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## "I Can See You": An Autoethnography of My Teacher-Student Self

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## "I Can See You": An Autoethnography of My Teacher-Student Self

### Abstract

This article is an autoethnographic investigation of my second-nature teacher-student self. What has made me into the teacher I am? What makes me the teacher I am? In order to address these questions, I draw upon my memories of my own teachers and students. As I portray my teaching-learning experiences as textual "snapshots," I find that my most cherished memories come from when my teachers acknowledged my presence and listened to me, and when I have been in dialogue with my own students. My autoethnographic journey ends up linking the personal to pedagogical theory centering attention to relationships between teachers and students, mirroring qualities of the humanizing pedagogy I discover, embrace, and which redefines and recreates my always evolving teacher-learner self.

### Keywords

Autoethnography, Memories, Textual "Snapshots", Teacher?Student Relationships, Humanizing Pedagogy, and Teacher Identity

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## **“I Can See You”: An Autoethnography of My Teacher-Student Self**

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*This article is an autoethnographic investigation of my second-nature teacher-student self. What has made me into the teacher I am? What makes me the teacher I am? I draw upon my memories of my own teachers and students to address these questions. As I portray my teaching-learning experiences as textual “snapshots,” I find that my dearest memories come from when I have been in dialogue with my teachers and students. This investigation leads me to pedagogy centering attention to teacher–student relationships; a humanizing pedagogy that I discover, embrace, and which redefines and recreates my teacher-learner self. Key Words: Autoethnography, Memories, Textual “Snapshots”, Teacher–Student Relationships, Humanizing Pedagogy, and Teacher Identity*

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Goiânia, 1985

“Okay, so now why don’t you all tell me your names and something about you, anything you feel like sharing, it needn’t be much.”

Maily, our Portuguese language teacher, gazes matter-of-factly at us from a distance behind her thick glasses. Maily, in her late thirties, is short, plain-looking, and has short curly black hair. She has just introduced herself and talked about her expectations for the course. Some 70 high school freshman students pack the classroom. I am seated at my usual backstage spot – the second or third desk from the back left corner. Like all the others, I am quietly trying to make out new teacher number three.

“We’ll follow the lines starting here at the first desk, up and down all the way to the student at the end of the seventh line.”

One by one we all say our names and add some unimportant detail: where we went to middle school, where we come from, what we like to do. Every now and then Maily asks a student a question or makes a quick comment, but she mostly listens motionless, attempting a half-smile if someone’s lucky.

Before I know it, my turn has come and gone, and then the last student’s micro-monologue is over.

Maily takes charge again, as 70 pairs of eyes, soon to be filled with surprise and amusement, turn back toward her.

“So let’s see if I know who you are.” Maily begins to recite each student’s name as she gazes fixedly at his or her face, from the first student in the first line to the last student in the seventh line, following a rhythmic pattern broken up only by brief instances of hesitation. We are entranced by Maily’s nearly perfect performance. She misses no more than two names. The whole class applauds with enthusiasm.

I know without a shade of doubt that I will like this teacher.

*“I can see you”*

Maily<sup>1</sup> (pronounced “Mylee”) was my Portuguese language teacher during my high school years in Goiás, Brazil. She was one of several unforgettable educators of various personalities and teaching styles who have influenced my life. From the start Maily was totally focused on her students and on the subject matter. As big as our class was, Maily always conveyed the impression that at any point in time she knew exactly where each of us stood academically—and she did so very elegantly, very smoothly, very effortlessly, it seemed. I respected her. I liked her. Maily called all 70 of us by name, and I knew she saw all and each of us.

Two and a half decades later, the memories most clearly imprinted in my mind relate to experiences in the classroom, both with teachers and students I have had over the years. Of all the professional roles I have taken on in the past 20 years (teacher, supervisor, translator, editor, information analyst, and researcher), teaching has accompanied me from the start and brings me the highest pleasure. It is the role I identify with the most, personally and professionally speaking. Another lifelong enjoyable role for me has been that of a student. It has become so recurrent for me to concurrently take and teach classes that I have come to see teaching and learning as two sides of the same coin. The teacher I am is impacted by the student I was—and still am today in a doctoral program in Language and Literacy Education at the University of Georgia. The teacher draws upon the student, whose memories of her own teachers now inform the teacher, in a recurrent, never-ending circle.

Because teaching and learning intrinsically define who I am and who I have become, I felt compelled to embark on this autoethnographic journey to investigate my second-nature teacher-learner self. A number of interconnected questions have drawn me to this investigation: *What makes me the teacher I am?* What are my nonnegotiable beliefs about what makes a “good teacher” and “good teaching”? *What has made me into the teacher I am?* How are those beliefs informed by memories of people and experiences that have influenced me? And what is the place of memory in teacher research?

My goal in writing my story is to add my own nuanced perspective on interpreting the world of teaching and learning by taking a road that leads to one of possible multiple destinations in educational research (Eisner, 2008, p. 22). I tell a story that expands a circle of communication and “advances human understanding” (Eisner, 1997, p. 5). With “epistemological humility” (Barone, 2008, p. 38), I do not suggest absolute answers. Rather, I speak and write in tentative tones so as to involve the audience in history-making dialogue, or what Barone has called *conspiratorial conversations* (2001, p. 150; 2008, p. 39). Barone used *conspiratorial* to suggest a communion of agents engaged in exploratory discussions about possible and desirable worlds. The community or audience I have in mind is “one that longs for fresh language and imagery to describe the

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<sup>1</sup> In all of my snapshots but two, the characters’ names are the real names of the teachers and students I interacted with. These people have consented to the use of their real names in this article. The two exceptions in which real names are not used occur in the fifth and eighth snapshots, respectively titled “Taguatinga, 1993” (p. 424) and “Athens, 2006” (p. 429). In those scenes, pseudonyms designate the students and the two professors portrayed.

indescribable emotional and intellectual experiences in and beyond language-education contexts” (Cahnmann-Taylor, 2008, p. 13).

### **Autoethnography as Method**

My method in this study provides the fresh language and imagery I seek, not so much to “reduce uncertainty” but to contribute to the “enhancement of meaning” (Barone, 2001, p. 153). Among the slightly distinct or strikingly different meanings, descriptions, and purposes assigned to autoethnography in the literature (Denzin, 2006; Wall, 2006), I take autoethnographies to be “highly personalized accounts that draw upon the experience of the author/researcher for the purposes of extending sociological understanding” (Sparkes, 2000, p. 21). A merger between autobiography and ethnography, autoethnography highlights the researcher and her own reflexivity and reflections as viable data sources in a given study (Cahnmann-Taylor, 2008, p. 8). Because autoethnography is a blurred genre (Geertz, 1983) or hybrid form (Cahnmann-Taylor), it combines autobiographical writing with the conventions of narrative writing. Autoethnographers communicate their self-study as a short story, essay, poem, novel, play, performance piece, or other experimental text featuring “concrete action, emotion, embodiment, self-consciousness, and introspection portrayed in dialogues, scenes, characterization, and plot” (Ellis, 2004, p. xix). Thus autoethnography “claims the conventions of literary writing” (Ellis, 2004, p. xix) and “overlaps with, and is indebted to, research and writing practices in anthropology, sociology, psychology, literary criticism, journalism, and communication . . . to say nothing of our favorite storytellers, poets, and musicians” (Jones, 2008, p. 208).

Autoethnography thus turns the autobiography or memoir genre into a *method* for conducting and displaying research. Here the emphasis is on the self-interrogation of the sociocultural processes of identity construction that have led the researcher to this point in her identity formation (Austin & Hickey, 2007). Thus writers who call themselves autoethnographers do not lose sight of their aim to explore and investigate the self. Since this research method makes room for various analytical lenses and understandings, the autoethnographic hybrid product can assume multifarious shapes and scopes, on a continuum ranging from researchers sharing personal experiences with their respondents, which then become part of the larger research narrative, to wholly autobiographical projects, to those that explicitly combine autobiographical data and fiction (Leavy, 2009, pp. 38-39). This process entails considerable latitude with respect to how autoethnography is conducted and what product ensues. Additionally, autoethnographers tend to vary in their emphasis on *auto-* (self), *-ethno-* (the cultural link), and *-graphy* (the application of a research process; Wall, 2006, p. 6). While autoethnography has increasingly become the term of choice to describe studies and procedures that connect the personal to the cultural (Ellis & Bocher, 2000), it is noted that since autoethnography displays multiple layers of consciousness—as researchers “zoom backward and forward, inward and outward” between their personal, social, and cultural experiences and selves—“distinctions between the personal and cultural become blurred, sometimes beyond distinct recognition” (Ellis, 1999, p. 673).

I came to autoethnography because I realized that if I expected to answer the questions that compelled me (*What makes me the teacher I am? What has made me into*

*the teacher I am?*) with any chance of success, I had no other, nor better or more promising place to go. I am attempting to explore the personal, the self, for the purpose of extending sociological understanding regarding teaching and learning, and teacher identity formation. Like Humphreys (2005, p. 852), I claim that an autoethnographic approach enables me as researcher to look inward and study myself in order to create a reflexive dialogue with the readers of this piece, in the hope that the meanings embedded in my life stories might have relevance to other teachers' and students' memories, experiences, and practices. Here I quote Sparkes (1996): "I attempt to take you as the reader into the intimacies of my world. I hope to do this in such a way that you are stimulated to reflect upon your own life in relation to mine" (p. 467). This indeed is one of the purposes of autoethnographic writing: to access the "nexus of self and culture" using "the self as a springboard, as a witness," in the hope of creating *resonance*— "me too" moments for readers (Pelias, 2004, as cited in Leavy, 2009, p. 37).

Autoethnography, after all, also means "setting a scene, telling a story, weaving intricate connections among life and art, experience and theory, evocation and explanation ... and then letting go, hoping for readers who will bring the same careful attention to your words in the context of their own lives" (Jones, 2008, p. 208). Carolyn Ellis (2009) explained that she directs her words to teachers and students "risking writing their stories for the first time . . . those who seek out autoethnography to better understand themselves and the world they live in and who desire to change it for the better" (pp. 373-374). I am one of those teachers and students. I also share Ellis' ambitious but indispensable goal "to try to open hearts and minds through stories" (p. 374) — my own.

### **My Autoethnographic Album**

In order to tell or *show* (Denzin, 2003, as cited in Chase, 2008, p. 69) my story, from the onset I had a clear sense that vignettes, or "snapshots," as I call them here, would provide the best means to do so. By framing my memories and experiences with the use of present tense verb forms and careful word choice, my verbal snapshots seek to create a photographic effect of capturing tones and shades that mirror the mental images I hold of those experiences. As in the example of my Portuguese language teacher Maily above, my verbal "snapshots" are accompanied by "captions," that is, additional clarifying, explanatory or reflective text. Combined, snapshots and captions represent a number of my teaching-learning experiences which—as far as my memory reached and to the best of my ability—correspond to the truth the way I remember and perceive it.

In photography, a snapshot is a photograph commonly considered to be technically imperfect or amateurish. The snapshot concept was introduced by Eastman Kodak Company in the 1880s to promote the newly invented roll-film camera (Munir & Phillips, 2005). Given the poor quality of roll-film images, Kodak highlighted the "fun" aspect of photography, encouraging users to "shoot" spontaneously. After 1900, however, with the invention of the Brownie camera and improvement of photo quality, Kodak shifted its advertising focus to actively encourage people to take snapshots to chronicle the important moments or events of their lives. The photo album was advertised as an archive for storing the shared memories of a family's history so that people could reconstruct their lives through snapshot images (Munir & Phillips, p. 1679).

The sense of snapshot that I foreground in this article encompasses the spontaneity and unpredictability in “shooting” images as well as the photo album concept for capturing and reconstructing significant moments in time. I combine memories and language devices to create textual snapshots that together form a sample narrative photo album of my teaching-learning life. Selecting the snapshots followed an intuitive process in which I looked for the recollections related to teaching and learning that evoked the strongest feelings in me, that were somehow the most striking and memorable I have had. Memories ranging from kindergarten through graduate school emerged, more numerous than I could possibly depict in this text. Because my current academic and career interests are focused on foreign language teacher education, most of the snapshots chosen for this work are set in post-secondary settings where I have either been a student or a teacher, or both. By the time I started college in my home country Brazil in 1990, I had attended eleven schools in two cities in the United States and six cities in Brazil. My father’s work as a Presbyterian minister caused our family to move frequently throughout my childhood and teenage years. In the 1990s, as an undergraduate student majoring in Translation, and later graduate student in English and Linguistics at the Universidade de Brasília (UnB), I was at last fortunate enough to remain enrolled in the same institution for more than a couple of years; those nearly ten wonderful years have molded me in ways beyond my comprehension. From the age of nineteen, while I attended college, I never quit teaching, and for a year, as a master’s student, I was also an instructor at UnB. Think of the perfect match...

Two years ago, as I embarked on this autoethnographic journey to investigate my teacher-learner self, I also encountered and dived into conceptual and theoretical waves propelled by the humanizing educational philosophy of Paulo Freire, considered by many to be the most important educator in the last half of the twentieth century (Kohl, 1997, p. 7). As I have “zoomed backward and forward, inward and outward” (Ellis, 1999, p. 673) between myself and other participants evoked in my teaching and learning memories, I concurrently have discovered Freire and other Freirean scholars, and found in them the theoretical language to help me make sense of my lived experiences. So while at first these journeys constituted separate projects that ran parallel to each other, it didn’t take long for them to intersect and intermingle. As a result, one exploration can no longer do without the other; my autoethnographic album is a whole made up of the textual snapshots as well as their subsequent captions containing my reflective musings on pedagogic theory and practice. Take the captions away, and the snapshots become mere sketches or vignettes. While it may be true that some pictures are worth a thousand words, I am convinced that some words have souls that no camera can capture on its own.

## What Has Made Me Into The Teacher I Am?

Brasília, 1990

It's nearly time for our 2:00 Latin class to begin – though the teacher hasn't arrived yet – when a panting Denise shows up at the classroom door. “What brings her here?” I wonder. She motions me to come out, a wide smile on her attractive face.

“I'm so glad I found you! I have great news: that research apprenticeship grant came through. But the deadline for completing the paperwork so that we can add your name to the roster and payroll is today! You need to come by the department office to fill out those forms no later than 4:00 this afternoon.”

Denise's delight in delivering the news seems to override my self-contained joy in receiving it. Denise is always so loquacious, intense, and vibrant, and she knows so much, I'm just thrilled that I'll be working with her. I thank her for the news, and before I know it, she's on her way, pacing briskly down the hall.

“We'll talk about your research work and hours after our next class,” she turns back to add while keeping up her pace.

“Sure,” I answer, a smile in my eyes.

*“I can see you and I will take strides to see you grow”*

To this day, I don't know how Dr. Denise Aragão Martins, who taught Portuguese language and discourse studies at the Universidade de Brasília, tracked me down in that huge campus so that I wouldn't miss the deadline for getting that research apprenticeship grant. My Latin class did not meet in any of the classrooms in our department. I suppose sociable Denise asked for help at the departmental office to access my schedule of classes, leading her to find out I was taking Latin and where my class met, several departments away. “Commitment to teaching well is a commitment to service. Teachers who do the best work are always willing to serve the needs of their students,” bell hooks wrote (2003, p. 83). Denise—the most knowledgeable expert that I have ever met in her field—went out of her way to serve me that afternoon nearly two decades ago.

In the classroom, spirited, dynamic Denise often had a story, a personal experience or anecdote, to start out a class. She could well have written the words: “There is no separating the personal from the professional. As a teacher, I do not leave my home and family experiences behind me when I drive to campus or when I enter the classroom” (Leggo, 2008, p. 91). Denise's lessons were packed with personal experiences. She spoke as naturally about her only child Anamaria (spelled jointly – “junto” – not “Ana Maria,” as expected) as she explained, articulately and clearly, the ways in which to use the comma (still a mystery to many educated Brazilians). Seventeen-year-old Anamaria was having a hard time making sense of Portuguese phonetics and orthography, and Denise told us how, during a one-hour walk around the block, she had successfully explained the subject to her daughter (in turn demystifying the topic for some of us as well). With Denise I learned that language is always context-based, not a set of abstract, technical rules. Denise also had a great sense of humor, and encouraged the students to participate with questions and comments in her classes, though at the time I was too shy to speak up. Just being myself in her company was fine

too, whether in the classroom or as her research assistant, a role I thoroughly enjoyed for the year it lasted.

Brasília, 1990-1993

The Critical Reading class meets once a week for two hours in one of the underground classrooms. It's 8:00 sharp this Friday morning and Dr. Mark David Ridd is already at his desk taking roll. Professor Mark is an Englishman in his early thirties who's lived in Brasília for many years (and who has not been late for class one day in his life). For those who don't know his name, the sideburns he wears give him away as a foreigner at first sight anyway. I will soon realize he speaks Portuguese as well as any educated Brazilian of my acquaintance. But I don't know that yet: I skipped the first couple of classes, no excuse provided.

Professor Mark has his head down as he is calling out the students' names. When I respond to my name, he looks up:

"You already have two absences. If you miss one more class, you'll fail this course due to excessive absences." I nod, but just barely.

(... nearly four years later ...)

I'm beaming as I step onto stage. The events so far—Mark's spectacular speech as our class' *paraninfo* ("godfather"), Neide's beautiful graduation speech, all 20 something of us proudly taking our graduation oath—have made this night so special and memorable already. In the audience, my parents, my husband, my brothers, and other relatives and friends—everyone but my 18-month-old son, long asleep on his chair—celebrate with me. On front stage, several professors are seated at a long table to perform the climax of the night. I am next in line to receive my diploma, after shaking hands with them all. The professor at the end of the table hands me my precious roll. The moment goes as swiftly as it comes, and I'm off stage and back with the audience. Now that I'm allowed to join my family, I take a seat between my husband and my brother Eduardo. No sooner have I sat down than Eduardo asks:

"What did Mark say to you?"

"*Merecido*. (Well-deserved). Why?"

"He spoke to no one else, just you."

*"I can see you and I will listen to you"*

If there is one teacher who has impacted me as both teacher and learner—though picking one out of a number of admirable teachers I've had of course wouldn't be fair to them all—that teacher is Dr. Mark David Ridd, Ph.D. King's College, London. The snapshot above shows the beginning and the final chapter of that period in time when our paths crossed (and they have crossed again since my graduation), but what matters, what made the difference, is obviously the in-between, the process that developed during those four undergraduate years. As a student in five classes that Mark taught in the Department of Foreign Languages and Translation, I came to know two distinct, yet totally compatible, sides of him. In the classroom, Mark was the serious, content-driven, always-on-task teacher who expected our nearly perfect attendance and dedication to the subject-matter. At the same time, his Portuguese-English translation classes were

essentially very participatory, because one can only teach good translation skills if various possibilities of translations for a same text are suggested and considered. During instruction Mark would routinely write out those possibilities on the board—his suggestions and ours. Yet, because he was the teacher *and* the native speaker, I always assigned more value to his version; I guess all of us did.

While Mark's classes were among my favorite, it was the Mark I came to know out of the classroom, either in our conversations right after class or in his office hours, that fascinated me and has impacted me the most. I made an A as a final grade in all his classes, but most of those A's were *negotiated*. That was only possible because Mark truly *listened*. "It is listening to the student that I learn to speak with him or her," said Freire (1998a, p. 106). Freire wrote about a type of evaluation (testing) "that stimulates speaking *to* as a stage on the way to speaking *with*" (p. 105)—by listening first. For Freire (1998a), this approach allows testing to serve as an instrument for enabling teachers "who have developed a loving yet critical relationship with freedom" (p. 105) to put themselves at the service of freedom and not domestication. In Mark's classes, most of the tests and assignments were translation exercises, and Mark used a grading system made up of pluses (+) and minuses (-). Our grades were calculated by adding up the number of pluses and minuses we got. Mark was a tough grader, and C's were not unusual among his students' grades. What often happened to me was that on some assignments I got a high B+, just a couple of pluses away from an A. Evidently I wanted an A, so I would turn to dictionaries and specialized books for information and arguments to support my claim of why my version was acceptable, so that I could get the extra pluses I needed. I can clearly picture my twenty-one-year-old self at the university main library engrossed in Black's Law Dictionary, reading furiously, making copies, and taking notes, arming myself to meet with my serious, stern-looking professor. The first time I tentatively approached Mark to make my case, to my delight he listened unarmed, pondered, and raised my grade. After that, going to him for that purpose nearly turned into a habit. It was not always easy to get him to reconsider; sometimes I really had to show him the facts. Once it took me finding a picture of a beautiful American porch spread out across two *Reader's Digest* pages to convince Mark that "porch" (my choice), rather than the British word "veranda" (his choice), was an acceptable translation for the Portuguese "varanda". Still, I cannot recall a time my B+ did not turn into an A. And certainly much more significantly, this fabulous professor who was willing to listen and who was never offended by questions, comments or challenges to his views—not even on the rare occasions when he would mispronounce a Portuguese word in class and someone would not hesitate to correct him—taught me at once determination, humility, and respect.

"The more efficaciously I manage to provoke the student into an exploration and refinement of his or her curiosity [of the object of knowledge], the better I am as a teacher" (Freire, 1998a, p. 106). Mark was that teacher for me; judging by his popularity, for many others too. He is the best example I know of someone who has resolved the traditional teacher–student hierarchy, the "teacher-student contradiction" (Freire, 1993).



Somewhere in time...

*“I can’t see you”*

This snapshot is the matrix for most of my experiences as a student. Rather than specific moments and incidents, what I have are a myriad of blurry, scripted classroom routines. There is nothing particular to recall. I was just one more in the crowd. Most of the teachers and many professors who graded my straight A tests and papers were clueless about who I was or where I was headed. All I got from those teachers who couldn’t see me were deposits of information that more often than not I failed to transform into useful knowledge. Aronowitz (1998) described Freire’s banking concept of education in these terms: “As a certified possessor of legitimate knowledge, the teacher’s authority is fundamentally always already established, and the student’s position as a consumer of knowledge is equally unquestioned” (p. 8). Most of my teachers followed their preestablished role, and so did I, the “obedient student” (Behar, 2008, p. 58). And that was that.

## What Makes Me The Teacher I Am?

Taguatinga, 1993

I take a deep breath as I am about to step into the classroom. I have the script on the tip of my tongue, but facing the music takes an extra dose of courage and will-power. No matter what it takes, I've had enough of the discomfort and uneasiness I've been feeling in this class, the subtle though unmistakably sharp rejection I've been getting from the 17 or 18 EFL students – mostly female teenagers and young adults – I've been trying to teach for a few weeks now. They're all there when I step in: the same suspicious looks, the same half-spoken words I've been getting three times a week. I sense, once again, that my arrival cuts their conversation short. I've thought long and hard about the best way to approach the students and the situation. I'm determined to follow through.

"Today we're not having a regular class, at least not yet. First, we're all going to be free to speak Portuguese. Second, I want to hear what you have to say. I know something's not right, and I want to understand it so that we can fix whatever's going on. It's the first time something like this happens in a class I'm teaching. You're obviously not happy and satisfied here. Please let me know what's on your minds, let's work this out together."

It may be my candid tone, it may be their need to speak; the fact is that I do not have to insist. They're ready, quite eager really, to take my cue.

"We're used to another type of class with our former teacher. He didn't use the textbook all the time," says Rosana.

"Our classes used to be more conversational, the teacher would often bring in extra activities to work on," adds Cláudia.

"You take everything so seriously, we don't really get to relax and enjoy this class," complains Renata.

"We could have less grammar, and more conversation, music, and extras in this class," wishes Márcia.

The list goes on, and I force myself to hear, the knot growing in my stomach. Otherwise my teaching experience has been so happy and unproblematic, where is this all coming from? I'm all ears, the students keep talking, and I wait for my turn to reply.

*"I can see you, and I am willing to face what you have to say"*

Introverted and shy by nature, for years and years I prepared my EFL classes very carefully so as to include something to hang on to—an activity, an exercise, a song—in case I had class-time left before the bell rang. Killing time by starting out a casual, unrelated conversation with the students or—even worse—going blank were not coming my way if I could help it. I always had my lesson plan very handy, and I usually followed through exactly as planned. Structure was the mask I wore, my safe harbor... which is not to say that I did not welcome improvisation and creativity. I did, and quite warmly, as long as it came from someone other than me: an outgoing, communicative student or two who would chip in with an interesting comment or a smart question once in a while. Does every introverted teacher wish for a couple of students like that in his or her class? Someone smart, good-natured, perhaps funny, to jump in when you most need it? I have usually been lucky to have a couple of students like that, who realize pretty quickly that though I may look quiet, serious, and content-driven on the outside, I am more than glad to hand over center stage to them for a relaxing break every now and then.

I had been teaching EFL at a private language school in Taguatinga for about four years when the scene in the snapshot above occurred. We were three or four weeks into the semester, and to my dismay no communicative, good-natured student had come out yet. Who would have guessed then that as I faced the students and their complaints about my book-driven, mechanical, and *yes*, boring classes, we were all growing together by confronting our differences through true dialogue (Freire, 1998a, p. 59)? Freire (2005) encouraged our interactions to be “open, democratic, free,” so that we “could exercise the right to our curiosity, the right to ask, to disagree, to criticize” (p. 106). No easy task, to be sure. But that day when I listened to my EFL students and we entered into dialogue, I learned quite a few lessons, and they did too. I learned that I needed to loosen up and find ways to make EFL learning enjoyable for the class. As for the students, they learned that they would need to work hard because we had landmarks to reach and I was not going to lower the bar. They also learned, however, that I could not do without their participation and partnership. And although I cannot recall my exact words to them that evening, the fact is that we compromised and were able to move on in a steady dialogical mode. I specifically asked the class to always speak up if they felt something wasn’t working in our classes. Our lessons became more laid back and conversational. We learned to talk and work through our differences—not only did we survive without the couple of outgoing, talkative students who failed to enroll in that class, but we got so far as wrapping up the course with a Secret Santa get-together at my house, one of the best Secret Santas I’ve ever had with any of my classes!

Goiânia, 2001

I have just finished teaching the perfect expository lesson, and I am so proud of myself! All has gone exactly as planned; my rhetoric and timing couldn’t have been better. I am sure that I have been able to introduce the fundamentals of English Phonetics and Phonology to this group of 25 non-English-speaking college freshmen at the Universidade Paulista (Unip) as competently as I learned them from Professor Gilberto Chauvet at the Universidade de Brasília (UnB). After taking Chauvet’s master’s level class and finally learning how to make sense of those phonetic symbols in dictionary entries, I’ve become the best of his disciples. I will make sure my students get the message too!

It is my second class with this group. They haven’t said much this evening or asked more than a couple of questions – just as I expected for today’s type of lesson. I needed them to listen closely and pay attention to the foundation I was laying for upcoming classes. So I set out to lead them on this fascinating journey through the differences between Phonetics and Phonology, the International Phonetic Alphabet, RP - Received Pronunciation, vowels and consonants, phonemes, and minimal pairs, with all the previously assembled examples I could think of. The students have listened carefully, intense concentration in their eyes; I am sure they are ready to embark on this adventure with me.

I’m smiling as I dismiss the class and head out. A few students are still in the classroom when I leave.

Minutes later I meet my husband João Marcos at our car. João Marcos has just been admitted to the English Language program at Unip and is enrolled in English Phonetics and Phonology. No one but the course coordinator knows we’re married. I have decided to break the news to the students during our next class. So I ask my husband if he’s heard any comments from the students on tonight’s lesson, any remarks?...

No one beats João Marcos at getting right to the point:

Gladstone, next to me, said, “Não gostei da aula. Fraquinha esta professora, não é?” (I didn’t like the class. This teacher is pretty weak/poor, don’t you think?)

*“I can see you, and I will step down so that you can learn and grow”*

I was dumbfounded by Gladstone’s response to my perfect lesson that evening in 2001. Total shock. Had he talked poorly about my teaching skills alone, I would have been puzzled enough; yet his words clearly showed he doubted my knowledge of the subject-matter. What in the world caused him to believe that I was “*fraquinha*”?

I think Freire, if allowed a word on the matter, would have agreed that the problem was not in the lecture type of lesson I taught, since he argued (1998b, p. 118) that the real evil was not in the explanation given by the teacher, but in teachers attempting to transfer knowledge to students considered as pure recipients. In most cases, reality shows that students will passively receive the deposits of information, even if it means that “absolute ignorance” is projected onto them (Freire, 1993, p. 58). Gladstone, however, refused to play the role of the passive, obedient student. The “absolute ignorance” that I inadvertently projected onto him backfired on me. If he was not able to understand what I was teaching, then the problem could only be in me, not in him. I was the ignorant one, not him. And in a sense Gladstone was right, though my ignorance pertained to my instructional approach rather than the subject-matter itself.

That day in 2001 I missed the dialogical perspective. Education grounded on dialogue as a process of learning and knowing (Freire & Macedo, 1996) takes place when all participants (teacher and students) build on the prior knowledge that they bring to the relationship. Clearly I had failed to create “the pedagogical conditions that would apprentice students into the new body of knowledge” (Freire & Macedo, p. 209). Whereas I had the best of intentions, I overlooked meeting the students where they stood, in order to properly introduce them to English Phonetics and Phonology. I had to speak their language before they could learn how to speak mine.

Back in 2001 I still didn’t have Freire and Macedo to help me figure out Gladstone’s response. However, I knew enough to realize I needed to step down so that Gladstone and the others could step up with me. So I planned my lesson all over again and taught it anew the following class. It was still an expository lesson and it was still complex, but now the language and examples were really tailored to my students. I asked them questions and welcomed their questions to make sure they were following before I moved on. I was not in a hurry to get as far as I had in the previous class, and I didn’t get as far. But that’s how my less-than-perfect lesson beat my perfect one.

Athens, 2006

I am waiting for Tiffany to finish up our first Portuguese test when Catherine spots me from the far end of the hall. Catherine is gasping for breath when she reaches me. It is 10:10 am and our PORT 1001 class ended 20 minutes ago. It is by mere chance that Catherine finds me seated alongside Tiffany at computer desks in the lobby just outside our classroom.

Circumspect Catherine doesn't speak much in class, always keeping to herself in an attitude that may convey aloofness. Today she is a very different picture, though: as distressed as I've (n)ever seen anyone around here in Athens, college student or otherwise. Catherine is fighting hard to hold back the tears, and she finally gives in.

"I stayed up late studying last night and then I set my alarm clock but it didn't go off this morning I overslept and so when I woke up just a few minutes ago I jumped out of bed and rushed here across North Campus to try to reach you. Oh I missed the test, I'm SO sorry! What happens now?"

I tell Catherine to calm down because she's here now and there's nothing that can't be fixed, so why doesn't she have a seat while Tiffany finishes her test, and then we can talk? Catherine's absence that morning having puzzled me, I am quite glad to see her. It has been her first absence in a full month, and though she is not outspoken in class I can tell she is following and knows the content.

Ten minutes later a still pretty upset Catherine and I talk. The take is obviously mine. I know Catherine is away from her home in Washington, DC, for the first time. I soon find myself exorcizing my own demons as I relate my experiences as a newcomer to Athens, how tough and challenging it's been to balance my teacher and student responsibilities in an unfamiliar environment, how so overwhelmed I've been feeling most of the time, how hard it's been to even find myself around in such a huge campus, but also how much I love teaching and learning, and how I've decided to take one step at a time, and how it seems to be working and I'm positive things will eventually come together. As I speak, Catherine's face softens, her tension melts away, her eyes brighten up. I sense our stories have more in common than anyone would guess.

"I'll tell you what, Catherine: if you feel you're ready for this test and you're available now, you're welcome to take it with the other PORT 1001 class I'm teaching again in 30 minutes. How does that sound?"

"Oh, that would be great, thank you!"

Twenty minutes later we're walking together to class. Catherine scores an A+.

*"I can see you, and I am as vulnerable and unfinished as you are"*

Despite my many years of experience teaching EFL in Brazil, teaching my mother tongue at UGA in 2006-2007 was a first for me. I was not as challenged by handling the language switch as by relating to the undergraduate students. Not having previously attended an American university, I was unsure of what to expect. Who were the students? What backgrounds did they come from? Why were they taking Portuguese? I came to learn that their reasons for studying Portuguese varied: while most of them, freshmen and sophomores, were simply fulfilling the university's foreign language requirement or seeking an alternative to the more common Spanish option, a few wished to learn the language to communicate with Brazilian friends or relatives. All of them had at least one thing in common: they were true "absolute beginners" in Portuguese.

Catherine was one of the many attentive but mostly silent students I encountered in the first few weeks of class. Coming from a verbal, outspoken cultural background myself, at first I was somewhat confused by the students' silent mood, but as the semester progressed, my dialogical approach paid off, and we succeeded in building a fruitful, participatory language learning community in our classes. In their end-of-semester evaluations many students noted the interaction, encouragement, and friendliness in our midst, and how that had motivated them to study and learn, or as one student phrased it: "I think there's a direct correlation between a teacher caring and then a student caring, and that translates into grades." "I feel it is all about this dialogue between us and you," he added. Or as another student put it: "You cared about us as people, I felt."

My interaction with Catherine on the morning she missed the Portuguese test was one of my first opportunities to show an individual student at UGA that I really did care. Like Ruth Behar (2008), who fears to break "the transparent butterfly wings" of her young, delicate students, I too may tend to overdo it: "The kind of teacher I am: too nice, because I'm absolutely terrified of causing harm. I know all too well, from my own life, that we are susceptible as students to the words of our teachers. So as teachers we need to be careful about our words. Nothing we say can be taken for granted" (p. 67). I picked my words carefully as I talked with Catherine that day, so as to convey understanding and empathy, vulnerability and unfinishedness, "an essential characteristic of our humanness," (Freire, 1998a, p. 59) in which education as a permanent process is grounded (p. 58).

Freire, Behar, and hooks are among the scholar-teachers I admire who value care as an essential element in the teacher-student relationship. "To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential," asserted hooks (1994, p. 13). "How can I be an educator if I do not develop in myself a caring and loving attitude toward the student, which is indispensable on the part of one who is committed to teaching and to the education process itself?" Freire somewhat rhetorically asked (1998a, p. 65). He called for the need to overcome the false separation between serious teaching and the expression of feeling, arguing that rigorous, serious intellectual discipline is totally compatible with the expression of feeling and care. "And, because I am dealing with people, I cannot refuse my wholehearted and loving attention, even in personal matters, where I see that a student is in need of such attention," he shared (1998a, p. 128).

## Still the Student ... Always the Learner

Athens, 2006

The moment I step into the classroom I sense something is not right. I've gradually come to dread this split-level class, which is jointly taught by two professors, so I never come to class expecting much. There's something else in the air today, though, some extra menace to watch out for, other than Dr. Cory Smith's sarcastic laughter at students' attempted responses to the readings and Dr. Jamie Brown's sharp penetrating eyes always trying to read our minds and souls. So far the joint teaching experience hasn't gone that well, as shown by the professors' frequent and sometimes rather heated divergent opinions in our discussions about the readings.

One important assignment in this class is posting a minimum of eight comments or responses to the WebCT online course page. I always keep up with the online discussions, so I know Jorge has made a spicy one-page post in the past couple of days. Spanish-born Jorge is an extremely competent writer and usually makes his case very skillfully. This time he has unprecedentedly dared to complain that our classes are not addressing theory that should ground and contextualize our readings. His posting also questions the purpose and relevance of our discussions. I have to say he builds a strong, reasonable argument, though an unmistakable thread of confrontation and perhaps arrogance is there too. I have grown used to Jorge's controversial opinions in class, and have secretly come to admire his boldness and intelligence.

Today Dr. Smith and Dr. Brown are in a hurry to begin the class and we soon learn why. Both professors, smirks on their faces, are standing up front (the usual pattern has been for one of them to remain seated while the other is leading instruction). Dr. Brown blurts out: "Since we don't seem to know how to teach this class properly, we've decided that today you are the teachers. We're going to split you into small groups – as many as the readings assigned for today – and each group is to prepare a lesson on one reading. You have 15 minutes to do that before the teaching session begins."

The next thing I know Dr. Brown is frantically splitting the students into groups of four or five and assigning the readings. My group of five includes two undergraduate students whose confused, fearful looks I pity. For the first five minutes or so the blow baffles us, and no one says or does much. Having no choice but to tackle the task, we decide to move to a corner to discuss our reading, but an unexpected "visitor" tags along. Dr. Smith won't leave our side for some everlasting minutes, to make sure that we don't forget to consider this or that passage, or to address this or that point. We lose precious minutes listening to the professor's unspecific, goalless babble.

I'm in autopilot mode for the rest of the class. The thought of stepping out does cross my mind, but I decide to stay. I can take this. For the last time I can – my ultimate sacrifice. Despite all the pressure and interference, somehow we manage to pull our act together. The show is not over until each group presents or "teaches" their reading, all four or five students lined up against the blackboard:

"You all have to come up to the front of the class, you're the teachers, remember? That's how teachers do," Dr. Brown points out.

I could live to be a one-hundred-year-old student and never again experience anything as remotely humiliating and outrageous as this episode.

*"I can see you, but I will not listen to you"*

This event took place during my first semester as a doctoral student at UGA, the same semester I taught Catherine's class. As my teacher self was tenderly nourishing and being nourished, my student self was in uttermost agony. As I grappled daily with that nerve wracking dichotomous teaching-learning situation, I was nonetheless sure of one thing: I would not perpetuate the cycle of oppression and dehumanization. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization in which individuals are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising power (Foucault, 1980). hooks (1994) remembered that in her college years in an American university the vast majority of her professors often used the classroom "to enact rituals of control that were about domination and the unjust exercise of power;" in those oppressive settings, she "learned a lot about the kind of teacher I [she] did not want to become" (p. 5). In Fall 2006, I knew the kind of teacher I *was* and *was not*; I had known for years. And the teacher I *was* passionately engaged in breaking the cycle of oppression when relating to my own students. In interacting with them I found some relief and cheer in stormy times.

This autoethnographic journey provides me the chance to share an experience that I didn't expect to ever find a use for. It was cast away with other sorrowful, good-for-nothing memories in my mind's "recycle bin" that I am never allowed to empty. How fortunate now that I could retrieve it so easily. This journey has made me realize that "what is" is also defined vis-à-vis "what is not:" by laying bare oppressive teaching-learning settings and experiences, one can learn which practices should *not* be taken up, what should *not* be done. Pedagogy can thus be found in the most unexpected, unusual, and least worthy sources.

Drawing on her own experiences, hooks (2003) argued that "To many professors of all races, the classroom is viewed as a mini-country governed by their autocratic rule" (p. 85). She further explained that, "Much as everyone likes to imagine that the college campus is a place without censorship, where free speech prevails and students are encouraged to engage in debate and dialectical exchange, the opposite reality is a more accurate portrait of what takes place in college classrooms" (p. 134). Nevertheless, hooks (1994) nourished a steadfast belief that "The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy" (p. 12). Yes, there is hope under the sun. There is hope for dialogue. There is hope for change.

Athens, 2008

I am entranced by the professor standing before us – her soft-spoken but articulate discourse, her self-actualized and yet charmingly shyish attitude, her humble, welcoming eyes. I am irresistibly drawn to her in a peculiar déjà-vuish way: this teacher could very well be *me* addressing a group of students on our first day of class. How amazing to sense such a thing, such an unprecedented, unexpected and even bizarre experience. I savor it, though – to the brim.

Like virtually any other teacher in the U.S., Dr. Melissa Freeman has gone over the syllabus for this course (an introductory doctoral course on qualitative research methods) and explained the grading criteria and assignments. Unlike many teachers, she has shown genuine interest in hearing the students' self-introductions – that's what her pensive look and smile, combined with a relaxed posture, tell me. I just *know* she's listening to us, some 20 students from several different countries besides the U.S., some four or five ethnicities represented. We're all facing each other, seated at desks arranged in a big rectangle.

"I am aware that writing papers in a second or foreign language can be a demanding task. I grew up in Switzerland, so I myself am bilingual in English and French. I can hardly write in French though," says Dr. Freeman.

What I hear is that she is knowledgeable, competent and hard-working, but vulnerable and unfinished. Like me.

*"I can see you, and I can learn with and from you"*

"Dialogue between teachers and students does not place them on the same footing professionally; but it does mark the democratic position between them," said Freire (1998b, p. 116). This implies a sincere climate of respect on the part of teacher and students, "one that is born of just, serious, humble, and generous relationships, in which both the authority of the teacher and the freedom of the students are ethically grounded" (Freire, 1998a, p. 86). That was the pattern in Dr. Melissa Freeman's class. We learned with and from her, and she learned with and from us. It was not uncommon for her to revisit her understanding of certain research methods and theories based on our questions and contributions. No one had to pretend he or she had understood something if he or she hadn't (phenomenology proved an especially challenging method of inquiry for me).

In addition, Dr. Freeman gave us thorough feedback on all our written assignments. She wished to help us excel in our academic work and develop scholarly minds. I often wondered if she had a life beyond the loads of our academic papers she was constantly grading. Commitment to teaching well *is* a commitment to service. I am sure I have not spent half the time in grading my students' papers that Dr. Freeman has spent in grading hers, but I wish to think I have learned to serve my students as well as she serves hers.

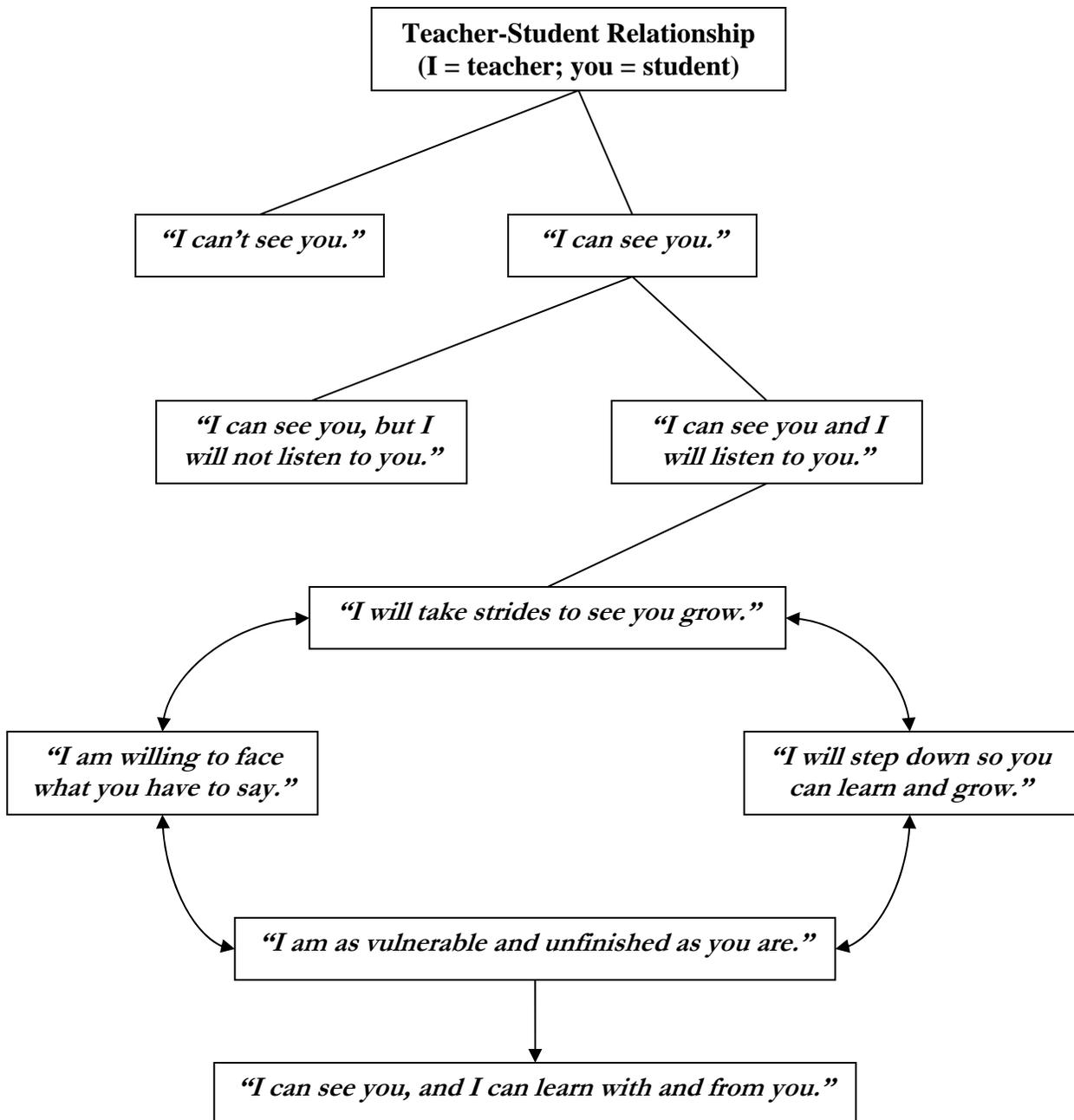
### **Toward Resolving the Teacher-Student Contradiction, *or* Becoming a Freirean Scholar**

My autoethnographic photo album captures and reconstructs memories and moments that will certainly last a lifetime. It has been an intense, profound journey in which many feelings, emotions, and epiphanies have surfaced. Whether my snapshots

have cast light on what some readers have experienced; whether they have had “me too” moments (Pelias, 2004, p. 11) concerning memory-based teacher-learner identities, practices, and aspirations, of course I cannot tell. But my hope is that readers, particularly preservice and novice teachers, have been somehow inspired to contemplate or search for possible and desirable educational worlds, albeit perhaps unusual and unfamiliar ones, and to engage in self-inquiry and exploratory discussions about such possibilities in their own teaching-learning life and practice. Again, like Sparkes (1996), I have attempted “to take you as the reader into the intimacies of my world. I hope to do [have done] so in such a way that you”—teachers and students—“are stimulated to reflect upon your own life in relation to mine” (p. 467).

In my own journey I have come to realize that my most treasured teaching-learning memories do not pertain to my own superior test-taking skills and excellent grades as a learner, or the highest achievers among my students, let alone the specific subject matter I have either learned or taught. My sweetest memories come from the moments and times when my presence was acknowledged and my voice was heard by my teachers. As a college student entering adulthood (and even before that), it meant the world to me to be seen as an individual with ideas and beliefs worthy of consideration—a Subject rather than object of history (Freire, 1993). On the same note, I cherish the teaching moments when my young adult students have responded favorably to my invitation for dialogue so that I could get to know who they were and hear what they had to say. Whereas the trigger may have been a problem or a complaint, the outcome has inevitably been favorable; the dialogical encounters have rendered good fruit. Hence my most cherished memories dwell in possibility and promise because they are relational, dialogical in essence.

When I first embarked on this autoethnographic experience, I had absolutely no clue where my memories would take me, nor was I consciously searching for connections among them. Intuitively, to write the snapshots I followed their chronological order, the only thread I initially perceived tying them together. Very much to my surprise, what emerged once I had finished crafting and carefully examining the snapshots were underlying threads weaving them into a coherent and quite revealing whole that transcended my initial intent to extend sociological understanding on teaching and learning. This autoethnography has allowed me to also link the personal to pedagogical theory centering attention to relationships between teachers and students. My snapshots have yielded a number of themes or labels that capture the essence of the relationship between teacher and students in the scenes portrayed, most of which mirror the qualities of the humanizing pedagogy (Bartolomé, 1996; Freire, 1993; Macedo & Freire, 2005, p. xv) that I have come to embrace. I rearrange these emerging labels schematically below.



The diagram offers an experience-based translation and representation of the teacher-student relationship as conceptualized in Freire and others (Bartolomé, 1996; hooks, 1994, 2003; Nieto, 1999, 2006). From this perspective, teaching and learning are first and foremost acts borne out of humanizing relationships grounded on dialogue. Thus in this diagram the worst scenario for me is undoubtedly the autocratic, oppressive classroom where oppressed students are seen but never truly heard; where all-knowing teacher-dictators rule absolutely. Probably not as aggressive but still dehumanizing and thus far from the ideal is when banking teachers, engaged and absorbed in making deposits of knowledge, don't really see their students. The best scenario can assume

various successful configurations, all of which point to students being seen and somehow heard by their teachers—when dialogue is in place. Teachers who serve and help their students; who consider the students' points of view and even their criticisms and complaints; who build upon the students' prior knowledge when delivering instruction; and who show vulnerability, understanding and care are in one way or another always listening to them. Resolving the teacher-student contradiction can thus occur in a myriad of ways, as long as true dialogue between teacher and students is a reality. This best scenario will lead to teachers and students learning and growing together. It is up to the teacher—traditionally positioned hierarchically above the students—to take the first step in stepping down to meet with them, so that students are encouraged to take their own additional steps and bring their contribution to the table. Through dialogue, teacher and students jointly construct knowledge while nurturing care, trust, humility, and respect.

Despite the deepened (but constantly evolving) understanding I have today of humanizing pedagogy theory, in my personal story, practice preceded theory; all but one of the memories portrayed in my snapshots took place years before I first read Freire or came into contact with his ideas. Nonetheless, as I was recalling and chronicling those experiences, and in doing so reliving them, I came face to face with qualities of Freire's humanizing pedagogy in the words and actions of my most memorable teachers, which in turn I have strived to emulate in my own teaching practice over the years. I have sought to be a Freirean educator for so long, and just wasn't aware of it! In crafting and reliving my memories in light of a number of readings and reflections, I created and recreated my sense of identity (Murdock, 2003, p. 11) as a teacher and a learner—a sense of identity that has included reaching a renewed understanding of the inherently relational aspects of teaching and learning.

Here I should say that, in and of itself, the idea that relationships are paramount in classroom teaching and learning is not a new one. According to Nieto (2006), "by now it is a taken-for-granted truth that relationships are at the heart of teaching" (p. 466). A number of qualitative studies conducted in elementary through post-secondary education contexts have corroborated Nieto's assertion. In 2004, Nieto herself undertook a qualitative study with 21 teachers who worked in US public elementary, middle and high schools. The study participants, all of whom shared a passion for teaching, were asked to write essays about why they teach. Nieto found that among the qualities and values embedded in good teaching are solidarity with, and empathy for, students; that is, good teachers foster close relationships with their students and have respect, admiration, and high expectations for them (Nieto, 2005, 2006, p. 466).

In the elementary school context, Robinson's (1994) in-depth ethnographic study conducted in four first-grade classrooms found that as the teachers in the study engaged in open-ended interaction with their students, teachers and students learned from and with one another, and all were empowered. Similarly, in a secondary school setting, Moje's (1996) two-year ethnographic study of the literacy activities and practices of a high school chemistry class found that the relationships between teacher and students motivated the students to engage in literacy activities. They sensed and appreciated the teacher's caring for them and responded positively to the pedagogical and literacy strategies she employed. Another study, a critical ethnography by Valenzuela (1999), showed that Mexican-origin students' perceptions of their relations with teachers had a profound influence on their motivation and level of engagement in the schooling process.

The study, which took place in a high school situated in a Texas inner-city community, argued that in order for learning to be effective, the teacher-student relationship must be founded on authentic caring, trust and mutual respect. A more recent study was set in the post-secondary context. McClure and Vasconcelos (in press) investigated an undergraduate teacher education class in the southeastern United States by combining a collaborative research partnership with ethnographic methods. Their study found that the critical and humanizing pedagogical approach practiced by the course instructor challenged the traditional teacher–student hierarchical structure, contributing to the development of caring relationships among teacher and students and the joint construction of knowledge.

While my autoethnographic study intersects with the studies above in the overall finding that relationships are at the heart of teaching and learning, I feel that my work more closely aligns with Barone's (2001) postmodern arts-based study that investigated "the enduring outcomes of teaching." Barone interviewed a caring high school art teacher and a few of this teacher's former students in order to collect the stories of their memories and perspectives on the impact teacher and students had on one another. Weaving narrative inquiry and aesthetic experience, Barone's text defies simplistic conclusions, pointing instead to the enormous complexity of the teacher and student relationship. His work offers "a delicate and subtle picture of the ways teachers and learners are reflexively engaged in the process of building self" (Davidson, 2002, p. 119), through intersubjective encounters and dialogue. In Barone's study—as in my own—this dialogue continued over a long period of time, and was often internal—a dialogue held in one's head with his or her ideas and memories of a former teacher (or student). However, while Barone offered a dual account of the teacher's journey and the students' journeys, narrating their distinct perspectives, in my self-study I merged both journeys as I recollected, crafted, and analyzed my memories of experiences I've had with my former teachers and students over the years. This brings me to a specific feature embedded in the autoethnographic nature of my study, and leads me to a further connection between my study and emerging work in the field of autoethnography.

Whereas the potential of autoethnography to "create a space for conversation, reflection, and critique" in education has been pointed out (Burdell & Swadener, 1999, p. 25), autoethnographic studies on teaching and learning and teacher identity formation are still difficult to find. Hickey and Austin's (2007) study is a recent example in this area. Arguing that autoethnography holds significant potential as a point of interrogation for critical, reflexive practice in education, Hickey and Austin carried out a qualitative research project with hundreds of undergraduate teacher education students and a small number of graduate students enrolled in an Australian university. The essential purpose of the project was to explore the impact of self-focused, professional identity research on people intending to teach. The participants were encouraged to utilize autoethnographic methods through memory work to interrogate the social construction of their identities via three principal axes of identity: race, class and gender. The "deliberate act of remembering" (Morrison, 1984) specific life experiences grounded in the axes of identity formed the principal database from which the participants interrogated their identities. The study findings suggested that the autoethnographic approach facilitated the participants' reflexive consciousness raising and their realization of the social arbitration of identity formation. Hickey and Austin informed that follow-up work on the final stage

of the study is underway; their new study will aim to examine the exploration of participants' responses to classroom teaching practice. The authors concluded that

What autoethnography opens is an opportunity for dialogue between the subject and the social practices that they've engaged throughout their existence. This translates into an interrogation of the lived experiences via memory work and a sense-making of these understandings of Self ... Autoethnography, as a way of mobilizing the theoretical intent of critical pedagogy, holds real significance as a method interested in interrogating constructions of Self and enabling emancipatory pedagogical practices. (p. 27)

As I consider Hickey and Austin's (2007) study in relation to mine, a curious thought comes to mind: Had I been one of the graduate students participating in their project, this autoethnographic study of my teacher-student self might very well have been conceived in their midst, sparked by their invitation for students to interrogate constructions of their identities through memory-based lived experiences. As it turned out, I had no knowledge whatsoever of Hickey and Austin's work when I first embarked on my autoethnographic journey. Yet both their study and my own speak to the potential of autoethnography for preservice and experienced teachers alike who wish to investigate and interrogate their identities, develop a better understanding of teaching and learning, and consider implications and applications for their teaching practice.

### **My (Always Evolving) Teacher-Learner Self**

So what has made me into the teacher I am? What makes me the teacher I am? Having completed the current stage of this life-long investigation of the self, the answers to these questions, as in other studies of this nature (Barone, 2001, p. 125), are far from clear-cut and complete. So rather than focus on tentative, partial, ambiguous answers, I choose to highlight the inspirational lessons I have learned in this *heartful* (Ellis, 1999) process: My greatest teachers had different personalities, came from various sociocultural backgrounds, and employed an array of teaching methods and techniques. When delivering instruction, they might show a preference for totally expository, lecture-type lessons, conversational, participatory classes, or somewhere in between. They came from countries as diverse as Brazil, England, Switzerland, and the United States. Among my Brazilian teachers, no two were born and raised in the same city, not even the same state or region. Yet all of my unforgettable educators, despite their multiple differences, "lived the difficult but possible and pleasurable experience of speaking to and with students" (Freire, 2005, p. 114); they all shared the practice of nurturing the teacher-student relationship. They entered into dialogue—a horizontal relationship founded upon love, humility, faith, and trust (Freire, 1993)—with me. In doing so, they were able to overcome the false separation between serious teaching and the expression of feeling and care, and did not refuse to dispense their "wholehearted and loving attention" (Freire, 1998a, p. 128) to me and other students. Those educators are more numerous than my snapshots could hold, yet fewer than the teachers who couldn't see me. Nonetheless, in many respects they have fortunately outnumbered my banking teachers. In their own

way and style, my memorable teachers showed me that “I am not, I do not be, unless you are, unless you be. Above all, I am not if I forbid you to be” (Freire, 1998b, p. 99).

Day by day, those teachers inspire me to be the best teacher-learner I can possibly be. I give because I have received. It is my way of passing on the precious lessons I have learned from such fabulous educators. Their excellent teaching has engaged me in the structures of deep learning, the kind of learning that fosters personal agency: “autonomous individuals who have the capacity to imaginatively shape their own lives by having the courage to write their own stories” (Siegesmund & Cahnmann-Taylor, 2008, p. 244). Today I write my story to honor my teachers of the past and the present, and to inspire my students of the present and the future to write their own stories too.

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