Negotiating the experience: Liminality, intersubjectivity, and writing on the path to a doctoral degree

Jon Brammer
jonbrammer@hotmail.com

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Negotiating the experience: Liminality, intersubjectivity, and writing on the path to a doctoral degree

A Dissertation Presented by

Jon A. Brammer

Submitted to the Graduate School of Education Lesley University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

March 23, 2021 Ph.D. Educational Studies

Individually Designed Specialization
Negotiating the doctoral experience: Liminality, intersubjectivity, and writing on the path to a terminal degree

Jon A. Brammer
Graduate School of Education
Lesley University

PhD. Educational Studies Individually Designed Specialization

Approvals
In the judgment of the following signatories, this Dissertation meets the academic standards that have been established for the Doctor of Philosophy degree.

Dr. Caroline Heller  ___________________________  __________
Doctoral Committee Chair  Date
Director, Individually Designed Specialization

Dr. Susan Gere  ___________________________  __________
Doctoral Committee Member  Date

Dr. Pearl Ratunil  ___________________________  __________
Doctoral Committee Member  Date

Dr. Paul Naso  ___________________________  __________
Co-chair, Ph.D. Educational Studies  Date

Dr. Amy Rutstein-Riley  ___________________________  __________
Interim Dean, Graduate School of Education  Date
Abstract

Doctoral students usually exhibit a proven track record of academic success as demonstrated by the completion of both undergraduate and graduate degrees. However, despite that success, attrition rates across doctoral programs are high. The challenges inherent in completing a doctoral program are well-documented, but the overarching concepts that account for those challenges are often subject to compartmentalization and reductionism.

This interdisciplinary qualitative study explored the experiences of current doctoral students and recent graduates through interviews with twenty-seven participants across a variety of academic disciplines. Using a set of scripted questions, each participant was asked to characterize their motivations for doctoral work, what expected and unexpected aspects they encountered, how they viewed their writing as a product of scholarship, and what they believed to be the most valuable part of the experience.

The interviews revealed common themes related to the personal and professional challenges associated with developing a new, academically focused identity. In addition, participants reported that many of their greatest challenges were connected to negotiating the epistemological and ontological changes they were experiencing within the context of advisor, department, and program expectations. Participants reported many transformative/transitional experiences that were only occasionally aligned with pre-planned, programmatic milestones. However, written work often served as the benchmark for recognizing those developments.

The theoretical ideas of liminality and intersubjectivity were used to develop a coherent model of doctoral education that not only accounts for the experiences described by the participants, but also suggests the benefits of a more contemplative approach to doctoral work. By realizing the inherently contemplative and reflexive nature of producing written work in doctoral programs, students can redefine their challenging experiences as opportunities for authentic self-expression.

Keywords: Liminality, intersubjectivity, doctoral programs, contemplative pedagogy, doctoral writing
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NEGOTIATING THE EXPERIENCE

I’ve worked in non-profits and education for many, many years, and I’ve always sat in conversations where people discuss people like me, people in my family, people in my neighborhood. And where I would share my thoughts, I would be dismissed because I wasn’t “academic” enough.

—Rita, recent PhD graduate in education

Chapter 1- Introduction

Motivations for pursuing doctoral work are likely as varied and numerous as there are graduate programs and students. For some, the expectation of career advancement is the most compelling reason to enter a doctoral program (Stubb, Pyhalto and Lonka, 2012). For many, no doubt, the complicated mesh of drives, needs and imperatives is often difficult to parse out and articulate. Whatever the motivations of a student entering the door to a doctoral program, the process of engaging in coursework and developing original research in a chosen field is almost always challenging, usually transformative, and consistently taxing. Despite this felt reality, there is a limited body of research about current conventions regarding doctoral education itself, including how doctoral students at different junctures of their program perceive the processes and expected products at the heart of their doctoral education (Prasad, 2013). The challenges that arise for doctoral students are even more daunting for those in programs that are transdisciplinary, as is the doctoral program in educational studies in which I myself am enrolled. Here, students may feel an added worry that their transdisciplinary program of study and finally their doctoral research may be a mismatch with expectations of established fields and scholarly publications (Prasad, 2013).

The need to explore the motivations of doctoral students prompted Wiley Education Services, a branch of Wiley Publishing, to conduct specific research into what makes graduate students enroll and persist. In early 2019, they disseminated the results of a qualitative study that made a bold claim regarding graduate students in the United States. The claim was that students could be categorized into three groups based on their primary motivations for pursuing an advanced degree. The study used the labels “advancer,” “launcher,” and “altruist” to indicate the initial trajectory for each type of student.
The Wiley study, while designed as a marketing tool for program curriculum design and text choices for graduate courses, provokes several compelling questions in terms of the accuracy of such broad categories. Every graduate student who enrolls in a doctoral program begins a course of study with a constellation of motivations and expectations. However, the processes that maintain or dismantle those initial predilections are quite elusive. Most research connected to how education is experienced by doctoral students suggests that, on balance, focusing on developing internal motivations for personal growth, as opposed to seeking external validations for academic work, has a more positive impact on student perseverance (Stubb, Pyhältö and Lonka, 2012). Unsurprisingly, Pyhältö et al. (2019) conclude that students who are more involved with academic activities and university culture report greater levels of satisfaction with their doctoral journey. While the Wiley study made ambitious claims regarding a typology of graduate student motivations, it did not address how the initial rationale for individual students can shift, evolve, or change completely. My research suggests this phenomenon is quite common; as doctoral students move through their programs, their identities and perspectives do not remain static.

The need to further explore the complexities of doctoral student motivation and persistence is evidenced by a program attrition rate of over 50% in some fields (Golde, 2005; Sowell, Zhang, Redd, & King, 2008; Rigler et al., 2017). Doctoral students almost always have a robust record of academic success. They complete undergraduate programs with a high enough level of achievement to apply to selective graduate programs; because it is generally required, most will complete a first graduate degree at the master’s level prior to pursuing a doctorate. What accounts for such a high rate of failure for students with a proven track record of academic success?

There are many possible answers to that question. Doctoral programs perform multiple functions as gatekeepers to communities of knowledge, preservers of epistemological orthodoxies, and fertile containers for cultivating new knowledge and intellectual innovation. The potential tensions
among these competing agendas may well manifest as obstacles to doctoral students: how to find meaning in learning itself and how to engage in the required original research that must be accomplished within an academically viable framework. What strategies can accomplish these goals with research that may be grounded in very personal motivations? The climate of some doctoral programs emphasizes almost exclusively those external validations in the form of expectations that students engage in scholarship that shines brightly on the doctorate granting institution and the students’ mentors. Students are encouraged to secure prestigious grants and fellowships, for instance, perhaps even at the expense of recognizing and therefore abiding by their own internal validation systems for honoring the work they engage in.

However innovative a doctoral program may aim to be, the pre-programmed assumptions that doctoral students carry with them (e.g. classes must be “hard,” meeting program requirements should be stressful, venerating professors is mandatory, etc…) may be powerful enough to make students complicit in maintaining a status quo regarding what is traditionally privileged in academia and what is not. These relationships among expectations, realities, and students’ evolving perceptions are further complicated when doctoral students come from demographics that may be particularly in counterpoint to the traditional discourse of academic institutions; as challenging as it may be for any doctoral student to conform to scholarly discourse and expectations, for those individuals whose backgrounds may not have served to groom them for academia as fully as their more privileged counterparts, the challenges are compounded. For example, the default tone of writing and dialogue encouraged in a doctoral program might be even further removed from their own experience of how knowledge is constructed. The presumptions of what is considered appropriate “knowledge” and what is not could run counter to their lived experiences. How doctoral students perceive what “counts” as a deep educational experience, including what they value as commendable doctoral research, is intimately connected to how their own identities as students and researchers developed before their entering doctoral work and
how these evolved over the course of time spent in a doctoral program. Golde (1998) asserts that expectations of students regarding doctoral work can have a profound impact on these emerging identities and perceptions of how original research is valued. The gaps between doctoral program reality and what students think or want it to be can be instrumental in students persisting in a program or giving up. Tacit expectations on the part of students and faculty in doctoral programs also contribute to a sense of shared understanding about developing original research, for example, but those expectations are not always aligned or explicitly unpacked and explored.

Additionally, contemplative scholar Ergas (2017) claims that when faced with experiences that do not meet their expectations of what graduate work should be (i.e., experiences that are difficult to quantitatively explain or not attached to an enumerated outcome), doctoral students in education, my own field of study, tend to devalue those experiences regardless of their actual impact on their identity or professional development. For doctoral program graduates who go on to teaching professions at various levels, this phenomenon is particularly troubling. How can pedagogical practices grow and change in an optimally powerful direction if those new to a given field are trained to have their educational expectations met without encouragement to inquire into the utility or validity of those expectations? When doctoral program purposes of gatekeeping and preserving orthodoxy are prioritized over encouraging ongoing self-awareness and innovation, the result, for both doctoral programs and the students in them, can be epistemological stagnation and a crippling inability to shift discourse beyond self-replication that reinforces existing norms.

The opportunities that doctoral students are afforded for the interrogation of their own presumptions about their educational experiences (those that take place before, as well as during doctoral work) vary. However, the common thread of doctoral programs as deeply transformative experiences suggests a potential to shift expectations of involvement in course work, epistemological development, research inquiry, and writing toward something that is more complimentary and involving
of students’ lived experience. The focus of my research is directly related to this idea via my guiding question: can doctoral work be made more authentic and meaningful by students becoming intentionally self-aware of the transitional moments/liminal moments in their own development and being encouraged to embrace those uncertainties as a vital part of the doctoral education process? The transitions that seem to be common to most doctoral experiences have the potential to serve as waypoints along a larger trajectory of epistemological thinking and writing development. Educational researcher Todd (2015) asserts that education which focuses too rigorously on skill attainment or acquired competencies is often “coupled with no appreciation for the existential vagaries and doubts that accompany living a life” (p. 241). For doctoral students, who are very often older and more professionally experienced than masters level students, the separation between academic life and “regular” life might become even more blurred if the challenges of holding down jobs, raising families, and pursuing activities other than academic work are not consciously addressed. Since doctoral students often work on their research independently for extended periods of time, without some framework for students to approach the unsettling instances of being intellectually adrift, the process of acknowledging transitional/liminal experiences can be all the more daunting.

Because doctoral work is weighted heavily towards the creation of written products, the connection between how these complex issues are experienced and what writing emerges from each phase of a doctoral program is also worth exploring. In my own experience, successfully completed written assignments served as benchmarks for my own slowly developing identity as a producer of original research. I recall clearly the first time I engaged in directed interviewing as part of a course assignment connected to qualitative research; the work was typical of what is expected of first year doctoral students. Moving through the processes associated with actual research production (e.g. composing interview questions, setting up recording equipment, transcribing the conversation, etc...) felt more authentic than dense theoretical readings about methodology. All the advice about
interviewing pitfalls and approaches to conducting qualitative research felt like distant abstractions until that lived experience could serve as an application. When I read documents from earlier in my doctoral study career, like my first attempt at a literature review or my earliest formulations of a direction for study, I am struck by their unfinishedness. The ideas presented were appropriate for the time and context, but I am certain that I would produce different work today given the same prompts. I have been surprised by the scope of that progression, and it has led me to reflect deeply, particularly on my preconceptions regarding what I thought academic writing was and the ways I now think about what it could become.

As a current doctoral student, I have been acutely aware of my own shifting internal dialogue regarding my educational experience. The ideas that were in place when I started my doctoral journey in the fall of 2014 seem a distant memory, both intellectually and personally, when compared to where I am now. Much of the idealism I had when first starting a doctoral program has been replaced by a resigned pragmatism, and I can only identify vague notions of how that has happened and why. Pyhältö et al. (2019) call this an increase in “cynicism,” but I am not entirely in support of that label.

Undoubtedly, what has pushed me to examine what doctoral students experience in their transition between “amateur scholar” and “expert” is the litany of horrific stories I have heard from students across a wide swath of liberal arts and sciences fields. Both successful completers of doctorates and those who have dropped out of programs seem to share an appreciation for the traumas, real and imagined, involved in the process. In interviews I have conducted for previous research projects and in casual conversations, I have been surprised and disappointed by the anecdotes of unfortunate treatment that doctoral students seem to experience: advisors who laugh at research ideas, curricula that seems designed to produce high attrition rates, and even graduate peers who seem to relish the opportunity to belittle their fellow students in classroom discussion. These narratives have been so consistent in overall theme that I have found myself struggling with the larger “why” questions
repeatedly: why does doctoral education need to be that way and what theories might provide a frame for understanding these student experiences?

Moving through the doctoral education process, I have found myself very much in agreement with Araújo (2005), who identifies doctoral work as a phase that reflects a suspended reality wherein efforts in the present are necessarily directed towards a future goal that is both a threshold of academic achievement and a possible entrance into a new professional identity. It is an obligatory time of skewed perspective that disturbs the normal experience of time and purpose on the part of doctoral students:

...the future, which, as a time horizon deeply shapes their everyday lives [...] as a phase that translates to a peculiar type of paradox: on the one hand it shows the dominance of the future, converting the present into a vacuum, a fluid. On the other hand, it expresses a certain degree of personal inability to regard the future as a real future. (p. 192)

When I consider this description, I realize that it captures the essence of my own experience accurately. Doctoral students live in this suspended area of liminality (Winstone and Moore, 2017; Keefer, 2015; Ranieri, 2015), moving through steps in a process towards the culmination of the actual dissertation defense. Their writing, as a manifestation of the reality being experienced, reflects the oscillation between the push and pull of where they want to go and who they need to be in order to get there.

Intentional activities on the part of students and instructors can, I believe, have a positive impact on how those challenging evolutions can be approached, critiqued, and ultimately absorbed into new and perhaps sounder scholarly orientations, epistemological stances, and personal identities for doctoral students. My preliminary explorations into the connections amongst these dynamic factors has made me profoundly curious as to whether my own perceptions are atypical or rooted in more universal experiences of doctoral students. A project related to the study that this chapter introduces—one that I undertook in 2016--revealed that many of the challenges faced by the sample of doctoral students I interviewed paralleled my own to a large degree. After further reading and the collection of a larger
sample of doctoral student experiences, I contend that reframing doctoral work within a contemplative template can provide an effective piece of scaffolding for students. Emphasizing the validity of first-person knowledge generation, the importance of reflective thinking, and the relevance of continually asking the “why” questions are components of an attitude that students in doctoral programs can cultivate on their own, but having departmental or institutional alignment could make those perspective shifts even more concrete. There is certainly more that could be added to the definition of a “contemplative” approach to doctoral work, but those three factors keep the definition accessible to most. The fifth chapter in my dissertation will take a deeper look into how contemplative approaches can manifest in doctoral work.

What would happen if approaches to both teaching and learning at the doctoral level could be modified to help pull forth and promote the value of reflective self-awareness? A more contemplative approach to designing doctoral curricula, to writing, and to research, one that privileges the qualities mentioned in the preceding paragraph could, in fact, become an integral component of authentic scholarship. If doctoral students know beforehand that their ideas will be put through a gauntlet of inquisition, shaped by the tacit priorities of institutions, departments, and individuals, would they be better prepared to accept take those experiences as part of the educational process as opposed to obstacles to be overcome? I know I would have been deeply appreciative of advanced information regarding the degree to which my own ideas and research directions would need to stay malleable in order to navigate the gauntlet of external criticisms and expectations. Instead of expecting doctoral students to fill traditional models of molds to shape their inquiries, could programs and students be better served by encouraging intentional awareness of the real transformations that many doctoral students encounter? This presupposition leads to the perception of the typical awkwardness and questioning that comes at transition/liminal points not as unhappy realities of doctoral education but as opportunities for self-actualization.
The focus of my dissertation is directly related to this idea. It is propelled by one guiding question: can doctoral work be made more engaging and meaningful by students developing their attention and cultivating intention when it comes to what they are experiencing? Could becoming intentionally self-aware of the intersubjective impacts and liminal moments in their own development and reframing them as experiences that are ripe with transformative potential be a valuable shift in attitude?

**Research questions**

1. How do doctoral students experience their curricula in terms of their development and the “in-between” state of liminality (i.e. being in-between roles or identities like student/scholar or research consumer/research producer)? In what ways (within their programs) are doctoral students encouraged to challenge their own assumptions about education, scholarship, and epistemology?

2. What intersubjective tensions exist between personal goals/expectations and institutional/cultural expectations for doctoral students? How do those tensions influence how students perceive their work?

3. What role does academic writing at the doctoral level play in enhancing or detracting from the experience of intellectual and personal development, both within the context of doctoral education and afterwards? What is valuable about students having opportunities to make those connections more explicit?

4. To what degree and in what ways can doctoral education and ultimately doctoral research be a contemplative practice? How much do doctoral students consciously engage in intentional contemplative practices to negotiate changes in their approach to course work and research?
In the sections that follow, I explore these issues and caveats connected to these questions and propose an avenue of continued research to address them more directly. I plan to further define the terms I use, particularly the ideas of liminality and intersubjectivity and how they can be identified and utilized in doctoral work. The connections between student expectations and their developing epistemologies, the value of contemplative approaches to inquiry, and the possible function of writing as a conduit and gauge for how those issues interact will be the focus of the following chapters.
Chapter 2- Research design and data collection

Educational researchers Adorno, Cronley, and Smith (2015) provide a useful template for a qualitative inquiry into issues I have described. They define “the doctoral experience as a prolonged state of being betwixt and between” (p. 634) as opposed to a series of movements on a linear trajectory. Much like Araújo (2005), they concentrate on the lived experiences of a relatively small cohort of doctoral students in social work to gain an understanding of their liminal experiences.

This study is similar in terms of scope and focus. I gathered information on students’ lived experience through interviews and subsequent electronic communications for self-selected participants. My initial request for volunteers to participate in the study was distributed electronically to two pools of current and former doctoral students (graduation within the last three to five years), both of which represent populations that are accessible during the academic year.

The first group was the collection of students enrolled in doctoral specializations in the educational studies PhD program at a private coeducational university in Massachusetts. I solicited volunteers through a group e-mail and arranged interviews via the Zoom video-conference platform. The responses were more numerous than I had anticipated; fifteen students from a list of over forty responded to my invitation, and I successfully arranged interviews for twelve. In three cases, scheduling proved a challenge, and after numerous attempts, the volunteers opted out of participation. In each case, at the end of the interview, I encouraged participants to contact me by email if any additional thoughts or issues came to mind as a result of the conversation.

The second group of students I invited to participate was connected to the Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education (ACMHE). I have been involved with ACMHE since 2011, and I
feel strongly that it provides an intellectual home for the way I teach and conduct research. I have met several current doctoral students and recent graduates at the annual ACMHE conferences; they consistently have fascinating narratives explaining how they started doctoral study and how they arrived at the conference. The breadth of academic fields evident in the participant pool from ACMHE provided a useful counterpoint to the first group. While participants from the second group were often more familiar with contemplative approaches in academia (I define these in later chapters), they came from many fields outside of education: communications, psychology, public health, sociology, nursing, etc. Given this relative diversity, I was uncertain of the response to my call for volunteers. However, after I posted to the group listserv, I received over twenty-five replies. Because many of the volunteers lived in other countries or time zones, selecting interview times was a challenge. In addition, after reading the informed consent documentation, some withdrew their participation. I was able to successfully interview fifteen individuals from the ACMHE group, with the same invitation given to every participant for continued communication if needed. I was pleasantly surprised by the level of candor and enthusiasm demonstrated by the individuals who agreed to be interviewed. I recall noting that more than one student mentioned that they had never been asked anything about what they were experiencing as doctoral students which, in and of itself, is a meaningful piece of commentary. Assumptions about what is happening in doctoral education, how doctoral students develop, and what they are experiencing seem to be so entrenched that asking questions about them is deemed unnecessary.

Qualitative research expert Maxwell (2013) identifies this approach to qualitative research as “purposeful sampling” that does not fall into either the probability or convenience sampling categories associated with quantitative research (p. 97). The snowballing effect was also in evidence as three senior professors in the ACMHE group distributed the call for volunteers throughout their respective programs, reaching several students through that indirect distribution. In addition, since the interviewees were
uncompensated volunteers, I made no effort to achieve a specific demographic distribution prior to the actual data collection. I selected no identity markers connected to gender, age, ethnicity, or sexual orientation in any way, and I include these in the chart below for the purposes of sociocultural discussion in this chapter. In total, I conducted twenty-seven interviews which ranged in duration from relatively brief (@twenty-five minutes) to much more in-depth (over sixty minutes). I started each interview with the same set of questions that I designed to explore themes of liminality, intersubjectivity, writing, and contemplative practice. However, I decided not to specifically mention the terms liminal, intersubjective, or contemplation or their variations, for including the concepts would serve as trigger language for the participants, and I did not want to lead interviewees by imposing my own conceptual vocabulary. The scripted list is included below for reference:

1. Where are you in the doctoral education process at present?
   a. How would you characterize your main motivations for pursuing doctoral education?
   b. Have your motivations shifted or changed since you began? If so, in what ways?

2. Of these three words, which captures your motivations best - advance, launcher, altruist?

3. What were your expectations of doctoral education in terms of intellectual or personal growth?

4. What unexpected realizations have you encountered since you began your doctoral education?

5. What are the greatest challenges you have had to overcome since you started?
   a. Do you feel any of those have been connected to ethnicity, gender, or any other demographic information?
   b. How do you characterize those?
6. Have you ever felt unsettled, frustrated, unmotivated or otherwise disenchanted with your progress as a doctoral student?
   a. What strategies did you employ for moving past or through those periods or feelings?

7. How would you characterize your own goals and aspirations for doctoral work as compared to what you feel is expected of you by the institution, your place of work, peers, etc....?

8. What milestones or turning points, if any, can you identify in your doctoral education so far, either positive or negative? Why do they stand out for you?
   a. Are there/were there any specific pieces of work, activities, classes, or conversations that you associate with those milestones or turning points?
   b. Have any of them impacted the way you view yourself as a doctoral student or educational professional?

9. Have you noticed anything about your own work, either as a doctoral student or an educational professional, as you have moved through the doctoral program, particularly the ways you write, research, or teach?
   a. What made you aware of those changes?

10. How do you envision your life changing, if at all, when your degree is awarded?

11. In what specific ways will a doctoral degree impact your personal or professional life?

12. What will be the most significant part of obtaining the doctoral degree?

Using a baseball analogy, qualitative research author Glesne (2011) notes that interviews involve “getting words on the fly” and then hoping that the responses to pre-planned questions are “hit well into every corner of your data park” (p. 102). My experience was very much in this vein as each interview had a unique character both in terms of apparent level of candor and openness and the relative applicability of the responses to the concepts I was attempting to explore. Some participants
responded with a robust repeated theme that circled back on every question (e.g. the lack of a viable intellectual community in doctoral programs, the difficulties of doing academic work with concurrent family responsibilities, the lack of diversity in their respective programs), while other interviewees gave lengthy accounts of their intellectual journeys in order to provide the context they felt was necessary for me, the researcher, to understand their replies as fully as possible (e.g. what they experienced as undergraduate students, their past relationships with faculty members, or the personal challenges they needed to overcome to manage doctoral work).

The overview table summarizes the pool of respondents in terms of basic demographic information. While I did not seek diverse participants in terms of commonly considered identity markers (e.g. gender, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc...), the pool represented a variety of demographic sectors. I assigned each participant a pseudonym to protect confidentiality (Table 1).

### Table 1- Participant demographics
(ethnic abbreviations are those used in many current census models; orientation markers are those self-identified in interview dialogue; R1 indicator is included for tier 1 research universities.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>##</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Orient.</th>
<th>PhD status</th>
<th>Inst. Type</th>
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<td>State</td>
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<td>Claire</td>
<td>&gt;30</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>Cauc</td>
<td>n/a</td>
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<td>Taye</td>
<td>&gt;30</td>
<td>m</td>
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<tr>
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<td>m</td>
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<td>18</td>
<td>Molly</td>
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<td>f</td>
<td>Cauc</td>
<td>LGTBQ</td>
<td>graduated</td>
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</tbody>
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Recording and transcription

With four exceptions, I conducted all interviews the Zoom videoconferencing platform. One feature of that application is the ability to record each session for future analysis and transcription. Zoom saves the entirety of the communication (both video and audio) as well as an audio-only file; in my ongoing effort to preserve participant anonymity, I saved only the audio portions for purposes of transcription. In three instances, technical difficulties made the use of videoconferencing impossible, and I continued conversations on the phone when internet connections became unstable. Two participants made requests not to be recorded on video: one opted for using the Zoom platform with the camera deactivated and one asked for the phone only.

Following my collection of all the interview material, I made the deliberate choice to explore a variety of options for effectively transcribing over 1200 minutes of recorded conversation. The first option, automatic speech recognition transcription from an online supplier, provided a reasonable level of overall accuracy but very little discernment when it came to identifying interviewer and participant turn taking. Pauses between sentences were also sometimes identified as new conversational turns when they were not. The automatic transcription process also failed to capture non-verbal conversational elements such as long pauses, laughter, or overlapping speech; there is sociolinguistic meaning in each of those elements, and I found that omission unsettling. Of the three transcription methods I used, the automated speech recognition was the most error-ridden from the phonological
standpoint and needed the most exacting proofing efforts. The first transcription included in appendix 1 gives an example of the results.

The second method I tried was doing the transcriptions myself; having a background in linguistics, I have experience transcribing conversations. However, I immediately noticed that I was hyper-focused on capturing every detail of each interview: pauses, filler words, backchanneling, and phonetic variations. The result was an incredibly time-consuming process that, while accurate in catching what took place in each interview, captured more information than necessary. Research psychologists Syed and Nelson (2015) contend that some quantitative reliability is desirable in qualitative research, but the specificity of the phonetic values from interviews, for example, was not necessary given my focus on broad themes like liminality, intersubjectivity, and contemplative approaches to education. In the open coding process, I wanted to identify commentary that had a robust connection to my core themes, and that can be done without meticulous linguistic accuracy. From a purely practical point of view, because that level of transcription detail was not necessary for my research questions, and, given the number of interviews to process, I decided to explore another strategy. The second transcription example included in appendix 1 shows an example of the approach I just outlined.

The third method, which proved most useful in capturing themes, was transcription through an in-person contracted service. A disinterested third party split the difference between the inaccuracies of auto-transcription and the hyper-detailed process I tried. Human listeners usually have an easy time identifying conversational participants given a recording of reasonable quality. They are also able to capture words in context that would be unintelligible to a voice-recognition program. Of the twenty-seven recorded interviews, fifteen were transcribed by an outside, in-person service. The clarity and brevity of the language, with filler words, short pauses, and other extraneous sounds removed, provided
the most useful text overall in terms of allowing for the identification of common themes among participants. The third transcription example in appendix 1 shows this method.

As Maxwell (2013) asserts, qualitative approaches often require researchers to amend research designs in process, which results in “‘tacking’ back and forth between different components of the design, assessing their implications for one another” (p. 3). My experience seemed to illustrate that situation clearly; dogged commitment to one transcription method would have resulted in a data set that had too much detail or too little. Like Goldilocks, after sampling a pair of transcription approaches, I settled on the one “just right” for my research.

I utilized the NVivo qualitative research tool to initially code the twenty-seven transcripts. The platform allows for the uploading of transcriptions, supporting documentation, articles, and multi-media files which can then be coded efficiently and cross-indexed across common themes. This tool proved to be extremely valuable for organizing the 100+ pages of transcriptions that resulted from the interviewing process. While it was tempting to pursue a line-by-line coding strategy, I learned from my earlier experiences with transcription that more is not necessarily better and opted for open coding via “chunked” text of responses that clustered along similar lines; Maxwell (2013) identifies this approach to qualitative analysis as “categorizing strategies” which he contrasts with “contiguity-based relations” that show opposition or juxtaposition (p. 106). My initial attempts were oriented closely with the individual scripted questions I used for each interview, but I realized early in the process that those distinctions were not always conceptually useful; individual responses often contradicted each other in terms of content and overall salience for a specific participant. For example, when answering a question based on perceptions of challenging obstacles, some respondents framed their entire doctoral experience as overcoming institutionally imposed obstacles, while others only brushed on the same issue as being relevant to their experience. For students of color, that often meant recognizing and naming the embedded systems of racism inherent in some graduate curricula. For other students, it was
trying to succeed while dealing with lifelong learning disabilities, mental health issues, or the complications that come with being a first generation graduate student.

However, the longer I used the Nvivo application, the more I noticed two unsettling trends. While the software allowed for organizing commentary into thematic categories, it did so at a cost—the loss of the overall flavor of each interview experience. Pulling statements or paragraphs out of context removed them from the flow of an organic conversation, making it harder for me to get the “feel” of the interaction. For example, some participants were noticeably bitter or angry, indignant or grateful, cautious or tentative at different points in the interview process. Those subtleties and my memory of them disappeared during thematic coding. The second feature I noticed was how my own writing process is dependent on intuition instead of formula. When I wanted to bring in the response of a participant regarding a specific point, I found myself going back to the original transcripts as opposed to using the themed categories as I had organized them. My own mental filing system simply did not mesh well with what I felt was a sterilization of my interview data.

I also attempted to follow what could be identified as a “contemplative” model of qualitative inquiry that shares many features with what Josselson (2013) labels as “a relational approach.” This approach is rooted in the exploration of fundamental ideas regarding human experience. Josselson claims that qualitative research can be boiled down to a clear distillation:

Our ultimate role as interpretive researchers is to understand people better—or at least differently—than they understand themselves. The aim of interviewing is to document people’s experience, self-understanding, and working models of the world they live in, so that we may later attempt to make meaning of these phenomena at levels of analysis beyond simple descriptions of what we heard. (p. 2)

During each interview I conducted, I found myself coming back to this core idea as a way to ground my ambitions and assumptions prior to any contact with participants; even though I knew some
basic information about each of them, I tried to bracket these assumptions out of the interview process as much as possible in order to take participants’ narratives as they developed. The mode of interviewing that could be identified as “contemplative” follows a very similar path. The contemplative mode of interviewing accepts both an intimacy with participants and the reality of constantly changing states of perception for the interviewer and interviewee as simultaneous and ongoing occurrences. We can artificially chart them in a linear relationship, but that might be a disingenuous construct. Human minds rarely stop, attend, and consciously move toward a revised set of assumptions. In an interview, the changes happen in a process of ongoing intellectual and emotional movement, and every small revision in a question or a non-verbal shift in expression can create a cascading effect on how the participant perceives the researcher or the research goals. In more than one instance during an interview, I noticed feelings of annoyance or irritation arising just as in others I could identify my own exhilaration or engagement. I made an attempt to be consistent in bracketing those reactions as much as possible until each interview had concluded.

In a similar vein, contemplative researcher and professor of education Janesick (2015) asserts that qualitative research is subject to the changing dynamics of the social world. This reality is easily observable in basic qualitative data gathering practices like interviewing. The uncertainties inherent in any kind of conversation, regardless of the pre-planned agenda of an interviewer, can lead to new avenues of inquiry and unexpected closure of presupposed lines of questioning. Janesick maintains that interviewing is ultimately a creative endeavor that must be approached with compassion and a mindset/attitude open to ever-changing possibilities. Given my interviewing experience, I am in complete agreement with this assertion.
I actually feel it’s been painful. It’s a painful process, this idea of becoming an expert.

--Jodi, recent PhD graduate in education

Chapter 3- Liminality and doctoral work

The decision to apply to and enroll in a PhD program in any field often occurs at the end of a long and arduous process. The multitude of factors that go into the choice, from the financial to the geographical to the interpersonal, to considerations of academic quality, conspire to form a constellation of epistemological and ontological uncertainties that become exacerbated during the process of doctoral study. Often, one of the early and continuing challenges for doctoral students is negotiating the changing identities that necessarily form and evolve. PhD students contend with a sense of losing their own fixed points of identity as they juggle roles as practitioners within their professions, researchers, scholars, and writers (Hay and Samra-Fredericks, 2016). This process is one that is undertaken voluntarily, but that does not necessarily make it any less challenging or potentially unsettling for an individual. Keefer (2015) identifies specific themes that suggest that the uneasiness that afflicts doctoral students is not an isolated phenomenon: the “imposter” syndrome (lack of confidence in their own scholarly interests and/or their place at the institution), the social isolation often associated with dissertation research, and research misalignment (being coaxed by an advisor or department to undertake research in unappealing areas). Any one of those factors, taken alone, could be too big an obstacle for an individual student to cope with easily. However, in situations when they are combined with anxieties about the level of writing skill required at the doctoral level, students can find themselves overwhelmed. Torrance and Thomas (1994) assert that “students who delay completion or fail to complete their dissertation often do so because of writing-related issues” (as cited in Kamler and Thomson, 2004, p. 195). All of those data points suggest that the development of what is typically called “a scholarly writing voice” is an integral part of being a successful doctoral student and managing the evolution of a new identity from the liminal space of a formal program of study.
The idea of how doctoral students experience identity formation has been explored previously (Kamler and Thomson, 2001, 2004; Araujo, 2005; Humphrey and Simpson, 2012), but the explicit recognition of the liminality inherent in programs that graduate PhDs is often left out of that discussion. The context of extreme liminality in which doctoral students find themselves makes the importance of written articulation a vital component of coming through their experience with a new, intact identity as both scholar and researcher.

In their research focused on the lives of graduate teaching assistants, Winstone and Moore (2016) show that a pervasive liminal state goes hand in hand with the mixed roles of being a student, a teaching or research assistant, and a teacher; for a doctoral student, none of these identities is fully formed or completely satisfactory as these identities are being dynamically engaged simultaneously. This can lead to persistent issues with identity formation and an ongoing tension, both personal and professional, as doctoral students work to “observe and internalize the behaviors and values of academics” in each role (Winstone and Moore, 2016, p. 494). While the literature concentrating on liminal identities for doctoral students is quite limited, the need for addressing this period—as a stage in academic life that can be as frustrating as it is fertile—seems warranted. This type of extended liminal experience may be the best time and place for doctoral students to do vital work on their own self-identification and intellectual development.

**Conceptualizations of liminality**

The genesis of conceptualizations of liminal space can be traced to the work of the reflexive anthropologist, Victor Turner (1969), who articulated the idea within the context of specific rituals designed to mark the boundaries between childhood and adulthood in societies he studied. From the Latin *limen*, meaning a “doorway” or “threshold,” the term was used by Turner to theorize an in-between space where individuals were allowed time to let go of old perceptions of identity and prepare for entrance into a new context. Deeply embedded ceremonies and rituals were used to provide psycho-
social scaffolding for group members who would otherwise be bereft of grounding influences during the transitional phase (Turner, 1977). Turner outlined three key attributes of liminality that are vital to understanding extended applications of the term: there must be a recognition of an older identity being lost, a new identity being formulated, and an acceptance of the transitional space between the two when neither is fully embraced (Wendling, 2008).

The last part of Turner’s idea has been developed in a more sophisticated fashion by educational researchers Land and Meyer (2005), who reshape the notion of liminality with their own three trait schema in the context of the educational process. For Land and Meyer, every liminal experience must be transformative, irreversible, and ultimately integrative. However, they also concede that individual variation in attitudes preceding the experience of a liminal space can have a tremendous impact on how that integration occurs; they label this idea of “pre-liminal variation” as being “a potentially important and useful means of opening up our understanding of why some students will productively negotiate the liminal space and others find difficulty in doing so” (Land and Meyers, 2005, p.384). Unlike the subjects of Turner’s anthropological field work, modern adolescents/young adults have very few cultural rituals to invoke that provide cohesive narratives to assist them through liminal space toward a new identity. While there are a few instances embedded in religious tradition (i.e., Catholic confirmation and Jewish bar mitzvah/bat mitzvah, etc...), there are no universal events that stand as markers of transition to new, mature identities. Due to this lack of formalized ritual in modern, western culture, there has been increasing attention on educational milestones as benchmarks of transition. A substantial body of research has developed focusing on the college experience as a time of significant transition/liminality for traditionally aged students (Palmer, O’Kane & Owens, 2009) and a number of scholars have developed the idea for specific application both as a pedagogical tool and as a philosophical backdrop for programmatic measures designed to address pragmatic institutional needs like increased student retention (Palmer, O’Kane & Owens, 2009). For doctoral students, the pomp and circumstance of
graduation ceremonies arrive as closure to an academic trajectory and the (often) dreaded dissertation defense comes just before, but no external rituals provide the guidance and affirmation at other stages within a doctoral program.

For an educational professional, this liminal state can be viewed as either an impediment to “real” instruction or an opportunity to explore the holistic nature of the educational enterprise at a greater depth. Carnes (2004) states:

Scholars of liminality contend that much of the significant imaginative work of every society is expressed through its liminal institutions. By allowing people to escape from the rigidity of social structures and the rules of daily existence, liminality gives them the freedom to invent new solutions to old problems, or to regard familiar things in new ways. (p. 4)

However, many college teachers have no interest in dealing with larger issues of life direction, purpose, and meaning that are of great concern to many students or in challenging themselves to be comfortable with the “uncertainty and emotional intensity” (Carnes, 2004, p. 4) that accompanies liminal/transitional space. Those instructors are reluctant to broach any topic not related to a specific field of inquiry in which they have expertise (e.g. biology, architecture, electronic engineering, nursing, etc...) and stick to that discourse doggedly. Often, this manifests as a rigid expectation of what doctoral work should be in each field and how that work should be explored, written about, and presented.

Thesen (2009) explores this further by pointing out that every meeting between a teacher and student represents a space of transition, both for the students and for the instructor who is charged with facilitating the educational experience. Approaches to teaching that only concern themselves with reinforcing existing paradigms of meaning making miss the chances for other moments of genuine engagement that can occur. Thesen claims that the only way to take advantage of these opportunities is to reprioritize intellectual constructs by subordinating pre-conceived assumptions about learning to the superordinate priority of engagement: “this is a more open-ended term, less directional and less subject
to the narrow definitions of learning in the shadow of assessment that occupies much of higher
education literature” (2009, p. 392). As proof of her concept, Thesen observed a teacher in an
introductory media studies course who dressed up like a film icon in order to provoke students into
authentic and extemporaneous image analysis. Despite the discomfort students initially felt at the
command of “analyze me” from their instructor, Thesen noted that they very quickly shifted into the
new intellectual space. Students entered into Pratt’s “contact zone” where they were working with
newly emergent identities as independent thinkers while also integrating subject-specific knowledge (as
cited in Thesen, 2009, p. 392). By moving away from the lecture hall as a space “for production of an
unquestioning authority,” instructors can rework their classrooms in order to intentionally design
experiences that allow for the practice of skills relevant to successful negotiation of larger liminalities
(Thesen, 2009).

For doctoral students, this connection often takes place within the confines of relationships with
advisors and dissertation committee members, but the quality of opportunities to engage can vary
widely. Doctoral work often goes hand in hand with a sense of isolation, and maintaining engagement is
often a challenge after students have completed coursework and moved into later phases of a program.
Baker and Pifer (2011) describe the typical stages of a doctoral program in the United States as being
divided into three specific parts. The first state encompasses the admissions process through the first
year of what is usually mandatory coursework; the second stage is marked by the completion of formal
coursework and the development of a dissertation proposal and/or candidate exams; the third stage
includes a primary focus on completing a dissertation. As doctoral students move from more structure
to less structure, they often become acutely aware of the pressures and opportunities that are inherent
in liminal spaces. Baker and Pifer (2011), in describing responses to their semi-structured interviews,
explain that during the shift to independent work:
...some students struggled to have even a basic understanding of what to expect at this stage and how to deal with the dramatic change in structure during the transition. For example, some students confided in us that their advisors/supervisors were essentially non-existent, which resulted in no guidance, no sounding board with whom to share ideas of concerns, and no mentoring or advice. (p. 9)

Students who successfully continued the transition from student to scholar were those who engaged in activities and processes connected to programmatic outcomes: research assistantships, reading and writing groups, student organizations, etc... However, this process is complicated significantly when factors of race and gender are added; students of color have the added burden of facing realities associated with ethnic identities while having few models on which to base their development.

Engagement as the focus of profound learning and successful transition through a liminal educational space is an essential concept to emphasize. Sibthorp et al. (2011) assert that learning which is both relevant and engaging leads to the most memorable experiences for students moving through times of transition. Those individuals who can self-regulate their motivational dialogue report the most engagement and success in college coursework (Sibthorp et al., 2011). Borrowing form Dewey (1910), the authors contend that learners can be “optimally engaged” when they are aware of goal-relevant motivation (e.g., what they need to know in order to pass a test) and experience-defined motivation (i.e. how interested they are in the process of getting to relevant goals). Dewey uses four quadrants to identify the relationships (Table2):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning is....</th>
<th>Enjoyable</th>
<th>Not enjoyable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relevant</td>
<td>“Optimal engagement”</td>
<td>“Drudgery”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not relevant</td>
<td>“Fooling”</td>
<td>“Disinterested”</td>
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Sibthorp et al. maintain that the longer optimal engagement can be sustained, the more likely opportunities for recognizing and practicing motivational regulation become. In turn, this connection allows students to develop “experiential wisdom” that will serve them throughout their lives (2011, p. 388).

While this ideal can be described in a relatively straightforward way, Domagalska (2014) argues that interactional and motivational issues are further complicated by modern forms of communication and the virtual identities that accompany the use of commonplace technology that is native to the contemporary educational experience. 21st century doctoral students may not be easily engaged by the same types of interactions that would have been familiar to educators like Dewey a century ago. Instead, they are constantly exposed to electronic enticements that offer experiences which are at once removed from personal contact and (as many hope) as meaningful as a face-to-face encounter:

By reaching out towards those experiences, we start negotiating a space for our sense of self that goes beyond the physical world. In doing so, we are creating clouds of presence infused with our sense of self. There is no difference whether we negotiate this understanding between ourselves and the objects in the physical world or abstract phenomena made possible by electronic devices and consoles. (Domagalska, 2014, p. 412)

The development of this technological incorporation moves even further away from Turner’s original examples of liminal space, yet it preserves the core notion of the creation of a new self after an intermediary period of some kind. However, Domagalska further asserts that the individuation which occurs in a current liminal context has changed markedly from the same process as it was understood only a few decades ago (2014). In addition to the face-to-face encounter with instructors or authority figures in an educational context, students at every level must now also be conversant in how to integrate social media, text personas, and other virtual selves into a more holistic tapestry, rife with implicit, complex, and new power differentials. Modern doctoral students have multiple platforms for
the proliferation of their writing far beyond the traditional avenues of peer reviewed periodicals. This in turn can amplify the complexities of experiencing multiple roles (teacher, student, author, blogger, etc...) with different expectations associated with each.

Modern versions of liminality also tend to incorporate the last aspect Turner identifies in his early work: liminal spaces “lift the normal constraints on behavior and bring participants into new relationships with one another” (Nathan, 2005, p. 147). In her groundbreaking work, Nathan, an anthropologist at a large university she names as “AnyU,” enrolled as a college freshman in order to do embedded field work as a modern student. Her experiences ranged from profound surprise at the lack of attention given to academic pursuits to a resounding appreciation for the liminal opportunity that is provided by a traditional college experience. Nathan’s insights were tempered by the knowledge of her own pre-liminal condition; as a Caucasian female over the age of fifty, she did not match the demographic norms associated with incoming freshmen. However, she still identified college as an important milestone event/space: “like all rites of passage, college is at once an affirmation and a preparation for the world and a creative response and innovative challenge to that same world” (p. 147). She further concludes that the forces shaping universities and colleges across the United States (e.g. demand for more economic impact, shrinking budgets, less emphasis on traditional liberal arts objectives, etc...) shape the way students experience the unique culture on any campus. For example, students are encouraged to take out loans to pay for their education, but that transforms into tremendous debt being the norm upon graduation. The realization of this situation leads students to pursue educational goals that will lead to lucrative careers in order to be in the position to address that same debt in the future. The boundaries of the liminal space that is college are thus dissolved and reformed constantly as cultural pressures inform institutional strategies and priorities.

For doctoral students, the underlying comforts of a residential baccalaureate environment are mostly unavailable. Graduate programs at the doctoral level occupy a unique space in terms of
perceptions of threshold period as many students enter advanced graduate study while they are also deeply entrenched in other aspects of life. Lichtman (2010), while writing specifically about 2-year colleges, could have been describing the realities of doctoral programs that occupy a “liminal space between world and school and between life experience and academy” (p. 17). Doctoral programs are uniquely situated to offer opportunities for individuals to explore their own periods of epistemological and personal growth in a way that is perhaps more connected to the deepest realities of human life than the sometimes more insular world that exists at the baccalaureate level.

Liminal milestones in doctoral work

Throughout the interview process, I was repeatedly struck by the level of internal awareness demonstrated by research participants when it came to identifying transitional points in their own doctoral experiences. The standard program-specific milestones associated with a typical progression through a graduate program in the United States were occasionally cited as being significant, but more often, very individual experiences, relationships, or reactions to assignments became the salient aspects of transition. One useful metaphor to consider is that of a labyrinth. Students face a complex path with unexpected twists and turns. Even if the entrance and exit are known commodities, the desired path is not always the same as the successful one, and doctoral students sometimes need to make difficult choices about how much they retain their own epistemological integrity and how much they need to compromise core values in order to be academically successful.

Hannah, a doctoral student at a large university in the Northwest, was acutely aware of not only the specific transitions she was experiencing but how the entire experience fit into the larger trajectory of her life:

I have wanted to stay very present and aware of how amazing it is that I am spending these hours and days of my life in this particular environment right now because I think it is unprecedented in terms of the freedom I have intellectually and the support I have to pursue
that. I don’t anticipate that will always be the case of that it will feel exactly like it is because
‘graduate student’ is a special place. I haven’t forgotten that...I try really hard to hold onto that
because I want to be able to respond to whatever life is when I’m done.

Despite the stress involved with her program, Hannah has maintained an appreciation for the
opportunity that is incorporated within liminal experience. She was determined to continue with her
intentional observation of her circumstances, whether or not they seemed enjoyable at the time.

Other participants shared their experiences of specific transition points that felt meaningful.
Taye, a recent psychology graduate from a large southern university, described the first of three specific
moments that he recalled “like they were yesterday” that shaped how he moved through his program:

One moment I had was in that first semester and that was the low point when I actually made a
C in a class- so you know of course in graduate school that’s considered failing. In that moment,
it was really pivotal because I had to make a decision...I really had to figure out if I’m going to do
this or not. But at that moment after that fall semester really was a moment I had to look in the
mirror and just figure out what I am going to do. And that’s when I came up with strategies of
looking for my perspective, so I stared looking at the African-centered perspective on different
phenomenon and reaching out to professors.

Coupled with a determined outreach and involvement in specific professional organizations, Taye found
a way to make his liminal experience meaningful. His final transition marker was doing an independent
study that helped him to solidify his intellectual direction: “I was doing my independent studies and just
having the time to put those pieces together. So I did eight hours of independent study- I didn’t take any
classes within a department, and I really just focused on my work. Where are my curiosities? And I
started to realize ‘Oh, I think I can do this smart thing.’”

In many cases, recognizing small epiphanies during the process was the root of tolerating the
ambiguity and intellectual confusion that can come with doctoral work. Being open to the resonance of
individual moments provided more meaning to students than the programmatic or institutional achievements that are supposed to mark successful transitions. As a student in a doctoral program in nursing, Chloe used her innate openness to serendipity on a daily basis:

I’ve had little moments along the way where I have felt more reassured or more confident or more excited, and I take those as successes any day...But I’ve felt a little bit more open to the signs. I try to pay attention to “God moments” or even just universal or universe signs...I do feel deep down that all my interests that feel so scattered and noncommittal at this point are going to come together in some weird and funky story as my life evolves. So I am giving myself that peace to this day...what’s important will stick with me, and it will come back and it will keep reoccurring and I will keep thinking about it. It’s been more of those serendipitous fateful moments that have kind of been my turning points or reassurance points.

Using her faith in an eventual positive outcome has helped Chloe move through a number of iterations of her dissertation direction as well as personal challenges with institutional politics.

In addition, the relationships developed by doctoral students, whether with a senior advisor, colleague, faculty member, or fellow student, can serve as the beacons for navigating the liminal space. Managing connections to people, in both positive and more challenging ways, can be micro-transitions in the macrocosm of doctoral work. Depending on the specifics of a program, students can be further enmeshed in the standards of a particular academic silo if their research inquiries are interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary in nature. Sophia, a doctoral candidate at Lesley University, experienced this first-hand. One of her committee members was inflexible on the style of her dissertation and explained this inflexibility in a matter-of-fact manner:

She said, “I read your work. It was interesting, but it was sort of post-modern in the way it threw the ideas together. And I want you to know if you work with me it’s going to be a philosophy dissertation, and we’re going to write this according to the rules of style in philosophy.”
see that when I took her class- I did badly- but it wouldn’t work for what I’m trying to do now, 
and it probably wouldn’t have worked for what I was trying to do before.

Two committee member changes later, Sophia finally was able to have an advisory group that matched well with her approach and topic choice. Managing the complex dynamics of interpersonal relations, coupled with an awareness of epistemological predispositions can become a full-time occupation for doctoral candidates throughout their programs.

Clearly, the liminal idea as originally expressed by Turner and developed by contemporary researchers is a common feature of an educational transition. The current literature indicates that the in-between space is a high risk and high reward environment that skilled instructors can use constructively. Doctoral students who remain cognizant of the challenges of their liminal experiences could also have an easier time negotiating the challenges they will undoubtedly encounter in moving from the structure of early coursework into the less structured environments that are marked by more independent research and dissertation writing. In the concluding chapter, the discussion will focus on how much this straightforward realization can influence programmatic boundaries, institutional priorities, and curricular design.
A piece of me dreads these joint meetings; it’s like the show “Shark Tank” where you present your ideas to sharks to tear apart, all for the betterment of the “business venture.” I feel like I am trusting my own pipedream business venture in a way...

-Chloe, 2nd year doctoral student in nursing, commenting on doctoral committee meetings

Chapter 4- Intersubjective challenges in doctoral world

While the initial motivations for individual doctoral students vary, the process by which those intentions evolve and transform is invariably complex and dynamic. Research has shown the importance of the student-advisor relationship (Baker and Pifer, 2011), the substantial influence of learning communities (Weidman, Twale, and Stein, 2001), and student awareness of conventions unique to each discipline (Carter, Guerin, and Atchison, 2020). However, the literature focused specifically on doctoral students and their experiences tends to highlight one aspect of this sophisticated mechanism as opposed to offering an over-arching template that takes into consideration the multiplicity of influences in play during a student’s journey through a doctoral program. For assistance in understanding the journeys of my own research participants, I have found the most useful theoretical approach to articulate this complexity is intersubjectivity: how do the internal lives of doctoral students connect with the unseen values and expectations expressed or implied by peers, advisors, or instructors who are representatives of academic departments, institutions, and scholarly disciplines. However, this confluence encompasses more than the programmatic expectations of a particular department or school. Each doctoral student brings to the experience a collection of identities, educational histories, and existential values that either mesh with what is encountered through doctoral education or push against it. As such, what might doctoral students benefit from learning about the presumptions and expectations of these largely disembodied institutional and disciplinary forces that are made real in the form of their advisors and instructors? Calarco (2020) identifies this “hidden curriculum” as one that is taken for granted by most educational institutions. According to Calarco, “the hidden curriculum tends to stay hidden, and that hiddenness perpetuates in grad school and in academia as a whole” (p. 2). Every doctoral student is then
forced to contend with a host of competing and sometimes contradictory subjectivities that have varying degrees of impact. Students of all backgrounds are required to learn the subtle rules necessary to chart a path through the labyrinth of academic socialization. How much of their own voice they need to compromise to do this successfully varies from program to program. The challenge of navigation is exacerbated for students in under-represented groups, whose task to learn and navigate the rules may well be compounded by the complexities of race and gender politics.

Unfortunately, most of the literature on the learning processes of doctoral students treats the reality of these intersubjectivities as a peripheral topic. This occurs even though the matrix of internal sensibilities interacting with publicly expressed expectations provides an influential foundation for how doctoral students approach their scholarly work and develop their ontological perspectives that place them as actors in a discipline-specific dialogue. Gunn (2014), an educational researcher at the University of Glasgow, argues that the awareness of intersubjective realities is “a critical component of our understanding of student learning because of the palpable influence they have over broader engagement in meaning-making” (p. 67). She asserts that the bridges between or among subjectivities create the often-invisible intersubjective space in a learning environment. Much of this can take place on a socio-cultural level that is rife with subtleties. The resulting intersubjective spaces are “mediated through these cultural manifestations and are sense intuited from nuanced context-based inferences, a more complex process than conscious interaction” (p. 71). In essence, doctoral students must develop a finely attuned sense of the layered complexities of interaction.

My first awareness of the impact of intersubjective space came in 2016. In the fall of that year, I was offered the opportunity to teach a required course for first year doctoral students at Lesley University. One of the unique aspects of the doctoral program in education at Lesley is that students can choose a “self-designed” option: five core classes were then required of students in the program, and for each student the rest were to be chosen in alignment with a doctoral study plan (DSP) written early
in the program under the direction of a faculty advisor and early classes. All the students enrolled in my course were in that category. The flexibility of this approach can be both an opportunity and a challenge for students. Choosing courses that reflect personal interests can increase the chances of students finding a curricular path that keeps them engaged and therefore increases the chances that they will perceive their learning as meaningful (Sibthorp et al., 2011). However, it also requires an early degree of commitment and confidence in an area of study; students who have a hard time finding their intellectual niche can struggle mightily with establishing an academic direction.

I was cognizant of my own struggles in that regard as I considered how to make meaningful contributions to this course, initially as a teaching assistant and then as the instructor of record. In the planning leading up to the term, I considered one of the writing tasks included in the syllabus that I thought could use some clarification. Almost every week, students were asked to compose a “memo” on an assigned reading for submission the following class meeting. As a second-year student, I remember being confused: the only memoranda with which I was familiar were the type pinned to employee bulletin boards in a break room. I recall that I simply wrote my first memo as a critical response, and that seemed to be the right direction to take. I thought that making the task label more specific (i.e., calling the assignments “critical response” papers instead of “memos”) might give entry level students more direction in how to proceed. I committed to exploring this agenda more consciously even though, at the time, I did not consider this to be an explicit example of an intersubjective negotiation.

The title of the course, “Nature of inquiry: Below the Surface of Research,” hints that the subject to be covered is directly connected to critical epistemological discussions, and this was very much the case. The brief weekly writings in Nature of Inquiry (NOI) served as a vehicle for engaging in an active intellectual dialogue with the assigned material. When discussing the weekly papers, I made a point of encouraging students to make connections to their own areas of interest or with other prominent themes usually presented in the course. I repeatedly emphasized the importance of ‘having something
to say” as opposed to simply identifying salient points from the assigned text. In retrospect, the same effort could have been interpreted as encouraging higher orders of cognitive process as defined by Bloom’s Taxonomy (Armstrong, n.d.); the lower levels of the taxonomy identify remembering and understanding while the higher levels include evaluation and creation. For some, that proved to be a challenge, while others managed to quickly adapt to the idea. My intention was to provide an opportunity for creative self-exploration as opposed to pure critique; I wanted to provide a counterpoint to some of the implicit directives that I had sensed during my own time in the program’s foundational courses. My own ongoing questions about what constitutes legitimate “doctoral work” and the tacit narrative about how to go about exploring research directions reinforced this decision. I recalled some personal frustrations with the assumptions of what makes up methodological canon and which authors are influential simply because of the number of times they have been cited in academic publications; would exploring those ideas with a larger group of authors provide these new students more insight into those issues than I had been able to summon during my first year? Since my teaching style with my own undergraduates is often antithetical to instructional orthodoxies most typical in the academy, I applied the same philosophy to the NOI course.

At the conclusion of the semester, students submitted evaluation comments, and I received a synopsis of their impressions after final grades had been calculated. I was pleased to see that most of the students found the course valuable in terms of helping them develop their own academic voice and scholarly direction. However, one comment stood out to me as being reflective of an entirely different paradigm: the student complained that my lack of experience led to a poor-quality course, especially when compared to another instructor, who, unlike me, was a long-time core faculty member, who taught the other first year course that same semester. That comment stuck with me as being indicative of a larger disconnect in how doctoral educational experiences unfold. Because most students in the doctoral program and in the course self-identified as educators, I was surprised at this student’s strong
reaction to what I felt were meaningful pedagogical approaches. My subjective experience was clearly at odds with the subjectivity expressed by that student, but I had no opportunity to develop a more complete understanding of what motivated that student’s comment.

As mentioned previously, contemplative scholar Ergas (2017) suggests that a pervasive school of thought in the broad field of education, especially for teachers, supports a curriculum that “emphasizes high stakes testing, academic achievements, accountability, and performativity, all of which suggest compliance with external standards” (p. 3). This can be contrasted, in an oversimplified way, with curriculum that centers on students knowing more about themselves, their inner lives, and their own attitudes towards knowledge. Certainly, both ends of that continuum are vital for doctoral students, and I had intentionally designed my approach to the course I taught with that in mind; I positioned my teaching and assignments in contrast to what I perceived to be some of the tendencies towards rigidity that I remembered from taking the other mandatory course for first year doctoral students. However, students with existing presuppositions about what doctoral education is supposed to be could have found my less authoritative approach quite off-putting. Their subjectivity and internal realities in terms of what education should look like were very different from my own, and the space where they met was likely for them a process of constant negotiation.

Of course, definitions of what constitutes effective teaching methods abound, but one that I find useful to consider is proposed by Parker Palmer (1998): “Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher” (p. 10). This idea leads to a number of ancillary considerations. First, teaching is less about utilizing specific techniques and more about presenting an honest presence for students to consider. That honesty can manifest as admissions of ignorance (when appropriate), revelations of personal experience, or shared emotion. Second, identity and integrity are inextricably bound to subject matter and the way it is presented. Authentic instructors would likely be unwilling and unable to present material in subjects they themselves did not
value and find relevant. Sometimes, this orientation is described as having a “passion for the subject,” but the integrity/identity connection Palmer mentions is larger than that; a teacher does not just have enthusiasm about history, for example, but for a particular way of being that interacts with historical material. Last, the integrity of the instructional process needs to have a consciously identified purpose beyond credit accumulation and course requirements. In short, authentic teaching is about having honest presence in the classroom and questioning knowledge right alongside students. It is also about admitting to one’s own shortcomings while maintaining intellectual investment and rigor toward the subject matter at hand.

As admirable as this goal can be, its fruition is affected by a pervasive fear connected to education: “that students will be tainted and propagandized. We fear the imposition of someone else’s values, especially religious values” (Hart, 2004, p. 4). In other words, the subjectivity of teachers and institutions is constantly suspect. A conscientious and authentically minded educator needs to walk the line between the temptation to manufacture like-minded individuals and the ethical obligation to facilitate a context in which those individuals can explore and create their own intellectual identities. Those guiding principles can certainly be applied to doctoral programs. Hart (2004) offers an analogy to “downloading” in an attempt to articulate how this process could work:

We form a dynamic system with information within a living universe; in order to decompress the data and open into layers of pattern and meaning, we must enter into a relationship with the symbols and signs and allow ourselves to be open to them and further opened by them. (2004, p. 5)

Without specifically using the term, Hart’s description is that of the intersubjective space between and surrounding teachers and students being used successfully in the context of learning. An educator concerned with constructing authentic learning experiences provides the fertile soil for this perception
to be cultivated. However, the same educator must also be conscious of the fact that fruits of such labor may not be what she intended in an original curriculum design or assignment revision.

Hart (1997) also identifies how the programming of our own educational expectations builds from an early age. The typical solutions to “mediocre and dispiriting education” come from the same place as the issues they attempt to address (p. 2). He argues that approaches to schooling are so deeply ingrained with inflexible paradigms that true curiosity is tacitly stifled by our often unconscious “programmed” promotion of rigid categories and external, materialistic rewards as opposed to the promotion of valuing an experience for its own merits. I would contend that in order to maintain an authentic engagement with students, educators must persistently reject this framework and embrace an approach that could be called progressive or even subversive as it encourages the development of radical questioning tendencies. Only then can underlying assumptions about authoritative versions of knowledge be re-examined. Kant (1785) identified the dangers of coming under the uncritical “tutelage” of an authority; for him, the sociocultural process of education is one that involves fighting the conditioned state of resignation:

> For any single individual to work himself out of the life under tutelage which has become almost his nature is very difficult. He has come to be fond of this state, and he is for the present really incapable of making use of his reason, for no one has ever let him try it out. (p. 86)

However, none of these explorations of how to craft meaningful pedagogy reaches the root of the issue at the heart of this chapter: why does it seem as if the role of the intersubjective space is especially important for doctoral students? One reason for this shortcoming is that the genesis of theoretical models for intersubjectivity comes from the discipline of psychology, not the field of education. Clinical settings involving a patient and a therapist are not exactly analogous to the learning environments that most doctoral students inhabit. But there are important elements of how to describe the intersubjective space that are easily transferred from one academic field to another.
The first set of terms that is germane to the exploration of intersubjectivity is the duality of “experience-near” and “experience-distant” differentiations first articulated by Heinz Kohut, the well-known 20th century German psychoanalyst (1984, pp. 187-190) who emigrated to the US just before World War II. His description of each of these constructs captures an important aspect of intersubjectivity as whole. The first construct suggest that certain experiences are so intwined with the predisposition of the observer that separating the two is impossible. On the other hand, “experience-distant” objects, like quantitative data sets, can be viewed with a greater sense of detachment and objectivity. When applied to a clinical setting, this distinction suggests the impossibility of a therapist being completely detached from the patient; the interior life of the provider of therapeutic psychological services will always have a bearing on the relationship that is formed with the recipient of those services. In terms of doctoral education, the paired ideas of experience-near and experience-distant can, I believe, be applied in two powerful ways, though there surely may be more. First, most theoretical approaches to teaching at any level acknowledge the reality of teacher interiority as a factor that influences what instructors do. Second, for doctoral students who are responsible for creating their own avenues of inquiry for their dissertations, there seems to be an inherent habit of mind that is intrinsically “experience-near.” Afterall, what motivates a student in a doctoral program to pursue a specific line of inquiry for research if it is not something that elicits and potentially answers questions meaningful (experience-near) to the student herself, as well (potentially) to the broad field of education?

Psychologists Stolorow and Atwood (1984, 2014) built from Kohut’s theoretical base to develop a nuanced approach to how clinical practice and theoretical construction can work together to form a useful model of intersubjective spaces similar to the one experienced by patients and therapists. For the purposes of this discussion, one concept they introduce applies directly to what is frequently experienced by doctoral students. They use the idea of “epistemological trauma” to capture the reality
of situations in which a subjective knowledge base is chronically invalidated and/or dismissed (2014, pp. 120-123). While they propose this idea in the context of childhood psychological development, the term is valuable in an educational context as well. For students at any level, putting forward a sincere attempt at meaning making or knowledge construction only to have that attempt devalued, ridiculed, or dismissed is discouraging at best, silencing at worst. When those interactions become chronic, students can become fundamentally disenchanted with the educational process as a whole. For doctoral students, who are often in the process of constructing new professional identities based on their scholarly work, this disenchantment can have far-reaching consequences. Both institutions and individuals (instructors, committee members) can communicate expectations in the intersubjective space that could be at odds with what doctoral students value; having the wherewithal to advocate for the validity of their subjective experiences is another quality that doctoral students need to develop in order to successfully navigate their programs.

Another interpretation of intersubjective space can be found in the work of Gunnlaugson (2009), a contemplative scholar and professor of leadership and organizational development. Gunnlaugson offers a definition that “explores experience from an intersubjective position that is represented spatially as between us, in contrast to inside us (subjective position) or outside us (objective position)” (p.27). While his definition is rooted in contemplative approaches to education, it can be applied broadly to a variety of contexts. Doctoral students have an intimate familiarity with the reality of intersubjective space even if they never acknowledge it with that vocabulary. Every time they go into a meeting with a dissertation advisor, for example, they come in with an agenda for discourse that could be a far cry from what is envisioned by the other party; social negotiation and the push/pull of changing perceptions, expectations, and attitudes make for a dynamic and unpredictable inter-relational milieu. The “intersubjective field” that forms always has at least three perspectives in play: mine, yours, and ours (Gunnlaugson, 2017, ix). If the advisor and student in conversation are unaware, unappreciative, or
unwilling to openly negotiate these aspects of meaning-making, then the subsequent discourse may become an exercise in intellectual domination and submission with predictable results for the party with less scholarly capital to expend. Gunnlaugson characterizes this outcome as one that is missing an important opportunity offered by a consideration of this intersubjective space:

When people come into a conversation with a conditioning around the dominance of the first-person or first-person knowledge or of third-person knowing, it tends to foreclose this opening, and it tends to close a receptivity that would otherwise support the emergence of something that is actually going to reveal new aspects of a subject or a quality of knowing that we either haven’t considered or we haven’t considered together. (p. 9)

An academic situation that acknowledges each piece of this tripartite mechanism for meaning making is perhaps the one that could allow for the most authentic growth on the part of doctoral students.

The potential fecundity of intersubjective space could be at the heart of doctoral experiences, but when it is not acknowledged, that opportunity can be diminished substantially. One of the most eloquent articulations of the dynamics of intersubjective space and how it could relate to doctoral work comes in the form the conceptualization offered by existential anthropologist Michael Jackson (2013) in *The Politics of Storytelling*. Jackson bases his volume on a passage from philosopher Hannah Arendt (1958) that captures a subtle and powerful sense of knowledge, reality, and existence:

Compared with the reality which comes from being seen and heard, even the greatest forces of intimate life– the passions of the heart, the thoughts of the mind, the delights of the senses– lead to an uncertain, shadowy kind of existence unless and until they are transformed, deprivatized, and deindividualized, as it were, into a shape to fit them for public appearance. The most current of such transformations occurs in storytelling.... (Arendt, p. 50)

Essentially, Arendt claims that our internal realities take on a necessary degree of concrete reality when they are shared in a way that allows for interactive acknowledgement. How this happens is variable, but
for doctoral students, it often takes the form of academic papers, proposals, and ultimately the articulation of a dissertation direction. Both Jackson and Arendt focus on public and private “storytelling,” but I would argue that it can be applied to the multiplicity of narratives which impact student life: narratives students repeat to themselves about their subjective experiences, narratives of what constitutes success in an institution or a field of study, and narratives that doctoral students create to contextualize their avenues of inquiry.

Jackson places his commentary firmly in the camp of privileging the intersubjective space over a one-sided viewpoint. In the doctoral context, only honoring a singular viewpoint might well promote either an institutional orthodoxy or a catering to the intellectual whims of doctoral students experiencing profound liminality, and while much of Jackson’s work references refugee communities or groups that have suffered social injustice, it also resonates with strong corollaries to educational experiences. Here, Jackson (2013) describes what he terms (and titles) The Politics of Storytelling:

This book is an anthropological exploration of Hannah Arendt’s view that storytelling is never simply a matter of creating either personal or social meanings, but an aspect of the “subjective-in-between” with which a multiplicity of private and public interests are always problematically in play (Arendt, 1958, pp. 182-184, as cited in Jackson, p. 31)

The “private and public interests” Jackson references are easily identifiable as the intersubjectivities mentioned at the beginning of this chapter; the influences exerted on doctoral students by peers, instructors, advisors, institutions, and expectations of specific fields of study create a massively complicated and potentially stressful dynamic for even the best prepared candidates. Coupled with the pressures of developing a potentially new professional/scholarly identity, the de-privatizing of intellectual interests in the context of an advanced program of graduate studies can place students in a vulnerable space, epistemologically and existentially. Jackson (2013) captures this tension in a more universal sense:
This oscillation between being an actor and being acted upon is felt in every human encounter, and intersubjective life involves an ongoing struggle to negotiate, reconcile, balance, or mediate these antithetical potentialities of being, such that no one person or group ever arrogates agency so completely and permanently to itself that another is reduced to the status of a mere thing, a cipher, an object, an anonymous creature of blind faith. (p. 32)

Successful doctoral students must master the intricacies of this web of influences even if they never acknowledge them beyond a tacit understanding that they exist. By asserting an epistemological stance and a direction for inquiry in the public sphere of academia, doctoral students tell their stories to a larger audience, perhaps for the first time. Jackson describes this process as “a form of restorative praxis—of sharing one’s experience with others, of finding common ground, or coming out of the closet, of restoring one’s place in the public sphere. But storytelling is also a way in which we act in the face of forces that render us inactive and silent (p. 23).

Even though other interpretations of both subjectivity and intersubjectivity exist in fields like rhetoric and composition, psychology, and philosophy, it is Jackson’s articulation that most closely matches the template of what doctoral students contend with on a regular basis. Without doubt, there can be positive results from interactions that take place in the space that exists between private epistemologies and what is articulated and introduced into the public sphere: what doctoral students do through their written work on a regular basis. However, the participants in this study tended not to focus on those items as much as they did the challenges and obstacles they encountered.

Managing the intersubjective field

During the interview process that propelled my research, I was struck repeatedly by the unfortunate experiences of doctoral students who were forced to contend with an overwhelming number of competing intersubjective influences. Anne, a third-year doctoral student in education, casually mentioned how many times she left the office of her dissertation advisor in tears; one time she
detailed an instance when the same advisor laughed at a research proposal she brought in for critique. Kelsey, another education student with the same advisor communicated a similar story, but perhaps with a better result:

I used to leave his office crying all the time. I felt so stupid, you know? But then I started to get over it bit by bit. He has his thing and I have mine. I am stuck with him until the end because of what I am doing, but I’ve figured out how he wants me to do things and I just do them that way. It’s so much easier than bonking heads all the time.

While Kelsey found a way to negotiate the intersubjective space by repressing her own views to some extent, she seemed content with that decision overall. It allowed her to “make lemonade from lemons.”

Jodi’s experience of coming face to face with a different idea of what she should be doing came as she was researching a number of doctoral programs prior to sending out applications. A recent graduate when I interviewed her, she said she could look back on her challenges with a degree of circumspection, but she still felt compelled to tell the story of what she was advised to do by a professor at a well-known liberal arts university:

I set up my interview, went in to see him and he started with, tell me about yourself. I said that I had 3 kids and never got any further. He just went off on his wife giving up her career to stay at home with his two children and how both his kids were now teachers. He rambled on nostalgically about stay-at home motherhood for a good 10 minutes, asked what my husband did, and when he heard that my husband was a professor, went on about how you can’t have two academics in a family, I’d never get a job etc. He never once asked me about my thoughts, my ideas, my professional experiences... it was really insulting and disappointing.

The overt sexism Jodi experienced was part of a larger institutional climate that prevents many students from working through a doctoral program in a way that reflects deeply held values. How many students resign themselves to experiences like this one in order to “get by” in their doctoral journey? In
many of the interviews I conducted, participants referenced the pressures they felt when bringing their private ideas about scholarship and research into the public sphere through discussions with advisors, mentors, and committees. Ethan described his first impressions of his doctoral program as being very different from what he envisioned, largely due to how interactions with faculty shaped the intersubjective field:

When I started grad school, I sort of envisioned grad school as this place where you have a lot of people who are super into learning and having great conversations and also supportive—especially advisors and professors—who are supportive of graduate students. My experience was more hostile. I have a great graduate cohort, but it felt for a lot of us it was very much grad students almost pitted against the faculty. A lot of times, faculty were doing so much of their own thing that it wasn’t a very supportive environment…. I was surprised by the unhealthy environment. I was surprised by the lack of relationships that were cultivated between faculty.

Ethan also related instances where he witnessed what he characterized as “betrayal” that had negative impacts on this cohort members:

There were a few times when I saw friends of mine who were in my cohort who were kind of betrayed by their advisors or by faculty members to the point where they left the program or endured bullshit. It made me very frustrated, and I guess I would respond by doubling down on how am I going to get out of this program? When am I going to finish? So, I would work harder and start planning alternatives… I also became really involved in extracurricular activities that made me feel more validated, and I could trust more in that program and environment.

He also made a point of detailing his disillusionment with institutional expectations for scholarly activities like publishing work prior to the completion of the doctoral program:

I felt institutionally, and from my advisor frankly, the quality is less important that the quantity: getting these publications to get publications on your CV. It felt somewhat like the private
sector. You are running a rat race—just having to check the boxes. It felt less meaningful...my view of academia is to further human knowledge, not just regurgitating what’s already been said or taking the same statistical data set and coming up post hoc with new questions...I had viewed academia as a bastion of doing what is right and what is ethical.

Disappointment with the reality of academic life, in one form or another, was a theme that ran through the interviews of sixteen participants. Often, this was described in terms of departmental toxicity or specific individuals who promoted values antithetical to what doctoral students thought appropriate. In each case, participants were put in the position of trying to “negotiate, reconcile, balance, or mediate these antithetical potentialities of being” (Jackson, 2013, p. 32). Ava, who just started a second year in a sociology doctoral program, noticed the dysfunction in her department from the start:

My department, like so many other departments, has so many issues....so many issues. We’ve had to fight for a lot of things... it wouldn’t be so bad if there wasn’t a constant tension and fights we are having to fight. I didn’t anticipate that... there are abusive people within the department who are not held accountable for how they treat graduate students...unfortunately, you’d think it’s sociology and these are the people teaching us about systems of oppression—that there would be an ethos in the department that is sensitive to issues of race and class and gender, and that is not the case.

Ava’s description of her problematic department didn’t end there; she also described expectations that focused primarily on producing noteworthy graduates:

With the exception of maybe one person in my cohort— one person doesn’t want to go into academia. She knows she wants a research job. I wouldn’t say they’re not supportive of that in our department, but I think they want us all to go do something really prestigious no matter what it is. But in terms of being able to get out finished work and be human beings? No, the
department doesn’t support that. The institution doesn’t support that. It’s pretty clear that we are there to be exploited and there to do their work.

Ginger, who works in academic support at a prestigious East Coast university, was similarly discouraged from pursuing doctoral work as a result of subjective views about gender roles and scholarly work. She was most surprised because the sexism came from a female professor in the department where she is still a doctoral student in a rhetoric and composition program:

I actually had a professor in our department tell me that I was crazy for getting pregnant before I had a tenure track position because I was ruining my career- and a female one at that- which goes to my motivation. That is not my motivation. I don’t care about tenure. I don’t care about being published. I care about people, and that is why I am doing what I am doing.

Ginger was part of a sub-group of twelve participants who felt little affection for the “typical” academic route of establishing a scholarly presence and then searching for a teaching position in a particular field. In addition, her story of her relationship with an advisor demonstrates the unpredictable nature of competing subjectivities. She came to the realization late in her doctoral program that her advisor was not as connected to her lived experience as she had previously thought. She described the dissolution of the relationship as a “break up,” with all the connotations implied by that phrasing:

The long story is that I broke up with my previous advisor last spring after I had defended my dissertation proposal. So I was already a PhD candidate, and I broke up with my previous advisor because she was emotionally and psychologically abusive. I had no idea that would be a thing. I went into it thinking that my advisor would be super supportive and would understand the demands of what it would be to be not just a PhD student but also be a mother because she is a mother. I thought that would translate and transfer, and it didn’t. That was really challenging for me. I wasn’t aware of the bureaucratic mess.
Ginger’s challenges were further complicated when she became pregnant while in her doctoral program and had to contend with a qualifying exam format (a four-hour traditional essay test in a classroom setting) that was not conducive to her physical state. When she tried to arrange for accommodations to allow for her advanced pregnancy, she witnessed an intolerance to her condition that provides an example of institutional expectations that deeply impact student experience:

I have never felt so un-human in my life. The woman that I worked with told me there was no reason I needed physical accommodations. There was no reason physically, or mentally or ability driven that would require me to take my exams from home when that was not the traditional format and that it was going to take the graduate program director to give me a waiver, and she was not willing to do that.... Thankfully, my new advisor was a fierce, fierce advocate for me. She went in guns slinging. She essentially told the graduate program director that if she didn’t give me accommodations, I would absolutely win a Title IX suit against her and the school.

Dehumanizing students and invalidating experiences in the intersubjective field were not limited to advisor relationships or institutional policies. At times, the constellation of stresses led to a holistic sense of tension that could not easily be categorized. Rosanna, a recent PhD graduate and an academic professional at a community college, conveyed her story in terms of an actual health diagnosis:

Unsettled...I was unsettled because it was a lot of presentations and public speaking that we had to do, and that is NOT my comfortable universe. And I did end up getting sick which was ultimately diagnosed as extreme anxiety. I guess it was the program. I lost twenty pounds and didn’t feel well, but there was nothing wrong with me, which was good. I ended up in counseling for generalized anxiety, but I’m sure it was coming down to the time of the dissertation...You sort of get thrown to the wolves. You’re working, working, working, and then it’s all of a sudden-okay, here. Go do this and in three weeks I want to see that, and then I am going to give it back to you seven times to rewrite, and I’m going to give you twenty more things to read.
Roseanna explained that even though she disliked public speaking, being in the program forced her to change her thinking: “I think I finally grew up. I gained confidence that my working brain is really working because other people could validate it.”

In every student narrative expressed to me during the interview process, participants told their stories of intersubjective challenges without prompting other than the open-ended interview questions detailed previously. I avoided using labels like “intersubjectivity” to let organic descriptions of experience come out in the interviews. Several participants mentioned the cathartic nature of that action as at no time previously had they been asked to articulate their experiences. I hoped that in the interviews themselves, as well as in their reading the representation of them here, they experienced what Jackson (2013) describes as “restorative praxis” (p. 23).
“It was very easy to write, and I didn’t want to write it. I found it an onerous hoop to jump through. I guess I’m a twit, like my students. I can’t find the real reason for why it’s happening; I don’t want to do it.”

--Julie, describing her first major doctoral paper

Chapter 5- The importance of writing in doctoral work

One fact that seems to unite doctoral programs across the disciplines is the ubiquity of complex writing tasks, most notably the eventual writing of a doctoral dissertation. However, in the United States, doctoral programs usually include formal course work, qualifying papers, dissertation proposals, and other varieties of scholarship long before a student tackles a dissertation. Doctoral students in education have potentially abundant opportunities to interrogate and critique their educational experiences, expectations, and visions of what kind of professionals they want to become. However, those opportunities are often not recognized or incorporated into any kind of formal curriculum. As mentioned previously, chances for engaged reflection are not part of a static, linear progression; they are a constantly moving ball of complexity that can often lead to a liminal uncertainty. I vividly recall my own first years of doctoral coursework as transformative and full of personal, existential questions regarding how I was a product of my own training and experience. What assumptions did I carry that needed to be reworked? What teaching approaches did I use and why? How could I improve the clarity with which I perceived my vocation as an educator? The development of my doctoral writing style emerged from ruminations on all of these questions, most often internally generated.

Doctoral writing researchers Humphrey and Simpson (2012) assert that these first steps to developing a voice as a scholarly writer are deeply connected to the formation of a new identity that emerges from a state of liminality. Other research also suggests that the writing process as it occurs in doctoral programs is a “complex, institutionally constrained social practice, rather than simply a set of skills and competencies” (Kamler and Thomson, as cited in Humphrey and Simpson, 2012, p. 737). Kamler and Thomson (2004) argue that successful acts of writing are correlated with higher degrees of
doctoral program completion and is vital to the formation of academic identities. They conceptualize writing practice as the gateway to becoming “legitimate knowers within particular scholarly communities” and as a means for shaping “tentative and sometimes highly anxious scholar identities” (pp. 197-198). This intimate connection indicates that the writing skills a student possesses upon entering a doctoral program, even if they are well developed for undergraduate, or Master’s degree work, might be the prerequisites needed to follow through on the liminal challenges connected to obtaining a doctorate.

In addition to these considerations, educational researcher Burford (2017) makes the case that doctoral writing is further bounded by affective restrictions that often serve to stifle expression in favor of an obligatory and largely fictional “objective” academic tone. Emerging scholars who wish to pursue careers in academia are encouraged to learn writing habits that feed the “fetish for publication metrics” (p. 79). The pressure that doctoral students feel when attempting to create written artifacts is a direct effect of how those artifacts are used. Burford suggests the affective realities of doctoral writing need to be acknowledged and normalized:

Feelings about our sense of worth and intellectual value seem to have become coupled with the abstract levels implied by these measurements. Indeed, many of us may have overheard, or ourselves felt the pride and satisfaction of “measuring up,” but I suggest that this may come at the expense of other ways of feeling about writing. (p. 79)

These challenges combine to form what is perhaps one of the greatest obstacles that doctoral students must overcome: how to transition from writing about the words of others to creating their own original work in a field or discipline. For students in the social sciences, that often means learning how to “write up” qualitative data taken from interviews, field journals, observations or other non-quantitative means. The path to acquiring that skill can, by itself, be considered a “rite of passage.” Kiley (2015) proposes that each of these thresholds marks a waypoint on the way to establishing a doctoral identity, and
through the encounter with and crossing of that boundary, students take their next steps into the
doctoral research process. Often, these important landmarks are not understood as part of formal
learning outcomes but as the expected development of intellectual and scholarly maturity: “once
grasped, it leads to a qualitatively different point of view of the subject matter and/or learning
experience of oneself as a learner” (Kiley and Wisker, 2009, p. 432). This position is echoed by Kamler
and Thomson (2004) who suggest that writing is “an integral part of the research agenda, rather than
something that occurs as the end” (p. 195). The aspects of scholarly writing, articulation of research
findings, and the internal work students do to establish a post-liminal identity can be seen as spokes of a
turning wheel, rolling through a doctoral program to a hoped-for successful conclusion/destination.

One additional factor that is easily observed in many doctoral courses is the ongoing conflict
between what “should” be written and what students actually want to write. Writing researcher and
teacher Elbow (1995) claims that identities as writers and identities as academics are frequently in an
antagonistic relationship. Students can “withdraw ownership and commitment” from/to their writing if
it is deemed too far afield from established academic norms for a particular field (p. 76). To see
themselves as such, writers need to be invested in their work and have the space to develop new ideas
and identities. While this is happening, the audience for that writing is made up of academics who carry
evaluative power. If that authority is utilized too bluntly in a doctoral setting, the very formation of a
tentative intellectual identity for a student can be squashed before it has chance to fully develop. For
Elbow (1995), this can be explained by articulating the competing drives of writer and reader:

...readers and writers have competing interests over who gets to control the text. It’s in the
interest of readers to say that the writer’s intention doesn’t matter or is unfindable [...] it’s in
the interests of writers, on the other hand, to have readers actually interested in what was on
their mind, what they intended to say, reading for intention [...] the academic is reader and
grader and always gets to decide what the student text means. (pp. 75-76)
This situation plays out frequently in doctoral programs; students are anxious to find an academic voice with which they are comfortable, while some instructors at the doctoral level are informed by the assumption that “doctoral work” needs to have a particular tone and format to be considered academically viable. Individuals pursuing advanced graduate study are then expected to consistently balance two competing ideals in their writing/scholarship: an awareness of and appreciation for the orthodox canon of their fields and a drive, often creative and passionate, to create new knowledge and fill “gaps in the literature.” The work required to skillfully maintain this balance is seldom acknowledged explicitly, yet it represents a required skill set that doctoral students often need to acquire to be successful.

One of the common tasks associated with doctoral writing is the construction of literature reviews in a candidate’s field. Depending on the specifics of a given doctoral program, this written product can mark a substantive transition that demonstrates “situating and articulating new work in dialogue with established knowledge” (Wisker, 2015, p. 64). Some researchers who focus on doctoral writing experiences argue that the construction of a competent literature review is one of the most important writing activities for a student that enables “learning, deepening of understanding, and clarification through articulation” (Wisker, 2015, p. 66). While it is debatable as to how doctoral student identity is impacted by the creation of successful literature reviews, there does seem to be substantial support that Wisker (2015) explains in some detail:

Effective early literature reviews are evidence of doctoral students reading their way into the field and the theories which will help them ask the question(s) and then interpret data. But even effective early literature reviews are not fully-fledged. Indeed, such work is produced to fit nascent exploration and understanding, setting out a version of the field. (p. 67)

One potential flaw in this rationale is that most traditional literature reviews ignore first person experience, practical knowledge from a student’s field of practice, and intersubjective realities as vital
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pieces of knowledge construction. The fiction of a monolithic “literature of the field” discounts the biases and relativity that contribute to particular readings having epistemological salience. How many doctoral students have had members of their committee or their senior advisors recommend texts that they have authored themselves, whether or not those volumes are particular innovative? What kinds of academic politics are in play when the body of work from one researcher is viewed as groundbreaking while the work of another in the same area is perceived as derivative or for some other reason, less important? Doctoral students are faced with a conundrum in terms of the often-competing obligations of exhibiting creativity, initiative, and originality, but not so much as to be too far away from the orthodoxy of their subject area.

**Doctoral writing as contemplative writing**

One way to ameliorate some of the challenges inherent to doctoral writing tasks is to frame them within context of contemplative practice, specifically contemplative writing. Recent scholarship in the field of contemplative studies specifies that contemplative writing might “encourage non-judgmental awareness, embodied or spiritual experience, honor for the interconnectedness of all beings, and more” (Miller and Kinane, 2019, p. 2). That ambitious collection of features could very well be outside of the scope of most doctoral writing tasks, but perhaps not all. A more limited criteria can be identified that seems to be a better fit for the types of writing that the majority of doctoral student are asked to produce. For these complex writing tasks to fall into the category of contemplative writing, they need to provide a vehicle for highlighting first person experience and knowledge construction. Additionally, they should allow for probing fundamental and personal questions about meaning, both of which are likely deeply connected to a student’s area of inquiry. Instead of artificially disengaging the “real life” experienced by a doctoral student from the theoretical, abstract, and often esoteric writing that students are asked to read and produce, using a frame of contemplative activity for doctoral writing may help to integrate experiences in a way that provides more meaning for authors and readers.
These factors stem from a more general foundation of what the term “contemplative” references in contemporary educational discourse. Contemplative approaches to teaching and learning that incorporate the features outlined above have been slowly embraced by higher education professionals over the last 15-20 years (Barbezat and Bush, 2014). Barbezat and Bush (2014) outline four distinct factors that help to articulate what “contemplative” describes in these educational contexts:

1. Focus and attention building, mainly through focusing meditation and exercises that support mental stability
2. Contemplation and introspection into the content of the course, in which students discover the material in themselves and thus deepen their understanding of the material
3. Compassion, connection to others, and a deepening sense of the moral and spiritual aspect of education
4. Inquiry into the nature of their minds, personal meaning, creativity, and insight (p. 11).

These same ideas can easily be applied to writing at the doctoral level as students who are in the midst of writing dissertations embark on a journey of intellectual synthesis that incorporates formal course material, their own intellectual curiosity, and a broader appreciation of the relevance of their specific field of study.

The other piece of connective tissue that different approaches to contemplative writing share is that these writings become artifacts of empirical introspection; they serve as the articulation of mental processes and reflections on those mental processes. Because they are inherently meta-cognitive, contemplative writing practices could be articulated as attempts to tap into, observe, or otherwise study the conscious mind for no other purpose than to know it better. Perhaps more than other creative processes, writing, deeply connected to oral language, can be used as a tool to articulate and understand complex internal states and communicate that understanding to others in meaningful ways.

Depending on the intention behind a writing task, the result might be unexpected. However, as McNiff
(2015) explains, that is exactly how it is supposed to unfold: “Creative discovery happens when we immerse ourselves in a process and trust it will shape and lead within a context where nothing is known in advance and expertise involves giving everything we have to the unfolding work...” (p. 16).

Given these features of contemplative writing (personal experience, meaningful questioning, and an intention to articulate), I found that a rough typology emerges that can help to differentiate various types of writing that could be considered “contemplative”:

- Writing as a daily practice
- Writing as a tool for “spiritual” revelation
- Writing as a mode of self-expression or aesthetic creation
- Writing as a means to capture first person experience
- Writing as Sitz im Leben (“situation in life”)

The terms “spiritual” and “spirituality” are inherently problematic given the often undefined associations they conjure for most people. Sometimes those associations veer into more religious territory, and sometimes they explicitly run counter to the assertions of organized religious practice. Paul Tillich, the noted existential theologian, proposed a definition that seems accessible and appropriate given the context of discussion about contemplative practices. Tillich identified the orientation to an “ultimate concern” as perhaps the most flexible and adaptive definition of that both religion and more ambiguous references to “spirituality” are trying to capture (1957, PP 1-4). While Tillich grounded his examples in the traditions with which he was most familiar, the idea of an ultimate concern lends itself well the scope of contemplative practice. What is the ultimate concern for an individual can be one of many things or a combination of several: a vocation, a relationship, a purpose, a deep belief in a core value or values. The important factor that connects it to the concerns of my research is that it is deeply connected to how students find meaning in what they are doing. For doctoral students, the ultimate concern could surely be something more profound than the desire for a
credential. The guiding star, so to speak, that they use to chart their paths through the intersubjective challenges of the liminal space can evolve over time, but the interaction between the current version and the written products produced by a student under the auspices of that orientation seem clear. The term “spiritual” is a useful shorthand for these more complex dynamics.

None of the admittedly artificial categories listed above are mutually exclusive, and the primary intention behind the first effort of picking up a pen and setting it to paper will likely be different in each situation. There can clearly be multiple intentions framed within one writing task. In addition, the context in which contemplative writing is produced can have a large impact on what kind of text results. Fluency in the sociocultural expectations inherent in academic writing is assumed of doctoral students; that expectation can function as yet another influence for how and what is produced through writing.

Famed writing instructor Natalie Goldberg (2016) provides one of the most elegant descriptions of writing as a practice or habit that may or may not frequently yield nuggets of wisdom and/or insight. The discipline she suggests in maintaining the habit of putting pen to page or hands to keyboard is analogous to that of an athlete in training:

...the practice school of writing. Like running, the more you do it, the better you get at it. Some days you don’t want to run and you resist every step of the three miles, but you do it anyway.
You practice whether you want to or not. You don’t wait around for inspiration and a deep desire to run. It’ll never happen...But if you run regularly, you train your mind to cut through the resistance. You just do it. (p. 11)

Goldberg also suggests that having expectations regarding a specific product or genre is actually the surest way to stop writing; if I have a concrete intention of writing a poem, for example, what do I do with all the creative notions that arise while I am busy focusing on getting my writing to sound “poetic”? The essence of the practice approach to contemplative writing is that it can be used as another meditative tool for probing how the mind works. If the practice of quiet, sitting meditation is focused on
repeatedly grounding attention through the breath in order to attend to the wandering mind, then writing could be viewed as a way of operationalizing the same process of returning attention, only externalized and made concrete. Our stream of consciousness can be tapped into at any given time and recorded with written language. When we write and put to paper the chatter of our minds, what we have at hand is “a more expedient way of settling into a quiet place” (Goldberg, 2015, p. 186).

Other authors in and theorists of the contemplative writing genre are more explicit and observably normative when it comes to stating their views about intention behind writing: cultivating spiritual insight is the primary goal. Experienced meditators who are also educators view the writing process as another activity with therapeutic potential that can have meaningful consequences. While that is a possibility for some applications, it is usually not the first intention of most doctoral writing tasks. Snow (2014) describes contemplative writing as a path, and “to progress along on a path, it’s often a question of getting out of our own way in order to function with compassionate awareness, and to release ourselves from the grip of destructive emotions, especially fear” (p. 7). She continues by claiming that writing and meditation complement each other so well because each is focused on “seeking what’s real, what’s authentic” (p. 7). For Snow and other contemplative authors, many with a background in Buddhism, the insights derived from meditational practice and spiritually focused writing are largely similar as well and privilege the development of compassion in a meditator or a writer:

Every human being has the same potential for compassion; the only question is whether we really take any care to create circumstances that allow it to develop, and then—very important—implement it in our daily life. This can be difficult, but we can’t just believe in compassion, we have to live it. (2014, p. 82)

Snow suggests writing exercises for teachers and their students that are designed to elicit specific emotional responses toward creating a written object to be considered for further contemplation.
Examples of these types of writing prompts suggest the qualities of contemplative writing that were previously described:

Imagine a bus coming towards you. The bus stops and different people begin to get off. These are personifications of elements from your recent meditation. Each of them wears a distinctive hat. Describe their hats. Give them names and physical descriptions. Pay special attention to their eyes. (p. 31)

Think back to a time when you were angry. What type is your anger? Hot? Cold? Hard and defensive? Write about its effects on you. On another person. (p. 66)

Make a list of things that you fear you will lose. Contemplate how the loss might impact your life. Appreciate the fact that they are still with you. (p. 73)

Sit in a chair facing an empty one. Visualize a specific fear in the chair opposite. Give it a face, a name. Ask this fear what it wants, what it needs. Change places and, as the visualized fear, answer these questions. (p. 70)

All of these suggestions for writing are intended to focus on the first-person experience, engage in a meaningful topic, and produce writing that is composed for the audience of the self. They are inherently meta-cognitive in their orientation but move beyond the restrictions of that label to encompass a deeper and broader scope of concerns. As mentioned previously, contemplative writing practices often attempt to engage connections with “ultimate concerns” and/or the fundamental “why” questions that inevitably accompany those connections. The awareness of mental process and self-regulation that are usually associated with meta-cognitive practices are the thin edge of a wedge that can have a more profound impact on the experience of doctoral students. In addition, given the potential rawness of emotional responses that might arise from writing prompts like these, it can be easily asserted that the meta-cognitive aspects of contemplative writing necessitate a comparatively high level of emotional honesty, self-awareness, and courage to explore aspects of internal life that are often left undisturbed.
This theme--the courage that is needed to confront topics that could lead to profound personal insight and/or upheaval--is also evident in traditions that are less known for meditative components.

Dorff (1998) convincingly argues for writing from wherever a writer is, internally or externally, in order for the writer to break through the fear that is often associated with putting words to paper:

The mere suggestion of writing frightens some of us. We know we are not writers. Some of our early teachers may have made that very clear to us. Consequently, before we start writing, we think we have to take a course in writing, or read an armful of books on writing, or read what the best writers have written...we may even do all this preparatory work on the assumption that, when we finally do get around to writing, our first effort will be admired by everyone as a ‘masterpiece’. (p. 23)

This description of the procrastination and unrealistic expectation that can accompany any kind of writing is likely familiar to many. However, for contemplative writers, the expectations of profound insight and wisdom flowing unabated is likely reinforced by the knowledge that the first-person experience of an internal life is both real and meaningful, even if it is not often acknowledged overtly in modern western culture, much less in academia. The motivation to continue to try to uncover and articulate our own versions of internal wisdom could be analogous to a dog playing with a ball that has treats inside- we know there is something really good in there but trying to get it out is both frustrating and tantalizing. Contemplative writing “can become a path for each of us to an ‘empiricism of the soul’ that eventually makes the reality of our inner life undeniable...we become more personally caught up in the experiment of our lives...” (Dorff, 1998, p. 64-65). Who would be more qualified to explore the mysteries of our internal lives if not ourselves? Even so, how frequently does modern culture encourage the repression or active disregard for this exploration?

Another category of contemplative writing engages these questions actively by using the contemplative process to capture real-time experience as opposed to memories, reflections, or
profound answers to questions offered up for consideration. The practice of contemplative observation (Brown, 1998) provides a template for capturing a real-time experience through focused attention on the embodied senses. The difference between unfiltered sensory experience and the analysis and meaning-making that comes quickly afterwards is deliberately uncoupled through writing. For example, a contemplative observer might write “a child in the corner is frowning” but not “the child in the corner is sad.” The process also encourages regular noticing of felt bodily sensations: tightness in the chest, rigidity in the mouth, sensations in the shoulders, or overall emotional states that arise from what is being observed. Again, the entire point of contemplative observation writing is to decouple the reality and the reaction. Brown (1998) concludes that “in observation, we practice noticing and letting go of the temptations to stabilize our experience and to protect against the newness of the observed moment. Paying attention to our uniqueness, we come to appreciate our particular knowledge...” (p. 8).

The type of writing that comes from this exercise, often used in educational contexts that deliberately include contemplative strategies, is a written record of relatively unvarnished sense-consciousness. Much like the other contemplative writing approaches already described, contemplative observation writing reinforces a particular set of mental habits that promotes less reactivity and more mental space between a stimulus and a response. The same steps can be observed in the qualitative research process, whether it is intentionally contemplative or not. Raw data is gathered as it occurs, possibly transcribed, and only then analyzed for patterns of meaning.

While this skill is easily practiced, the unfortunate reality is that writing, as a second level symbol system that is a product of human language, invariably distances a writer from that which he or she experiences. The limitations imposed by the conventions of grammar and appropriate word choice necessarily provide a filter for what human senses gather and then record. Borrowing from criticism in theology, the idea of Sitz im Leben (“situation in life”) as both a sociological and rhetorical template can
help to frame the relationship between what is experienced and how writing captures experience (Table 3):

**Table 3- matrix of crossovers from “situation in life” idea**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sitz im Leben 1</th>
<th>In theology</th>
<th>In experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The events taking place</td>
<td>The event taking place or what is observed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sitz im Leben 2</th>
<th>Oral traditions describing those events</th>
<th>Conscious decisions made on how to construe that event or observation</th>
</tr>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sitz im Leben 3</th>
<th>Written work that captures a “snapshot” of all the oral traditions</th>
<th>Written artifact that captures the chosen construal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Even for self-conscious and self-reflective writers, whatever is produced in a contemplative mode of writing is self-limiting; language forces human expression into an imperfect mold and writing visually represents what comes out of the mold after it has solidified. The struggle to capture experience adequately with the written word gives rise to a host of expressive devices that manifest in literature: metaphor, analogy, simile, and others.

Given the underlying premise of contemplative writing in general and the idea that the self is the primary audience, it is unsurprising that there is general agreement on the constructive potential of the activity. What Dorff (1998) describes as “meditative writing” is labelled “contemplative writing” by Wenger (2015) and just “writing as meditation” by Snow (2014). However, the shared idea of the empirical validation of the importance of first-person experience is a tacit theme. Dorff provides an articulation of this process:

When we find ourselves being caught up in this soul-stirring movement of meditative writing, we begin to recognize that writing is beginning to do the same thing that any of our other meditative practices may be doing. It is beginning to knit together the many dimensions of our lives with soulful integrity by leading us inward, helping us stay within ourselves for a while, and
leading us outward again. We then know, not by hearsay but by our personal experience, that writing can be a soul-stirring practice. (p. 29)

The larger context that could also be addressed by the personal experience articulated through contemplative writing is the rich inner landscape of the mind itself—not just emotions or profound insights about life—but the whole nature of the conscious experience that we live daily. Gendlin and Johnson (2004) identify this as a large component of what they label “First Person Science” that attempts to blend the usual, third person quantitative view of scientific inquiry with an empirically verifiable first-person perspective. Most qualitative research paradigms value this type of blending, but it is not universally considered legitimate in academia across disciplines. However, insights into the complexities of the human experience seem to be more likely when first person observations become an important pillar of developed inquiry.

Other authors with diverse backgrounds provide remarkably similar accounts of how writing is a tool for exercising self-reflective muscles as well as a tool for inspiring authentic academic work. Educational researcher Luttrell (2010) suggests that reflexivity in writing is a key component in a social scientist’s toolbox. She encourages researchers: “Write for yourself. In these writings, you are in conversations with yourself about your evolving ideas, associations, and feelings. Don’t be afraid to connect your personal experience (including “fringe-thoughts,” “snatches of conversation overheard on the street,” and “dreams”) to your writing...” (p. 469). In addition to this focus on the audience of self, Luttrell engages the second component of contemplative writing by advocating for “memo” writing that highlights aspects of a researcher’s identity in order to develop “the personal relevance of the research you are planning and why you care about it” (p. 470). The combination of self-reflection, profundity of topics, and the audience of self could easily place the activities Luttrell endorses in the category of contemplative writing. However, what is most notable about her assertions is that they come as a vital part of “mainstream” social science research development; they are the foundations of empirical work.
Mills (1959/2010) echoes many of the same sentiments when he describes a melding of experience and reflection that includes an outline of a critical first-person form of inquiry. His recommendations to beginning researchers are clear and concise:

> What this means is that you must learn to use your life experience in your intellectual work; to continually examine and interpret it. In this sense, craftsmanship is the center of yourself and you are personally involved in every intellectual product upon which you may work...you have to control this rather elaborate interplay, to what you experience and sort it out...” (p. 139)

Mills further suggests that the most reasonable way to go about doing that is to create files for various intellectual directions and to make writing a weekly endeavor. Through writing, Mills argues, researchers can make self-reflection a regular part of inquiry that can engage their internal lives. That habit in writing can serve as a vital and practical bridge between the academic life of a doctoral student and their “real” life outside of intellectual pursuits.

Some recent formulations of contemplative writing have attempted to codify the practice for academic purposes like research writing (Zamin, 2019). However, no one size fits all formula exists for how contemplative writing should be approached or how it should be theorized as a specific method of inquiry. The dynamic interplay amongst doctoral students’ lived experiences, the intellectual relationships they must negotiate in their programs, the lines of inquiry they find most meaningful, and their own sense of what is most important in their educational endeavor has a major influence on how doctoral writers approach the artifacts of their work. By intentionally grounding writing tasks within a contemplative framework, students can perhaps manage those complexities from a more grounded place.

**Real writers, real challenges**

One data point that emerged from the interview process was the unanimous acknowledgement of how important writing skill is to doctoral work. Very few participants indicated any degree of
confidence with their academic writing, and almost all articulated the challenges they faced at different stages of their respective programs.

Vanya, a recent graduate from a state university in the Northeast, was very aware of how her writing evolved during her doctoral experience, moving from a chore to a better expression of her viewpoint:

My writing at the beginning felt somewhat forced. You know you’re writing papers for college classes and, to be honest with you, I went to such a bad school. I don’t know how I got into the doctoral program. When I got in, I couldn’t write...I had a professor for American philosophy and he told me “your writing- it sucks- it’s terrible.” So, I went to his office every single day at 4 o’clock, and he would literally teach me how to write. And in the beginning, it felt like “okay, I’m writing this paper for a class theme or the semester final paper. Crank it out” But in the end, you know, by the end I should say it was more authentic, more from the heart. It was more focused, you know?

Each interviewee also recognized the importance of developing different types of writing skills that balance the competing intellectual demands that are placed on doctoral students. One aspect that was highlighted in several instances was the ability to “code-switch” when producing written products, depending on the audience and purpose. The importance of having the ability to move between a more colloquial writing voice and one with a more academic tone was mentioned by several participants.

Kristoff, a doctoral student who is on a leave of absence at his university, articulated what he felt to be a troublesome paradox for doctoral writers.

One of the challenges for me was that focused academic language and learning to write in a certain way where I’d get feedback from papers and stuff like that. It was hard because I know the feedback they were giving me was the correct feedback in terms of if I wanted to get
published in the journal, but I felt I had to change my writing... That’s always been a concern of mine- to make sure it’s not just important work but that someone actually wants to read it.

Concerns about the long-term impact of dissertation topics was also a common theme amongst participants. A complicated paradox emerged for many doctoral students who reported how they wrestled with mixed messages about relevance and purpose: how can a written text be dense and academic in feel while at the same time retaining accessibility and relevance for a larger audience?

Michael’s experience in a public health program at a large research university illustrated this point well:

The polarization of “You need to graduate and it’s just a dissertation, you just need to get it done” versus “this is the rest of your career, you need to find out exactly where you want to be.” It depends on who you talk about it with, and even then, the people you talk about it with, it depends on what kind of conversation you’re having- they’re stressing two different things. To find an in between...people try to wear both hats.

Claire, who works with special education students in her professional life, was exceptionally clear in articulating her viewpoint on the value of her writing:

I am a strong proponent of things being accessible in academic writing. I also feel- I’m not trying to bash anybody who might write a more academic type paper- I remember someone saying, “Sometimes, dissertations are just sitting on shelves and nobody is really accessing them.” I want to be able to feel that my work and anything I do after the PhD is accessible to people in the field of education and behavioral analysis. I want to feel that is has a purpose outside of philosophical thinking along.

In addition to comments about relevance and meaning, almost all the participants acknowledged their own levels of discomfort with specific aspects of the writing process. However, they appreciated the necessity of progressing through the discomfort imposed by doctoral level writing tasks. Despite the difficulties, many participants made strong connections between the evolution of their writing skills and
their intellectual development. Taye was cognizant of his skill deficiencies entering his doctoral program and reported major changes in attitude as he progressed through his program:

I wasn’t a strong writer at first. I was not able to present at all, so I learned presentation...I want to be an author now, so I’m trying to be an authority on the dynamic of psychology in education. I want to start putting myself out there. I’ve been challenged to put my work out there. That what the challenge is- I did all this cool work, I understand how to analyze, so now, how can I use it in service?

Julie, a middle school English teacher, communicated a different set of challenges. While the writing itself was less problematic for her, finding the motivation to do it and the meaning behind it became the largest obstacles:

Find the time to write. That’s the biggest challenge. I spend all day teaching other people to write, so by the time I get home, I’m like “no thank you.” The reading doesn’t both me as much because I read quickly enough and it’s just not that onerous to me.... But the writing- I write almost everything at the last minute. I still do well, and I suppose my saving grace is being and English teach. I have a lot of training.

The internal dialogues that the participants reported were nearly identical to the ones that I have experienced. The struggle with relevance and meaning in the midst of the doctoral grind is a recurring and profound complication that seems an integral part of negotiating the development of student and scholar identities through a progression of writing milestones.

Coffman et al (2016) suggest that for doctoral students, becoming a scholar is the equivalent of becoming an expert in a particular field, and the conference of the actual PhD and the issuance of the accompanying diploma could be viewed as the artifacts legitimizing the transition. However, having the internal identification with those credentials is not always automatic. As doctoral candidates themselves, Coffman et al (2016) offer their own view of this dilemma:
Yet a scholarly identity was, in our minds, beyond our grasp. It must be the result of more experience, more research, more conference presentations- whatever we might possess; in our minds a scholar or expert was someone who was a step beyond our own accomplishments [...] part of our process involved demystifying scholarly practice and moving closer to owning the identity of scholar or expert. (p. 31)

Clearly, a distinction can be drawn between external measures of expertise and scholarly success and internal validation of the same. Does one become a scholarly expert based on the number of publications on a CV? Is a scholar a person who can teach proficiently in a given area of expertise? How does the role of intellectual curiosity impact the issue? Many academics label themselves as scholars, educators, researchers, or professors. I suspect those tags represent an effort to calm insecurities about their own positionality in relation to a field of study. For a writer who is composing work for an academic audience, those labels can be even more important. Who am I to attempt a contribution to a scholarly discourse if I do not have the necessary credentials to be taken seriously by peer reviewers? How much of the judgment of intellectual merit is placed on how well a writer follows disciplinary conventions as opposed to how much the writer proposes unique ideas to a discourse? I have wrestled with these ideas for years, and the questions have become more prominent and disquieting as I have been engaged in more active scholarship work.
At the same time, where I started with all this confidence, I’ve had a lot of confidence-shaking events I’ve been going through. Those have shaken my confidence but have also made me really focused on how important I think what I’m doing actually is.

-Luke, fourth year doctoral student in education

One thing I want to say is that I’m honestly confused. I remain confused—befuddled might be a better word—as to why it’s so much work. I find that really confusing, and I’m so in the middle of it that I can’t wrap my mind around why it is so much work.

-Hannah, third year doctoral student in communications

Chapter 6- Discussion and speculations

For the most part, doctoral students are academically proficient and resourceful in terms of finding strategies to complete the milestones required of a terminal graduate degree. However, even with successful records of achievement and strong initial motivations to pursue a PhD, students in doctoral programs drop out at alarming rates across all academic disciplines. For the ones who persist, the experience of moving through a doctoral program and navigating its aftermath pose significant interpersonal and intrapersonal challenges. The previous chapters have outlined key theoretical aspects of liminality and intersubjectivity as they relate to doctoral students and the role of writing in the process of discovering an academic identity and voice. While these components are undeniably linked to what PhD students experience, they are also predicated on a few basic assumptions about education in general and specifically the purpose of graduate education.

One of those assumptions is the underlying premise that education is a defined and socially accepted route for self-improvement. Students begin their education at any level through accepting the idea that whoever they are now is not enough, and they will be more capable and complete at some point in the future when their educational cycle is complete. That could mean learning discrete basic skills like subtraction and multiplication, building a more expressive vocabulary, developing abstract thinking skills, or being able to synthesize and critique multiple arguments on a particular topic. Ergas (2019) identifies this as the “insufficiency of now” that propels individuals through the machinations of
the educational process. Students accept the hardships associated with moving along an educational trajectory by orienting towards a future state that they believe will be more complete. Put succinctly, they enter a liminal condition that persists until their education goal or stage is concluded, often with the conferral of a recognized degree. The adult learners who populate doctoral programs are conceptually entangled by the impact of how well they can maintain a state of incompleteness and the time and tasks that are required to resolve their liminal experiences.

Another assumption that serves as a foundation to educational pursuits is that a positive trajectory of transformation and development is occurring during an educational program or course sequence. While improvement in an educational trajectory is often the tacitly expressed goal, what counts as “improvement” is highly subjective. In a PhD program, markers of improvement could range widely from increased visibility within an academic community to the formation of a more concrete research direction. However, what the student values most may or may not align with those external makers. A more useful idea to pair with an educational trajectory could be the label of transformation. This term could be viewed in many ways, but the foundational idea is that a student transformed at the end of an educational trajectory is profoundly changed from the individual who began the process. This presumption is so deeply embedded in the phenomenon of education that it needs to be specifically articulated and recapitulated. Educational achievement is often measured in terms of years of formal education completed as opposed to being assessed in terms of the value that has been added during and as a result of those years. An undergraduate who spent four years earning a baccalaureate degree is viewed as more educated than someone with a high school diploma. Those with terminal degrees are perceived as attaining a high level of educational development when compared to those without graduate degrees. However, the most deeply transformational pieces of a doctoral experience may have less to do with the external validations that come with degree conferral and publicly praised academic work and more to do with the more hidden inner work of identity transformation. Educational
researchers McAlpine, Amundsen, and Turner (2014) identify the transformative nature of doctoral work as an “identity-trajectory” that often includes “challenges in managing competing intentions between the personal and the academic” (p. 961). How the trajectory unfolds for different individuals depends on the student’s perceptions of time, her level of agency, her perception and vision of the meaning of academic work, and her response to the other intellectual and institutional demands every doctoral student faces (McAlpine, Amundson, and Turner, 2014). Inouye and McAlpine (2019) build on the idea of identity development as it applies specifically to doctoral writing. After reviewing twenty years of published literature on academic identity and doctoral student writing, they found that very few of the texts they analyzed provided explicit definitions of what “identity” means even though the process of developing one was cited frequently as a key outcome of doctoral work. They further contend that the major theoretical apparatus used to connect doctoral writing with identity development is vaguely socio-cultural. However, that viewpoint has limitations:

.. studies based on sociocultural approaches to identity development lead to an incomplete representation of the relationship between writing, feedback, and identity. This approach portrays identity as the result of enculturation and apprenticeship-style learning, neither taking into account the micro-level processes students engage in as they write and assess and draw upon feedback, nor the ways in which prior experience, personal contexts, and individual goals affect how doctoral students may construct their own academic identities in relationship to feedback and iterative cycles of writing. (p. 17)

The complexities of intersubjective negotiation suggest that all the factors listed above—sociocultural, interpersonal, and intrapersonal—impact the manner in which writing, the most commonly assessed product of doctoral work, reflects a doctoral student’s experience.

My own positionality with regards to those same sociocultural, interpersonal, and intrapersonal factors is an aspect I came to consider more and more throughout the process of collating interview
data and interpreting what participants indicated as the most salient experiences of their doctoral careers. As a straight white male, I am part of the demographic that is supposed to be at the top of the sociocultural hierarchy. Even so, I have felt the push and pull of all the factors that my study participants outlined in their interview responses, some more and some less. Doctoral students from underrepresented groups deal with added layers of identity politics, explicit or implicit institutional oppression, and within those “forces” developing epistemological and ontological stances. These layers no doubt are far more complicated than what I have experienced. While the scope of my present research does not include the following question, I may well wish to ask it of my future research: If the challenges feel visceral for me, how must they feel for others with more demographic challenges?

Liminal encounters

As mentioned in an earlier section, the ambiguity that doctoral students experience seems to be a real phenomenon that can have a detrimental impact on how students perceive themselves and the validity of their work. If the model of an educational trajectory can be expanded somewhat, the in-between state exists for doctoral students most obviously in a longitudinal sense. It begins when they enter a PhD program and ends when the program requirements have been completed. However, along that relatively linear path exist a number of micro-liminalities that can have transformative consequences. Adult education scholar Mezirow (1997) provides a useful definition of transformative learning that seems appropriate for application to doctoral students. Mezirow defines transformation as “effecting change in a frame of reference” that takes into consideration the lived experiences of adults: “Adults have acquired a coherent body of experience- associations, concepts, values, feelings, conditioned responses- frames of reference that define their life world. Frames of reference are the structures of assumptions through which we understand our experiences. They selectively shape and delimit expectations, perceptions, cognition, and feeling” (p. 5). This perspective seems vital in guiding
us to a more complete understanding of how doctoral students move through each threshold they encounter, be it a programmatic requirement or a meaningful instance of unexpected insight.

Many participants in this study articulated their liminal experiences that they marked as being connected to official and unofficial transitions. Hannah, a third-year student in a doctoral program in the Northwest, noticed a key phrase that marked her threshold crossing:

In my family- both my parents graduated with an associate degree in college, but no bachelor’s and no graduate school stuff going on. So, I don’t think socioeconomically I was in the greatest bucket. As I said, I came to academia negatively, and I know that was cultural. But having these other academics look to me and include me and validate the work I was doing? How amazing- it was a very big shift in my understanding of who I was based on how others saw me. I kind of effortlessly just said, “as an academic,” and that phrase would have been much harder even a year ago.

The linguistic creep into her communications of phrases like that indicated to Hannah that she was crossing a threshold into a new professional identity.

Rita’s liminal transition signal was more dramatic; she recounted the exact moment when she teetered on the edge of continuing with her doctoral work or quitting her program. Again, the marker led her to a new appreciation for her capacities:

I felt it most during the qualifying paper process. I think the classes- I could take the classes until I’m old and gray- you learn some things but sitting down and distilling your work and really focusing. To me, it was an arduous process because of all the hoop jumping. So last year in December, I remember having a conversation with my husband and telling him I was going to quit. I was just done. I didn’t know why I was there anymore. He talked me out of it. That was the turning point for me because I felt like I was ready to give up. I didn’t have the energy,
patience of mental strength anymore to continue writing. I turned it around and once I finished those three papers, it was a palpable shift for me. I felt like I could do anything.

Multiple participants described similar “make or break” points in their doctoral careers. The choice they made to continue in their respective programs moved them from the uncertainties about possible failure squarely into the camp of potential success. At times, the markers of boundary crossing were as mundane as single assignments in one course. Jodi articulated her experience in exactly that manner when relating the challenges she experienced in her program:

I had one independent study paper that I hadn’t finished. That was about the time my family life got very hectic, and it took me... was it a year? I lost a full year in that... I had this incomplete that was keeping me from moving on to the next phase. Pretty much, that was my biggest stumbling block and my biggest challenge. Once I got over that, then I could move on... that was the point - I’m not going to finish, or I am going to finish. That was the crux of the whole program.

However, the most profound evidence of liminal transition came when participants related what they felt were the most important aspects of their doctoral journey after they completed their degrees. Taye, a recent psychology graduate, found that his perspective changed dramatically after he completed his program:

I would have to say a shift in perception. The biggest takeaway had to be a shift in perception. And probably now I’m being granted authority to a certain extent, right? Being seen by your peers as being able to contribute to academics. What changed for me- because I always came in with the same goal- I came in with the goal of trying to better understand my situation as a black man. I came into it wondering, when I interacted with people- they saw me as the exception, not the norm, right? So, for a while I thought there was something special about me, but the shift really came in my understanding I really wasn’t special... it’s more than being trained, it’s being a little more mindful or more things in the environment- what to look out for.
None of the participants who were recent graduates self-identified as being fully formed academic researchers in any particular way unless their professional experiences had already landed them in the category. In theory, their transition from student to scholar was completed in terms of program completion, but for some, terminal credentials seemed to be like new shoes that feel big and ungainly until broken in.

**Intersubjective negotiations**

While the ideal educational trajectory is a linear one, that is seldom the reality that doctoral students experience. The reality is that any developmental trajectory in a doctoral program is placed squarely within an intersubjective field. Both micro-liminal and macro-liminal stages bracket the intersubjective experience with written artifacts serving as the concretized articulations of various points on the same trajectory (Figure 1). The worth of written artifacts is judged within the confines of an intersubjective field made up of advisors, mentors, institutions, peers, and editorial boards. The aims of earning a terminal degree completion are the same only on the surface; the real motivations for each individual doctoral student are innately complex, dynamic, and subject to a host of influences from the interpersonal and intrapersonal spheres.

![Intersubjective field](image)

*Figure 1 - relationship between liminality and writing within the intersubjective field*
This model, while idealized, captures some of the key features of doctoral student experience.

Educational trajectories, as mentioned above, are seldom completely linear, so the representation above displays a theoretical version of the doctoral journey from beginning a program to reaching the goal of a doctoral degree. The transitions that happen along the way can be expected (e.g., program mandates, dissertation milestones) or completely unanticipated (e.g., job loss, health issues, financial strains), so the actual progression can easily be inconsistent, convoluted, or a combination of backward and forward movement (Kralik, Visentin, and van Loon, 2006). However, the ultimate goal, if a student persists, remains the conferral of a terminal degree. As established in previous chapters, doctoral students are invariably stuck in a liminal state throughout the years they are enrolled in a program. Their identities are maintained in a state of flux as they complete the academic rituals needed to be considered for a PhD (Deegan and Hill, 1991). They are “challenged by the ‘not quite student, not quite faculty’ role to which they have subjected themselves” (Burke et al, 2017). However, the list of other factors that can be folded into the idea of intersubjective negotiation is long and complex. The intrinsically liminal experience of moving through an academic trajectory invariably leads to questions about personal and professional identify as well. If the challenges and obstacles, both real and perceived, prove to be more powerful than experiences that “make them feel like academics,” then doctoral students are more likely to “disengage” from their work (Emmioglu, McAlpine, and Amundsen, 2017, p. 74). We lack robust evidence that this consequence is readily acknowledged in most doctoral programs. Ava articulated this reality when describing the dynamics of her department:

There is some horrible, engrained racism and gender discrimination that happened within the way people are graded, the way people are treated in their TA or RA roles or their advising situations. The faculty seems generally out of touch with what our lives are actually like in terms of expectations, in service to the department, time spent, or how much we are paid. They are really unwilling to work with us to provide additional support in any way- it’s just not a friendly
place. I think we all-the graduate students- have realized that probably a lot of these problems exist in a lot of places, but we ended up at a particularly contentious place. There’s a lot of in-fighting between the faculty. It’s toxic. I love the graduate students, but yeah, there’s a lot of....stuff.

The potential for discrimination of various kinds is high when the effects of intersubjectivity are so powerful and pervasive for students in doctoral programs. How students choose to deal with what they encountered varied. Darnell, who recently completed his degree, explained his acceptance of institutional racism and his strategy for moving past it. He spent years as an academic staff member on several campuses prior to entering a doctoral program:

I also understood that—particularly as a black man who will need to navigate the higher education system like a professional—I knew that I would have to be equipped with the most skills and degrees possible to maximize my opportunities... I knew for sure that the more degrees I earned, the less likely I would be pushed out of job searches. You know, when you get to the end of the day, we know racism plays a role in that, right?

Darnell’s experience, unfortunately, was not unique to his circumstances. All the students of color who participated in this research study related similar narratives with varying degrees of resignation or acceptance. One of the most provocative descriptions came from Taye who relayed his impressions on starting his doctoral journey:

Prior to getting into the program, I taught special ed at a high school, so my experience as a teacher really put me towards graduate studies. Then I read this amazing book—I’m sure you are familiar with it—Paolo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed—and that blew my mind. It drew me to understand education better and of course to try to make an impact on the other side....so when I got into the program I had these high expectations, and then I came into it--I got into the program in 2015—I came into it with a contemporary mindset to a certain extent, and once I got
to the ivory tower, I was like “Oh man, this is 1915”...it was definitely a culture shock because I was not used to academic at his level. I guess to add a little nuance to it all--put it into context--I was the only black student in my program.

Taye found he could successfully manage the racism he perceived in his program only by looking for support from higher education professionals at other institutions and associations connected to his field of study. However, as shown in the examples above, the salience of a given identity marker for an individual cannot be predicted with any reliability; making assumptions about the importance of a single aspect of identity and its relative prominence in the life of a person represents another form of implicit bias that is often overlooked in discussions of educational inequity.

Another example of the intersubjective influence is observable in the differences between the stereotypical career track associated with doctoral work compared to what students are intent on pursuing for work. A sizable sub-group of participants expressed disdain for the idea that there is only a strictly academic career path that doctoral program graduates are suited for. Nine individuals articulated desires to move into more direct service avenues with their credentials even if their institutions did not encourage that path. Perhaps unsurprisingly, most of the participants who indicated a desire to work outside of academia are or were committed to doctoral programs in healthcare or health-related fields. Alexus, who is in her second year in a nursing program at a large university, expressed this idea when describing her research in healthcare disparity:

I’ve learned from my research there’s a lack of education. I have been back and forth about whether I want to stay in academic full-time because a big part of me wants to be in the community. I can do community-based research, but I also have a bit of an entrepreneurship bug in me. I’ve noticed when I tell people that, they’re like, “oh no, you need to be in a tenure track researcher,” and I’m going to leverage my skills differently. I feel like I’m constantly playing
the filed...in my mind, there’s something else going on that I’m actually bringing in...and I’m very
selective in who I tell both ideas to.

Developing an awareness of the academic politics involved in having a discussion of one’s real intentions
versus acquiescing, at least in one’s words, to the implicit expectations of a program or institution is one
of the skills that doctoral students need to cultivate. The possible consequences of missteps in that area
can be compounded if advisors and/or committee members have inflexible ideas about the ultimate
purpose of doctoral education.

Perhaps the most rigid construct maintained by almost every doctoral program is the necessity
of a dissertation as the capstone project of a student’s work. Dissertation writing serves as the
benchmark for intellectual competency and academic credentialing even though many doctoral
programs do not actively reflect on what its completion demonstrates. The progression of writing tasks
leading up to the eventual production of a dissertation is assumed to be in line with the expectations of
future academic work even if this is not explicitly expressed within a program or institution. If the
production of a “proto-book” is vitally important to a doctoral degree, then what exactly is the degree
representing (Cassuto, 2021)?

While most participants focused on the challenges of managing intersubjective priorities, some
of the recent graduates offered a more positive spin on the benefits of learning those skills in an
academic environment. Those responses often identified a singular professor, course, or research
opportunity that became a formative touchstone for the doctoral experience. Rita, a recent graduate in
education, summarized this succinctly:

Generally, I had a good experience...I was fortunate enough to have a decent advisor who I now
consider a friend I can keep in touch with for the rest of my life. I’ve met some great people--I
feel like years from now if we ever reached out to each other, we would have fond memories of
our time. It’s kind of what it’s about...because of this experience as a doctoral student and what
I’ve learned over the years in the program, I feel like I’m ready for bigger things--whatever that may mean.

Rita conveyed the usual complaints about aspects of the process of obtaining her doctorate but reported also that she “wouldn’t change anything major” about her experience.

Michael, a doctoral student in a public health program, reported that while he has not yet graduated, his interests have shifted markedly based on his experiences. The obstacles he has encountered and his successful surmounting of them has changed the way he views what constitutes “health” in a more holistic way:

I’ve become more and more interested in this idea of resilience and self-care, goal setting, personal empathy- to where it won’t really matter what the letters are behind the name, even if it’s not there…I think this idea of personal growth- of becoming a more well-rounded person- is actually more important to me. In education, you’ll never fully understand everything but will always continue to learn.

Ginger recognized that the challenges she encountered in her doctoral journey served as a crucible for forging her professional path as she continues in higher education:

I also think about the experiences I have had and the challenges that I’ve had, and they are going to be one of the things I am going to take away from this, especially I think about being in higher ed eventually. There’s this mantra “that’s the way it is.” I don’t want that anymore I’m tired of hearing it. “this is the way it is. This is what grad school is like.” No. That is not how it should be. It should not be indoctrinating people to do the same thing that their professors went through. That is the one thing I get angry about, and I am still angry about it.

Ginger’s example could illustrate an important truth about intersubjectivity: the action of pushing back against a perceived orthodoxy can give rise to a deeper motivation to work to change that orthodoxy with future research and teaching efforts. For doctoral students in under-represented groups, this
possibility has even higher stakes. According to one recent report from the American Council on Education, students of color now comprise roughly a third of graduate students while faculty membership is three quarters white (2020, p. 13). Without passionate doctoral students actively challenging the status quo with regards to their educational experience, what kind of evolution will take place in graduate education? As PhD graduates move into situations where they can influence others through teaching and publication, the trickle-down impact of their resistance to or acceptance of the intersubjective negotiations they experienced as doctoral students becomes apparent.

**Doctoral work as contemplative opportunity**

While these very real challenges are likely to surface in the intersubjective field, there are also ripe conditions for development, transformation, and intellectual innovation if the scaffolding is in place within a specific doctoral program. Fortunately, there is a broad collection of practices and attitudes that provide a basis for formulating a meaningful strategy for constructing this foundation. Most of these techniques originally come from religious practices, but many have been significantly secularized in the 20th century to produce versions, like mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), that are applicable in a variety of academic and non-academic settings (Moore and Malinowski, 2009). The irony here is that the original models of higher education that evolved into the institutions we know today had their start in seminaries and monastic contexts in the 12th century (Palmer and Zajonc, 2010). The focus was on an education that would allow students “to make the spiritual journey to God” (Palmer and Zajonc, 2010, p. 7). In those early iterations, the liberal arts curriculum was presented in the two categories of the Trivium, covering subjects like grammar, logic, and rhetoric, and the Quadivium, which dealt with arithmetic, astronomy, geometry, and harmonics (Taylor as cited in Mahani, 2012, p. 215). The chosen subjects had self-evident integrative qualities with one collection allowing for complex articulation of insights in the other.
The modern university system that developed in Western countries, post-Enlightenment, rejected much of that naturally interdisciplinary work in favor of deep specialization (Mahani, 2012). The result over several hundred years is generally a less personalized outlook on knowledge; it needs to be discovered and accumulated by in all fields with a sense of detached objectivity. Wallace (2000) identifies this practice as the “depersonalizing” of inquiry (p. 7). This approach has been embraced by social sciences and liberal studies in order to bolster internal claims of legitimacy and rigor but with limited success (Schram, 2012). The quest for objective inquiry, devoid of intersubjective complexities, has led to the emergence of a dominant academic paradigm that is fundamentally aligned with a specific type of empiricism.

The field of contemplative studies attempts to shift this paradigm by re-invigorating the roots of liberal arts education to infuse inquiry in all areas with authentic reflection and contemplation of how knowledge is generated, what knowledge creation means to human endeavors, and how knowledge integrates with the “critical first person” perspective (Roth, 2006) that is universally accessible. A sub-field of contemplative studies, contemplative pedagogy, has developed as more and more instructors in higher education have begun incorporating techniques and over-arching philosophies that counter the developments outlined above. Repetti (2010) defines contemplative pedagogy broadly as “philosophies of education that promote the use of contemplative practices as valid modes not only of teaching and learning but of knowledge construction and inquiry” (p. 9). Most of these approaches incorporate some form of practice that is designed to cultivate the ability to consciously exercise one-pointed concentration in some form (Repetti, 2010). This ability to concentrate mental energy and re-focus the mind after a series of distractions has long been associated with increased cognitive flexibility, longer attention spans, and a more balanced affect (Moore and Malinowski, 2009). William James (1890) articulated this idea and its relationship to education exceedingly well:
The faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention, over and over again, is the very root of judgment, character, and will... An education which should improve this faculty would be the education par excellence. (p. 463)

For contemplatively inclined educators, this means designing classroom practices and activities that continuously strive to maximize opportunities for this kind of experience. As Simmer-Brown and Grace (2011) contend, “traditional pedagogical methods across the disciplines address the student as if only one inner quality-discursive rationality-were present” (xvi). For doctoral students, this lopsided emphasis could also be seen as an opportunity, often unrealized, to explore dimensions of their own, personal epistemological journeys in a variety of meaningful ways specific to their chosen research direction. Even if formal curricula highlight a particular type of interior work, there is nothing stopping doctoral students from engaging in a more multi-dimensional style of scholarship and inquiry.

Educational psychologist Jared Kass (2015, 2017) provides some concrete recommendations for changing the way institutions of higher education engage with students by identifying the ways in which higher education serves to mirror the social ills and persistent challenges of the human condition without addressing them in meaningful ways (2017). Kass asserts that higher education has, unfortunately, become the means by which many of the causes of social injustice and inequity are reinforced. Even though his research is focused mostly on undergraduate populations, the pedagogical approaches he suggests that are more conducive to contemplative reflection are easily applied to doctoral students. Since the late 1980s, Kass has used what he describes as a “transformative learning curriculum” that is intentionally “designed to help students understand the functional role of spiritual development and contemplative practice in human maturation” (Kass and Lennox, 2005, p. 193).

Students are often asked to complete several written assignments in the courses Kass teaches that provide opportunities to reflect and question spiritual beliefs. As mentioned in a previous chapter, the shorthand label of “spiritual” could be used for a host of profound “why” questions that are
epistemologically and ontologically important, both in the microcosm of an educational setting and in the larger context of an entire life. For doctoral students, the list of potential questions can be connected to the purpose of their educational goals and the challenges they face along the way: Why am I pursuing this degree; why does the institution ask me to do this requirement; why does my committee not support my research direction; why does the path to a doctoral degree have so many challenges; why are other students in my cohort/group/year succeeding or failing. Kass identifies these types of inquiries as being central to “person-centered spiritual maturation” that is a prerequisite for students to develop into “professionals and socially responsible citizens (2015, p. 53).

The importance of these approaches in any higher education setting is reinforced by a recent report from the Fetzer Institute that contextualizes the experiences of many of the participants in this study. The Fetzer research summary, What Does Spirituality Mean to Us? (2020), reports that not only do most individuals identify themselves as being “spiritual” in some way (86% of those who participated in the study) but also that how that manifests in daily life is immensely variable: “people identify a wide range of experiences and activities as spiritual, and they are regularly engaging in them of seeking them out both within and outside religious institutions” (p. 6). Unsurprisingly, there are also very strong correlations between individuals who self-identify as being “highly spiritual” and activities that promote community welfare and “greater good in the world” (p. 6). In addition, a kind of spiritual aspiration that promotes a larger connection to humanity as a whole is viewed as a positive aspiration. Many of the participants in this research seem to be grasping for an elusive something along those same avenues.

While there is no pre-requisite of spirituality or religiosity for the majority of doctoral programs, the kinds of interactions and challenges that students and graduates of PhD programs describe confirm that seeking a more profound meaning to their work is a common experience. They want to be treated decently, supported in their educational trajectories, and connected to doing something that could make a positive difference in the lives of others. Jodi wants to be seen as a smart and capable academic,
not just a returning adult student with kids; Taye and Darnell want to experience less racism in the academy; Brent and Ethan want to land jobs that will let them use their knowledge to improve community health; Elaine, Rita, and Kristoff would like to be respected for the jobs that they do even if they are not “academic enough” in the eyes of some; Luke hopes to prove that he can overcome all the challenges from his academic history to be an example to students who have faced the same obstacles; Ava just wants out of her department so she can be the kind of academic she thinks the world needs; Chloe and Alexus want to get away from academia so that their research can focus on impacting real people. None of these goals are overtly “spiritual” in nature, but they all connect to aspirations to connect with others and to the desire to serve something greater than the self. However, in most cases, the people, departments, and institutions providing the basis for the intersubjective context of their doctoral experiences privilege other benchmarks.

When I consider my own limited teaching experience with doctoral students, I find that I can now reframe my observations within a different schema based on what I learned from talking with the participants in this study. By remaining true to my own values and approaches to education in general, I provided what might have been perceived as a foreign construct for some students. I have taught undergraduates for over twenty years, and I often make the joke to colleagues that traditional age college students have had their natural curiosity “beaten out of them” from twelve or more years of compulsory education in an era of testing mandates and shrinking educational funding. When they are asked to explore their interior lives—what they value and what they want to do in the world—I am often surprised at how much push back occurs. How can those considerations be important if they are not on an exam or not part of what is being presented in a textbook? Consistently there is a cadre of students who have no interest in exploring education as a personal endeavor. They have become so jaded by their previous experiences that they simply want to know the rules of the game so that they can succeed and move on to the next step. They have lived through so many years of the epistemological trauma
described by Stolorow and Atwood (1984, 2014). I can sympathize with this viewpoint, but I am also disappointed that it seems so prevalent in modern versions of higher education.

The information collected in this study and my own anecdotal observations in the course I taught suggest that doctoral students can be much the same. However, because students in PhD programs have chosen to be there, the ramifications of intellectual dismissals from professors, advisors and/or colleagues are perhaps more intense. As mentioned in previous chapters, individual students choose how they respond to the intersubjective influences they perceive, but many perhaps fail to see how their existence in a liminal state for the entirety of their doctoral education can exacerbate their reactions to those influences. No participant in this study reported being in a program that acknowledged either of those concepts explicitly even though they are tacitly acknowledged as vital to student success.

Perhaps the most constructive way for doctoral students to approach their experiences is to view them as opportunities to contemplate what is most important in their lives. Doing that consistently can be an immense challenge, especially in the face of institutional and “real world” pressures to do otherwise. Despite that difficulty, the rarefied period of doctoral work offers more than a terminal credential that can open doors into academia. The process allows for meaningful inquiry into motivations, values, intellectual directions, relationships, and professional development. Doctoral students who can become more explicitly aware of what they are going through in terms of how liminality and intersubjective negotiation influence experience could be better prepared to do their work and their writing with a different kind of focus- one that nourishes human personality instead of one that tamps it down. What students in PhD programs ultimately need is the courage to face each transition and challenge with a sense of vulnerability that allows the newness of their experiences to shape them internally. Like malleable clay, our inner states, when allowed to govern our intellectual journey, can be transformed into something different and more connected. Ted Simon (2005), who
chronicled his four-year motorcycle ride around the world in Jupiter’s Travels, offers a compelling description of how to approach new experience:

The goal was comprehension, and the only way to comprehend the world was by making myself vulnerable to it so that it could change me. The challenge was laying myself open to everybody and everything that came my way. The prize was to grow big enough to feel one with the whole world.

Maybe what doctoral students need to optimally embrace liminal transitions and intersubjective challenges is just this sort of faith. It cannot be a faith that is dogmatic or irrational, but a faith grounded in experience. The kind of faith that feels most appropriate is “an inner quality that unfolds as we learn to trust ourselves (Salzberg, 2002, p. xiv). With that faith intact, the reaction to the systemic pressures of doctoral work could be balanced by a willingness to stake out an intellectual ground regardless of how much that space is belittled or dismissed. A cohort of doctoral students so armed could approach their work not as an acquiescence to the pre-formed orthodoxy of an academic field but rather as a worthwhile tug of war that they have every intention of winning.
Afterward

Writing a dissertation during an historic pandemic is a challenge I did not think I would encounter when I embarked on the doctoral journey. I found myself struggling repeatedly with issues of meaning in the face of unprecedented crisis across the globe. All writing comes from a particular historical and sociological context, and I would be remiss in ignoring how the unique political and cultural situations of the past year have impacted my thinking about the ideas presented here.

More and more, I find myself concluding that much of what is held in high regard by academia as a whole is far removed not only from day to day lived experience but also from the ideologies and values that drive many human behaviors. My own students in ethics and religions courses have shown a remarkable resilience over the past few semesters, and I think doctoral students have been forced to adapt to many of the same challenges. Doctoral students are arguably the most intellectually sophisticated members of the non-faculty population at any institution, yet they also contend with the same aspects of the human experience that afflict everyone else. They have families and need to pay bills; they face loss, celebrate success, and wrestle with existential questions.

In the discussions with my committee surrounding the final revisions of my dissertation, I noticed my increasing desire to direct further research into areas that could have some practical and lasting positive impact for doctoral students. Doing the interviews that are discussed in this work has shown me that I am not at all alone in wishing that the process of getting a doctoral degree was a bit different than it is now. Most of the participants in this study wished to make a positive and meaningful impact in their communities or fields of study with their work. However, institutional and programmatic demands seem to steer students to a different path. With those background statements in mind, I can envision several directions for expansion and application of the ideas presented in my study.

**Restructure doctoral curriculum to reflect the lives of real students** - This is perhaps the most obvious application for faculty and administrators who contribute to the development of
curriculum in doctoral programs. Simply normalizing the depersonalizing factors that can have a real impact on students could be a large step towards improving rates of attrition and better preparing incoming doctoral candidates for the actual struggles and milestones they will experience in their respective programs. An ancillary effort would be the introduction of “360” evaluation in doctoral programs to address not just what is traditional for faculty but also what is needed to address the changing needs of modern doctoral students.

**Change the outcome models of doctoral programs from careers in teaching to something more contemporary**- Multiple authors have claimed that the current model of doctoral education is both outdated and impractical. Given the trends towards decreased funding for state sponsored institutions of higher education, the number of traditional teaching positions at baccalaureate institutions will continue to decline in many academic fields. This is exacerbated by the myth of the corporate model being the panacea for all that ails academia. Restructuring doctoral programs to reflect a student-oriented, student-designed end goal could be a way of revitalizing the model.

**Interrogate the racism, sexism, and classism that is embedded in institutions of higher education**- The events of the last few years have exposed the deeply corrupt values at the core of the interaction between majority culture and historically disenfranchised, disadvantaged, and underrepresented groups. The repeated, unwarranted devaluation of human personality that occurs systemically when people of specific demographic groups interact with established institutional actors is undeniable. The landscape of higher education seems to be no exception. However, it is also a place that has the potential to ameliorate those conditions through a concerted effort. More doctoral students from underrepresented groups means more PhDs in the world who understand oppression on all levels, viscerally as well as theoretically. Every time
a member of that cadre can teach at any level, that individual can help to change the narrative of indifference to one of informed, compassionate calls to action and on the ground action itself.

This list is by no means exhaustive. However, the findings in this small qualitative study suggest that there are many avenues that can be investigated pursuant to the re-structuring and re-envisioning of doctoral education.
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Appendix I - transcription method samples

To preserve the “raw” data feel of these transcriptions, I made the deliberate choice to not proof them too carefully. Many of the grammatical and mechanical issues are highlighted because of the method used to transcribe. Conversational turn taking and linguistic fidelity varied considerably depending on the transcription strategy as detailed in chapter two on research design and data collection.

Sample 1- automated transcription with corrections

Chloe- November 2019

I did these interviews on your side of stuff, so I understand.

Are you working into your dissertation phase or do you have that in your program?

So kind of. I did kind of a pilot preliminary study this summer looking at food, faith, and health which was kind of intersection of my interests. But I’m evolving a bit with my actual dissertation topic so I’m not sure that will be the bulk of it anymore, but that is the meeting of the topics right now. Yeah- it’s actually kind of up and coming and it seems like a hot topic right now. I don't know if it's just in this [deleted] area, but a lot more churches are being involved in this discussion of food and how it relates to faith and the environment and social justice.

All right. Yeah. Food security is a big thing, right?

Exactly. Yeah. So it's taking a holistic approach at that.

OK. So I want to thank you again for voluntarily taking the time and I really appreciate it. And it’s really nice to get some folks from non-humanities-ish stuff. So that’s absolutely fantastic. So, did you have any questions for me before we get rolling? Anything you want to ask about the process or the topic or anything like that?

Yeah. I mean maybe a bit more on the topic. The process I’m pretty clear with, but maybe just a little about yourself and then your research interests.

Sure. So you know obviously I’m working on my dissertation and I've been teaching at a community college for 17 years. And I do academic support in writing and I teach philosophy classes and things like that. I've been involved in contemplative education a little more deeply probably since 2011 or so. It's kind of what I was doing all along, but then I got into the ACMHE group and realized “oh there’s a name for this.” And so those are some of some of the features that have guided my research. My academic background is that I've got degrees master's degrees in English language/linguistics and religious studies and those can have a weird relationship. I started up the doctoral program at Lesley mostly because it was really flexible that I could chart my own path a little bit. Honestly I'm way too old to study what other people tell me to. So my research has evolved from that. In some ways, trying to normalize my own experience in the
doctoral program. Then also just chatting informally with people and some of the stories that came out from people's experiences, good and bad. It was a really weird thing that I started looking at research and there's not a ton out there. You know the literature is thin on doctoral student experience. So that's the background.

Part. It's fascinating. Yeah. Well thank you for letting me be a part of it. When I saw the short line of what the research was about, I was really interested because I think there's a lot of formation that happens when we're in this process and I too have had kind of some informal conversations with other people in my life. But then through social media now they're all connected that way. So it's this idea of what the process is and how to do it, what it looks like, how it makes you hold your breath. All right good questions. Thank you.

Int. Oh sure- my pleasure. You know if anything comes up any other questions you feel free to just ask. So I've got an actual question list to run through. Obviously, if any of the questions make you feel weird you can pass. But otherwise these comments- I will sanitize everything- nothing identifiable will be used in the research. What I usually like to do is to send out transcriptions when they're done and any answers you want to redact or change or anything else that's fine. So can you tell me a little bit about where you are in the doctoral education process right now you know your academic background a little bit and where you are how you got there.

Part. Yeah, definitely. So I had to think about for a second I'm 24, and I recently graduated from Marquette University in Milwaukee.

Int. No way! I got my first graduate degree at UW.

Part. Oh yeah? Oh gosh. My boyfriend's mother teaches at UW and she's involved in that. Wait a minute. She's- what department is she- she teaches Italian so she is like in the foreign languages?

Int. Okay cool. What a trip. How long did you go there?

Part. I was there for about five years. I would have stayed much longer, but I did four years of undergrad and then about a year working as a nurse there. Well I tried to. I love Milwaukee. I miss it so much and then moved here last August.

Int. So wow that is a small world. That's really weird too.

Part. I love it. So yeah I went to [redacted] graduated in 2017. I got my bachelors in nursing-their bachelor of science in nursing but I did double majors in nursing and theology. I have always had that interest in religion, spirituality and health care. It's a Jesuit university which made it really interesting. I was in public school my whole life. I grew up Christian, but in the ELCA Lutheran tradition. So it's kind of like whoa school and religion. I really thought those two would go together but ended up being a formative experience for me to start to see religion and spirituality in its role in my education as a nurse from [redacted]. I'm originally from [redacted]
OK yeah. So I moved. It's about an hour and a half two hours away from family which wasn't bad at all. And then I graduated. I was going to stick around for another year. If I added one more, I could have gotten a degree in theology like a Bachelor of Arts. And I regret that- it just weighs on my heart a little bit. So I did not spend the money to stay there to double major.

Int.

Weird- so a colleague of mine- we always argue about the least profitable major. He's an anthropologist. This year I won for religion. And then another year it's like oh you know anthropology is really the one.

Part.

It is funny but it's also sad because it's really important knowledge base to have to value... but the job prospects for them are not always great. I also spent a year after I graduated in May 2017- I worked for about a year as a nurse switching off between the hospital. I was in hospital for half that year and then an eating disorder treatment center for the next chapter- that happened that year. In the process of that applied to Duke and found out about Duke from Dr. Harold Konig because he's kind of this big guy in spirituality, religion and health research. He puts on a workshop here at Duke and he is actually the first person who was a nurse himself but now he's a physician and he was the first to kind of get my head thinking about a PhD program. I guess I knew that there were nurses that had their PhDs. We had to take a research class in undergraduate and we were taught by professors that have their PhD. I just never really thought about it as a career option- like not really. Just a lot of the nursing education is so clinical focused that there's not a bunch that goes around like talking about research.

And so Dr. Konig was you know kind of an initiator of “hey have you thought about doing your PhD.” It could be a really great way to combine your interests and religion and spirituality and also health and nursing. So I took his advice and applied. I started in August of 20...what was that 2018. Yes, last August. So now I'm in my second year of the program but halfway through. I initially came in and interviewed with this topic of religion/spirituality and health. And when I interviewed that was kind of a broad overview and I said look you know I'm interested in kind of three levels right now-looking at religion/spirituality/health on a patient level. So like what does religion/spirituality bring to patients in their care and preferences or looking at it on the provider level. Thinking about how are we caring for the caregivers of our health care and a third level because I felt like we had already have a pretty solid basis that both of those are very important to the patient and the provider level. But I felt like we were missing a lot of the actual educational components. Since we know those are important, why are we not seeing as much education around how to care for religion and spirituality within nurses and probably within medical doctor programs? The programs are empty of things like that.

I interviewed with a caveat because I went down this path of food because I had just after interviewing at Duke that's when I had picked up that job working with individuals with eating disorders. And so I really just started becoming really fascinated about our relationship with food. How do we come to know our relationship with food? And I mean when I grew up, I didn't have an eating disorder, but I definitely struggled at
certain points of my adolescence and teenage years with food and weight and body image and things like that. Never to like an extreme extent, but food was something I kept thinking about often. I was lucky because I had background in a lot of medical knowledge- I knew kind of to nip that in the bud pretty quickly and how to get to a healthy relationship with food. So I had a personal experience with that but then also to seeing individuals suffering through an eating disorder. It got me thinking about how we come to know food and what food means in our lives. And so the first semester I’d say I really dove into looking at religion and spirituality and eating disorders- just merge the two together. And then that’s when I ended up- through connections of different people and the Divinity School- actually I got connected with a pastor here in who started this eating together faithfully framework . Yeah. So that kind of understanding like to bring food and faith together what does that look like? I kind of got embedded in that community which I’m still so grateful for. I really was kind of thinking that that would be my dissertation focus at the end of the semester last year. And I did a study this summer and I still have to analyze and go through that data- I’m planning to that this spring. So definitely I can hang on to that because I am really attached to that stuff. I’m really interested in that and what they’re doing. I’m not quite sure. I don’t know if this is like a lack of skill or just like a kind of a fear of doing things too fast as I’m not quite sure that that’s going to be a fit for a dissertation and like yeah there’s something to build from there.

Int. It’s a groovy topic- I mean there’s so many crossovers. Yeah I’m sure you know this already but you know religious ritual ensue. There are so many in religious practice- somebody goes to communion or keeps kosher. There is so much there and I can see a lot.

Part. Yes, definitely yes. I’d like to write on that, but I was overwhelmed with how much.

Int. And I mean that opens up a whole box of worms with your work and that’s just so multidisciplinary which is great.

Part. That’s what I love. But it was just kind of feeling a little bit overwhelmed, and I just kind of took a pause at the beginning of the semester to really think about why I was initially coming here what was my motivation for this.

Int. OK now this is fantastic because haven’t seen my questions yet but that is my next question. Yes- so how would you characterize your motivations- you said you maybe you weren’t thinking about doctoral work right away. What was your sort of motivation- personal, professional- whatever that got you rolling?

Part. I think really the motivations were connected to being nurtured. Nurtured is a word that just comes to mind I just felt very nurtured at . I had so many people on my side that were cultivating and encouraging these ideas. They just inspired me to want to do religion, spirituality and health and bring those together in some way and I think a lot of the times because they had that kind of framework or narrative to work within because they were a religiously based community.
I’m not saying all professors were religiously based but you know a lot of them still took on our mission of caring for the whole person and doing for the greater glory of God and things like that. So I think they maybe always put that on the forefront explicitly. I think they saw that within me that I was interested in these two different topics- nursing and theology- and really encouraged them to come together. And so I think a lot of my motivation came from that. And those people who pushed me forward in that and helped me explore that intersection. You know I had some great people in the theology department who I remember my first meeting when I went to meet with one of the advisors. Again kind of thinking about adding theology as a major. And he was over the moon. He’s told me to go to a double major- theology is something that you can kind of take in and roll with and he’s said nursing is a great fit for that.

And so I had a lot of great mentors who facilitated that process and we’re really encouraging that. So I think the people aspect- those motivators, those coaches and mentors. They were a big piece of my motivation. And so when I was at the beginning of the semester I was struggling with the food and faith and health piece and what does this have to do with nursing? And I know I could come up with something obvious like nutrition or things like that, but I really started thinking okay what about studying what you’re saying are you really passionate about and want to get into? That’s when I remember back to my one course- I developed this independent study with a professor in my senior year of college looking at Faith Community Nursing. I did a pretty like low level comparison of FC nursing and chaplaincy. And so that is currently where we’re at right now with my dissertation topic- looking at a faith community. We did this interfaith study on Muslim Christian dialogue in Milwaukee. It’s kind of a known hub for that which is- well, it’s not very known- and so we wanted to make it more known.

So I’m really interested in looking at the faith community nursing in a non-Christian context because a lot of the literature right now is only on Christian faith community nursing. The name has changed for a reason to be more engaged. It has been reported that there are nurses serving in these different contexts currently where I’m at but I’m also having a lot of faith that at some point this food piece will maybe catch up or I’m going to catch up with it and kind of have a merge that’s a bit more in nursing community focused.

Yeah it’s weird that you questioned the connection to nursing because off the top of my head I see so many, right? I totally agree. So I want to throw three terms at you and just think about them in connection to your motivations and if any resonate more for you than others or a combination. The three terms are advancer, launcher and altruist.

OK so you just want kind of first thoughts on any of those?

Yeah- what captures your motivation or a combination or a different word? Anything at all.

OK the advancer really kind of yeah caught me first. I guess it depends on what week you catch me on, but right now advancer is something that gives me a lot of anxiety and feels overwhelming. Kind of just like pressures that I feel.
I think one thing I was just recently thinking about was that students are supposed to accomplish advancing the science and to some degree, and I think I just notice I get overwhelmed by that.

I really love this idea of kind of becoming known or becoming quote unquote expert in something, but I also sense this responsibility to know everything in order to do that. I think part of it too maybe because I came right from my bachelor’s degree into a PhD without doing a Masters. Maybe a masters would have prepared me more for this, but I just feel like I am the one sole person responsible for doing the research. Nobody else is doing my stuff with me to fact check me or to like have an experience with me in this life. I’m the one to do it all. So then I go and share or report what I find but I think I just get anxious because there is not somebody else alongside with me to be able to tell me you’re right on that or you’re wrong on that.

It's more like can you argue it can you prove it? I don't know- there's always this fear of missing something and am I leaving stuff behind or am I missing things that my mentors won't be able to tell me because they're not experts in this field? So I think right now yeah the term advanced are a little bit daunting right now, but I also recognize and try to compartmentalize in some way those fears and those anxieties. Then that word becomes exciting to me because I think about all the different ways I can add to this body of literature. Hopefully, I can provide something new for this field and perhaps make a jumping pad for me to take off on to the rest of my career.

And maybe this goes a little bit into the altruistic piece. I keep coming back to this reminder from mentors- your dissertation is just one study. It's one study. You do a couple of things around it, and it's one study, one project that will not define the rest your career. It might, but I might not and oftentimes it doesn’t. It's just a stepping stone to something else.

Int. And it doesn't need to win a Pulitzer either.

Part. Exactly. It doesn't need to. Exactly.

And I also hear from some professors and faculty that say you should like it and you want to enjoy it because you’re going to be doing it for at least a couple of years. I might stick with the topic, but afterwards, depending on how long it takes and all that stuff, who knows?

I think a piece of that is finding the grace to tell myself, “Chloe, you are fine to just choose something and decide to land somewhere.” I’ll move and need to have faith that I'll move where I'm supposed to be after PhD life. I also thought I'd find this struggle trying to combine all of my interests into the perfect research question or the perfect research study which is not super feasible.

But I'm trying to kind of find this this bridge of all of the things I value and I enjoy that includes wanting to contribute and give back to society. Putting that all in one dissertation just isn’t even possible. Now that I am talking a lot about it now it's therapeutic in the sense that it’s not feasible.
It’s a big challenge. It’s a big challenge everywhere in every field. You want to write the great American novel, right? You want to get all the changes for the future in one document. That is going to be tough.

Right. Exactly, yes.

So can you talk a little bit about the expectations you had of doctoral education? Did you have any expectations about how you were going to grow or change when thinking about the workload or the people? Anything at all that you sort of came in with about doctoral education?

Oh these are great questions! Whose expectations—yeah, I think a part of me didn’t have too many because of the way I got the nudge to apply for a PhD program to then applying and getting in and then starting a program. The time was pretty short, so I don’t think I had too many expectations.

I’m sure I Googled what the program is like, but I think I was a little bit naive going in because I didn't have many expectations. I assumed the workload was going to be more rigorous just because it is an advanced degree, but I did not anticipate my personal reaction to the amount of writing and reading.

When I applied to my school, I guess I did have an expectation of a community that is supportive and not competitive because that's the sense I got from the interview-students and the faculty were all really interconnected and so I had that expectation going in. It has lived up to that in my cohort. I have a cohort that I really love. There are seven of us. There were eight, but now we are seven. The rest of the program is pretty small—maybe 40-ish students across all four or five years?

So that is a big asset for expectations. I didn't have any or at least not too many. On the one hand, I think that was good because it was just like just go in. I am the kind of person who jumps in when I get an idea. Let’s just see how it goes.

I actually knew I would need a therapist, so I got that right away. I checked in with my mental health at the start because a lot of the orientation programs that discussed talked about how PhD students are at risk for depression and anxiety and I know I have a history of anxiety. I recently went through a personal breakup relationship and saw that I was not starting off in the happiest with personal life and the program. But I quickly found supports at the start to serve me along the way.

And then I think now that I’m like a year in it—a year and a half in? It's frustrating but I also understand that there's almost no way to prepare you for what the journey is going to look like. It's so different for everybody because everybody’s personal response to things is different. Their topics are different. But I remember that just two or three weeks ago I was just getting lost in this hunt for a dissertation topic. What is the purpose of this? Why am I here? I think I went on Google and YouTube and looked up “how to get a PhD” just to find a “how to” video or something.
I found some that were not very helpful but I found one TED talk by this woman who mentioned the seven things I Wish I’d Known Before I started or the things that I learned along the way. Everything was relatable. You’re going to have 16 different doors in front of you and you have to choose one and you have to like be ok with letting go of the other 15. I know that I didn’t care about it until I was experiencing it. That’s when you ask, “oh gosh how do you do this?” What do we do? I’m grateful too because we have these things called pods- like a peer mentorship program- that some other PhD students a couple of years back created in our program. It’s a group of usually about one person from each year. There are one to five people and then a faculty member. It’s a peer support group that meets once a month to just talk about all the stuff that doesn’t get addressed in formal meetings about program expectations or things like that. That’s really helpful, and we’re trying to get something started where it’s even more of a workshop- a three hour block where everybody meets together and we learn about grant writing and how to navigate mentorship.

I think our school our program does good job at addressing all those different elements from grant writing to mentorship to postdocs to funding and all those things, but it would be great to see it in a more comprehensive way with everybody because there's just so much knowledge that we can share with each other within our program.

There are things there that have helped with understanding the expectations and I still think I'm learning them even as I'm in a second year myself. One of my cohort members one is studying mindfulness and resiliency and another is studying nursing presence and things of that nature so through them I know that they're pretty well connected in the program and the school.

Int. Have you come across mindfulness strategies in your program for the students? I’m just curious because there's actually a mindfulness training called KORU in the counselling/academic advising areas, but I think it’s mostly geared toward undergrads. That’s one aspect that I am interested in and I’ve been to their teacher training program. I am wondering if that’s something that you’d come across.

Part. Yeah I haven’t come across that, but I know about CAPS. I've heard there's an integrative medical department or something at Duke Hospital. They have an integrated prayer area but I haven't attended very much of the programs that come out. I have gotten little bits from my two classmates who have shared with us very graciously their practice and their kind of tips and tricks.

So they call our cohort like the hippy cohort because of all those interests!

Int. If you’re thinking about the faith and spirituality and health connection you might be interested in it. I did the teacher training a few years ago just to get a sense of what it was and it’s really about. The focus is really about acknowledging the internal lives of students and that is important to a lot of different things. If you ignore the self-care thing because you're in a program or curriculum, it can be problematic.

Part. I'll look into that and how do you spell it?
If you look up or Google mindfulness, it'll tell you like the story of it and there are links to the folks who started it. You might be interested in what they are doing.

My next questions is related a bit. It seems like a lot of folks come with big bags of expectations and you seemed to have a lighter load there. That being said, what have been the surprises for you? What have been the unexpected things that have come up for you? Either good or bad. Anything that's like “oh wow I didn't know I was going to be there”?

Yeah. That's a good question. I think the one that's probably most pressing to me right now is this idea that Duke was very flexible and that you didn't have to have to pin down a dissertation topic coming in. They were like it's fine if you have a broad direction- we'll work with that and help you cultivate that. Right now a part of me is very appreciative of that. I work in a much better when I'm working in a flexible environment. I think a little bit of me now is surprised at how lost I can get in a sense that I know that I have this passion for these things but I keep getting psyched out. There are just so many rabbit holes when you're reading and you start to find the literature and look at one body of literature and then there's that set of literature then there's another one. I was surprised at how easily it was to get off track. I also know there's like a million things that you could study. I guess a part of me was like “oh it's not going to happen because you have to generate new knowledge and it might be hard to find something new.

But it's actually pretty easy in the sense that as long as you can craft an argument and are able to support your claim and explain why the knowledge you have is meaningful, you are good.

I also just realized how difficult it's been for me when it comes to like sitting with my mentors and trying to explain what I'm interested in. I'm surprised at how hard it is sometimes to take everything that's in my head, synthesize it, and then deliver it to them because they're always going to be testing me and questioning me and pushing me just to know my topic. This is natural, but sometimes I take that as me missing something important. Neither of them come off that way. That's my own interpretation in my own head of the process. I think it just surprised me how much of an exercise it really is to learn and know your topic well.

Yeah. Most people I've chatted with have gone through kind of a similar thing. You have to have something to say before you figure out how to say it.

Mm hmm. You have to go through a lot of like marinating and percolating. That is when you know a sort of gut level passion for your topic. I have to say X and then how do I get to say that right.

That was nicely stated. So anything else unexpected any other surprises in terms of personal stuff, people, program stuff- anything else has come up for you?
Part. Yeah I was just thinking too about this idea of talking and communicating. One thing that surprised me was how little I engage with like family and friends and even my partner- how much I just don't talk to them about it because I am exhausted by talking about my mentors or other people in the program. I have to continually hash it out and define it and all this stuff. But also I think there's a piece of you that knows that they don't get it. Maybe that's discrediting them because I know my partner is in his second Master's program, so he understands the academic environment. But my mom's a nurse. My poor mother keeps wanting to know my dissertation topic but I've had that conversation in my head so many times already. She knows me well.

And then I start to think back at like how sometimes I wish I could go back to Marquette and have some of my mentors engage in this conversation with me. It should be the same for my mom because she can offer some good insights, but there's still a piece of “you’re not in the academic doctorate world.

It sounds bad even saying that out loud- like I'm high up and untouchable which I’m not, but I think sometimes when I'm in my own processing mode it's hard for me to open up and share that with others. I don’t know how to communicate it because I have a feeling they don't understand. That's been kind of a surprise because I'm usually very open, and I love talking about my ideas.

It's just I feel like my brain is changing, and honestly I think some of my personality traits have changed a little bit since being in the program- in terms of my academic personality. I guess I like to think that my core personality outside of academia has been pretty consistent but the way I like conduct myself in school is a little different. Again, I think a lot of it's because we're so isolated within our own thoughts. We’re isolated by loneliness and not being with other people by choice. For me, I think it's a little bit isolating when I'm thinking through stuff and mulling over things- processing. It’s hard to be more open and talk about my ideas out loud like I do a lot more when I am with the people in my program. So that has shocked me a little bit.

Int. And that is a great segue to the next idea I want to broach which is about the challenges you have experienced. You've already mentioned a couple: the rabbit holes that you can go down and the intellectual isolation.

Part. Yeah, yeah. That’s just off the top of my head.

Int. It sounds like what you're describing is that you have people around but it's the inside your head stuff- that is the isolating part? Any other challenges that you've come across in terms of personal, professional, educational or anything else?

Part. Yeah I mean my brain spins in a couple different directions on that one. I've found it really challenging to keep everything in my brain- I swear I have a memory problem. I don't know if that memory problem was the same in college or has presented itself and its ugly head now, but I just have a really hard time.

There's a lot we have on our plates, and we're reading a lot for class and dissertation. You know we're just doing so many things at one time. Maybe I’m just kind of
overloaded? And so when you're overloaded the memory is not going to be as good. That's been a challenge because sometimes I get frustrated when I read X number of articles, and then I get my mentorship meetings and they ask me about them. Sure, I read these but I can't really remember my notes. I don't like to promise to do something and not do it.

Int. Okay, so you have this memory piece but then also the challenge of proving that you have done your work? And how do you marry the two?

Part. I've done some things now. I've started recording in my mentorship meetings so I can get the gist. I know I can always go back and listen. But then that seems like doing double the work sometimes. Just the other night, I might read an article or two on faith community nursing and then started to draft a background page to put together these pieces. I'm getting there, but that's been a challenge.

And then one personal life challenge has been only but that wasn't a challenge it's more like a surprise that has worked well - my partner. He's in [redacted] now for his master's program, so we're doing the long distance thing. But it's honestly been fine because I think both of us have our work to do. Had he been here I don't know if I would be as focused or as diligent with getting stuff done. In a way, that's been like a pleasant surprise.

Of course, it is kind of nice just to be able to dive into your work and be totally into what you're doing without outside distractions. If he were here, I'm sure there would be more of a challenge and that would be something to work through. It's not bad and not unwelcome but it's something I've noticed. I like being on my own and just having my own space in my own time for planning my own schedule.

Time management has been a challenge at points because we do plan our own schedules. It's easy to get distracted and fill that time with Netflix or chatting with my partner or talking to my family or whatever it may be. It can be challenging with all the distractions, but finding a good mesh between those has been interesting. We are on our own schedule and a lot of what we can do can be done remotely. That kind of eases things in terms of a relationship at long distance- have the flexibility to visit on Skype or call or what have you.

Int. Okay. So a couple more details about challenges. This may seem like a kind of a weird question to think about. Have any of the challenges you have encountered been connected at all to any identity markers in terms of things like educational background, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic class, religion? Any part of your personal identity?

Part. Yeah. Oh I really like this question!

(Pauses)

Int. Feel free to take your time.

Part. Yeah. I'm like "oh quick- I need to produce a study before yours comes out so I can use that question."
Int. You know what- honestly feel free. I mean seriously how much of doctoral work is finding good models and thinking about how you’d like to try them?

Part. Yes. Yep. Oh too funny!

So I think that’s a great question. I definitely think so- I pause because I’m just fascinated by how almost common sense the answer to that question is for me. Also, how little I actually reflect on that like consciously. I like to think I know that my motivations and identities are wrapped into what I’m doing but rarely do I take the time to parse that out and say what they are. Well I think definitely that my own religious upbringing- being in the Christian church- but not my religious slash spiritual upbringing.

I want to say because I’ve always been religious. I don’t know- since when I can remember maybe high school or middle school we had to take a confirmation class with my church. That happens right before we go into high school and I remember we had this faith statement that we had to write like I was essentially like a brief little paper about why we believe in God. What does our religion mean to me? Where do we see ourselves in the church or with the church in five years?

I was super bothered by that assignment. I just couldn’t really wrap my head around like what I really felt strongly about and I remember getting frustrated. Apparently, I’m sick and created my own religion because it just makes more sense to me that way. So I think from a fairly young age I have always had this very open mindset to what it means to have religion or spirituality as a component to you.

That has kind of evolved into my interfaith and multi faith interest, and that is a really strong piece of my identity. If I think back to that first year, I pushed it a bit to the wayside because I thought it was a separate thing from what my nursing stuff. But when I think about how it has come to fruition with a where I’m trying to take this faith community nursing staff- it gets me really excited. I feel very comforted and almost more calm about this topic because I feel resonance with it. Maybe in a much deeper way I thought this is all coming out first hand right now.

I think definitely that my own religious and spiritual beliefs and values have come to play and not just my identity as a nurse. There’s a strong admiration I have for nurses, and I say that not to like promote myself because I honestly feel like I have only like a one year of clinical experience. I just like so many other nurses and the amazing work that they do. You know ICU nurses or a school nurses- the different specialties that people go into. Definitely my identity marker as a nurse is really important. I always make it a statement to say when I’m introducing myself- I’m a registered nurse and I’m also a nursing student. My Jesuit education at Marquette really sticks with me- this idea of caring for the whole person and striving for that.

It’s interesting though because I would say right now my own personal religious life is not as strong or as investigated as I would want it to be right now but I’m okay knowing that it’s still a part of me. I’m just not kind of practicing it as intentionally as I could be.
Int. So I'm just going back to the stuff you mentioned earlier about the importance of your own religious upbringing. I know that some nursing programs are very clinical, right? Sometimes the pragmatism can overwhelm the personal sense of caring— that personal sense of internal life. Have you felt that at all in this program?

Part. I don’t see that getting short shrift but like it's like deemphasizing- yes, yes oh yes. I resonate with that idea.

Actually it's funny. I just reached out- I'm not afraid of reaching out and getting support from strangers. I just reached out to someone I'd been connected with through a classmate. She had gotten connected with one woman who did her PhD in nursing on religion and spirituality, so the three of us who are doing religion, spirituality, presence and mindfulness have kind of all banded together and we thought we'd all reach out to her in conversation to help and get some support.

I mean the fact that even accepted three people that were doing more interpersonal value based explorations of things definitely stands for something and show something and shows that they value it. But the supports around that sometimes are difficult to come across.

So we had talked to this woman about first year in the second semester I want to say and she was great and she offered some really great advice. I actually need to reach out to her again a couple weeks ago to touch base. She was just really gracious about holding with us this idea that we are in a very rigorous traditional science space institution that is trying to be more open. We will come across challenges when it comes to research priorities and when it comes to funding priorities. We know not everybody is going to be interested in this, and we might find pockets that work super well. For me, I know I always have the John Templeton Foundation the back of my head.

She just offered some really great insights into that because we are in a much more pragmatic field. Not only the institution but I think just the way that science is viewed in general can oftentimes overlook a lot, at least in nursing and clinical nursing. Science nursing is much more open because we are more holistic in our careers. She offered some great advice on just how to be gentle with yourself in the process and understand that it is a process where you will be critiqued. You will have to adjust and fix and revise certain things to come across a specific way. I know she had issues- she just messaged me about she had issues publishing her dissertation because the journal that she wanted to publish came back with a comment. Something along the lines of like you have too many references in the background section or her literature review was too all over the place.

She added a couple of philosopher names and apparently they don't like that, which speaks to the challenge that some people have a certain way of what science can look like. But I have always been a proponent of interdisciplinary collaboration and I like making it a point to go outside of my kind of home school within universities. So this year I took a class in the which I totally turned me upside down.
I haven’t taking a class with philosophers in a long time, and I feel like all of them are philosophers, so it’s interesting. The **Anthropocene** is kind of related to my food topic; even now with this faith community nursing topic. One session was on medicine and how medicine this age looks and feels and where it’s moving. It’s just neat to see that you can plug into so many diverse conversations.

For me as a nurse in my own field we had faith connections team which is an interdisciplinary research program at **Marquette**. At **Duke** they have a bunch of these teams where it’s required to have undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty all working together. It’s kind of a horizontal leadership model and that’s been really great. They’re studying economies of care and looking at care labor, a lot of it from the feminist economy perspective. I was thinking “oh, care-nurses do it all the time. I think applied and just got a really interesting experience - both that **Anthropocene** class and this care team. Sometimes, I feel like they’re pulling me in different directions or just challenging me to really be asking what research is because it looks a lot different here than it does in divinity. It has made me very appreciative of the different ways that people function and things like how I can learn from that. Whether I take it and roll with it now or just sit with it throughout the next couple of years or months or weeks and maybe do something with it later on.

I’m really grateful for that because I’ve always been more connected and get fueled up by going outside of nursing to understand maybe how to better communicate. This is why my stuff is important; this is why I’m interested in this and this is how it relates to this kind of understanding of how to communicate better.

**Int.** So I just want to step outside our chat for just a second and I’d like to be mindful of your time. We’re just coming up on about five to one. Are you okay continuing chatting?

**Part.** I’m good but I probably have to go at around one thirty.

**Int.** Okay, that’s great. I just don’t want to take too much free time. I appreciate that. You’ve mentioned this a couple of times that you’re okay reaching out for support and stuff like that. Are there any other things you do when you maybe you’re feeling less motivated or more frustrated? Are there other strategies that make it work for you?

**Part.** Yeah that’s good. Yes, definitely. I’m a very big talker. I talk a lot very night. I love people and I love talking to people, so I think my first go to is always reaching out with friends or family and talking through some stuff, but sometimes again, like I said before, because it is academic focused I am usually more hesitant to do that. I’ve already thought about this for so long, so I don’t like to explain why I’m like annoyed or confused or lost. That is why my mentors are really great.

I’ve had two mentors, one who is my primary mentor, and he was he and I were assigned to be together at the start. Then, if you like each other you keep going with it. If not you can find a new mentor, but I really like him. He is quirky, he’s fun and he is never is going to say that you’re right or wrong. He just always asks like why, why, why. How come? Where do you see that? Things like that. But then I have added a co-chair
commenter who I just feel a lot more. I’m almost like friends with her and then I can go to her and be like “oh, you know I’m frustrated with this or I’m annoyed with this and I’m super overwhelmed, and she’s very like, “all right let's get things organized.”

So I have a lot of trust in both of my mentors but both kind of get a very different personality from me, and so I kind of adapt and adjust and use them for what I need at the time. Then there’s nothing like a good day of just being by myself alone and turning stuff off in terms of school and taking time just to like watch TV, do laundry go out with friends. Those are very therapeutic for me: to go on walks out outside.

I think one thing that our program did a good job at this first year is that they are all about self-care. Take days off and take breaks. Work life balance- all those kind of terms were thrown out, but it was kind of like OK that's great- I would do that, but I also have like 16 readings to do.

That was something I know that our cohort could have talked about as a challenge. But also I think something in that the self-care was doing those readings or doing some of the readings just so I could feel like I did something productive with my time. I’m all for self-care, and I do it pretty well- maybe too well sometimes.

When I go to work, there is this this concept of work life balance. When I think of the work life balance, I think of like relationships in life and how do you balance. I’m not a mom, but I've partnered- I’m still an unmarried woman in my younger 20s. How do I understand this idea of work life balance when like a lot of my life and my relationships are in different states?

They're away and like they're kind of on their own, but I'm very much still connected in those networks just like from afar. My friends are all across the nation now. We're all doing our different things, so the work life balance is a little bit different for me than say somebody who is married, has kids, or is more senior in their job. That's been an interesting concept to work with. I don't feel like I've needed to figure it out yet, and I’m not totally challenged by it a lot. I think that's a really great place to be because I can be intentional now about what are the practices of balance I'm creating in my life now?

What can I do now to help down the line in the future with being intentional about how do I take space to stop and pause and care for other things besides school?

Int. Okay. I want to come back to this thing you said about the self-care recommendations in the orientation. You said it was really good to hear but also a little confusing? Is it fair to say that that was sort of- and I don’t I want to characterize this too negatively- but that was sort of like a see where you are and do what you need to do, but we can’t help you much?

Part. Yeah, yeah, yeah. It was it was we were told there's a reason for self-care, but not everybody can adapt and adjust in their own way. If there’s a reason for so much self-care maybe we should look at why there's so much of that reason.
So there's a Band-Aid in a way and a Band-Aid in a sense of the program. I also understand that another narrative of that conversation was cultivating these practices of being and caring for yourself in this process because you as a student right now are going to look different than you will as a junior faculty member or postdoc and on and on. It was a little bit of like a like a miss.

Int. This is just an aside, but there is a good body of data on the mental health of graduate students, and it does not look super pretty.

Part. And I think a lot of people are doing stuff to respond to that, but I think that more is one hundred thousand percent needed. And I also think that we can look at education a bit more targeted early to understand like what is it in our educational systems that is producing and perpetuating this. Actually the class tonight on the Anthropocene is on formation and education, so I'm sure if we had talked after that I would have a whole lot to say.

I remember though once in a theology class. We were talking about C.S. Lewis actually, and we watched this one video that was on YouTube. It was one of those pictorial videos that has a guy sketching on a whiteboard and then there is some awesome narration around it. The video was about our academic system and just like a factory line, we get in, we produce. That's really stuck with me; to this day I think about that.

Int. Yeah, well there's a lot of truth there. I'm just curious because you had mentioned that particular piece. I want to ask more about your personal experience. Can you identify any milestones or turning points that you've experienced so far?

I know you're not done with your program- you're still in the midst of it. Have there been any things that- I hate to use the word epiphany because it's not quite what I'm getting to- but any turning points or realizations about what you're doing? You talked about it a little bit, but I just wanted to zoom in more on that.

Part. Oh, that's good. The turning point. I think part of the essential question needs turning points. In terms of my dissertation topic, I feel like I've had a lot of turning points in terms of that because it's changed probably four to five or six times now. But I wouldn't say that has been like a total milestone yet because I don't quite think I'll feel like I've hit a milestone until I land on a topic which I feel closer to now. I'm in a literature that I feel more comfortable with that I know how to navigate and understand that doesn't feel all over the place.

I don't know if I've had many milestones. I've had little moments along the way where I have felt more reassured or more confident or more excited, and I take those as successes any day. I think I've had moments where I've gone to church and I've been listening to the sermon. I'm like, “oh gosh, that really resonates with me” or it kind of clicks. I don't know if it's the nature of this topic and going back into more explicitly the connection with faith and nursing together.
But I've felt a little bit more open to the signs. I try to just pay attention to “God moments” or even just universal or universe signs. I just wrote before this interview on Facebook and saw that a friend who I had known pretty well just got her license or her certification. I was like, “wow, like just like totally out of blue I didn't know she was doing it.” And so it's just moments like those more so that I get.

Int. It's just really serendipitous but content connected?

Part. Yes. Yeah, exactly. And I think just a piece that I'm holding on to in anticipation of those milestones is giving myself the peace to know- and this comes a lot from like my religious and spiritual background- is giving myself the peace to know that everything I'm doing is going to lead to something.

At some point, I do feel deep down that like all my interests that feel so scattered and like noncommittal to this point like are going to come together in some weird and funky story as my life evolves. So I'm giving myself that peace to this day. I'd like to something now and stick with it and keep on with the journey. It's just about having faith that all the all of the things I'm reading- which I know I'll never ever remember or recall all of them- what's important will stick with me, and it will come back and it will keep reoccurring and I'll keep thinking about it.

Yeah. It's been more of those like serendipitous fateful moments that have kind of been my turning points or reassurance points. Yeah, that's interesting. I guess my initial answer to that question is there have been a ton of milestones, but I wouldn't say there's been one groundbreaking one. That seems fair.

Int. Okay, so this is a little bit more serendipity. Again, you have not looked at my question so and yet your last response is a perfect segue. How do you envision your life changing once you get your degree done? What do you envision as this is going to be different or this is going to be a broad change?

Part. Yeah, wow. I have a lot of reactions to that question. One is resistance because I don't know. Jon, please don't ask me! That's my first catch all response, but now that I think about it, there are a couple of things I have in mind. One is I've always envisioned myself- again from a fairly young age- wanting to dress like a business professional for work. When I say I am a nurse, I was like, “well should I marry scrubs?” The professional dress- that's not possible.

And I love public speaking, so I have always had this idea of just going to conferences, doing public speaking, being engaged with maybe students at some point- maybe being a professor? I always thought that was going to be my retirement plan, but now it looks like it's going to be a little early retirement plan. I have had that vision and that fuels me and keeps me going that in some capacity I'll be presenting and sharing and engaging in conversation and in dialogue.

That's kind of vague though, and I think my age really does play a big factor when I think about what the next five years look like because I just don't know. I could get married to my partner now or I might not. And then if I do- if we stay together- I might move to
where he is and then that would change where I would do a postdoc or get a faculty position.

There’s so much talk about getting non-academic positions now. So do you create your own business or work for a governmental agency or things like that? I haven’t tapped into any of that yet just because I would like to get my dissertation topic first. I don’t know what it might look like when they start changing things up again. Yeah, I am very open to what’s ahead and I think I’m really comfortable with that. I know a lot of people need to plan, plan, plan- but I’m not that way. I’ll take it as it goes. I’m sure if you were to talk to me at year three, four or five years- each time would be different. I think what I would say is the thing that really takes hold of me at that time.

I know that’s a very common viewpoint to have. It’s weird you mentioned the non-academic nursing thing. I had a chat with a former student last fall who was also a former employee of mine. She got her masters in nursing but her niche was something I had never heard of before. What she does is medical-legal consultation; she works with lawyers who need medical expertise on different cases like personal injury or you know whatever is going on. So she told me this story about how a lawyer had contacted her about a guy who was in a car accident. The lawyer was skeptical of the testimony because of the injuries of the participants, right? So the guy was saying that he was driving, and it turns out the woman in the car with him was intoxicated and at the wheel. So the person was doing the consultation looked at the hospital reports and concluded pretty quickly that he was lying because of the way the impacts and injuries happened to the two people.

So I was fascinated by that. I had no idea that was even an industry or something nurses did. Apparently that kind of niche sort of thing exists. When you talked about non-academic things that just popped into my head- there were only a bunch.

Yes. Yeah exactly

If you don’t want to take a traditional professorial track and you still want to wear your business casual, right?

Exactly. That’s fascinating. And forensic nursing is a thing that probably kind of fits in similar. I love that about nursing- It is so broad that you really can do a lot of what you want and kind of make your own path. I think it’s something in nursing education that needs to be a bit more stressed because a lot of it is making you to be a certain kind of nurse. They only really speak to the hospital experience because they assume that once you graduate from there you’ll go directly into clinical hospitals our mostly hospital settings to learn your skills refine your skills. You become an expert in whatever but that’s just not the way a lot of people go. So yeah it’s interesting thinking about how we value that education.

So this is officially my last question- t’s really the last one. So when you think about it again that sort of kind of post-graduation era, right? Or if you think a little bit more holistically about obtaining this terminal degree- what do you think is going to be the
most significant part of that for you personally? Is it going to be a personal achievement thing? Is it going to be the capacity to share knowledge with others? Will it be the credential itself? What will be the most salient, significant part of this accomplishment? Part.

Yeah. Oh gosh, that's interesting. Again, my first answer is I don't know- which then makes me think, “Why did I even start this program?” But I definitely think the personal accomplishment is- selfish as it sounds out loud- was a huge motivation. For me to get this at this age was something that was cool and it seems like a well accomplished thing to do. That again gets me thinking about the product and what our education values are. It makes sense why I would think that. It's funny when you use the word “terminal degree” that's like we're going to die after this. All education is banned from your future.

Yeah, it interesting to me to consider what the PhD means. I have reached a point where I just had to do the research stuff and learn how to create new knowledge, how to identify issues, and how to produce something. I don't know if anything I'm doing means anything, but I am doing better interviews with a more qualitative focus. You're bringing together other people's experiences- you're the facilitator of that. I just cherish that a lot. So for me, this is a lot more grounded in community. How do I utilize my skills to help and facilitate the voices that might not be shared? It speaks to me in that way.

But with the terminal degree aspect there have been moments- and I've talked to another one of my classmates who’s also my age- both 24. She did a similar track and worked for a year and then went straight to the PhD. She and I have talked about whether we would go back to get a DNP or even like a master's nurse practitioner degree. Maybe we would if we wanted to jump back into the clinical world because we just we got a little bit of experience. I mean that's just the fact of the matter.

But like if we have the inkling to do that would we go back to school and do another degree to focus in on that? I think I'm so open to doing that especially if I really felt like I had found my clinical niche within the eating disorder world or the mental health nursing community. Like I said before, there were so many clinical experiences I didn't enjoy, and I just I've never been a fan of hospital nursing. It just was always a struggle for me and gave me a lot of anxiety.

But when I was in more of a kind of outpatient situation or still residential care with mental health- I just totally fell in love. And I remember there had a really good friend who was three years ahead of me in the program- when I was a freshman she was a senior in the nursing program at Marquette.

What she said to me will stick with me for the rest of my life. I remember talking to her about my frustrations about how I didn't really know what I'm trying to do with this nursing and theology stuff. I don't like clinical parts of nursing but I love other parts. I kind of shared my struggles and anxieties and doubts. She said, “Chloe I just think you have so many different interests that are particular but really fill you up and you see them combining. It's just going to take you longer to find your niche but like you'll find
That. I am confident you will find something that you totally love that brings this stuff together.”

That is something that I think about even now in this program. I hold on to it because I did find things out at the end of my one year clinical experience that ended a little sooner than I though. It took me quitting and taking the risk of quitting a job and applying to a bunch of other jobs. I thought I'd be in a nursing home which I really want to be in or end up getting placed in an eating disorder facility. So that was kind of that milestone I had in my clinical nursing world.

And not to say that that you know that niche exploration is not finished within that clinical space but I finally felt like there is a clinical nursing world I can get into and I feel more at peace with. I take that advice now today and I am sure that I don't feel the pressure of it as much right now. I'm still pretty early on in the program, but I'm sure at this end the end of these couple years I will have a different view.

I'm trying not to think about applying to funding agencies- who's going to fund me with these questions? Where do I find my people and where do I find my home and my space?

I think that is always going to be something I carry with me, but I carry it lightly because of what my friend had said- it might just take some time. So that's something that I think will continue to be with me especially at the end. What am I doing? Where am I going? Who are my people? Where are they at? Sorry I'm just holding onto those ideas.

Int: Fantastic. Yeah. Those are all vital questions to ask. I think that it’s good to go through that questioning, even if it isn’t formal.
Int.: Can you tell me a little bit about where you are in your program and what your focus is.
Part.: Alright...I am in the program at University of West Georgia, the Psychology program. You’re familiar with that, right?
Int.: Yes.
Part.: Alright, cool. I just defended my dissertation on Halloween and it took me right over four years. I did four years, and I finished it in October.
Int.: Oh, Congrats, man. So you’re fresh – you’re fresh done.
Part.: Fresh.
Int.: Nice.
Part.: Yeah, so I’m adapting to post-non-research-life right now. It’s pretty cool.
Int.: I hear you. What was your focus? What did you do your research on?
Part.: I did a qualitative photo-voice study and I explored the lived experiences of black students on campus. I explored their experiences on campus
Int.: Undergraduate students or grads...?
Part.: All of them undergrads. I had five participants and I asked them three different questions, and they took two photographs per question, and had written narratives to go along with them
Int.: Gotcha, okay. So when you think back to getting into the doctoral setting what were your big motivations for doing that?
Part.: Prior to getting into the program, I taught Special Ed at a high school, so my experience as a teacher really put me towards graduate studies and I read this cool book – I’m quite sure you’re familiar with it- Paolo Freire Pedagogy of the Oppressed
Int.: Yeah...it’s a classic.
Part.: Yeah, and that blew my mind. It drew me to understand education better and of course try and make an impact on the other side.
Int.: Nice. And have your motivations – have they shifted at all since you’ve been working through the program?
Part.: No. [Laughs]
Int.: They’re pretty much the same.
Part.: Pretty much, yeah.
Int.: So, I’m going to throw out three words to you, okay – and just let me know which ones sort of resonates for you in terms of your own motivations – and it could be a combo, or if none of them resonate and something else does, that’s fine.

So, the three terms are: *advancer, launcher, and altruist.*

Part.: Hmmm…advancer, launcher, or altruist…

I guess advancer probably resonates the most of the three words you shared with me.

Int.: Any particular reasons for that one?

Part.: Thinking about my time in the program…I was trying to…advance my understanding of the phenomenon – you know, the black experience in school – around with, I guess, advancing an agenda that’s not really talked about in academia much.

Int.: And in terms of expectations for your program, did you come in with any expectations – good or bad – about what the experience was going to be like.

Part.: Prior to?

Int.: Yeah.

Part.: Yeah, prior to the program I had expectations. I knew it was going to be a challenge – a really big challenge. It would be the hardest thing I faced. I knew it was going to be high speed and what I expected from the program was to really learn more about how to use qualitative studies so that was a good experience. What expectations did I have of the program…? I guess it was to learn how to be an academic. How to do writing and research and how to advance agendas. But also to learn how to be an author were some of my expectations of the program prior to.

Int.: So, when you said being an academic, so specifically, being an academic in higher education…?

Part.: Yeah, in higher ed.

Int.: Okay.

Part.: Well, in higher ed or K-12. When I got in I wanted to come at K-12 with school policy systems. But when I got in, I guess that’s kind of how my eyes shifted, I shifted and started thinking about higher ed and diversity and inclusion, but now I’m back to K-12 again.

Int.: Does anything account for that circle? Is anything in particular that made that happen?

Part.: What happened in the program?

Int.: Yeah.

Part.: Hmmm…

Int.: Did you get sick of higher ed because of the program or was it something else?

Part.: Well, it was both those. Ideally, I kind of wanted to be in between – probably like a bridge project in between the two.
Int.: Okay.

Part.: Because one dilemma you hear, is we don’t have enough people who look like me or act like me in higher ed, right and that could be one thing. But a problem they look at is academic preparation on one end, on the other end you got look at environment. Those are both my concerns and right now I’m trying to find my best fit between those two worlds.

Int.: Okay, so you’re looking for a niche that combines those things.

Part.: True.

Int.: Got it. Okay. What sort of unexpected realizations have you had since you started the program until now.

Part.: [Laughing]

Int.: Oh, that’s a good one, okay…a bunch I guess…

[Laughing together]

Part.: Oh, man…

Int.: What surprised you most?

Part.: Alright, so when I got into the program I had these high expectations and then I came into it – I got into the program in 2015 – so I came in with a contemporary mind set to certain extent, and once I got within the ivory tower, I was like, “Oh man, this is 1915!” [Laughing] It was a time warp for me so it was a little…it was definitely a culture shock because I was not used to academia at this level so that was my culture shock. I guess to add a little nuance to it all – put it into context – I was the only black student in my program.

Int.: Like at all? Or just in your cohort?

Part.: Well, within a three year period.

Int.: Okay.

Part.: I was the only black student in the program but they just brought in another black student last fall that I’ve never met. But yeah, in a three-year period I was the only black student. Might have been one more ahead of me but she quit the year I joined.

Int.: Okay. So, not a real diverse group of folks.

Part.: Well, if we think about the campus being 41% black undergraduate, right?

Int.: Gotcha.

Part.: To put it into context.

Int.: Any other sort of unexpected things either like personal or intellectual as you were moving though?
Part.: I was honored to be there...but just like I said, it was traumatic for me...especially after the adjustment. But yeah, a lot of personal growth. Where I started off I had short hair I ended up with this...

[Laughing together]

So it was a personal transformation in the process and it was an academic one because it allowed to fine tune my focus.

When I came into the program I wanted to work with education and try to understand better. I had this picture at the time K-12 but then I realized, “Oh...it’s the system itself...” I don’t have that power at all to fight a system at the macro level but I do try to occupy my space genuinely at the micro level.

So, that was a transformation for me to understand my role in this big dilemma we have.

Int.: So, I wanted to ask you a little bit more about challenges you faced. You mentioned a couple of things about when you came in you had an expectation of challenge. What were some of the big things for you? What were some of the biggest challenges? You mentioned the culture shock, getting into academia and you said it seemed like you said a time warp. What other challenges came up for you?

Part.: Well, that was a major challenge, right?

Int.: That’s a big one.

Part.: Now, I’m going to be downplaying. I was literally – when we started reading the literature – and you realize how literature positions you...and you think about savage discovery and all that great stuff...how literature positions your experience and not having that support there on campus kind of helping me out with that narrative that’s going on, right? So the big thing for me was the culture shock and it was something that persisted because to be the only is to be The Only in the classroom. Not only to be the only one physically off, ideologically, because I came from a different perspective. I learned the African-centered perspective while in the program, so it was kind of like I did double the work. I would read the literature they provided in class and then go out and get the same kind of literature from a perspective that I agreed with – so, it was a lot of work in the process. So that was the biggest thing. I don’t know if I answered your question or not.

Int.: No, that did. Just out of curiosity, did you – how can I say this? Did you find a lot of sympathetic ears in faculty, or were there people in your cohort, or was that an uphill fight?

Part.: My cohort was my cohort. I would say I had a good cohort. We were always, I think we were a little bit more critical in my cohort so they kind of understood. They came from their own critical perspective. We had two females in there who really took up the feminism part and had another one who was really into – I don’t know what to call it – but he was really into radical freedom (or whatever he was into) so a lot of people were addressing the same topic but from different dynamics. So, they may not have understood what I was going through but they understood the situation.
They understood pieces of critical part, right?

In every cohort I guess. My cohort was golden. I did have a couple of allies in the faculty. Sad to say that the ones I did end up working with would end up leaving...every year....so every year you get a new faculty to work with because the one you really want to work with....

Alright, I can tell you this. So, before I got into the program I came up there to check it out and it was with a professor and she was the only black professor on that faculty. She left that semester. I never had a chance to work with her. I found the critical person, “Ah, she was great, she knew the issues,” Poof. She’s gone.

And I had another faculty member....

I don’t know where I was coming from but...

What I did was I started taking more independent studies. I took classes at [redacted]. I took classes at [redacted], and I even got mentorship at ...so I just learned how to branch out to people

Also, going to conferences was a big help. I’d present my papers at conferences so I’d find networks that way outside of the department.

But that worked for you okay? A little bit of networking, getting a wider audience and a wider conversation going?

Well, finding support was the main thing. Finding support and like I say I’m learning this perspective as I’m in school with people who see from their perspectives. For a while it was confidence, right? Because and you’re not really sure, right? Because when you’re the black guy talking in the room they don’t really question you that much, so you could be wrong [Laughing] and not know you’re wrong until you get into a crowd that asks you, “Oh, that’s not how...” had to make sure I knew what I was talking about in a way that really helped me out.

Okay. So when you went through some of those challenges – like you said the culture shock things – you mentioned a couple things that seemed to work for you in terms of networking and getting support. Were there any other strategies that you used that were helpful for you?

Like what?

Anything at all. You mentioned the idea of get a reading and you would look for other perspectives on the same idea to sort of balance out what you’re getting. Any other strategies like that that worked for you?

Yeah, that’s what it was. Getting alternative material...joining organizations like I said. ...started writing a little bit about it in my classes, so say I go to a conference and develop networks...I took classes at other colleges...got on the internet and found people who thought similar or just had classes that I was interested in and try to find them that way.

So that was the main thing. Just try to improvise the best way possible was the strategy I used – improvisation.

Okay. So, because you’re done. You defended. You got your whole thing. Did you find that -- and you mentioned a couple of things about this already -- your goals and aspirations for what you
want to do versus what the institutional goals and aspirations are -- how aligned were those and how divergent were those in your experience?

Part.: And that was the great thing about my department, right? They didn’t give us those boundaries...I had opportunity to explore my curiosity within the confines of the department. My biggest dilemma was trying have supportive resources. That was my dilemma. Toward the end it worked out, I ended up getting with Dr...so it all worked out well and I ended up getting a professor from [redacted], that black experience piece, so that’s how that worked out.

Int.: Okay. So do you have anything that sticks out to you in terms of milestones or turning points as you worked through the program? They can be personal, intellectual, or relationship-wise?

Part.: I had moments. Yes. So, one high moment I had was that first semester and that was the low point – and that was when actually, I made a C in the class – so, you know of course in grad school that’s considered failing. In that moment it was really pivotal because I had to make a decision because I was depressed...like I said, new environment....I really had to figure out if I’m going to do this or not.

So, I sat down, and of course when I got to my counselor – oh yeah, I got therapy going that was a great thing with helping me out. But that moment after that fall semester really was a moment I had to look in the mirror and just figure out what I’m going to do. And that’s when I came up with the strategies of looking for my perspective so I started looking at the African-centered perspective on different phenomenon and reaching out to professors.

Another a-ha moment had to be when I started getting this confidence after I attended a conference in Houston, Association of Black Psychologists...I went to their conference in Houston and I got into a network of other psychologists who were doing the work – and that was a great moment for me and it gave me the confidence I didn’t have – it gave me more resources. That’s how I got in line with the professor from [redacted] to work with – because I met him at that conference. That was a big point.

And the third point – it was three different moments – I remember these like it was yesterday...I was doing my independent studies and just having that time to put those pieces together. So, I did eight hours of independent study that semester, I didn’t take any classes within a department and I really just focused on my work. Where are my curiosities and I really started to realize, “Oh, I think I can do this smart thing,” a little bit...my own way...what it represented to me.

Int.: Okay. You mentioned the conference thing a couple times -- have you seen that sort of rippling out to other things in your life or is it pretty much mostly the intellectual stuff or is it a wider thing?

Part.: Well is that social, too? Like did I make friends at the conference?

Int.: Well, anything at all....places where that confidence part came out.

Part.: Oh, yeah, yeah... I got back into fitness, so I picked up yoga. Yoga was very beneficial with me. Actually, I have to give school credit for this one, too. So we had a mindfulness class, a mind and
body class within the college and one of our goals was to pick up a mindfulness activity. So I said, “Alright...let me pick up yoga.” So, we made a blog about it and that kind of stuff and during that process of taking yoga, that really hit me up personally, mentally, spiritually, because lifestyle adjustment, and I’m trying to be a yogi now and things like that – that’s one aspect. I picked up running again. Because I found out – I’m an avid runner as well – as I was jogging I was able to think about things and balance. My family is very important – my son was born my first year in the program...

Int.: Oh, wow!

Part.: And that was pivotal as well. I don’t know if you have children or not, or if you understand but, when you have that child come in the world, and it’s like, “Who will he see – looking at me.” So that reason why I couldn’t quit the program was that – that extra layer of responsibilities. I had my son my first year and I just had my daughter at the end of my third year. They were very important – it was the family unit – being able to come home to my family every night was just therapeutic for me.

You know, going through the stress environment and trying to read two books a day, you could just come home and laugh...

Int.: Okay. So it sounds like you had a lot of stuff going on in terms of family stuff also. How much did you work at balancing things? Was that something you consciously tried to do or did it just sort of happen for you?

Part.: No, it was intentional. I definitely had to learn to balance the day by spreading it. It was good – well, no it wasn’t that first semester...it had to be around that second year because my son was born in March, so had the luxury of having the summer off and spend time and spend the summer with him so that next fall, I was able to really organize it in a way where it maximized my day. Usually, we’re all asleep by eight, I’m up at five, taking care of my personal needs before everybody wakes up, take care of my school needs, and so on...

Yeah, so I had to really intentionally balance my day out to not have overload. I didn’t work on purpose – I didn’t work full-time. I do personal training, so I kept my personal training clients at a minimum, so I was able to make income without it being stressful.

Int.: Okay. So, in the process of going through the doctoral work what have you noticed in terms of changes to the way you write or research or do presentations....anything that has sort of evolved for your as you’ve gone through the program?

Part.: Yeah, I learned how to write.

[Laughing together]

I wasn’t a strong writer at first. I was not able to present at all. So I learned presentation – I learned a lot of skills from my doctoral program – everything you mentioned I learned in the program.

Int.: So, now that you’re wrapped, like October – you just wrapped – what do you envision changing for you? What do you think is going to be the next piece?
Part.: I want to be an author now, so I’m trying to be an authority of the dynamic of psychology in education, so I want to start putting myself out there. I’ve been challenged to put my work out there. I’ve been channeling my thoughts – I haven’t published anything yet. That’s what the challenge is: I did all this cool work, I understand how to analyze, so now, how can I use it in service? So, my goal is to be service-oriented and I guess my focus is education now. That’s kind of my focus now to use what I learned towards that goal.

Int.: Okay. So, what do you feel right now is the most significant part of having the degree? Is it the knowledge base? Is it the shift in perception? Is it credential? What’s the big takeaway for you?

Part.: I would have to say shift in perception. The biggest takeaway had to be shift in perception. And probably, now I’m being granted authority, to a certain extent, right? Being seen by your peers as being able to contribute to academics.

Int.: Can you say a little bit more about shift in perception? Anything specific come to mind when you think about what’s changed for you?

Part.: What changed for me – because I always came in with the same goal – I came in with the goal of trying to better understand my situation. I came into it wondering...when I interacted with people they saw me as the exception, not the norm, right? So, for a while I thought there was something special about me. It may be, but I doubt it – we all do the same thing every day. But the shift really came in by understanding I really wasn’t special...I was able to identify certain aspects of their environment that other people really didn’t bag at the time, right? So how do you say that’s not being special? It’s more just being trained. Or, being a little more mindful of more things in their environment. So, that’s how my perspective changed....versus special, no I just had mentorship along the way that guided me in certain directions that told me what to look out for. So that’s how it was shifted.

Int.: Would you say it tuned you into to stuff that other folks weren’t so tuned into?

Part.: I would say yeah....attention to a certain extent. I did attend to certain things that other people didn’t attend to....and I learned that it didn’t come from me, it came from mentorship primarily. More about behaviorism, right? I was getting positive consequences from what people told me. I was like, “Oh, man!” so I wanted to keep doing cool things like that. And learning how to help. Learning how to assess an environment better, is how my perception really changed.

Int.: Okay. So, looking back now on the entirety of it, if you could do the magic wand thing, is there anything you would change about your experience? Like, anything you did or the context you found yourself in. Is there anything you’d really want to change?

Part.: I would write to publish.

[Laughing together]

It’s different now. “Are you published yet?” It could be a question, right? I would definitely try to write to publish more.

Int.: Okay. Anything program specific? Like, “I wish they had more x or y or z....”

Part.: Well, yeah, Captain Obvious would say: I wish they had more diversity.
Part.: And a little more cultural responsiveness. I think the program is awesome but just like that confidence piece, because I think at one time people wanted inclusion, or whatever diversity, but was unaware about how to actually pursue it. Instead of talking to the black students on campus, they talk amongst themselves.

Int.: Okay.

Part.: I wish it was a more diverse experience, and I wish it wasn’t so lonely. It was depressing for a while. It builds character for a time, I guess.

Int.: Yeah, I hear you.

Part.: Well, cool.

Int.: Anything else that came up for you as we were chatting?

Part.: Not that I could think of. We hit most of the key points, you had some really good questions, man.

Int.: Well, okay, thanks, man. Again, I thank you for taking the time.
First off, can you tell me where you are in the doctoral process right now and what your focus area of study is?

Sure, I am a doctoral candidate. It is my fifth year and I am studying the sensed and embodied experiences of writing center tutors in two different geographical locations. My one field site is in [redacted] at a community school, which are all neighborhood placed institutes, and my second field site is in [redacted], on the coast. It's two very different places and I am just starting my research. I’ve done initial visits and one round of observations in [redacted] and I’m not starting my second visit to the site down in the city until the beginning of next semester.

I got a really late start getting everything up and running because of IRB situation – I was going to have another site and ran into some issues there, so I learned a lot about cross-institutional research, which was part of my frustration with the whole process.

Like I said, it’s my fifth year. I defended my dissertation proposal this past spring. I was actually out on maternity leave in the spring of 2018 so everything got pushed back a semester, so I’m technically a semester behind, but I’m not really.

Okay, that’s fair enough.

Could you talk a little bit about your main motivations for pursuing a doctoral education? What were some of the big reasons you were thinking about doing it?

The main reason was so that I could teach at the higher education level. I’ve always wanted to do first year writing. It’s always been this really strong pull for me. I was a secondary English teacher for eight and a half years before I started my advance graduate study so it felt like a natural progression for me. Teaching high school was getting, really, really, really stressful and I wasn’t happy anymore and my professor from my undergrad had been poking and prodding me to apply to these PhD programs, specifically in [redacted] and then a whole slew of personal shit happened and I decided that I was going to come home. So, that was the main reason was so that I could really do what I wanted to, but the second reason was so that I could continually learn and be a student again. I really miss that. I loved being a student when I was in my master’s program – and I found that it’s not the same...

[Laughing together]

...at all.

Right.

It’s completely different

That’s a fair assessment.
As you’ve gone through the program, from the time you started until now, have your motivations shifted at all, have they changed, or evolved?

Part: Yeah, I’m actually more focused on becoming a writing center director. I was happen-chance placed in the communications center here on campus for my TA position after my first year and I loved it. I absolutely loved it. It was the culmination of all of the things I loved about teaching writing and about teaching in general without any kind of stakes. But, I also got to work with undergraduate tutors and could really be a mentor for them and I realized that there didn’t have to be a separation between the administrative things that I’ve always loved to do and that I’m really good at and the teaching element – they’re not always separate, they can live together – and that’s where the writing center opened up a new opportunity for me to think about in terms of a professional goal. So, that’s really my trajectory right now is to find a writing center director position after I’m done.

Int: That’s one of the things I do in one of my other hats.

Part: Oh, awesome!

Int: I coordinate my campus writing center and we have a staff of six paraprofessional tutors and usually have five or six peer tutors also.

Part: Oh, that’s awesome.

Int: Yeah, so when you mentioned being a writing center director-coordinator….just one of those weird coincidences, right? They abound…

I’m going to throw out three words for you and I’m just curious which one resonates for you the most in terms of your motivational package – and it could be a combo, if you have a different word, that’s okay, too. The words are *advancer, launcher*, and *altruist*.

Part: Hmmm…..can you repeat those one more time?

Int: Sure… *advancer, launcher*, and *altruist*.

Part: I would say *advancer* and I think a lot of that is just where I am in my program – that’s the hope of my dissertation is to advance what writing center tutor education looks like, getting away from the relational sphere between a tutor and a writer and engaging in a more personal individual idea of the importance of preparing writing center tutors to do the demanding hard work that being a writing center tutor entails. That’s definitely my main driver is to address what I have seen and experienced personally, as a gap in really all of teacher education. I was never given any sort of training – and I don’t like that term – on what it means to be a teacher. It’s not just communicating information and content to people, it’s a very intrapersonal thing and nobody really talks about that – they kind of set that aside and I think that’s the thing that’s become the most important to me is advancing what that means. What does it mean to be a tutor and advancing that idea – and advancing myself? Not necessarily for the pomp and circumstance to be called Doctor – quite frankly, that scares the living piss out of me – but to advance my
understanding of how other people experience the world and that has become the
driver of my dissertation is to tell people’s stories.

Int: Okay.

If you can recall back to when you first started your program and when you were
ramping up to get into it, do you recall any particular expectations you had of what it
would be like in terms of intellectual growth or personal growth or anything like that?
Did you have any ideas of what you would encounter?

Part: I knew it was going to be really challenging. Number one, I was uprooting my entire life
to move 900 miles away from the life that I had built for myself and I knew that was
going to be really challenging. I was coming home and so that was kind of good for me,
but I also knew it was going to be challenging in terms of the work load just because of
the institute of where I am – it’s pretty prestigious and also pretty competitive. So, I
thought because of the competitive nature of the undergrad program that the PhD
program would be that way, too and it hasn’t been that way and it’s been really, really
wonderfully supportive. I have an awesome cohort of people. We are all friends. We are
all part of a community. We all support each other. One of my friends and I, we meet
weekly but I didn’t know that was something I would have to do on my own and seek
out by myself. A lot of the support that I thought would carry from my master’s degree,
in terms of support from faculty has been way beyond my expectations of what that
looks like.

It’s taken me a while to get to that point, and I can share that with you also if you want
to hear about that a little bit?

Int: Yeah, sure.

Part: The long story short is...I broke up with my previous advisor last spring after I had
defended my dissertation proposal, so I was already a PhD candidate and I broke up
with my previous advisor because she was emotionally and psychologically abusive. I
had no idea that that would be a thing. I went in thinking that my advisor would be
super supportive and would understand the demands of what it would mean to be not
just a PhD student, but to also be a mother. Because she is a mother I thought that that
would translate and transfer – and it didn’t. That was really challenging for me. I wasn’t
aware of the bureaucratic mess. I was a student, much like I was when I was an
undergrad and a master’s student I would be – not immune, but shielded from a lot of
that stuff that’s happening in the department, and that’s not the case at all especially
with that advisor.

I don’t experience that now with the advisors that I have now and so the expectation of
having this support system to help you through an individualized program, which is the
nature of the program here – we all do whatever we want to do as long as you can find
somebody to help you with your work.

The other thing is I thought that coming into a pretty established program would mean
that there would be opportunities for all of us to make sure that we got the teaching
experience that we were going to need in order to find a job when we were done. That expectation, which was promised to us when I got here, was taken away. I have had zero – well, I wouldn’t say zero, I still have my experience of being a high school teacher, but that doesn’t count. So, I have had to deal with the repercussions of leaving and then not having any higher ed teaching experience because we’re also not allowed to moonlight.

Int: Oh, okay...

Part: We can actually lose our funding if people find out that we’ve been moonlighting. So, I have played that card straight. Other people are braver than I am in that regard but I’m not playing that game.

Int: Moonlighting specifically as teachers or as anything?

Part: As teachers. We’re not supposed to adjunct in addition to our other TA responsibilities and that is even more complicated when you’re on fellowship like I am. We are not supposed to be doing anything except working on our dissertation.

Int: What you just mentioned about being shielded from the internal politics that seemed like something that surprised you?

Part: I was not expecting to be – at least from my previous relationship with my previous advisor – I wasn’t expecting to be thrust into the middle of that without being asked to be a part of it. In the past, before I started the program, there was always a grad student representative at all of the faculty meetings, and that stopped when I got here. There was an opportunity in the past for us to have a presence in those meetings for a certain period of time – obviously, for certain business, we were not allowed – but that has been stripped away. There’s been a really fine line between, “What do we do as graduate students? How invested are we in the department and the program’s success?” and “How much do we keep on truckin’ and just stay focused on what we are supposed to do?”

I think it’s really important to know the context of that: our department is in the middle of revising our entire PhD program.

Int: Oh, wow...

Part: So we who are here now – there’s nine of us here presently – we are probably going to be one of the last in our actual degree program. The new set of students that come in, not next year, but the coming year, will be a whole new degree program.

Int: The title is going to change?

Part: Yeah, the whole program is going to change – the title and the program – the whole thing. The whole thing.

Int: Wow...
Part: I think that’s kind of important. There was this really weird...it’s hard to describe...it almost feels like...because you spend so much time here, at least for me, it’s hard for me to not feel invested, especially when I was working in the writing center. It was really important to me that the center was successful, that was growing, that we were doing things that we were trying to get more students in the door. Then, that just kind of got taken away because I didn’t get a TA position, I got a fellowship instead. So, that has been really hard for me because I feel part of my motivation for being here has taken a back seat a little bit and I’m not tutoring right now. There’s good and bad things about that – it allows me to take a really big step backwards and really better understand why I’m doing everything I’m doing but it also makes me feel I’m not as attached to this whole thing except for being in my office every day when I’m not traveling.

Int: Continuing on the theme of unexpected things. Have there been any other unexpected realizations or surprising things that you’ve noticed either about the program or about yourself as you’ve kept on going?

Part: Not so much about the program, the faculty, but about the school in general. I got pregnant at the end of my second year. I found out I was pregnant in April of 2017. I was in the middle of finishing my coursework – it was my last semester of coursework, and I was like, “I can do this. I’m totally fine. I’m going to get my exams done in the fall before I even have this kiddo. Everything is going to be good,” and I ended up being early and having Parker early. In the midst of trying to get all of that taken care of, I went and did a formal request for physical accommodations because I was so pregnant. I was at the end of my third trimester when we were scheduling my exams and my doctor didn’t want me to be stuck in a room by myself unattended that late because stress can induce labor.

Int: Who knows, right?

Part: Who knows – I was thirty-five weeks pregnant and we retrying to figure this all out. The old exam format was sitting in a room for four hours by yourself, timed: no food, no drink, no break. Four hours. Straight memory. No nothing. So, when I told my OB this he said, “That’s not happening. That’s not okay. You’re going to take your exams at home.”

I brought my doctor’s note to the then general program director and she was like, “Well, we have to go through the official channels. You have to go through the office for disability services for students and you have to make a formal request for accommodations,“ and I’m like, “Okay, fine. This is no big deal. This is not new to me. I’ve worked in secondary schools. All of this is totally cool.”

And then I went and met with them.

I have never felt so unhuman in my life. The woman that I worked with told me there was no reason why I needed physical accommodations...there was no reason physically, or mentally, or ability driven that would require me to take my exams at home when that was not the traditional format and that it was going to take the GPD to give me a waiver – and she was not willing to do that.
She was going to extend my time to six hour and I could stop and start the clock whenever I wanted. I’m like, “Oh, now a four hour exam is going to turn into an eight hour exam that’s not changing anything. This has nothing to do with my ability to do the work. I can do the work, but I need to be able to lay down on my floor and be somewhere I am comfortable and walk around. I can’t do that in a room with a desk. I can’t even fit in the desk you’re asking me to sit in.”

We ended up essentially combing through the student handbook for our program and finding that you didn’t have to take all of your exams at the same time and I ended up taking my one exam that semester because it was traditionally a take-home exam and the GPD gave me a whopping extra twelve hours. After explaining to her that I was sleeping for twelve hours and traditionally all of the other people in my program hold a forty-eight hour spread of just straight work to get this exam done. That’s all you had was forty-eight hours for your major exam, and I’m like, “I can’t. I’m literally sleeping half of that. I’m either going to take one of these now and you’re going to give me an accommodation, or you’re not.”

Thankfully, my now-advisor was a fierce, fierce advocate for me. She went in guns slinging. She essentially told the GPD that if she didn’t give accommodations I could absolutely win a Title IX suit against her and the school.

Int: You probably could, yeah.

I’m curious about this because this isn’t the first story I’ve come across that has this vibe. I’m asking you to speculate a little bit, why do you think they were so adamant about those things?

Part: I think a lot of it is about the culture on campus. There’s this very much, “You need to be able to hack it. If you can’t do it, you shouldn’t be here,” and that I think, pervades a lot of the policy that goes on, which was something that I was really trying to push up against.

When I met with the person at disability services, I told her, “Listen, I’m not asking for anything beyond me being able to take my exams at home. I know that it is totally not normal and it goes up against what everybody else is doing...”

But they were also in the middle of changing the exam format when I was making this request because I set that in motion. I told many of my professors, “This exam format pedagogically makes no sense. If you ask any composition pedagogy person about these exams, they’re going to tell you that’s crap. It doesn’t gauge anything: it doesn’t gauge synthesis, it doesn’t gauge analysis, it doesn’t gauge original thought -- it simply gauges whether you can memorize information. Is that what we really want to do?”

In the middle of all of this, they’re trying to change the exam format, I’m requesting this and it’s almost like they are butting heads. The idea of, “You need to be able to do it on your own – this way,” made it a rigid requirement in a situation that is so rare on campus that it’s almost unprecedented.
That was a weird semester. There were three other people – three other PhD student that I knew personally – that were pregnant. That was very weird. Other than that, I know of only one other student in this program in the last ten years that has been pregnant. To see a pregnant person on campus is very weird. To be a pregnant person on campus was very weird.

**Int:** This seems like it was a major challenge because it was such a big deal all the way around.

Have you encountered any other examples where those identity markers contributed to challenges? You know, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, condition or anything like that? Any other examples come up for you?

**Part:** I think in general being a woman here at this school is one of those weird markers. Traditionally, up until – I couldn’t give you the exact date, but it was probably twenty years ago – this school was male only and it was majority white male from very, very wealthy families. This is probably one of the most privileged schools I have ever stepped foot on and it makes it difficult for someone who is from a working class background – and I was a first generation college student – and it’s been very hard for me to navigate a lot of the policies and a lot of the culture here on campus, especially working with undergrads. I think especially when I was pregnant that my femininity was hyper visible. As a female on campus you’re always visible because we are still in the very small minority – I think this campus is only 30% female overall ethnicity, socioeconomic, all that stuff – including international students of which we have a very large population of – it’s like 30% international.

So, being pregnant and having your femininity really pronounced was at times, really, really uncomfortable physically – and not just because your body is not your body – but people making comments that physically made me tense up and cringe.

**Int:** Do you remember anything in particular? What kinds of stuff?

**Part:** I actually had a professor in our department tell me that I was crazy for getting pregnant before I had a tenure track position because I was ruining my career...

**Int:** [Softly] Wow...

**Part:** ...and a female one at that...which goes to my motivation...that is not my motivation. I don’t care about tenure. I don’t’ care about being published. I care about people and that’s why I’m doing what I’m doing.

I also had students that I was working with at the writing center ask me if I knew what I was doing. I had a slew of students that I had worked with in the past – in hindsight, probably I shouldn’t have done – but they were curious and most of them were female and they would see the kid move in my stomach...elbows and knees...and they were like, “Is that real? Is that really happening? Can you feel that?” and I was like, “Yeah, of course I can feel it. Do you not see the foot sticking out of my stomach...?” and they were like, “Can I feel it?” and I was like, “Uh...sure!”
Int: That’s gotta be a weird situation.

Part: I had known them for almost two years – these were repeat students.

Int: Okay.

Part: That was really odd but then...the glaring. The gaze. The male gaze, specifically. Walking down the sidewalk and literally watching people follow me like this [demonstrates behavior] craning their neck to watch me walk by them. It was the weirdest thing I've ever experienced.

As soon as I left campus it was a non-issue – I was just another person. There is a bubble around this place and the world does not permeate.

Int: Interesting.

This ties in with that professor comment, “...you’re ruining your career...” have you experienced things where the goals and aspirations of the institutions versus your own aspirations – have they been similar or divergent?

Part: They've been pretty divergent, but I've been lucky – I have people on my committee and I have advisors that are supportive of that. They all know that I am not getting this degree for prestige, like some of the people that I know are.

The program itself really tried to funnel you into that tenure track research focus just by way of the content that you’re learning in your classes and not having any teaching experience available and the requirement that you have a published peer reviewed article and at least two conference presentations and an accepted grant proposal before you even graduate.

Int: Wow...okay...and that’s for everybody?

Part: I have done the two conference presentations, an accepted grant proposal – I have not done a peer reviewed article publication. I have been reassured by many, many people that that is not going to keep me from graduating

Int: Is that a formal expectation? Is that in the graduate handbook?

Part: It is in our program’s graduate handbook.

Int: It’s interesting to hear about other programs – all the folks I’ve talked to, you become an expert in your own stuff, you become an expert in the program, the political climate and everything else – so hearing about other folks and what they experience, especially things like that, that’s a fairly rigorous standard in some ways.

Part: Yeah.

I don’t think it is like that for every program -- every program is different. The OG – of course, here I am talking acronyms – the Office for Graduate Education – talk about knowing your own thing – has a certain set of credit hour standards at what I call a macro level. So, there’s a certain number of credit hours. There are certain other
milestone that you have to meet: qualifying exams, dissertation, proposal, creation and defense, and dissertation defense. Other than that, OGE has zero claim over what each of the programs does within those parameters.

Int: Okay...each program has a customizable thing that they do?
Part: Yeah.
Int: Interesting...wow...

This is kind of related. The things you’ve mentioned already have been fascinating.

Have you experienced anything you would call a milestone or a turning point – positive or negative – besides the programmatic things? Getting your IRB done is a big deal, but besides – and I’m going to put this in scare quotes, the hoop jumping stuff – have you noticed any other milestones or turning points intellectually, personally, relationship wise?

Part: My first field site visit was definitely one of those milestones in the most wonderful way. I have never done ethnography except for in my master’s program and that was considered an action research project because it was in my own classroom with my own students so that it would be applicable to my teaching in the future.

I’ve never gone to a place I don’t know. I’ve never gone to a place where I don’t know anybody and essential asked and politely begged people to be a part of my study. And when I got there, and this is in the site in Virginia, everybody was so wonderful, so open, and so excited that it created this wonderful pick-me-up that I needed for a lot of reasons.

It’s been a personal challenge to be okay with leaving my family for an extended period of time to do this. Since I’ve started the program, I’ve had this really weird sense of this is very important to me but I also have all these other obligations I need to continue to keep as priorities and I’ve learned that all of that is not set in stone. Everything is so fluid and moves. It’s a lot of shuffling. That’s kind of how I see it. There’s a lot of spinning plates – you choose which ones you’re going to spin and at the same time and which ones you can put down.

Int: And which ones are going to crash and shatter, right?
Part: Thankfully, none of that has happened yet – except for a failed research site. I would say that was another really big milestone that it’s okay that something didn’t work out the way you thought it was going to. I had attached to – and it’s so foolish now that I think about it – that this is going to be my second site because it was close to home, it was accessible, everything was going to be fine and then I ended up going through the IRB ringer with that school. They wanted me to make four different sets of revisions to my protocol and my informed consent after it was already approved here.

I hadn’t heard from them in a month after the last set of revisions that I sent them and that was two weeks ago. I said, “Listen, we are getting into November – I have to do
this,” and I felt really slighted professionally that somebody couldn’t contact me and communicate with me in a reasonable amount of time.

It’s serendipitous because my field site that’s in the city is actually better.

Int: So it worked out.

Part: Yeah, it worked out great. I knew that when I had to drop that site – I only had one site and my advisors were like, “You have to have two. You really need to have two. You need one set in this context and you need another one to see the difference as an outsider...to be able to emplace yourself somewhere different than where you’re used to.”

I was like, “Oh, crap...I’m going to throw caution to the wind and send out emails to everyone I can possibly think of...” and it just happened. So that was really great – the failure of the first site was great for me in terms of growth and then the first field site visit to be able to go and really dig in and do real ethnographic work – I am hooked. It’s awesome. I absolutely love it.

That was really good for me because I’ve had severe imposter syndrome the whole time I’ve been here which I deal with on a daily basis – somedays better than others. So, having that really awesome experience has been really good for me because I’m realizing that I can do this – and I have been doing this for my entire professional life. I’ve interviewed students when I was teaching. I was a participant observer. I was asking important hard questions of them. I’ve been doing it forever – I just didn’t know it. Nobody was calling it that.

Now, I would also say that embracing the slow graduate mentality has been instrumental in me still being here.

Int: Can you say more about that? That’s an interesting phrase, the slow graduate mentality – what does that mean to you?

Part: There is an article that’s based off the slow professional and it’s all about not attaching yourself to the rat race. Essentially, taking your time in better understanding the importance of intentionality. So, if I’m going to sit down for an hour, I’m going to sit down for an hour. If I’m going to sit down for five hours, I’m going to sit down for five hours. But when I leave my office, I leave all of this here. I don’t think about at home. I don’t check my school email when I’m at home. I don’t deal with anything related to my dissertation at home. Some people have told me that I am nuts...that I’m never going to finish, but I’m more productive when I’m here because I’m focused. I actually get things done. It becomes a signal for me, “Okay, I’m here. I’m working.” So, having that shift of I have to read everything, I have to do everything, I have to blank-blank-blank meet all of these expectations and essentially chase the carrot.

I’m going to use this as a marker – one of my friends was like, “Once you do your first article, the second one will be easier,” and I’m like, “You’re missing the point. That is not what I am trying to do.” I’m trying to go through a day at a time. I am doing things
moment-by-moment. That’s it. Adapting that has helped me be more creative. I’m more motivated. Also, I feel it’s made me a better partner to my husband and a better mother because I’m seeing this as something that is not the end all be all of my entire life like it is to a lot of people in my program. This is all they have to do. This is not all I have to do. I have a lot of other things I need to do like take care of another small human. My husband owns his own business and we have a lot of stuff going on at the same time so there are a lot of moving parts to our life and I’m the one that keeps the wheels on the bus.

Embracing all of that about myself and realizing that just because I’m not twenty-five and I’m not single and I’m not coming right out of my undergrad degree doesn’t mean that I am any less capable of doing things the way I want to do them. Doing things on my terms has been really important for me because I’m not the typical PhD student at this place.

Int: It sounds like the strategy you’ve developed is being very present at whatever place you are: when you’re working, you’re working; when you’re not working, you’re not working. That’s a good boundary.

Part: Yep – and sometimes it’s not distinguished. Especially now when I’m in the middle of research and I have participants emailing me, I don’t want them to have to wait until I go back to school but I’ll wait specifically when Parker goes to bed and I have a half an hour in between when he goes to bed and my husband gets home so that doesn’t interrupt the time we spend together because we are like ships passing in the night.

Int: Right.

I want to go back to something you said before you. You mentioned that really specifically about the imposter syndrome. Have you noticed your own work especially when you did your first field placement, has that imposter feeling lessened since you’ve been doing field work and research or is it at the same place?

Part: It’s lessened, but I’m not sure if it’s because I’m not here in this culture…

Int: On your campus? In the bubble like you said.

Part: Yeah, the bubble...or if it’s because I feel more comfortable and I equate a lot of that with my own personal preparation before I go and do field work. I do a lot of writing and I have to travel to both sites and I have a lot of down time. I do a lot of writing. I listen to a lot of podcasts that help me focus and stay present, like you said and realize that there is something bigger going on here. It’s not only what I can see, what I can perceive, and what I can notice but here are other things going on beyond that might not be available to me at this point as possibilities but they are still there as possibilities.

Int: You mentioned the writing – that you do a lot of writing.

Part: A lot, yeah.
Int: Most folks in doctoral programs...lots of writing. What have you noticed about that since you’ve started the program until now? What has writing done for you? Has it changed for you? Is it the same? Do you have any thoughts about what you’ve noticed along the way?

Part: When I first started the program, I was writing every single morning before I went to class or came to campus – every morning – and then that got really challenging after I had a kid. It was really challenging for me to pick that back up. I’m still working on sitting down and reserving time for myself every day. Not just for my writing practice, but for my yoga and meditation practices – that has been hard for me to pick back up. Also, trying to not judge myself and embrace the fact that if I get five minutes on my yoga mat or if I get five minutes of meditation at home that’s really great. But this space has also been really wonderful for that.

My writing has really...I think because I was a confident writer when I came into the program, I’ve only fine-tuned a lot of what I had already done. It’s very important to me that my writing is accessible and isn’t inflated and it’s relatable for people and so I’ve tried to fine tune what that feels like for me and what it sounds like on the page and I practice it a lot. I try to write for at least an hour everyday – and it doesn’t necessarily have to be for my dissertation writing. I found myself writing a lot about non-dissertation things that end up being in my dissertation things. Once the wheels start spinning and you move from potential to kinetic energy it’s hard to stop that wheel from spinning. Some of the wheels start spinning together – that’s the best way I know how to put it. I find a lot of inspiration from the things that I’m writing about that are happening in real time and I’ve been forming a lot of my dissertation writing – even if it ends up a little two word phrase – that becomes what I start my dissertation writing about.

Instead of seeing it as a separate practice of personal writing / scholarly writing it’s started to overlap a little bit. It’s almost like those concentric circles when you’re trying to find the similarities between the two things when you were in grade school? There’s this little slice between that is starting to overlap. I see it like two primary colors that are becoming this third color – there are elements of both of them in that very specific kind of writing.

I think a lot of that is because of the nature of what I’m writing about. I’m writing about things that are really important to me as a human and that might be why, I know that there are people who are like, “My dissertation writing is completely different from my life,” but I can’t speak to that.

It’s also been really good for me to have really shitty writing days where it’s really hard for me to sit down and write. I had one of those the other day. So, it’s really poignant that we are having this conversation today. I got no writing done yesterday – at all. I had so much other stuff going on in my head and I tried every single thing that I had in my wheelhouse, in my toolbox to clear all of it out – and it was not clearing out and I was locked up.
Int: Going back for a second – the writing thing – you mentioned the overlap. You mentioned a little bit because these are things that are important to you – is there anything specific you can point to topically or in terms of research direction that you really notice like “Oh, this is something in my personal life and it just dives right into the dissertation,” any examples that come to mind?

Part: Yeah, specifically my own experience as a contemplative practitioner really has found its way into both. When I started writing as an adolescent, on the recommendation of my therapist, I didn’t realize I was writing in order to work out a lot of my stuff. To empty this – to get rid of all of the shit rambling around in my head. I didn’t know what that was and she didn’t have a name for it then – that was in the 90’s before this whole boom happened. I think that’s definitely The Thing and a lot of the way that I approach that, my writing as a contemplative practice, not just in content but also in practice. When I sit down to write for my dissertation or I’m sitting down to work on something that is academically focused, I try to not pass judgment on what I’m getting down on the paper. Sometimes that’s really, really hard because imposter syndrome comes back up, “You have nothing good to say! You have nothing good to say! Everybody’s already said this before! What are you really contributing?” Sometimes that gets hard to quiet that want to just give up and when that happens – I just abandon that and I go and I write about whatever it is that I notice.

Because I have this really lovely window in my office, there is a student – an undergraduate – who plays the fife on his way to class every single day.

Int: A fife!? 

Part: He marches across campus playing his fife. I had a conversation with him yesterday because I literally ran into him in the quad. I said, “You make my day every single day!” He marches across the quad and practices his fife to play for the fife and drum corps every single day. So, yesterday I was having that really crappy writing day, I wrote about him playing the fife across the campus and I ended up writing a poem about it. That has helped me embrace the importance of what it means to be an ethnographer, when you are in place that’s not your own, being aware of all of that and how that can inform the writing that you’re doing as research. Without having that contemplative element to my own writing practice, I wouldn’t be able to notice those things and I wouldn’t see them as important or valuable or a way to understand what I’m experiencing and how that’s affecting me.

Int: That makes a lot of sense.

Looking forward a little bit, when you think about wrapping up this dissertation process and being on the other end of graduation, how do you envision your life changing?

Part: I know because I was already a professional before, I know it’s probably not going to change a whole lot. In terms of demands, specifically in terms of my time and attention, it’s just going to shift a little bit – at least I hope. The job market for running writing programs and writing centers is not all that hot right now. I think as I’m looking towards
that moment specifically in the future, I’m trying not to focus on it too much. But I’m also very aware that I might not be able to do what I really want to do when I’m first done. I’ve resigned myself to being okay with working part-time and doing some grant work writing or working for a nonprofit doing communication things doing grant writing or whatever. If that were to happen – and I don’t want to speculate too much and project – but if that were to happen, I think that my life overall would be very different because I know there would be something missing. I know – especially not being in the classroom and not tutoring specifically for so long – that that is where I’m supposed to be. It’s the only thing that I want to do. I would choose it anyway. It’s what I would do even if I weren’t paid.

Int: That’s fair.

When you look at that post-graduation time, and you mentioned this a little bit, you mentioned it at the beginning when you were talking about advancing ideas in education for writing tutors and what they do and things of that nature. When you finish, what do you think will be the most significant part of the experience for you? Is it going to be the credential? Is it going to be the information? Is it going to be research experience? Some combination?

Part: That’s a good question!

I honestly think it’s the experience overall. Specifically, the research experience and doing something that is relatively new to me but also, what I’m already learning about people and getting to know people that I never would have known if I hadn’t done this. I’m already creating relationships with wonderful human beings and that has already positively impacted my experience especially as a graduate student.

But then I also think that the experiences that I’ve had and the challenges that I’ve had are also going to be one of the things I am going to take away from this especially as I think about being in higher ed eventually. There’s this mantra, “That’s the way it is.” I don’t want that anymore. I’m tired of hearing it, “This is the way it is. This is what grad school is like.” No. That is not how it should be. It should not be indoctrinating people to do the same thing that their professors went through…that their professors went through… that their professors went through. That’s the one thing that I get angry about and I am still angry about it. I wasn’t okay with being angry about it when I was going through it because it made me really vulnerable. But now, that I’m on the other side of it and seeing people go through what I went through and they’re just laying down and essentially taking it, I’m like, “No! Be angry! You do not deserve to be treated like this. This is not right.” So, that makes me want to be a mentor and an advisor to another graduate student who sees that it doesn’t have to be that way. That’s the big picture, right? Trying to change what this whole experience actually should be like. It should be really eye-opening. It should be really intellectually challenging. But it shouldn’t be mentally, emotionally, psychologically damaging.

Int: Nicely encapsulated and I swear you did not see my last question because it rolls right into that. Looking back on this experience, you said it very explicitly, “It doesn’t have to
be this way. It’s not the way it is,” right? What would you think of changing in your experience? General stuff? Specific stuff? If you could go back and magically make some changes, what comes up for you?

Part: Well, I wouldn’t have chosen my first advisor. I would have thought more critically of what that meant because I didn’t know what that meant. Nobody tells you what that role is meant to do. So, that would be number one. Number two, in my first year, I would have spent less time worrying about what I should be doing and just doing what I wanted to do. I think that I would have gotten to this point in my research trajectory, earlier if I hadn’t listened to everybody else telling me I had to leave my teaching self behind and that – what did my one professor say? She said, “You should keep your personal and research interests separate,” and I’m glad that I stopped listening to that because I listened to that for the first whole year of my experience.

Int: Just out of curiosity, what do you think the motivation is for that kind of comment? Obviously, whoever told you that thought that was important enough to mention. What goal are they searching for there? Is there some assumption that they’re working from there? Any thoughts on that?

Part: I really wonder if it’s just not having the opportunity to really choose what it is that you really want to do. I know from working with people that are in other graduate programs here on campus that they don’t get a say in what they do for their dissertation research. It is very separated for them. They have no investment in it. So I wonder if that’s where it comes from. Being able to really create this interdisciplinary home for myself has been really valuable for me but I also know that not everybody has that opportunity.

Int: That makes a lot of sense. That’s interesting

That’s all my formal stuff. Just selfishly speaking, you gave some really fantastic responses, so thank you.

Part: Oh, you’re welcome it was really great.