last beginning to see [his] students” (1993, p. 69). In his increasing awareness of them he also gains awareness of the fact that his teaching could be open to “just seeing everything and providing a space for spirit to express itself” (1993, p. 69). When he begins to embrace the openness of heart that he learns with the help of experienced teacher Brother Blake, he describes what he learns this way:

One could cause things to happen by opening up a space in one’s heart to register the subtle movement of the students’ souls toward real change. And one could do this only if one remained unimpressed by the old forms of power - progress, ability, ambition, results - and rested in the creative, unique, never-again-to-be-obtained moment of simple awareness of that which is. (Inchausti, 1993, p. 69)

With regard to being open and to being oneself, Ladson-Billings cites this testimony from a new teacher, Tara in a chapter called “Sojourners” in *Crossing Over to Canaan*:

I realized that to be a good teacher you needed to be yourself, and when I tried to play teacher, it didn’t work. I wasn’t being myself, but when I was myself and told the stories and got them excited about Japan in the unit, and they knew me as who I was, and my life experience was, [things] worked a lot better. (2001, p. 39)

Until one has discovered the power of telling, and the freedom to just be oneself, it can be very difficult to reach students. Braithwaite describes what his teaching was like before he began to tell: “It was as if I were trying to reach the children through a thick pane of glass, so remote and uninterested they seemed” (1959, p. 66). In *To Sir, With Love*,

Braithwaite (1959) begins to talk to his students with frank openness, because it is a last resort. Nothing else has worked. He has tried all kinds of ways of reaching the students, to no avail. And so he decides, after a particularly memorable interruption – the burning sanitary napkin incident – to speak to them honestly, because his response to that interruption enables him to address the action. He says, in reference to his honest communication with the students, which is new to him: “I hadn’t planned any of this, but it was unfolding all by itself, and I hoped, fitting into place” (Braithwaite, 1959, p. 73). Braithwaite opens his mind to the possibility of a changed way of speaking to his students, and it changes his subsequent interactions with them.

McCourt is aware that there are plenty of teachers and counselors who do not take telling breaks. He says of these educators: “Their message to their students is, I am your teacher, not your counselor, not your confidant, not your parents. I teach a subject: take it or leave it” (2005, p. 147). McCourt knows that his approach is different. He, like Braithwaite, is frank and open. He tells the students whatever is on his mind, and cares less about whether what he is saying is “appropriate” according to school guidelines and more about how his students feel and what they experience in his classroom.

McCourt explains that there are some students who can be fooled sometimes, but mostly, he feels compelled to tell them the truth:

You can fool some of the kids some of the time, but they know when you’re wearing the mask, and you know they know. They force you into truth. If you contradict yourself they’ll call out, Hey, that’s not what you said last week. You face years of experience and their collective truth, and if you insist on hiding behind the teacher mask you lose them. Even if they lie to themselves and the world they look for honesty in the teacher. (2005, p. 203)

At the same time, McCourt knows very well that there are things that one cannot tell one’s students:

I could never tell my classes how I lived over one of the last waterfront bars in Brooklyn, how every night I struggled to drown out the sounds of the rowdy sailors, how I stuffed cotton wool in my ears to muffle the shrieking and laughing of women who offered shore love, how the pounding of the jukebox in the bar below, the Village People singing ‘YMCA,’ jolted me nightly in my bed. (2005, p. 198)

While the teacher may feel compelled to tell the truth, and while it is often told from one’s own life story, one need not tell *all*.

McCourt describes his learning to tell this way:

They were building bridges where we could travel back and forth. I answered their questions and didn’t give a damn anymore about giving them too much information. How many priests had I confessed to when I was the age of these girls? I had their attention and that was all that mattered. (2005, p. 146)

McCourt knows that a balance must be struck, and his understanding that there are many things to tell and some one must *never* tell shows that he consciously attempts to do this. These bridges of which he speaks are the places where truth walks down, where truth crosses over, from the teacher’s shore to the students’ shore, and back again. This mention of a bridge tells us that McCourt knows that there is a gap between teacher and student, and that this distance can, in fact, be bridged through honest telling. His “not giving a damn anymore” is exactly what his students need (2005, p. 146). Their questions inspire him to speak to them frankly, openly, and honestly.

Engaging in telling breaks may be one way in which “grownups...retain the ability...to vibrate sympathetically with the attitudes and doings of those about them” (Dewey, 1916/1944, p. 43). Or, be that people who take telling breaks do so because they have this ability. It may also be a combination of the two, where being attuned to one’s students, taking telling breaks, and sharing, is a way that one becomes more open. Or, one may be an open and receptive person in the first place, willing to risk being

vulnerable and opening up in order to tell. On the other hand, it could be an utter lack of reflection that allows someone to engage in a telling break, taking no time at all to consider what one is going to say. In this case, what is said is a complete surprise to the teacher and students alike. Perhaps the act makes one more open, but the fear of repeating the same behavior and breaking the boundary might instead close a teacher off.

Teachers' Telling Breaks: Analysis of the Telling Breaks from Six Novels

These telling breaks are primarily the recounting of a variety of experiences teachers had as children. Whether it is Brown's remembering the grief his teacher shared with the class over the loss of her husband, or McCourt's account of the fear experienced when he encountered a nun, these teachers have included examples of telling breaks in their autobiographical novels about teaching. *Bridge to Terabithia* supplies a fictional telling break of the experience of Jess Aarons as a fourth grade student; *The Freedom Writers Diary* offers a glimpse of a telling break by Ms. Gruwell from the perspective of her student through his diary entry; *Teacher Man* and *To Sir, With Love* provide telling breaks as self-reported by the teachers themselves.

I present each of the following telling breaks in the order in which they fall on the spectrum of the educational interruption, from left to right. They begin with the storytelling of Mr. McCourt and progress to the personal anecdote of Ms. Johnson. These are followed by two different telling breaks in which teachers reveal their feelings of grief to their students. Following these, Mr. Braithwaite's telling break directed at Seales will be the third kind of interruption to which I will later refer as "emotional revelation." The last three telling breaks I present in this chapter are by Ms. Gruwell, Mr. Braithwaite, and Mr. Brown. Each of these is in the category of "angry outburst."

Story

Teacher Man, Telling Break

McCourt's Irish stories and his telling stories about the docks seem to be the most innocuous of the interruptions in these six novels and seemingly only improve things in the classroom. They may likely result in a pleasant relief or a calm feeling for the students and teacher alike. There may be a shift in the boundary between teacher and students.

Mr. McCourt, will you tell us one of those Irish stories tomorrow? For you, Doctor Sylvia, I would recite an epic. This stuck in my memory like a rock, forever. When I was fourteen, growing up in Ireland, I had a job of delivering telegrams. One day I delivered a telegram to a place called the Good Shepherd Convent, a community of nuns and lay women who made lace and ran a laundry. There were stories in Limerick that the lay women in the laundry were bad women known for leading men astray. Telegram boys were not allowed to use the front door, so I went to a side door. The telegram I was delivering required an answer, so the nun answering the door told me step inside, that far and no farther, and wait. She put down on her chair a piece of lace she was working on and when she disappeared down the hallway I peered at the design, a little lace cherub hovering over a shamrock. I don't know where I found the courage to speak, but when she returned I told her, That's a lovely piece of lace, sister.

That's right, boy, and remember this: The hands that fashioned this lace never touched flesh of man.

The nun glared at me as if she hated me. Priests were always preaching love on Sundays, but this nun probably missed the sermon, and I told myself if I ever had a telegram again for the Good Shepherd Convent, I'd slip it under the door and run.

Sylvia said, That nun. Why was she so mean? What was her problem? What's wrong with touching flesh of man? Jesus was a man. She's like that mean priest in James Joyce going on about hell. You believe all that stuff, Mr. McCourt?

I don't know what I believe except that I wasn't put on this earth to be Catholic or Irish or vegetarian or anything. That's all I know, Sylvia. (Mccourt, 2005, pp. 194 - 195)

All Sylvia has to do is ask, and Mr. McCourt is ready to launch into “one of his Irish stories.” He opens up to her and the class and reveals how it felt to be glared at by the nun “as if she hated [him]” and how he would never be brave enough to knock on that door again. It takes courage to reveal to his students that he “doesn’t know what [he] believes” but that he does not feel he was born to be a category like “Catholic,” or “vegetarian.” Frank McCourt is frank. He tells the truth. He is willing to tell a story from his childhood and reveal to his students that he was afraid. More than that, he reveals that he has not even figured out exactly what he believes, but that he is willing to tell Sylvia that “for her,” he “would recite an epic.” His willingness to oblige, to take the telling break, and to tell his truth all demonstrate his openness. While the boundary between teacher and students is still there, it feels different when he finishes his telling. He has given his students the image of himself as a scared little boy, and has admitted that even as an adult he remembers being an object of this nun’s apparent hatred. McCourt demonstrates vulnerability when he freely admits that he does not know why he was “put on this earth,” and ends with the humble admission of, “That’s all I know.”

McCourt never mentions what it feels like to tell this nor what happens in the classroom that day. Thus, what happens in the space created by this telling break is unknown. We do know that Mr. McCourt willingly and freely reveals the memory of his fear as a child, his not knowing, and his lack of certainty in belief. We do not know whether his students have been “pulled up short” (Kerdeman, 2003, p. 194).

As I mentioned earlier, when a teacher tells stories, there could be a shift in the boundary between teacher and students. McCourt says:

When I told stories about the docks they looked at me in a different way. One boy said it was funny to think you had a teacher up there that worked like real

people and didn't come from college just talking about books and all. He used to think he'd like to work on the piers, too, because of all the money you make on overtime and little deals here and there with the dropped broken goods but his father said he'd break his ass, ha ha, and you didn't talk back to your father in an Italian family. His father said, If this Irishman can get to be a teacher, so can you, Ronnie, so can you. So forget the docks. You might make money but what good is that when you can't straighten your back? (McCourt, 2005, p. 65)

If McCourt interrupts his teaching of the English curriculum to tell stories about working on the docks, then because they are unplanned and personal he is taking telling breaks.

The students see him as a “real person” and they see him in a new light when he tells them about working hard on the piers. He shares the truth of what hard work really means, brings it out in the classroom for Ronnie and all the others to see. For a moment McCourt might be a paraclete, walking with them for a time to tell them how it really is out there, regardless of whether you have “come from college...talking about books and all” (McCourt, 2005, p. 65).

Personal Anecdote

Ms. Johnson tells about her experience with her elementary school teacher, Mr. Johnson. While this could be categorized as either a story or a personal anecdote, I have called it the latter because of the degree to which it is personal. This anecdote certainly must surprise some of Ms. Johnson’s students. It might also bring a bit of relief to them to know that while she often yells at them, she might actually remember how it feels to be in their place.

Dangerous Minds, Telling Break

Ms. Johnson recalls the way her teacher treated her. She is about to touch a student and catches herself:

“All right,” I said. “I won’t touch you. I used to hate it when my teachers touched me, way back when I was young. In fact, I bit my English teacher. Bit

him right in the leg.”

Mr. Johnson, that was his name,” I said. “Gotta watch out for those Johnson teachers. Anyway, one day, he was telling the class a story and he reached out and pinched my cheek really hard. It hurt and it scared me and I yelled, but he just laughed. All the kids laughed at me, too. I was so mad I wanted to kill him, so when he left the room to get something, I ran up under his desk. When he came back into the room and walked to his desk, I crawled out and barked real loud and bit him on the ankle. He was very angry, but he didn’t do anything. And he never touched me again, either. (Johnson, 1991, p. 112)

In revealing the emotion she felt, in revealing the personal, Ms. Johnson is engaging in an educational interruption that may, indeed, pull her students up short. For moments as her students are listening to her, the boundary between them changes, because now they can picture her as an angry little girl, barking like a dog and biting her mean teacher on his ankle. She paints a picture of herself as a child for her students, and, in doing so, allows them to see her differently, as a person who felt humiliated and angry at the way her teacher treated her. The space that is created by her telling gives her students the opportunity to understand who she is, and that she, too, might understand their humiliation. In this moment they may come to see her anew.

Emotional Revelation

Mr. Brown remembers the grief his first grade teacher shared with his class. Mrs. Meyers tells Jess Aarons that she did not want to forget her husband when he died, and reveals how devastated she is at the loss of Leslie Burke. Mr. Braithwaite reveals that he felt hate for people and wanted to hurt them. The next three educational interruptions are examples of different emotional revelations that teachers in the novels share with their students. I choose to call these “emotional revelations” because they are not necessarily stories or anecdotes, but examples of confessions that teachers make to their students that

reveal their deep emotion. Mrs. Myers's and Mrs. Tomasso's grief, and Mr. Braithwaite's anger are examples of this.

The Great Expectations School, Telling Break

My first grade teacher, Mrs. Tomasso, lost her husband the year I was in her class. The day after the funeral, she returned to school and explained her feelings and told us about her husband's life. At seven years old, I absorbed her grief and love. Did she have any idea how much I grew up in that hour? (Brown, 2007, p. 164)

In this educational interruption, Mr. Brown is revealing to the reader that his first grade teacher, Mrs. Tomasso, openly "explains her feelings." Even though there is little to go on – we do not know for certain whether this was an educational interruption - he remembers being moved by the truth telling of his teacher, and he "absorbed her grief and love." It must have brought him pause that day, even pulled him up short, for his memory of it causes him to reflect upon how much he "grew up in that hour." In that time of shared presence, of communion with his grieving teacher, he has the opportunity to contemplate life.

Bridge to Terabithia, Telling Break

"Jesse Aarons. Will you step out into the hall. Please." He raised this leaden body and stumbled out of the room. He thought he heard Gary Fulcher giggle, but he couldn't be sure. He leaned against the wall and waited for Monster Mouth Myers to finish singing 'O Say Can You See?' and join him. He could hear her giving the class some sort of assignment in arithmetic before she came out and quietly closed the door behind her.

OK. Shoot. I don't care.

She came over so close to him that he could smell her dimestore powder.

"Jesse." Her voice was softer than he had ever heard it, but he didn't answer. Let her yell. He was used to that.

"Jesse," she repeated. "I just want to give you my sincere sympathy." The words were like a Hallmark card, but the tone was new to him.

He looked up into her face, despite himself. Behind her turned-up glasses, Mrs. Myers' narrow eyes were full of tears. For a minute he thought he might cry himself. He and Mrs. Myers standing in the basement hallway, crying over Leslie Burke. It was so weird he almost laughed instead.

"When my husband died" – Jess could hardly imagine Mrs. Myers ever having had a husband – "people kept telling me not to cry, kept trying to make me forget." Mrs. Myers loving, mourning. How could you picture it? "But I didn't want to forget." She took her handkerchief from her sleeve and blew her nose. "Excuse me," she said. "This morning when I came in, someone had already taken out her desk." She stopped and blew her nose again. "It – it – we – I never had such a student. In all my years of teaching. I shall always be grateful."

He wanted to comfort her. He wanted to unsay all the things he had said about her – even unsay the things Leslie had said. Lord, don't let her find out.

"So – I realize. If it's hard for me, how much harder it must be for you. Let's try to help each other, shall we?"

"Yes'm." (Paterson, 1977, pp. 124 - 125)

This educational interruption takes place after Leslie's death when Jess is forced to return to school just as though nothing has happened. Jess Aarons has just lost his best friend, and when he learns that his teacher is also heartbroken at this loss he is "pulled up short" (Kerdeman, 2003) by her revealing this to him. He hears a tone in her voice that is "new to him" and she offers him her sincere sympathy. She is open in her willingness to reveal the emotions she experienced with the loss of her husband. Her emotional revelation consists of sharing the personal emotion of her deep sadness, openly crying, openly sharing her pain with him.

In the space created by this interruption, this nine year old boy wants "to comfort her," he wants to "unsay all the things" he has said about his teacher, while she feels compelled to tell him that "in all her years of teaching" she "never had such a student." While the boundary is never broken – they remain in their teacher and student roles – the

encounter enables them to share grief. Even though Jess never cries (“for a minute he [thinks] that he might cry himself”), it gives him space to contemplate that Mrs. Myers, aside from being “Monster Mouth Myers” as he and Leslie have dubbed her, is a woman: “Mrs. Myers loving, mourning. How could you picture it?” In this telling break, a space is created that allows Jesse to see Mrs. Myers as a person who loves, a person who mourns. She has shared a piece of herself with him in sharing her grief. This interruption, while the only one taken from a work of fiction rather than an autobiography written by a teacher, serves to show that a teacher’s interruption need not be a long story; a sharing of honest emotion can be enough.

To Sir, With Love, Telling Break

“It’s easy for you to talk, Sir, nobody tries to push you around.” Seales’ voice was clear and calm, and the others turned to look at him, to support him. His question touched something deep inside of me, something which had been dormant for months, but now awoke to quick, painful remembering. Without realizing what I was doing I got up and walked to where he sat and stood beside his desk.

“I’ve been pushed around, Seales,” I said quietly, “in a way I cannot explain to you. I’ve been pushed around until I began to hate people so much that I wanted to hurt them, really hurt them. I know how it feels, believe me, and one thing I learned, Seales, is to try always to be a bit bigger than the people who hurt me. It is easy to reach for a knife or a gun; but then you become merely a tool and the knife or gun takes over, thereby creating new and bigger problems without solving a thing. So what happens when there is no weapon handy?”

I felt suddenly annoyed with myself for giving way to my emotion, and abruptly walked back to my desk. The class seemed to feel that something had touched me deeply and were immediately sympathetic in their manner. (Braithwaite, 1959, p. 162)

“Without realizing what [he is] doing,” Braithwaite responds personally to Seales’ comment and the telling break begins. He reveals what has happened him, his life experiences of “being pushed around,” and then he reveals even more – how much he

“wanted to hurt” the people who made him feel this way. He “gives way to his emotion” and then feels “abruptly annoyed with [himself].” He is pulled up short, himself, by the telling break, and though there is no way to discern what sort of space has opened, Braithwaite does say that “the class seemed to feel that something had touched me deeply and were immediately sympathetic in their manner.” The break has caused a change in the “manner” of the students. They have just listened to their teacher reveal his experience with racism. He has confessed to them that he “began to hate people,” and they know he has been honest with them.

Angry Outburst

Ms. Gruwell’s yelling at her student causes him to drop his jaw. Mr. Braithwaite tells his female students that “only a filthy slut” would have done what they did. Mr. Brown smashes a desk above his head and breaks the blackboard when he punches his fist into it. These three interruptions are examples of what I call “angry outbursts,” interruptions that are nothing short of unpleasant and shocking, and of which later the teachers might even feel ashamed. Nevertheless, they are honest about their actions in these descriptions and they provide examples of the extreme end of the spectrum of educational interruptions.

The Freedom Writers’ Diary, Telling Break

Ms. Gruwell approached me and asked to speak with me in the hallway. At first I thought she would drop me, but since I was already in what the other teachers called “dummy” English, where else could I go? I figured she would simply give me the same speech other teachers had given me: “You’re failing and I know you’re bright, so get it in gear. OK?” Sometimes I just wanna say, “No shit, really? I’m failing, so how do I change that?” But in light of the many times I’ve been blown or brushed off, I keep it to myself. I walked into the hallway and immediately she turned to me and said, “What’s this? She flashed my evaluation in my face. “Do you know what this means?” I didn’t answer. I didn’t know what to say. Just when I thought she was at her boiling point, she turned it up a

notch by adding, “FUCK YOU! That’s what this is! It’s a fuck you, and a fuck me, and a fuck everyone who’s ever cared about you!” Immediately our conversation became a road trip to hell with me riding shotgun. I was thrown off, confused, flabbergasted, and to put it simply - shocked.

No one in my life has ever given me the facts so boldly. I had never had a “pep talk” like this. After my jaw seemed to wind itself back into its proper place, what she said began to sink in. She went on to tell me that “until I got the balls to look her straight in the face and tell her to fuck off, she was not going to let me fail, even if that meant coming to my house every day until I finished the work.” I couldn’t tell her off, so I just stood there with tears in my eyes. (Gruwell, 1999, pp. 119 - 120)

This journal entry is written by a high school student of Ms. Gruwell’s and is one of many in the compilation called *The Freedom Writers Diary*. The separation between teacher and student is clear. She, the teacher, has evaluated him, the student. He is used to being evaluated by teachers and falling short. He does not expect what is coming. This educational interruption happens in the hallway – Ms. Gruwell has the wherewithal not to lash out with her words in front of a classroom full of students. When Ms. Gruwell begins to tell him what she thinks of his work as they stand in the hallway, this turns into an interruption. She has been observant, it is clear, and she knows he can do better. She is a compassionate person and has put so much into helping this student that she just loses her restraint and unleashes, one definition of *break*. She breaks the traditional boundary between teacher and student when she lets loose her wrath and says, “This is a FUCK YOU!” This “road trip to hell” on which Ms. Gruwell takes this student “throws him off.” There is no doubt that he has been “pulled up short” (Kerdeman, 2003, p. 294).

“Flabbergasted, shocked,” he now has entered a space that has been opened up by the frank words of his teacher. She willingly reveals that she takes the situation personally, and she does not hide her emotion about it. She speaks to him crudely, telling him that “until [he] had the balls to look her straight in the face and tell her to fuck off,

she was not going to let [him] fail” (Gruwell, 1999, p. 119). The space they share is uncomfortable; there is certainly no relief or reprieve here. But Ms. Gruwell is bringing the truth to this student, and they exist in a space that is new, where the normal boundaries have been altered. It takes time for him to “wind [his] jaw back into its proper place” and in that time he experiences her compassion. The tears in his eyes are a sign he has truly listened to his teacher and sees her differently now. Because of her risk to engage in this interruption, he changes. Subsequently, this student goes on to write this entry, which is later published in *The Freedom Writers Diary*.

To Sir, With Love, Telling Break

I was so overcome by anger and disgust that I completely lost my temper. I ordered the boys out of the room, then turned the full lash of my angry tongue on those girls. I told them how sickened I was by their general conduct, crude language, sluttish behavior, and of their free and easy familiarity with the boys. The words gushed out of me, and the girls stood there and took it. By God, they took it! Not one of them dared to move or speak. Then I turned to their latest escapade.

“There are certain things which decent women keep private at all times, and I would have thought that your mother and older sisters would have explained such things to you, but evidently they have failed in that very obvious duty. Only a filthy slut would have dared to do this thing, and those of you who stood by and encouraged her are just as bad. I do not wish to know which individual is responsible, because you are all to blame. I shall leave the classroom for exactly five minutes, in which time I expect that disgusting object to be removed and the windows opened to clear away the stink. And remember, all of you, if you must play these dirty games, play them in your homes, but not in my classroom.” With that I stormed out of the room, banging the door behind me. (Braithwaite, 1959, p. 70)

This telling break begins when Mr. Braithwaite finds a burning tampon in the fireplace of the classroom. He is “so overcome by anger and disgust” that he loses his temper, orders the boys out, and lashes into the girls who stay there and “take it.” In fact, they are “pulled up short” (Kerdeman, 2003, p. 294) as the words “gush out” of him, so

much so that “no one dares move or speak” (Braithwaite, 1959, p. 70). He tells them that “only a filthy slut” would do such a thing. He holds nothing back. In his anger, he has abandoned all reserve and tells them their mothers and sisters have failed to raise them to be “decent women.” As they stand there and listen to him, a space opens, a space filled with the stinking smell of a burning tampon. In this place where their male teacher is telling them they are all to blame for this disgusting event, they listen: “The words gushed out of me, and the girls stood there and took it. By God, they took it! Not one of them dared to move or speak” (Braithwaite, 1959, p. 70). This telling break ends when Mr. Braithwaite bangs the door behind him and leaves the room after having directed them to removed the “disgusting object” and open the windows to “clear away the stink.”

The Great Expectations School, Telling Break

I looked at Sonandia and her half page of notes about Iroquois ways of life. A string snapped inside me, and I lost it.

I lifted cackling Tayshaun Jackson’s desk above my head and *wham!* smashed it to the floor. “SHUT YOUR MOUTHS!” My voice shook with convulsive intensity. The room went dead silent and motionless at my paroxysm, like a record scratching to a halt in some terrible game of Freedance.

“Do you have any idea what you are doing to me? Just shut your mouths!”

“It wasn’t me -“

“SHUT IT, CWASEY! I don’t care. I don’t care!” I was kickball red. “Do you know that all I want to do is teach you? *That’s all I want to do.* I don’t have any other job. This is it. And you make me yell and scream *all day!* Do you know how sick that makes me? *Do you know how sick I feel right now?*”

With the last phrase, I snapped my body hard to the right, punching the blackboard with my closed left fist. The chalkdusty surface splintered and gave, and I saw my hand in a six-inch cranny between the board and the cement wall. Lakiya Ray’s face froze in a crazed openmouthed grin, but the rest of the kids looked appropriately petrified. My eyes bulged, and I brushed sweat from my temple.

“Mr. Brown, you wiped a little blood on your face.”

“Thank you, Destiny.” I dabbed at the red wisps on my forehead and glared at the back wall’s ‘Iroquois Longhouses’ bulletin board, safeguarding my eyes from meeting those of any terrified children. *Especially Sonandia*.

“I’m thinking about not being your teacher anymore,” I said gravely. Several stunned gasps escaped from the mute gallery. I righted Tayshaun’s slammed desk and sat on it, feeling weary and spent. “None of you deserve to experience fourth grade like this.” A long silence passed. The quiet made it feel like a different room, and even though I had unforgivably just lost all composure in front of ten-year-olds, I briefly relished holding the uncontested floor of 4-217. If only everything could be different. (Brown, 2007, pp. 113 - 114)

Here Brown reveals that he is a person who cannot take another moment of their antics. He makes himself entirely vulnerable to them, even after having done something so inappropriate, so risky. He is “opening up himself” to the students and telling them that they have gotten to him. He is, in effect, “showing his other side,” his “human” side.

This action of his, a physical action of slamming a desk, brings space because it causes the room to go “dead silent” and to be “motionless at [his] paroxysm” (Brown, 2007, p. 113). In a way, he is “between worlds” because he is no longer the figure of authority at this moment, but instead, just a vulnerable person who has *had it*. When he tells his students how sick he feels, he is honest about his anger at them.

And he is not done. The physical violence continues. Again he strikes out, lashes out, and this is, indeed both an emotional confession and an angry outburst. It is a violent telling break, but a telling break, nonetheless. His telling break is a breaking loose, bordering on breakdown. Mr. Brown reveals how sick he feels, how sick his yelling at his students all day makes him, and he blames this directly on them: “Do you have any idea what you are doing to me” (Brown, 2007, p. 113)? They are the direct recipients of his frustration, his anger, and then, his physical violence. At the moment asks “Do you

know how sick I feel right now?” he punches the blackboard and breaks it, taking the telling break to the level of physically breaking the board on which he has been assiduously writing notes to a class that never listens, save one – Sonandia (Brown, 2007, p. 113).

When Mr. Brown reveals that he is “thinking about not being [their] teacher anymore,” this telling break has taken on a confessional tone, and it is at this moment that “several stunned gasps escape from the mute gallery” (Brown, 2007, p. 114). They are all pulled up short, shocked into silence. The teacher himself is pulled up short by what he has done. The space in which he finds himself with his students is one characterized by “a long silence” passing. Not only are they all sitting there together stunned, Mr. Brown himself describes the space as having been altered: “The quiet made it feel like a different room.”

Mr. Brown’s having “unforgivably lost composure” means that the boundary between his students and him has been crossed. It is initially sparked when a “string snaps” and now as he sits there “relishing” the “uncontested floor,” he has a chance to contemplate what he has done, what he has revealed to these people sitting in silence in the room with him. The storm passes and they are sitting there together when Mr. Brown says, “None of you deserves to experience fourth grade like this.” They file out in silence when he dismisses them.

Part IV: Analysis of the Conceptual Dimensions of the Educational Interruption That Arise from the Interviews and Novels

The words of students in the interviews presented in the previous chapter are the basis for several conceptual dimensions of the educational interruption I have conceptualized. In contrast, the first part of this chapter presented excerpts from six

novels that provided examples of different aspects of the educational interruption. While at first these examples may seem in stark contrast to the descriptions provided by the students in their interviews, these excerpts have at their center some of the very same conceptual dimensions that arise in the interviews.

Continuity

There is a continuity that begs interruption in every classroom. It consists of the continuity of curriculum, but also of rules and other structures in place in a school classroom. The structures are temporal as well as physical. Often, a bell rings to signal the beginning and end of a class. There is attendance to take and objectives to meet, tests to give, and tests to take. For students, lectures represent one continuity of experience that is “very serious,” or “monotonous,” as Ian says. During this time of information-delivery, a student might feel forced to “go into straight copying” or “note-taking mode.” A student may “have to put all interesting thoughts out of his head,” as Ian confesses he does, in order to “focus on like, pen and paper, little blue lines,” and “the white space in between.” In this situation, there is no “in between” besides that space between the lines, from one line of notes copied from the board to the next. With his metaphor of the “interesting teacher switch” Ian informs me that he feels that the switch is down, or off, for “teacher lesson.” This continuity of teacher lesson, the continuity of the curriculum, the monotony of the delivery, comprises a good deal of the temporal continuity.

As we will soon explore further, James explains, “sojourns...alleviate the situation.” This situation of which he speaks is the continuity, the monotony, the seemingly endless hours of teacher lecture and teacher notes on the board, which must be dutifully copied into one’s notebook. As Ian aptly puts it, it is a “lecture we are *on*,” just

as one might be on a long, never-ending train ride during which one might wonder, “Are we there yet?” But there is no time to ask, for one might fall behind in note-taking and get lost. In addition to the monotony of a teacher’s lecture, there might also be the fear of falling behind, of not keeping up with the curriculum, of losing one’s place or falling off the track the teacher has set. James says that the students are “focused on the board, on what the teacher is teaching,” and Kim describes her teacher Mrs. Johnson as “just strictly like teaching.” She “hates the classes that are just pure lecture and everything.” She does not explain, except to say that in those experiences she “just hears the facts.”

Nate’s experience of the continuity of curriculum makes him say to himself, “This is so boring – I got another hour of this.” To him, even worse than the boredom, the situation feels “like prison.” Kyle says that this experience of a continuous lecture, day after day, as “[he’s] sitting there, and [he’s] taking notes,” feels like “the burden on your head.” Hannah calls the classroom “tense” during times as these and Bill says that the teacher has a “serious mood” when he is “teaching something important.” Annie admits that during lectures she “just stares at her paper” and “stares at the clock.” Sometimes she draws. Mostly she tries to pay attention because she knows that “it’ll be on a test and she just has to know it because it’ll be tested, not because she wants to know it.”

Lectures seem to be something to be suffered through. “Bored” is defined as “weary” or “suffering from ennui,” and it does seem from these students’ descriptions that they do, in their own way, suffer through the continuum of an uninterrupted lesson or lecture (“bored,” *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. 1989).

Day in and day out, students listen to their teachers speak. Day in and day out, students file into the classroom, sit down, take notes for an hour, and file out. They may

experience this as boredom, or a burden, or even prison. The monotony is something of which they are acutely aware and which they must endure. For the duration, they endure. They endure the bureaucratic rules, the regulations, and the evaluations. When they are not sitting taking notes they may be sitting taking tests.

Garrison uses a vivid metaphor to describe what these “fixed and inflexible bureaucratic standards, norms, and averages” do to the minds of those who experience them. He says that they “close doors and manacle the minds of students and teachers” (Garrison, 2009, p. 76). It is reasonable to assert that the continuity of the curriculum, the continuity of the structure by which information is often delivered to students, “closes off other worlds,” as Garrison says (2009, p. 74). If a student must “put all interesting thoughts out of his head,” as Ian does, in order to make it through this experience, it seems that his mind is, indeed, in some respect, “manacled.” A teacher who must constantly watch the clock, keep cadence to show each PowerPoint slide for the hour and make every point she believes she must make is also “manacled;” she cannot veer from her structured lesson plan. Is it “correct” thinking and “right” action to meet the core curriculum content standards? Yes. But Garrison maintains that “correct” thinking and “the moral structures of ‘right’ action” “close off other worlds” which could be available to students (Garrison, 2009, p. 74). The inflexibility of the curriculum creates a continuum of experience for teacher and student alike. It is in this context that the teacher must make a choice. This continuity makes interruption possible.

The Situation to Be Interrupted: Boundaries and Separation in the Classroom

The situation of teacher and students in a classroom can be described in terms of

both physical and psychological boundaries. These boundaries create a separation between teacher and students that begs to be broken in a way similar to the continuity. The boundaries create a palpable separation between teacher and students alike. Just as the wall of continuity begs to be broken, the experience of the separation calls out for interruption. The situation, comprised at once of both the continuity and the separation, is one to be alleviated.

In addition to the temporal continuity of the curriculum, there is a physical structure as well that creates a separation and a boundary between teacher and students. The teacher is often at the front of the classroom while the students sit in rows at their desks. There may even be a teacher desk or lab bench, as there is in my classroom, separating the teacher when she is at the board from the students who are far away on the other side at their desks. Thus, because of the difference in physical space in which they must coexist, there is a separation, a natural physical boundary, between teacher and students in most classrooms.

There is the natural separation between teacher and students that arises out of their age differences and the roles they occupy. The spatial separation in the classroom also exacerbates the degree of psychological separation that necessarily exists. The psychological separation can be felt as a boundary that is not to be crossed, a limit that is not to be pushed, or a barrier that is not to be broken. Separation is defined as a state of being “disjoined, disconnected, detached, or set or kept apart,” and this separation might at times be used to describe what students experience in the classroom (“separate,” *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. 1989). The distinct roles of the teacher and students are maintained by differences including age, life experience, extent of education and

learning, the choice of a paid position versus the mandate by state law to attend school, and so on. Their physical separation in the classroom, while certainly a factor in the creation and maintenance of a boundary, cannot begin to match the degree to which the respective roles of teacher and student create and maintain a psychological barrier, a boundary that is certainly tested, rarely, if ever, crossed, and certainly never entirely negated.

The teacher is the one who does most of the talking. The teacher is the one who has the plan, who must enforce the rules, who must administer tests, who is required to uphold state standards, meet state requirements, and to hold students accountable for their achievement, for their actions, and their behavior in the classroom. The role of the teacher is to deliver information and the role of the student is to absorb it, process it, and present it again as evidence that the teacher has been successful in her mission and responsibility of delivery.

It is also the role of the teacher to hold and wield power. In several examples from the novels, teachers have the power to move about room and to dictate when a child moves or not. In *To Sir, With Love*, Braithwaite walks over and stands next to Seales' desk in order to decrease the physical separation between teacher and student and make his point. But this can also mean leaving the room altogether. In *Bridge to Terabithia*, Mrs. Meyers instructs the class to work on arithmetic after she orders Jess Aarons into the hall where she can speak to him in private. She has the power to adjust the location of the situation and she wields it.

In *Dangerous Minds*, Ms. Johnson tells her students about her teacher who used his power to pinch a child, the power to hurt and scare a child, and the power to laugh at

the hurt, scared child. When Ms. Johnson herself as a child crawls under that teacher's desk to hide there and bite him, she is crossing an important boundary. She catches him by surprise, and in the place of his power – his desk – crosses the boundary. In doing so, she challenges the teacher's authority. In *The Freedom Writer's Diary*, Ms. Gruwell has the power to ask to "speak with [him] in the hallway" (Gruwell, 1999, pp. 119 – 120). Teachers have the power to do the asking, and the demanding. It is never the other way around. Teachers sometimes have the power to drop a child from their class: "At first I thought she would drop me, but since I was already in what the other teachers called 'dummy' English, where else could I go" (Gruwell, 1999, pp. 119)? A teacher has the power to label a child a "dummy" and this, sadly, can also be a part of a teacher's role. Teachers evaluate students – "she flashed the evaluation in my face" – but rarely do students evaluate teachers. Braithwaite has the power, as teacher, to "order the boys out of the room" and, after doing so, "turn the full last of his angry tongue on those girls" (Braithwaite, 1959, p. 70). The role of students is that they must stand there and "take it."

Part of the role of a teacher is to maintain order and control, and this includes self-control. As Brown says, "I have unforgivably just lost all composure" (2007, pp. 113 – 114). Braithwaite "gives way to emotion," and Gruwell "turns it up a notch," all speaking to the fact that part of the role of a teacher is not to give way to emotion, not to lose composure, and not to "reach one's boiling point" (Gruwell, 1999, pp. 119 – 120). For the students' part, they must call their teacher "Sir" in the case of Braithwaite, and they must sit there when Mr. Brown smashes a desk to the floor while screaming, "SHUT YOUR MOUTHS" (Brown, 2007, pp. 113 – 114)! These powerful examples from the

novels help to elucidate the way in which the teacher/student boundary can be broken, and, in doing so, help to define the boundary, the separation in the first place. After all, when Braithwaite is “suddenly annoyed with himself,” he “walks abruptly back to his desk” in order to resume that physical separation, restore the boundary, and regain the ability to wield his power as before (Braithwaite, 1959, p. 162).

The existence of a boundary between teacher and students means that there is always a degree of tension, a degree to which each person in their role is inaccessible to the other. The students have very specific things to say in their interviews about this boundary, this separation between them and their teachers. Many of their comments refer to the times when the boundary is slightly shifted, so that the role of teacher is more amorphous and the role of student is perhaps less defined as well. The role of a student, for example, is “someone just taking notes.” The role of a teacher is a “job,” and it is to teach. Some teachers, as Ian says, “see themselves as teachers,” and that is where their role ends, while others “see themselves as more than that.” He goes on to explain that these are people he considers “educators,” people who are willing to expand their role from deliverer of the prescribed curriculum to someone who will talk about “life.” For Nathan, the role of the teacher sometimes entails being “all boxed” up, closed to the students. Tommy describes teachers as “mysterious,” and in this role shrouded by mystery they are “figures of learning.” Tommy refers to what he calls the “professional barrier,” that is, a barrier between a teacher and her students that can be broken. He says, too, that there is “tension” when a teacher and student talk to one another, and that the tension can sometimes be broken. This is when he says that it is “actually two people talking to each other.” Brian calls the teacher “head of the class,” and David says that it

often feels that the teacher and students are in different worlds. However students describe the separation they feel from their teachers, there is a definite boundary - a barrier - that exists in classrooms. Evan says it is a “separate plane”; Braithwaite feels it as a “thick pane of glass” (1959, p. 66). McCourt says that the only way to cut through it is to “build bridges” where teacher and students can “travel back and forth” (McCourt, 2005, p. 146). Thus, the educational interruption in the classroom requires a continuity that begs to be interrupted and a boundary between teacher and students that calls out to be altered, shifted, bridged, and perhaps even broken.

Open and Willing to Tell: Being Vulnerable, Taking a Risk

Given the situation of the classroom and its dimensions of continuity, boundary, and separation, there are also specific qualities of the teacher herself that can make for the possibility of interruption. A teacher may possess particular qualities of character that enable her to recognize in the very first place that the situation calls for alleviation. She is keenly aware that there is a need for interruption. These qualities include perceptiveness in a ready ability to notice her students, be open to them and be open with them. If she has a willingness to be vulnerable and an ability to share with her students, then she will be more inclined, more able, to interrupt.

A teacher may be open to listening, to “seeing her students” (Inchausti, 1993, p. 69). This willingness to listen, to be open, to interrupt, and to tell is one of the important conceptual dimensions that arises out of the interviews with students and the passages from the novels. The open teacher is aware of the students’ listening and in turn becomes more open in her own listening. She has an openness of heart (Inchausti, 1993, p. 69). She is willing to speak her mind. She willingly trusts, and entrusts her spoken thoughts

into the hands of her students. She risks, whether knowingly or unknowingly. Her willingness to risk and to be vulnerable is a part of this situation and cannot be extricated from it. She has an “openness of mind” (Dewey, 1916/1944, p. 175) during moments of the interruption, and in time before it, and in time after it, and she is able to “rest in the creative, unique, never-again-to-be-obtained moment of simple awareness of that which is” (Inchausti, 1993, p. 69). No one knows precisely when the awareness comes, but it does, and her openness may only flourish and grow. She might also turn and close down, but this quality of openness is one that the students speak of time and again, and one to which the teachers in the novels point.

Perhaps the openness is accompanied by a willingness to trust one’s students as Mr. Taylor does. Ian says that his trusting of his students “holds [them] honest in a guilt way.” While it might not be his purpose, Mr. Taylor shows his students that he trusts them. It is through his interruptions to tell stories that he teaches his students that he is “a trusting guy.” Does the fact that he trusts his students make him open and available to them? Ian seems to think so. He says that Mr. Taylor makes himself “available as a person.” In what way does a teacher become “available?” In giving an impression to students that he will open up to them as he wishes, that he will trust them as he needs, and that he will be available to them when *they* need, Mr. Taylor is a teacher who is generally open and willing to tell, willing to engage in interruptions that could go practically anywhere. Ian describes Mr. Taylor as “accessible.” This openness, this accessibility, this willingness to interrupt and tell becomes the key to the space that opens. The space opened up by the interruption becomes the place where a teacher becomes open, and willing to tell, and accessible. The openness is the way in; the

openness is what happens there; the openness changes the space, that interruption in experience, even after the space has closed, and the continuity is again the experience.

Nathan says that “some teachers are open with everyone and some aren’t.” He tells me that the teachers who are “locked” only tell things that are at a “low base, plain and simple.” His explanation for this is that the teacher is a “person who doesn’t trust anyone.” Regardless of the reason for being open, a teacher can give the impression to the witnesses that she is trusting, and that “she can open up.” To Nathan, it is simple. “When they open up, it’s great.” Tommy recognizes that a teacher opens up to tell just as much for herself as for anyone listening. He says that he thinks teachers “tell stories for *them*.” A teacher who is open can see the students, as Bill says, and “sees that we’re all bored.” Kyle says that Mr. Taylor will “just stop, and look at [them],” and *sees*. It is when he *sees* his students that he opens up to tell.

An openness on the part of the teacher and a willingness to tell means that there is a certain degree of receptivity in the classroom. The students are receiving the message that a teacher feels “comfortable” and is “trying to reach out,” as Kyle says. A teacher may feel “comfortable in his own skin,” as Bridget describes Mr. Bright, and he is “not afraid to be himself.” The “comfort in sharing” that the students describe is what they most perceive as reflecting the overall openness of a teacher. As Caroline says, a person who is “open” shows this, “to certain degrees,” in how “willing [he is] to share.”

Hannah reminds us that there is the possibility of being what she deems “too open.” Without telling “a lot about her personal life,” a teacher can be open enough to “tell enough that you know she’s a real person.” Perhaps what matters more is that a teacher tells enough to show that she is real. It seems to me, based upon the words of the

students, that they do equate *open* with *real*. A teacher who is *real* can be *open*; a teacher who is *open* can show she is *real*.

This “openness of heart” is a willingness to confess (Inchausti, 1993, p. 69). Before any shared space in a classroom is opened up, Inchausti claims that this “openness of heart” is actually “opening a space in one’s heart to register the subtle movement of students’ souls toward real change” (1993, p. 69). A teacher who is open in the way he describes is someone who is keenly aware of the “subtle movement” and again, this becomes a matter of awareness, of receptivity to one’s own change and to change in others.

This is evident in McCourt’s words that he “answered their questions and didn’t give a damn anymore about giving them too much information” (2005, p. 146). He opens to them; they open him. He is open to opening up to his students, and in opening up to them, in not “giving a damn anymore,” he is no longer personally or emotionally closed off. His willingness to open up is again reinforced when he tells Silvia, “For you, Doctor, Silvia, I would recite an epic” (2005, p. 194). And after he does tell his “Irish story” about the nun whose hands “never touched the flesh of man,” he admits to Silvia, and everyone else who is listening, “That’s all I know, Silvia.” He trusts them with his fear as a child, he trusts them by telling them that he knows he was not put on this earth to be “Catholic, or Irish, or vegetarian,” and he trusts them to tell them “that’s all he knows” (Mccourt, 2005, p. 195).

Mccourt’s willingness to tell and reveal has a confession-like quality to it. His educational interruptions resemble the “confessional narratives” of which Hooks speaks (1994, p. 186). She says “sharing experiences and confessional narratives in the

classroom helps establish communal commitment to learning” (Hooks, 1994, p. 186). As is clear in McCourt’s willingness to be open, his willingness to tell, and even willingness to confess, “students are not the only ones who are asked to share, to confess” (Hooks, 1994, p. 21). His classroom becomes a place where a “teacher grows,” too, and where he has shown he can be vulnerable (Hook, 1994, p. 21).

Teachers become vulnerable, open themselves up, and become willing to tell in different ways. Mrs. Myers reveals her pain to her fourth grade student, Jesse, and her “tone [is] new to him.” She gets close enough to him that he can now see tears in her eyes. Her voice breaks, the smell of her dimestore powder is detectable, and he suddenly is opened up by her willingness to tell him about her own sorrow and grief. “Lord, don’t let her find out,” he prays, when he sees how deeply she is grieving over Leslie’s death, as he is. His image of Mrs. Myers is changing; suddenly he hopes she will never know that he and Leslie called “Monster Mouth Myers.” Even though she clearly has not done it in the past, or her students would not have dubbed her “Monster Mouth,” now in the face of this loss Mrs. Myers is willing to “take the first risk,” to be “vulnerable, being wholly present in mind, body, and spirit” (Hooks, 1994, p. 21). Perhaps Jesse at nine years old does not fully comprehend the degree to which Mrs. Myers is becoming vulnerable, but he feels the difference and he is moved by it. Certainly Mrs. Myers is changed.

In a similar interruption, Mrs. Tomasso tells her first grade class that she has lost her husband. She tells them about her feelings and her husband’s life. We have no more details than these. All Brown says is that “at seven years old, [he] absorbed her grief and love” (Brown, 2007, p. 164). He asks, “Did she have any idea how much I grew up in

that hour” (Brown, 2007, p. 164)? We know from his description alone that Mrs. Tomasso opened up to her students, that she told them about the man she loved, and what it meant to lose him.

The openness can be simply to let words “gush out” (Braithwaite, 1959, p. 70). The openness can be to just let “a string snap” (Brown, 2007, p. 113). In the cases of Mr. Braithwaite and Mr. Brown, neither fights the torrent that comes. Is it an “openness of heart” that allows a teacher to “lose it?” Perhaps a teacher who is closed off and unwilling to ever open up would never feel the “snap” in the first place. The “openness of heart” may be what allows a teacher to scream at his students that they are making him *sick*. Though extreme, screaming at one’s students that they are “filthy sluts” and “turning the full lash of an angry tongue” on one’s students still requires an opening up (Braithwaite, 1959, p. 70). This opening is most certainly taking a risk, most certainly becoming vulnerable. But perhaps even more than an “openness” to “losing it” I think that Brown just truly “loses it” when he breaks a student’s desk and smashes his fist into the chalkboard, shattering it. While there is openness in writing a book in which he confesses this incident, his “openness of heart” comes *through* the interruption, the break, in which he breaks. Mr. Brown displays an “openness of heart” when he tells his students, “I’m thinking about not being your teacher anymore” (2007, pp. 113 – 114). He stands there in the aftermath of risk, completely vulnerable, risking more. In the cases of both Brown and Braithwaite, the opening opens them. A torrent of pure emotion - in this case, wrath - opens them.

Whether a story or a torrent of rage, when a teacher is open she is “sharing an experience,” and the teacher is “speaking to [students] as people,” Joe says. It is the

sharing “from person to person, instead of just from teacher to student.” Annie says that the teachers who open up to tell stories are “not afraid to be vulnerable.” The lack of fear in telling the truth, the willingness to share, and the willingness to be in a position of vulnerability in the situation of the classroom all are perceived by Annie as an openness on the part of her teachers causes her to connect to them. Kyle says that teachers who “share their life experiences with you” possess a willingness to “bring in a little bit of themselves.” These life experiences, customarily thought of as transpiring outside of the classroom, are very much within the classroom as well. Life very much happens in the classroom: the openness of a teacher to tell of experiences - whether they happened long ago or are happening at that moment - opens life up in the classroom. As Kyle explains, “you’re learning about the person, they’re sharing their life experiences with you, and you get to learn more about how they react to everything and learn some of their emotions.” This is what Joe means when he says that, “when teachers start sharing stories, they bring in a little bit of themselves and their lives into it.” Whether a teacher is telling a childhood story or lashing out in wrath, openness brings life into the space. Kyle says, “You’re like, ‘Wow.’” There is no doubt that everyone is “pulled up short” through the openness that comes through an interruption; the interruption is the opening that opens up space (Kerdeman, 2003, p. 308).

Breaking Open: Storytelling

The situation can be alleviated through the teacher’s telling of stories. These stories are not necessarily a prescribed part of the lesson, but they are not necessarily distinctly set apart from it, either. Stories may very well be educational interruptions, or, like the many stories my father told his physics classes, year after year, they become an

integral part of the curriculum. In fact, students would tell rising physics students that the last day of class was a surprise, and not to be missed: a day of my father's telling his stories. They can bring respite; they can bring laughter. Often stories teach a concept or provide an example that catches the attention of the students in a memorable way, and that is how my father used them.

Some teachers are known for their great storytelling. They break the continuity, which may lead to a break in boundary, or at the very least, a slight shift. The breaks that students in the interviews so often equate with "stories" are what Ian calls "little quips." He says that these are the "stories that break up the class." The breaks of which many of the students speak are little stories that are "good diversions." The students see these breaks as teachers "going on tangents," or as "taking a break from lecture...to give a little story about something interesting that happened." Kim says she "just likes it." Bill says that it makes him "more excited." David calls these breaks "little bridges" between the teacher and the students. Joe says there is indeed a "difference between...the actual lesson and when the story comes up." Nisha describes these events as a teacher's mind "going on another train of thought," and she believes that they represent, in the end "how far a teacher chooses to carry a train of thought" as they "go off on a tangent." These breaks for Matthew are "just small little diversions that help sort of break up the learning." Hannah simply says, "it's always kind of nice to have a break from the regular curriculum."

Thus, the breaks, according to these students, provide a means to alleviate tension or stress, which is "a condition of strain produced by anxiety, need, or by a sense of mental, emotional, or physical disequilibrium" ("tension," *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd

ed. 1989). It seems that they feel a certain return to equilibrium when a teacher takes a break to tell. Hannah, the very student who expressed feelings of discomfort when a teacher tells something too personal, is also very clear about how a little break can make her feel much better at times. She says that a teacher's interrupting to tell a story can sometimes be "almost a relief, 'cause...there's a minute that I can just spare to relax." To "relax" means to return to equilibrium, to break that "tension" or "physical disequilibrium." Students say that the stories, these breaks, give them a chance to relax. Nathan says, "that feeling...when they change the topic [feels like] something new, and you look forward to it." Ian says, with relief in his voice, that "everything's just like, 'aw, thank God.'" Kyle says, "You feel relieved."

"Relief" is defined as "an agreeable change of object to the mind." Relief also means "sustenance" and "succor" ("relief," *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. 1989). A teacher who breaks his teaching by stopping to tell a story might very well be supplying his students with "succor" and "sustenance." Not to do so may deny the students relief from the tedium, the monotony, and the long, tortuous experience of continuity.

There are many meanings of the word "break." After a "long, settled period," a "break" can be a sudden "change of weather." To "break" can be to "dissolve" and "relax." To "break" can be to "to interrupt the continuance of (an action)," or to "suspend." To "break" can also mean to "penetrate," as in the way that "light breaks the darkness," or to "make a way through." To "break" means to "burst (a barrier)," or to "spring out from restraint." To "break" means to "transgress," and it means to "burst into flower." To "break" means to "open up ground with a spade or blow," and it means to "bring (virgin land) into cultivation" ("break," *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. 1989).

All these meanings of “break” bear upon the descriptions students use for the time when a teacher takes a break from teaching to tell a story or to react to a classroom event.

For example, Kim says that during the time “you’re kinda calming down,” and in this case, the break is a time to relax. Bill describes feeling “calm and relaxed, rather than concentrated studying.” Bill says, “we’re studying and all of a sudden he starts, so, when he starts telling a story you just put your pencil down and relax. And listen for a bit.” John says the very same thing: “I put my pencil down.” Nathan describes what it feels like when this break arises: “You just turn, you pull your head up and your eyes kinda open, and you just listen.” For John, it “turns off the student instinct.” For Caroline, it “wakes her up.” For Kyle, it “clears [his] mind.” Matthew finds it a “refreshing digression,” and Nathan says, “it’s kinda like a spark - I wanna listen now.” Caroline says that the experience “encourages the class to pay attention,” and Joe says, “I’m definitely more focused when it happens because it’s like a change from whatever we’re learning.”

This “diversion” as Matthew describes it can be what causes the students to “tune in a little bit more, “ as Tommy says, and “start laughing.” A “diversion” is, after all, “the turning away of the thoughts and attention from fatiguing occupations, with implications of pleasurable excitement.” A “diversion” is also anything that serves as “distraction, recreation, amusement, or entertainment.” From the way students describe their feelings, it is clear that they are entertained and amused, and that this break to tell might be a time of “recreation” (“diversion,” *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. 1989).

In addition to being funny, students say that their teachers’ stories are “interesting.” Garrett and Ian say this, and Evan says that their stories are “always really interesting.”

Bridget says that Mr. Bright and Mr. Taylor tell “very interesting stories,” and both Tommy and Caroline also say that the stories their teachers tell are “really interesting” and “keep the class interesting.” Annie says, “I always get interested,” and Brian says that Mr. Bright’s stories “make class more interesting.” In short, there is agreement among many of the students that their teachers’ stories are “interesting.” “Interesting” means that which “concerns, touches, or affects.” It also means having the “qualities which rouse curiosity, engage attention, or appeal to the emotions” (“interesting,” *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. 1989). There is no doubt that students find their teachers’ stories interesting for all of these reasons. As Bridget says about Mr. Bright, “he loves sharing that part of his life with us.” They recognize that their teachers want to share with them, and this makes the students feel “happy,” as Brian says. Matthew says that sometimes a story “resonates” with him. This telling, this sharing, means “participating with (a person) in something,” so that when Nathan says that sometimes he feels as though he has “something with the teacher,” he means that he feels in some way “equal with” the teacher. To share not only means to tell, but to share can mean to “impart to others one’s spiritual experiences” (“share,” *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. 1989).

So many of the students say that listening to their teachers tell stories feels “good” or makes them “happy.” Kyle says, “They tell us funny stories to make us happy, to make us laugh.” John says, “He’ll stop and talk to his students about things that don’t have to do with class and it makes him and his students happier.” “It feels good,” Bill says, and Nathan says, “It’s good, it’s good.” “Actually, it feels really cool,” Tommy says, and Annie says, “I’m really happy that they tell stories most of the time.” She continues, “It’ll make me excited.” Caroline says that telling stories is a “good tool,”

even though she is the same person who says that sometimes she “sighs” when she feels yet another story coming on.

Breaking Open: “Pulled Up Short”

When teachers break the continuity to tell stories, to create “little diversions” that bring reprieve and respite to the classroom experience, the atmosphere changes and the students relax for a few moments, or minutes. Is a space created in which they are “pulled up short” (Kerdeman, 2003, p. 308)? Not necessarily. For an educational interruption that is a story to be classified as a telling break, the conceptual dimension of being “pulled up short” must hold. Not every story is an educational interruption because it is not necessarily experienced as separate from the continuity of the curriculum. A story that provides respite and reprieve may be an educational interruption. A story that qualifies as a telling break is one that must “pull up short” the situation in the classroom (Kerdeman, 2003, p. 294). The break that is the *telling break*, the “break in experience” which is “at the heart of the educational matter” (English, 2007, p. 138), can be very well be a story, provided that dimension of being “pulled up short” applies (Kerdeman, 2003, p. 294). Thus, a story can be a telling break, but not all stories are. Likewise, not all telling breaks are stories.

For an educational interruption to be classified as a telling break, the components must all be in place: a long wall of continuity, a teacher and students in their respective roles, the boundaries holding these roles in position, the separation between teacher and students, a time that the teacher interrupts to tell, and, finally, that pause, that perplexity caused by being “pulled up short” (Kerdeman, 2003, p. 294). The conceptual dimension upon which the model of the telling break hinges is that of being “pulled up short”

(Kerdeman, 2003, p. 294). Whether it be a story, a personal anecdote, an emotional revelation, or an angry outburst, if the interruption pulls up short, then it is a telling break.

The experience of being “pulled up short” (Kerdeman, 2003, p. 294) or finding oneself “brought to a standstill of hesitation and suspense” (Dewey, 1910/1997, p. 10), is marked by an interruption in continuity in the classroom that brings one to an unknown place. As Giarelli (personal communication, March 9, 2011), says, “my heart [was] all aflutter,” so surprised, so “pulled up short” was he when a student declared, “all education is brainwashing.”

The feeling of not knowing where to go next, of being in a “blind spot” (Kerdeman, 2003, p. 308) can open up a space one has never experienced. This happens when Mr. Taylor suddenly tells about how he saw two praying mantises having sex that morning, or when Mrs. Creedon pulls out a dildo or tells the class about how her brother-in-law has a venereal disease called The Clap. But it could also be the experience of listening to Ms. Johnson tell her students, “All right, I won’t touch you,” because “I used to hate it when my teachers touched me” (Johnson, 1991, p. 112). No doubt her story about plotting to bite the teacher who pinched her on the leg is an experience in which most, if not all, witnesses are sitting there open-mouthed, or at least interested, while feigning a lack of interest.

The girls who endure the “lash of [Mr. Braithwaite’s] angry tongue” are “pulled up short,” and the children who witness Mr. Brown’s smashing Tayshaun’s desk into pieces before smashing the chalkboard with his fist are too. Just hearing the tone of voice that Mr. Braithwaite uses to say, “I’ve been pushed around, Seales, in a way I cannot

explain to you,” is enough to bring a student’s listening to pause (Braithwaite, 1959, p. 162).

The most striking thing about the conceptual dimension of being “pulled up short” (Kerdeman, 2003, p. 308) is that one might imagine that only the listeners - the students - experience the feeling of perplexity. Lest we forget that the teacher who is interrupting is listening, I remind the reader that the teacher and students together are the situation. They are the teacher-and-students-together - yet separated and divided by boundary - a living breathing situation experiencing the interruption, and the teacher and students alike are brought into an experience of being “pulled up short” when this interruption strikes (Kerdeman, 2003, p. 294). The situation calls out for interrupting; the interruption that truly rends an opening is the one where the listeners - everyone - are all “pulled up short” (Kerdeman, 2003, p. 294). When Ms. Gruwell screams at her student that the failing grade on his evaluation is a “FUCK YOU!” she is no doubt feeling the shock herself. Though she does not stand there, “thrown off, flabbergasted, and to put it simply - shocked,” her student does (Gruwell, 1999, pp. 119 - 120). While the “tears in his eyes” are not her tears, this interruption is one that they both feel, that brings them both to a state of perplexity, and she keeps going! She tells her student “that until [he] got the balls to look her straight in the face and tell her to fuck off, she was not going to let [him] fail” (Gruwell, 1999, pp. 119 - 120). There really is no differentiating between or among the ones experiencing the shock. The fact is that there is an experience of surprise, of shock, and it is this interruption that brings teacher and student alike to a place of pause.

The feeling of being “pulled up short” could be the result of experiencing the grief (Kerdeman, 2003, p. 294). One does not usually go to school expecting to feel the grief

and loss felt by another, especially one's teacher, and most teachers do not go to school expecting to pour the contents of their aching hearts upon their students. But Mrs. Tomasso does just that, and a seven-year old experiences her "grief and love" (Brown, 2007, p. 164). This accomplishes the very same opening, that place where a child is struck (forever) by an adult's sharing of her pain. The same thing happens when Mrs. Myers shares her grief with Jesse. The change in the tone of her voice is enough to "pull him up short," and suddenly he "wants to comfort her" (Paterson, 1977, pp. 124 - 125).

Thus, the conceptual dimension of "pulled up short" is what separates a story that is part of the continuity of the curriculum and one that is altogether a shock, that actually can break a small opening up in the many boundaries between a teacher and her students (Kerdeman, 2003, p. 294). This opening leads to a space, and in that space a number of things might happen.

The Nature of the Space and What It Holds

Nathan feels a story coming on as a little "spark;" I describe it in my interviews as a "turn" or a "shift;" Ian calls it a little "switch." The signposts that lead up to it may not completely foretell the feeling of pause. Once that place comes into being, once that space has opened, however, that place of "striking novelty or unusual perplexity," one finds oneself experiencing a "shock," an "emotional disturbance," and a "more or less vague feeling of the unexpected" (Dewey, 1910/1997, pp. 73 - 74). It is this feeling that first enters the open space. It is a "salutary shock" that makes everyone present newly present. A new sense of awareness can be felt. "Not one of them dared move or speak," Braithwaite says (1959, p. 70). "A long silence passed," Brown says, and "the quiet made it feel like a different room" (Brown, 2007, pp. 113 - 114). "His question touched

something deep inside of me, something which had been dormant for months, but now awoke to quick, painful remembering” (Braithwaite, 1959, p. 162). There is a waking up, a new feeling of alertness and of being awake and present that did not exist before. “He looked into her face, despite himself,” Paterson writes, and Jess is seeing the eyes of teacher up close for the first time, filled with tears (1977, pp. 124 - 125). “No one in my life has ever given me the facts so boldly,” Ms. Gruwell’s student writes (1999, pp. 119 - 120). In this space that opens there is a waking up because of the boldness, even reckless abandon, of a teacher.

According to the interviews, the space that the interruption creates is a place of reprieve, a place of solace. Ian says, it is the time “when you go back to being a person again, instead of someone just taking notes.” The students say that it brings them calm. James tells me that in the space the “situation” is “alleviated,” “when [they] all take this sojourn and sit back and relax and smile and listen.” Kim says, “it gives you a little break, so you can break out.” In that space one “feels the tension break,” as Tommy says. Kim asks, “It’s almost like, is it like reality, kinda?” She says she wonders, “Wow, am I in school right now?” Annie says that the space is a place where there is a “link into their life,” and what this means to me is that there is suddenly an awareness for everyone that real life is present, that a teacher who is “sharing life experience” is real in her humanness. The reprieve comes from a temporary softening of the boundary, a release, in the space, from the roles. “It’s like crossing the path between just like teaching to a student and connecting to a student as well,” Kyle explains. Patrick says in his space his teacher “seems like more of a human being and less like a teacher.”

Teachers break free from their roles and just tell. They become vulnerable when they do so. They witness this break themselves; the break opens the space that becomes the space of witness. As Hooks says, “we marginalized and oppressed people attempt to recover ourselves and our experiences in language” (1994, p. 175). When the structure of schooling and the continuity of curriculum begin to oppress, when there is a “splitting of mind and body,” a break can “make a place for intimacy” (Hooks, 1994, p. 175). In this intimate space created by the interruption, by the telling break, there is no longer the “burden on your head,” there is no longer the effort to keep all thoughts from one’s head while struggling to focus on the little blue lines on the paper. Instead, however the space has arrived, “you go back to being a person again.”

If the interruption is a harsh waking up to the emotion of a teacher, to the “full lash of [an] angry tongue,” what happens in the space then (Braithwaite, 1959, p. 70)? The novels provide examples of the way space created serves not as respite, but as a space for waking up, for being on high alert, for experiencing silence, the aftermath of wrath, together, with or without the teacher. Braithwaite “storms out of the room” and “bangs the door behind him,” (1959, p. 70), while Brown “briefly relishes holding the uncontested floor” (2007, p. 114). If the space is where truth comes out and the harsh reality of unrestrained emotion is unleashed, there is still a quality of being awoken, of being “pulled up short,” of facing the unexpected (Kerdeman, 2003, p. 294). The newfound awareness of being, of seeing the teacher and perhaps oneself anew, is what happens in the space that has opened. It is not a gentle parting to make an opening; rather, it is a ripping or tearing open that makes space. However this bursting of boundaries happens, Garrison says, the “trickster teacher” must find “new outlets for our

energies that lead to the plenitude of existence” (2009, p. 74). The spaces created by the dissolving of boundaries, the rendering of the continuity, by whatever means necessary, open up these “new outlets.”

The space that is created by the interruption is a “pause in time” as English says, “when our experience breaks with itself” (2007, p. 136). I believe that in this space it is finally possible to be “copresent with the other” (Garrison, 2011, p. 5). However this space has been created, once there, the witnesses become listeners to one another in a way that no longer separates teacher from learner. Instead, there is no longer a “false separation between serious teaching and expression of feeling” (Freire, 1998, p. 125). There has been “serious feeling” unburdened, and this has lifted the burden of all. Biesta says that in this space, in the “in between,” “communication” and “existence of meaning” are “made possible” (2004, p. 20). When they “go into the gap,” that is, they “descend into that alien territory” of the space, they can finally “reveal who they are” and “come ‘into presence’” (Biesta, 2004, p. 21).

The space can be a place to relax and release burden; it can be a place where the teacher and students experience a breakdown of structure, rules, and roles. The physical separation might still be in place, but the psychological separation has been altered, the separation of power may have shifted, and the distinct roles of the teacher and student may have even blurred. Even more than causing the dissolution of these boundaries, the space awakens. The teacher and students wake up and are reminded they *are*.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have presented nine excerpts from six novels that represent a particular kind of educational interruption. I call this unique event the telling break. In contrast to the stories students say their teachers tell, which I presented in Chapter 3, these telling breaks are fraught with emotion and present extreme cases of a teacher's interrupting the continuity of the curriculum. This ranges from telling something very personal to lashing out at a student or an entire class in anger. The students in the interviews never mention having experiences like those reported by these teachers in their autobiographical novels about teaching. Thus, in stark contrast to the stories teachers tell, as reported by their students, these excerpts provide another perspective of the educational interruption, one that ruptures and truly breaks.

CHAPTER 5

A MODEL OF THE TELLING BREAK

Introduction

The model presented here is the outgrowth of a phenomenological study of student interviews and novels about teaching along with alternative literature on the educational interruption and my own life experiences as a student and classroom teacher. It was after 12 years as a classroom teacher that I was finally able to ask students to tell me about “stories their teachers tell.” In Chapter 1, I explained how this study was inspired by my own experiences as a teacher, and how I came to recognize that the educational interruption is one of the most, if not the most, important educational experiences of the classroom.

The literature review presented supports the view that the educational interruption is situated in a larger conversation about interruptions. The study of the educational interruption is grounded in a current exploration led by English, Haroutunian-Gordon, and Garrison, to name just a few. In Chapter 2, I provided contrasting literature from management studies that have sought to identify and minimize interruptions in the work place. The management studies have been used to support the assumption that interruptions in education are therefore also a cause of “time lost” (Glover & Miller, 1999).

In this study the two sources of supporting material that inform the building of the model of the educational interruption and more specifically, the telling break, are the student interviews and the six novels studied. The eighteen interviews I conducted with eleventh and twelfth grade high school students provide their personal recollections about

teachers who interrupt their teaching to tell stories. I never used the word “interruption,” but I did ask students about the “turn” or the “shift” that occurs, and every one of them I asked knew what I meant. Ian took that suggestion of mine and made a metaphor of it, telling me that if there were a switch to a light above the board, an “interesting teacher” sign might light up when the teacher stopped to tell a story.

I have used these eighteen interviews with high school students as a means of searching for conceptual dimensions that would arise when I asked about ways in which teachers interrupt their own teaching. Without ever telling students that I was looking for examples of the teacher-generated interruption, they told me a great deal pertaining to the ways teachers interrupt their lessons to tell about things, to “follow tangents,” to take little “diversions,” or bring the students along on a “sojourn.”

As I explained in the methods section and expanded in Chapter 3, I asked the students to “tell me about stories their teachers tell,” and I did not ask them to tell me about emotional outbursts of any kind. In the novels I read I found a combination of stories and outbursts. I also found examples of educational interruptions that met the criteria about which I had already had a hunch. At first I thought that the student interview data would provide examples of telling I could use; the more I analyzed the excerpts from the novels, however, the more I found that they also fit the conceptual dimensions of the model of the telling break I was exploring and that was emerging in the texts. Over time I started to realize that some of the examples that students use are “stories.” I wondered if there was a difference between an ordinary story and an educational interruption. I decided that every story must be felt as an interruption of some sort, unless it is obviously part of the curriculum. Then, it is not an interruption at

all. The experience can differ among students in a class in that sometimes it is relaxing and sometimes it is stressful to hear a teacher tell a story. What could induce stress in one person (a student who worries about time and preparing for the test) is relaxing to another (a student who enjoys the temporary respite). An example of this is Matthew's recalling that his teacher told the class about meeting her husband rather than discussing *The Great Gatsby*. He said everyone was "so interested" and they loved it. He did not. He was so excited to have Ms. Stevens take over on maternity leave for that teacher because then they actually "did work."

What my investigation has shown me is that how the educational interruption is felt seems to determine the degree to which the boundary between teacher and students is altered. If the educational interruption is one that shocks, it is likely a boundary has been altered more severely. If the educational interruption is a just a little stroll-in-the-park kind of experience, "sharing an experience" for fun, then a boundary is less changed. If it generates a feeling of camaraderie or respite, reprieve or relaxation, the boundary might nearly dissolve temporarily. But, if the educational interruption is an angry outburst, then the feeling is one of separation, perhaps even anger and betrayal. In the classroom, there are an untold number of different experienced interruptions, but in this analysis I focus on the teacher-generated educational interruption, the interruption that specifically occurs in a school classroom and is caused by a teacher.

Jackson says that to "decry the existence of [interruptions] is probably futile, yet their pervasiveness and frequency make them too important to be ignored" (Jackson, p. 17, 1990). Jackson's identification of interruption as a "feature of school life" rang true to me the very first time I read it. I remember thinking that while the school culture from

the perspective of a teacher seemed to portray interruptions as something to eschew, secretly I welcomed them and yes, even caused them. This made them educational interruptions and teacher-generated, because they were caused by me. When I considered that Jackson calls interruptions “facts of life” and that a study had yet to be done on the way that “teachers and students cope with these facts of life,” I realized that here was my opportunity (Jackson, 1990, p. 17). Here was my opening. Jackson suggests, “coping might leave its mark on their reactions to the world in general” (Jackson, 1990, p. 17). It was then that I thought, “Maybe the interruptions are *life*.” After all, we who spend our “life in classrooms” know that interruptions let life in.

This study began as an inquiry into the nature of the educational interruption in a classroom. In the literature I found that a number of philosophers had already identified the interruption as a focus of inquiry. But no one had focused in on a theory of the educational interruption caused by the teacher herself, and there existed no means for describing what a teacher-generated interruption might look like. I chose to combine data from student interviews with excerpts from autobiographical novels written by teachers because I wanted to explore the phenomenon from both sides. At first, the phenomenological data from the students seemed at odds with the data from the novels. Still, I always knew in my heart that there was something deeper that would reconcile the two and show that they both pointed to a phenomenon that had in common several discrete conceptual dimensions.

The first conceptual dimension to become apparent was that of the being “pulled up short,” a term used by Kerdeman to describe the feeling one has when something has unexpectedly caused one not to know where to go or what to think next (2003, p. 294).

Kerdeman herself calls this an “overlooked dimension” and asserts that often we feel this way when something “interrupts our life and challenges our self-understanding” (2003, p. 300). English refers to a similar experience resulting from interruption and says that there is a space when “we encounter the unexpected” (2007, p. 137). Rud and Garrison describe the interruption as causing one to “stop in one’s tracks completely” (2007, p. 164). Therefore, a requisite conceptual dimension of the specific kind of educational interruption called the telling break is that it brings one pause. The telling break causes one to reside in a place, or a space, that feels different. As I continued to read about and study this conceptual dimension, I realized that the real object of inquiry was the “space” (English, 2007, p. 137).

From the research literature I have drawn a number of phenomenological descriptors to convey what I have found in both the student interviews and the novels. Some of these have become the conceptual dimensions of the model: continuity and boundary/wall of separation from Garrison (2009), interruption from English (2007), Rud and Garrison (2007), “pulled up short” from Kerdeman (2003), the space from English (2007) and the “in between” from Biesta (2004). In creating the theory of the educational interruption, I borrowed the descriptors from the work of the philosophers above and combined these with the conceptual dimensions I mined from the student interviews and the excerpts from the novels.

The Definition of a Telling Break

Teachers interrupt their own teaching to tell. This is the premise with which I began this study and indeed, I have found that they do. I suggest that teachers generate their own interruptions by interrupting their own teaching. From here on, the reader may

assume that each time I refer to an educational interruption I am referring to an interruption that happens in a classroom and is caused by the teacher herself. In my analysis of the student interviews as well as the excerpts from the novels, I have found that the educational interruption is not readily classified as a single, specific phenomenon. Rather, there is a spectrum of the educational interruption in which many different versions of the event exist. On one end of the spectrum are the “stories teachers tell,” and these stories are indeed educational interruptions if the teacher interrupts the continuity of the classroom experience to break and talk about something clearly not the curriculum, or perhaps only tangentially related to it. Perhaps it is an experience he or she had, or a story he or she once heard as a child. This is a time when the teacher breaks to *tell*. It is the story itself that the teacher is taking a break to tell that “tells” something to the students listening. On the other end of the spectrum are the times when a teacher breaks, that is, a teacher “loses it,” or is so overcome with emotion that she cannot contain herself. In this case, the educational interruption is a phenomenon that begins with the teacher’s *breaking*. This breaking can be a breaking loose. In this moment, it is the *breaking* that tells the most. Then there are all the possible variations of these extremes in between. Most educational interruptions fall somewhere in between. On the spectrum I have only identified “story,” “personal anecdote,” “emotional revelation,” and “angry outburst” as representative of the kinds of educational interruptions that may fit into the definition of a telling break.

In my definition of a telling break, it is an event that occurs in a school classroom. It is almost always a spoken educational interruption (though it can, at times, be physical) made by the teacher. Felt as an interruption by everyone in the room, it is a break in the

continuity of instruction and learning. It is not necessarily related to the curriculum, though it can be; it may be related to – or inspired in some way by – the goings on in the room. A telling break can begin as a tangent, which spins off from the topic at hand; it can seem to come out of the clear blue sky. It is felt as an interruption because it breaks open a space that did not exist before, a space where the students listen differently. They feel different because they can safely put their pencils down and not take notes. Whether the teacher is bursting forth with the details of a shocking anecdote, or reminiscing about her summer, the students can let go of the focused attention they felt moments before.

But it is not enough that the students put down their pencils and sit back, relaxed, in their seats. They might not be relaxed at all if they are witness to an educational interruption in which their teacher's face has turned beet red and insults are hurtling through the air. Instead, if they are “pulled up short” by this interruption, it is the specific kind of educational interruption called a telling break (Kerdeman, 2003, p. 294).

Whatever story the teacher is telling must be one that opens up a space where the students sit in a new kind of silence. Whatever outburst the teacher is having must be one that opens up a space where the students sit in a new kind of silence. Wherever the telling break lies on the spectrum, whether it is analogous to a sunny day at the beach or a time when thunderheads and lightning let loose, it is only a telling break, and not simply an educational interruption, if the students feel brought to a halt, and they “stop in their tracks” (Rud and Garrison, 2007, p. 164). As Dewey says, there is a “standstill of hesitation and suspense” that ensues from the telling break, and if it does not, then it is not a telling break (Dewey, 1910/1997, p. 10).

The single most defining feature of the telling break is that it breaks open a space in which everyone involved, both the teacher and the students, exists in a new state of “perplexity,” as Dewey calls it (Dewey, 1910/1997, p. 117). As English explains, “Dewey pulls apart this moment of perplexity in learning, demonstrating it as a productive educative space of experience in which individuals are held in suspense; they can begin to inquire into and reflect upon themselves and the situation in which they are stuck” (English, 2009, p. 72). Indeed, students are stuck. The teacher, too, is stuck, especially if he or she has begun a telling break in which he or she finds that a quick exit is not possible, and must finish what was begun. It is not just the students who may find themselves the “perplexed wayfarers,” as Dewey calls them, but the teacher as well. The teacher, too, “must carefully scrutinize what is before him and he must cudgel his memory” (Dewey, 1910/1997, p. 10). Thus, the telling break is an educational interruption that puts everyone who experiences it into a state of perplexity, a place of feeling stuck, of wondering where to go next.

Dewey describes the “difficulty” of the interruption in a way that rings true to the classroom experiences of the educational interruptions in the novels. In the excerpts from the novels, nearly every one of the educational interruptions that is a telling break “presents itself first as a shock, as emotional disturbance, as a more or less vague feeling of the unexpected, or something queer, strange, funny, or disconcerting” (Dewey, 1910/1997, pp. 73 – 74). The space where the emotional disturbance is felt – whatever degree of pleasant or unpleasant – has the characteristics of being “pulled up short” (2003, p. 294). Kerdeman defines this “overlooked dimension” as a place where “events we neither want nor foresee and to which we believe we are immune interrupt our lives”

(2003, p. 294). She goes so far as to assert that the “level of insight that arises from being pulled up short does not represent a gradual alteration or expansion of our existing worldview,” but rather a “radical transformation” (2003, p. 297).

Yes, the telling break interrupts the lives of the teacher and students, but I do not agree that being “pulled up short” is the “radical transformation” that Kerdeman asserts (2003, p. 297). Instead, I think that there is a *waking up* that happens. Dewey says, “pupils wake up when something beyond their ken is introduced” (1910/1997, p. 221). It is that “wide-awakeness,” as Greene calls it, and it happens to all (1977, p. 121). Greene explains that Kierkegaard was “concerned about depersonalization, automatization, and the bland routine of life” (1977, p. 119). There is no doubt that the continuity of the classroom experience often becomes a “bland routine,” and the only way to break it is to “communicate to [people] in such a way that they [might] become aware of their ‘personal mode of existence’” (Greene, 1977, p. 120). The experience of being “pulled up short,” then, is one in which each person who witnesses the telling break awakens (Kerdeman, 2003, p. 294). Greene quotes Thoreau in *Walden*, who says, “to be awake is to be alive” (1977, p. 120). The telling break is an interruption that wakes everyone up and reminds each person that she is alive. The space opened by the telling break, therefore, is a place where the people in a classroom are brought to awareness that they are locked in a structure of school, “boxed up” in a “prison” of sorts, as Nathan calls it. They are reminded of the continuity when it is broken and they are woken up and reminded that they are alive (and stuck there together).

The telling break is an interruption to the continuity in a classroom caused by the teacher’s spoken words. This interruption puts everyone who experiences it into a place

that is felt, perhaps as a “difficulty” (Dewey, 1910/1997, pp. 73 - 74), as being “pulled up short” (Kerdeman, 2003, p. 294), and then as a state of “wide-awakeness” (Greene, 1977, p. 121). Whether a story, a personal anecdote, an emotional revelation or some sort of outburst, a telling break will be a “narrative moment” or series of moments, as Hooks (1994, p. 167) says, that interrupts and breaks open a space that awakens.

What is the difference between a story and a telling break? Teachers go on tangents and talk and tell stories, and they share information about what they know that is not directly related to the curriculum. This seemingly endless teacher talk as it fills classrooms is, in fact, part of the continuity, because no space opens, and the listening does not change. But if a story a teacher tells suddenly causes “arousal to perception of something that needs explanation, something unexpected, puzzling, peculiar,” then the story is a telling break (Dewey, 1910/1997, p. 207). Then the story is an interruption to the continuity and breaks open a space where everyone listening, including the teacher himself, has been “stopped in [his] tracks completely” (Rud & Garrison, 2007, p. 165).

From what I have gathered from both the students’ interviews and the novels, it is the revealing of the personal that most often succeeds in causing “perplexity” to the listeners (Dewey, 1910/1997, p. 10). In addition to this, when the teacher reveals emotion, lets loose and breaks the traditional boundary of the roles of the teacher, this opens a space where teacher and students alike must “metaphorically climb a tree” (Dewey, 1910/1997, p. 11). They must contemplate where to go next together.

The Conceptual Model of the Telling Break

Continuity of Curriculum and Classroom Experience

Continuity exists in the classroom and will be broken. There is a spatial component to this continuity: the students occupy desks facing the board, and the teacher stands or sits in front of them. Day in and day out, this is the usual configuration that occurs in the classroom. Primarily, the temporal component of the continuity is the monotony; there is also the predictability of the bell that rings to begin and end class. Each day there is an identical allotment of time for the class, and each day the teacher is expected to teach a certain amount of curriculum, to “cover” a certain amount of “material.” For teacher and students alike, hours blend into days, days into weeks, and weeks into the academic year.

The Teacher Teaches

Ideally, the teacher puts the learning into the hands of the students and the experience in the classroom is student-centered and inquiry-based. However, even in classrooms where this is a reality, it is often the case that the teacher lectures. This delivery-based model of instruction is common and the interviews with students support this. Nearly every student mentions the lecturing of a teacher and most speak of the experience as a “situation” that requires “alleviation.”

The Students Learn Through Listening and Taking Notes

The students spend a good deal of time in the classroom listening to the teacher deliver information. The students must keep their eyes glued to the board or the overhead projector and keep up with taking notes.

The Boundary between the Teacher and Students is Maintained by Their Respective Roles

The boundary between the teacher and students is defined by the roles they traditionally play in the classroom. The teacher delivers information, assigns work, collects work, manages student behavior, enforces rules, delivers consequences, and so on. The students receive instructions, information, and punishments. The teacher works to maintain order and keep the attention of the students. The students fulfill their requirements by listening and obeying; the teacher fulfills her requirements by meeting the standards set in place by the district and the state. The teacher is an adult and the students are children or young adults. The boundary is maintained by the physical and psychological separation of their respective roles.

An Interruption Breaks the Continuity

The continuity is broken by an interruption. Whatever the nature of the interruption, the continuity is ruptured. The rupture leads to a space that opens up. There are many different kinds of interruptions that can occur in a classroom, but if an interruption is caused by the teacher, it may be classified as an educational interruption. It may even be a telling break if it meets the specific criteria. Using several examples of possible educational interruptions, each of which falls on a different part of the spectrum of classification, one can then determine, potentially, the nature of the space that the interruption opens up. If the teacher interrupts to tell a story which is clearly not a planned part of the curriculum then a space might open up which feels like a calm reprieve, a happy “sojourn” in which everyone puts their pencils down and relaxes. If the teacher breaks the continuity of a lesson in class to tell a personal anecdote or narrative of some kind, the space might still be one that calms and offers respite, but some students

might find it “frustratingly irrelevant,” thereby already complicating the nature of the space, which must necessarily vary from one person to the next. This spectrum of the educational interruption contains within it the possibility of a telling break.

Thus, depending upon the nature of the rupture, space can open to allow a happy sojourn, or bring silence that feels like “a road trip to hell.” More likely, the space lies somewhere between those two extremes. Therefore, whether a place of comfort and reprieve, or discomfort and unrest, the space that the educational interruption creates is one that is *new*.

The Space Opened by the Telling Break is a Place Where the Boundary Alters between Teacher and Student

What may happen in the space opened is that the roles of teacher and students shift in such a way that the boundary between them changes. This may or may not be consciously experienced, but it is a possibility of the space. Whether a soothing story or a raucous rant, a telling break will open a space that can cause everyone in it to experience being themselves, and to feel the presence of the others, differently. They may be reminded that they are people who are alive. This copresence, this coexistence, may even allow for the possibility that they feel free for a moment from the wall of separation that always exists between teacher and students. For those moments, the space might negate the wall and they all just exist together in it.

And then they must return. They must leave the space and return to the seemingly endless continuity. They go back, because a sojourn is only a temporary stay. The story always ends. So does the silence. When they return to the curriculum, to the routine, to the lecture, and to the note taking, they return to the customary separation, the traditional boundary that must be maintained for the continuity to hold.

But the boundary has been altered. The space has been opened up and everyone knows it. The teacher who interrupted with a telling break knows; the students who witnessed it know. Because the continuity has been interrupted and a space opened, everyone now knows it is possible. They listen for it, even in the midst of the “lecture they are on,” and just as the teacher knows what is possible, the students listen with newfound expectation. Thus, the altered boundary - that break in the separation - has caused a subtle shift to occur in their listening. They know it can happen again.

The Educational Interruption: A Telling Break, The Space It Opens, and the Potential Awareness of the Boundary and Copresence

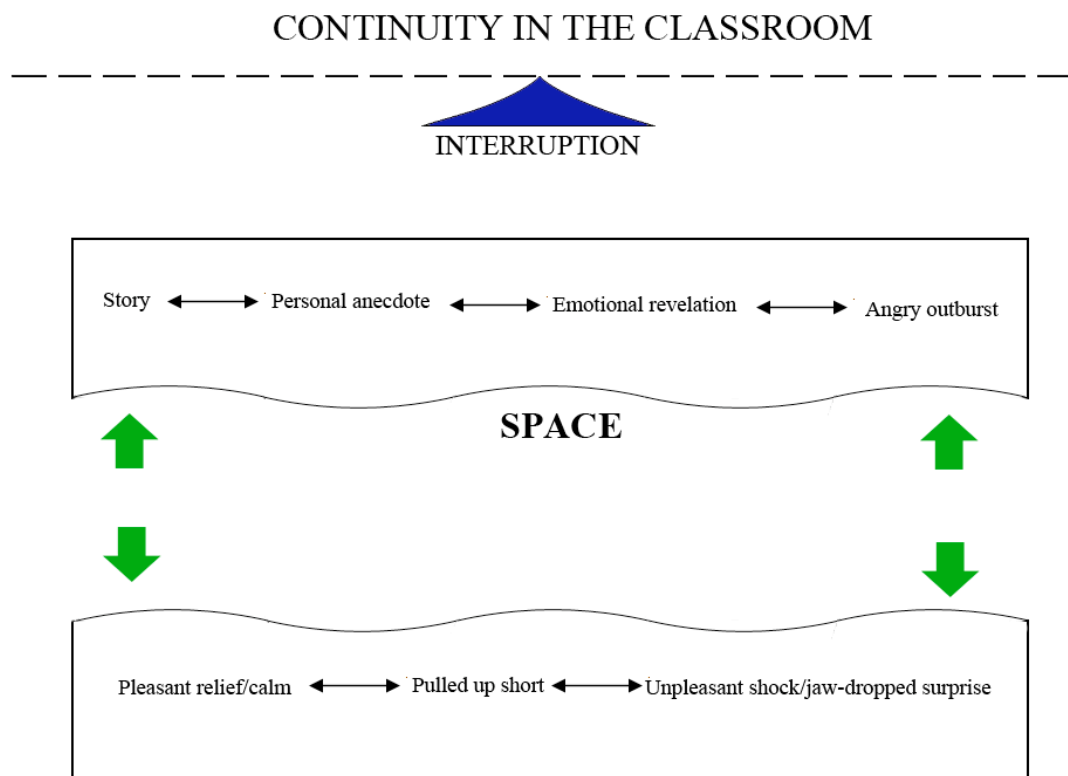


Figure 1 Graphic of the Model: A Spectrum of the Educational Interruption.

Explanation of the Model: The Spectrum of the Educational Interruption

In the graphic of a spectrum for the educational interruption there are two parallel lines, the top line represents the type of interruption itself, which could potentially be a telling break. On the far left is “story,” to the right of that is “personal anecdote,” next comes the “emotional revelation,” followed by “angry outburst” on the far right. These are only examples of myriad possibilities of telling breaks which could fall somewhere on this spectrum. Between the two lines is SPACE. The lower parallel line describes the nature of the experience in the space above. On the “story” end the lower line has a “slight shift,” because there really is only a “pleasant relief” or a calm that comes over everyone. On the far right, if it is an “angry outburst,” the space feels uncomfortable, or a place of shock, or just silence and jaw-dropped surprise. “Personal revelation” is somewhere in the middle, not completely innocuous but not entirely toxic, either. Finally, on the left side, if a story is told and the space is a “sunny day,” there is a “slight” shift, perhaps closer, perhaps *not*, that occurs in the boundary between teacher and student; on the right side where there is an emotional, even angry outburst and everyone is shocked – not by the pleasantness but by the trauma, the shock causes a major shift in the boundary on the line producing a “shock wave.” This could even be a downright rupture or rift. Therefore, on this spectrum, there is a sliding scale that accommodates the extreme examples of educational interruptions with the ones that seem to fit somewhere in the middle. The possibility that any type of educational interruption could be a telling break, given the necessary criteria, is accounted for by this spectrum, as well.

Experiencing the Continuity

The metaphor of a set of train tracks is probably the best way to explain the classroom atmosphere and the situation in which both teacher and students exist on a daily basis. English refers to the classroom experience as a “seemingly continuous stream of experience” (2009, p. 72). Garrison describes the continuity of the classroom situation as “fixed and inflexible” (2009, p. 76). Train tracks are built in advance and are typically rigid and unmoving. In a classroom the tracks may vary due to the uniqueness and individuality of a teacher, but for the most part, the curriculum is like a set of train tracks: laid down ahead of time, fixed in place, immutable, and seemingly endless. The teacher, who must deliver the information contained in this curriculum, becomes the driver of the train. The path is rigidly defined, and the students sense this, know this. They describe their experience in the classroom using similar language to that of Garrison and English. Garrison says that the “bureaucratic standards, norms, and averages” – that is, the curriculum and all associated rules contained therein – “close doors and manacle the minds of students and teachers” (2009, p. 76). Such rigidity can create a monotony that closes the minds of those students and teachers who are locked in place on that set of train tracks, moving ever forward, in a continuity that is rarely broken or interrupted.

Evan says that teachers “stay on track” and make great efforts to do so. Tommy says there is tension in the room when the teacher lectures on and on. Hannah describes this as the “Charlie Brown teachers” who sound like “raa raa ra raan raan raan...” The endless clicking of train wheels on the tracks would sound that way, too. As Nathan says, the teacher can be “rambling on,” and in this monotonous continuity he says, “it

feels like prison.” While these descriptions may seem extreme, nearly every student says that lectures and “strictly teaching” cause in them feelings of great boredom. James describes this as a “situation” which “can be alleviated” through a teacher’s stopping to take a “sojourn” with the class and tell a story. Kim describes the continuity as “strictly teaching,” that is, teaching (lecturing) and nothing else. Annie describes the experience as one “where we’re just taking notes” and “I stare at my paper, I stare at the clock.” It is “a lecture we’re on,” says Ian, like being on an endless journey with no beginning and no end.

That continuity of experience a student feels as he watches the board, day in and day out, copying ferociously - always copying - is one with which he must cope. To do so, a student must “put all interesting thoughts out of [his] head,” says Ian. This experience is reported by all the students and occurs in all the different classrooms of which they speak. Ian equates taking notes with “learning,” and says that “if [he wants] to actually take notes and learn, then [he] has to push all that away and focus on like, pen and paper, little blue lines, like white space in between and all that.” Students say that the experience is the antithesis of interesting, or fun, or stimulating. Instead, they describe the situation of being in a classroom where the teacher is lecturing as “monotonous,” “serious,” “focused,” “boring,” “difficult,” and “strictly teaching.” Tommy says the experience is one of “tension.” Kim declares that she “hates the classes that are just like pure lecture and everything.” Kyle says that sometimes when his teachers “teach long lectures” it feels like “you’re sitting there, and you’re taking notes, you’re like, oh, this is so much, and you feel the burden on your head.”

It is the unbroken continuity that is the “burden.” Purported to be the essence of efficient and effective teaching, the continuity of the experience of the delivery of the curriculum, day in and day out, is like being on one long, endless train ride. One cannot even look out the window for fear of falling behind: “You go into straight copying mode and write down everything on the board.”

The experience of the continuity in a classroom is not necessarily universal, but the frequency with which it appears in the interviews with students clearly indicates that it is a common experience for them, in that it both occurs frequently and that they all experience it and know the feeling well.

This experience of continuity is what is broken by the interruption. Thus, the continuity itself is a necessary part of the model of the educational interruption. As Floden, Buchmann, and Schwille explain, the interruption, that is, the “break in experience,” is “no simple discontinuity,” but instead a “turn that leads in a worthwhile direction” (1987, p. 2). Regardless of whether this is always true, the interruption is certainly more than a “simple discontinuity.” Only then can the train be brought to an abrupt halt.

Being Open, Being Willing

Where does being open, being willing to share, to tell, come into the model of the telling break? It seems that students who sense an openness on the part of the teacher may do so because that teacher tells. These students recognize that some teachers are distinctly more open than others. According to Smith (1985, p. 34), “receptivity and openness” are key. The idea that a teacher is in tune, and open to listening to, or at least

heeding in some way, the needs of students, seems to be linked somehow in the minds of the students to an openness and a willingness to tell, or to engage in telling breaks.

Caroline tells us in her interview, “Mr. Taylor’s stories show that he’s open and willing to talk about things.” She says, too, that the degree to which a teacher is “willing to share” may show “that he’s someone who’s...open.” Bridget explains that Mr. Taylor is “comfortable in his own skin,” which means to her that he is open with his students about who he is, because “he’s not afraid to be himself around [his students].” Hannah says that Mrs. Sharp “tells enough that you know that she’s a real person,” and she seems quite happy with the degree of being open – it is not complete – that her teacher chooses to exhibit.

Just the new tone that Jess Aarons hears in Mrs. Meyers voice (“the tone was new to him”) is an example of a student’s awareness of a new willingness to share that may never have been there before (Paterson, 1977, p. 125). It may not be easy for Mrs. Myers to open up to Jess. But as Garrison says, “remaining open is awkward” (1996, p. 433). Greene encourages us not to “elect to be silent” (1988, p. 14) and instead tells us to “be aware of the ways in which we originate ‘moments of transaction’” (1988, pp. 199 – 200, 1988). What she wants is that we be open to those moments and to be “conscious of the fact that we are the motivators of what is happening” (1988, pp. 199 – 200). Thus, in addition to being open, one must be aware, and recognize that we consciously create these “moments of transaction” (1988, pp. 199 – 200).

Greene maintains that it is a teacher who is willing to be openly “in search of his/her own freedom” who “may be the only kind of teacher who can arouse young

persons to go in search of their own” (1985, p. 14). If the telling break is that search, then that just might arouse a student to wake up to the search himself.

Freire warns us that this “freedom that moves us, that makes us take risks,” is “being subjugated to a process of standardization of formulas and models in relation to which we are evaluated” (1998, p. 102). Still, he says to stay open. He says to “live in openness toward others” (1998, pp. 120 – 121). To him, it is the being opened, staying open, that is the expression of his very “openness to life itself, to the joy of living” (1998, p. 125). While this openness can mean taking risks to bring life into the classroom, Freire maintains that it is “necessary to overcome the false separation between serious teaching and the expression of feeling” (1998, p. 125). This separation keeps life out of the classroom, holding the “joy of living” at bay Freire, 1998, p. 125). Openness to being open, willingness to share and express, are qualities that become expressed through teachers; they come before the telling and after; they grow during, and through, and between interruptions.

The openness means that the teacher notices when the class is bored; sometimes it is because the teacher just feels inexplicably compelled to share because of something that someone has said. The openness, as Braithwaite exhibits in his saying “I know how it feels, believe me...,” comes from a willingness to tell the truth, to share the contents of his heart (1959, p. 162). Mrs. Tomasso’s openness and willingness to share allows her to tell her seven-year old students of her grief (Brown, 2007, p. 164). Mrs. Johnson’s openness allows her to share her feelings as a child: “I used to hate it when a teacher touched me” (Johnson, 1991, p. 112). Ms. Gruwell is open and willing to break the traditional boundary between teacher and student by yelling “FUCK YOU!” at a student

(1999, pp. 119 – 120). Braithwaite allows the words to “gush out of [him]” – certainly this is an openness, an opening, a willingness-to-tell (1959, p. 70). McCourt, too, is open to telling his “stories about the docks” (2005, p. 65).

Haroutunian-Gordon tells us we can listen differently: “when teachers allow their listening to be interrupted by a challenging perspective, they open themselves to the recognition of heretofore tacit beliefs” (2007, p. 148). A teacher who allows herself to interrupt her own teaching is similar to this in that she is attune to, and is listening to, her class. In this, her listening is changing just as she is interrupting the continuity. Her students are changing, too, and their listening now is in light of her listening, her interrupting, her telling, and her changing her listening yet again. It is English who tells us that interruptions are something with which we engage, and that we can “be attuned to” them (2009, p. 73).

I contend that it is our attuning to our students that provides openings for interrupting, which in turn provides opening for space, which in turn causes us to listen differently to the interruptions which will surely arise to break the continuity. This is an endless circle of listening, tuning in, interrupting, listening, tuning in, and so on. The listening is reflexive. Students who ask questions prompt teachers to tell. Then the possibilities for dialogue, telling, and space are interwoven.

According to Garrison, teachers must be “compassionate listeners,” and this listening, this “compassion to attend fully,” enables a teacher to be “copresent with the other” (2011, p. 5). He says, in fact, that this is “all we may do” (Garrison, 2011, p. 5). The teacher who interrupts her own teaching because she is tuned in, because she is listening compassionately, may very well be the “paraclete” Garrison describes – that is,

“one who comes to walk alongside” (2011, p. 5). Listening, truly listening, means heeding the signs and interrupting, making a space for being.

Being “Pulled Up Short”

English says that the “interruption in experience” is what “occurs when we encounter something strange, different, or unexpected in our experiences” (2007, p. 136). From my work I have discovered that the interruption of the experience of the continuity in the classroom is another sort of experience itself. This encountering, this experiencing, is one that brings both the teacher who is interrupting and the students who are listening, witnessing the interruption, to an abrupt halt. It is not so much a discontinuity, as Floden, Buchman and Schwill say, but rather a shock, or nearly such (1987, p. 2). It is not the interrupting that is the shock, but rather the words said. It is not the silence that ensues, but the emotional content of the interruption that precedes the silence which shocks. This encountering, this experiencing, this witnessing of something that feels shocking, is the essence of being “pulled up short,” as Kerdeman explains (2003, p. 294). While she expresses wonder about how one would “educate...the disposition to be pulled up short,” I believe that great potential for learning and teaching exists in the experience (2003, p. 306). Kerdeman herself says that it is “teachers who are open to being pulled up short themselves [who] can conceive that this experience might be a learning opportunity for their students” (2003, p. 305).

Kerdeman’s assertion is that “being pulled up short surfaces assumptions in lived understanding that would otherwise remain invisible” (2003, p. 297). She says that, “being pulled up short can liberate us to become more fully human and ‘present’ in the world” (Kerdeman, 2003, p. 298). While others explain the experience of being “pulled

up short” with slightly different language, there is a common thread of agreement in the literature. Interruptions do, indeed, force one into a state of reckoning, let us say. How does this happen? It could be a story a teacher tells that causes us to suddenly “be pulled up short” (Kerdeman, 2003, p. 294). Or, as in the examples of telling breaks from the novels, an angry outburst from a teacher can “pull us up short” (Kerdeman, 2003, p. 294). A teacher can be “pulled up short” by his own words, his own story, or his own outburst (Kerdeman, 2003, p. 294). Essentially, Kerdeman describes being “pulled up short” as experiencing “an event we neither want nor foresee and to which we may believe we are immune” (2003, p. 300). She says that this event “interrupts our life and challenges our self-understanding” (2003, p. 300). The words of Ms. Gruwell’s student in *The Freedom Writers Diary* probably describe the experience better than any other. Ms. Gruwell has shown him that he failed, and she has screamed at him that it is a “FUCK YOU!” to her and everyone who has ever helped him and believed in him. He describes this event: “Immediately our conversation became a road trip to hell with me riding shotgun. I was thrown off, confused, flabbergasted, and to put it simply – shocked” (Gruwell, 1999, pp. 119 - 120).

English tells us that the “encounter with the unfamiliar and unexpected causes one’s listening to be ‘thrown off course’,” (2009, p. 72), but I think one is simply thrown. It is not just one’s listening that is suddenly “pulled up short,” but one’s entire sense of being (Kerdeman, 2003, p. 294). Ms. Gruwell’s student says that his “jaw [had to] wind itself back into its proper place.” He means that his entire being was thrown off, shocked, all because of the words of his teacher which cut right to him, taking him

completely aback and forcing him to grapple or reckon with a truth he does not know he is going to be forced to face.

Hooks says, “like desire, language disrupts, refuses to be contained within boundaries” (1994, p. 175). This disruption can be a downright violation, she says, “speak[ing] itself against our will, in words and thoughts that intrude, even violate the most private space of body and mind” (1994, p. 175). Braithwaite refers to the experience of being “pulled up short” this way, when he describes how it felt to hear Seales tell him that he did not know what it was like to have been discriminated against for the color of his skin (Kerdeman, 2003, p. 294). He says that “his questions touched something deep inside me, something which had been dormant for months, but now awoke to quick, painful remembering” (1959, p. 162). He tells Seales that he has, indeed, been “pushed around” in a way that Seales might not even be able to understand. There is a sense that Braithwaite is being “pulled up short,” he is interrupting to tell, and then Seales and everyone witnessing this telling break may share the experience as well (Kerdeman, 2003, p. 294).

Mr. Brown describes the experience of being “pulled up short” (Kerdeman, 2003, p. 294) as “a string snapped inside me” (Brown, 2007, p. 113). He says that “the room went dead silent and motionless at my paroxysm, like a record scratching to a halt,” and that eventually, “several stunned gasps escaped from the mute gallery” (2007, p. 113). As Rud and Garrison put it, some interruptions “cause one to stop in one’s tracks completely” (2007, p. 164). There is little doubt that for teacher and students alike, this happens when Brown screams “SHUT YOUR MOUTHS!” and breaks the blackboard with his fist. In the aftermath of such an interruption, as Braithwaite says, “not one of

them dared move or speak” (1959, p. 70). They have all been “pulled up short” (Kerdeman, 2003, p. 294).

In being “pulled up short” we have lost our equilibrium and must somehow regain our balance (Kerdeman, 2003, p. 294). Biesta explains that it is in our not being able to “maintain coordinated transaction,” when the continuity and predictable nature of the classroom learning experience are interrupted in such a drastic way that “we do not ‘know,’ in other words, how to respond” (2007, p. 14). He says, “it is the situation in which we encounter a problem” (2007, p. 14). Benner and English say that the space that comes from an interruption such as a the shock is a

...space in which one has suffered the negativity of perplexity, but has not yet resolved the difficulty that consequently arises: the Old is recognized as false – and in a certain sense, determinately negated – yet the New has not yet been found. (2004, pp. 414 - 415)

This is why the experience of the interruption which causes all present to share in being brought to pause together is so important in the creation of the space, and a crucial component of the conceptual model of the educational interruption called the telling break. Kerdeman is sure that the space is an “unexplored dimension” and that the space actually occurs because of “being pulled up short” (2003, p. 294). As she says about the teacher’s experience, “being pulled up short reminds us that outcomes can exceed and even defy what we plan and expect” and that “vulnerability...is continual” (2003, pp. 307 – 308). She says that as a result, “teaching is a well-crafted leap...into the unknown” (2003, p. 308). Of course. It always is. In the case of the telling break, it is most certainly a leap with unknown consequences.

While “we do not choose the events that pull us up short,” teachers cause them when they engage in telling breaks (Kerdeman, 2003, p. 294). Kerdeman says we have

choice about how we experience being “pulled up short” – we “choose to recognize, experience, or resist” (2003, p. 305). Being “pulled up short,” if we are able to recognize it, can pull us into sudden presence, sudden awareness (Kerdeman, 2003, p. 294). It is this experience of being “pulled up short” that gives the telling break its power, and isolates it as a unique phenomenon that is not quite like any other in the classroom (Kerdeman, 2003, p. 294). It is not necessarily the content that determines it, or the relevance or lack thereof to the curriculum, or the degree to which it is planned or unplanned, or even whether it feels like an interruption. It is the experience of being “pulled up short” that makes the interruption an interruption (Kerdeman, 2003, p. 294). That is, being “pulled up short,” as the response to the interruption, allows for the discovery of the stimulus in the first place, the teacher’s words and behavior (Kerdeman, 2003, p. 294). Thus, this is not different from the reflex arc Dewey describes. The ongoing experience of curricular continuity, interrupted by telling, and being “pulled up short” brings awareness to being (Kerdeman, 2003, p. 294). Thus being interrupted, and then entering the space which the awareness of being seems to bring, followed by the closing of the cycle, so that continuity can be in continuous unfolding, only to lead to interrupting, and so on.

Being “pulled up short,” from an unexpected halt to a shocked silence of jaw-dropped surprise, is the key component of the telling break (Kerdeman, 2003, p. 294). Otherwise, a telling break is no different from a story a teacher stops to tell, or the average speech a teacher gives to the class when someone misbehaves. The telling break is an altogether different experience. It is a story, or an anecdote, or an emotional

revelation, or even an angry outburst, but it is not a telling break unless those who are experiencing it are pulled up short.

Interrupting

In the beginning, the literature on interruptions caused me to ask what the interruption did, what it allowed, and what could happen when an interruption occurred. I kept wondering, “Are interruptions good?” I read English and took to heart her statement that “to recognize the break in experience is to recognize the heart of the educational matter” (2007, p. 138). Now, in light of my own work in interruptions, I have a new perspective to offer.

I began my study with the persistent conviction that a teacher’s interrupting her teaching to tell stories was *good*. I had not yet considered what other sorts of telling might occur, or that there might be a wide range of telling that could be classified as “interruption,” but only a small segment of which could be accurately categorized as what I have continued, all along, to call a “telling break.” What I originally understood and believed to represent the concept of the telling break has changed. From my analysis of the interviews with students and the excerpts from the autobiographical teaching novels, I have discovered that the “telling” encompassed by educational interruptions covers a wide range; the actual telling break is much narrower.

This has been an exciting study of discovery. I found out something I did not know before. I discovered that one can look and look and look at data and sometimes it is very difficult to undo what one thinks one will find within those data. And then one day, one sees something entirely new, and it is a synthesis of what has been there all along, but it changes the way one sees everything, as if suddenly the data are all *new*.

When this happened to me, I suddenly realized that the stories teachers tell really are just that – stories. For the most part, these stories teachers tell serve a worthwhile purpose: they alleviate the situation. They are a diversion, a welcome respite, and yes, even a welcome sojourn. They are not necessarily telling breaks. Yes, a teacher takes a break to tell, but she does not always break the boundary between teacher and student to do so. Yes, a teacher breaks to tell, but she does not always interrupt the flow of the curriculum to any great extent that the students cannot quickly resume the business of being students. The students tell me that they find the breaks to allow them to rest, and they find comfort in them. Never did a student tell me about a telling break. But I never asked.

When I read the accounts of telling breaks as described by Braithwaite, and Johnson, and Brown, I knew I was encountering a phenomenon about which little is admitted or written. The telling break - what I have actually discovered it to be – is most like the way Hooks describes black vernacular in her classroom: “ruptured, broken, unruly speech” (1994, p. 175). It has no place in pedagogy, one would say, and yet the “narrative moments” she says arise because of the “language disrupts” and “refuses to be contained within boundaries” are the very force that open up space (1994, p. 175).

The models of a story, a narrative moment, and a diversion lead, in turn, to the definition of a break. All these represent succor, or at least alleviation of the tension and the boredom created by the monotonous continuity of the curriculum. For the most part, these are times in which students sit back and relax. Some of them experience boredom from the stories, and some experience discomfort. But there is a sliding scale of “discomfort,” and as we move from left to right on the spectrum we come to events that cause distinct discomfort. These events are memorable and the teachers and students

who tell of them explain how what the teacher did was an interruption. Dewey says that the interruption causes “perplexity,” so if the time when the teacher stops to tell is simply a story, then there is not that same situation of the space created in which people sit, perplexed (Dewey, 1910/1997, p. 10).

Using the separate meanings of break, we have a break on the left that is positive and perhaps refreshing, and a break on the right that is perhaps negative and upsetting. But that is too simplistic a summary. Instead, both kinds of breaks create space, depending upon whether they “pull up short,” and even being “pulled up short,” itself, is on a “sliding scale” (Kerdeman, 2003, p. 294). So, there is a spectrum within the educational interruption, and there is a spectrum within the “response” to it. This, importantly, is the discovery that the stimulus, if it is a telling break, is just that. This calls into question whether the interruption, the would-be stimulus, causes the emotions and feelings associated with being “pulled up short,” and that the space in the middle of all this is the place where the boundary and separation between teacher and student opens or closes (Kerdeman, 2003, p. 294). There becomes, even in McCourt’s story-telling, an awareness, eventually, for the students, that their teacher is a person, an interesting person, and it may be the contents of the story that pull the students up short. For example, when he tells Sylvia, “that’s all I know,” it is not a drastic “pulled up short” but a sort of revealing, unsettling experience of pure honesty from the teacher (Kerdeman, 2003, p. 294).

In my original choice of the term “telling break” I only meant that which was an interruption in the delivery of the curriculum and content of the discipline. I knew that there was a kind of interruption that could be described by its telling nature, but I had not

yet analyzed the many possible ways in which a teacher could interrupt his own teaching to tell about something that was distinctly not the prescribed subject matter. Throughout this analysis, I have come to see that it was an educational interruption I first conceptualized. I was tempted to use the term “telling break” to describe when a teacher takes a break from being the teacher, per se, to tell a joke, a story, or some sort of harmless, silly anecdote. However, a story or personal anecdote describes that event better. As far as for the event when a teacher *breaks*, that is best described as a time when a teacher reveals emotion or experiences an emotional outburst. Thus, while all of these can be telling experiences because of what the teacher reveals to the students, they cannot all fall under the very precise classification of “telling break.” Even so, it will help to clarify the descriptors used in the model to explore the multiple meanings of the word “break.”

One relevant meaning of the word “break” to the first interpretation is “a sudden change of weather.” It can also mean to “dissolve” or “relax.” As a verb, break is to “interrupt the continuance of (an action)” or to “suspend.” Thus, in the description of the educational interruption that causes a break in the continuity of the curriculum or that brings respite, succor, relief to the class, one gets the positive feeling that this break must be good for all involved (“break,” *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. 1989). Another relevant meaning of the word “break” to the second interpretation is “to break” or to “burst (a barrier).” Break also means to “transgress” (“break,” *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. 1989).

Somewhere in the middle of these two kinds of educational interruptions that can be understood as types of breaks is the actual phenomenon on which we can focus most

acutely. On the side of relief, the educational interruption is not necessarily a telling break at all, but simply a story. Yes, there is a kind of space created in this kind of educational interruption: it is one of calm, and relief, and respite. Everyone breathes a sigh of relief. They cease to be automatons and become people, sharing in the listening of a story being told to them by their teacher.

It happens that to “break” may mean to “open up ground with a spade or plow,” and it can also mean to “bring (virgin land) into cultivation” (“break,” *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. 1989). I think this meaning of break describes the possibility that might exist when a telling break really does break open a space. There is nothing that guarantees that the space will result in the cultivation that leads to yet another possibility: that the “break” will result in a “burst[ing] into flower.” A telling break creates a space wherein lies the possibility for cultivation. This is not far from Garrison’s assertion that teachers are the ones who make holes and “let in beauty and light” (2009, p. 79). The telling break creates a new a space and is a time and place where unexpected possibilities can unfold.

I now know that a telling break is a very specific kind of educational interruption. It can fall any place on the spectrum from story, to personal anecdote, to emotional revelation, to angry outburst. Wherever it falls on the spectrum, the only place kind of educational interruption on this spectrum that can be classified as a telling break is the one that 1) pulls up short and 2) opens up space. If these two things happen, then something very specific also happens, just as Dewey says. This interruption called the telling break becomes a “difficulty” that “is likely to present itself at first as a shock, as emotional disturbance, as a more or less vague feeling of the unexpected, or something

queer, strange, funny, or disconcerting” (Dewey, 1910/1997, pp. 73 - 74). Each of these descriptions applies to the model of the telling break. As English says, “all learning involves interruption when we experience something unanticipated that throws us off course” (2009, p. 72). It is this experience that causes in those who experience it an “arousal to a perception of something that needs explanation, something unexpected, puzzling, or peculiar” (Dewey, 1910/1997, p. 207). That, in the end, is one of the greatest possibilities of the space – that the mind will be “forced...to go wherever it is capable of going,” and that “the feeling of a genuine perplexity...has laid hold of it” (Dewey 1910/1997, p. 207).

There are many things that might cause that “genuine perplexity” to which Dewey refers. In the end, it could be any number of things: a teacher’s revelation of a piece of information that seems far too personal, a willingness to tell a story that seems completely incongruous with the person the teacher appears to be, an openness to talk about one’s feelings, whether insecurities, frustrations, sadness, or anger, or a lack of ability to contain one’s out-of-control emotions. There are no doubt many more, I am certain, but these are some examples that have been at the heart of the conceptualization of this theory. In the final analysis, I can say with certainty that an ordinary story about two praying mantises having sex, as Mr. Taylor so willingly tells to his students one morning, may be just a story to some, just a little tidbit of information; to others, it might be a telling break, just for the “shock” of its content. However, it is on the story-side of the spectrum of an educational interruption because of the degree to which Mr. Taylor is not revealing something personal. It is unlikely that someone hearing his story will be truly “pulled up short” (Kerdeman, 2003, p. 294). Even if students have never seen two

praying mantises having sex, it is likely there are plenty of other things Mr. Taylor could reveal to them that they would find *far* more shocking.

Change in Listening

The students in their interviews say how often refreshing or comfortable they find a teacher's interrupting to tell a story. James calls the experience a "sojourn" and explains that the way that the class listens to Mrs. Copper changes. They are all much more relaxed. They enjoy the stories, and it "alleviates the situation" for them. Then they go back to listening to the continuity of the curriculum – her lecture.

Annie tells me that she listens with interest to a teacher's telling a story in a way she does not when it is an ordinary lesson. Bridget listens with interest to Mr. Bright as he veers away from physics to "share this life" with his class. Nathan listens differently to a teacher when he feels he has "something with her" because she is open and not "boxed up." When Matthew describes his listening to what he deems and acceptably brief and at least somewhat relevant story, he says that "resonates" within him.

I contend that listening changes whenever a teacher talks about something other than the specific curriculum. Listening changes that much more in light of a telling break. Telling breaks do not bring respite. They rupture. Therefore, listening to a teacher's lecture or ordinary lesson will also be different from listening to an unexpected outburst. One's listening is interrupted and one is "pulled up short" (Kerdeman, 2003, p. 294). The change in the listening is the experience of how one listens differently once one has been shocked into "jaw-dropped surprise," as Ms. Gruwell's student experienced.

I assert that the telling break does indeed cause a "shift" in the listening of the teacher, just as Haroutunian-Gordon says, and that this shift is not limited to the teacher's

listening, but is true of the students' listening as well (2007, p. 144). There is a change in the listening of everyone who witnesses the telling break.

Haroutunian-Gordon says, "when teachers allow their listening to be interrupted by a challenging perspective, they open themselves to a recognition of heretofore tacit beliefs, to new questions, and to new ideas about the resolution of those questions" (2011, p. 1). I believe that it is not just teachers whose listening can be interrupted and who will then suddenly find themselves coming to grips with new ideas. Students can have a similar experience as a result of the telling break. I agree with Haroutunian-Gordon: "by listening to a challenging viewpoint, one may gain perspective on one's own views and values" (2001, p. 1). If one is forced to suddenly think about oneself, who one is, who one is becoming, what views one holds and values one upholds, then one will change one's listening, one's interrupting, and one's telling. Whether one is doing the telling or the listening, these are true for each witness to the educational interruption called the telling break. Either way, from one end of the spectrum to the other, a person is experiencing waking up, alertness, and aliveness from being challenged, from feeling perplexed, and from being "pulled up short" (Kerdeman, 2003, p. 294).

The Nature of the Pedagogical Space Opened by a Telling Break

The space does depend upon the means of its creation. It is that time when there is shock, silence, or awakening, but the nature of the space is different depending upon what has opened it. One can see that there is a degree to which an interruption can lead to a calm, peaceful silence or to jaw-dropping, shocked silence. On this spectrum might lie anything from an enjoyable story and the reprieve the space offers to an angry, fist-smashing tempest that opens a space of shock.

Perhaps it is not continuity alone that is broken when a telling break is a tempest, so to speak. It may be that in addition to the traditional continuity of the school day and the school routine, the very structure of school is ruptured, or interrupted. Screaming at students that the windows and doors need to be opened and the classroom aired out from a burning tampon in the fireplace, or smashing a desk and the chalkboard, are both examples of the structure of school being completely interrupted.

If the stories are too frequent, or the angry outbursts are too frequent, they are the norm, not the break. A break is not a break if there is nothing to interrupt. While not a conceptual dimension of the model, frequency of the interruption is an important piece of the description, because frequency helps to describe the nature of the continuity, the continuity that exists before and after the interruption.

What evidence do I have that the teacher “finds” gaps? I would say that in my interview data as well as the novels, the teacher makes the gaps, that is, the teacher causes the interruptions to make the space, and then the continuity continues, but the boundary has shifted and things feel different. The students say that they feel closer, more connected, and that the teacher is a teacher-as-friend during those times. While they are not able to articulate it this way, I believe that the descriptions that students give of how the teacher “feels like a friend” is in fact what they feel as a shift in the boundary. The memory of the teacher’s having been that way is something the students carry with them, and each day when they endure the monotony, the tedium, and the seemingly endless continuity, they know that there is at least the possibility that another break will occur.

The Space and What Happens in It

What happens in the space created by the interruption? Dewey calls the space “educative space of experience in which individuals are held in suspense (1910/1997, p. 72). For the teacher, English believes that it opens up a space for reflection, and that “at the moment she begins to reflect...she begins to search for new ways of learning in the realm of teaching” (2007, p. 137). English says that not only are we allowed to reflect in “the space between the negativity of experience and the formulated problem, we experience the limits of our knowledge and ability, and we can seek to understand how these may require an expansion” (2007, pp. 138 – 139). This is why Kerdeman’s “pulled up short” is so vital to the conceptual model of the educational interruption called the telling break (2003, p. 294). The telling break causes a distinct and unique space. In it, listening changes. In it, awareness changes. In it, the boundary changes.

It is when the boundary changes that we become aware of the existence of the boundary. For a moment, though, we may realize we have forgotten that we, individually, are different, and separate. Now in the space there is recognition and admittance that there was, indeed, a situation we all shared, and that it was crying out for alleviation. The situation is alleviated if and when the teacher and students simply acknowledge that fact, however silently, however personally. All this happens in the space.

The teachers who cause educational interruptions, in general, over time, become known for it. The students are actively listening for when it will happen. For thirty years, students signed up for Mr. Green’s classes at our school because he was known for his educational interruptions and the word around school was that you simply could not

graduate without having had the experience of his class. Teachers may or may not be vigilant about monitoring interruptions they cause. No matter whether they interrupt themselves frequently or rarely, their listening changes, too. They may attend or listen to their students differently as a result. When teachers truly *listen* to their students, they *see* them. They are attending fully to every face in the room: they are attuned and listening for the reactions of their students.

In my efforts to describe what happens in the space caused by the interruption, I continually reach an impasse when I try to describe it in a linear sequence. Each section of each chapter has been sequential, for the sake of consistency (but not simplicity). The phenomenological nature of the interruption and the space it breaks open are difficult to describe completely. I feel limited by the linear nature of the description of events, and by the two-dimensional nature of paper, even. In my attempt to describe how the listening of both teacher and students changes as a result of the listening, I find that I reach a place where the listening of the teacher and the listening of the student cannot be separated. The listening of the student and teacher alike becomes the discovery of the interruption. To give this idea credence, I turn to Dewey's article "The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology" (Dewey, 1930/1981, p. 145) in which he states, "the end to follow is, in this sense, the stimulus" (1930/1981, p. 144). Further, he says, "it furnishes the motivation to attend to what has just taken place; to define it more carefully" (1930/1981, p. 144).

This is the thing of it: the telling break opens a space wherein only then are the students aware of the boundary and the separation between them and the teacher. It is their listening that becomes the discovery of the interrupting. Dewey says that "the

discovery of the stimulus is the “response,” and so the entire experience is indeed a circuit and not at all an arc, as he explains (1930/1981, p. 144). The telling break “pulls up short” and shocks, like a burn, and then it is the “burning” that brings the space into existence (Kerdeman, 2003, p. 294). This is the space in which teacher and students feel perplexed or “pulled up short” (Kerdeman, 2003, p. 294). They become aware of this sensation, they realize there has been an interruption, and then they discover that the break that has occurred brings to light what has always existed in the classroom: a teacher teaches and the students learn. It is not for the teacher to suddenly break through the barrier and the separation, but, surely, the students witness it, become aware of it once they have been “pulled up short,” and now discover anew the boundary that may or may not have been crossed (Kerdeman, 2003, p. 294). The space is the place where those people who *are* the situation are suddenly aware of the boundary and the separation between teacher and student. The “simply existing” together part of being in the space – even if it “burns” – changes the listening because the space that is created by the interruption enables its discovery.

With Dewey’s circuit model, the seeing is just being in the classroom, experiencing the continuity of curriculum and living in a state of ennui, or intense focus; the reaching toward the burning flame of the candle is like witnessing and listening to the telling break, and being burned is the being “pulled up short,” shocked, because now the listening is being interpreted by the experience of having been together in that space of shock (Kerdeman, 2003, p. 294).

Kim, in her interview, tells me that she almost fell out of her chair laughing at her teacher, Ms. Rodriguez, when she got down on the floor and pretended to be a rat as she

told the class a story. The interrupting became something that took Kim away, far away, from the classroom. It was, as Annie dubbed the experience of listening to her teacher tell a story, an “out-of-classroom experience,” and Kim remembers thinking to herself, “Am I really in school right now? Is this really a teacher in front of me?” It is also Kim who says that the experience is “real,” that it is “kinda like reality.”

The phenomenon of the telling break causes the breaking - the separating - to potentially occur. This breaking is the discovery, then, of the continuity, to which awareness is drawn most acutely *once* the interrupting is occurring. Likewise, the boundary between teacher and student is brought into focus once it has been broken, or, as Hannah says, that “fine line” has been crossed. If everyone has been “pulled up short” and shocked speechless, the breaking creates the space in which existence becomes shared presence, shared being, sitting, waiting, listening to the silence (Kerdeman, 2003, p. 294). Shared being is the stimulus of the interrupting, and the interrupting is then the response. That is, it is an interruption because the space has been created. As English says, now everyone in the space is “held in suspense,” and “can begin to inquire into and reflect upon themselves and the situation in which they are stuck” (English, 2009, p. 72).

English defines “educative listening” as “being attuned to” and “engaging with interruptions” on the part of the teacher, but I would like to suggest that the interruption changes the listening of both teacher *and* student (2009, p. 73). I can say with certainty that students experience awakening of some kind, and that they feel a shift in the telling by their teacher. Their listening changes and the way the teacher speaks to them also changes. I am also certain that the students’ listening to the interruption and suddenly feeling themselves pulled up short causes awareness and understanding of the separation

between teacher and student. Awakening occurs. It might be the realization that the classroom is prison and one is locked in it. One might simply look up and stop feverishly copying notes and realize what one has been doing. Or one might be suddenly forced to imagine one's grown teacher as a little child hiding under her teacher's desk plotting to bite his leg – and succeeding.

Implications for Practice and Conclusion

“Music is the space between the notes,” says Debussy. Have you ever found yourself in a music hall, listening to a symphony, when you lose yourself so that you forget you are even listening at all? There is a swell in the sound and even that does not rouse you from your reverie, from the continuity of the music. And then there is a break, a silence, a space. All the bows are suddenly in the air, poised a hair over a string of every violin, and the hand of the percussionist has gripped the drum. You are brought into sudden awareness, presence in the place where the music was and now is not. You have full clarity of the music you were hearing and there is something so sweet and fulfilling and exciting about its momentary absence. Those silences in a symphony wake us up. They are not entirely different from the interruptions in a classroom that bring us to a place of wonder, difficulty, or perplexity, of shock, sudden horror, or instant joy.

This study has brought me to a different understanding of the educational interruption than I ever imagined it would. The model of the spectrum of the educational interruption that I have put forth came as a surprise to me. The interruptions that teachers make are more complex than I imagined. I also thought that there would be simple and finite categories that would emerge: black or white, good or bad, innocuous or harmful. Instead, each of the conceptual dimensions is on a sliding spectrum and there is a point of

balance that emerges for the telling break. The model provides movement and motion: the space opened by the educational interruption is undulating. Its waves are as calm and peaceful as a serene ocean on the left of the spectrum and its waves are choppy and rough on the right, but there is no clear separating boundary between the two.

There are benefits to experiencing a teacher's stories, personal anecdotes and emotional revelations. Even the angry outburst occasionally wakes us up and brings us back to an awareness we might have lost. Existing in the space together becomes the real life of the classroom; everything else is the continuity, the background noise, the place where we lose ourselves "in the white space between the little blue lines," as Ian says.

My exploration of educational interruptions and my work in creating a model of the telling break, provide possible insight into what van Manen calls "thinking action" (1995, p. 36). He says that "teacher thinking and teacher reflection" need to be explored in "phenomenological, philosophical, conceptual and empirical" ways (1995, p. 36). This phenomenological study provides a conceptual model of the educational interruption we can use to think about our own actions. Within the broad spectrum of the educational interruption is a very specific interruption, the telling break. The telling break opens up space. The space created by the perplexity and the difficulty allows for awakening.

Now we can continue to think deeply about the ways that interruptions rupture the classroom continuity and create space. Now we can consider how the space changes, depending upon the nature of the interruption that creates it. I hope that this model will fuel a discussion among educators about how to break through the "manacles" of "inflexible bureaucratic standards" (Garrison, 2009, p. 76). I hope that it will provide a foundation for continued exploration of the telling break. There is power in creating the

“new outlets for our energies,” which, as Garrison says, “lead to the plenitude of existence” (2009, p. 74). Teachers who can open themselves up to possibilities that the telling break can render will be those we can trust to bring life into teaching. With every telling break we witness, we can be sure that life is present in the classroom.

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