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## Romance and the Teacher: A Dissertation Revisited

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## Romance and the Teacher: A Dissertation Revisited

### Abstract

This article is an auto-ethnographic study of my own deeply held metaphors about teaching and how I carry them into my university classroom work with preservice teachers. It is a continuation of a previously shelved dissertation. Ignited by a simple question during an encounter with a former student and research participant, this article looks at the dissertation work carried out previously through a new lens. The dissertation focused on my participants who were students and student teachers and their metaphors about teaching. Years later I was challenged to revisit this work and identify my own teaching metaphors. By holding a metaphor of teaching as a romance I was challenged to consider how that metaphor carried itself into my teaching and into my relationships with students. Through honest reflection and self-examination, I learned that my metaphors must be recognized and challenged. They do carry into my work with students and can change how I see them as future teachers.

### Keywords

Metaphor, Teacher Education, Teacher Identity, Autoethnography

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## Romance and the Teacher: A Dissertation Revisited

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*This article is an auto-ethnographic study of my own deeply held metaphors about teaching and how I carry them into my university classroom work with preservice teachers. It is a continuation of a previously shelved dissertation. Ignited by a simple question during an encounter with a former student and research participant, this article looks at the dissertation work carried out previously through a new lens. The dissertation focused on my participants who were students and student teachers and their metaphors about teaching. Years later I was challenged to revisit this work and identify my own teaching metaphors. By holding a metaphor of teaching as a romance I was challenged to consider how that metaphor carried itself into my teaching and into my relationships with students. Through honest reflection and self-examination, I learned that my metaphors must be recognized and challenged. They do carry into my work with students and can change how I see them as future teachers.*

*Keywords: Metaphor, Teacher Education, Teacher Identity, Autoethnography*

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*I was betrothed to teaching as a young child in a damp basement playroom. My older sisters taught me to love the feel of chalk dust on my fingers, the sound of opening a crisp new workbook for the first time, the smooth flow of ink from a pen, and the linear beauty of aligned magnetic letters spelling out my name. They introduced me to the art of teaching and it began a romantic relationship that would wax and wane but stand the test of time. Teaching was my love and my passion and my little brother and numerous dolls and stuffed animals became the objects of all my energy as I honed my practice. (Spiker, 2013)*

This excerpt is how my dissertation began in 2013. I completed my doctoral degree while working full time as an Associate Lecturer, having left the elementary classroom after eighteen years. For my research I conducted a multiple case study of four of my preservice teaching students for three semesters; a semester of courses, a semester of residency in an elementary classroom, and their first semester as a teacher of record. My study sought to examine the metaphors held by preservice teachers and to record any changes in these metaphors after key transitions in their teaching lives.

My dissertation topic was selected after sitting in a graduate course with a favorite instructor and listening to his lecture on metaphor and how strongly the metaphors we hold influence our lives. After that class session I found myself keenly aware of the metaphors around me, specifically those involved in teaching. Further research revealed that in teacher education metaphors represent ideas about teaching, learning and children and these metaphors held by preservice teachers tend to persist even when new teachers are confronted with new perspectives (Bullough, 2008; Massengill-Shaw, 2011). I wondered if my students held these metaphors about teaching, if they could put them into words, and if their metaphors persisted over time regardless of their new experiences and contexts. My research topic was born and I experienced the relief all doctoral candidates experience when they finally know where they are headed and realize it may finally result in a terminal degree. It was the light at the end of my tunnel. I was going to study my students and learn about teaching metaphors. What I did not realize then, and wouldn't until a recent epiphany, was that my study would reveal my own

teaching metaphors and would challenge me to deeply examine my teaching and interactions with students.

## **Metaphor**

Until that pivotal lecture I had only considered metaphor as a term used in English class. A metaphor was not exactly a simile, but it was a method of comparison without using “like” or “as.” I had taught simile and metaphor in my elementary classrooms. Metaphor is so much more powerful in our lives than my simple definition. Metaphors are a convention of language used for comparison, but they are much more (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). Our everyday experiences develop through use of metaphor in our language (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). Understanding the meaning of these metaphors enables us to make better sense of concepts in our experience and leads us to proactive use of conceptual frameworks (Geary, 2011). Individual metaphors provide a tool for in-depth examination of beliefs, philosophies, and practices (East, 2009). They allow us to be meaning makers. In fact, one’s very orientation to life is framed by the metaphors they have available for explanation and definition (Klumpp & Lamm, 2010).

Metaphor permeates the lives of teachers inside and outside of the classroom. We utter approximately one metaphor for every ten to twenty-five words we speak (Geary, 2011). If preservice teachers’ metaphors shape their view of the world and are essential for learning, I was compelled to examine them to see how preservice teachers marry their view of self as teacher and the new learning they are asked to internalize at each stage of their journey. It is difficult to define metaphor without using a metaphor and the use of the term “marry” in the previous sentence presents a metaphor for combining and overlapping. Metaphors help to define life.

Metaphors function as a lens through which students perceive experiences in teacher education (Massengill-Shaw, 2011). Metaphors about teaching are embedded in and shaped by past experience and they reveal preservice teachers’ understanding about teaching and learning (Massengill-Shaw, Barry, & Mahilos, 2008).

James Geary (2011) attributes metaphor with powerful decision making. By simply changing terminology we can call people to action. Think of the term “global warming.” This term, when first encountered, can be associated with something pleasant and non-threatening. Some may associate warm with a feeling like describing things as “warm and fuzzy.” If we instead use the terms “climate crisis” or “climate cancer” we are much more likely to motivate action and change behavior (Geary, 2011).

I set out to study four preservice teachers, examining their metaphors about teaching and how these metaphors shaped them as new teachers. In doing this I discovered my own deeply held metaphors about teaching and I found these metaphors being challenged. Looking back now I believe this challenging was uncomfortable and something I didn’t want to face. I happily set aside my self-study and continued on with the study of my students. After all, I had taught elementary aged students in various roles for eighteen years. I had taught college students for six years. I had my own craft under control. My students were just starting their careers. Surely, they had much more interesting information to provide. To use a metaphor, I hid behind their stories and ignored my own story for fear of what it might reveal if viewed in the light of day.

## **Dissertation Findings**

I conducted a case study of four students, three females and one male. All participants self-identified as Caucasian. Participants were between 21-23 years old. I asked participants to

identify teaching metaphors and then conducted interviews, collected artifacts, and conducted observations to monitor these metaphors for any change. As I mentioned previously, research has suggested that these metaphors do not change significantly even in the face of new information (Bullough, 2008; Massengill-Shaw, 2011). However, Massengill-Shaw and her colleagues (2008) had not studied the transition from graduation to teacher of record and I planned to do so.

My dissertation was titled “Examining Teaching Metaphors of Preservice Teachers; A Hopeless Romantic Learns Lessons about Gardening, Romance, Teaching and Life.” This title was based upon my findings. I quickly learned that my students saw teaching as a romance. I heard about passion, falling in love, being happy and giddy. I saw a progression from dating to engagement to marriage. The participants entered the profession committed to teaching. Once they were teachers of record, though they had difficult days, they were honoring their commitment and staying the course. Jim described his relationship with teaching in this way.

*My students asked me if I loved teaching them. I explained to them that teaching is my girlfriend. I love teaching them every day just like I love seeing her every day but I do enjoy a little time to myself on the weekends. We're in this together—both my girlfriend and I and my students and me.*

It is interesting to note that Jim was dating and becoming committed to teaching while he was dating and committing to his future wife. He saw teaching as a growing committed relationship. He drew parallels regularly in our interviews and email exchanges.

My participants also held metaphors about teaching as gardening. They discussed student growth and spoke of how students needed nurturing. They spoke of themselves as being the gardener and giving water (knowledge and skills) to the students so that they could bloom.

I did find that these metaphors persisted but that first semester of teaching as teacher of record there were minor shifts. An interview with Wendy revealed one of these minor shifts.

*I used to think that my classroom was like a garden and I helped students to grow. I loved seeing them blossom and watching their faces light up as they drank in learning. But, I have a few weeds. I have a couple of kiddos that are giving me a run for my money. I need to pull some weeds some days. They choke out the learning if I let 'em.*

The gardening metaphor persisted, she was not willing to let it go, but it shifted to reveal some weeds. She had some behaviors that were challenging her garden. She made these challenges fit her long held metaphor. The metaphor persisted and the difficulties she encountered were named in a way that agreed and made sense for her.

### **Dissertation on the Shelf**

I greatly enjoyed my dissertation work but I, like most doctoral students, was very glad to have all the paperwork signed and my degree conferred. Of course, my committee encouraged me to publish my findings in several articles. They encouraged me to continue to follow my participants. I intended to do just that.

My position as a Lecturer is one that involves a full load of teaching and advising. I do not have a publishing requirement. Even so, I had every intention of doing more with my dissertation. I printed it out and bound it. I put it on my shelf and I celebrated my graduation with my family and time passed. My dissertation remained on the shelf and in the back of my mind as I returned to teaching and picked up some administrative duties. One of these new

duties was co-directing our local site of the National Writing Project. I began working with teachers around our state to encourage them as writers and teachers of writing. This involved summer professional development sessions. It was one of these recent sessions that provided an epiphany for me and brought the dissertation off my shelf for a new purpose.

### **Running into Jim**

Last summer I held a professional development session for practicing teachers to discuss ways to teach writing in their classrooms. I began my presentation and looked out to see my former research participant Jim with his wife, also a teacher, in the front row. When my presentation ended, and breakout sessions began I quickly sought him out, eager to hear how his teaching journey was going. Our conversation ended with a discussion about how much he still loved teaching but felt it was a relationship with highs and lows. There were days he did want to walk away but he was going to honor his commitment and work to always make his teaching better. It was obvious he was enjoying teaching. “You’re still in love with teaching,” I said to him. He replied with, “Aren’t you?” That was it. He walked away to catch the next session, but his question weighed on my mind. Was I in love with teaching? What did that mean? Had my metaphors changed over time? In retrospect that moment was the beginning of a self-study into my own metaphors of teaching and how I carry them into my preservice teacher courses. Are my metaphors shaping how my students view teaching? Am I in love with teaching and, if so, do I expect my students to be as well? The questions kept coming.

### **My Teaching Metaphors**

Jim’s simple question was a significant moment. Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) refer to a significant moment with lingering effects as an epiphany. It serves as a catalyst for study. Jim encouraged me to look deeply at my own metaphors and how they shaped my own teaching and potentially influenced my students in my classroom.

I began to revisit journal entries, emails, and letters I sent to others about teaching. I re-examined my dissertation field notes and interviews. I held conversations with trusted colleagues about my metaphors of teaching. I revisited my blog posts and syllabi. I looked at the writing I produced during my work with our Writing Project site. Writing allows the author to make the invisible visible (Denzin, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2006). My writing was a rich source of data.

I also spent time considering my cultural context. My story is embedded in my culture of experiences and how these experiences relate to each other in a larger cultural context (Alexander, 2011). My position related to teaching has changed dramatically. Ten years ago, I left the elementary classroom for a university position. In my current role I teach preservice teachers and I work with in-service teachers in professional development. I was a teacher now I’m a teacher of teachers. In one of my journal entries I called myself a square peg in a round hole. I still identify as “teacher” but I am also a member of a higher education institution. My identity as teacher now has many layers. The following illustration helps to explain these layers and provides my context (see Figure 1).

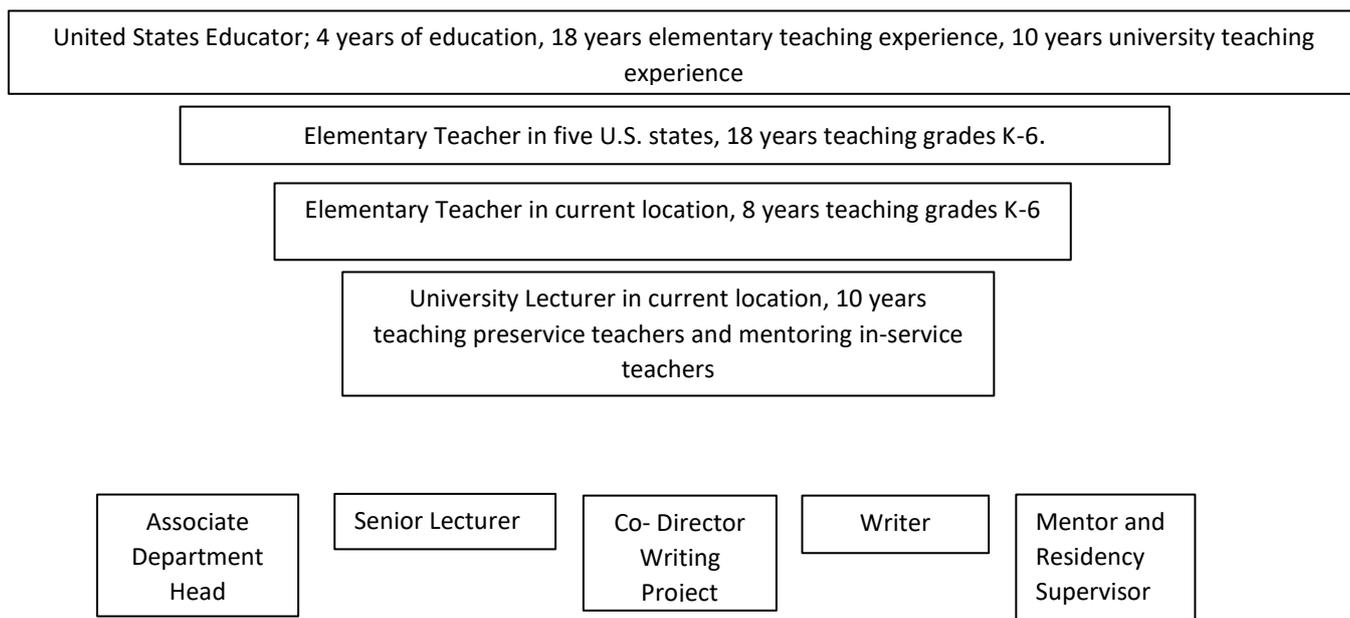


Figure 1. My teaching contexts past and present.

A square peg in a round hole. I straddle two worlds. I still identify as an elementary teacher but when I enter my former school I am seen as a representative of a higher education institution. A few at my university see my Lecturer role and my lack of required research as being “just” a teacher. Sometimes I feel like I have two homes. Sometimes I feel homeless. This context plays a role in how I view teaching and the metaphors I’ve adopted. A metaphor related to this context and to my teaching was revealed in an email to a friend.

*Sometimes I feel like I’m building a bridge from the school to the university. Sometimes I feel like I’m deep in the abyss, to borrow a line from a song- stuck in the middle. I want to be the one that spans the two- stretches the boundaries until they overlap. I want to be the bridge that helps both sides realize we’re all doing the same thing. We all have the same goals. Personal Communication, 2012.*

In my current role I want to be a bridge. I see myself as a connection between the elementary school world and the university world. I carry this metaphor into my teaching. In my talks with students I speak with them about my prior experiences, so I can have street credit with them. I want them to see me as a teacher like they will be. But, I also want them to recognize my role as their professor and know that I earned my spot on the faculty and joined the faculty to be a bridge between these two roles and worlds.

### Seeking to Analyze and Understand

Considering the catalyst of Jim’s question and my own metaphors and context, I chose to conduct an autoethnographic inquiry. Autoethnographic study seeks to describe and analyze personal experiences in order to understand cultural experiences (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). I wanted to analyze my personal experiences with my teaching and my students. I wanted to analyze my own deeply held metaphors and to understand their impact on my

teaching context and interactions in my classroom. This self-study also proved to be narrative in nature as it examined encounters between my students and me and patterns were identified and interrogated as my narrative evolved (Tedlock, 1991). Autoethnography seeks to study common values, beliefs, and shared experiences to assist insiders and outsiders in their understanding of a culture or a particular context (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). I sought to study metaphors and beliefs surrounding them held personally in an effort to understand my context and my interactions with my students. Additionally, autoethnographic study has the potential to alter one's perception of the past, inform today, and shape the future (Custer, 2014). This was my exact desire by entering this study.

In order to gain a deeper understanding through my study of self I began by collecting artifacts, examining field notes, and analyzing my interactions and personal communications within my context. Fortunately, I am a writer and a collector, so I not only consulted my previous dissertation work for data sources, I also mined through reflection journals, email exchanges, and notes from conversations with students and colleagues. After collecting all items of data I could find related to my metaphors and my teaching work with my students, I conducted layers of analysis. My first reading of the data was a holistic reading as I began to explore themes and ask questions about my own held metaphors and my teaching and work with students. I asked myself what I was noticing as important, what ideas and terms I was encountering often, and what was revealed about my own metaphors around teaching. Once I identified themes, I revisited my data and highlighted key words and phrases that were related to my metaphors and how they related to my teaching in various contexts. I placed these highlighted words and phrases on index cards and built a physical web on the floor of my office and sat with this visual representation of my data examining it for relationships and connections. During this time of analysis, I challenged myself to become an objective observer of the data as much as I could. I asked myself how an outsider might view the data and build connections. My last step was to again revisit the data holistically through the lens I had constructed from my physical web and to draw meaningful conclusions. These steps reflect metaphors employed in qualitative data analysis. Janesick (2000) speaks of qualitative data analysis as both a scripted minuet and a creative improvisational dance. There must be a balance in the analysis between formal process and creative process. Janesick also speaks of the use of "crystallization" in data analysis. Crystallization is not a strict step-by-step process for analysis. It is a process of examining and reexamining data through various lenses. It is examining the data as if it is a crystal, turning it and watching how light moves and changes from various positions. (Janesick, 2000). In an effort to employ these metaphors of analysis I used the process of interpreting the data collected with critical, analytical, and interpretive eyes (Chang, 2007) while remaining open to what the data revealed through turns in the light. After deep and recursive examination of data and dancing and turning, I prepared a narrative of my findings.

### **Aren't You Still in Love with Teaching?**

Jim's question, the catalyst to my self-examination, was much more than the two words "aren't" and "you." This question implied that Jim knew I was in love with teaching when he was in my class. What signs did I give my students that made this visible? I shared my story of wanting to be a teacher since I was a young child and talk about my *passion*. I shared how much I *loved* school and learning. I shared joyful stories about teachers that *touched* my life. I shared about my *heart* for children. I shared that teaching was my *calling* and my *destiny*. I definitely carried, and still carry, the romance metaphor into my classroom.

Digging through my writing I found several references to the italicized terms above. In our Writing Project each summer we each write a piece called *In the Trenches*. It's designed

for an icebreaker. We take time to write about a teaching story and share it with others. In one of my first *In the Trenches* writings I wrote about why I stayed with teaching during a particularly challenging time. I stayed because of a student named Jason who carried a note I wrote to him around in his pocket for three years. The story illustrates how important it is for me to connect with my students and the power of the written word. The story I wrote contained more than thirty references to a romantic teaching metaphor. I used the words love, passion, and commitment. I used phrases like “chasing after” and “delighting in.” I dated teaching in college; I got engaged to teaching my final year of college when I cemented the decision to seek a teaching job, and I’ve remained committed to teaching through the ups and downs over the years. Teaching is my life partner. I won’t give up on it even when I question the relationship. I’ve held this metaphor since third grade when I wrote on a piece of construction paper that I would love to be a teacher and put hearts around it. It has persisted for more than twenty years in the field through numerous professional and personal life transitions. Yes, Jim, I’m still in love.

### What’s Love Got to Do with It?

As I came to the awareness of a deeply held metaphor I began to assemble my experiences using hindsight to come to the “so what” part of my story (Bruner, 1993; Denzin, 1989; Freeman, 2004). I used this awareness as a lens to examine my teaching of preservice teachers. If they were aware that I was in love with teaching and had committed my life to its partnership was I expecting the same of them? What did I do if one of my students did not share this romantic notion of teaching? Did I view them in a negative light? These questions concerned me. I was nearly driven to put the dissertation back on the shelf. I know now I was likely afraid of the answers. Awareness brings responsibility. If I was aware I would need to change.

I turned again to field notes, journal entries, writing samples, discussions with trusted colleagues, and a great deal of honest introspection. One email about a student (name removed) gave me much to analyze.

*I don't know if ( ) really wants to be a teacher. I don't see any excitement or passion. When she's working with the students she's very structured and content driven. She's all business and doesn't seem like she is having any fun. She's got the content but doesn't seem to be experimenting with the art and craft of teaching. I see a flat affect in class as well. I just want to ask her if this is truly what she wants.* Personal Communication, 2013.

What does this email reveal? Painfully I accepted it revealed that if one of my students does not appear to be happy or be having fun I assume they don’t want to teach. I definitely saw this student as too much serious business and not giddy enough for a new teacher. I wish I had a video of this student to view again. What was I truly noticing and, more importantly, what was I missing in my observations of her? I did not ask her if she wanted to be a teacher, but she became a teacher and is in her third year. She is committed. She approached teaching in a different manner than I would. She was structured and goal driven. She utilized free time in class and each minute was spent on a learning task. She was not relationship driven and did not use humor, but she has proven to enjoy her job and has met with success in her position. We are different in our approaches to teaching. She did not appear to be in romantic love with teaching and did not exhibit romantic feelings. That did not make her less effective with her students. I believed it did at the time I crafted that email. I believed her to be at a deficit.

## Moving Forward

Ethnographic study should give a substantive contribution to the field. It should express a reality and make an impact (Richardson, 2000). It should be reflexive and should demonstrate how the researcher changed as a result of the work (Ellis et al., 2011). This work has changed how I will teach and how I will interact with students. I will be more aware of my long-held romance metaphor and I will work to make it visible to my students. In making it visible I will hope to have my metaphor challenged and to challenge those held by my students. I will be more cautious of the assumptions I make about students that do not hold my romance metaphor. I'll be more supportive of the students that do as they may meet with roadblocks when teaching breaks their heart one day and they question their commitment. I will challenge my students and my colleagues to consider their own metaphors and the role they play in their teaching.

The changes are beginning for me. I have two recent pieces of evidence to demonstrate small steps. My most recent piece of writing during our Writing Project summer activities reflected upon this recent self-examination.

*It is many years past my student teaching and I've experienced many changes along my career path but I still go into a classroom to teach and feel fortunate. Teaching still brings me joy and excitement. I still feel butterflies the first day of class. I love what I do and I try to convey that to my students. I use humor and my teaching is based heavily on building relationships and getting to know students as individuals. Much like my research participants, I am the gardener and I get joy out of watching my students grow and I blame myself if there is a lack of growth. I am deeply committed to teaching and want others to share my love and happiness. It's much like my thirty-year marriage relationship. There have been rough patches but I wouldn't change a thing.*

*The hard part comes next. I have to think about how I work with students who do not have these same deeply held beliefs. I have to challenge myself to be open to new perspectives and to withhold judgment from someone with a different metaphor for teaching. The student who told me that a teacher is a drill sergeant may need some challenge but he is not hopeless and he is not any less committed to being a good teacher for his student. I will challenge him but I will also not force my metaphor upon him. It won't fit. I will need to be constantly aware and honest with myself as I reflect. Journal Entry, 2017.*

I recently had a conversation with a student who was apprehensive about student teaching. She was expressing feelings of fear that she may not love her chosen profession. This conversation reflects another sign of change for me.

*Student: I have always wanted to be a teacher and I'm finally getting there.*  
*Me: The year will go fast and you'll be in your own classroom before you know it.*  
*Student: It's exciting..... and nerve wracking. What if I suck?*  
*Me: That's what this next year is for. You'll be prepared and you'll get experience.*  
*Student: I just worry sometimes that I won't love it and I maybe I won't be happy, you know?*  
*Me: These are normal feelings. Tell me more. Tell me why you want to teach.*  
 Personal Communication, 2017.

The last line of this conversation is a shift for me. In the past I would have glossed this over by telling a student, “Oh, of course you’ll love it. It’s the best job ever.” This time I probed for more information related to a metaphor held and gave the student space to puzzle through as they talked to me. I did not make a quick judgment that this student’s concern meant she wasn’t in love with teaching and may not be successful. I know I have rushed to those very judgments in the past.

The final excerpt from my dissertation was a bit of an exaggeration at the time it was published in 2013. I don’t know that I learned a great deal about myself until years later when the question “Aren’t you?” hung in the air and challenged me. I offer it here as a true and honest conclusion to my dissertation study. It was to be a study of four students but ended up being a study of my own teaching and resulted in necessary challenges and changes.

### Discussion

Metaphors permeate our world. They permeate my teaching world and my interactions with students. They function as a lens through which students perceive experiences in teacher education (Massengill-Shaw, 2011). They reveal preservice teachers’ understanding about teaching and learning (Massengill-Shaw, Barry, & Mahilos, 2008). If metaphors are all around us and impact our interactions and instruction of pre-service teachers, giving them attention is warranted.

In my autoethnographic study I learned that my metaphors impacted the way I interacted with students and even how I evaluated their performance. By recognizing my metaphors and their power in how I define effective teaching I have been able to make changes in the ways I interact with pre-service teachers. I have been able to better support those students who hold the same romance metaphor that I do when the romance begins to fade. I have been better able to support those students who hold a completely different metaphor about teaching by being open to challenge. I have learned ways to thoughtfully challenge and examine my own metaphors and to offer this same type of thoughtful challenge to my students.

In work with pre-service teachers recognizing these deeply held metaphors can serve as a way to increase the transparency of instruction in the university classroom. Examining these metaphors has the potential to expand the definition of effective teaching and to increase dialogue about the act of teaching and the choice of teaching as a profession. I found that interrogating my own metaphors helped me to better understand my students as they entered the teaching profession. Those who work with preservice teachers can engage in this same type of self-examination and allow what they learn to be shared with their students. In doing so dialogue can take place around the act of teaching and we can all grow as educators in the garden of education.

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### Author Note

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