



A Space to Learn

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ABSTRACT

Weighted with the demands of graduate studies and frustrated by a writing deadline, a doctoral student is transformed by unexpected and vivid memories of a most beloved place of learning: a space containing the critical elements of energized creativity, well-worn tools, and the warmth of devoted guidance. Through interwoven reflection and the tools of meaning making, this student achieves a deep understanding of what a space to learn requires for educational inspiration.

Doctoral study has been described as a process of fundamental ontological and epistemological change reflective of the intellectual, personal, social, and cultural transformation experienced by the candidate (Mezirow, 1991; Tennant & Pogson, 1995). Management of academic expectations and the accompanying life transformation draws heavily on one's resources of capacity, skills, and perseverance (Tennant, 2000). While there are undeniable moments of satisfaction during pursuit of higher education, the culminating sensation can be one of being formed, re-shaped, and re-finished yet again.

Currently I am learning to teach others, about teaching and learning. Discouragingly, there have been moments of isolation during this practice of spending so much time sitting still, listening, reflecting, learning, and writing. There are times when I want to throw off the weight of what feels like an ill-fitted cloak and leap out of my chair and away from this desk, where creating and learning so often feels hard. It seems that the work itself is less an effort than is the endeavor of locating a *space* to learn. Finding a space where I feel what I once felt; content in my place of learning has been both tumultuous and enlightening.

Recently, while in the physical and head space of the learner facing the demands and time constraints of yet another doctoral writing task, I found myself restless and agitated. Hours of precious time had been frittered away on seemingly pointless school commitments and stacks of papers due very soon were conspiring against me. Suddenly a wave of smothering fatigue brought on by an endured confinement of writing and a sense of lost autonomy crashed over me. Facing the blank screen with a rage intensifying, I startled at hearing my own voice cry out, "I want my workshop."

I miss how tranquility settled on me there; that place with its hard and soft surfaces, tools of every shape, and its creative possibilities. In that space I was many things at once: calm and energized, easy and intense. In that space I had solitude and the company of countless remembered conversations heard clearly over the whir of my saws and sanders, and the radio. In that space time slipped away and I was free.

Right now I want to be away from this desk, in this room, a place of learning where I feel pressure and alone. I want to be back in that place where learning was wrapped in warmth, care, and creativity; where demands and insecurities could be shaved off in curls of contentment. Gazing at the mostly empty page, my hands touched keyboard and an account of the physical and the sensory experience of the space I craved came without effort.

I have cut a length of mahogany on my table saw and I now feel its smooth and warm texture, and a smile runs through me. Next, I cut a piece of cherry wood and with the slice comes the smell of bubblegum fresh as the first chew, lingering only a moment. With a slow look around my space, I see that it is all here. Over in the corner is my sawdust encrusted ghetto blaster from high school. I hum along to big bold ballads and sugary pop songs while I saw, sand, scrape, and fuss. These favorite tunes heard between whirring blades carry me along and occasionally I throw back my head and join in as loud as I want: "I can see clearly now the rain is gone and I can see all obstacles in my way" (Nash, 1972). I am not alone here. Underneath my bench, lying in a growing pile of sawdust and junks of pine and oak from projects past is Noah. His mass of hairy gold and four perfect paws suggests not one but two piles of wood ends, shavings, and sawdust at my feet.

Today's project is a wooden book with covers made of alternating bands of cherry and mahogany. I decide that it will be a Christmas gift because it is turning out so beautifully. Later on, I will make giant wooden pencils, for my young nieces and nephew. Seven-foot replicas painted with bright colours with their names running down the side. My heart chuckles because I can already see them so clearly and I know I will make them.

This knowing fills me up and again I smile. I wonder at this feeling. Is it joy? Yes, I know pure joy here. Looking around my space with bursting satisfaction, I also see tools of every shape, function, and age around me. I have quite a collection now. My gaze settles on the tools and I stop because some of them are Grampa's. Well, I suppose that almost everything I need is here.

The words now fly onto the page with abandon, without awareness, and I slip away from an account of the physical space of my workshop to another sensory experience; an account of a working space now beyond reach but *oh* so filled with presence.

Somehow he is here, here with me and I miss him. I so want to show him the desk I have fixed and refinished like the many pieces we worked on together. I want to know what stain will highlight that perfect grain. I also wish I could ask him again how to adjust the new blade on my band saw. Too much time has gone by now and I seem to forget how he showed me. I cannot bring it to mind. I just didn't pay enough close attention the last time he was here; the last time.

You see, at that time, when my grandfather visited my new workshop he thought it was terrific. He even hinted that he was a bit envious of me because where he lived then was no longer his own place: our space, warm with projects and time to spend. I suspect that those times years ago in his basement are somehow with me when I am here in mine. I remember his work benches worn by hammer heads and scrapers, with marks penciled with ticked off inches, 8ths, and 16ths, and his wall of tidy soldier tools, lined up on pegs of readiness. I see that I have arranged my tools like he did his. Deep down I sense that he was proud that I was just like him, that I love the things that he loved, and that I understood what comes from creating in that special place. It was in his workshop using his band saw when I was five, maybe six, that I recall working carefully and intensely to make my name in scrap wood.

Glancing to my left, I stop my task and watch him bend over his table saw, a saw "much too dangerous for me," a saw he says, "is the most dangerous of all." In knowing these words, I am unable to take my eyes off him as he flips the switch of the saw creating that awesome cry of machine, swirling wildly around us. He leans into the wood and my breath stops while I watch his face so intense, concentrating and then relaxing with satisfaction as the wailing sound slowly whimpers to silence. Two perfect slices are held to the soft bulb overhead and I see his finger tips slide down a smooth wooden edge. Exhaling in silence, my heart cries out "YAY! Grandpa!! You did it!" and with renewed purpose, I return to cutting that tricky "J" in my work, listening to my little saw blade pulsing. And I concentrate too, just like him.

While still standing at the bench in my workshop, I recalled yet another experience of us, there in his workshop. I am older now and engrossed in my project with just a wee bit of skill and a whole lot of gumption:

I work away with hammer and chisel pounding against the wood that “just-wants-to-stay-stuck!” when a calm breath from behind intercedes. Sensing him leaning over me, I hear, “With the grain, with the grain. Do you see?” And his massive hand, roughly calloused yet so smooth with care, envelops mine to gently guide his own sharp chisel that I grip, over my project. And with this care and my now tempered taps, the wood magically shaves away easily. Like a spatula through icing the wood slices away and the action feels so smooth now that I am lost again in my work; which is our work. And everything just works, for a time.

Suddenly there is the flurry of a chattering voice and the caress of light footsteps cascading from above. Grandma flutters down the stairs and singsongs something ridiculous into our space: “Oh Don! I need a little shelf this long to go over my sink. Make me a little shelf, just so.” Our blue eyes twinkle at one another before we look back to her. Slowly his head swings back and forth as he points to his task on the bench but, as I watch him closely, I can see his thoughts. Yes, I understand now and I know that Grandpa will make it for her, and he will do it with a full heart and that smile of his.

I am returned again to the memory of standing in my own workshop feeling this joy of him in my core even with the ache of loss. I am there again but it is a time and place where I have recently lost so much. I am alone.

My losses are piled up like the stacks of dog-eared woodworking magazines in the corner; the loss of my marriage, of strength, and of trust and faith in me. But there is something down here, a contentment that comes when I am in this space. It is mine alone—not for others; others who take from me in different ways. In this place, I do not create for purpose and assessment and there is no value in this work for anyone but me. Yes, when I “create and fix” things elsewhere, there is satisfaction, but when I am here in this space, energy comes, there is renewal.

Make no mistake, this space is not perfect nor has it been a place without pain. In this space, a range of emotions, fluttering, raging, and even crushing have been spent. I have been injured in this space and I have felt real heartache. There are tools here that can exaggerate passion. I have smashed and lashed out here. I also remember the sudden flood that spring, when my tears joined the wet wood as tools rusted and my creations warped before my eyes. I have hidden down here when I

could not cope with those who betrayed or confused me. I have worked hard in this space on planned projects and have worked easily all day on absolutely nothing in particular. Somehow, I was always able to move against the weight of a heavy heart and stinging eyes, to focus, to concentrate, to create here. This space seemed safe enough for my angst and I suppose, safe enough to be content. I have sung out loud here. Again, I remember the feeling of being there and being pulled to create:

I will carve his name; something in pine or perhaps in birch. He liked the clean look of white birch. I will hang it over there, under the window next to my band saw. Deep down I smile with satisfaction because I know I will do it. Soon I am very still with my thoughts. Perhaps, the circle has come around for me, here in this space. I sense Noah getting up and after stretching long and lazily he moves near. He noses around the pile of scrap wood at my feet and then brings me a piece of oak, all tooth-marked and damp with drool. He smiles at me too, with soft brown eyes, and I feel his warm breath as I take from his mouth this offering. I turn the wood over in my hand and know its strength. "Oak? Yeah, pup, that'll do" and instinctively I reach for my stubby pencil and carefully begin to sketch his name over the grain: "A. D. Keirstead." I understand now that in here, in my space of creating, there is almost everything I need and there is time. I am energized, filled up, content and calm.

It is clear, as I write these memories, that in that space of learning, I have learned much about me and the world I inhabit. I shared some of these memories a few years ago when I was asked to put pen to paper to describe my "favorite place." Immediately my mind shot to this space and indeed, I was actually there somehow. Now, in this frustrating moment of doctoral endeavor, I am trying, very hard, to learn about the tools I need in what for me is a new craft of creative work. I struggle with the pace and demand of my academic responsibilities and so often it seems that I am pounding away at work that "just-wants-to-stay-stuck!"

I listen in my mind for the deep guiding voice I used to hear so clearly over my shoulder. It is barely audible in this learning space, at my desk, where project papers pile around me like flattened scrap and sawdust, where the tunes from my iPod are catchy but somehow constrained. Thankfully, Noah is still here, very near, but his golden is showing strands of grey and the space under my desk, where he wants to be, is too cramped for his length. There is also little, if anything, falling from this work surface for him to chew. I want desperately to be back in that place, where my work put me at ease. It seems that current academic endeavors have left me without time or space to create and again, I feel loss.

However, through the oft-used tool of the teacher and learner reflection I realize that in response to this resisted task of academic writing about learning the words spilling from my hands have taught me an unintended lesson. A lesson perhaps, that will guide me further in my efforts to learn about teaching other learners, about teaching and learning. I suppose I must pay closer attention to not only the lessons that I must prepare, but also to my core, where lessons are learned; give attention to what fills me up enough to be both energized and calm.

For a few years now, following a time of great upheaval of a life once lived, I have been on an entirely new venture of becoming me again, here in academia; unfortunately without a workshop. It takes just about all my energy to focus on the daily intellectual work, the product of which, in the moment, can feel like it is for others, not for me. What I have known for some time, during these passing years, but to which I suppose I have not paid close enough attention, is that I must have a space where creativity and joy can wash over me and right the daily drum of wrongs and worries. You see, I have years ahead of me still, to toil at this venture, and I understand that this doctoring process will command me, shape me, and quite possibly at times, overtake me. Without a safe creative space for making meaning and art, a place noisy enough from whirring blades, scraping metal and pop music, to hear that calm voice inside, I know I will not make it. To where I believe I must go, to make a difference in this new venture of learning, I need a space like this to learn. With this knowing, I turn that tool of reflection over in my mind and while considering its worn and dulled edges, another image slowly appears.

He is in his big chair reading one of his many books and the radio hums along in the background. Stacks of books are piled around him, casting towers of shadows under his lamp and his old pup lies heavily across his slippers feet. I am reading too but I can feel him deep deep in thought; enough to draw my gaze to him. He reads on but his stillness disquiets me. Laying aside my book, I end up perched on his footstool and softly ask, "Whatcha reading Grampa?" Over his glasses, blue eyes catch mine and slowly he shows me the cover. His book is about war, a war that was and was not his war, and ever so hesitantly he begins to speak a little of tanks, of mud, and horror in North Africa and Italy. He is soon telling stories of missing grandma and the baby girl he will not hold for four more years; the same baby girl who will one day be my mom. With an ever-brightening smile and chuckle in his voice he tells about the wayward fruitcake encased in butter cream icing, made and mailed overseas by Grandma; a fruitcake that took two years to find him, over there. His eyes twinkle as he describes how he and his buddies "sure did enjoy" that unbelievably still moist cake, once they "hacked off all that rock hard icing" with his bayonet! I hear Grandma's voice from the kitchen joining in the telling: "You know, I saved my

food rations for ages to buy all that butter!” and he grins at me slowly nodding in agreement. The voice from the kitchen adds that she still has all the letters he sent her, “and you know, they always came in bunches, even though he wrote one to me every day for four whole years.” Again he nods, with that smile.

What I know from the many stories told, just like these, is that Grandpa was one of the first in his village to go to college, just before being shipped overseas, when many folks barely finished high school. I know that he loved his wife madly and that he was lucky or smart enough to survive crazy times of insane turmoil over there, to come back here. He was also smart enough to give an intense story a happy ending when his granddaughter was listening. I know too, that he loved to learn, that he loved to be challenged, and that just like me, he often got lost in his books, about war, adventure, and ideas, and about many other serious matters needing consideration. I know these things.

Years later, struggling with my own version of insane turmoil and newly alone, he was able to visit with me at my home. To relieve the pain I saw reflected in his eyes, I enthusiastically showed him the work I had been doing, to keep the place I lived, and myself, from falling apart. On the tour of my projects we visited the repaired water tank, the new porch steps I had made from reclaimed planks, and the refinished cabinets nearly complete. As we finally stood in my workshop contemplating all the other tasks to tackle, he stopped me mid-sentence to ask, “But how did you learn to do these things, all by yourself?” At first I wasn’t able to reply. After some thought I told him, “Well, I just got some books, tried to figure it out, then, I guess, I just did it.” I remember his head gently swinging back and forth, and our blue eyes met and held for awhile longer than ever before. I then saw his lips say, “You know granddaughter, you’ll be alright.” And with him with me, I was.

When I reflect on that time, which was our last time, and consider the life I now lead as a learner and teacher, I expect that he would hint again that he is a bit envious of me, envious of the incredible opportunity I have to learn about teaching and learning, and about writing. He would probably also smile at me knowingly about how it can get hard sometimes. I think he would be proud knowing that I still love what he loved, that I am a storyteller too, who tries to share both the heartache and a bit of joy, before the last line.

Sitting amongst this stack of papers, deciphering details of daily emails, and the bewildering pressure and demands to write, write, write, when I would rather just cut, sand, and shape, I drift back again into memories that help me understand. After a

time Noah moves from his cinnamon bun curl at my feet and raises on slow legs to press against my side. I am brought back to the present when I see his raggy old ball roll to a stop against my computer. I look down at him as he rests his great warm muzzle on my desk and raises big brown eyes. He sighs heavily and suddenly noses my arm from the keyboard. It is time to play, to walk, to nuzzle, to share a treat, and to remember that grandpa deeply loved his dogs too. In fact, he was never without one, you know, just like me.

I am stunned at knowing that I have just created this recollection of that space, our place, while hours and hours have slipped away unnoticed. My blue eyes glisten and my face is damp yet I feel calm. Perhaps, during my academic endeavors, I can find a space to learn through creative work of a different sort. If not in a workshop, then maybe in the places of my work, like the place I am now, using these very different tools. Perhaps while writing without constraint, about non-academic things, or even “about nothing at all in particular,” I can begin to engage in higher learning and thoughtful teaching with a lighter heart, and even with a feeling of joy. Yes, perhaps my space for creating is through writing; where really, there is almost everything I need at, or under this desk, refinished so long ago, when I was there.

In this workspace, over the whirr of hectic academic demands, I have listened to that guiding voice while time slipped away and I have seen those blue eyes twinkling through my own, leaving me feeling easy. Deep down I smile with satisfaction because I have written him on paper instead of wood and I can continue to do this whenever I need him. I know I will do it. I understand now that in my space of creating, there is almost everything I need and there is time. I am energized, filled up, content, and calm.

References

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