

The “Teacher” in the Classroom: A Personal Self-Study With Photographs

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Abstract

This article illustrates a reflective experiment of analyzing the teacher self through personal photographs. While performing an observational study within my secondary English classroom, I embarked on my own exploration of my teacher identity and its relationship to my practice. I open the article by discussing my data collection procedures and discussion of artefacts from my recent past. I then discuss my sorting process with treating my data, as well as my methods of categorization and meaning-making with regards to my photograph collections. I conclude this article with curatorial statements, which highlight my personal engagement of self, expressed through these photographic moments.

Introduction

This self-study displays my engagement with photographs to discover messages about my teaching practice. During the 2019–20 school year, I engaged in an experimental journey within my secondary English Language Arts (ELA) class. As part of my doctoral study, I aimed to explore the impact of Surrealist-inspired pedagogical approaches in contemporary English classrooms. Concurrent to my period of observation and engagement within the classroom, I embarked on a personal study of the teacher self. This article details my self-study journey, where I examined a collection of personal pictures captured during my period of observation. I began with a hunch that my/the teacher self is not isolated from the confines of the classroom. Teaching and learning comprise experience, which involves a constant, “transactional” (Rosenblatt, 1994) interplay of exchanges. If, as I had wondered, a valuable relationship could be forged between the private and professional aspects of teaching, more could possibly be discovered in unlocking potential for both. I isolated an often-disregarded data set, which I had amassed with little to no regard to research. Picture-taking, and by extension, memory-making, has become automatized, instinctual, and sometimes ephemeral, by virtue of important shifts in photo-capturing technologies. This normalized practice of committing moments to (digital) memory using handheld devices has become woven into the lives of everyday citizens, including teachers. Therefore, these seemingly innocent pictures could in fact serve as valuable nuggets of identity—and, for my purposes, the teacher identity with and outside of the classroom. By shifting my gaze to the personal, intimate confines of the teacher self, I hoped to discover how even the most suppressed, subconscious desires or tendencies could work to shape the events of a classroom.

My Positionality in Self-Study

My act of self-study involved examination of my personal teaching practice. This act constitutes an autobiographical engagement, as I actively questioned myself, my teaching practice, and the complex web of contextual factors that affected its creation and continued evolution. In a sense, I envisioned my self-study to involve an exploration of self with and within others. The Surrealist methods of calling into question established norms, which are reflected through archetypal characters and thematic arcs in literature, therefore helped to inform my exploration. At the time of my research study, I experienced some frustration as an educator, sensing that I was not accessing students' full levels of potential in experiencing and engaging with textual themes. I wondered whether or not my role as an ELA teacher involved teaching students codes and cues to recognize in literature, which would serve as reference points throughout their academic and cultural pursuits, rather than opening doors to aesthetic (Rosenblatt, 1994) experiences of engagement and meaning-making. My researcher self therefore aimed to support this teaching dilemma, by exploring teaching methods which expose and question our current methods of reading and understanding texts in a specific manner. Surrealism embraces experimentation, with the belief that multiple reality is a construct, and experience is personal and multifaceted. I therefore aimed, through my self-study, to discover how this method of openness could bolster our shared experiences with art (and life) within the classroom (and beyond).

Data Collection: Photographic Inquiry and Self-Study of Practice

Theoretical Framework for Photographic Inquiry

Mitchell and Weber (1999) presented different strategies for doing memory work in the process of engaging in self-study. One of these strategies included the examination of photographs, which in the case of the authors, consisted of school-themed pictures (Mitchell & Weber, 1999, p. 74). This observation illuminates the degree to which capturing moments is a natural part of our lives, but also how we often do not contemplate how these moments can be placed together to form a continuing story. Teresa Strong-Wilson (2008) described the process of memory work in self-study to constitute an excavation of artefacts from our personal pasts (p. 22). The process of remembering the events of one's past also involves re-experiencing these memories anew, "such that remembering becomes an event" (Strong-Wilson, 2008, p. 78).

Data Collection: Photographic Inquiry and Self-Study of Practice

Collecting Photographs to Collect the World: Bringing Theory into Focus

Susan Sontag (2008) noted that "to collect photographs is to collect the world" (p. 1). To amass a collection of photos could therefore suggest one's "imaginary possession of [the] past" (Sontag, 2008, p. 6). By producing a photograph, an individual is transforming an experience into a tangible object. Sontag's collector, whom she compared to a tourist, reacts to the stimuli of the world by committing it to film. These

moments, now encapsulated in physical form, serve as evidence of past moments (Sontag, 2008, p. 6), but also evoke the collector’s positioning within the world. Eric Freedman (2011) recalled Sontag’s (2008) metaphor of the photographer as tourist, suggesting how an emphasis on “gaze” (Freedman, 2011, p. 2) could illuminate the specific sociopolitical context, as well as the personal motivations behind photographing an event. The author’s focus on the photograph as an individual’s engagement with (and creation of) experience invites a contemplation of self. Therefore, within my self-study, I assumed the position of the collector tourist, whose own personal collection is the object of scrutiny. I chose to use photographs captured on my personal iPhone, as this device has been an instrumental tool in the collection process. Without even realizing it, collection has become a part of my everyday routine, as my access to this documenting, certifying technology has allowed (or caused) me to become a tourist in my own life. I wonder whether or not the intimate relationship I have with my mobile phone has allowed for the “image” of creating experiences (passive collecting), while enabling me to delay the reflection required to render these experiences personal. I frequently find myself exercising Sontag’s (2008) conceptualization of tourism photography: “stop, take a photograph, and move on” (p. 7).

Still Life of Moments: A Self-Study With iPhone

I divided my self-study process into two distinct phases: Preparing and Playing. The Preparing phase involved processing the wealth of data that contributed to my study, making it manageable to start my act of play. The Playing phase followed the initial preparation process where I developed an organized system to access and categorize my pictures. However, it is worth noting that I employed a certain level of play when initially viewing the data and categorizing it into sections. Similar to Bridget Campbell (2017), who was inspired by Anastasia Sameras (2011), my phases of collection and analysis were at times fluid, as the physical collection (and preparation) of the data required reflective thought and experimentation (play) (Campbell, 2017).

Data Collection and Analysis, Phase One: Preparing

The Preparing Phase Process

Phase 1: Preparing

- 1) Managing my 9000+ photo corpus
- 2) Creating folders using Photos application (according to the months of the study)
- 3) Creating albums using the triaged photos in folders (according to thematic sub-categories)

I began my experiment with over 9000 photos stored on the Photos application of my mobile phone. It appears that while my personal photo-taking habits have produced a number of souvenirs (Sontag, 2008), I have been somewhat of a packrat tourist (Freedman, 2011). I noticed that my souvenir collection displayed little rhyme or reason, and the sole organization markers were the date and location stamps from the phone application. I was reminded of more traditional practices of sifting through photographs; but rather than viewing neatly displayed albums, I was working with a cardboard box in which photos had been haphazardly tossed, with their contexts and sensibilities mixed to create a nebulous non-narrative. I decided that in order for me to begin any form of meaningful analysis, I would need to break down the wealth of data within my collection. Katie MacEntee (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2019) also began with a large collection of over 200 photographs before selecting 20 units for her photo-elicitation interviews with preservice teachers. I also noticed that while the mobile phone's casual ease of use makes "capturing" extremely efficient (Freedman, 2011), "processing" on the same device is rather challenging. My phone accompanies me through all parts of my day, yet I experienced difficulties in manipulating the data using this compact "life" device. I equated this discomfort with attempting to re-organize photographs or documents that have already been placed within folders or albums. The messy level of play that I intended to do required the photos to be pulled out of their folders and sprawled out on the kitchen table; for my purposes, the kitchen table was the Photos application on my computer.

I decided to create albums within the Photos application, which I dated according to the respective months of my study. I acknowledge that, unlike some other self-study practitioners, my process did not involve leafing through paper photographs that may be stained, faded, or creased. All of my photographs were taken in high definition, and some of them, which is the case with Live photos, could actually move. However, I argue that transferring pictures from my mobile Camera Roll (Photos application) to the larger display of my computer's Photos application rendered them more "tangible." While I could still not touch these moments as I would a creased and stained photograph, viewing them outside of my day-to-day context of the mobile phone, side-by-side on the flat tabletop of the computer screen, invited me to notice different forms of wear-and-tear. This involved the ways in which the pictures were structured, the content that was included and excluded, and the emotions behind the static frames; in other words, I aimed to explore the challenges and overall "life" that these souvenirs weathered.

I also noticed that despite having access to my photograph collection at all times via my mobile phone, there were certain pictures that I knew particularly well. These photographs, such as those from my December 2019 family trip to New York, have been studied, examined, discussed, and shared many times over. This sharing would take place via our family WhatsApp group chat, where my parents and I would continue to relive our shared New York memories long after our return. These memories elicit positive feelings and reflect a "self" that I have taken comfort in revisiting, possibly when I need reminders that she exists. At the same time, there are other pictures that may have existed alongside my New York family photographs in my mobile Camera Roll, which I have possibly never revisited. These "passing" moments form the content that I scroll past on a regular basis to access the "important" memories. For my self-study, I aimed to stop and pay attention to these passing, fleeting moments. Everything contained in my Camera Roll constituted something that I felt needed to be committed to film. As Sontag (2008) referred to photo-capturing as a practice of note-taking, these notes, as insignificant as they may have

seemed, could have revealed something about myself. This self-study formed a move against my regular act of passive scrolling. By being able to swipe past dozens of pictures at once, I have caused these fleeting moments to flee faster and faster. I therefore aimed to stop the scrolling and the spinning, in order to bring these moments into focus. I attempted to approach these photographs with an open perspective, trying as hard as possible to move beyond my existing ideas of my personal self. I also noticed that my memory would at times deceive me when it came to the ordering of my memories. I found it interesting how the narrative I internalized of “what happened” sometimes stood in conflict with the reality of the date stamps and ordering of the Photos application.

Another notable element of my self-study process involved careful omissions. While I aimed, when performing the initial transfer (from one device to another) to process an authentic collection of moments, I did remove certain moments from my data set. I recognize that any omission from my collection could raise questions in terms of validity, as my set could presumably not represent “reality.” However, I made the categorical choice to remove photos that contained inappropriate or compromising content. This resulted only in the omission of around ten photos over the duration of the entire study. For my current purposes, as those items have not been treated as data, I still asked myself the question about what this act of omission could reveal. Was I feeling shame or remorse with regards to the content of the pictures? Regardless, this act revealed, to me, the tenuous and subjective nature of constructing an image of self. Even on a quest for discovering an “authentic” idea of self, it appears I still felt compelled to doctor my ways of seeing.

After having placed my photographs in the folders that were categorized by month, I created a separate set of folders, or as the Photos application aptly names them, “albums.” I titled these new folders according to my themes of exploration: Significant Life Events, Failures, Sources of Inspiration, and Questioning. I developed these themes while engaging in the “preparing” phase of my photographic experience. Threads would arise as I encountered and sorted pictures, thus prompting me to establish clear areas for analytical exploration. My manipulation and movement of the pictures within the Photos application on my computer formed my attempt at creating some structure within this large collection, which would make it easier to treat and eventually contemplate. I used bolded headings for the four folders designated toward my themes of exploration in order to easily differentiate the folders from the others, which were sorted by date. When selecting pictures for the respective categories (themes), I would view the photographs from a specific month before moving onto another. In addition to viewing the photographs one month at a time, I also filtered through the months by addressing one theme at a time. This is to say that when addressing the September 2019 collection, I would filter through the photographs with the singular lens of “Significant Life Events.” I would collect the photographs that applied to this category within the September 2019 folder, and drop them into the folder for this theme. I would then move on to a second observation of the September 2019 collection, with the observational lens of “Failures.” I would continue this system for all of the categories of exploration, before moving on to the next month. I would repeat this system twice for the entire collection. This means that the photograph collection for each month of the study would have been viewed eight times, through the lens of four guiding themes.

I noticed that my first round of viewing the pictures resembled the writing of first drafts (Mitchell & Weber, 1999). The process was instinctual and rather quick, as I did not stop to reflect too strongly on how a photograph corresponded to a specific theme, but rather, collected pictures that stood out to me (within the context of a given observational lens). For my second viewing, I was more scrutinizing, and moved through the pictures with a closer, slower eye. I had already been exposed to the collection once, allowing me to form a working understanding of its collective messages. These understandings shaped the ways in which I viewed the collection for a second time, and I argue that while the first viewing was based on instinct, the second viewing was based on logic. I also noticed that certain themed folders were far easier to fill, such as Significant Life Events. Others, such as Failures, or Questioning, were more abstract and I found myself needing to “read into” the pictures and their contexts a little more when addressing these themes. These challenges and moments of contemplation speak, once again, to the fluid nature of my self-study process, and how even in the Preparing phase, I was engaging in some thoughtful play. The categorization of pictures was a key component of my study, as placing a photo into a category meant it would be read as part of a specific collection. That collection would form a narrative based on the messages it revealed about my personal self. Jon Prosser and Dona Schwartz noted that “researcher-generated photographs are subjective visual records of an event [which] represent the photographer’s individual viewpoint and what he or she considered of value to document” (2003, as cited in Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2019). This observation suggests the careful decisions that lie behind the presentation of a photograph collection, as evidenced in the work of Mary Cullinan (2019), and how organization can form far more than a logistical task (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2019).

Data Analysis, Phase Two: Exploring Personal Photographs (Playing)

My analysis of personal photographs constituted an act of photo elicitation (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2019). MacEntee (2019, as cited in Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2019), used photo elicitation methods when conducting interviews of preservice teachers involved in a series of participatory, arts-based workshops called YAKP (youth as knowledge producers). Just as my research data included a selection of photographs from a larger collection, MacEntee selected her sample from a bank of images taken during the YAKP workshop period. MacEntee (2019, as cited in Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2019) “hoped the pictures would help jog [participants’] memories of events from several years earlier” (p. 39). She used these photographs as prompts for memory elicitation and discussion, as Benoit (2016) used images as triggers for personal memories. As well, MacEntee’s use of recent photographs, taken during the time period of a particular event, mirrored my use of personal images taken concurrent with my classroom observations. MacEntee (2019, as cited in Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2019) also noted that “looking at the photographs elicited a looking forward to consequences of participating in [the workshops] since the project had ended” (p. 38). Similarly, D. Jean Clandinin and F. Michael Connelly (2000, as cited in Campbell, 2017) noted, “bringing . . . memories forward [involves] going backward, forward, inwards and outwards” (p. 33), as the researcher attempts to examine moments within their narrative contexts and complexes. This means that while my chosen images spoke to specific spaces in time, their implications and constructions elicited discussions on the stories that surrounded them.

I divided my photograph analysis process into phases, as I did with the photograph collection process. My phases for analysis were Isolating, Meaning Making, and Synthesis. The Isolating phase involved extracting thematic strands of inquiry from my collections, while the Meaning Making phase involved attempting to make meaning of these strands. The Synthesis phase involved summing up the understandings that were established in the previous phases, in an attempt to unite the collections and form cohesive messages on my personal self. Campbell (2017), in her doctoral thesis, frequently noted the questions she asked herself as she moved through the research process. These personal inquiries paved the way for further exploration and the formation of overarching research questions. Essentially, Campbell has made explicit the “hunches” and musings that guided her toward the tangible research goals she pursued in her study. As such, I shaped my photograph analysis phase around a series of personal questions, starting with a hunch and moving toward a research question, or goal, for my exploration of images. Before embarking on my exploration of photographs, I had the hunch that my Camera Roll was more personal than it appeared. I therefore asked myself the question, “how could my everyday photos say something about me?” This question prompted me to form photograph collections, upon which I performed a thematic analysis.

Isolating: What Do I See “Again and Again” in This Collection?

Similar to Benoit’s (2016) categorization process, I reviewed my four photograph collections and isolated thematic threads based on emotional responses, reflective understandings, and the people in my life. Unlike Benoit (2016), the content of my photographs did not follow an established structure.¹ Therefore, I also paid close attention to the content I chose to include, the circumstances in which it was included, and, likewise, what was omitted from my images. I feel this close photographic analysis (Mitchell & Weber, 1999), involving an analysis of content as well as my aesthetic (Rosenblatt, 1994) engagement with it, has been conducive to a meaningful exploration of self. I adopted Benoit’s (2016) approach of holistic thematic analysis by isolating four recurrent themes in my collections: Food, Art and Beautiful Things; Prominent People; Festivity and Celebrations; and Triumphs. “Food, Art and Beautiful Things” was a theme I developed in response to my abundant images of food. Whether it be food produced by me, or something I ate outside of the home, I evidently displayed a fascination with food in all of my collections. From going to restaurants or watching television cooking shows, food has always formed content that is calming, comforting, and inherently associated with pleasure. This concept of abundance and luxury, somewhat bordering on obsession, permeates my teaching practice and passion for storytelling within the curriculum; in other words, to me, the curriculum is a narrative. “Prominent People” is a category that was inspired by Benoit’s (2016) theme of “Teachers and Supervisors.” While certain people were recurrent in my images, others came and left. I also charted the absence of certain figures and felt the presence of these “ghosts” (Mitchell & Weber, 1999, p. 86) revealed some important aspects of my own personal self. I have come to realize that the characters of my life have impacted the manner in which I shape my stories within the classroom. These people and experiences have also affected the manner in which I build relationships and feel the need to protect my students. “Festivity and Celebration” was a theme that was intended to address my love for celebration. I have never been a person who enjoys crowds or large gatherings, and have always preferred intimate spaces and moments.

However, upon examining my photograph collections, my longstanding personal identification as an introvert became slightly complicated. I noticed that, as with food, celebration and festivity was an outlet I used to bond with others and create experiences. I bring abundant, somewhat frenetic energy to the classroom, and I have come to realize it could reflect my desire to transmit my love of learning to my students. Finally, the theme of “Triumphs” was born from my desire to celebrate my personal self. After having overcome a number of challenges in 2019, leading up to my period of observational study, I decided that establishing an event as a triumph need not always involve “official” recognition. While I recognize that my work within my professional life, including my doctoral studies, has involved a series of measurable milestones, the work within these spaces and my personal (and interpersonal) life experiences has reshaped my vision of an accomplishment. The qualities I have observed within myself are directly linked to my teaching philosophy and my desire to treat education as an emancipatory, celebratory experience. I aim to foster an environment where students also feel excited to enjoy small moments and possibly recognize their own potential as characters within their own stories.

Meaning Making: How Did These Images Come to Be, and What Do They Say?

Mitchell and Weber (1999) called into question particular ways of interacting with (and interrogating) photographs. The authors discussed the methods of Annette Kuhn (1995) in dealing with memory work, noting important steps in approaching photographs: considering the human subject, considering the picture’s context, discussing the techniques and aesthetic circumstances of the photograph’s production, and discussing the photograph’s currency and viewership (Mitchell & Weber, 1999, p. 99). The authors also illuminated processes of altering ways of seeing, through cropping and staging (p. 98). I used these considerations when approaching my own photographs, paying close attention to the presentation of the content, the codes and conventions that went into presenting the content, and the personal decisions behind including or omitting content. To synthesize, I developed a personal set of analysis questions inspired by Mitchell and Weber’s memory work. My questions were as follows: What or who is the subject of the photograph? What is the context surrounding this moment? What are some artistic decisions included in the photograph (lighting, cropping, etc.)? Who were the viewers of this photograph? (Despite the fact that my photographs were intended for personal use, certain moments were captured with the intention of being shared. These particular photographs speak to, even more so than the immortalization of a moment, my own validation of having participated in it). I synthesized my responses to my collections through curatorial statements (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2019), which aimed to express my discoveries of self.

Synthesis: What Do These Collections Tell Me About Me?

Paul O’Neill and Soren Andreasen (2007) connected the act of curating to Francois Truffaut’s theory of the auteur, conceptualizing the “curator as a creator . . . rather than a facilitator or administrator of exhibitions” (p. 138). This perspective on curating provided inspiration for my treatment of photograph collections, as I aimed, from my compilation and interactions with the images, to create meaning and stories. For my curatorial statements, I aimed to produce a message, or set of messages, on my personal self. Within each statement, I discussed the context of the collection, recurrent themes, and the meaning rendered from the images. Patti Allison (as cited in Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2019) created curatorial

statements for her project on social justice photo albums. Allison (as cited in Pithouse-Morgan et al, 2019) noted that curatorial statements “help guide the way audiences perceive [an] exhibition [and offer] a chance to communicate directly to viewers” (p. 49). Interestingly, the sole viewer of my collection, up until the publication of my doctoral thesis, had been myself. However, I found Allison’s conceptualization of curatorial statements to be helpful in channeling a focus for my collections, and allowing me to step in and out of my position as the “self” subject of observation. My internal positioning allowed me to create personal messages, but treating the collections as exhibitions for analysis offered me a position from which to make “outsider” observations.

Curatorial Statements: Independent Photograph Collections

The following four passages form my self-study curatorial statements of photographs. These statements offer cohesion to the collections, while displaying my own reflective process in analyzing my memories.

Significant Life Events



Fig. 1: Collage representing Significant Life Events collection

This collection reflects feelings of picking up and moving on, but also pausing to reflect upon my journey. Ranging from a series of close-up shots of beautiful meals and shiny jewelry that suggest meticulous focus and attention to placement, to some casual snaps of my parents and (a new) partner (often taken prior to enjoying delicious food), there is an air of enjoyment, celebration, and rewards in these pictures. This collection, which has notably been permeated by the ghost of my ex-husband, displays my constant effort to develop and discover my (new) personal self. From the images of my first home, to the weathered map

of Manhattan that guided my family vacation, these images show a constant commitment to overcoming challenges, developing new skills (I have always been directionally challenged, so using a paper map was a triumph), and celebrating the self I have (and continue to) become. The recurrent images of food, from a homemade pumpkin pie (my first, largely successful attempt), to an iconic Eastern European perogy dinner at Veselka's, to a sunny lunch (date) at the Ikea furniture store, display not only my slight obsessiveness with food, but the victories (big or small) that I accompany with my enjoyment of good food. Notably, this food also reflects my personal recognition that I embody a "self" that is worth celebrating. This celebration of special, everyday moments is a value I wish to transmit to my students. They are all entering transformative periods, and my hope is to use my conceptualization of triumphs to fuel their own.

Failures

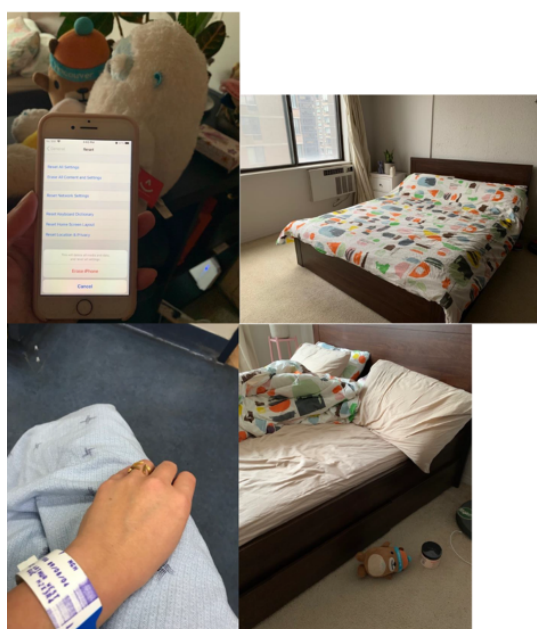


Fig. 2: Collage representing Failures collection

The image of the home screen of my old mobile phone, prompting me to "Erase iPhone," sums up the feelings of this collection. This is a collection that has once again been permeated by the ghost of my ex-husband, but rather than sparking victories in meeting and overcoming challenges, these images reflect the loneliness that has become a notable part of my personal self. The ghost's presence is everywhere in this collection, eerily forcing me to witness a life that once consisted of beautiful things and love—things now being sold on Facebook Marketplace by a newly single, lost self. I recall choosing the dark wood Ikea bed that stood in my former apartment, and how my ex-husband had travelled from our previous residence to spend the day constructing the frame. I also recall sitting on my couch, waiting for a total stranger to finish breaking apart the same frame that housed so many fond, warm memories. This collection has shown me my own experiences of coming to terms with erasing a life, and how seemingly quickly the "sacred" can turn to "omitted." The image of my hospital bracelet, along with remnants from a series of failed dates, reflect my constant fear of being alone, and my desire to once

again be happy. I also feel that these images reflect a desperate spiraling and an unwillingness to accept the fact my former life has been erased. Lastly, images of my (stuffed) animals, Doris and Muk, falling on the ground, suggest my desire to capture my own personal failures on film. Meanwhile, my carelessness in letting these creatures fall violently reflects a failure to control the chaos that had become my new norm. My desire to protect my students and build relationships reflects these past failures. Failure is something to which I have been well accustomed, but it has also helped me hold on to the positive bonds I have forged within the schoolplace.

Sources of Inspiration



Fig. 3: Collage representing Sources of Inspiration collection

This collection reflects a quest for art in life. Again, food assumes a central position in these images, but this collection pays specific attention to composition and the unexpected juxtaposition of food and beautiful things. However, in the image taken of my mother with a string of gnarly Brussel sprouts, the food is not particularly beautiful as it is eye-catching. This reminded me of the images I took as a child and teenager of misplaced fruits that I would find in my everyday travels. I also, as a child, asked my mother to pose with a rotting orange that had been infested with ants on a window sill, showing that my fascination with displaced produce has been an ongoing source of inspiration. In two photographs from this collection, I placed an orange on another food item. In one instance, it was a cruller donut; in another situation, it was a tub of coconut eggnog yogurt. Interestingly, at the time of writing this passage, I have taken to hiding oranges in plain sight. The unexpected nature of my compositions reflects my playful experimentation with the different elements I encounter on a daily basis, especially within the classroom. With my students, I aim to subvert commonplace narratives and help expose new ways of seeing and experiencing the (otherwise boring) world. This is especially evident in the images of my

(stuffed) animals, particularly the ones where Muk, the marmot, stares out of the window in a manner indicative of Friedrich's *Wanderer*. Evidently, for me, the innocent building blocks of my life hold great importance and inspiration, as they channel stories of their own. This collection also displays my interest in particular philosophies, notably the trend of vegan food, with which I have a fascination because of its own practice of subverting expectations (e.g., a milkshake that contains no milk), and also Anthony Bourdain, a lost figure whom I feel has helped me embrace my divergence and curiosity. Finally, this collection displays an interest in novel ways of seeing and approaching the world. An image reflecting the use of fresh snow to cool beers and champagne displays a resourceful way of viewing the world. I aim to channel this creativity and whimsy into my teaching, and hopefully inspire students to see their surroundings as the building blocks for play.

Questioning



Fig. 4: Collage representing Questioning collection

This collection reflects reservation, skepticism, and my unwillingness to trust the world at face value. While the recurrent theme of food surfaces in this collection, these images reflect subtle questions of the “normal” world around me. From a lone BLT sandwich on a desk, left behind by a student who quickly fell ill upon entering the class, to boxes of Little Debbie Christmas tree-shaped snack cakes, this collection displays my curiosity and fascination with the strangeness of everyday life. Vegan food has once again appeared in my images, in the form of veggie ground meat(less) products, a fast-food burger, and a Beyond Meat sandwich. Once again, the concept of something presenting itself as a regular, accepted part of everyday life, when in fact it is foreign, raises (Surrealist) questions of reality, but also feelings of betrayal and lies. I wondered to what extent the other elements of my life were imitations, and how it can become commonplace to sustain oneself in a life of inauthenticity. This concept was present in the images of Bar Boulud, a restaurant I had very much wanted to dislike. After Daniel Boulud took over the local high-end bistro Feenie's, which had been a much-loved special-occasion destination for my

family, I questioned the chef’s motivations. Seeing as he was a friend and mentor of the Feenie’s chef, I became especially repelled by Boulud’s seeming act of betrayal. However, when the Bar Boulud meal ended up becoming an occasion in and of itself, with a lobster potato salad serving as inspiration for my own culinary attempt, I realized how my skepticism has operated in creating rigid narratives. In turn, I aim to combat this tendency by inspiring students to be better. This collection reflects my tendency to continually ask questions, sometimes to the point of personal frustration. I use the classroom as a place for possibilities and discovery. I have always thought of myself as a proponent of justice, as I use the curriculum as a platform to promote openness and equality.

Conclusion

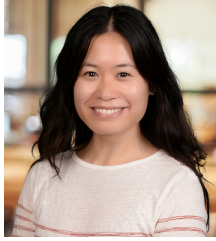
In this article, I describe my personal self-study, which highlights my engagement with photographs to discover messages about my personal teacher self. By mobilizing an unexpected data set, I aimed to discover more about who I am, and possibly how my practice came to be. From my successes and points of pride to my failures and sources of vulnerability, I hoped to create a picture of my “ways of being” (Berger, 2008). My exploration of elements which inspired me, as well as questions I asked of the world, illuminated my “ways of seeing” (Berger, 2008) during my specific period of study. Through this process, I aimed to gain a better understanding of the motivations underlying my decision-making within my teaching practice. Within my doctoral experiment, I gravitated toward Surrealism as a source of inspiration for the problems I perceived within my classroom. However, I wondered about the elements of my personal self, which caused me to see my practice in this way. Therefore, in order to understand the connections that I aimed to forge, and the experimentation within which I hoped to engage, I needed to discover why I felt compelled to pursue these directions. This work has also illuminated the valuable need for teachers to stop and reflect upon our practices, using the artifacts which inform the world(s) which we actively construct around us.

Notes

1. Benoit (2016) included photographs of former schools and personal residences, whereas my content involved all images included on my personal mobile device. I did categorize my photograph collection into four threads of inquiry in the processing phase of my data collection, but for the most part, commonalities in content were the subject of my analysis phase, rather than a necessary step in the data collection phase, as was the case with Benoit.

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