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Reflective Practice Portfolio

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Critical and Creative Thinking

## **Exhibit 1**

601: Critical Thinking

Fall 2016

Reflection: One of the skills I learned this semester was how to hold two opposing ideas simultaneously. In my manifesto, I explored how multiple opposing ideas could exist within the same concept without losing their individual truths. In the Critical Thinking class, we focused on identifying how our own perceptions informed the information we received. I wanted to use my manifesto as an opportunity to push further into how language plays a role in shaping, communication, and, sometimes, cementing our perceptions—even when those perceptions are inconsistent or contradictory. I was especially drawn to *The Thinking Classroom* and the language of thinking, mental management, and metacognition. I used these concepts as a foundation for my 10 tenets, attempting to provide examples of how understanding the dichotomous nature of language could help its users brandish it more effectively and with more authority.

Product: Briefing 3 Manifesto

In approaching this manifesto, I considered the themes present in my principles micro-journal, my personal project, and my own outside interests. What stood out most prominently to me was the balance required to think critically, continuously: that contradictory ideals may need to be adopted if either is to be effective. What was also clear was that the medium is the message. Just as “the processes of thinking are intertwined with the content of thought”, the composition of language is inextricable from its content. In recognizing that, I zeroed in on the role language plays in education, communication, and connection, as well as the rules governing language in and of itself: the nature of language to clarify or obfuscate. The resulting manifesto is a creative interpretation of a set of binary principles central to the language of critical thinking based on the claims that “our intentions, beliefs, and philosophy as teachers and leaders all give rise to our language... our language helps to shape our intention and that of our students” and that “good thinking is cultivated by exposure to a rich linguistic environment.” Its goal is to stimulate pre-thinking processes in order to encourage deliberate language practice that may give way to constructive, critical thinking.

### The Essential Language Manifesto

Every time we open our mouths, put pen to paper, or poise our fingers above the keyboard, we have an opportunity: create or repeat. Each word is its own path, and the pattern in which we lay them simultaneously illuminates and constructs a unique destination. We can choose to wander down familiar roads, grind habitual phrases into dust, and feel confident in the predictable exchange of pleasantries. To do so is comfortable; it requires little thought. We cannot always

afford to travel, even from our routines. But we can also choose to pursue unknown corridors, pick through forests of forgotten words, and feel foolish as we fumble with the foreignness in our own language. To do so is courageous; it requires careful consideration and constant vigilance.

Language is our milestone. We mark our first words and our last in commemoration of the story told in between. To accept this is to be accountable for the power language possesses and to be answerable to the inherent implications of its use. By engaging in any dialogue, we, knowingly or unwittingly, commit ourselves to the following tenets:

1. Language is Permanent— What is said cannot be unsaid. We are responsible for our words once they have left us. They are our children, and they can bring us pride or disappointment in equal measure. They are ours to live with, and they live on with others even after we've gone. They are our history and our legacy, and we will be remembered by them. Language is enduring, unrelenting, surviving, and long-suffering; use it with care.

2. Language is Transitory— Language is fashionable; words are worn for a season and cast aside, *de rigueur*. Language is a sign of the times. It's groovy, neat, rad, gnarly, sick, and wicked. We use some words in our childhood and rarely, if ever, again. Our words are less than sticks and stones and leave no vapor trail; use them with abandon.

3. Language Connects Us— In our desire to communicate and connect, we, from infancy, push our breath into intelligible shapes in agreed upon structure accepted by a particular community.

It is our initiation into a fraternal bond of like-tongued and like-minded. The very structure of our words draws from ancient roots and builds bridges across continents. Language is unifying; use it to break barriers.

4. Language Divides Us— Language indicates native and nonnative. The harsh tilt of foreign words in foreign mouths has given rise to sneering, jingoistic mocking. It categorizes us and siphons us into relegated territories. No matter how high we scale the wall and study the landscape of another's yard, we are not at home there. Even in our own dialect, language is exacting, esoteric, and elite: signifying educated or illiterate. We practice jargon, idiom, slang, or vernacular to identify insiders from outsiders. Language is the division of people and place; use it to strengthen your own community.

5. Language is a Tool— We use language to construct, instruct, and accomplish. Our nouns, verbs, and adjectives are brick, mortar, and concrete. The building blocks of the most basic ideas, language propels concept into creation. Without the language to call a spade a spade, how could we dig deeper into the trenches of invention? Language is an instrument to bring thought into action; use it to carry out small and grand tasks.

6. Language is an Art— The crafting of a sentence takes care and skill. Each word chosen for its quality, hue, or timbre, a sentence is a selection of individual pieces combined to express that which we feel most intimately. To create worlds, dreams, and lives with such seamlessness, a

masters of language must imagine with shades of their alphabet. Language is the hewing of form from mass; use it to carve your identity.

7. Language Must Be Free— Language is public property. We have a right to speak or to write unreservedly. Our thoughts belong to no one but ourselves unless we are free to express them. We are too brief in existence to hold them dear, too precious to repress our realities. Language is a liberation of spirit; use it to deliver yourself to the world.

8. Language Must Be Cautious— Language is a weapon. It is a latent explosion. It is a finger on a trigger pointed aimlessly. It is a sword brandished directly. We wound, enrage, or mislead with the words we wield. They can initiate wars, divorces, maledictions, and ideologies. Language is capable of mass destruction; use it with discretion.

9. Language is Truth— Language gives form to data. It conveys the facts of our universe and challenges concurrent hypotheses to reach further until evidence crowns a victor. It unveils mysteries and exposes guilt or innocence. We support our beliefs with words like “faith”, “empirical”, “proven”, or “God.” Language is an expression of universal and personal honesties; use it with precision.

10. Language is a Lie— Language is a manipulation of sound intended to satisfy surreptitious yearnings. The agreed upon deception is that our language accurately expresses our aims. We use them sloppily, tossing unvetted words together out of convenience or habit. Used with

premeditation, words can misconstrue, swindle, or slander. Language is an opportunity to invent terrible wonders; use it to get your children to sleep.

## **Exhibit 2**

602: Creative Thinking

Spring 2017

Reflection: My time in the Creative Thinking class has made an inestimable impact on the way I see myself as a thinker, a writer, and a creative. From the start of this class, I have pushed myself to look at and evaluate myself honestly and to share my findings. I am, admittedly, very self-protecting, so creative pursuits can be challenging for me—no matter how much I may desire to fulfill creative goals—because it means being vulnerable and risking observation. This course has helped me accept that vulnerability, risk-taking, and even fear are important aspects of creative expression and that the only failure I should truly fear is the failure to try. In my second reflective review, I offer myself an analysis of my growth, a plan for continuing my progress, and a chance to challenge the way I have seen myself in order to step more confidently into my creative self.

Product: Reflective Review 2

The past 12 weeks have been psychologically transformative for me. I didn't really realize how much I had stagnated in my life. There is still much I'd like to develop and improve, but I have now identified more clearly where and how those changes need to show up. I have let my

financial needs rule my life (for practical reasons), but I can't keep putting off what I want from my life until the perfect moment arises (or it never will). What I noticed the most about my diary entries (particularly weeks 7-11) was how many projects I have going on at once. This is both "good" and "bad" (terms that are used only for convenience and not for accuracy). What this made me recognize is that I have to be careful when nurturing my many ideas that I don't end up spreading myself too thin. I have a lot to say (a trait that got me into a lot of trouble as a kid) and a great deal of ambition, so I have a tendency to over commit my time but then under commit my attention. What I have learned (personally versus academically) from this semester is that I don't have to drop out of projects that are meaningful to me, but I do have to work with a realistic schedule, and this is not impossible if I use some creative thinking techniques.

My intention is to continue using the exercises and skills I learned in this class to work toward achieving my life goals. I have made strides toward breaking down my internal barriers (lack of courage, fear of mistakes, need to be "right") and building up the confidence and focus to follow through with my purpose. This means incorporating visualization, flexibility, elaboration, and creative problem solving into my daily thinking: 3 M's, 5 Why's, and What If are going to be the staples of this effort. I will admit that I have been in a bit of a panic knowing that this class is coming to an end and wondering how I'll keep these practices active without the classroom incentive. In an attempt to mitigate the loss I'll feel from the close of the semester, I've agreed to participate in a self-actualization workshop with a friend of mine. This is one step in bringing the tenets of this class to my life outside the CCT program.

My overall experience in this class has been unequivocally positive. I truly feel that I have grown as a creative thinker, as a student, and as a person. I am much more willing to acknowledge that I have a lot more to give than I currently am and that the opportunities to do so are mine for the *making*. The patterns that emerged in my weekly diary entries were not entirely surprising, but seeing them so clearly helped me to recognize that my habits are not *who I am*, but *what I do*—and what I do *can* change. The habit breaking exercises were (as expected) the most challenging for me, so they were naturally where I “learned” the most. I learned that my stubbornness and rigidity are choices that I can reinforce or subvert, if I can only stay aware of when they crop up and try to take over. I also learned that creativity is not strictly an artistic quality, but a way to view the world—that I do not have to create to be creative, I just have to look at things differently. In that looking, I can see avenues un-pursued, un-built, waiting for someone to bring them to life. In that looking, I can see that my hammer is not just a hammer, and my problems stop resembling nails.

### **Exhibit 3**

615: Holistic and Transformative Teaching

Spring 2017

Reflection: It would be difficult for me to separate *teaching* from *learning*. In the Holistic and Transformative Teaching course, I have come to understand how these two practices, which appear to be two sides of a single exchange, are essential one, and how “we make the road by walking.” In one class discussion, we looked at the word *transformative* through the lease of the



verb *being*. In this sense, *being* can encompass current states of practice as well as accumulated states of practice tilting toward future practices—practice plus perspective, where both can shift. In my Educational Biography, I examined my *being* and how my educational experiences, whether formal or informal, were learning steps that brought me into the perspective/practice I have formed as a learner, as a teacher, and as a being.

Product: Educational Biography

My educational experiences inside and outside the classroom have had a significant influence on my personal outlook, my teaching, my relationships, and the role I try to take in the world. The context and individual moments that shaped me most are myriad, but there are some that stand out. Probably the most influential aspect would be my exposure to different people and parts of the world—either through travel or through reading. I moved frequently and traveled often. This gave me the opportunity to challenge my preconceived notions about myself, others, culture, and social politics. I switched schools just about every three years. I attended public and private schools, coed and all-girls school, east coast and west coast schools. Each time my family moved, I got the chance to start over somewhere new with more information and more perspective. This constant moving around made for a complicated, but extraordinary education.

I've been trying to understand what it is about education that is so integral to who I am and what I do; why does it matter to me so much? And has it always been this way for me? I was raised by people who put a high value on learning, although they took different paths with their own educations. My parents were highly literate, musical, theatrical, artistic, and business minded.

My mom pushed herself to achieve good grades, get out of her small, narrow-minded town, and graduate from a top college. My dad, though very intelligent, did not take his education seriously, got terrible grades, and dropped out of college to pursue his career. Decades later, he went back to school and has since gotten two Master's Degrees and taught Philosophy at the college level.

These are the people who directed the steps of my education (my first holons). From the start, there was a strong emphasis on language and reading—they read to us or told us stories almost everyday. We made up songs constantly, learned how to rhyme, play with words, and make puns. I don't remember ever not knowing how to read. Books were a major part of my life (and still are) and, since I hadn't begun school, they were probably my first introduction to new perspectives. I couldn't wait to start school. I used to wait for my big sister to come home from school, so I could do some of her homework. I was so proud the first time I got my own homework to do. I was proud of being smart like my parents, and, for a time, made an identity out of being a good student—maybe I still do; I do still get excited about homework.

Moving around the country and going to different schools was difficult and made for some moody teenage years (what doesn't?), but it also made me see first hand what a diverse range of school systems had to offer and what effect environments can have on forming thought processes and behaviors. The first school I went to, in Arizona, was a K-6 public school with open-air hallways. We had a number of students who had just immigrated and hadn't yet learned to speak or read English. I was partnered with another girl in my first grade class to help her navigate the

new language. This was my first “teaching” moment, and it informed a lot of how I treat my students today. She really wanted to communicate, but she just didn’t have the English words to do so yet—this was standing in the way of her making friends in this new place. I probably wasn’t conscious of this at the time, but I have thought about her a lot and how language and communication (including non-verbal communication) are central to building human connections.

After a few years, we moved to upstate New York, to a K-12 private school this time. The educational memory that stands out to me the most from these years was actually a friendship I made in third grade with a student in the twelfth grade. I remember thinking it was perfectly normal for an eight year old and an eighteen year old to be friends, but in retrospect, I see that this is not quite the typical friendship. As I’ve gotten older, I’ve noted how people tend to section themselves off by age group, not bothering to build relationships with people of different generations. The memory of that friendship and the subsequent friendships I’ve made with people as much as forty years my senior or twenty years my junior make me want to explore the impact open grade levels would have on students’ emotional and intellectual growth. The conversations that arise in multigenerational company have incredible depth and scope and have given me a much wider view of past and current social issues.

From upstate, we moved to Manhattan, to another K-12 private school. This was an overachiever’s dream school. There were a lot of lessons learned in this school environment and in the city, overall. This was a very full, complex chapter. One of the big learning moments was

a series of less-than-stellar grades I got in my French and Latin classes. I tried so hard in those classes, met with my teachers after school for help, studied constantly—I did everything I could think of to improve, and I just couldn't get my grades to budge. As heartbreaking as it was at the time for middle-school me, I realized that all the effort I could muster still might not be enough to reach those goals—some things I just might not be able to achieve even if I give it my all. More than that, though, I learned that I could enjoy a subject without being good at it. This realization made me want to see what I could do, and what others could do, if grades weren't the goal. What would learning look like if it were pursued for its own sake?

I moved many more times after that, each place with its own impact. From Manhattan, I moved to a small town in Connecticut, to a public high school. As much as I loved my time there, it was not all that academically challenging. Moreover, it was not all that open-minded. There was a strong homophobic undercurrent and an incredible lack of racial and religious diversity. LGBTQ students were physically threatened and verbally harassed daily. My sister started a Gay Straight Alliance at the high school, and I took over after she graduated. It was remarkable to see that, once it was established, this club drew the highest membership of any school-sponsored organization. This was a real “if you build it” moment, and I learned that if I spoke up when I saw others treated unjustly, other people could respond in kind. The glow of that experience didn't last long, however, once I went to college and got a lesson in knowing when not to speak up and to let others speak for themselves. Being reminded that my experience is not always indicative of a wider reality, or even a welcome contribution to the conversation, was an

important step in finding the line between an advocate and an ally. This lesson also made me more keenly aware of how vital it is to listen carefully.

Finally, I chose to go abroad during my junior year of college. The program I attended is as close as I've ever been (until graduate school) to my ideal learning environment. I was immersed in a culture I knew little about, by a language I didn't understand, and by people of different ages, races, religions, nationalities, and educational backgrounds. It was almost everything I'd ever wanted in a school, and it's exactly this missing piece that's made me want to start my own educational program. The program was very self-directed and structured unlike any course I had taken before. One of the most meaningful classes I took during my semester there was taught in a way that, if you weren't paying close attention, you ran the risk of missing the lesson. The professor would begin by discussing the text we were working on and then he would inevitably shift into a tangential thought, a memory, or an anecdote about some literary figure or other. It would be very easy to believe that he'd lost his train of thought entirely and was simply indulging his own musings. However, I never felt my time was wasted, and when I sat to write my final paper and reviewed the class syllabus, it was clear that each digression was an example of the various literary themes we'd been studying. This incident made me keenly aware of how nuanced good teaching and learning could be.

Through all of the various phases, places, and communities I've been a part of over the course of my life so far, I've been influence most by the people I talk to. I've always been inclined to keep a conversation going as long as possible just to see what else we can learn. My parents we fond

of asking me, “Lauren, are you still talking?” But what I gain from being a relentless conversationalist is an empathy for and appreciation of different people, perspectives, and experiences. I learn best by talking through big picture concepts with diverse groups of people. When I realized that my perspective alone wouldn’t provide me with either the deepest possible understanding or the widest breadth of knowledge, I started actively searching for ways to supplement my worldview through other people. It wasn’t easy to switch schools as often as I did growing up, but it armed me with the tools to jump into a group of strangers, make them comfortable, and get them talking. One of the lessons I learned in doing this is that people *want* to share their experiences; they want to have someone listen to them. It seems quite simple, but people are more willing to talk about complex, emotional, or personal ideas if they feel they are being invested in. This is one of the qualities I think gets lost in traditional schools. Over time, students begin to realize that the right answer is prioritized over their understanding of the answer (or even the question). My goal with the school program I’m developing is to give students the chance to reconnect with their own thoughts, trust their ability to think deeply, and learn how to devote their focus to what is being said or read.

It has been my experience that anything and anyone can be interesting if approached with earnest enthusiasm. There are people and subjects that might naturally draw my attention, but I can see the richness of uninvestigated content and its potential to strengthen my understanding of the world around me. If I can learn to fill the gaps of my knowledge by connecting with other people and other fields of study outside my own, then I stand a better chance of avoiding the predicament W.H. Auden imagines for the Athenian: “...the bewildered comment of any fifth

century Athenian upon our society from Dante's time till our own, and with increasing sharpness every decade, would surely be: 'Yes, I can see all the works of a great civilization; but why cannot I meet any civilized persons? I only encounter specialists, artists who know nothing of science, scientists who know nothing of art, philosophers who have no interest in God, priests who are unconcerned with politics, politicians who only know other politicians.' Civilization is a precarious balance between ... barbaric vagueness and trivial order. Barbarism is unified but undifferentiated; triviality is differentiated but lacking any central unity; the ideal civilization is the integration into a complete whole." What we learn from one another, we enhance in ourselves. The lessons I learned from my family, my friends, my classmates, my teachers, and my traveling have equally contributed to who I've become and what I hope to achieve. As much as I gain through others, I strive to give back. I realize what a gift it is to have had the range of experiences I have, and if I could cull the benefits of each and bring them together in my program, in my teaching, or just in the way I live my life, I think I will have given the best of myself to something I really believe in.

## **Exhibit 4**

630: Criticism and Creativity in Literature and the Arts

Fall 2017

Reflection: One of the major themes, or principles, I have witnessed unfold in my thinking through this class is letting go of perfectionism. I am less concerned about polishing every word or thought before it leaves me and instead focused on allowing my thoughts room to grow,

remaining open to the possibility of critique. I have given myself permission to be imperfect, to take risks, and to accept that I will come up short of my own expectations from time to time. Rather than seeing this as lowering the bar, it has allowed me to relax and try new things, to experiment and learn without pressure. It was in this spirit that I put my principles and practices lists together in a Manifesto for Creative Living and Lifelong Learning.

Product: Manifesto for Creative Living and Lifelong Learning

**Cover Note:**

In keeping with the approach I have used throughout the semester, I did a lot of my thinking here through Her Majesty, Thundercat of the Universe. As a character, she has taught me a great deal about how I want to interact with others and how I want to engage with the world. As a product, the series has taught me a lot about what I can accomplish when I commit to my own creativity and use my critical thinking to push my work forward.

In my first literature/arts reflection journal entry, I mentioned the desire to be more improvisational in my work. I did not realize then that that would be exactly what I learned to do. From turning a smudge into a rock and a rock into a solution, to growing an alter ego into a dynamic character with a history and personality of her own, the work I have done in this class has given me a better understanding of how to support my creative thinking with critical thinking and how to encourage children to do the same.



In this manifesto, I am addressing a “We” entity. I often find it easier to think about what I mean if I extend it beyond myself and then reapply the concept. It is a way for me to think more universally to see if my ideas work in a larger context. If they seem to be valid, then I consider how they can work for me. A number of the principles and practices that I had developed over the course of the semester played meaningfully into my life and my creative work, so I have incorporated them in my manifesto and expanded upon them. These principles are not exclusive to creativity or to creative products, but extend to lifelong lessons of living openly, kindly, and, of course, creatively.

**Abstract:**

Creative living and lifelong learning are not just goals, but strategies for making meaning out of obstacles, boredom, and frustration. Creativity is not just something that happens when we are feeling good about ourselves or when we feel inspired. Creativity can be a way through a difficult time, a way to understand something we consider unfathomable, or a way to entertain ourselves when we seem to have run out of options. It can also be a means of survival. When we are overwhelmed, lost, broke, or disheartened, we can use our creative thinking to find ways to take care of ourselves. But creative thinking can also be a way to learn about ourselves and learn about how to treat the people around us. To think creatively, we need, at a minimum, to think differently than we had been, to try a different outlook, or to believe there is another, brighter possibility for us and then to try to create that reality.

**Manifesto for Creative Living and Lifelong Learning:**

1. Creativity can be dormant, waiting for an opportunity—We have within us an indefinite quality to invent. We invent ourselves, our thoughts, our dreams, all seemingly without effort. We may not be aware that this is creativity, but that creativity is aware of us and waits to be called on directly. Sometimes it will offer itself easily; sometimes it will burrow deep inside, demanding to be wooed out into the open. Sometimes it wants to be left alone. But always, it knows when it is needed.

2. Constraints are like oxygen: the quantity matters—Limitations can inspire us to rise above, to move around, or to dive through the loophole. When we are told what we cannot do, we begin thinking of ways we can do exactly that without “breaking the rules”. The rules can challenge us to navigate new planes of thinking. But we must be able to work around the rules; if we are not enabled by them, we are entombed by them.

3. Stories may not take the form we would expect; allow for abstraction, improvisation, and unexpected outcomes—We cannot expect to control all aspects of our story: neither the ones we write nor the ones we live. If we could, we would lose all desire to discover, for we would already know the outcome of every adventure.

4. Learning and creative awareness can take place at any point in a story, even long after its conclusion—Some lessons are taught now and learned later. Some need time to grow before they

can be felt, seen, or understood. We are lucky if we learn the lesson at all, so we need to be patient if it wants to appear after it was needed. We may need it again in time.

5. Don't hide from insecurities and fears; as long as there is no immediate danger, confront whatever intimidates—Our insecurities can teach us where to grow, how to be vulnerable, and what we desire. We may see things in other people that make us feel envious, empty, or embarrassed of our limitations. These are important moments because they give us insight into what we wish for, what we fear, or what we need. Listen to these feelings and learn from them. We can grow what we desire by first acknowledging it has not been planted yet.

6. Support others in their quests; remember their dreams belong to them—There may be temptation to begrudge what others have accomplished. This only keeps us from accomplishing our own goals. Cheer loudly when others succeed. It will be their voices that cheer returns to when we reach our goals. Beyond reciprocity, it is good for our hearts to want to see others happy, thriving, and proud. We should champion their dreams as fiercely as we champion our own.

7. Help when it is necessary and in a way that facilitates growth—We may find it easier to do what needs to be done than to teach people how to take care of themselves. But there is little to learn on the easier path. If we are sought for help, we must remember that help is what we should give. We should teach others how not to need us; we will not always be there. Help in ways that leave others stronger than when they first asked.

8. Believe in a whole self: not just strength, not just weakness—There is no quality better than one we possess honestly. We are all parts of ourselves. We can strive to be better, but that means understanding what we are now. Our weaknesses are often what endear us to others; they make us real so that others might see us as real. We can connect more deeply when we offer our whole selves to the world, not just the parts we consider perfect. How few might those be?

9. Consider your strengths; eliminate the one you rely on most. How does this change your perspective?—When we focus on developing a strength, we forgo a potential source of power. There may be latent abilities within us that we have ignored because another comes more easily. What would we do if we lost what we are most proud of? What could we become if we looked at what has gone unnoticed?

10. Conflict does not have to be personal: be supportive of yourself and your characters. Find solutions and ways of encouraging that are consistent with purpose—We may feel attacked by or desire to attack those who disagree with us. This feeling is the profound juxtaposition of perspectives. We need not change our perspectives, though we may, but we need to see how, why, and what others think before we can decide they are wrong. Try always to remember that we are all attempting to exist meaningfully in the world. How can you help make that happen for yourself and for someone else in this moment?

## Exhibit 5

651: Advanced Cognitive Psychology

Fall 2017

Reflection: Many of the principles I developed over this course came about from combining my observations as a teacher with my experiences with my grandmother after her recent surgery and subsequent stroke. Seeing how the brain makes strides down familiar paths until it realizes that it can't continue that route—especially linguistic routes—has given me a deeper appreciation for what I have often taken for granted: our brains are where our language resides. This appreciation has manifested in an awareness that mindfulness and creativity are connected in that, together, they illuminate and generate multiple pathways to access what lives within our minds. This is what I have aimed to convey in my Principles Synthesis.

Product: Principles Synthesis

### **General Principle Statements:**

1. Inattention/neglect does not necessarily indicate an *inability* to focus on a task or object but a shutting down of automaticity.
2. Deep processing creates multiple retrieval paths through which material stored in long-term memory can be accessed for use in working memory.

3. False memory builds connections that can have a long-term impact in a person's autobiographical memory or self-schema, even if the person was once aware that the memory is false.

4. Expertise is an ever-advancing goal that begins with foundational understanding and requires increasing challenges in conditional or contextual frameworks to proceed to higher stages of proficiency and flexibility or risks remaining in a state of arrested development.

5. The ideal representation may not exist in reality but as a conceptual composite of apparent requisite features that are distributed among members of a group within a given category.

6. Analogical thinking offers a way to process aspects of the four stages of creative problem solving simultaneously.

7. Creativity requires an understanding of the traditional use, form, or function of a particular domain before it can deviate, cultivate, and offer alternatives.

8. Bringing mindfulness to one routine task can increase focus and improve performance in other routine tasks as a by-product of that attention.

9. Accurate use of precise language not only supports clear communication, but also shows respect to those being described, insofar as members of a group agree that the terminology is appropriate.

### **Synthesis:**

The thread that seems to run through the principles I developed over the course of the semester is the need for mindfulness. I am thinking of mindfulness as an aperture through which our attention is narrowed or widened. We can adjust our focus to the present moment and our involvement in it or to the broader context of our lives, our world, or our position in the universe. The attention we bring to our actions, our thinking, or our language can impact a number of aspects of self. When our attention slacks or behaviors become automatic, we may miss opportunities to cultivate our creativity, reach new areas of expertise, or solve intricate problems. Mindfulness could also contribute to our ability to process information deeply or accurately and move that information between working memory and long-term storage by encouraging and practicing alert awareness of surroundings and subtleties. This could promote an increased capacity to distinguish attributes of a defined concept versus its real world counterparts, which could then allow us to be more flexible in our judgment of reality and its complexities.

Where this leads me in terms of my own thoughts on cognitive psychology and its role in my life is to an understanding that I can guide, in some ways, the depth and level of connectedness

between my mind and the world around me, whether that means learning new material, practicing patience with myself and others, or recognizing where I have become “lazy” in my thinking. There seem to be enumerable benefits to mindfulness, not the least of which is an awareness of one’s own mind as at once a part of and apart from a larger framework. It is this particular facet of what I have learned about cognitive psychology that I think will carry over to the rest of my schoolwork, my writing, and my personal life.

## **Exhibit 6**

688: Reflective Practice

Spring 2018

Reflection: I used to treat creative thinking and critical thinking as separate modes of thought—distant relatives that don’t get along well and have little to say to one another anyway. Through Reflective Practice, I have found that these modes are more like partners, taking turns listening to what the other has to offer and responding thoughtfully. Through my writing practice, I have also realized that thinking is not enough. I benefit from drawing a thought across multiple means of expression: thinking, writing, and talking. When I allow a thought to appear in each of these mediums, I am able to hear it more clearly. A classmate this semester offered that we might use our passions as a compass for our lives. I have wondered if “hearing” myself could be that compass: if the compass is really guiding me closer to myself. If so, then listening for what I want to do can help me see what I need to do. I struggled at times to be declarative rather than inquisitive in my writing, but inquisitive rather than declarative in my thinking. It was



challenging to discern what I learned from what I knew and what I was still unclear about.

Because my grasp kept shifting, I struggled to feel secure in my thinking, and I kept wondering if I was headed in the right direction. What I realized ultimately was that action research isn't about know, it's about finding out how.

Product: Plan for Practice

Having allowed myself the time to get to know myself the way I have over the past 13 weeks, I now have a better understanding of what I need to do in order to channel my anxiety and balance my time. I have learned that I need to both write and talk to best hear what thoughts are accumulating. I learned that the stress and anxiety I feel when staring down a list of tasks I need to do is a response to feeling that I have no time to spend on my own needs and that my own thoughts have not been heard. By taking the time to listen to my thoughts and share them with someone, I gave myself the opportunity to reflect on why I take on so much and what value each task adds to my life. Rather than feeling intimidated by an endless onslaught of responsibilities, I found it was possible to tackle my obligations with a clear, centered mind if I took time for myself first.

I recognized that I need more texture to the way I express my thoughts. Writing alone limits the range of understanding I feel I need when trying to explore my thoughts. I found the most satisfying days were the days when I could write and then check in with my observer to talk about what was on my mind. In this way, I observed three levels of thinking: thinking through my mind, thinking through writing, and thinking through speaking. When I could move a

thought through these three stages, I felt I had a better grasp of its nuances. I also found that I could clarify and refine my thoughts when I could bring them to each of these venues and see how the new territory affected the lucidity of what I was expressing. If I could not make a thought clear in the speak stage, I might not have gotten it to a stage of development necessary for others to comprehend. Put more simply, I hadn't finished thinking yet.

It may be a simple realization, but this practice helped me see how important my thinking is to me. It was midway through the semester when I remembered that I had kept a journal through most of my adolescence into my college years. I don't know how, but I forgot that writing my thoughts used to be a daily practice and was for a significant number of years. When I had filled out my first journal this semester, I went to look for another and rediscovered past journals with years of documented thought. I have always logged the time and date in my entries, partially out of causal interest and partially to revisit the moment those thoughts were formed by lending a context for them. I reread some of these old entries and found that I was wrestling then with some of the same issues I have been grappling with now. I worried that I had not yet found the way to cope with some of these recurring thoughts all these years later and began looking for ways my practice is different now.

The first observable difference is the passage of time. I had to acknowledge that I am constantly under construction and some foundations are not solid when first attempts to build scaffolding are made. The second difference is the invitation of a participant. When I was younger, I would keep my thought private and sacred. Now, I relish the chance to talk with someone and am

grateful for any opportunity to share what's been going on in my mind. Third, in my new writing practice, I am actively looking for themes. This is not to suggest that I force my thoughts in a direction, rather that I take note of when I head down familiar paths. I also know that I am not what I think, but what I think has an impact on how I behave and how I have grown as a person. I allowed this additional layer of reflection to play a part in devising my plan for practice after the semester has ended.

Looking at the way I wrote when I wasn't scheduling it in to my day, I wrote in fits and spurts. There were periods of time when I would write five times a day, anything I felt was worth saying. Then there were long gaps of time between entries, the longest being the one that lasted from 2009 up until this past February. Essentially, I had gone nine years without actively listening to myself. While I certainly don't want to repeat past missteps, I believe that moving forward, I may not have the commitment to be writing six days a week for the designated 20 minutes. I will admit that it was difficult to hold myself to writing everyday, and that some entries were made with more willingness than others. It may not be practical for me to expect myself to write in the same manner I set out for myself, but I do know that writing serves as my intervention for stress, so I am exploring ways to adapt my practice to a more manageable long-term plan. I know that I will turn to writing during times of high pressure, as it offers an immediate release of troubling and overwhelming thoughts.

Using what I have learned from my past practices to inform next steps, I will give myself a writing allowance each week. I will give myself 60 minutes a week to distribute in whatever

allotment I need. This means that I will need to check in with myself each day to assess what I am experiencing internally and externally and evaluate whether my current state of mind could use support. These 60 minutes will not include any creative writing or academic writing I may otherwise be doing. The weekly writing is also not going to serve as a replacement for To Do lists. I realized that the practice I was piloting was not so much about ridding myself of a compulsion, but about finding a way to add value back into my days. By giving myself the writing outlet, I can address my tasks with an uncluttered (or less cluttered, anyway) mind. This takes unnecessary stress out of necessary duties.

The problem I was facing with my checklists was not that I had too much to do, but that I was making it so that I only saw one angle to my day: productivity. Forcing myself into this perspective made me feel that I was only valuable if I was getting something done. Allowing myself time to reflect gives me a moment to appreciate myself for the sake of myself, not for what is expected of me, not what I can get done, and certainly not for how many boxes I can check. As a part of my plan for practice, I am also limiting myself to weekly checklists. It is not reasonable for me to think that I will never write another To Do list. They help me see what needs to be done. But I will hold myself to certain rules: checklists do not include interacting with people, actions of self-care, or obligations over a week away.

The checklists were damaging the way I saw myself and the people in my life. My goal is to relegate checklists to a simple reminder of upcoming responsibilities and promote human interaction to higher status, where it belongs. By putting my social interactions on the same list

as my chores, I was equating people with chores. I didn't realize I was doing this until I found myself irritated by an interaction that should have made me happy. This person was standing in the way of my ability to check the next box. Once I started listening to myself, I observed how differently I felt in these interactions. I made conscious effort to exit my thinking and enter an interactive state. I found that my mind was willing to make this shift because I had satisfied its need to be heard. My mind was equally amenable when it came to going about my chores. I could move from one task to the next without feeling like a cog.

Checking in with my feelings instead of just marching from one task to the next made it so that I felt I was an active part of what I was getting done, which helped me remember why I cared about doing it in the first place. In terms of how I will keep this a part of my practice, I plan to ask myself the following questions at least weekly:

- What am I thinking about?
- How do I feel?
- Why do I feel that way?
- Have I felt this way before?
- How did it affect my actions?
- What outcome do I want?
- What will help me?

I will also be asking myself to focus on *why* I am doing something rather than *what* I think I need to be doing. By shifting my thinking from what to why, I can remember that my actions are directly related to my goals, whether those goals are academic, personal, or professional. Using these questions, I will reframe my thinking to be more centered around bringing my energy into what I'm doing, and not how what I'm doing is taking my energy away from me. I will remind myself that I am involved in my accomplishments; I am not a conduit for productivity.

My plan for practice does come with its own set of To Do items, but these are designed to put my needs at the center of my actions. Moving forward I will need to remember to do the following:

- Prioritize “Why” Over “What”
- Recognize My Needs
- Differentiate Needs/Musts/Wants
- Communicate Clearly
- Confront Conflict Directly
- Write To Do Lists for Tasks Only
- Write for Mental Health
  - Journal Writing
    - Let Thoughts Develop
    - Unburden
    - Clear Clutter

- Creative Writing
  - Explore
  - Express

Identifying the differences in things I want to do, things I must do, and things I need to do has helped me organize the actions I take and the feelings I take with me when I execute them. I am learning that these categories help me see myself and my responsibilities in a more satisfying way: Wants include all human interaction and elected activities, Musts include all acts of self care, and Needs include all legal, professional, or academic requirements (though, academic work vacillates between Wants and Needs). Placing myself under the category of Musts makes me a priority, which helps me see the Needs and Wants as coming second to making sure I have been taken care of. Because I was treating my own existence as a chore, I couldn't see the value in any of the other things I needed to do.

Moving forward, I will be placing energy into caring for myself first by checking in with my emotional and mental state, scanning for stress or anxiety, asking myself my question set, and taking the time to write if needed. From there I will check in with what I need to do and note any concerns that arise when thinking about my obligations; this will offer another opportunity to reflect on whether or not I should be writing. Once I've thought about what I need to do and then do it, I will ask myself the same questions, once again inviting myself to write. If I can get through the whole process without feeling a need to write, I will roll over my writing allowance to the next day, never going more than a week without writing for at least an hour. In addition to

the writing needs being met, I will make sure that I talk to my observer once a week or more, with respect for his schedule and flexibility for unexpected interruptions.

This practice is more than just useful for centering myself as a human being; it helps me understand why I set the goals I do, why I pursue the interests I do, and understand the thoughts I return to, whether they are personal or simply inquisitive. Listening to what I have to say to myself helps me shape what I want to say in the world and how I want to be understood. Before I can offer my thoughts on a work project, a course reading, or a personal issue, I have to digest what I think on my own. I have learned that I can't think clearly when I don't value my time, and I don't value my time if I treat myself like chore. Taking myself off the checklist and putting my thoughts on the page did more than reduce stress and reconnect me with myself: it made me see myself and the people in my life with more patience and gratitude. I can think of the things I get accomplished as testaments to what I care about, but not as the sum of who I am. As I close this reflective practice project, I am looking at my next responsibilities not as daunting obligations, but opportunities to reinvest in myself and nurture my thinking.

## **Exhibit 7**

693: Action Research for Change

Spring 2018

Reflection: One of my key takeaways from this class (from this semester, really) is that who I am as a person and who I am as a practitioner are the same. As I noted in my PD workbook, this



means that all I am as a person will be coming with me into my work, so I need to understand it thoroughly and understand that this is true of everyone involved in my work and life. I have needed to take a deliberate look at my values in relation to my goals and recognize that I, my values, and my ethics are always at the heart of my projects. Outside of that, it is essential for me to honor that I am limited, as are we all, and that asking for help is just a way of asking someone to be helpful.

Product: Process Review

There were a number of important moments for my thinking throughout the semester. The first was realizing I had no idea what I had gotten myself into. Action research was not an area I had any real familiarity with, at least not on a conscious level. In the first two weeks, I fluctuated between frustration and excitement as I got to know new terminology and new strategies for engaging in meaningful research. There was one tool in particular that stood out to me in those first weeks: force field analytics. I was initially pleased by how tangible it seemed. It was a tool to help me see what is working for me and what is working against me. From that vantage, I could try to move the restraining forces over to the facilitating side. Simple. Until I started thinking about how. “How” became a key word for me this semester as I attempted to delve deeper into what I wanted to see happen. *How* do I change restraining forces into facilitating forces? *How* do I measure the impact of my intervention? *How* do I change someone’s thinking? *How* do I know that what I am doing is meaningful, necessary, or important? Force field analytics was my first glimpse of *how* I could both underestimate and overestimate my grasp of a

concept. It was my introduction to *how* I need to slow down and investigate further. If something appears to be simple, it probably isn't.

Which brings me to the next tool for confronting *How*: the KAQF. I wrestled with revising my KAQF for several weeks. My first attempt and the subsequent revision request showed me that I was making claims that I wasn't fully supporting with evidence or inquiry. This tool helped me see that I can tend toward definitive statements without allowing for investigation, or if I do invite investigation, I oversimplified the means. This does not mean that I need to do something complicated to "find out", but that I need to articulate the process such that someone else could pick up my KAQF and understand my thinking and next steps. It took me several more attempts before I felt I could resubmit my KAQF; I felt I needed to understand my project goals better before I could communicate *how* I would "find out". I first find out what I needed to find out.

The PBL:PFA activity helped me make some insights into my overall concern about education, but also put me in an awkward position given my profession and my intentions. I came to the conclusion that schools no longer have a clear purpose. All the threads—or chains—in my diagram brought my thinking back to that dire claim. It isn't that I stopped believing in educational institutions, it's that I think they are not doing what they claim they are supposed to do. This got me thinking about what it is I think schools *are* meant to do versus what they are currently doing (grand generalizations made). Now that my Problem Finding Activity had me facing an issue much larger than I had intended to address, I had to consider what I could possibly do about it. *How* could I intervene?

McNiff's "How do I/How do we..." question framing helped me scale back down to working toward identifying steps I could actually take. It isn't enough to point out that the educational system is broken or doesn't meet the needs of a diverse population or doesn't prepare students to enter the workforce or "the real world". I had to *find out how* I could possibly make a difference. So, how do I make a difference? How do I help where I can? How do I have a meaningful impact on my students' thinking? This framework helped me reframe my guiding question, but it also helped me see that I can only do so much by myself. The language of that statement—how do I—invited me to consider the limits *I* have, not in a way that stops me from working toward my goals, but in a way that helps me recognize that I need help if I want to reach them.

Identifying when I need help and who could provide that help brings me full circle (full cycle?) in my thinking from the earliest weeks of the semester when I had the opportunity to talk to an active listener. I heard myself acknowledging a staunch resistance to accepting help, or relying on others, or even believing that others will follow through with what they promise. I heard myself testifying that I preferred to depend on myself to do what I needed done—that although I offer help, I don't accept it. Not a particularly productive way to affect change. After weeks of personal writing, it was in this area that I felt my work from 688 coming in most directly. In my Reflective Practice process, I worked on changing the way I approach responsibility and this led to a shift in my thinking about how I engage with other people, especially in terms of what I allow them to do for me. I realized that I enjoyed the platform of being a "helpful person" so much that I was denying anyone else the chance.

That insight illuminated personal values, educational values, and professional values that all point in the same direction: I need to feel like I am meaningful, necessary, and important, and the experience of making someone else feel meaningful, necessary, and important is what allows me to feel that. So, when I investigate *how* this school I've been designing is going to help me do that, I have to keep in mind that at the root of this is a desire to help but also a need to be helped. The ultimate outcome would be if this school could activate a community of helpers, who are able to see where and how changes can be made.

Seeing where changes can be made seems like the key phrase for my overall Action Research learning so far. I need to be able to see in myself where I can change, what I can change, and how I can change as much as I look to see these things in the work I do.

## **Exhibit 8**

612: Creative Thinking Seminar

Summer 2018

Reflection: In writing my Personal Blocks Paper, I felt threads knitting together from previous classes and from parallel parts of my life. My debate about whether I am a teacher or a writer turned into an understanding that I am both, and I use my writing as a way to teach. I understood that I could be dichotomous myself and still exist truthfully in all my contradictions. I also found

that my blocks could help me if I am able to see them. I don't have to give my blocks power over me, and I don't have to allow my multiple passions to point in opposing directions.

Product: Personal Blocks Paper

### **Contemplating How to Turn Writer's Block into Building Blocks**

#### **Current Situation:**

For the better part of my life, I have pictured and projected myself as a writer, but I have spent more time and effort cultivating a knowledge of writing or teaching writing than I have actually writing. My relationship to language has been natural, but that does not mean it has been free from struggle. I was drawn to books before I knew what they contained, was quick to learn how to read, and immersed myself in stories. As a toddler, I would sit for hours with a book in my lap, just turning the pages, fascinated. As a child, I would fall asleep surrounded by dozens of books. Now, as an adult, I am perpetually running out of shelf space. With all of the reverence I have for writing, for writers, and for language itself, I find myself unable to add my own voice to that choir. There are a number of blocks in my creativity that I have been coming to face over my time in the Critical and Creative Thinking Program, some manifesting from a disconnect between my personal and professional life, others originating much further back.

For the past ten years, I have been an English tutor, teaching all aspects of the English language, from phonics to SATs to college entrance essays. I started tutoring right out of college for sake of stability and a tangential connection to writing; throwing my full weight behind trying to write professionally seemed a financially irresponsible choice. I have wanted to be a writer and voiced

the desire to be a writer since I was in the second grade. I did not, however, really learn what that would entail. To be honest, I did not try to find out. Instead of taking the steps to reach that goal and risking the potential failure of aiming for something that truly mattered to me, I committed to teaching. That said, I found that I was an effective teacher and that the close proximity teaching gave me to language was enough to feel connected to my first love. Not to be misunderstood, I enjoy being a teacher, but I feel I need to acknowledge that it was not my dream job.

When I think about the work that I do, I recognize that there is a frustration about ends and means. I value education and have found learning to be one of the great joys of my life. I love bringing that to my students and seeing them connect with their own learning. As a tutor, I am often teaching someone else's curriculum, adjusting to another teacher's expectations, helping students meet standards that may not have anything to do with their personal goals. I feel that the work I do does not allow me to educate the way I want to educate, nor does it allow me to teach what I feel is most important. This frustration is what brought me to CCT. I felt I needed to dig deeper into the issues that contributed to my professional stagnation. What I have found so far is that I have been shutting down my voice, holding myself to impossible standards, and allowing myself to fail before I start.

To address some of these obstacles, I started thinking about the way I want my students to feel, how I want the world to look, and what I have to offer. I recognized that there were teachers in my past that made lasting negative impressions (to be discussed later) that have overpowered the

positive. I also realize that I do not want to have that effect on my students. I believe that I am a part of how my students learn how to exist in the world, so I take my interactions with them very seriously. With that in mind, I wonder if the best way for me to impart what I find most valuable would be to step away from teaching and toward writing. Of course, it may not be necessary to abandon teaching altogether, but I think I need to see what I can teach when I am not beholden to someone else's words.

### **Creative Personality:**

When I hold myself up against Zorana Ivcevic and John D. Mayer's *Creative Types and Personality* scales, I can see where I may not belong. I am a risk-averse, anxiety-riddled, perfection-driven, people-pleaser. I like problems to have solutions. These characteristics do not lend themselves easily to creative expression. Seen from another perspective, though, I can see where I do belong. I am sensitive to problems, endlessly curious, reflective, playful, and have a sharp sense of humor. I am resourceful and willing to grow. I take pains to look at myself honestly, if sometimes a bit too critically.

I felt that there was some ambiguity to Ivcevic and Mayer's definition of "openness to experience", which made me unsure as to whether or not I could apply that description to myself. I am open to global experiences, to educational experiences, and to artistic/cultural experiences, but I shy from many social situations, adrenaline-driven activities, and spotlights. I have a fairly controlled nature, but I'm not so rigid that I shut myself off from experience. Considering openness to experience is one of the significant measures Ivcevic and Mayer use for determining

creative personality, I had trouble understanding whether or not I belong in any of their categories.

Csikszentmihalyi, however, showed a bit more leniency in his article *The Creative Personality*. Through his description, there is space for me to be complex. Where Ivcevic and Mayer dissect, Csikszentmihalyi connects. Csikszentmihalyi brings antithetical traits together as part of a “multitude” within a creative personality. Reading his interpretation of creative personality traits, I felt seen rather than assessed. I can be energetic or lethargic, realistic or fanciful, extroverted or introverted; the list of dichotomies continues with reassuring accuracy.

The attention I have given to the way my mind and creative processes work has been both helpful and halting. Acknowledging that I may be as much one thing as another (conventional and unconventional) and still be considered creative has helped me accept that I can, in fact, create without being an imposter. However, upon completing the Metacognitive Awareness Inventory and seeing how frequently I disregard strategies that require asking for help or relying on intrinsic motivation, I realized how my current mindset is inhibiting me from setting and reaching goals. I am stuck dreaming when I should be planning.

### **Creative Process:**

For years, I have sat on ideas, telling myself that I was not ready to go near them. I don't believe that is entirely untrue, but I do think I have used that explanation as an excuse not to investigate what I could be working on. I tend not to plan but to write sporadically bits of stories that I tell



myself I will return to later. My process looked a lot more like pulling clothes out of a closet, throwing them on to the floor to pile up in a clump, and finally shoving them back into the closet out of frustration. I know they are still in there, but I have shown them such little care that I don't know if they possess any value anymore. Until very recently, I hadn't ever truly completed a story. My ideas were always grander than my patience and my stamina combined.

About a year ago, I committed to a character, a theme, a rhyme scheme, and a maximum word count. Given those constraints, I was able to write three short children's books that addressed subjects I find more meaningful than the ones I teach. The process of writing those stories most closely resembled Barron's Psychic Creation Model (Plsek). To begin, I gravitate toward this model because I am not sure yet to what degree I believe the subconscious is responsible for pushing the creative process. I can't say I understand where ideas come from—though I can generally trace their origin through a series of connections and associations—so I am remaining open to the idea that there is some mystery as to their source.

The difficulty herein is that adhering to this model takes some of the autonomy out of my creativity. I do have to be responsible for the ideas at some point, especially if I want to carry them to term. It is this follow through that seems to be missing in most of my creative work. Unless there is a deadline to drive me, someone to be disappointed if I don't get my work in on time, I wallow in the lack of restriction. I cannot yet seem to understand myself enough to move from desire to do something to actually doing it. So what is keeping me stuck in the gestation period, still dreaming, not planning?

## **Writer's Block:**

While I may not be much of a drummer, Shaun McNiff's point in the chapter "Blocks" from *Trust the Process* about activating the muscles to stimulate creative thinking, release inhibitions, and connect with the "rhythmic movements of nature (McNiff)" speaks to me. When I am faced with a paper to write or project to do, and my thoughts are crowding my space, I go for a walk with my husband and talk with him about what I am considering. I find that the change of environment and the movement help me find the right words to formulate my thoughts more fully. So far this has worked in expository writing, but creative writing has been more of a challenge. I have been wondering if this is indicative of a lack of desire, a lack of motivation, a lack of inspiration, or plain old laziness and self-doubt. Victoria Nelson's *On Writer's Block* offers a number of explanations for the writer's block phenomenon that make the experience much more clearly a self-inflicted one, albeit subconscious.

Procrastination has been a mainstay of my education and my writing. I am a last minute thinker, relying on the pressure to perform. Whether I'm writing for class or writing my wedding vows, it is inevitably done at the eleventh hour. (This may not be the appropriate venue for such a confession, but I am also working on taking risks.) I seem to need a deadline. It is as if the looming due date helps me focus on a single train of thought, when I might otherwise be following the tracks for miles in any and all directions. This may be part of the gestation period; I allow my thoughts to develop undisturbed until they need to emerge. But underneath that may be some more complex issues. It could be that I have been avoiding thinking and writing in a

sustainable manner because I doubt that I am able to do such a thing. Beneath the desire to communicate is a voice telling me I have nothing worth communicating. Beneath the frustration of teaching content incompatible with my values is the fear that I cannot teach. If I cannot reach my students, how can I expect to reach my readers? If I cannot reach my readers, why should I bother reaching inside myself and discovering failure? Better to just impart someone else's knowledge.

I certainly don't buy into these doubts, but they exist nonetheless. So where might this be coming from? Why should I be reluctant to use my voice?

### **Voices From the Past:**

Reading Nelson's chapter "Starting Cold: The Beginner's Block", I was drawn to the section on childhood critics. I could feel the humiliation and rejection rising up as I read about how "an overcritical or narrow-minded teacher may freeze a child's natural instincts toward self-expression (Nelson)." As a child, I was involved in every creative outlet I could be: dance, theater, art, choir, and writing. I dreamed of being an artist or a writer; I felt limitless and unabashed. I had a child's confidence, but I also had a child's sensitivity. There are clear moments I recall of bringing my portfolio to a favorite art teacher to have it dismissed, of being publicly shamed by my dance teacher, of having my acting coach cross clear personal boundaries, of having my writing dismantled by an unimpressed professor. I was crushed each time. It is that internalized self-doubt that I hope never to instill in my own students.

When I realized how many of these moments still trigger deep embarrassment, I saw how I had built a protective block around myself to keep me safe from criticism. And while I have to own my sensitivity, I also have to let go of the damage I have held on to in its name. But addressing the damage my voice has done to myself does not address the damage my voice has done or may do to others.

**Resistance:**

Susan Kolodny explores the reasons we may resist tapping into our creativity in *The Captive Muse*. Kolodny discusses the powerful resistance we may have to the subject of our work, that we may avoid looking deeply at triggering or emotional content in our craft because it may bring us to places we are not ready to revisit. In my life and in my writing, there have been resistances to content and to meaning that have kept me from listening to my voice for fear of what it might have to say, and for fear of what it has already said. In my most honest work, an abstract memoir, I wrote from a place of pain, confusion, anger, and mistrust in a voice that sounded more like my own than I had ever heard before. It told me things I knew I knew but in a manner that was aggressive and lyrical, punishing and clever. It explored thoughts I had not wanted to admit. I was enormously relieved when I was finished with it and felt it was a special, but very private piece of writing. In some course of events that is entirely unclear to me, this piece was mailed to the person about whom it had been written. The fallout from his reading my writing was sad and significant. Ultimately, we recovered, but I still feel at risk when considering using that voice again. I believe that this experience built another block around me, but this time it was built to protect others.

What would happen if everyone heard this true voice? I wonder about this frequently. I am someone who takes measures to put others at ease, to build them up, to make them feel seen and respected, and to act in kindness as much as I possibly can. There are days when this is not easy and seems to go against what I might be feeling inside. When I recognize this dissonance, I begin feeling as if I am in some way false in my manner, that there is something dishonest about my interactions. Of course, I don't believe that I need to tell everyone my innermost thoughts, but I do wonder if this balancing act has made it more difficult for *me* to hear my own thoughts. If I cannot hear myself, if I don't attempt to hear myself, how can I write from a place of authenticity? If I cannot address myself, how can I address my work?

**Revision:**

Kolodny invites us to consider the issue of revision as an experience of facing oneself. There on the page or canvas is our first impression of ourselves—the one we might try to show others. Revision might be difficult because we (I) recognize that this version is not entirely genuine. It may have been written to impress, or to convince, or to conceal. In my own writing, I have experimented with many different voices. As I person, I think of myself as having many facets, so I have some trouble accepting that I am to have one true voice. Perhaps what Kolodny is suggesting is not that we strive for the truest version of our voice, but to speak truthfully and recognize and revise when that is not happening. It also mean attempting to identify what we may have told ourselves is true when it is not. Self-critique in this way can be a form of

self-scrutiny and evaluation. Not to criticize, but to understand, heal, and create. If we are working blocks into our craft, we are still blocked.

I have resisted revision under the guise of laziness, but I now recognize that it was the fear of seeing how far short my work falls from my expectations. To acknowledge that there is still so much to improve means admitting that I was not perfect. Admitting imperfection means inviting doubt. That doubt has kept my creative work in a state of fruitless gestation for years. While doubt may be an inhibitor, it has also played a role in my striving to grow, so I have to accept that some amount of doubt is helpful, as long as it knows when to get out of the way.

Now that I am working on my children's books, I have become more open to revision of my creative work. I have been able to see where improvements can be made, where things are not working, as well as where things really are working. I think that I began using these books to help me say what I truly want to say to my students, what I would have wanted to hear, and what I still need to hear. When I started writing from that place, I felt more confident about making that work: it wasn't about critiquing me, it was about making my work shine. Somewhere in all of the workshops and classes I have taken over the years, I missed that lesson. Maybe what needed incubation was my own self-confidence; now that it is illuminated, I can revise without the same degree of fear.

But once revisions have been made, there comes the next set of fears: success and failure. The work can be revised any number of times, but at some point I have to decide that I can offer it to

the world. What happens after that is something I have not yet prepared for. There is every possibility that my stories will be rejected, that I will never hear back from publishers, or that they are picked up, and they fail in the hands of my readers. This is the risk I do not know how to take. Remembering how the criticism of my teachers ate away at my confidence in my developmental years, despite the praise of other teachers, makes me afraid for the critique I will face from publishers, literary agents, editors, critics, and readers. Beyond that, there is the fear that finally, after years of dreaming of being a writer, I will know, and my friends and family will know, if my work is “good”. Was the dream worth the investment of time and energy?

And what if it is? What if I succeed beyond my expectations? Will I be done with doubt and fear? From all of our readings, it seems unlikely that those antagonists will ever fully fade, but I may be better equipped to work with them.

### **Building Blocks:**

The fear, doubt, confidence, and playfulness all belong to the same writer. They have, for years, attempted to win space and dominate my personality, but I possess all of these traits; they do not possess me. Giving in, or surrendering, to the desire not to write, to the need to process before proceeding, or to the inevitable facing of myself does not mean that I am forestalling my creative process. It means I am allowing myself to take part in one. Overcoming blocks means accepting that they exist and that they are attempting to alert me to something unaddressed within my work and myself. I cannot entirely separate myself from the obstacles, but I can begin to overcome them by seeing them for what they are.

Seeing them is the first step. To help move through these blocks, I am listening to the inner critic, naming it as fear or doubt, thanking it for trying to protect me, and telling it to let another feeling take a turn. I don't think I will be able to fully silence my fears, but I don't think I need to, either. Allowing them just enough space to be heard can help me understand what is standing in the way of my creativity. I can resume journaling, giving those feelings a place to speak up. This type of writing is a good way for me to stay connected to my inner voices without the pressure of producing a complete work. When I begin writing a creative piece, I will deliberately give myself time to move the way I do with expository writing. I will permit myself to make small steps, as long as I continue to make steps, recognizing that a hiatus from writing should be a choice, not something to punish myself for. Overcoming my blocks will take a balance of control and surrender.

## **Exhibit 9**

603: Philosophy

Fall 2018

Reflection: I used my Metacognitive Essay as an opportunity to play with language within one of my favorite constructs: rhyme. I've always enjoyed seeing how rhyme could force a thought down new or familiar paths. This time, I did so with the express purpose of seeing how to use that format to introduce complex concepts and issues to children. While I admit that this is not exactly child-friendly, I stand by the reasoning behind it: children are more capable of engaging



in philosophical thought than they are often given credit for or opportunity to discover. I realized in this class how often I come back to children's literature or children's entertainment at a platform for communicating social, cultural, and personal values. It may be an obvious correlation between the work I do and the work I appreciate, but I see a place for deep, meaningful, and exploratory conversation to take place between adults and children that could have large, lasting impacts on both parties.

Product: Metacognitive Essay

For my metacognitive essay, I thought it appropriate to write the way I think. I tend to think in questions and find that those questions push me to the next question and onward. My line of reasoning still seems to advance even if none of the questions yield answers. I also wanted to explore the notion of children as capable of philosophical thought. I don't remember thinking any differently as a child from the way I think as an adult, so I've been curious why there is any controversy around the possibility that children could possess the skills to engage in deep inquiry.

Children seem to be ceaselessly asking questions. They are new to the world, and they want to understand it. As adults, we forget that we are also new to the world. We have our comforting habits and routines, our faiths and our practices, our jobs and families and friends and hobbies and pleasures, but we don't have answers. We have just as many questions as children do, but we've gotten very good at forging ahead anyway as if we aren't plagued by uncertainty. I have always held that if a child is old enough to ask a question, the child is old enough to know the

answer. But what happens when children ask questions we can't answer? Are we capable of sitting down and wondering with them?

I started thinking about how to engage children in the types of deep questions we treat them as incapable of handling. For my essay, I decided to write in the style of a children's rhyming poem. In my poem, I bring up themes in a way that I wouldn't necessarily present children—language shifts would need to happen to help them broach the larger issues, but I don't believe the content is anything a child couldn't engage with if the adult reader is prepared for discussion.

### **Can you only think in questions?**

Can you only think in questions?

Would it help the thoughts along?

If you only thought in questions,

would the thinking come out wrong?

Is it enough to think in questions,

or do you need the answers too?

How do you know that answer

is the only one that's true?

Is truth the same for everyone  
or do we each just see a bit  
of a larger truth that knows  
where and how we each all fit?

In a world of only questions,  
would we need to answer why?  
Why are we here, why do we live,  
and why do people die?

Why are people cruel,  
and why do people care?  
Why do we treat some people  
like we don't even know they're there?

Why did we make up language  
when we ignore what people say  
but think that someone's listening  
when we sit down to pray?

Does a God mean someone got it right,  
and we're just waiting to find out

if we have lived a worthy life  
when we were struggling with doubt?

Is it wrong to like the questions  
and seeing where they lead  
more than looking for the answers  
and living by a creed?

Do the people who believe in God  
ever think they've got it wrong?  
Can I walk into a house of God,  
and feel like I belong?

If no religion seems to want me  
can I know where I fit in?  
Can I dance among the angels?  
Is there room there on the pin?

How can people choose a path  
and know they've chosen right?  
Am I sitting in the darkness  
and they've gone and seen the light?

Am I sitting in a cave,  
shackled, staring straight ahead  
while the fires burn behind me?  
Am I really that misled?

Or are my questions valid?  
Do they show me where to go?  
Do they help me understand  
there's really nothing I can know?

Can doubt be just as truthful  
as claiming to be sure?  
Can I put my faith in wonder  
and pray to the obscure?

What happens when my body dies?  
Does my mind go somewhere new?  
Is consciousness a fixture  
and all the rest milieu?

Am I a product of condition,

or is there something deep inside  
that sees that we are all the same  
in our needs, our hopes, our pride?

Why then, if we're all the same,  
do some people get it worse?  
Were they put here for a reason?  
Is the reason we're perverse?

Do we know the steps we ought to take  
to ensure we're treated fair?  
Was justice just constructed  
to give illusion that we care?

Is something waiting for us in the end  
to evaluate our souls?  
Does that lift our obligations,  
or are we holding the controls?

Is there an end to all the questions?  
Does knowledge come in death?  
Are we just guessing at the truth

until we suffer our last breath?

But what if knowledge never comes,  
and there really is no true first cause?

What if we're just wasting time  
and pretending lies are laws?

What if the larger picture  
is what we'd never wish to see?  
Could we just live our lives  
and let each other be?

If God is inside all of us,  
and we were made like Him  
Are we what we should worship?  
Are we the seraphim?

Is it too late to start again  
and try to mend our minds?  
Could questions be the answer  
that the questions seek to find?

Is it just lazy thinking  
to admit that I don't know  
where my thoughts all come from  
and where they want to go?

Is it wrong to want to linger  
in the mystery of thought?  
Can I simply ask my questions?  
Can I think like that or not?

## **Exhibit 10**

692: Processes of Research and Engagement

Fall 2018

Reflection: This was a challenging class for me for a number of reasons, and my Final Self-Assessment is a reflection of that. I felt myself moving closer to and farther from my original intentions over the course of the semester, and sometimes in frustratingly unclear directions. This semester brought with it many personal and professional difficulties that were often distracting from my academic goals, but I tried to use what I had learned about myself and my process in previous semesters to help me through those challenges. I chose to include the Final Self-Assessment because it shows where I was able to take stock of what was working well



for me and where there is space to examine where I could have done more, how I can improve, and what directions remain to be explored.

Product: Final Self-Assessment

## **CRCRTH 692: Final Self-Assessment**

### **Phases of Research and Engagement Goals**

Phase A. Overall vision	
Goal: I can convey who I want to influence or affect concerning what (Subject, Audience, Purpose).	
Plus:	I feel clearer about this phase. What I feel I accomplished was tolerance for initial ambiguity and perseverance to investigate further to identify my goals.
Delta :	I struggled to identify the subject, audience, and purpose at first because my governing question evolved to include different aspects of my thinking. I would like to continue working on narrowing my thinking to find where I can dig in and affect change.

Phase B. Background information	
Goal: I know what others have done before, either in the form of writing or action, that informs and connects with my project, and I know what others are doing now.	
Plus:	I improved here. I used new search tools from our library resources to help me find articles that related to my project.

Delta :	I had some trouble managing a reasonable reading load. I gave myself too much to read at first and had to work on finding key articles and chapters from within what I had selected rather than expecting myself to digest everything I had chosen.
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Phase C. Possible directions and priorities	
Goal: I have teased out my vision, so as to expand my view of issues associated with the project, expose possible new directions, clarify direction or scope within the larger set of issues, and decide the most important direction.	
Plus:	This is where my initial broad thinking did come in handy. I found many associated issues within and outside of my scope. I chose a direction to follow that I believe is truly important.
Delta :	Having said that, I am never sure if a given direction is the <i>most</i> important. I want to continue to work on staying focused on one direction even when others call to me.

Phase D. Component Propositions	
Goal: I have identified the premises and propositions that my project depends on, and can state counter-propositions. I have taken stock of the thinking and research I need to do to counter those counter-propositions or to revise my own propositions.	
Plus:	The position counter position was one of my favorite assignments this semester. I found it incredibly useful to step into another perspective to understand why someone might object to the proposal I am making. Having that knowledge helps me see how to frame and inform my own position.
Delta :	At times I felt that I needed my buddy partner to help me with this area. I wanted to counter my thinking with thinking that differs from my own, which can be challenging when using the same brain for both ends. That said, it was important for me to stretch my thinking in new directions to better understand other perspectives.

<p>Phase E. Design of further research and engagement</p> <p>Goal: I have clear objectives with respect to product, both written and practice, and process, including personal development as a reflective practitioner. I have arranged my work in a sequence (with realistic deadlines) to realize these objectives.</p>	
Plus:	I think my personal development as a reflective practitioner has been significant, and I have put in concerted effort toward clarifying my objectives.
Delta :	Establishing realistic deadlines was a struggle for me this semester as life made its presence known at almost every turn. This is usually not an issue for me, but this semester was particularly difficult.

<p>Phase F. Direct information, models &amp; experience</p> <p>Goal: I have gained direct information, models, and experience not readily available from other sources.</p>	
Plus:	The interview I held was one of the greatest direct modes of gathering information, and I'm grateful to have had that practice. Not only did I learn what I wanted to know for my project, but what I learned was directly applicable to my work life also.
Delta :	I would like to have expanded the Google form survey I had the class do to include people outside of our class. It would have given me deeper insight and stronger reference for my final report.

<p>Phase G. Clarification through communication</p> <p>Goal: I have clarified the overall progression or argument underlying my research and the written reports.</p>	
Plus:	I believe I clarified the argument underlying my research and provided sound reasoning to show why the research is important.

Delta :	I see places where I could have gone deeper into the research that supports my arguments. I had difficulty finding academic resources that addressed the topic I finally landed on.
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Phase H. Compelling communication

Goal: My writing and other products Grab the attention of the readers or audience, Orient them, move them along in Steps, so they appreciate the Position I've led them to.

Plus:	Yes. I believe I delivered the progression of my argument well, providing insight into the context and guiding my readers to a logical sequence of thoughts and steps to understand why my proposal is relevant to the initial issue.
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Delta :	I could have explored more potential obstacles that were directly tied to the parent communication issue and less to the logistical issues.
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Phase I. Engagement with others

Goal: I have facilitated new avenues of classroom, workplace, and public participation.

Plus:	I used my interview and my class survey to engage others outside of my project. I also began dialoguing with new parents and parents of elementary school children.
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Delta :	I could have been more strategic about the way I documented these conversations so that I could more easily reference them in my final report.
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Phase J. Taking stock	
Goal: To feed into my future learning and other work, I have taken stock of what has been working well and what needs changing.	
Plus:	Yes. I am generally very critical of the work I produce, and this semester was no exception. I tried new note keeping and reference tracking strategies this semester (almost entirely on the computer) that I don't feel worked well for me. Knowing that, I have identified what does and does not work well for my style of learning/recalling.
Delta :	Organization was a challenge this semester because I was trying new things while I was moving. On the plus side of the delta, I found what works for me and what doesn't.

**Developing as a Reflective Practitioner Goals**

*Including Taking Initiatives in and Through Relationships*

1. I have integrated knowledge and perspectives from my current and past courses into my own inquiry and engagement in social or educational change.	
Plus:	Absolutely. At work, I think about magnify, modify, and minify all the time when approaching problems and integrating solutions. Because we are a small team about to scale up significantly, thinking on both a small and large scale has been incredibly helpful. At the same time, learning how to problem find has made it so that I can anticipate issues before they arise and address already existing issues.
Delta :	I would like to be more conscious and deliberate about the way I integrate what I've learned into my life. I can recognize it in retrospect, but haven't named the process before or during its implementation. It has mostly been internalized.

2. I have also integrated into my own inquiry and engagement the processes, experiences, and struggles of previous courses.	
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<p>Plus:</p>	<p>I found myself thinking a lot about the action research course while working on this project. I used my narrative outline from Action Research to help me approach the narrative outline I did for Processes of Research and Engagement.</p> <p>As I'm thinking about my synthesis, much of the work I did in Holistic and Transformative Teaching and Creative Thinking and the readings I did in Critical Thinking have been weaving together and revealing ways they want to be connected in my upcoming project.</p>
<p>Delta :</p>	<p>The Action Research course was one of the most challenging courses I had ever taken, and I believe I could have transferred more of what I'd learned from handling that challenge to Processes of Research and Engagement, particularly when I came to managing my expectations about the scope of the project I can reasonably take on in a given timeframe.</p>

<p>3. I have developed efficient ways to organize my time, research materials, computer access, bibliographies, etc.</p>	
<p>Plus:</p>	<p>I devised a system for managing my time in the 688 Reflective Practice course that I really found effective. I prefer having my research material printed or in some way tangible, but I have learned to be comfortable with Apple Books. I keep a running bibliography that I update as I get more sources, and I have found that to be a good system for me.</p>
<p>Delta :</p>	<p>I have tried different online systems that don't work well for me, at least based on my current level of fluency with them, which is limited. I would like to improve here especially considering my appreciation for how technology can make life more streamlined, but I think I ultimately might be more comfortable with the familiar in this regard.</p>

<p>4. I have experimented with new tools and experiences, even if not every one became part of my toolkit as a learner, teacher/facilitator of others, and reflective practitioner.</p>	
<p>Plus:</p>	<p>I tried new systems for keeping my information organized, new approaches for finding resources, and for connecting with others who are interested or experienced in the issues I am investigating.</p>

Delta :	I identified systems that do and don't work for me. I learned that I need to have information written down by hand if I want to remember it and then transfer it to the computer, but if I put things on the computer first, or only, then I lose track.
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5. I have paid attention to the emotional dimensions of undertaking my own project but have found ways to clear away distractions from other sources (present & past) and not get blocked, turning apparent obstacles into opportunities to move into unfamiliar or uncomfortable territory.	
Plus:	This has been a really important piece for me this year especially. Managing the emotional dimensions has been more challenging at some times than in others, and I have worked hard to identify boundaries and limits to what I can take on at once. Most of the time I am adept at clearing away distractions in order to move forward.
Delta :	Some distractions are larger and more important than I can put aside, and I have tried to honor that. That means I have not always accomplished everything I set out to do in the beginning.

6. I have developed peer and other horizontal relationships. I have sought support and advice from peers, and have given support and advice to them when asked for.	
Plus:	I have developed firm support systems among my student peers and professional colleagues, as well as with my family and friends who have supported me through this journey. I have become much better at asking for help when I know I need it.
Delta :	I can be more active about reaching out to my student peers, and I have begun to do so. I want to continue to develop here.

<p>7. I have taken the lead, not dragged my feet, in dialogue with my advisor and other readers. I didn't wait for the them to tell me how to solve an expository problem, what must be read and covered in a literature review, or what was meant by some comment I didn't understand. I didn't put off giving my writing to my advisor and other readers or avoid talking to them because I thought that they didn't see things the same way as I do.</p>	
<p>Plus:</p>	<p>I think so. I have reached out to my advisors and professors when I need clarification or want to check it. I also value the input of those who have done something that I haven't done before, so I seek guidance when I think I need it, but I don't think I let guidance dictate my actions beyond its instructional intention. This semester more than ever I asked for the support I needed when life presented challenges that affected my usually work habits.</p>
<p>Delta :</p>	<p>I would like to continue developing thoughtful processing of input and feedback. I believe I already take feedback for what it is, but I can always improve.</p>

<p>8. I have revised seriously, which involved responding to the comments of others. I came to see this not as bowing down to the views of others, but taking them in and working them into my own reflective inquiry until I could convey more powerfully to others what I'm about (which may have changed as a result of the reflective inquiry).</p>	
<p>Plus:</p>	<p>Especially in my propositions, my thought map, and my final report, I have taken comments and feedback to mind in order to do meaningful revision. I may not make all the changes suggested or clarify every point exactly as indicated, but I consider input deeply before I begin my revisions.</p>
<p>Delta :</p>	<p>While I like to digest what others have to offer about my work, I could be more timely in my turnaround.</p>

<p>9. I have inquired and negotiated about formal standards, but gone on to develop and internalize my own criteria for doing work—criteria other than jumping through hoops set by the professor so I get a good grade.</p>	
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Plus:	Yes. I think a lot professionally and personally about what it means to meet standards in order to achieve a grade or score. I have negotiated with myself what it means to produce my best possible work and have worked hard to accept that the best of what I am capable of is conditional and situation dependent.
Delta :	I am learning how to accept that I cannot always hit the same high bar I set for myself and that falling short of my expectations does not mean I didn't learn something important and useful.

10. I have approached this course and the program as works-in-progress, which means that, instead of harboring criticisms to submit after the fact, I have found opportunities to affirm what is working well in the course or program and to suggest directions for their further development.	
Plus:	Absolutely. I think knowing that my work is always in progress is one of the key takeaways I have from the CCT program: I will never really be finished with my work, but I do eventually have to stop and submit.
Delta :	I have wrestled with perfectionism; coming to a stopping point in my work is a bit of a challenge, even if it is a welcome one.

## Exhibit 11

694: Synthesis of Theory and Practice

Spring 2019

Reflection: In my synthesis semester, my initial reasons for coming to the CCT program came together in a single product: I wanted to bring new tools to my teaching practice, to acquire new ways to engage my students, to develop curriculum that would allow for an appreciation of self

and other, and to design an intervention that would help students/children open themselves to self-awareness, self-appreciation, and critical self reflection. I have explored methods and moments for intervention, creative writing and thinking processes, critical reflection, metacognitive analysis, philosophical self-exploration, and how my experiences have shaped my perspectives. I have tried on a number of different approaches to the issues I see in education: a chasm between students and their learning. Through *Her Majesty, Thundercat of the Universe*, I found a way to connect my deep love of language, my teaching skills and experience, my passion for writing, and my desire to help people in a way that could have the impact I want on the educational experience and on the experience of being fully oneself in the world. I found that way through the CCT journey, through trying and reflecting, through striving and flailing, through refocusing and refocusing and refocusing, and through understanding that the cycle of learning is never at rest, never isolated, and never finished. I have chosen two sections of my Synthesis to include here as a reflection of how the threads of my learning have come together in this final product, which is not to say that this is a finalized product, but the culmination of several channels of thinking into a single offering.

Product: Synthesis Sections: Intervention & Collaboration and Justification

### **Intervention & Collaboration:**

Generally speaking, there is no group of people who care more about children than the people who raise them. Optimistically, when it comes to a child's long-term success, parents and caregivers are the most motivated and invested support system. I would argue that after loving

families, the next most invested demographic is passionate educators. Given that, as of 2016, there were 83.09 million families in the United States and 3.6 million primary or secondary school educators, I feel that there is a bank of knowledge that is not being accessed by a group of people that could benefit from it (Statista, 2019, Nces.ed.gov, 2019). From direct experience, I know how effective good teachers can be, so rather than suggest that teachers aren't doing enough to address the issue of illiteracy, I am suggesting that the learning experience be extended to include development before formal schooling begins. I have seen how determined and dedicated parents and caregivers can be about their children's educations, so I feel confident that there is an eager population willing to engage in this manner.

While parents and caregivers may have the motivation and goal of encouraging good thinking and learning, they may not have the tools and strategies that teachers, psychologists, educators, and curriculum designers have spent years researching and developing. Giving these tools and strategies to those who may value them most and have the greatest opportunity to use and reinforce them could have significant impact on children. This could help establish a learning disposition that could mean the difference between a high-school dropout and a college graduate. "Students who start kindergarten behind form the largest group of dropouts, and they have less than a 12 percent chance of attending a four-year university" (Readingfoundation.org, 2019). Giving parents and caregivers a foundation of teaching practices could help them provide their children with a greater chance of scholastic success before they even enter the classroom. I recognize that parents and caregivers already face daily challenges and may not have the time or energy to turn every moment into a teachable moment. For a child, however, there is rarely a

moment that is not a learning moment. This is why the intervention I have been developing would build off of a routine that is typically already taking place: story time.

In the spirit of joining my love of language and children's literature, my experience as an educator, and my desire to contribute to shaping generations of compassionate, self-empowered learners in the world, I am offering work that brings these missions together through story telling and collaboration with parents and caregivers. The work I am doing will give parents and caregivers an opportunity to use story time as a chance to engage with their children in practicing thinking strategies, acquiring language and vocabulary foundation, and developing mindful self-reflection by providing them with a set of sample questions and activities that facilitate thinking, discussion, and play around what it means to be a unique critical and creative thinker. Because "[our] intellect is shaped by our participation in or social worlds" (Antonacci, 2000), it is my aim to use children's literature as an avenue to strengthen the relationship between words and the people who use them so that they may develop deeper connections to themselves and the people in their lives.

*Her Majesty, Thundercat of the Universe* is an original story series that I have designed to demonstrate the behaviors and dispositions that would help orient a child to interact with the world with confidence, compassion, and curiosity. Its purpose is to provide an opportunity for children to experience and practice engaging with a range language elements, learning dispositions, and life skills through storytelling and play. The stories come with a set of questions and activities to help parents and caregivers use story time as a chance to engage with their children in practicing thinking strategies. As a character, Her Majesty, Thundercat is used

to model the learning of, the use of, or the teaching of critical and creative thinking skills, including resourcefulness, flexibility, playfulness, and sensitivity. The stories in which she is featured are written with learning and discussion in mind. They are meant to provide children and their adult readers with an opportunity to explore themes, to discuss words and their meanings, and to consider perspectives other than their own. The primary objectives are to provide a dynamic reading experience that equips caregivers with the tools to support early learning and that will help position children so that they are willing to approach new concepts with playfulness, confidence and flexibility.

There are a number of principles that have informed the design of the *Her Majesty, Thundercat of the Universe* stories and the engagement strategies that go with them, central to which is that the way children interact with learning informs the attitude they form to learning. In other words, children can feel invited into learning or left out of learning and that feeling can shape the way they learn throughout their lifetime. A child's first years are prime learning and development years, so parents and caregivers have an instrumental impact on how that learning is formed. "Along with children's natural curiosity and their persistence as self-motivated learners, what they learn during their first 4 or 5 years is not learned in isolation. Infants' activities are complemented by adult-child relationships that encourage the gradual involvement of children in the skilled and valued activities of the society in which they live" (Bransford et al., 2000). Parents and caregivers, therefore, are the primary introduction into those social worlds and have the first opportunity to shape a child's relationship with those worlds. Involving children in discussion about and around stories can enrich those relationships. "Such sustained curriculum

conversations will help children's language grow and develop, bringing their personal meanings of words closer to the conventional cultural meanings" (Antonacci, 2000). By actively using story as an avenue for conversation, parents and caregivers can prepare children to use language to bridge their inner and outer worlds.

Because I see language as a gateway to thinking pathways, I have been very purposeful in crafting the language of these stories, selecting vocabulary that is deliberately above the reach of new readers, let alone pre-readers. This is done in an effort to invite a conversation between the child and the adult reader about what words mean. Using advanced vocabulary is also done to acclimate the child to asking for help and to being comfortable encountering new language. Parents and caregivers can show children how to navigate new words by thinking about them out loud and incorporating that thought process into discovery. Doing so demonstrates that language acquisition is an active ongoing process that even adults continue to practice. It also provides context for the use and meaning of new words in relation to the child's social and linguistic world. "Language acquisition cannot take place in the absence of shared social and situational contexts because the latter provide information about the meanings of words and sentence structures (Chapman, 1978 cited in Bransford et al., 2000). Providing children with a rich vocabulary gives them access to concepts not just about the world, but also about themselves, what they can be, and what they already are.

The stories are written in a structured anapestic tetrameter, meaning that there is a set pattern and meter to each verse. Rhyme and rhythm provide an opportunity for children to see that sounds

can be produced by a variety of letter combinations and that thoughts can be expressed through different sentence structures. Following the pattern provided, children should be able to anticipate that the end of the upcoming line will rhyme with the previous. In this way, children will be exposed to multiple spellings of similar sounds, which serves to prepare them to accept the complexity of reading and writing English words. As children become more proficient in their reading ability, parents and caregivers can turn this into an activity, inviting children to search for all the ways a sound is represented on the page or throughout the story. Where the *Her Majesty, Thundercat* stories provide the platform for the learning, the companion guide for parents and caregivers shows them how to extend the learning beyond story time and incorporate it in moments throughout the day. The activities, questions, and prompts are written to enhance and capitalize on the learning possibilities for the child by equipping the parent or caregiver support system with tools and strategies that may prepare children to practice flexible, independent thinking in a classroom. It is important to remember, however, that these stories need not become textbooks. I am entrusting parents and caregivers to read these stories as stories first and to then engage with them as learning tools.

### **Justification:**

When language is used to tell stories, those stories can serve to expand on a child's reality. Children make connections to the text by seeing how the stories are different from their own experiences or how the stories reflect something about their experiences. Stories are an

opportunity for children to practice responding to a situation by trying it on through the filter of a character. Stories can be a chance for children to learn empathy, to learn how they feel about issues, and to learn more about who they are and how they see the world. A parent or caregiver can make this process visible by helping a child move their thoughts into language through the context of the story. “You must be willing to enter into a dialogue with the text, to interact and not merely extract. And through these transactions with text, we might learn how to better enter into conversations with those in the real world who offer us another perspective or present us with an idea we are reluctant to hear” (Beers and Probst, 2017). Parents and caregivers can capitalize on the power of storytelling to help their children discover and develop the deep thinking that they not only have the power to do, but will also need to navigate life’s challenges with the confidence. This type of thinking can create compassionate readers who understand their own minds, how they are different or similar to those of the people around them, and how to respect and respond to differing perspectives. “Compassion should sharpen the readers’ ability to see other points of view, other perspectives, and to imagine the feelings of those who hold them. It should enable readers to take, if only momentarily, the perspective of someone else and thus better understand motivations and thinking” (Beers and Probst, 2017). The literacy experience, therefore, is not just about understanding words, but about understanding self, other, and how both fit into the context of the world.

Some may argue that children are not prepared to engage in language and learning in these ways, yet research supports that children are not only capable of this type of engagement, they benefit greatly from it. Parents and caregivers can provide literacy and learning foundations by



understanding that “...literacy emerges before children are formally taught to read...literacy is defined to encompass the whole act of reading, not merely decoding...the child’s point of view and active involvement with emerging literacy constructs is featured...the social setting for literacy learning is not ignored” (Mason and Sinha, 1993). During any moment that a child is engaged in language use, exposure, or observation that child is learning. Whether that learning is active or passive is up to the parent and caregiver to construct.

Language learning should not be a static or intimidating activity. Parents and caregivers can facilitate playful learning by. “1. *Playing word games* that emphasize the structure of the language. There is evidence that introducing the alphabet along with words games can help children understand that words are made of individual sounds...2. *Reading children’s books*.

There is sound evidence that young children can learn new words introduced by an adult while looking at pictures in books, or when the adult reads the text in the book” (Sénéchal, 2009).

Language provides children with a tool to identify, explore, and inquire. Parents and caregivers facilitate their children’s language development, and dialogue around language plays a large role in that development because “if [children] are not in a language-using environment, they will not develop this capacity. Experience is important; but the opportunity to use the skills—practice—is also important” (Bransford et al., 2000). By participating in these dialogues, the parent or caregiver is showing through practice how to think about a text and make connections to concepts outside of the text, which are skills children may not have developed at this stage but will be asked to call upon in their later schooling. “In areas the child has not yet reached developmentally, the adult acts as a “mediator” between the child and the tract in the areas where

the child cannot function alone (e.g., being able to predict, relating experiences to the text, and so on.)” (Mason and Sinha, 1993).

Modeling a curiosity about language in a way that communicates partnership and identifies strategy gives children the message that encountering a new word is not an indication of the limits of what they know: it is an opportunity to learn. Saying things like “I don’t think we’ve ever seen that word together. How can we find out what it means” followed by a new approach each time or a reflection of what was done the last time not only reminds children what their resources are but helps them see that there is more than one way to approach a challenge.

Caregivers can expand on this as they see fit by having their child look for clues in the picture, in the context, or within the word itself.

In this way, parents and caregivers are activating different areas of a child’s brain by having them hear the words, see the words, say the words, and think of words that are connected.

Children are also learning how to seek help and feel confident acknowledging when something is new. Parents and caregivers who activate learning in this way are participating in “a) adult modeling and coaching processes, or how to learn something replaces teacher-directed instruction; b) *scaffolding* the learning environment, or setting up instructional situations that allow learners to succeed as they advance toward higher levels of understanding; and c) working within the student’s “zone of proximal development,” which means providing instruction that spans the region in which a learner can advance both with and without help” (Mason and Sinha, 1992). By working together and activating multiple regions of the brain, caregivers would be

providing a learning experience that supports greater general intelligence, according to the Parieto-frontal Integration Theory, which posits that intelligence is formed and embedded through the interaction across regions of the brain (Reisberg, 2016), and stays within a child's Zone of Proximal Development (Trafton, 2012, Antonacci, 2000, Mason and Sinha, 1993). To paraphrase psychologist Lev Vygotsky who developed the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development, "an indisputable fact of great importance (is that) thought development is determined by language" (Antonacci, 2000, Vygotsky, 1986). If children can access the words that represent their thoughts, they can better access their thoughts.

With this in mind, parents and caregivers need not shy away from introducing their children to advanced language. On the contrary, limiting access to higher vocabulary can limit a child's thinking. "Educators and textbook writers tend to simplify language, in order to make the presentation of difficult material more attractive and accessible to children. Yet doing this prevents learners from receiving the important linguistic cues they need, in order to guide and manage their own thinking" (Tishman, Perkins and Jay, 1995). By giving children access to high range language and giving parents and caregivers access to tips to reinforce what the language represents, I am attempting to capitalize on the role of language to create connections, not just to the text or to its related concepts, but to ourselves. "Words are precision instruments. They create categories to think with—categories to apply not only to received information, but also to one's own thoughts" (Tishman, Perkins and Jay, 1995). If we follow the connection between literacy and social mobility, giving children access to their thoughts can mean giving them access to their long-term success.

