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## Teaching Students How to Make Their Dreams Come True: An Autoethnography of Developing and Teaching the Dream Research Methods Course

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## Teaching Students How to Make Their Dreams Come True: An Autoethnography of Developing and Teaching the Dream Research Methods Course

### Abstract

How to make students' dreams come true is the central focus of this autoethnography that chronicles the story of the transformation of a traditional undergraduate communication research methods course into a new and creative dream research methods course. Pedagogical and institutional issues in teaching the traditional methods course join personal influences in my life story to birth the new dream research methods course. The content and format of the new course are described chronologically using personal stories, student perspectives, advice to teachers, and reflection questions. I encourage teachers, by experimenting with the ideas in the dream research methods course, to serve as midwives for helping bring their students' dreams to birth.

### Keywords

Research Methods, Dreams, Teaching, Learning, Autoethnography, Purple Cow

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### Acknowledgements

I wish to acknowledge my early teachers of social science, Cal Hylton, and Michael and Judee Burgon, and my later teachers of autoethnography that I only knew from their writings, Bud Goodall, Jr., Carolyn Ellis, and Robert Coles.

## Teaching Students How to Make Their Dreams Come True

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I lay half naked on a bed in a small room when I felt cool gel and the tip of a rubber probe contact my chest. On the other end of the probe, I hear the young voice of a female medical technician ask, "So, what do you do?" I've been asked this question, the equivalent of "what do you do for a living," hundreds of times over my thirty-some years of teaching. I pull out my pat answer, "I'm a professor at Old Dominion University." A predictable follow-up question jabs me, "What do you teach?" I counter with the names of a few courses I teach (e.g., theory, methods, peace, listening), and the conversation abruptly ends. In hindsight, I wonder: what if I chose to respond differently? What if I said, "I teach people how to listen to the SONG of life, how to make their lives more wonderful through peaceful communication, and I teach students how to make their dreams come true."<sup>1</sup>

*How to make students dreams come true* is the central focus of this autoethnography that chronicles the story of the transformation of a traditional undergraduate research methods course into a new and creative *dream research methods course*. To situate the autoethnography in a historical context, I provide a two-decade curricular summary of the transformation from the *old way* of teaching research methods to the *new way* of teaching research at my home institution.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This episode is a real interaction that took place in January of 2017. The reframed response to the medical technician represents three courses that I regularly teach: (1) *Listening to the SONG of life* (Baesler, 2017) is a listening course where SONG is an acronym that stands for listening to life in the contexts of Self, Others, Nature, and God or the divine, (2) "Making life more wonderful through nonviolent communication" is a phrase used by Marshall Rosenberg (2005) that I frequently repeat when teaching the *Nonviolent Communication and Peace* class (Baesler & Lauricella, 2013), and (3) "How to make dreams come true" is the central focus of a new type of research methods course that I developed called the *Purple Cow Dream Research Methods Class* (Baesler, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> I started teaching a social science based undergraduate research methods course in the mid 1980's as a PhD student at the University of Arizona Tucson under the direction of Michael and Judee Burgoon. Beginning in 1990, as assistant professor of Communication at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia, I taught research methods for 25 years before developing and teaching the new purple cow dream research methods course the past two years.

## For Reflection

**This section represents the first in a series of reflection sections where I invite teachers, primarily of research methods, to meditate/consider/contemplate on a theme related to teaching.**

How do you respond to the question, “What do you do for a living?” when asked by someone outside of the academy? Do you invoke prescribed social roles, status symbols, and/or describe work-related activities? How might we reframe our response to the gambit “what do you do for a living?” in ways that create more openings for dialogue?

For teachers of undergraduate students, how is *time* a teacher for you, that is, how has your teaching evolved over time? Specifically, how would you describe your *old ways* of teaching in comparison to the way you teach now? In what ways have you integrated time tested old ways of teaching with new innovative ways of teaching?

## Autoethnography as Method

Before delving into the story, I make explicit my assumptions about the autoethnographic methodology that I employ in this narrative. My understanding of autoethnography as a method of academic research is grounded in two sets of assumptions. First, language is a primary medium by which we are conscious, understand the world, and communicate our learnings to others in *stories* (Coles, 1990). As stories have a beginning, middle, and end, I set the scene for my life as a teacher in a communication department at an urban university faced with several challenges in teaching the research methods course. I describe the process of meeting these challenges by creating an alternative way to teach research methods that allows students to make their dreams come true. A second assumption of autoethnography is that *signs*, in and outside of a particular context in the life-world, serve as entry points to a variety of ways that reflect and enhance meanings in the ongoing story of life (Goodall, 1996). There are many such signs from the life-world of the academy (e.g., faculty issues, administrative forces) and my personal life (e.g., home schooling, spirituality) that contribute to the on-going story of how I teach research methods as a dream course.

In addition, a *good* autoethnography, based on my reading of autoethnographers in the field of Communication (Bochner, 2014; Chang & Boyd, 2011; Ellis, 2004; Frentz, 2008; Goodall, 1996; Holman Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013), is a personal and emotionally engaging story about meaningful events in the author’s life (auto) that connects with the story of others (ethnography) within a stream of ideas (e.g., a model, theory, or body of literature) for some purpose (e.g., consciousness raising, praxis, learning). In this autoethnography, my personal story as a teacher (the auto part) connects with the story of my students (the ethnography part) in my struggle to teach research methods. My students, embedded in an academic culture, are the *others* I seek to understand. I also attempt to connect with *other* teachers in the academic culture by posing a series of reflection questions throughout the narrative that serve to raise consciousness and provide opportunities for envisioning and teaching a dream research methods course. Finally, the stream of ideas that make up the story come from a variety of academic and non-academic tributaries such as: meditation and spirituality, homeschooling and pedagogical sources, psychological resistance and research on love, and autoethnographic resources.

## The Research Methods Sequence

Two social science research methods courses dominated the undergraduate curriculum for students pursuing their Bachelor of Science degree in Communication during the early 1990's at Old Dominion University where I teach. In a national sample of 184 Communication departments in the U.S., Frey and Botan (1988) report that less than half (46%) of departments required *one* course in research methods. My informed speculation suggests that requiring undergraduates to complete *two* social science research methods courses is a rarity.<sup>3</sup> Our intention as faculty is to provide students with a rigorous sequence in social science methods that prepares them for graduate school or a research related position in the public or private sector. Our good intentions were offset by pedagogical issues described in the next section: time, faculty workload, and course content. Eventually, these issues led to the demise of the advanced methods course, and serendipitously led to the development of the new dream research methods course.

### Temporal Issues

To enroll in three sequential courses (statistics, introduction to research methods, and advanced research methods) is a time management challenge for most students exacerbated by: (a) increases in the number of majors competing for enrollment, (b) a moratorium on faculty hires that specialize in research methods, and (c) work schedule conflicts for commuter students. An even greater challenge is the time lags between courses. Extended *time lags* (greater than one semester) between courses create memorial decays and/or distortions in course content for many students. While some review of concepts between courses is expected, time lags of more than one semester can often interfere with learning new content because of the unnecessary burden of re-teaching basic concepts.

### Faculty Issues

In a department with 100+ majors, there were only two Communication faculty capable of teaching the social science methods sequence during the early 1990's. Prior to my arrival, the methods sequence was outsourced to the Psychology department. The year I arrived at Old Dominion University, we borrowed Psychology's model of a two-semester methods sequence, and I found myself teaching the advanced research methods course for the next ten years while my colleague taught the introductory course. As our student body grew, so did the pressure to offer multiple sections of research methods.

### Content Issues: Proposing and Executing the Research Methods Project

The logic of the research methods sequence is to propose a research project in the introductory course and execute the project in the advanced course. This two-part method sequence seemed pedagogically sound, but in practice, I encountered many obstacles. Often the proposals from the introductory course were designed with ideal conditions in mind (e.g., unlimited grant money and time). Thus, almost all proposals required extensive revisions. A

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<sup>3</sup> No survey research was found addressing the frequency of a *second* research methods course in the undergraduate Communication curriculum using the search terms *research methods* AND *survey* in the data base *Communication and Mass Media Complete* on January 16, 2017 except for one conference paper (Dunn, 2008). Unfortunately, neither interlibrary loan nor the author can access the paper. Tentatively, based on my personal network of research colleagues over the past 20 years, I conclude that two required social science research methods courses in an undergraduate Communication curriculum is unique/rare.

second challenge was managing 25 individual research projects the first semester I taught the course. Imagine directing 25 Master's theses in one semester. I struggled along with the students to complete the term, and decided to do things differently the next semester.

The next semester, I replaced individual projects with group projects. Group papers were more manageable for me to coordinate and evaluate as an instructor, but this came with a price of low motivation for students that did not win the debate for which topic to choose for their group. To boost group morale, I created group activities: create a catchy group name, decide on a group motto, and assign group roles. While these efforts improved group morale somewhat, I still felt a sense of dissatisfaction with the group process and product. I *wanted things to change*, but I wasn't sure how to proceed.

### **Regression: From Advanced to Introductory Methods<sup>4</sup>**

External forces contributed to a *change in my teaching*, but not the kind of change I anticipated. To cope with the growing number of majors, and the limited number of faculty available to teach traditional social science research methods, we as a faculty voted to prune the advanced methods course from the curriculum. Consequently, I began teaching the introductory level research methods course. This *regression* in teaching, from the advanced to the introductory methods, enabled us as a department to double our offerings of the introductory methods course and thereby accommodate the increasing number of majors.

To cope with suddenly teaching introductory research methods for the first time, I taught a scaled down version of the advanced methods course using research groups. After six years of teaching the introductory research methods course in this manner, I still felt dissatisfied with the research process for several reasons: low student motivation for group projects, insufficient time to cover content *and* conduct research, and a relatively low quality research product at the end of the term. Fortunately, during these six years, a number of personal experiences began to coalesce and eventually change my outlook on teaching and research. These experiences led to the transformation of the introductory research methods course into a new *dream research methods course*.

### **For Reflection**

If you teach a methods course, how would you describe your experience, and the experience of your students? What kinds of pedagogical issues are inherent in *teaching* the research methods course? Are issues like time, faculty workload, and content of concern? If so, how do you cope with these (and other) pedagogical issues in teaching methods? How satisfied are you with the quality of work that students produce? How well does your course prepare students for: graduate school, entry level research positions in the public or private sector, and pursuing their life dream?

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<sup>4</sup> Initially, I felt a sense of failure when the faculty voted to nix the *advanced* research methods course that I taught for over a decade and assign me to teaching the *introductory* research methods course. The transition into teaching the introductory course as a "purple cow dream research methods course" reminds me of Johnson's (1998) parable about mice discovering that someone moved *their cheese* from their favorite spot in the maze. Some mice were devastated at the loss of their cheese and lamented while others sought out and eventually found new and better cheese. Similarly, when *our courses* are deleted from the curriculum (someone takes away our cheese), we can reframe the situation as an opportunity to innovate and create new courses (find new and better cheese).

## Converging Influences

In the first few years of teaching the introductory research methods course, several life influences/forces/energies began emerging and converging in my consciousness. The growing force of these energies compelled me to begin the transition from my traditional way of teaching to a new way of being and teaching. This new perspective contributed to the creation of several new courses in the departmental curriculum: nonviolent communication and peace, communication and love, listening to the SONG of life, and the new dream methods research course. Syllabi are available for all courses upon request from the author. In the next section, I describe some of the salient influences that contribute to the development of my ongoing evolution as a teacher, and to the creation of the new research methods course.

### Homeschooling<sup>5</sup>

My wife Mary Elizabeth taught first grade in the public school system, and based on her experiences, we both decided to homeschool our two sons (now ages 12 and 25). My first exposure to the idea of homeschooling as an alternative to public/private education came through the writings of former public high school teacher Gatto (2006, p. xxi): “Schools [public schools in America] are based on the assumption that most people are dumb and need to be educated, trained, disciplined, taught to obey...this requires institutionalized, standardized, government schooling, i.e., school serves the needs of business and government.” Later, I discovered other critics of the government sponsored public education in America. For instance, Robinson (2006, 2015) describes how public schools discourage creativity, or phrased more positively, students are natural learners when motivated, and teaching should be about facilitating the learning process through: engagement, empowerment, creativity, curiosity, collaboration, and compassion. These later faculties, according to Robinson, are precisely the ones most lacking in much of the American public education system. I recognize that individual teachers can be exceptions to this pattern. For instance, Esquith (2007, p. x) creates a safe haven in his fifth-grade public school classroom “...where character matters, hard work is respected, humility is valued, and support for one another is unconditional.” Overall, homeschooling has sensitized me to the challenges of public education, and the possibilities of using life as the primary vehicle for learning, character development, and for discovering and following one’s dreams.

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<sup>5</sup> I do *not* want to debate what kind of education is best for our children: homeschooling, private school, public school, or some other type of education like, for example: democratic schools (e.g., Mintz, 2003), free schools, (e.g., Neil & Lamb, 1995), Montessori (e.g. Polk, 1988), and Waldorf (e.g., Steiner, 1998). I *do* want to share my personal experience. I attended both private (grades 1-8) and public (grades 9-12, and 12 years of university) schools. When our first born was school age, we tried private school, then public school, and finally settled on homeschooling. As parents and educators, we knew the needs of our child better than any teacher. Logistically, we can provide individualized instruction for our child that a teacher with 20-30+ students simply cannot provide. Since my wife is a credentialed kindergarten through 8<sup>th</sup> grade teacher, few people argue that public or private education would be better for our child than homeschooling, but some individuals will still argue with us about “inadequate socialization.” For us, *all life is homeschooling*, and as such, our children have ample opportunity to socialize with all age groups across the lifespan including situations like: neighbors young and old, story time and art/music activities at the public library, YMCA physical education activities and groups, boy scouts, chess club, church groups, shopping for food, making conversation with the bank teller, talking on the phone with relatives, and so forth.

## The Genius of Seth Godin

I discovered the genius of Seth Godin through listening to an audio recording of *The Tipping Point* by Gladwell (2002). After reading Godin's (2003) book *The Purple Cow*, I began to see more possibilities in teaching. As one example, Godin (p. 121) writes "The big question is this: Do you want to grow? If you do, you need to embrace the Cow [the purple cow]." Translating this idea into teaching: if we want to grow as a teacher, and have our students grow with us as learners, we need to embrace the purple cow. The *purple cow* is a metaphor for a creative idea that is truly remarkable, like seeing a purple cow in a field of black and white Holsteins. I wanted student research projects to be purple cows. I expand on the import of Godinian purple cows, and working with our dreams, in a later section entitled "purple cow dreams."

## Spiritual Awakening

Over a period of several years, beginning just prior to my tenure and promotion in the mid 1990's, I experienced a series of "events/episodes/encounters" that I identify as a process of *spiritual awakening*. I describe these spiritual experiences in more detail elsewhere (e.g., Baesler, 2009, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c). Language does not adequately describe the phenomenological essence of these spiritual experiences, but words do serve as pointers to the mystery: curiosity and wonder, opening to beauty and truth, living from the heart, solitude and stillness, delight and joy, hope and love, connection and union, and gratitude and grace. I continue to grow in cultivating this spiritual way of being/living primarily through the study and discipline of contemplative practices like: prayer, meditation, yoga, aikido, poetry, art, music, gardening, and dance.<sup>6</sup> For me, this process of spiritual awakening *inevitably* spills over, and profoundly influences, my academic life. Over time, these spiritual experiences are integrated into my being/personhood/identity/humanity, and thus become a permanent part of my teaching.

## Cornucopia of Teaching Influences

I vividly recall sitting down with the Dean in his ninth-floor office, him comfortably seated in an executive maroon colored throne, and me in a short-backed tan chair in front of his eight-foot long mahogany desk. My first semester of teaching as an assistant professor was complete, and my student evaluations from the fall lay centered in front of him on his desk. His baritone voice declared, "YOU need to clean up your teaching this spring or else you'll be looking for another job come summer" [my paraphrasing]. This brief encounter with the Dean set into motion a personal quest to investigate literature on pedagogy, and make concerted efforts to improve my teaching in the college classroom. As a way of honoring this memory in a growth oriented way, I have, and still endeavor to maintain, a file of ideas related to understanding learning and improving teaching. A sample of these teaching/learning ideas that continue to motivate and influence my life as a teacher are identified through quotes and illustrated with brief examples in the next sections.

**Dialogue.** Lecturing is like putting the brakes on a student's curiosity; ask them open ended questions to get the car moving again (Paul & Elder, 2006).

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<sup>6</sup> For those interested in knowing more about contemplative practices, there is a pictorial representation of a mature oak tree with a different set of contemplative practices growing on each branch of the tree, and hot links to more information about each practice (Duerr, 2015). Other resources for exploring contemplative practices are Plante (2010) and Wilber, Patten, Leonard, and Morelli (2008).



**Needs.** Instead of playing the game of “who’s right/wrong,” let’s play the game of “making life more wonderful” by collaboratively meeting each other’s needs (Rosenberg, 2003) like: yearning for deep connection, longing for silence and solitude, search for meaning and purpose, hunger for delight and joy, and creative drive (Kessler, 2000).

**Assessment.** “I have come to see grades as school’s drug of choice, and we are all addicted” (Bower, 2013, p. 160). I minimize the amount of grading in my courses to promote intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivation for learning (Kohn, 1999).

**Relevance.** Students need to connect their learning in class to life outside the classroom. Freire (1993) calls typical schooling *banking education* where students receive, file, and store deposits. Instead, he argues that students are conscious beings and need to engage the world through *problem posing education*. I want to teach students about things that matter in life, like fulfilling their dreams in the research methods course. “Go within. Search for the cause, find the impetus...Dig deep into yourself for a true answer...then build your life upon it.” (Rilke, 2000, p. 11).

**Metaphors.** The best we can do in teaching is to invoke metaphors, “It is like Y” (Denton, 1972, p. 37). There are many metaphors for teaching/learning: farming (planting seeds, nurturing growth), editing (read one thousand pages and distill to one page for students), bridge building (transport students to where they want to go), scientific testing of hypotheses, and preaching (motivate/inspire) (Malikaw, 2006).

**Living and loving.** “Happiness is love. Full stop...Relationship is...the essential human need...the act of loving one another that matters even more” (Vaillant, 2012, p. 52, 169). Creating a compassionate loving connection with students is the most important thing I attempt to facilitate as a teacher. One way to love is through listening. As we learn to listen, we learn to teach (Vella, 2002). If love is the most important thing in my life, then that love should be reflected in my teaching as well.<sup>7</sup>

## For Reflection

How would you describe the main influences that contribute to your identity, attitudes, and behaviors as a teacher? Consider influences such as: other teachers, mentors, books, movies, *YouTube* videos, and other sources of inspiration such as poetry, dance, theatre, art, and religion/spirituality. What would you consider to be the three most important characteristics of a *good* teacher? Why these three, and how do you consciously embody them?

## Summary and Transition to the Purple Cow of Dream Research Methods

I began teaching *advanced* communication research methods at the undergraduate level over twenty years ago, and due to issues with enrollment increases and faculty workload, I began teaching the *introductory* research methods course seven years ago. Issues with teaching the introductory course combined with multiple life forces/energies to galvanize the transition to a new type of research methods course that I dub: “The Purple Cow Dream Research Methods course.” In the next section, I proceed chronologically through the course, providing

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<sup>7</sup> What is love, and how are we to love our students? While there are many meanings for the word *love*, from Roger’s (1969) unconditional positive regard, to Lewis’ (1960) four loves, to Sternberg’s (1999) theories on love, I have found Saint Paul’s description of agape love in the New Testament (I Corinthians 13: 4-13, *Revised Standard Version of the Bible*) an ideal standard for my conduct as a teacher:

Love is patient and kind. It is not jealous or boastful. It is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way. It is not irritable or resentful...Love does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends...So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

examples of different parts of the course using the following format: (a) a personal story to introduce a course idea, (b) a sense of what it means to be in the class from the student's perspective,<sup>8</sup> (c) advice to teachers that may want to repurpose the teaching idea in their research methods course, and (d) reflection questions for those that want to move deeper into the ideas.

## Meditation

**Centering.** The day long workshop on centering prayer ended with participants forming a long line to make personal contact with an elderly man seated at the altar railing of a church. From my vantage point in the front pew, I could plainly see the facial expressions of the eighty-some year-old Thomas Keating robed in a Dominican habit. I could sense a spiritual presence in his broad smile and warm gaze as he greeted each person. I was surprised as the last person in line that he still beamed with glowing energy when I spoke with him. This personal encounter with the man behind the books I read about (e.g., *Centering prayer*, Keating, 1986) led to teaching a similar kind of meditation in the classroom.

In the next section, I as teacher use my imagination and creativity to role play what a student might feel, think, say, and/or do during her first day in research methods, and during her first experience meditating. For this and the following sections, I use my mental storehouse of interactions with students in- and out-side of the classroom for the past 30 years of teaching college courses as a basis for creating student amalgams that represents a *student* perspective in the classroom. Student voices serve as points of comparison/contrast with my voice as a teacher. Student voices may not be factually accurate due to my memorial distortions over time, but I have endeavored to create student voices that are consonant with the spirit of a what a student might feel, think, say, or do.

**First Day of Class...Meditation?** I just finished lunch during activity hour when I climbed the stairs and entered the corner classroom in the Engineering building. As I took my seat in an empty desk on the far side of the room near the window, I noticed a tall bearded man clad in a long sleeve shirt and black jeans. Turning from the white board where he finished writing in large blue letters: "MEDITATION: Dreaming," he began, "I'm Dr. B. Welcome. I invite you to *turn off* your digital devices and *turn on* to your inner world by meditating with me for a few minutes." I've never meditated before, so I felt kind of weirded out. This is research methods, not a mediation class, right? But I continued to listen because there was nothing else to do. He continued:

Try to let go of your day up to this point...leave your troubles at the door (you can pick them up on the way out if you like) ... relax...notice your breathing...take a deep breath...another...Now, sitting with your spine erect, gently close your eyes and *meditate* on the word "dreaming" for a few minutes by holding the word at your *center* and welcome whatever thoughts, feelings, and images bubble up. Hold the word at your center by imagining the word "dreaming" in your lap, or in your heart, or see the word gently resting on your forehead. If your thoughts go too far astray from the center of *dreaming*, for example, you find yourself thinking about what you will make for dinner tonight, then say to yourself, "I will return to my center" and silently repeat the word "dreaming." That's enough for now. Are there any questions?

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<sup>8</sup> To tell the story of what it feels like to be in the course with the students, I recreate student voices in the class. I realize that I am telling the story from a single point of view, namely, that of myself as the instructor. For example, I am the one choosing the content, and which student voices to include. Nonetheless, I have my memory and my notes from teaching the class for two years to recreate the student voices.

No one had any questions, so we sat silently for about three minutes and then I heard Dr. B. say, “It’s time to bring your meditation to a close...when you feel ready, take a deep breath and open your eyes...I invite you to share something about your meditation experience with the class.” A few people began sharing. Dr. B. thanked and encouraged each student in some way. I shared that I never meditated before today, and that the meditation felt relaxing. Others shared about dreaming at night, and another student asked if we could meditate again sometime.

**Purpose of Meditation.** Some students are understandably suspicious when I invite them to meditate with me at the beginning of the first day of class. After I explain that our class meditation is a form of reflection/contemplation on course content, and not a religious activity, most students appear less suspicious. The intent of this type of meditation is to assist students in relaxing and cultivating a sustained and focused attention about a topic that we will cover later in class.

Student responses to the first meditation experience in class vary greatly, from the simple “I felt relaxed” to more in-depth reflections. I endeavor to affirm all responses, emphasizing that whatever we experience during meditation is *okay*. Even the uncomfortable experiences have something to teach us. By the end of the second week of class, student feedback after our meditation time indicates that many students appreciate, and some even look forward to, our mediation time. The discussion after meditation also varies. Sometimes there is pregnant pause after I invite students to share (no one is required to share) while on other days, many students share. As we proceed through the weeks, I gradually add further meditation instruction (e.g., hand position, breathing, additional ways to deal with distractions, suggestions for out of class practice, and so forth; Baesler, 2015).

**For Reflection.** Consider how you begin your classes. How do you help students make the transition from outside to inside of class? How might you create a relaxed and focused learning environment at the beginning of class? Can you envision using some type of meditation in your class? Do you have a personal practice of meditation? If so, how might you bring part of the spirit of your meditation practice into class? In addition to meditation, are there other methods that might help you, and your students, begin class in a way that facilitates learning?

## Purple Cow Dreams

**Stealing dreams.** Godin’s (n.d.) on-line manifesto on education read: “Stop stealing dreams.” Is he accusing me of stealing student dreams? My annoyance turned to guilt as I read and realized that I inadvertently steal students’ dreams. Initially, I approached teaching as I was taught to conduct social science: create behavioral objectives, provide lectures to meet those objectives, test students using standardized metrics, and meter out grades based on the statistical bell curve. This scientific approach to teaching impedes a student’s ability to pursue their dreams in the research methods course. To change this trend, I adopted a new way of teaching research methods by nurturing, instead of stealing, student dreams.

**Introducing Students to Traditional and Dream Research Cultures.** After our meditation today, Dr. B. took us on a tour of research:

By signing up for this course, you are beginning the indoctrination process into the *traditional academic research culture*. This course is pre-boot camp...Getting your Ph.D. is a three to four-year boot camp. If you survive boot camp, then you compete for a scarce number of tenure track assistant professor positions in your area of expertise. If you win the competition, you are granted

the privilege of carrying a time bomb that explodes at the end of five years. Rainbow colored fireworks light up the sky with a bang if you make tenure and are promoted to associate professor, or the time bomb may blow apart your academic and personal life if you don't succeed and are asked to leave the university at the end of your fifth year. If you see fireworks after five years, the publish or perish game is still on, and your goal is now to be an internationally recognized expert in some niche in your field. Eventually, you reach the pinnacle: full professor.

After listening to Dr. B.'s research tour, I definitely didn't want to be a full professor, and I even question whether I want to be in this class. It sounds so hard. There are a lot of really long stretches of delayed gratification and pitfalls on the path to full professor. Maybe I should drop this class and change my emphasis from Bachelor of Science to Bachelor of Arts so I don't have to take research methods? This research stuff doesn't sound like it's for me. While feeling thoroughly bummed out, Dr. B. introduced an idea about a *dream research culture* that provided me with the hope I needed to stay in the course. With a reassuring smile, Dr. B. continued:

There is an alternative to the traditional academic research culture. I call it the dream research culture, and that's my teaching philosophy for this course. While we still use many of the principles from traditional research methods, we have a different starting point, and a different purpose: pursuing one's life dream. I don't mean a "pie in the sky" impossible dream like building a time machine, and I don't mean a mundane dream like working a job you dislike that only pays the bills. Rather, I mean a dream that sits between these two extremes. Seth Godin (2003) calls this kind of dream the *purple cow*, and in this class, I call this dream the *purple cow dream research project*. Godin uses the image of a purple cow in a field of Holsteins as a metaphor for an idea that is truly remarkable, something that when people hear about it they stop and say: "WOW, that's really cool" (several examples of purple cow dreams are given).

I felt excited. Maybe I can find a meaningful dream after all. Dr. B. ended class by talking about: making the world a better place, making a difference that will impact the seventh generation, helping others as a path to personal fulfillment, and hitching onto a dream on Ted.com (a site where experts share their dreams in ten to twenty minute presentations). He challenged us.

I want each of you to do some soul searching, some meditating, and come up with a dream topic and elevator talk (a 20-30 second summary of your dream) for a purple cow dream research project by the next class.

The next class we shared elevator talks for our dreams in groups of three. Dr. B. reached into his back pocket and pulled out a cocktail napkin and issued another challenge. "Draw a picture of your dream on the back of a napkin." I didn't see how we were going to squish our entire dream onto the back of a napkin, but after we watched Roam's (2008) video clip describing how to visualize and draw complex ideas on the back of the napkin, I felt like I might be able to do it after all.

**Life Long Dreams.**<sup>9</sup> Students are familiar with the idea of pursuing a life-long dream, but unfortunately, most students are not encouraged by faculty to follow their dreams. *If* students can describe a life-long dream that they genuinely care about, something meaningful and important to them and something that is also beneficial to others, *then* they have tapped an artesian spring of motivation and can draw on this reservoir to learn the research methods that will assist them in realizing their dream. Using the dream as an intrinsic motivator is a seismic shift in learning/teaching. Instead of stealing student dreams, I'm helping students articulate their life-long dream and, using a variety of research methods, bring part of that dream to fruition.

**For Reflection.** What are your dreams as a teacher? What kinds of activities can you develop in the classroom to assist students in articulating and taking steps toward realizing their dreams? Can you see yourself co-dreaming with students to enrich the lives of others and make the world a better place by conducting research?

### Finding Buried Treasure

**Pirate pennies.** Turning on my side in bed before sun up, the whisper of my Dad's voice tickled my five-year-old ear: "Some pirates buried a treasure chest in the backyard...let's see if we can find it and dig it up!" I lit up like a matchstick. Dad led the way out the back door with a flashlight, past the gate at the middle of the yard, pausing near the base of a pomegranate tree. My eyes followed the flashing light to the ground where I spied a foot-sized "X." From behind his back, Dad produced a shovel. I grabbed it and started digging. About a foot down, I hit metal. A small brown and gold colored chest with a painted pirate's head and cross bones sparkled on the metal chest. Dad also produced a key that magically fit the lock. Opening the chest, I see hundreds of shiny copper pennies. Overjoyed, and much to my father's chagrin, I began digging holes all over the backyard in search of more buried treasure in the following days, weeks, and months. I'm still looking for buried treasure today, but of a different kind. I use this metaphor of searching for buried treasure to describe finding *buried research treasures* in the literature review stage of the research process. In the next section, a student describes how I teach them to play the role of pirate and find buried treasure.

**Teaching students to find buried treasure.** Our meditation phrase for today is "buried treasure." I keep thinking of the movie *Pirates of the Caribbean*, and I can't see how buried treasure is relevant to research methods. After meditation, some students made connections between dreams and treasure: "A life-long dream is like a precious treasure...Maybe the dream is buried somewhere, and research methods helps us find it...Maybe the buried treasure is inside of us..." After some discussion, I began seeing how buried treasure relates to the dream part of the class. Next, Dr. B. gave us a treasure map. "You might find buried treasure for your dream in conducting a *traditional literature review* of scholarly journal articles in library data bases." He showed us how to access and search some of the databases, and then said:

You might also find treasure by completing a *dream culture literature review*. Search for treasure using blogs, *You Tube* videos, *Wikipedia*, Magazines, music lyrics, poems, novels...anything related to your dream topic can become a kind of treasure for the literature review. Some of the best treasures are buried deep. You DIG for them.

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<sup>9</sup> The idea of visualizing and realizing a dream is part of American culture, as in the "American dream," or "following one's dream," but here I emphasize a life-long dream, something that will provide meaning and purpose over the long run. Irvin and Hiden (2013) in their book *Build your Dreams* provide practical advice on pursuing one's dream through five steps: discover, research, embark, adapt, and maintain. I borrow from parts of their book and video documentary for the dream research course.

Dr. B. showed us a short video on how to use *Diigo* as an electronic treasure chest to store the treasures we find during our literature review. The *Diigo* software looks pretty easy to use. You can highlight articles, make e-notes, add tags, and save PDF files. We ended our treasure hunting expedition by meditating on a four-by-six-foot garden spider sitting in its web projected onto the classroom screen. Dr. B. said, “I took this picture of the garden spider last week,” and then continued:

That’s what I want you to do. Be the garden spider. Create a web of ideas related to your dream. These key terms are the nodes of the web. Use these terms in different search engines to catch treasures for your literature review. The web is also like a *dream catcher* that the indigenous peoples of *Turtle Island* use.”

I didn’t really like the idea of becoming a garden spider (I’m not Spiderwoman), but I did dig the dream catcher metaphor. I remember the dream catcher in my bedroom growing up, so I can visualize myself creating a dream catcher for my project. Dr. B. gave us time in class to create our web. He asked for volunteers to share key terms from their web and demo’d how we could use these terms in search engines to find research treasures for our literature review. I’m hoping to find lots of buried treasure for my dream topic before next class.

**Quality treasure.** As most students are familiar with tagging pictures on social media, they are quick to catch on to the idea of creating a web of key terms (tags) to use in their database searches for buried treasure as part of the literature review. I find that many traditional scholarly databases are not familiar to students, thus we spend extra time demonstrating how to navigate these databases. In comparison, dream culture resources like *Wikipedia*, *YouTube*, *Twitter*, Instagram, Pinterest, and Blogs are commonly used by students, and they readily find buried treasure for their dream projects using these resources.

Students often struggle with evaluating the *quality* of resources/treasure. Using the buried treasure metaphor, I describe peer reviewed journal articles as gold, dissertations as rubies, and meta-analyses as diamonds. I do not have treasure images for the myriad of dream culture resources, but I do remind students that the quality of these resources needs evaluation. I encourage students to evaluate their treasure/resources in terms of the credibility of the source (experience and education), potential bias in organizational affiliation, currency of the resource, and where applicable, sample size and appropriateness of methods and statistics. We also note that some dream culture treasures serve as inspiration/motivation for the journey, and are optional for inclusion in the literature review. For instance, some treasures (e.g., music, art, poetry, blogs, videos, and novels) might convey more wisdom and guidance for daily life (gold treasure) than an informative statistic from an experimental study (brass treasure).

**For reflection.** If you teach students how to conduct a literature review for a research project, what kinds of resources do you suggest? How do you talk about the value of sources that are not categorized as traditional research like: music, art, dance, theatre, poetry, blogs, videos, and so forth? How might these dream culture resources of inspiration/motivation become a part of the literature review? What kinds of buried treasure have you found in your own research? How can your own method of reviewing literature be shared/modeled for students?

### **Clothed in Methods**

The black dress pants I wear when teaching research methods reminds me of former instructors of social science research that often wore black pants. For many years, it didn’t occur to me to try on a different style or color of pants. But, Goodall’s (1991, 1994, 1996) ethnographic research trilogy inspired me to try on a different pair of methodological pants and

write my first autoethnography entitled, *The prayer life of a professor* (Baesler, 2009). Donning the pants of an autoethnographer, I felt a new sense of freedom to tell my story about prayer, showing how my personal prayer life informs my professional life as researcher and teacher. I needed inspiration from autoethnographers in my field, like Ellis (2004), Frenzt (2008), and Bochner (2014), to provide me with the courage to write autoethnographically, and to legitimize my autoethnography as genuine scholarship to administrators.

Six years passed before rediscovering the pair of autoethnographer's pants in the corner of my academic clothes closet. I was curious if the autoethnographer's pants still fit, so I tried them on and wrote an autoethnographic keynote address for the *Religious Communication Association*. Later, the speech became a journal article (Baesler, 2017a). Discovering that I liked the *feel* of the autoethnographer's pants, I continued to wear them for other research projects (Baesler, 2017b, 2017c, and the present work). Autoethnographic pants are comfortable for me as full professor, snug but not too tight, like a pair of well-worn denim jeans. When I peer into my academic clothes closet, I now see two pairs of methodological pants: the black dress pants of social science, and the blue jeans of autoethnography. Similarly, students need to see a wardrobe of options in research methodologies, and be willing to try on several different pairs of pants to find the *best fit* for their dream research project. In the next section, a student describes their experience trying on methodological pants for their dream project.

**Trying on methodological pants.** "Shopping for pants" was the unusual topic of today's meditation. I thought about going to stores at the mall, finding the right size, color, and style, and trying on many pairs of pants before finding the right one that felt good, looked good, and didn't cost too much. I wasn't sure how this reverie about "shopping for pants" connects with research methods until Dr. B. said:

Finding a research method for your dream is like trying on different pants to find the *best fit*. Sometimes it takes a while to find the right pair. I want to show you a variety of methodological pants today, and let you try them on for size. Everyone will try on the survey method pants and create ten questions related to their dream project. These questions provide a basic pattern that can be altered to fit other methodological pants like interviews with experts, starter questions for a focus group, and Likert statements for an on-line survey.

Dr. B. walked to the left side of the white board and wrote the heading "ETHNOGRAPHY." As he described different types of ethnographic observation, he wrote the sub-headings: true observer, participant observer, and native. He continued in this manner, writing across the white board until he reached the far end of the board and wrote: "EXPERIMENT" with the words "pre-post, post only, and mixed" as subheadings. Between the extremes of *ethnographic* on the left and *experiment* on the right were written: interview, focus group, and survey as main headings. So, these are the pants he wants us to try on!

My big dream is to own my own jewelry business in the next five years. I want to create and make turquoise jewelry. I hope to create four different designs for a turquoise ring, have friends rate the designs, and then, using the best rated design, make several rings and sell them at a tourist shop in Virginia Beach. If I can't make the rings, I plan on finding one, photographing it, and asking friends specific questions about the design, pricing, and intent to purchase. A focus group of friends and interviews with jewelry store owners sounds like a solid methodology for my dream project. I like the focus group and face-to-face interview methods best because you can explore people's responses by asking follow up questions.

**Finding the right fit.** Before I invite students into the research dressing room to try on different methodological pants, we talk about ethics of research: consent, confidentiality, risk,

debriefing, and other ethical issues. We also consider sampling issues like random versus convenience samples. The first pair of pants I have student try on is the survey. Students create ten questions for a survey related to their dream and try them out on a few friends for practice. Survey questions serve as a basic pattern that can be altered (like a sewing pattern for a pair of pants) for whatever method best fits their topic. For example, survey questions can provide clues for: observing ethnographic episodes, developing starter questions for a focus group, or measuring variables in an experiment.

**For reflection.** If you teach methods, how might students in your class respond to the metaphor of “trying on different methodological pants”? Can you improve on the metaphor, or create another image, to help students understand and discover which research method best fits their topic? Do you have a favorite research method? How might the kinds of questions you ask yourself when deciding which method is the *best fit* for a particular research project lead to exploring methods other than your favorite one?

## Slaying Dragons

Nightingale (2002) narrates a story about an executive of a large steel company in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that paid efficiency expert Ivy Lee \$25,000 (about \$350,000 in purchasing power today) to obtain the secret of success: list the things you need to do, prioritize, and do them in the order of priority. Early in life I understood the importance of setting priorities, but decades passed before I learned to *slay the dragons* that prevent me from doing things in the *order* of their priority. Pressfield (2011, p. 4) describes slaying the inner dragons of *resistance* that often prevent us from accomplishing our top priorities: “...fear, self-doubt, procrastination, addiction, distraction, timidity, ego and narcissism, self-loathing, perfectionism...” In the next section, a student in class describes how they learned to slay the dragons that prevent them from achieving their dream.

**Students: Here be dragons!**<sup>10</sup> “You begin your real voyage today” said Dr. B. “Everything up to this point has been preparation: discovering and envisioning your dream, finding and collecting treasure for your dream, learning a method to help you sail your ship, and mapping your voyage. Now, you begin in earnest.” Wow, we’re only really beginning now...all the hard work we’ve put into the dream project prepares us for this moment.

I was excited and ready to set sail, but Dr. B. warned us: “There will be dragons to face on the voyage. You need to know how to recognize, engage, and defeat them lest you give up the dream.” The only dragons I’ve seen are in movies and video games. I’m not sure what kind of dragons he’s talking about...dragons? Really? Dr. B. continued his dragon story:

The heart contains dreams and dragons. When you put your heart into a dream, some forces in the universe seem to come to your aid (e.g., mentors, guides) while other forces, like *dragons*, will try to crush your dream. Most dragons live within: procrastination, resistance, wanting to give up and quit. You will all face dragons. Your research map, prioritizing what you need to do and when, is your first line of defense. Remember, together we can defeat the dragons that seek to destroy your dream.

I don’t know much about fighting dragons, but I’m beginning to understand that the dragons living within me can keep me from realizing my dream. I feel reassured that we can ask Dr. B.

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<sup>10</sup> The origin of the phrase *here be dragons* is uncertain. I was introduced to the phrase as an undergraduate in the 1980’s through a friend that gave me a calligraphed poem called “Here be Dragons...Good!” The “Good!” emphasizes that dragons represent a challenge to be overcome, the possibility of a quest that builds strength and character.



for help during the next four weeks. He's not just standing at the dock saying *bon voyage* as we launch our ships out to sea. He's more like an albatross that flies with us in all kinds of weather, materializing on board our ship whenever we need him. With Dr. B.'s support, I think I can do this. I've got my map for the four weeks, and some tips for fighting dragons: fight the dragon early when it's small, keep on attacking until it's defeated (don't give up), and fight the fire breathing dragon with the waters of action. I feel excited, encouraged, and anxious...can I really make part of my dream come true? Despite some doubts, I'm resolved to launch and see if I can sail this dream ship. I want to find out what I'm made of by engaging the dragons of air and sea in battle.

**A flexible flow chart.** Almost none of the student research dream projects can be accomplished in a semester; thus, students create a flow chart of their *big dream* and identify a *piece of the dream* to accomplish in four weeks during the semester using behavioral tasks. Students also chart their progress using a research log that includes date, description of research activities, learnings, time invested, and anything else they want to add. This ship's log is also used as a guide for self-assessment at the end of the course.

Rarely do things go according to plan. Knowing when to persist and when to modify the project requires discernment, which is why I encourage students to meet with me during their four week voyage (in person, e-mail, or by phone). Many students experience some trepidation when they meet their cherished dream face-to-face: "What if I fail? I've told myself for years I want to do this, and now that the opportunity is here, I don't know if I can." Some assistance is often needed to slay the dragons of self-doubt and fear. With each success in slaying a dragon, they seem to shrink in size, and with encouragement to persevere, most students complete the research voyage with some degree of success and pride.

**For reflection.** What methods have you found successful in defeating inner and outer dragons that prevent you from achieving your dreams? How might you model/teach these methods to your students? Are there other metaphors that you find useful for assisting students in understanding and overcoming the challenges of conducting research?

### Endings and Beginnings

After four weeks of intensive research in the field, students prepare a four-part final project. First, students craft a narrative of their dream research project, from conception to completion, including a description and interpretation of original data. Second, students translate their dream research story into a social science type of abstract with a hypothesis and/or research question, method and sample, main findings, limitations, and an idea for future research. Third, students solicit a credible expert in their topic area to provide written feedback on their project. Fourth, students meditate on what they learned during the research journey and, with the aid of their accountability log, provide a rationale for a letter grade. As instructor of record, I conduct my own assessment of their research, considering the outside evaluator's feedback, and the student's self-assessment, before providing my own feedback and assigning a letter grade. Next, students present their dream research projects to the class, preferably without the use of *Power Point*,<sup>11</sup> highlighting their motivation for the project, proposal,

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<sup>11</sup> I want students to think creatively, beyond the limitations of *Power Point* which Tufte (2006, p. 2) demonstrates to be:

...foreshortening of evidence and thought, low spatial resolution, a deeply hierarchical single-path structure as the model for organizing every type of content, breaking up narrative and data into slides and minimal fragments, rapid temporal sequencing of thin information rather than focused spatial analysis, conspicuous decoration and Phluff, a preoccupation with format not content, an attitude of commercialism that turns everything into a sales pitch.

Suffice it to say that I don't normally use *Power Point* in my classes, nor do I recommend students use it.

accomplishments, and ideas for future research. Finally, I conduct individual student conferences in place of a final exam. In the conferences, I can talk personally with each student, providing feedback on their written research project and presentation, and inquiring about the next steps in their dream. Most students beam with pride during these conferences. This research is something they wanted, envisioned, put their heart into, slayed dragons to accomplish, and will pursue long after the course is over.

Here, we end the course. But, students are just beginning to understand that the next destination of their dream is within reach, and that they have the power to realize their dreams. I include several brief descriptions of student projects in Appendix A to provide readers with a sense of what I mean by a *purple cow dream research project*.<sup>12</sup> Overall, I and most students, based on my reading of their final projects and presentations, find these dream research projects uniquely varied, personally meaningful, and life-enhancing.

## Learnings

Now that grades are in, I meditate on what I learned as a: midwife of dreams, fellow traveler on the research journey, a dragon slaying coach, a facilitator of innovative ideas and plans, and as a learner among student teachers. Following are some of the learnings from teaching the purple cow dream research methods course.

**Motivation.** Letting students pursue their purple cow dreams is a beneficial way to motivate and engage students in learning and conducting research. When students realize they *need* to learn certain research methods to solve the challenges that they face in pursuing their dream, they *want* to learn research methods.

**Serendipity/Synchronicity.** Some moments cannot be planned for. Arriving spontaneously, these moments can sprout from a question or impasse. For example, when student plans for the dream project make contact with reality, cognitive dissonance, and the accompanying emotions of frustration and anger, often ensue. Students question themselves: “Why aren’t my plans working out?” Students need assistance in reframing these set-backs, revising their plans, and trying again. I provide such assistance via written feedback instead of grades while students work on their dream projects. Thus, students can re-do parts of their project without the penalty of a low grade before turning in the final project.

**Trusting students.** Ultimately, only the student knows how much time and energy they invested in the dream research project, and what they learned during the course. I ask students to provide a self-assessment of their work by meditating, reflecting, and writing about what they have learned in pursuing their dream. I also ask: Is this the very best work you are capable of? Most student self-assessments are compatible with my assessments, but some are not. Of this later group, there appears to be two types. Some students have an exaggerated view of the worth of their work. I remind them that no one’s work is perfect. Often the outside evaluator helps temper these overestimations. Second, some students are too humble and underestimate the worth of their work. For these students, I recommend a higher grade.

**Affective learning.** A series of articles in *Communication Education* edited by Hess (2015) suggests that there is a reliable direct relationship between positive student affective experiences with their instructor and course content (e.g., liking, commitment, and satisfaction) and student learning outcomes. I facilitate positive affective experiences for students in the dream methods course through meditation, developing a dream culture research language,

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<sup>12</sup> Additional examples of student dream projects are listed on the last page of my blog that I began the first semester I taught the dream research methods course:

<http://purplecowresmethods.blogspot.com/2013/09/normal-0-false-false-false-en-us-x-none.html>

I update this project list every time I teach the course, choosing four to six of the best projects. I obtain student’s permission to post their dream project idea (without their name) on this public blog.

using creative metaphors, and by coaching. For some students, the emotions experienced while researching their purple cow dream is very positive: satisfaction, pride, gratitude, transformation, happiness, and excitement. But, there are also character building emotions like: frustration, stress, and anger that are eventually transformed into positive feelings of persistence, completion, and even joy. As a teacher, facilitator, and coach, I feel a deep sense of satisfaction when I observe and read about the positive and character building emotions that students experience when conducting dream research. Assisting students in cultivating a legitimate identity as a researcher while making their dreams come true is truly satisfying, and even at times thrilling.

**The better way.** A dragon voice inside me reminds me at least once during the term, “This is too much work to do in one semester...why don’t you go back to the old way of canned lectures and standardized tests...it’s so much easier for you and for them.” Yes, it would be easy to slip back into the old ways of teaching, but it would not be the *better way*. This higher or better way is graphically represented in *Aikido*<sup>13</sup> as a person traveling a road with a crown on their head. This is the royal way, the kingly/queenly way, the better way. That is how I view the purple cow dream research methods class. This new way of teaching research methods is an entirely different path than the old way of teaching research methods. For me, traveling this new path as teacher/learner is the better way; indeed, for me it is the best way.

**Purple pencil.** At the end of the last class, I wanted to give students a parting gift, something concrete to remind them of the class, something to symbolize the purple cow research ideology...a purple pencil. After visiting four stores and not finding any purple pencils, I spied a roll of purple tape on a lower shelf near the pens and pencils section at *Office Max*. My imagination jumped, and soon I was rolling two inches of purple tape onto the upper end (just below the eraser) of thirty-some standard number two pencils, and writing the names of each student on the purple tape in indelible black ink. Before I handed out the purple pencils at the end of the last day of class, I gave a final challenge:

As you leave today, I challenge you to meditate on your purple cow dream at least once a month, and journal about whatever insights bubble up using (here I raise one of the purple taped pencils to shoulder level) a purple cow pencil inscribed with your name. As you continue to meditate, journal, and work on your dream, the pencil lead will grow shorter as you sharpen it. Over time, the lead at the bottom of the pencil will meet the purple tape at the top of the pencil, and hopefully you will have accomplished your dream by that time. But if not, I offer hope. Mail me the stubby pencil, include an update on your dream, and I promise to mail you a new purple cow pencil with your name on it so that you can keep meditating, journaling, and working on your dream. If you continue in this iterative fashion, I’m confident that you will eventually realize your dream.

At the end of my speech, the class spontaneously began clapping in appreciation of my gesture, and perhaps in recognition of what the purple cow pencil symbolized, a chance to realize their dream. For me this moment is the pinnacle of the semester, an affirmation of the vision I started with: a purple cow dream research methods class. Calling their names, one by one, I stood at the door and handed them their purple cow pencil as they departed. Silently, I wished them well, and prayed that one day they really will make their dream come true.

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<sup>13</sup> Based on my weekly Aikido training from the past two years, my understanding of the pictorial meaning of “Aikido” consists of three related pictographs: a “pot of food cooking below a roof” symbolizes harmony in the family, “three wisps of steam rising from four kernels of rice” symbolizes the movement of the spirit, and “a person journeying on a road with a crown on their head” symbolizes taking the higher way, the best road. Taken together, one translation of the three pictographs is: the way of spiritual harmony.

**For reflection.** What kind of final impression do you leave with students on the last day of class? Do you summarize the semester, give them a pep talk, or do they take an exam and silently leave? What could you offer students, like the purple cow pencil, as a parting gift? It need not be an actual object. It could be an idea, or a word of encouragement. What kind of gift could provide an opportunity for students to reconnect with you at some later point in time (e.g., a self-addressed post card)? Finally, if you knew you would never see *this* student again, what would you want your parting words to be for them as they leave your class for the last time?

### Conclusion

Godin's (n.d.) on-line radical education manifesto, *Stop stealing dreams*, is one of many influences that inspired me to revolutionize the undergraduate *traditional social scientific research methods course* into a *purple cow dream research methods course*. In this new methods course, students dream about what they want to accomplish in life and, using research methods, attempt to realize part of their dream over the course of the semester. The course is described autoethnographically by way of personal stories, student perspectives, advice for teachers, and reflection questions. Students begin the semester by brainstorming dreams, visualizing and drawing their dream on the back of a napkin. They slice their dream into pieces of pie, and choose one slice of the pie to accomplish in a semester's time. Students look for buried treasure, try on methodological pants, create questions to ask a sample of individuals, and develop a flow chart of research activities for four weeks. Next, students ground the dream in reality by working their four-week plan, slaying dragons, and actualizing as much of their dream as possible. Students meditate about what they learned, develop a narrative and social scientific abstract for the written part of the research project, and share their accomplishments with the class. Lastly, during individual student conferences, we plan the next steps for realizing their purple cow dream.

It is possible to help students envision and realize a piece of their life dream using research methods as a vehicle. The basic process of research is radically simple: ask a question, find a method, and collect data to answer the question. Similarly, in the dream methods course, students envision a dream, find an appropriate method, and collect data to actualize their dream. My hope in narrating this autoethnography is that teachers of traditional research methods in the social sciences may be inspired to experiment with one or more of the ideas presented as the purple cow dream research methods course. In experimenting to improve the quality of the research courses we teach, I trust that we will be pleasantly surprised by how we can make our student's lives, and our lives, more wonderful by making our dreams come true.

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## Appendix A

### Samples of Former Student's Purple Cow Dream Research Projects

**2<sup>nd</sup> Chance.** This program connects first time college students convicted of a nonviolent crime (most often drug related) with local businesses who will give them a second chance for employment.

**Truck'n Biodiesel.** Surveying diesel truck drivers at a local gas station revealed that truckers are willing to buy biodiesel for just under the current price of gas, and that gas station owners are willing to sell biodiesel. The purple cow part is to create homemade biodiesel from enough local restaurant's vegetable waste to fill this need.

**Green Windows.** Almost every college student that has access to a section of a sunlit window to grow some vegetables using hydroponics, or even using a simple plastic pot with soil from a nearby yard. The purple part is targeted toward students in dorms on campus. Each dorm (or floor of a dorm) could grow a different vegetable, and then share the produce with other dorms/floors. If the types of vegetables are timed properly, there can be a continuous supply of veggies for everyone.

**The Lym.** This creative idea combines the best of a library (the "L" in LYM) with the best of a gym (the "YM" in LYM). The goal is to enhance the health of body AND mind under the one roof. The idea is to make the Lym a community center for low income children and teens in an urban area near campus.

**Animalia.** Creating a farm-like home for unwanted pets of all kinds (from snakes to rabbits to dogs, cats, horses, and...). Options for pet adoption are included, as well as sponsoring a pet. Pets stay until adopted or die a natural death. The farm is run by volunteers, especially high school and college students, that care about animals.

**Sneaks and Peeks.** In this small shop located near the resort boardwalk of Virginia Beach, vacationers and locals design their own sneakers (sneaks) and sunglasses (peeks) with the assistance of a software program in the shop. Pictures are taken of the person's feet and head, and the sneakers and sunglasses are custom fit through the marvels of 3D printing.

**I was there.** This dream project is geared to those that like to travel to famous park landmarks. The purple part is to prove that you "were there" by using an app on a mobile phone device that is activated when you are within 10 feet of the landmark. Currently, travelers take pictures of themselves by the landmark, but skeptics often wonder if they simply photo-shopped their image into the picture. A speciale-badge that matches the theme of the landmark and colors of the park appears on a mobile phone as proof that you "were there."

**Take it or Leave it.** A weather proof plastic bin with shelves was set up near the parking lot area of an apartment complex with a note attached explaining that you can take anything in the bin (for free) and/or leave anything that you want to donate for people in the apartment complex. Permission from the management was secured, tenants were notified, and a trial run proved successful. Plans to field test at other apartment complexes are on the horizon.

**Global Coffee House.** This student wanted to bring her coffee shop experience in Italy to America by creating a friendly home atmosphere coffee shop with exotic brews from all over

the world. Pictures of the landscape from the places where the coffee is grown, and pictures of the farmers, along with the story of their lives, decorate the walls.

**Ugly Produce.** A business plan is created to open a farmer's market type store that sells produce that is "ugly" (too small, misshapen, blemished, and so forth) at significantly reduced prices. Research found that 25 to 40 per cent of local produce grown in near-by farmland doesn't make it to the market because it doesn't fit the "gold standard." This project saves some of the produce that is plowed under by making it available at discounted prices. This arrangement economically benefits the farmer and the consumer.

**Cool Hats.** Starting a new fashion line of cute clothes for larger sizes requires an entry point. This student decided to test one of her designs on female college students in her network of relationships on *Facebook*. She designed, marketed, and sold cool designer hats with hand embroidered logos. Twenty initial hats sold out in the first week that they were posted on-line.

**Mobile Stu.** This student duo proposed to buy a recreational vehicle on *Craig's List*, reconvert it into a mobile studio for young musicians, and promote their work with social media (*Facebook* and *Twitter*). They found but did not purchase the recreational vehicle, but they did record and promote the work of two young musicians.

**ATM.** This student created and copyrighted his own music label called "Addicted to Music" (ATM). He also created and uploaded original songs from the label to social media, performed at live shows to promote the label, and signed one rap artist to the label. His vision of the future includes an ATM studio and a nationwide tour.

**My Song.** A concrete goal seemed doable at the beginning of the term: produce one song and get it played on the radio. This student sang since childhood--school plays, church choir, football games...and over the years, she had written over 20 song lyrics, but she could not produce her own song for others to hear. For this project, she spent over 30 hours during four weeks in a sound booth trying to make beats for her song and edit them together with her voice. Ultimately, she did not get the song on the radio, nor did she even finish the song. She did interview local song writers and artists and found out that "you can't do it alone." You need to ask for help. When she presented her project to the class at the end of the term, she narrated a story of two friends that both ended their life prematurely in the past few months. Then she sang acapella the song she had been working on entitled, *Hold On*. She humbly ended the presentation: "Maybe my song will help others *hold on* and have hope so that they won't end their life like my friends did." My face was wet with tears...I was so proud of her. I have no doubt that she will make her dream come true.

### Author Note

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*Reports, Communication Research, Human Communication Research, Journal of Argumentation and Advocacy, Journal of Communication and Religion, Journal of Ecumenical Studies, Journal of Nonverbal Behavior, Journal of Peace Education, Listening: Journal of Communication Ethics, Religion, and Culture, Listening Education, Peace Studies Journal, Presence: An International Journal for Spiritual Directors, Review of Communication, and Review of Religious Research.* Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: [jbaesler@odu.edu](mailto:jbaesler@odu.edu).

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