

**Dialogic Relevance Pedagogy:
Encouraging Complex Reading Connections through Memoir Research**

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THESIS

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SUMMARY

This dissertation seeks to expand teacher conversations about “relevance” in English classrooms. To develop a practical pedagogy that focuses on students making meaning of relevance itself in literature classrooms, I describe “dialogic relevance” and “dialogic relevance pedagogy,” and ultimately emphasize a broad definition of relevance. Teachers attempting to motivate and engage their students make assumptions about relevance based on content connections, thematic connections, or perceived background knowledge. As students engage in more direct inquiry about relevance, teachers create potential for developing relevance strategies that are increasingly reader/student-centered. Dialogic relevance pedagogy accommodates the expansion of each student’s sense of relevance that occurs through reading and supports experiences that students can apply to other texts and contexts.

In this dissertation I develop bridges among transactional reading theory, strategic reading, and inquiry based research projects that highlight alternative constructions of relevance for students. Through narrative inquiry, I bring multiple stories together. Included are stories from my own teaching as well as from observations and collaboration in a colleague’s classroom. Taken together, the individual stories and their relationships provide an account of my experiences exploring the meaning of relevance in a dialogic context.

The study suggests a strong connection between relevance and literacy that calls for a shift in teacher practice. Teachers considering this shift in pedagogy to dialogic relevance recognize students’ ability to discover and explore relevance as an essential literacy skill that gives students more choice in developing relevance relationships. Research papers about memoirs emerged through my study as one invitation for students to develop what John Dewey refers to as “habits” connected to dialogic relevance (Dewey 46).

INTRODUCTION: ARRIVING AT RELEVANCE

This dissertation evolved as I tried to understand and define “relevance” within various educational contexts. While selecting materials to engage students was always a part of my teaching, over time the methods at my disposal did not seem to adequately address “relevance” in the ways that I had personally experienced it or that I hoped my students would experience relevance in the classroom. Relevance, in my experience and in my goals for students, was something to be discovered, not assumed. Upon reflection, I asked questions about my teaching methods and ultimately shifted away from what I now think of as a linear conception of relevance that defined my early teaching.

Relevance was linear in my teaching in the sense that, despite involving some complex relationships, it ultimately represented a straightforward relationship between a student and the text. Perhaps the student had similar life experiences to those represented in the text. For example, students reading Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* might be asked to think about their own experiences of love in order to understand a character and to find relevance in the story. Or, a student from Chicago might be asked to read *The House on Mango Street* in which Sandra Cisneros describes her life in Chicago, with the assumption that it would be relevant. I saw my role as a teacher to influence the relationship between the student and the text – in essence to help students to recognize relevance in the way that it is defined by Webster’s Third New International Dictionary: “bearing upon or properly applying to the matter at hand” (“relevant”). I perceived that the central goal of the English classroom was for a student to recognize the class text as “pertinent” or connected to their lives (“relevant”). The connections that I imagined for my students guided me as a teacher. I saw my role in the classroom as making, or at least revealing, these connections for students.

This type of relevance is commonly explored in English classrooms in the context of decisions about the “relevance of literature.” For instance, Peter Neumeyer suggests in “What is Relevant Literature” that:

One of the most basic problems with which all teachers of literature must struggle is the questions of what, if anything in literature is relevant to students, or, especially, how any literature can be made relevant to some youngsters whose lives seem far removed from belles lettres. (Neumeyer 1)

The approach that Neumeyer identifies for accommodating this issue of relevance is significant. Although he wrote this article in 1969, his assertions were consistent with my own feelings entering the classroom as a teacher. Pedagogy consistent with these ideas in many ways still prevails in Literature classrooms. Neumeyer asserts that suffering and the sense that one is not alone are what make texts relevant for students. Suffering is universal and therefore is also what consistently connects a reader and a text. However, even this view of a relevance connection from student to text, one in which all texts are relevant to all students based on “the grief, the doubt, the injustices,” in fact shows a limited lens for relevance (Neumeyer 1). Within the confines of Neumeyer’s definition of relevance, the role of the teacher is to mediate the relationship between the student and the literature. In other words, a teacher can “make” a text relevant to students by explaining to them how a text, characters, or themes are connected to the students’ lives. Neumeyer also goes on to suggest that great literature shares a relevance connection to “basic human problems” (Neumeyer 1). However, connecting to “basic human problems” is a narrow prism considering the variety of ways that our social, political, and economic identities influence our worldviews and definition of a problem. This view of relevance does not properly accommodate the complexity of relevance, which more accurately takes place in multiple realms at once, from different viewpoints, and from multiple sets of life experiences.

My dissertation inquiry challenges the idea that it is a teacher's role to "make a text relevant." I suggest instead that it is important to acknowledge that the relationship that we have with texts and students is more dynamic than Neumeyer's definition suggests it is. The dynamic nature of relationships in the classroom between the student and a text, the teacher and a text, and the student and a teacher creates an opportunity to explore what I have come to understand and define as dialogic approaches to relevance. Further underscoring the dynamic, non-linear nature of relevance in the classroom is that any potential dialogue about relevance itself takes place within the context of other dialogues, including the dialogues that are happening as multiple readers engage with a text in a classroom that is simultaneously in dialogue with the world outside the classroom. The dialogically relevant relationships that I describe function more like a triangle built among three posts: the text, the student, and the world. Within this triangle, a web develops among the posts through relationships among history, the context of a written text, background knowledge of the reader, experiences of the reader, and the voice of the author. This complex view of relevance allows teachers to reconsider the pedagogy that we use to approach relevance relationships with this dynamic in mind. It allows teachers to foster and to develop students' access to and choices of relevance, with such access and choice being significant to the students' sense of agency in developing a relevance web as a reader. In the non-linear understanding of relevance, each connection is one that a reader chooses to make. In dialogic relevance, individuals *create relevance as a process of reading and relevance connections*. The non-linear approach also provides opportunity not to "find relevance" when we read. Although in linear relevance choice also exists in deciding a text is not relevant, in dialogic relevance, the choices arise through

reading and are made multiple as opposed to relevance already understood at the outset of reading or in one narrowly defined connection.

Approaching relevance as dialogic versus a linear, teacher-centered approach to “make a text relevant” might have similar outcomes in the short term. Both approaches to relevance help students identify the connections between themselves and the text. For example, using youth experiences as a way to connect students to a text might engage a reader in a meaningful relevance relationship with the text. Classroom teachers who engage students with linear relevance connections offer a welcome contrast from a text or teacher-centered classroom in which the text or teacher has all of the knowledge about the “real meaning.” However, it is the long-term considerations of dialogic relevance and the ways that we want this type of literacy to inform our communities outside of the classroom and our students’ interaction with the world that is dissimilar and forces us to reexamine teacher practices related to relevance. With the longer, web-like view of relevance, teachers and students learn to navigate multiple layers of readily apparent relevance and also learn how to assume relevance outside of the linear connections in ways that connect students to the world in new ways through reading. So, while the youth experiences a teacher assumes makes a text relevant for students might in fact be a relevant connection for that student, in a dialogic relevance, that relationship is understood within the inquiry about relevance that has potential to uncover new relevance for the student as well.

This dissertation seeks to describe how teachers can better support students developing dialogic relevance relationships with texts in addition to valuing the ways that they naturally develop those relationships. My dissertation does not intend to provide teachers with classroom practices to start using tomorrow morning. Rather, I seek to tell the story of my

own classroom and the classroom that I observed to share the principles of dialogic relevance pedagogy. These principles shape questions for teachers to consider. The study did not enact these principles through the course of the project rather we hypothesized about the principles to challenge our practice. The end of the story will be more questions, not answers. The project led us to consider the potential of a classroom focus on relevance.

I offer the following descriptions to further clarify the principles. One classroom is a composite, based on my own experiences as a teacher and the observations included later in this dissertation. The other classroom is one in which the teacher is grappling with the meaning of relevance and enacting the questions raised by dialogic relevance pedagogy in ways that suggest the principles argued for in this inquiry.

In the first classroom, the teacher chooses a book to teach, maybe based on a curriculum that is assigned or perhaps chosen with more latitude. And the teacher, before reading a page of the text with the students, begins to think about how the text is connected to the students' lives or actively seeks ways to encourage these connections. The teacher formulates an opinion about why students will connect to the text and might try to make a particular connection that will allow them to connect the text to other texts or other goals. In this classroom, the teacher will likely design activities that focus on the particular aspect of the text. Examples include Chicago, love, teenagers, or perhaps even academic connections like concerns about AP testing. This teacher will also design activities for the whole class to complete together. The students in this classroom have limited freedom or encouragement to engage relevance outside of the teacher's pedagogy.

In the second classroom, relevance is discussed directly with pedagogy specifically framed to support and engage that dialogue. Relevance is also the focus of classroom

conversations once the students are reading a book. Students have multiple opportunities over the course, and across texts taught during the year, to understand how they are already understand their relevance connection to text. The teacher is also explicit about naming those connections, having students discuss and share their relevant connections, and introducing new ways of making connections (specifically, finding relevance in an unknown situation or connecting to a person who appears to have different life experiences in a way that is personally relevant). In this classroom, the teacher has not predetermined the relevance of the text, but builds time and space for students in the classroom to inquire directly into the personal relevance of the text through dialogue.

In fact, this approach to relevance engages relevance in a way that makes greater space for the type of growth described by John Dewey. For this reason, dialogic relevance pedagogy shifts teachers' focus towards the development of what Dewey calls "habits." A "habit" is "the ability to use natural conditions as a means to ends" (Dewey 46). In other words, this refers to the student possesses the ability to accomplish a goal of their own volition, with ease. In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey also describes "dispositions" as a precursor to a habit, "the ability to learn from experience; the power to retain from one experience something which is of avail in coping with the difficulties of a later situation. This means power to modify actions on the basis of results of prior experiences, the power to *develop dispositions*" (Dewey 44). The specific dispositions and habits of dialogic relevance would foster experiences of seeking relevance and assume that for future texts, readers will be able accommodate relevance relationships with fewer apparent connections. The assumption of a relevance habit is not that we are immediately connected as readers in one way to a text, for example through the universal as Neumeyer describes, but rather that there

are multiple ways available to readers to connect to the text. Readers developing these “habits” will also learn about new ways they are connected to the world. Enduring “habits” and “dispositions” of dialogic relevance, given this mode of thinking, allow us to consider not only the immediate relevance connection that we can support a student in making to a text (to aid comprehension and engagement, for example) but also to promote the acquisition of experiences that would allow students to nurture textual relationships with relevance dialogue with future texts as well.

The basis for understanding the habits that dialogic relevance relationships seek to establish, and placing those habits in the realm of literacy and particular ways of reading, relies on Louise Rosenblatt’s transactional reading theory. Rosenblatt, who developed her approach to reading based on her understanding of Dewey’s work, views reading as a relationship moving in both directions between a text and a reader. Through the relationship between the reader and the text, meaning is made (Rosenblatt xix). Since meaning develops through this relationship, the habits of relevance attend to this relationship between the text and the reader. Transactional reading, by clarifying the role of the reader in the transaction, acknowledges the reader’s agency to determine the nature of each transaction in terms of relevance.

For example, Rosenblatt describes a continuum for transactions determined by both what the reader pays attention to and the reader’s response in public or private terms (Rosenblatt xxvii). Dialogic relevance relies on these aspects of transactions because both what the reader chooses to pay attention to and what the reader chooses to make public about that reading is a significant part of the transaction and also is part of what defines the relevance of the transaction.

Jeffrey Wilhelm, a practitioner invested in considering pedagogy associated with Rosenblatt's transactional reading, argues for teachers to make explicit the strategies that good readers are using to develop relationships with texts as transactions (Wilhelm 23). In similar ways, his work is also important in linking conversations about literature to conversations about the act of reading. Wilhelm views his role as a teacher to help students transact with texts with an awareness of "strategies" to read the text. In his collaboration with Tonya Baker and Julie Dube, they call this "strategic reading" (Wilhelm, Baker and Dube 30).

In my view, the strategies that Wilhelm, Baker and Dube discuss are building blocks towards the development of Dewey's habits and dispositions. A student who has experiences of reading, coupled with explicit strategies (shared by the teacher), gains access through these experiences to a set of tools used in transactions. But what is significant is not using the tool itself in isolation but the access to that tool through the expression of a habit in future experiences. The strategies become available and students gain a sense of agency through a decision to utilize them. Jay Robinson explains the importance of remembering these ideas from Dewey saying that as teachers "we are or should be always striving to modify and educate *dispositions* –emotional and intellectual inclinations that under the right conditions just might become habitual" (Robinson 23). This is helpful in understanding the role of strategies as part of habits only when the teacher takes the step not only to demonstrate the strategy, but also to contextualize strategies in a "disposition." For example, making a personal connection to a text through a theme could be categorized as a strategy, but it becomes a part of a "habit" and subsequently a "disposition" when a student sees that as an option available for developing relevance within their personal transaction with the text and

when that student knows the implications for creating the relevance connection in that way as opposed to others. The ability for students to develop dialogic, as opposed to linear, relevance relationships with texts ultimately shifts students' relevance relationship with texts to a "disposition" of seeking relevance and making choices.

However, the pedagogy of dialogic relevance also attempts to build upon the thinking behind "strategic reading" as a way to move towards these habits of relevance. Dialogic relevance pedagogy is built on a foundation suggesting that relevance develops uniquely for individual students; evolves constantly and not consistently across experiences; brings the student into the conversation about relevance's complexity; develops through relationship with text, experiences and background knowledge and engages students in the act of connecting text with not yet known information as a literacy skill. These aspects of relevance pedagogy in the English classroom represent an opportunity to think of relevance dialogically connected to literacy habits and the broader goals of the English classroom. "Strategic reading" encourages us to think of the explicit strategies that are required of a reader who is enacting dialogic relevance within a transaction.

Arguably, dialogic relevance is helpful in addressing the goals of literacy and also the broadly defined goals of the English classroom. In response to the question "What is English Education?" the National Council for Teachers of English in a Conference on English Education Position Statement draws these conclusions that invite a redefinition of relevance pedagogy:

The subject of English [Education] consists of that area of the curriculum responsible for preparing students, at any age, in the effective production and reception of the range of possible textual representations of human experience- in short, to become sophisticated writers and readers, broadly conceived. The ultimate goal of all literacy learning and experience is to foster an understanding of self and others through engagements in the wider world mediated by language. ("CEE Position Statement")

Defining the goals of the English classroom is difficult, as the description suggests. What “textual representations” should be chosen? How can we develop “sophisticated writers and readers”? What does it mean to “foster an understanding of self and others”? What does “engagement in the wider world” look like? In my understanding, each of these questions is connected to relevance. Students fundamentally have to see each aspect of the English classroom as connected to their lives as they develop the capacity to access the full complexity of relevance relationships through language.

The habits that Dewey argues for are achieved through dialogic relevance pedagogy, but the pedagogy also relates to student empowerment and guides an approach that a teacher takes towards her students. Much can be learned about these relationships from Paulo Freire’s work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Freire writes, “Authentic liberation—the process of humanization—is not another deposit to be made in men. Liberation is a praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it” (Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 79). Student praxis leads to change of the student and the world. Freire does not espouse the ideas of habits or dispositions as a goal for education but rather for the liberation possible through education. His pedagogy is built on a foundation that focuses on dialogue and inquiries (Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 86).

These foundational ideas contribute to the ways that teachers should engage with students in dialogic relevance pedagogy. For Freire, what occurs between the student and the text is described as a relationship, but additionally he addresses the power of the student by viewing reading in this way. He writes,

What’s the point of boasting of having read twenty books-twenty books! Really reading involves a kind of relationship with the text, which offers itself to me and to which I give myself and through the fundamental comprehension of which I undergo

the process of becoming a subject. While reading, I'm not just a captive of the mind of the text as if it were simply a product of its author. This is a vitiated form of reading that has nothing to do with thinking or teaching correctly. (Freire 34)

The reader Freire describes is equal to the text. This equality suggests the authority that the student can exercise in the reading. Freire explores a similar dynamic of the teacher and student in the classroom. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, he refers to a “banking model of education” in which the student is expected to accept the deposits from the teacher in a similar way to how he describes having to read as if it was a product of the author (Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 72). Again, the student is necessary for meaning making. For my own sense of relevance, these ideas create a powerful argument for the necessity of dialogue and inquiry in order to avoid a teacher's reification of power dynamics and oppression through the ways that she defines relevance for her students as a deposit.

In discussing the teacher role in the dialogue, Freire raises the critical aspect of inquiry to dialogue. Freire suggests, “[t]hey must abandon the educational goal of deposit-making and replace it with the posing of the problems of human beings in their relations with the world. ‘Problem-posing’ education, responding to the essence of consciousness- *intentionality*- rejects communiqués and embodies communication” (Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 79). The communication of Freire's pedagogy, applied to relevance, puts students at the center of the inquiry about relevance itself and explicitly demonstrates and emphasizes ways that students understand their choices within the dialogue of a relevance relationship with a text through inquiry. This positions students to view the world in a uniquely personal way that also puts the student in a relevance relationship with the world.

Freire's banking model further argues that a teacher who views herself as mediating the linear space between the reader and the text would be attempting unsuccessfully to “make a

text relevant,” in a sense interrupting the conversation between the student and the text to define that relationship. However, in a dialogic relevance, the teacher would demonstrate the variety of relevance relationships available, offer multiple opportunities to engage with texts across a range of relevance relationships, as well as invite students to share their own sense of the possibilities for relevance. When a reader is able to move among the multiple relevance constructions and explores that relevance, a dialogic relevance is at the core and the student has been empowered. For example, students may choose to draw upon background knowledge or may choose to seek information about the author’s life if it is significant to their transaction. These relevance explorations have potential implications for the ways that students can develop future relationships outside of immediate and linear relevance with text.

In the English classroom the relationship of literacy itself, a part of these relationships between students and teachers, has influence over reaching a goal of student empowerment and praxis. Robert Yagelski, in *Literacy Matters: Writing and Reading the Social Self*, describes the significance of the individual and the community through acts of literacy. Specifically, Yagelski explains the ways that individual empowerment and literacy are connected:

Like Freire, I see reading and writing as acts of participation in a wider project of possibility and empowerment, as a way to construct our roles in that project, as a vehicle for participation in the discourses that shape our lives, and as a means of making sense of our lives in the context of others’ lives. Literacy is central to the ongoing struggle for democracy and self-determination. It is a matter of individual empowerment in the way that it can enable one to negotiate the complexities of life; it is empowerment in a broader sense in that literate acts are always inherently social within the political, cultural, and economic contexts within which we lead our individual lives. And literacy represents a kind of joy as well as the joy that comes with using language to structure your world, to give voice to your ideas, to create a space for yourself in an endless stream of discourses, to work toward change, to reflect, to expound- to act. (Yagelski 3)

Yagelski clarifies first that reading and writing influence our ability to make our way in the world. Second, Yagelski states that literacy provides not only access to participate but he defines the quality of that participation for the individual. The acts of reading and writing, both what and how, influence the nature of that participation. It follows that, for our shared future, literacy, and essential literate acts encourage individual participation and that true literacy will benefit our communities and our students' ability to act within the community and to both understand and have agency over their place with the world.

Terry Tollefson, of *Facing History and Ourselves*, echoes the connection between literacy, democratic life, and attending to voices. He writes, "Democracy requires the active engagement of its citizens. Equipping young people with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for civic engagement is central to this task" (Tollefson x). The English classroom and the literacy habits that teachers are charged with supporting are directly connected to the ability to engage in the activities of a citizen. Dialogue and engaging with voices are principles of democracy enacted through what Todd DeStigter calls "citizen teaching" (DeStigter, *Reflections* 294). Our insistence on dialogue, including conversations about relevance, in the classroom contributes to the development of our democratic citizenry. This focus will prevent teachers from making the ultimate goal to teach only strategies independent of the social and political context of the world, the classroom can become a means for students to develop the habits that grow as a result of experiencing and utilizing the habits in meaningful ways but also with a focus on engagement.

A "disposition" of dialogic relevance has potential implications for thinking about the qualities of a disposition of civic engagement. A disposition of this type is connected to a dialogic relevance because a prerequisite for engagement is to see oneself as being connected

and in relation to others. Dialogic relevance creates habits of a more democratic citizenry through attention to literacy. One way to understand this relationship is through what Jay Robinson calls “civil literacy.” Civil Literacy is how we interact with others in our “literate communities” in a way that shows a “willingness to listen” (Robinson 14-15). And he defines literacy in part as “attending to the lives of others” (Robinson 16). Jay Robinson and Patti Stock invoke Freire in “The Politics of Literacy” and consider not only what literacy is but also what it should be. They write, “A literacy that develops learners’ consciousness of personal rights, literacy enacted as a process of search and creation, literacy that results in a learners’ critical presence in the world, offers promises of changing the world even as it changes learners’ ways of being in that world” (Robinson and Stock 272). Essentially they address not only what it means to teach our students to be ‘literate’ but how it is inextricably linked to social change as well.

Dialogic relevance calls for teachers to acknowledge the complex and dynamic relationships between individual students, text and the world to meaningfully address this type of literacy. In the case of dialogic relevance pedagogy, the specific invitation is for a dialogue about relevance and is the alternative to “making a text relevant” for students. This invitation is an inquiry, discussed by Patti Stock. Under a dialogic relevance, rather than interrupting the reader’s interaction with the text, the teacher’s role is to ask questions about the ongoing conversation between a student and a text. Jay Robinson and Patti Stock in “The Politics of Literacy” describe these opportunities for conversation as “openings,” saying, “[i]n a critical pedagogy, the openings students provide enable teachers to create from them places for instruction where students might learn for themselves ‘the deeper meaning of language and the word’” (Robinson and Stock 273). The students create the openings and the

teacher responds with instruction that is similarly an invitation, or inquiry based learning, which begins with a question. In a reading that becomes a relevance inquiry, the student explores the meaning of relevance, chooses the relationship that he or she will have with a text, and sees the ways literacy habits inform his or her own sense of relevance in ways that have meaning in future interactions with texts and outside of texts as well.

Through their work with students, Robinson and Stock embark on a reexamination of one student's work outside of the framework of more traditional notions of assessment that they previously used. They observe:

In the world we inhabit with our students, one is not made literate or taught to become so; one chooses to become literate, in circumstances where choice is made available; one learns how to become literate by using words in situated actions that are rendered personally meaningful by social and intellectual practices that are socially meaningful. No one becomes literate who does not see some opening, however small, toward active participation in a literate world that is part of the reality in which he or she lives. (Robinson and Stock 313)

Here, Robinson and Stock acknowledge the importance of continually remaking a curriculum so that students and teachers can find entry. Dialogic relevance both creates an opening through inquiry but also fosters choice as students engage as readers. Robinson and Stock also emphasize the significance of students' choices within a classroom to their larger literacy engagement and in doing so also demonstrate the connection of relevance inquiries to democratic dispositions.

As I made progress in writing this dissertation, I would reread my writing and realize that I gained further understanding about relevance. This process was the reason that I chose narrative inquiry for my dissertation. Dave Schaafsma and Ruth Vinz describe dissertations of this type as a process of "narratizing." I have chosen to be present in the narrating of events and I am also responsible for crafting the narrative to "situate and reveal" (Schaafsma

et al., *Narrative Inquiry* 3). Teaching, reading, and experiences of everyday life also changed the ways that I thought about what is relevant and made narrative inquiry the best-suited methodology for my dissertation. My perceptions of situations are based on memories and impressions over time. As Schaafsma and Vinz suggest, the methodology of narrative inquiry “includes convincing readers of reliability, sincerity, commitment to fairness, and honesty” (Schaafsma *et al.*, *Narrative Inquiry* 106). I chose narrative inquiry because as Schaafsma and Vinz suggest, this method allows for the kind of uncertainty that characterizes reflective teaching:

We see real teachers struggling to raise issues of consequence for them and their students, narrating with some intensity their *not knowing* and not striving for easy answers. They don’t have the answers, but they are willing to let the narratives provoke them into looking, and (re)searching again as they continue to struggle with how to teach. (Schaafsma *et al.*, *Narrative Inquiry* 12)

Like my teaching experience, this dissertation reflects a struggle to raise “issues of consequence” for teachers and students. There is not a neat and tidy ending to this story. In other words, I tell this story and, at the end, ask the reader to weigh these ideas against the reader’s experiences to see if the story is helpful to define the pedagogy of relevance.

Polkinghorne describes my experience as “narrative knowing,” saying:

The report is retrodictive rather than predictive, that is, it is a retrospective gathering of events into an account that makes the ending reasonable and believable. It is more than a mere chronicling or listing of the events along a time line: it configures the events in such a way that their parts in the whole story become clear. (Polkinghorne 171)

Polkinghorne adds that at the end of a narrative inquiry, we must rely on conclusions that have validity outside of a realm of measurable data. Narrative has a “likely” conclusion that is simultaneously open-ended (Polkinghorne 175-6). Despite an ending that is consistent with Polkinghorne’s definition, my process did ultimately lead to a concrete sense that the

principles of dialogic relevance should be connected to pedagogy in the English classroom. If teachers implement the principles of relevance pedagogy as I am arguing for them here—that is, relevance that is determined through dialogue with the student—then such relevance should lead to revisions in traditional curricula.

In Chapter One and Chapter Two, I introduce my dissertation and tell the story of the evolution of my own interest in relevance, my definition of relevance, the connection I make between dialogue's relationship to relevance, and the limitations of my own teaching. Beginning as a student and moving through my experiences as a teacher, relevance shaped my early learning experiences and emerged as a pervasive aspect of curriculum planning as well as a key feature in pedagogical decision-making. As I tried to connect relevance to my beliefs about literacy and dialogues, some of the same qualities of literacy pedagogy and dialogic curriculum made me ask questions about relevance in these contexts. For example, Patti Stock describes a dialogic curriculum saying that it shares an inquiry focus and engages the competencies of a particular inquiry (Stock 24). Relevance as it connects to literacy and conversations in a classroom has deep connections to habits outside of the classroom in other aspects of students' lives. But Stock also helps clarify the importance of being in dialogue about relevance itself. To understand relevance as a result of this dialogic process of exploring student readers' connections to text enables students to discover relevance in texts that they might have initially thought to be irrelevant. It also enables students to establish relevance more expansively than they may do instinctively.

Chapter Three describes the interactions between relevance and text as a set of habits by exploring transactional reading theory. Louise Rosenblatt's description of the efferent/aesthetic continuum clarifies the different types of transactions that students may

have that empower them to make choices to move along the continuum (Rosenblatt, *The Reader* 27). Dialogic relevance offers a similar opportunity to student readers as it allows them to make choices about the ways that they will develop a relationship with a text along a differently situated relevance continuum. Practitioners who have set out to be transparent about the habits that certain types of readings require served as guides. I began to apply these ideas to try to understand dialogic relevance pedagogy.

Chapter Three also tells the story of my decision to work with Anna Smith¹ (pseudonym), my teacher of choice for the project. Choosing and working with a teacher for the study expanded my sense of relevance and also challenged my definition of dialogic teaching in the literature classroom. As I observed Anna's literacy practices with the questions that I had about relevance, my observations immediately raised questions about dialogic teaching. My process of deciding to study Anna, as well as the methodology, was one that informed my own thinking about the connections of literacy and democracy. This chapter suggests also that Jay Robinson's concept of "civil literacy" is key to developing pedagogy that addresses relevance (Robinson 14-15).

Chapter Four raises questions about how background knowledge can be more dialogic through relevance inquiry. This chapter looks at the challenges to relevance that are raised by pedagogy including: frontloading, pre-reading activities designed to "build background knowledge", and one particular use of research. The current debate, related to the Common Core State Standards, about how much these activities are beneficial to student readers, as opposed to doing too much of the work of reading for students, challenges the ways that teachers should value student transaction connected to background knowledge, thought to be

¹ Anna's name, school, and identifying information have been changed in order to protect her privacy. Additionally, all documents that are linked to her, including her Master's thesis title have been deidentified.

necessary information to comprehend a text. However, dialogic relevance pedagogy offers an alternative way of thinking about how to accommodate the challenges raised in these conversations. In dialogic relevance, background knowledge is not fixed but is also developed within inquiry and attended to for the habits of relevance that can develop through explicit conversations with student readers.

Chapter Five introduces practitioners who use inquiry research alongside the research assignment that Anna gave to her students in order to explore the connection of research and relevance. The research paper provides an opportunity to explore relevance habits when we expand the research to accommodate dialogic relevance. Like classics of literature, the research paper is often considered “old literacy” which focuses on traditional modes of discourse (Richtel). This dissertation suggests that research papers, dialogically taught in conjunction with literature, reveal principles helpful to teachers of relevance itself as an inquiry and ways to provide key “openings” for students. Research within a reading transaction models the type of dialogic relevance that also leads to an understanding of how we are connected to others, which Jay Robinson terms “civil literacy” (Robinson 14-15). This chapter explores the complexity of relevance and research through one student’s response to Anna’s assignment. Ultimately this chapter also helps to make connections between dialogic relevance pedagogy and crafting research papers with literature assignments for the purpose of exploring student’s relevance possibilities.

Chapter Six describes my collaboration with Anna in creating classroom activities for the book *First They Killed My Father*. We worked to bring together some of our thoughts about the assignment to connect research and literature. Together, we tried to think about the difference between giving background knowledge and finding pedagogy that would support

student transactions with text that included research. Since the work was embedded in a real classroom, we also tried to address Anna's responsibilities to her department and the course curriculum map.

Chapter Seven describes the ways that research papers about memoirs, specifically about genocide, also help clarify principles of dialogic relevance and create multiple opportunities for students to negotiate and explore relevance as they interact with and make connections to the text. When teachers attempt to pre-determine relevance by inserting themselves between the student and the text, teachers will ultimately obscure the relevance of the text for the students. This chapter looks closely at Anna's goals. The unfolding understandings gained through the assignment provide the opportunity to clarify the potential of the genre of memoir for students to gain habits related to relevance. Memoirs discussed support teachers and students in seeing the power of finding connections and the variety of connections that are available.

And Chapter Eight focuses on connecting my narrative inquiry and the present. Consistent with narrative inquiry, the journey does not have a finite ending or tidy conclusion. The chapter shares more about the questions that remained unanswered as the project drew to a close. Deborah Meier in *The Power of Their Ideas* describes the philosophy of Central Park East, an alternative and progressive high school in New York City, about relevance.

It's not that we've figured out how to make all our subjects interesting or relevant or our assessment authentic. Although we try. But the place itself is interesting and authentic. I used to say that I learned most of what I knew as a kid in the company of people who were talking 'over my head.' I think that's how human beings naturally learn. Maybe the kids learn more here accidentally than on purpose. There are so many conversations going on. (Meier 14)

Meier's description can also apply to the ways we engage our students in the classroom and the role of the teacher as it relates to relevance. She too speaks about "making relevance" but her description of the school is dialogic. This dissertation is about creating space in the classroom where we purposely use conversations and texts to help students move towards habits of relevance.

CHAPTER ONE: FOUNDATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF RELEVANCE

Conversations about teaching have been an integral part of how I make sense of the challenges and rewards of teaching. I remember how I used to invite my husband, then my boyfriend, to come and hang out with my teaching colleagues for a drink after work on Fridays that marked the end of another, often grueling, week of teaching. No matter what was happening in the outside world, he would leave the gatherings having peered into my teaching world by having heard stories about x student, y situation, or z principal mandate. But peering in didn't seem to ever describe what it was really like or why we had to talk so much and why I would leave these after-work gatherings with greater clarity and the will to return to work on Monday. This dissertation grows out of such a discourse that has taken a number of directions through conversations that began when I was a student and continued when I was a pre-service teacher, teacher, co-teacher and now teacher professional developer.

My inquiry developed through conversations with educational texts, with a colleague who shared her classroom with me, and with professors who have asked many questions and have been important in shaping the ideas set forth in this dissertation. Each of these conversations, when woven together through the difficult task of writing (another dialogue), help me to think about dialogic teaching and learning and provided an opportunity to reflect in meaningful ways on my own practice. As I moved across classrooms and eventually outside the classroom, the dialogues also suggest possible influence on the world outside of the classroom. Dave Schaafsma describes this process in *Eating on the Street* saying, "This larger story, comprised of our collective stories, is an act of imagination that is committed to change, to praxis, to social justice" (Schaafsma 202). The stories that we choose to tell and

that emerge from our lives can reflect this commitment. The stories in my paper reflect my commitment to the power of story and dialogue to affect change.

In the background of the conversations in this paper is my sense that the ways that we teach literacy matter for the more democratic collective community that we imagine and that dialogue is a necessary foundation for classrooms that seek to affect change. In order to affect that change both teachers and students have to contribute their own experiences of the world and what is important through dialogue. Patti Stock describes in *The Dialogic Curriculum* the distinguishing characteristics of this type of literacy curriculum. She writes:

A dialogic curriculum is introduced when teachers invite and enable students to join them in a broadly outlined field of inquiry. A dialogic curriculum is established when students ground the curriculum in topical inquiries- issues, questions, problems- that their prior experiences have prepared them to explore within that field. A dialogic curriculum develops as learners enable one another to enrich and extend the understandings and to improve the competencies with which they entered the field on (sic) inquiry. A dialogic curriculum concludes when learners carry their enriched and extended understandings and their improved competencies back from their inquiries into their home communities. (Stock 24)

Stock's description shows a process of learning that emphasizes relationships and conversations that develop through those relationships. Through her focus on dialogue within the curriculum, texts, and amongst students, she also shows how a teacher can create and remain in dialogue with students and the world by enacting a specific pedagogical approach. Teaching in this way requires foregrounding dialogue. In *Reflections of a Citizen Teacher*, Todd DeStigter defines what he calls a "citizen teacher," which for me illustrates the imperative for teachers to attend to aspects of teaching dialogically. DeStigter describes a "citizen teacher" as having a "kind of complex observational and analytical perspective, when infused with a desire to advance the ideals of democracy, come together in a disposition which I will call that of a 'citizen teacher'" (DeStigter, *Reflections* 12-13). He

also suggests that this type of approach will influence the ways that we teach both establishing habits and the nature of working together in classrooms:

Mostly, though, our participation in fostering democracy occurs when we take up our books and our chalk, when we prepare our lessons and develop curricula, and— most importantly—when we model the democratic habits of critical intelligence and cooperation in our daily encounters with our colleagues and students. (DeStigter, *Reflections* 24)

DeStigter urges us to be aware of the ways that we dialogue with our students and colleagues. Through his definition of citizen teaching he calls for teachers not only to be aware of the power of the dialogue within the context of the classroom, but also to clearly show how that dialogue is significant to a larger democratic goal. Citizen teaching and dialogic curricula are needed to make philosophy about the power of education meet the realities of our classrooms.

However, DeStigter also cautions teachers about the significance of dialogue in an English classroom by challenging the alleged potential of literacy to promote democracy. He says:

Thus, as vital as it is to encourage and value students' voices in our classrooms as an aspect of democratizing education, I also think that citizen teachers must resist the temptation to believe that if we can teach our students to read critically and write compellingly to a variety of audiences and for various purposes, we will soon see an end to unemployment, poverty, neglect and loneliness. Such an expectation is not just unrealistic: it is dangerous, for it enables educators (and the public) to wash their hands of the social conditions that can make a person's ability to read and write relatively inconsequential. (DeStigter, *Reflections* 294)

Recognizing the dangers DeStigter suggests, my inquiry will focus on dialogue both for the ways that it can “democratize education” but also as a way to think about the larger question DeStigter raises: How can we move that which happens in the classroom to the world outside of it with a greater potential for change? When the pedagogy of dialogue moves beyond the context of the literacy classroom, the conversation that emerged for me was to

consider in what ways “relevance” was significant to teachers’ invitations for students’ dialogue and as a call to explicitly connect students to the world beyond the classroom. In other words, what is the role of the teacher in developing students’ sense of relevance? And how does that sense of relevance democratize their relationship with text through specific and dialogic reading habits?

My story about “relevance” begins in small town America, in Canton, Ohio. To be specific, a town made famous as the home of the Football Hall of Fame. I graduated from a high school class of 500 students and left right after graduation for the “big city” of Ann Arbor, Michigan, where I studied English at the University of Michigan. After graduating from college I made a few under-inspired attempts to find gainful employment that ultimately came up empty. When I decided to go to graduate school to work toward an M.A. in English Education, I moved to the real big city, New York City, to attend Teachers College, Columbia University. Notwithstanding the distractions and diversions I encountered – beers, boyfriends, and books (in that order?) – my educational path was, on the surface, a straight and unbroken line from nursery school through graduate school.

There are many possible explanations for the straightforward way that my education has unfolded and for my developing questions about “relevance” as a student/learner/teacher/teacher-educator. One such explanation lies in my own experience as a student. Significantly, I grew up as a white, middle class girl in a home that valued education and with the privilege of access to an education. The school system in my small community also provided educational opportunities that met my needs. My educational pathway was charted in part by the ways schools and my classrooms aligned with my sense of what was relevant to my life. The content was aligned to my expectations (i.e., canonical

texts); moreover, the purpose was connected to a relevant pathway (i.e., college). The learning contributed to the ways that I already understood the world or wanted to understand it. The straightforward nature of this type of relevance worked for me because it matched my teachers' assignments and their implied sense of relevance as well.

My struggle in AP Calculus illustrated the power of this type of relevance alignment. Despite allowing myself to think briefly about why I would need those skills “in life,” I was able to persevere through the course. Study and focus combined with asking the teacher and classmates for help, and my efforts allowed me to earn an A. I didn't achieve college credit given for getting a high score on the AP exam because I did not take it. Yet, my relevance alignment was maintained and I earned a weighted grade to maintain my class rank. The AP track, my teachers, and my parents were all focused on what would come after high school: college. There was little question that a significant purpose for high school was, as a whole or in part, to prepare me for continued education. I chose to engage in work in my classes based only on its connection to this “unknown” future in college. I worked hard to earn high grades so I could maintain my class rank. I maintained my class rank to help get into a college of my choice. Relevance match is a part of what connected me to meaningful learning allowing me to overcome disengagement that might have resulted based on my inability to find a relevant connection outside of this purpose.

However, there were also a few outstanding teachers whom I remember for the ways that their pedagogy aligned with several of my less articulated notions of relevance and invited me to find my own sense of relevance, more dialogically. My AP American history teacher, Mr. F, taught the course content backwards. His approach was closely aligned to Stock's in that his class was guided by inquiries about why history was taught in a particular way. Mr. F

was aware that history classes rarely make it to the 20th Century and I vividly remember learning for the first time about the Vietnam War and Betty Friedan. I connected to his methods and was engaged by what I learned because by being clear about his own vision of relevance, Mr. F framed history itself and all of the course content as relevant. Many of the social issues that we learned about in history were unfamiliar to me in my own life, yet our study began to make these issues visible. I was not yet to a point of recognizing my own relationship to history or its legacies, but I began to explore the complexity of democracy and America's relationship in the world as significant to my own life. He presented openings and invited us to be curious about topics we did not know about. Mr. F's purpose setting changed the way that I engaged with the content of his class as well as the history that we were studying. I attached new meaning to what we were learning in the sense that it was about exposure to something new and important and I saw this learning as relevant because he set up all learning as relevant. It was also a class that established for me another aspect of relevance that had to do with learning for the sake of learning, just because it was part of a set curriculum. Mr. F's class gave me an experience to suggest that an object of study could be engaging, although in this case it was within a teacher-centered area of study. Although he was a linear relevance teacher, there were also opportunities to grow my own sense of relevance, as it was an unfamiliar way of thinking for me.

I also remember Ms. B, who read and commented on the journals we kept in AP English. She used emotional connections and personal experience to cause a relevance shift to the unknown. Ms. B supported my reading of *Heart of Darkness* and replied to journal entries in which I explored connections to my life as a teenager. What made these learning experiences relevant was that she showed interest in my personal connection to literature. She showed

that she cared about my life and my thinking by reading and commenting on specifics within my journal. Ms. B was also the first teacher to be explicit about the idea that each student would have a different reading of any text. She invited us to value our own interpretations. My sense that personal connection and interpretation are aspects of relevance was reinforced in her classroom.

Examples from my own education stimulated my developing sense of relevance.

“Relevance” came to mean a range of connected, overlapping, and shifting concepts. Each focused on an outcome connecting personal experience to relevance: purposeful goal setting towards college, engaging in teacher-defined content, and using personal experience were my earliest experiences with relevance. In schools of education we often discuss, as Bruce Novak and Jeffrey Wilhelm do, the qualities of learning experiences that teachers remember as relevant in order to help us to move from the experiences that we had as students to those that we create as teachers. But using our personal experiences as a starting point for relevance is limiting and any approach to relevance that makes assumptions about our students is also limiting. In *Teaching Literacy for Love and Wisdom*, Bruce Novak describes Jeffrey Wilhelm’s meaningful learning experiences in a way that helps me reflect on the evolution of my own thinking about relevance. Their list shifted my focus from the relevance experienced as a learner (including experiences of relevance alignment, pursuit of inquiries, and connections between personal experiences and literature) to teacher practices. Novak begins to coalesce those experiences of relevance and to suggest a pedagogy, saying:

Jeff then wrote about the teachers and their practices individually and found these common themes: (1) Each had leveled an appropriate and personally directed challenge to Jeff; (2) the teaching was suffused with engagement, excitement, and even joy; (3) the substance of the teaching was highlighted as profoundly important; (4) there was a focus on assisting Jeff to be able to *do* something new, on learning the *how* of some kind of process and discipline; (5) intensely personal possibilities and

horizons were awakened and roused; and (6) there was a forging of a new connection and conversation with the world- to history, to the environment, to the discipline, and to actual applications and accomplishments in the world. (Wilhelm and Novak 156)

Novak and Wilhelm's broad view helped emphasize that developing a sense of relevance is part of the dialogue between the teacher and the student. My experiences with Mr. F's and Ms. B, as well as the elements enumerated by Novak about Wilhelm, show the significance of the methods that we use to connect students to relevance. Taking Novak and Wilhelm a step further, we should ask ourselves how relevance can be made dialogic and how explicit teaching can improve our students' connections to texts, literacy, and their own ability to have dialogues. The significance of the task of relevance pedagogy is complicated because the nature of dialogues is simultaneously individual, collective and connected to the world.

My own sense of relevance, my relationship to learning, and the reality of my students' relationships to learning about the world complicated the classroom. My experiences were guided in large part by the personal. I could see how a text was relevant because it would allow me to accomplish a goal, was connected directly through conversation about my own life, or there were characters that were visibly connected. However, the complicated nature of pedagogy that would attend to "relevance," defined outside of the personal, was clear and necessary to me from the outset of student teaching. Assigned to teach on the upper east side of New York, the students had chosen the alternative high school from a diverse cross section of the city. During student teaching semester, I experienced my first struggle to create a curriculum that would be relevant to students encompassing the world beyond their immediate experiences or feelings. This became important immediately in the sense that I could see how little I knew about my students' lives as a result of working within the framework of relevance I experienced as a student. The relevance that happened in school for

me would not be adequate to meet the relevance needs of my students. As my own worldview expanded and I thought about teaching, my own education's limits were clear. The tools that I had at my disposal were not sufficient to establish the relevance outcomes I had as a student. The tools assumed that students would connect to the content, the skills, or the grades associated with doing the work in class. Curricular content and pedagogical style that had been relevant to me as a student turned out to be irrelevant for my students.

I co-taught with a Social Studies student teacher. My co-teacher and I relied on our own meaningful learning experiences as well as the texts and learning we were doing in graduate school to provide a road map. Our unit was relevant in the ways that we were reading about in graduate school. We blended English skills and Social Studies content to create an immigration unit that culminated in a portfolio and a trip to the Tenement Museum in New York City. We incorporated meaningful assessments in the form of a student-generated portfolio. We used field trips and local connections through our exploration of New York City and created interdisciplinary connections across English and Social Studies. Students had choice in what they would read. But despite all of these aspects of curricular attention to relevance, my memory is that the Tenement Museum trip was optional and only a handful of students came; portfolios were unevenly undertaken; and the unit as a whole was neither very successful nor wholly unsuccessful in meeting the needs of all the students in the classroom. Ruth Vinz in *Composing a Teaching Life* refers to this experience, typical in the transition to becoming a teacher, as the “incongruence between ideal and real” (Vinz 52). I was learning about planning for the ideal, but experiencing the real, and I suspected that this incongruity was the result of my trying to teach things to my students that they saw as irrelevant and the fact that we did not engage them in conversation about relevance. Relevance mismatch

describes when the teacher approaches the class with a particular way of defining relevance that does not meet the needs of the student. Since individual students comprise the class, a relevance match or mismatch will not apply to all the students. Lisa Delpit discusses these challenges in *Other People's Children*, a text that we explored and I was experiencing first-hand.

My student teaching raised questions that continued as I moved to three different schools in my first three years of teaching. I continued to attempt to create relevant assignments for my students; however, each school presented different challenges to my definition of relevance. Specifically, my struggle with relevance as it connected to literature began to add more layers to my questions about pedagogy to support dialogically defined relevance.

My first “real teaching” experience was a start-up for-profit charter school on the South Side of Chicago where the school climate was a work in progress. Moving straight from New York and Teachers College, I brought Nancy Atwell’s writing workshop, described in *In the Middle*, directly to the classroom. I had success with relevance through the self-exploration of students through writing but not as much in engaging them in texts. Each quarter we had a celebration of writing where students could present a piece that they wrote as we sat in a circle and had snacks and juice. I emphasized the value of writing that would help students explore and analyze the meaning of their own experiences in order to create relevance for my students. We focused a great deal on reading memoirs and writing that would have personal meaning. Grammar was taught with the idea that students would incorporate it into their writing because of its immediate use. Writing workshop showed me how this particular pedagogical approach could be adapted to any context and be relevant for students because of the focus not only on the individual experience, but also with the sense that relevance could

be established for students through a focus on genre. I also asked students to read texts in the “service of” our writing workshop. For the memoir unit, for example, we read texts like *Our America* by LeAlan Jones and Lloyd Newman, *boy* by Roald Dahl and *bone black* by bell hooks in order to learn from the author’s craft about students’ own writing. The students were enthusiastic about telling their own stories and learned various literacy skills as well as developed fluency. This approach did seem in some ways to compensate for the ways that race and socio-economic status could influence our relevance dialogues with text and to avoid the “banking” approach that Freire warns about.

But despite our ability to bridge the relevance gap in some ways, the gap was amplified by my own classroom experience in noticeable ways when I taught reading as opposed to writing. The personal connection that was effective in teaching memoir writing did not satisfy the students’ relevance expectations as we read. For example, I chose Margaret Craven’s *I Heard the Owl Call My Name*, which details the story of a young vicar who travels to a Native American village to die. I used it, not because it was the best book for my students to read, but because it was available as a class set and funding and support for new books was not available. Although students were asked to read the book and we discussed it, the personal connection I was able to develop in writing workshop did not translate to the text, the assignments, or to literature connections, nor did the literature inform or enlarge the writing that students were doing. In retrospect I learned that relevance was about more than helping students make personal connections with literature.

My second teaching job was at a Chicago public elementary school with great test scores; therefore, there was an overwhelming drive by the administration and the faculty to keep the scores high. This school was on the North Side of the city in a predominantly Polish

neighborhood. In other words, it was almost the diametric opposite of my first school, both geographically and socio-economically. The 6th, 7th, and 8th graders in my Language Arts classes were required to take 5 assessments per week. Working in such a “score oriented” culture raised different questions about relevance. Instead of a personal connection to reading and writing that developed through a writing workshop model, North Elementary (a pseudonym) emphasized a personal connection to learning through the development of skills that would lead directly to the students’ future academic success. The underlying assumption was that successful test taking was the key element for students. They were to understand that they “had to” score well on the tests for their future and find the classroom learning “relevant” in that context. The atmosphere that this testing preoccupation created in the school for the teachers, and most importantly, for the students, did not allow for circles or the primacy of personal connections to learning. Most of the year was spent with the desks in rows while students were focused on the skills that they would need to “prepare them for high school.” I gave worksheets, assigned five paragraph essays, and created vocabulary lists each week.

In this experience, the students found the skills relevant in the sense that this relevance subsumed other relationships that students might develop with texts. We used the Accelerated Reader program and the class texts we read included *The Scarlet Pimpernel* and *The Trumpeter of Krakow*. Again, the literature that we read was not explored for relevance or much beyond a basic level of comprehension. Students were expected to develop the ability to read more complicated texts, as measured by the computer program, and were achieving very high scores on the standardized tests. While many students resisted this educational method, I learned that some students could be engaged in a quest for skills and

the mechanisms of demonstrating those skills; they did find a personal relevance in the pursuit of achievement as measured through standardized tests. Unfortunately, these students were creating meaning within the confines of a particular definition of relevance that was also limiting in terms of pushing them outside of a personal relevance towards a focus on the ways we trade on our literacy; relationships described by Deborah Brandt in *Literacy in American Lives*. These students would be able to apply to the selective enrollment schools in Chicago and would be able to answer multiple choice test questions in ways that would benefit most of them personally.

As I tried to make sense of the philosophy I had embraced at Teachers College, student teaching, as well as the realities of my first two schools, I was attracted to a job opportunity at Oak High School (a pseudonym) not only for the shift from middle to high school but also the structure of the school. The focus of Oak High School was to develop and ensure college readiness for urban students. As a teacher, I saw the promise of commitment to a college-bound education as the goal for the majority Latino population at Oak. Because I appreciated the small size, the enthusiastic staff members, and the supportive administration, I remained at this school for five years, developing relationships with students and investing in building a strong school culture with my colleagues.

Yet beyond the personal relationships, the dilemmas of relevance continued to permeate my life as a teacher at Oak High School. At Oak High School, I tried to overcome “relevance mismatches” as I recognized that my task to create “life-long learners” had so many complicating factors. This led me to approach relevance in multiple ways within the course. I tried to draw on personal connections through memoirs that were consistent with my experiences with middle school students. But, when I tried to teach both *Catcher in the Rye*

by J.D. Salinger and *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson as class novels, I found that the students could not relate to the characters, the context, or the angst described in either. In contrast, I also used literature circles, and many of the students who chose to read *My Bloody Life* by Ramundo Sanchez found a personal connection. Ramundo Sanchez' memoir tells the story of his own experiences as a gang member in Chicago. These choices alerted me to the significance of teacher choices in literature and ultimately my responsibility as a literature teacher to push notions of personal relevance outside of the outcome based relevance of a direct personal connection to literature. I wanted my students to be able to find their own relevance to any text that they might encounter. Sheridan Blau describes these dispositions broadly, saying:

Performance Literacy, then, refers to that kind of knowledge that enables students to perform as autonomous, engaged readers of difficult literary texts at any level of education. These are readers who, in encounters with difficult texts, demonstrate a particular set of attributes or dispositions that may seem more like character traits than academic or literary skills. (Blau 210)

Some of the most vivid examples I know about the power of literacy and the development of a model of this type of literacy that relates to relevance begin with personal purpose setting. Deborah Brandt in her case studies about literacy in *Literacy in American Lives* discusses an individual who finds relevant connections to literacy through personal need. In her story about Johnny Ames, who learned to read in prison, she illustrated how the program he set up for himself was one that was more complex and more connected to his life than other curriculums to which he would have been exposed. Each of the legal briefs Ames read related to his case and immediately made visible the connection to the larger society that had incarcerated him (Brandt 68-9). This is an example of a relevance disposition. The connection moves beyond the personal to connect the personal to the larger world. Brandt

also discusses the distinction between literacy learning (acquiring new skills), literacy development (learning over time) and literacy opportunity (relationship between social and economic factors that create opportunities) (Brandt 6-7). These aspects of literacy are factors in the development of a disposition of relevance.

In a way, thinking about relevance at Oak High school was not only about seeing these dispositions develop but also relevance established along the lines of Margaret A Gallego and Sandra Hollingsworth's "multiple literacies" (5). Gallego and Hollingsworth help define literacy in their book *What Counts as Literacy* and make not only the connection from classroom to the world clear but show the significant ways that relevance calls for particular reading and writing. Gallego and Hollingsworth define literacy not as a set of skills that a reader should learn but rather with a concept of "...multiple literacies as part of lived experience" (3). These multiple literacies are distinguished as school literacies, community literacies, and personal literacies. School literacies are defined as "the learning of interpretive and communicative processes needed to adapt socially to school and other dominant language contexts, and the use or practice of those processes in order to gain a conceptual understanding of school subjects" (Gallego and Hollingsworth 5). Community literacy is, "the appreciation, understanding, and/or use of interpretive and communicative traditions of culture and community, which sometimes stand as critiques of school literacies" (Gallego and Hollingsworth 5). Finally, "personal literacies- the critical awareness of ways of knowing and believing about self that comes from thoughtful examination of historical or experiential and gender-specific backgrounds in school and community language settings, which sometimes stands as critique of both school literacies and community literacies" (Gallego and Hollingsworth 5). Dialogue about relevance is necessary to describe literacy across these

directions. This is true not only because each of the literacies are intimately connected to meaningful experiences, but also because a connection across them is significant to a full literacy. Gallego and Hollingsworth encourage us to shift our practice to “expand what counts as texts in schools,” “engage in instructional praxis” and “learn about literacy teaching from relational knowing.” Their argument suggests that dialogue, or what they call “relational knowing,” is necessary for teachers to understand and value their students’ “literacies” (Gallego and Hollingsworth, “Conclusion” 293). Which is pedagogically aligned to the principles of dialogic relevance.

Each teaching experience demonstrated the challenges and dimensions of relevance. In the first school I focused on the personal connections between students and text. In the second I focused on preparation for students in the academic pursuits of the future in high school. And in the third I pursued multiple approaches to relevance but still missed the mark. I was very confused about the lack of consistent success for all of my students. For example, these relevance approaches did not meet the needs of the students who were reluctant to share their own stories in class or the students who did not imagine their own future along the trajectory that I assumed for them.

After one of my Teaching of English Methods professors from Teachers College, Dave (later, my dissertation advisor) moved to Chicago and the University of Illinois at Chicago I was able to begin my exploration of the emerging questions about relevance. Open-ended assignments, inquiry assignments, allowed me to pursue my interests and see their value. I read Ted Sizer and thought about *Horace’s School* as one approach to connect schools to needs outside of them, but also experienced a pedagogy that invited me to make connections with the support and experience of a mentor. I recognized the power of inquiry and saw how

this learning would be meaningful for me. I wanted to try to make sense of teaching and recognize the difference between reality and my expectations. I felt that it was important to talk about the students with whom I was working in order to express how they were changing my expectations about what to teach on a daily basis. Therefore, I decided to take a class at University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) and continued to do so through most of my eight years in the classroom.

As a part of my work at UIC, I attempted to conduct action research in order to help me sift through the different notions of relevance through a look at my teaching practice during my last two years in the classroom. I hoped to contribute to what Donald Schön describes as an “epistemology of practice” (49). It was important to me to be able to talk about the thinking behind my teaching and to be able to engage in the ongoing conversation with both the practitioners who shared their experiences, as well as the theorists who influenced my thinking. My goal was to find evidence, to analyze my experiences, and to connect what I was seeing to the philosophies that I had nurtured at Teachers College and UIC (and was in the process of nurturing through my experiences teaching). I wanted to observe my actions and how they were responses to situations and students. Schön says, “our knowing is *in our* action” (Schön 49). Specifically, I wanted to understand what students would find relevant in their English classes.

During the 2005-2006 school year, I set the goal to explore what I labeled the “engaging” aspects of my English classroom. My research proposal was titled “Defining Engagement-Understanding How Students Make Sense of Their Own Learning” and I described the purpose of the study saying:

Completing this study will help me to understand the importance of students’ perception of their engagement with what they are studying. I hope to understand

engagement in a way that will help me to better prepare future classroom experiences... I hope to provide more opportunities for those types of engagement to occur. (Gelb, "Defining")

By the end of the year my notes were scattered and I realized that I had not defined for myself what "engaging" meant. My interest in the relationship between the content and the student was what motivated me. Initially, I understood "engagement" to mean that the learning experience I was sharing with my students was one that I enjoyed teaching. I believed that an engaged student was one who worked diligently during class (maybe they even did homework) and created "quality" work. Engagement was a classroom experience that involved an arbitrary measurement in which the assignments involved skills that would somehow be useful in the future.

I saw the concept of engagement as an intersection of the individual with the "content" of the English classroom in ways that were connected meaningfully to students' lives. Student engagement occurred in my experiences, when students understood the connection between themselves and the content (for example, actually reading a book that they selected in a literature circle). They were engaged when the student could understand the purpose in developing a skill (perhaps learning narrative structure so they could write a memoir). However, these elements that I identified in my students are more accurately aspects of the "participation component of engagement," which has been discussed in the following terms:

Researchers have recently used the term *engagement* to refer to the extent to which students identify with and value schooling outcomes, and participate in academic and non-academic school activities... The participation component of engagement is characterized by factors such as school and class attendance, being prepared for class, completing homework, attending lessons, and being involved in extra curricular sports or hobby clubs. (Willms 8)

As I began to unravel these ideas, I turned to the central tenet of relevance, best described as the power of the personal.

Randy and Katherine Bomer describe gaps in the personal focus on engagement in their book *For a Better World: Reading and Writing for Social Action*. In that work, the Bomers provide a context for the criticism of the type of writing assignments that I gave and also for a general approach that defines relevance simplistically as having students engage in exercises that explore themselves only from a personal perspective. They share the arguments that are made about assignments that seek relevance only in the known. The assignments do not go far enough. Bomer and Bomer describe this, saying,

What we did not see was that student readers and writers were rarely reaching consciously for socially significant ideas in their language and thinking. Though they wrote about things that were privately important to them, they usually did not go the extra step toward connecting their interests to socially significant themes. This blind spot in our teaching slowly became illuminated by insistent critiques from others in the larger conversation about literacy education. (Bomer and Bomer 1)

Bomer and Bomer use these critiques to call into question whether their teaching moved students far enough towards resistance of the dominant discourse of society and outside of the known. They emphasize the ways that literacy classrooms are a microcosm of the larger community. Therefore, they emphasize the importance of developing relevant assignments toward a more socially conscious and consciousness raising pedagogy.

Bomer and Bomer's thinking in *For a Better World* speaks to the limitations of a linear relevance that is defined by the teacher and that limits students to connect only in the ways that they already know. In my confusion, I began to look to other practitioners and my own classroom to try to understand "personal" meaning of relevance and how I could measure my students' connections to the work that we were doing in class, and why it mattered so much to me as a teacher of English. William Ayers, John Dewey and Ted Sizer helped move me towards a specific question about how a teacher's understanding about relevance and its connection to literacy has implications for a more democratic pedagogy. Dialogic relevance

invites teachers to give priority to the development of a particular type of dialogue between student and text that pushes teachers out of the personal and into a role of citizen teaching by modeling democratic “habits.”

William Ayers describes relevance in *Teaching Toward Freedom* through a description of the dynamic relationship between the student and the world. He describes an interconnectedness saying, “We create a space to enact an education linked to the lived lives of students and connected to a larger dynamic world” (Ayers 138). He goes on to describe the relationship with the term “relevance” to mean a connection both to students’ “lived lives” and “wider ways of knowing.” Ayers defines relevance:

Through dialogue, freedom teachers link student experiences and daily lives with deeper and wider ways of knowing, connect students with the world, opening our eyes to the concentric circles of context— social, historical, cultural, economic, spiritual- in which life is lived. Learning engages the five senses with the mind, joins heart and hand and brain... We aim for awareness, conscious that there is always more to know and more to do. (Ayers 158)

Implied in this definition is a strong sense of the learner, a constructivist approach to learning, and pedagogy to support that type of learning. The understanding that “there is always more” is a relevance goal. Finding the way to help students to connect to texts with this understanding is the goal of dialogic relevance because it implies that students’ understanding of their own relationship to the world in a way that they have personally determined.

In a similar way, with implications for a definition of relevance, the experiences that students have within the classroom are inextricably linked to the experiences that they have outside the classroom. Dewey calls this the “continuity of experience.” In *Experience and Education* he states, “every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after” (Dewey, *Experience*

35). When we begin to think about the experiences that come after, we can consider expanding the implications for students and how that expansion connects to engaging in the society that they are a part of in “full” and “free” ways. Dewey writes,

Since education is a social process, and there are many kinds of societies, a criterion for educational criticism and construction implies a *particular* social ideal. The two points selected by which to measure the worth of a form of social life are the extent in which the interests of a group are shared by all its members, and the fullness and freedom with which it interacts with other groups.... A society which makes provision for participation in its good of all its members on equal terms and which secures flexible readjustment of its institutions through interaction of the different forms of associated life is in so far democratic. Such a society must have a type of education which gives individuals a personal interest in social relationships and control, and the habits of mind which secure social changes without introducing disorder. (Dewey 99)

Most importantly, Dewey discusses the ways that individuals are a part of the group, as well as the importance of each participant being closely connected to the group and finding relevance in those relationships.

In order to further define dialogic relevance and to begin to imagine pedagogy, the “wider ways of knowing,” and “continuity of experience” join with what TheodoreSizer describes in *Horace’s School* as a “habit of thoughtfulness.” He suggests this has to do with how we place value on individuals who are able to cope with something new (Sizer 71). He writes that:

Good schools are places where one gets the stuff of knowledge- that is, crudely, “the facts”— where one learns to use that stuff, where one gets into the habit of such use. (Sizer 68)

While “data” is important, it is not necessarily the focus, but rather the practice of what to do with data and the way that it informs our understandings. Sizer refers to these as qualities and abilities that allow the individual to exercise “awareness and logic” (Sizer 72). Sizer also refers to Dewey’s definition and suggests that habits are different from skills (Sizer 74).

A student learns the Bill of Rights, what those constitutional amendments say, precisely, and what they meant at the time of their framing. He learns then to use the Bill of Rights to understand past, present, and even possible situations... An American, he must learn to examine social and civic life in this way, through the lens of personal rights; that is, he must develop the habit of routinely addressing such situations. (Sizer 69)

However, Sizer also makes particular reference to understanding the context of a text and not only a personal connection. There is a personal stake to a broader understanding of one's relationship to "situations." In addition to one's connection, Sizer also describes the usefulness of the learning. He writes:

Learning is not this neat, of course. Few of us learn the facts very well unless we see their utility for us as individuals and unless we practice their use. We need to want to learn them; practicing will cement our grasp of the essential detail. Habit grows from a mixture of conviction ("This is good for me; it is persuasive; I can use this to good advantage"), of practice ("I can do this stuff in my sleep"), and of reinforcement from the community ("The place where I live and study is a place that values this"). (Sizer 69)

As the definition of relevance expands to include the habits that one uses to approach new material and situations, we can rethink aspects of a dialogic curriculum and relevance as well in a way that is connected to citizen teaching. Relevance itself should be seen as desirable, possible and useful in visible ways in our classrooms as it is made into a *habit*.

Ayers, Sizer and Dewey suggest that relevance is layered. Not only through the established connection that one makes to the text, and not only to understand that relationship as it connects to the world, but also to have power over that relationship and to shape that relationship through dialogue. The layers of relevance call for a shift from a pedagogy that develops linear relevance relationships between a reader and a text (i.e., a personal connection). Rather, dialogic relevance opens up under this more broadly defined relevance and suggests that the aim of teachers and students is to develop habits of creating relevance relationships. As an independent reader, in relationship with the text and the community,

each student will experience these relationships in unique ways and will learn to see the choices involved in the type of relevance relationship that they use.

My very linear, almost predetermined course of education, ironically has led me to realize the importance of non-linear relevancy in the teacher-student-text relationship. My experiences as a student, as a teacher, and as a student again have led me to recognize the importance of dialogic relevance. Also the reading over time played a role in considering the ways that relevance is connected with my beliefs about the role of education in empowering individuals to see themselves in relationship with the world with the ability to change it. For all the ways that I understood my own connections with text, over time I could see that the individual nature of relevance is a key part of pedagogy and attending to it will shift teacher practices.

CHAPTER THREE: MOVING TOWARDS DIALOGIC RELEVANCE PEDAGOGY

In my eighth classroom at Oak High School I transferred some of my experiences to the questions I had about relevance. Ironically perhaps, my experiences with assessments and a shift in my school's curriculum led to this change in my thinking not about relevance but about how to approach the pedagogy of relevance. My classroom at Oak was big; it had wonderful windows, was carpeted, and had three whiteboards. There were enough student desks, a teacher desk, reliable technology, file cabinets, and bookshelves filled with books. What stands out as significant for me in this classroom were the ways that two conversations, one dealing with "what students would need to know," and the other dealing with a school-wide objective/assessment oriented conversation, began to coincide with my own questions about the widening scope of relevance.

The school administrators at Oak High School planned to use the PLAN, EXPLORE, and ACT tests to measure student progress over the four years that students attended the school. In theory, this would allow teachers, parents and students to measure and map student progress towards gaining the skill set that they would need in college. The correlation between skills and readiness is described on ACT's website:

ACT's College Readiness Benchmarks are scores on the four individual subject tests (English, mathematics, reading, and science) that indicate whether students are ready to succeed (highly likely to earn a "C" or higher) in specific first-year, credit-bearing college courses in those subject areas. ("2008 ACT College Readiness Report News Release")

At the time that I was involved in the project, ACT's tests were used as a teacher tool to measure student progress towards the application of these standards. "EXPLORE, PLAN, and the ACT measure students' progressive development of knowledge and skills in the same academic areas from grades 8 through 12" ("Explaining what College Readiness Scores

Mean” 1). The assessments were not “high stakes” for students although teachers included the assessment as one student grade over the course of the quarter. As a college prep high school, the purpose was to try to diagnose how teachers could improve students’ scores and to track their progress in acquiring the specific skills required by the ACT. To that end, a design team was formed to break down the standards by grade level, to decide during which quarter each standard would be taught and to create interim assessments for each standard. The assessments would be used as benchmarks each quarter for teachers to measure student progress. As a member of the design team I, along with my partners, spent days working with these assessments. Our process began with careful examination of ACTs. We combed through the standards, read ACTs for frequency of the standards, and read question stems that connected to the standards. Next we researched additional passages, and wrote new “ACT style” questions to correspond to the standards. This incredibly tedious process was foreign to me from my own high school experiences, and my experiences at Teachers College and UIC. It was also unconnected from the daily work of teaching.

However, as a school requirement, aligned to the standards, I needed to list the “Do Now,” “Objectives,” and “Homework” on the board. Not surprisingly, there was an immediate influence on the classroom. The language “students will be able to” was first introduced to me and what came at the end of that phrase was tied directly to tests that students were required to take. During this initial process, I did not ask enough questions. In fact, I was happy to be on the ground floor of the project for a couple of reasons. First, it seemed like an honor to be “chosen”; second, I didn’t want someone else to know more about the process than I did; and third, if I was going to have to give my students an assessment, then I wanted to understand it.

That last teaching year these assessments contributed to what I have come to call the “semi-colon epiphany/dilemma.” Working closely with the assessments, my own learning shifted about the influence of making visible and explicit strategies. As a result of the work on the standardized tests and my grammar study, the semi-colon became part of what I folded into my teaching practice. I did not issue an invitation; however, the students learned to identify the semi-colon’s correct usage in passages through error correction and sample ACT style passages. I could see that according to the scores, the students learned to use the semi-colon, which was a remarkable revelation for me for a number of reasons. If I wanted to use the semi-colon properly, I could; if I taught the semi-colon, students would learn it (at least as measured in this particular way by a particular assessment). And the “skill” of using the semi-colon was embedded within a set of “strategies” that I shared with the students for using them properly and for a very specific application of answering the questions on the test. All fell under the umbrella of a larger goal of doing well on the test for the next step: college success. I also had to carefully consider the goal that we were working towards and work backwards from that goal. I left the classroom with new questions about relevance in the context of the work with assessments and “college readiness.” I began to consider how my learning about the semi-colon could translate into deeper understandings of the “skills” that I associate with relevance.

The semi colon epiphany/dilemma was important for me because it was a transition. The semi-colon shifted me towards the idea that there were lessons that I learned from my experience with the semi-colon that could have some application to elements of citizen teaching. The dialogic goals of teaching are often more abstract and harder to apply in this way, but my teacher-centered more direct approach to teaching the ACT skills was

informative and made me think differently about my curriculum. My temporary solution to coping with the competing goals of teaching towards relevance and teaching ACT skills was to divide the classroom time. The approaches that I used in one part of the class were very distinct from the other part. I relegated the teaching of strategies to one part and the ideas of dispositions to another. I began to think of students' connection to the texts that they were reading and my desire for them to have dialogic experiences with texts, in other words, reading for relevance in these more explicit ways from the other area of the classroom. For example, first, there was an element of transparency about the teachers' view of relevance as well as a contribution on the part of the student. Second, there was a significant role for both the text and the habits used to approach the text that can be more dialogic and deliberate even with democratic goals.

At about this time, my classroom walls started to feel confining. I wanted to be able to relax at night and be able to fall asleep without worrying about students, rather than be exhausted from the number of interactions that I had each day, and filled with anxiety from those interactions. Even as I continued to learn, as I had throughout my eight years in the classroom, I decided to leave the classroom and take a job as a Professional Development consultant for teachers. This meant that as I continued to think about these issues of relevance, I could no longer do action research in my own classroom. If I still wanted to research the issue of relevance I had to find a high school English teacher who was willing to open her classroom and was interested in having a conversation about literacy and pedagogy.

In my mind the teacher whom I would observe and write about would be a "model" of teaching for democracy. I would prove my thesis by demonstrating how good literacy teaching would result in a classroom of good citizens! But, like teaching, and life, most

aspects of this process, including selecting the teacher and deciding what I was looking for, was messy and did not go according to plan. The multiple threads of the stories, classrooms, and theorists created the contradictions that would be the source of my conversations with Anna.

Anna, the teacher who agreed to work with me, and I met through our graduate work at UIC; she had taught for ten years. Because we had a common love of both teaching and swimming, we began discussing teaching methods at the gym. As time passed, we spent more time together, including driving to NCTE one year. Based on our conversations, I felt that I became familiar with her teaching. Like me, Anna loves literature and adventure; we also seemed to define democracy in a similar way. Anna's Masters Thesis, "Pedagogy of Morality and Democracy", (title is changed) contained the following:

For the very notion of democracy includes in it the idea that it is in all people's interest to understand and learn from each other in order to affect the progress of the society rather than to concern themselves solely with maintaining the status quo (Dewey 1916). As Dewey points out, an individual can only realize his or her full capacity when he or she has the chance to respond to greater diversity of stimuli (Dewey 1916). Thus my students and I become freer in our capacities as acting, thinking human beings when we are exposed to each other's diverse opinions, perceptions, and understandings of the world. This freedom to reach one's full capacity as a rational, responsible person is a primary goal of a moral, or democratic, education. For as Dewey writes, "A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (Dewey 1916). (Masters Thesis- "Pedagogy of Morality and Democracy" 4)

Anna's emphasis on this particular definition of democracy spoke to my own beliefs about dialogue. She also emphasizes the transformative nature of her work with students and their ability to dialogue with the world. As I set out to engage with Anna, I planned to see these ideas about dialogue and personal growth in her classroom and to think about how these notions would translate outside of the classroom. I also assumed that the pedagogy, literature, and student work would focus on these notions of dialogue. These expectations were

consistent with the goals Anna's thesis articulates in her reflection, an acknowledgment of her own power and status, and her personal aims as a dialogic teacher.

The answer, I discovered, was that the morality I sought to engender in Stephanie and *all* my students, is the morality of shared ethical and political concerns of all members in a society, regardless of race, socioeconomic status, or level of education. This is the morality, or mindset, of democracy, without which a democracy ceases to be. By the "morality of democracy" I mean not only a particular method of governing individuals in a state or country, but also a way of life which is contingent on people recognizing and being willing to behave in a manner consistent with the connectedness of their own welfare to that of others. That is, in order to sustain a democratic society people must know, and act as though, their interests and desires are in common with their fellow citizens, no matter how disparate their particular racial, ethnic, or socio-economic situations may be. (Masters Thesis- "Pedagogy of Morality and Democracy" 2-3)

The "morality of democracy" that Anna illustrates in her thesis connected clearly to the issues of relevance and democracy that I hoped to explore and validate through my study of her. She described her own interest as the desire for students to recognize their interconnectedness as well as the idea that a "mindset of democracy" foregrounding that connection would guide their decisions.

During Anna's first year at West High School (pseudonym), I visited her classroom. I hoped to understand the ways that she enacted her goals described in her Masters Thesis. The drive to her suburban classroom took me an hour, no matter what traffic was like and I had a "first day of school" feeling each time I went to the school. Immediately after leaving Chicago and heading towards the school I noticed the space. Once inside the enormous school it felt easy to be anonymous, but the security guard recognized me after my first visit. There was a mural by the counselors' offices, which was close to the security office, that represented the diversity of the population, and there were a couple dozen plaques in a case in the same hallways with the National Merit scholars from the prior decade. During one conversation I tried to describe my impressions of West High School to Anna saying, "It's a

very ‘school like’ environment... I don’t know if it is the length of the class periods, or if it’s how big it is.... It felt very ‘school’ to me.” Anna replied, “Yeah it did to me, too, when I first walked in.” Later in the conversation we explored why we felt that way, saying:

Anna: I think that... the size is a lot of it. I really do.

Denise: It’s like your high school?

Anna: ... But at [West High School] there are more clearly defined groups, and the ways they are moving through the halls and the boyfriend/girlfriend stuff. You know, I feel like the kids run the school a little more, you know. In a good way². (Personal Interview. 11 June 2010)

In spite of the enormity of the building, I felt the social nature of West High to be consistent with my experience as a teacher. Students clearly interacted on a variety of engagement levels. For example, the classes were tracked and I observed classes that were considered both “college prep” and “remedial,” but students were working hard or hardly working in both tracks. During one of my visits, a fight broke out outside of Anna’s classroom; at the same time most students were peacefully walking to their next class or standing and watching the fight.

The teachers’ lounge was also familiar. Anna’s colleagues and department chair were friendly and supportive. While relaxing in the lounge, I listened to conversations about students, teaching challenges, and about the shared grade level curriculum. The English teachers might sit with headphones on, but they seemed willing to pull them off to discuss the challenges of teaching pathos, logos, and ethos or to compare student progress in *Lord of the Flies*.

According to the Illinois State Board of Education 2008 Report Card, West High School, located in a close suburb of Chicago, has 1,661 students with a demographic breakdown as

² Transcriptions were based on audio recordings. Where possible exact language was captured. Transcripts did not include vocalized pauses.

follows: 29% White, 2% Black, 64% Hispanic, 3% Asian/Pacific Islander and the remainder is Multi Racial/Ethnic. There is a 14.3% Low Income Rate. Class sizes are small, with an average of 18 students per class. The Prairie State Achievement Examination (PSAE) scores, a test taken by juniors, for reading show that 9.3% are at “Level 1- Academic Warning”, 45.3% “Level 2- Below Standards”, 40.0% “Level 3- Meets Standards” and 5.3% “Level 4- Exceeds Standards.” The Report Card also shows that the school did not make AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress) (“E Report Card”). In a big school, Anna’s classroom is a small piece of the puzzle for students despite all the work that was done structurally to establish the connection between the structures of a school in general to student success in the classroom. The structures included for example a study hall system set up to support struggling students.

Almost immediately I was struck by what I observed in Anna’s classroom. I realized I was going to have to look more deeply to understand how she was enacting her goals as well as how I had to challenge my expectations. An email I wrote after attending one of her classes showed my conflict regarding my choice to observe her. I knew her teaching philosophy in part from our conversations, but my experiences in her classroom were different from my expectation. What I saw was not immediately connected to my questions about relevance and was in conflict with my ideas about dialogue. The content of the classroom, similar to Oak High School, included the ACT College Readiness Standards. This included a daily “do now” that focused on grammar rules. Students had to revise sentences that were up on an overhead projector. The structure of the class had routines embedded to support students’ independent reading as well. Despite my own work of teaching around the standards, I still felt that the work was separate from what Anna articulated as her goal for teaching towards more democratic thinking. I wrote to my Professor, Todd DeStigter:

The work that is being done in the classes I have observed so far is pretty strictly “literary”—without explicit connection to the lives of the students. Although in the reading of [*The Great*] *Gatsby* the other day, a student mentioned that “she heard” that people who are drunk express their true feelings. So, while I mentioned to the teacher that I would love to “be involved” now I’m wondering if I need to be more on the same page philosophically with the teacher and the school structures, or if it is better to challenge myself to dialogue from this space? (DeStigter, “re: hi”)

What I describe as “literary” in this e-mail was pervasive in Anna’s classroom. There was a focus on canonical literature (*The Great Gatsby*) and particular ways of reading that literature that focused on teacher-centered close reading and comprehension as opposed to personally constructed transactions. Many of the questions that I asked myself about the literature taught in the course echoed conversations with new teachers in *Composing a Teaching Life* with Ruth Vinz. She writes:

Many questions come to mind: Why is content (the emphasis on text) the central consideration in some literature curriculums? What assumptions about learning literature are posited by such a long and often internally unrelated list of texts? ... What assumptions underlie the practice of selecting literature prior to knowing the students who will read it? And finally: Who decides what literature to include and exclude on required lists? (Vinz 41)

Sharing the questions Vinz raises, I also knew that Anna struggled to navigate the design of her curriculum in a way that was relevant for her students, included multiple layers, and was not consistently in line with her sense of democracy. She grappled with how to spend class time saying,

My ideology and how that plays out in the classroom is something I do think about.... Teaching for social justice... it’s really hard to enact in an actual classroom where A, you don’t have 100% control of the curriculum. And B there’s the reality of these tests that really are meaningful for my kids... There’s this tension... is that serving the kids the best way? (Personal Interview. 7 April 2011)

My UIC professor, Todd, advised me to become a “fixture there; earn the right through the time... to be more of an informed partner. Don’t feel as though you have to take the place by

storm...” (DeStigter, “re:hi”). This important advice became a guide for the ways that Anna and I discussed literature and many other topics. I chose to work with Anna because of the intersections of our teaching aspirations in the areas of relevance, literacy and democracy. My response to what I saw in her classroom was to keep talking with Anna.

In addition to our shared beliefs about democracy, Anna shared views about pedagogy. I decided that I wanted to continue working with Anna and remain in her classroom. I also decided that I would conduct my study as a narrative inquiry. The stated purpose of my project was now framed as an inquiry “I hope to explore how teachers connect literature and reading skills to skills of reading in other contexts” (Gelb).

D. Jean Clandinin and F. Michael Connelly, describe the inquiry stance in *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research* by describing how, “when narrative inquirers are in the field, they are never there as disembodied recorders of someone else’s experience. They too are having an experience, the experience of the inquiry that entails the experience they set out to explore” (Clandinin and Connelly 81). “In “Composing Storied Ground: Four Generations of Narrative Inquiry”, written by David Schaafsma, Gian S. Pagnucci, Robert M. Wallace, and Patricia Lambert Stock, the authors highlight their own experiences with narrative inquiry and draw out four features of narrative that are also significant to my choice to use narrative methodology. Central to the process and product is that they are contextual and take into account perceptions as well as reality; that they allow transaction with the reader; invite interpretation through everyday language and privilege relationships (Schaafsma *et al.*, “Composing” 302-303). As my relationship with Anna developed, these aspects of the process and product guided our work together as we talked

about the situations in her classroom, often informally and without a sense of the outcome of the inquiry, but with a commitment to learning through our experiences, narratively.

Patti Stock, in *The Dialogic Curriculum*, also articulates another reason that narrative inquiry is the most appropriate for this study. Stock states, “[m]y argument for teacher talk, for the power of anecdote, for the importance of narrative in educational research rests in just these characteristics: in their very occasionality, in their very particularity” (Stock 99). I adapted to the changing nature of the story and the ways that I might follow the particular or occasional as neither of us had a sense of a “right answer” but rather as experienced teachers, we knew how much we could learn from talking about our practice.

As a narrative, my main methods of data collection were interviews, asking for Anna’s perspective on the curriculum planning, implementation, and her assessment of student work through interviews, communicating in writing over email, informal conversations outside of class, and collecting student work. The data for my research text include transcribed interviews, field notes, student work, and teacher emails.

One of the main limitations in the design of this study was my observer role in the classroom. I visited the classroom a limited number of times and was an outsider. In order to increase my reliability, I took field notes that included not only actual descriptions and quotations of the action of the classroom, but also added a layer of comments. These field notes included feelings and questions as well in order to provide a vehicle to be more aware of my own thinking (Merriam 106). Another method I used to improve validity was to have Anna communicate her own perceptions of the class. Her observations added corroboration to the narrative. In order to move from the field text to the research text (story), and to ensure

validity and reliability, I also used “member checks” in order to ensure that Anna felt that the interpretations were plausible (Merriam 204).

Through these conversations with Anna, an important area of inquiry developed about relevance. The narrative developed outside of what happened directly in the class in the sense that we did not enact dialogic relevance pedagogy. Rather through the experience of the story and the time that we spent in conversation, we imagined possibilities. The inquiry began with a focus on literature, the content Anna was teaching, and the connections to her sense of developing a dialogic classroom. Anna said, “Sometimes it is so hard to justify the literature, though. It’s so hard. On the one hand you feel like it is undemocratic not to expose certain segments of the population to the literature. And the other hand what are they getting out of it?” (Personal Interview. 7 April 2011). Later during our conversation Anna goes on to say,

I would not teach half those texts if I had the choice. The kids are not there. It’s at their frustration level. And that’s the thing. Part of me says, oh that’s a horrible thing to say. They should be exposed to the same texts. Is that undemocratic to say oh, you don’t read Shakespeare? *You* can’t handle it or *you* don’t read this. But at the same time I get this stuff I end up reading it all to them. And then what was the point? Did I make their skills any better? Did I help them become better readers? Did they get a genuine love of this text? Is that what my goal was? (Personal Interview. 7 April 2011)

But Anna also notes that there is a shift in her school to a focus on skills and that she sees an influence on her students who did have a reading skill centered course as opposed to those who did not receive that class. A division between thinking about literature and reading is drawn into focus.

Personally, I think all kids should have reading. We only give it to our lowest level kids but they all need it. Those kids come out of the reading program so much better equipped to handle whatever we’re doing.... Even my lower readers have better strategies. (Personal Interview. 11 June 2010)

As an English teacher, Anna often framed questions about her classroom in terms of the literature that she had to teach and the skills of reading (and writing skills) that her students did/ did not have or needed to develop for various reasons (either testing or department generated assessments). The interesting relationship between the skill of reading and the texts chosen is a central part of decision making for the English teacher. In many classrooms, teachers feel the pull between the texts that they are supposed to teach and the students' ability to read them. This tension comes not only when the teacher makes decisions about the texts that they choose but also in the day to day decision making about supporting student readers.

Anna articulated some of the challenges in a conversation that we had at the end of the year. Her self- reflection follows:

Anna: I felt good about what I did this year. Sometimes you finish the year and say what did I do? I actually felt pretty good. I knew what I was doing. I think that I always feel worse when I don't know what my goals are. So, I'm aimlessly presenting them with stuff. I felt better this year. It's funny though with the juniors vs. the seniors. Yeah the seniors were honors kids... where it was more of a literature focus and less skills based and you get more kids coming up to you at the end of the year going you really made me love literature; you made me like reading; you made me like this book or whatever And I'm never going to get that with the juniors the way the curriculum is set up.... We're using literature to get at something else that is not necessarily integral to the literature. So I mean... you really taught me how to use commas, thank you so much. They're not going to get that.

Anna: They know that I cared about them you know, but....

Denise: Do you think that they get that...you're teaching them skills to read the literature?

Anna: I hope so.

Anna: And I will try to say to them and I don't know if they believe me, but this is so that someone else doesn't control your life, you know. You really don't want old rich white guys making all the decisions about your life for you. And I believe that....

Denise: Yeah

Anna: ...That's what's going to happen to them if they aren't able to be involved in their communities and get a job. I don't know.

Anna: Some of them come into junior year not seeing college as a possibility.
(Personal Interview. 11 June 2010)

In this conversation, Anna addresses many of the questions, observations, and challenges that are a reality for English teachers who are struggling to meet the needs of their students and the requirements of their school districts. It also suggests the importance of transparency about how a teacher defines relevance within the context of a classroom dialogue.

Transparency, I realized later, might have been key to allow Anna's students to understand the place of both the skills and the literature with which she invited them to be in dialogue. It also speaks to the tensions that develop around a relevance pedagogy that asks us to develop that relevance in relationship with students' current lives while also acknowledging that we are trying to develop relevance for the future as well.

Embracing the concepts of relevance from Ayers, Dewey andSizer and examining the realities of both my own and Anna's classroom called for adjustments to our pedagogy and attention to how literacy habits might be connected to these ideas about relevance. As a result, I revisited reading some favorite texts in order to try to discover pedagogy that has the potential to address key questions that we were wrestling with about relevance, dialogue and literacy. Narrative inquiry provided the opportunity to explore the space between Anna's goals and the realities of the classroom. And our conversations and Anna's reflection on its challenges are the focus for our consideration of the principles of this pedagogy. In Anna's case, similar to my own experience, our choices were informed in part by the realities of skill-driven instruction and struggling readers. This inspired me, through our conversation, to consider the pedagogy of dialogic relevance.

At the core of this potential relevance pedagogy is Louise Rosenblatt and transactional reading theory. Her work describes the relationship between the text and the reader that shapes the way relevance is relational. Stemming from Rosenblatt's work, Jeffrey Wilhelm's "strategic reading" provides an opportunity to view teaching as providing opportunities for students to have experiences of particular transactions. Students then gain facility in these transactions and apply those strategies, or what Dewey would call "habits," to other readings. Alongside these theorists, and in what might appear to be a parallel path, I had conversations with Anna about the principles of dialogic relevance pedagogy. These principles were not always clear during our conversations but came instead as a reflection when students were no longer working on the assignment and Anna had finished teaching the unit.

Dialogic relevance pedagogy appears to have the potential to foster students' understanding of relevance itself. Essentially, the pedagogy calls for an inquiry into relevance that takes place within a transaction between a student and text and in support of the transaction, through research. The pedagogy requires an inquiry into relevance because throughout the experience of reading a text, relevance relationships can shift as the reader and the text are mediated by the transaction. Relevance is not fixed and can be developed in many ways, each having different motivations as well as habits associated with their co-creation. Relevance can be developed not only through the commonly explored: prior experience, human themes, or direct connection to background knowledge. Instead, dialogic relevance pedagogy attends to the critical aspect of reading to broaden one's perspective coupled with the belief that reading can provide an opportunity to connect to the world. Cris Tovani describes and argues for pedagogy with principles such as "good readers appreciate the real-world payoffs of making connections. They know that background knowledge helps

them relate to characters, visualize, avoid boredom, pay attention to the text, listen to others' responses, read actively, remember information, question the text, and infer answers" (Tovani 77). Dialogic relevance pedagogy seeks to help students use relevance to establish a connection that supports student readers in making the "known" a category of information that is shifting and changing through both reading and research into the previously unknown, or "new" (Tovani 63). Dialogic relevance pedagogy is concerned with the ways that the unknown can be shaped through reading and research in ways that form new relevance for students and create the habit of making choices as readers about the type of relevance that we pursue within our relationship with text.

As my project progressed, I continued to read and revisit the thinkers who shaped my philosophy of teaching for the particular purpose of exploring pedagogy for dialogic relevance and identifying the habits that are used when reading with relevant connections between the reader and text are key goals for the teacher and student readers. The importance of dialogic relevance to both reading and literature is to begin to define the habits one uses as a reader to teach the habits to see oneself as a reader in a relevance dialogue as opposed to a teacher's process to make relevance for students. Another important concept of dialogic relevance is to acknowledge that there are ways that these specific habits can be applied to our relationships with others. Relevance is a goal to achieve for a student reader that implies that they have understood something about the world and their own connection to the world through the transaction. The teacher's goal is to then help students to identify how these types of transactions can occur and also to expand the relevance that is available by modeling for students these habits for future transactions.

In *Literacy and Democracy*, Jay Robinson suggests the importance of what he calls “civic literacy” and “civil literacy.” He makes an important bridge for any discussion about literacy to a larger question about pedagogy to support a definition that creates a dialogic “disposition” for students. Robinson describes civic literacy as participatory saying, “students were engaged in acts of citizenship as they sought to learn about and take actions to ameliorate threats to the community’s immediate environment” (Robinson 12). He goes on to articulate the habits required for the actions of civic literacy:

But civic literacy must extend beyond a language of critique to languages of construction and of possibility, to ways of thinking and speaking that are adequate to the complexities of collective living and problem solving, to modes of listening and of responding that are sensitive to multiple voices and minds of those who have stakes in civic issues and those who are affected by the solutions that are proposed for difficult problems. (Robinson 14)

While the “action” is important in the civic engagement, Robinson also discusses the habits involved in taking the action. The type of literacy Robinson describes invites students to gain the ability to, in a sophisticated way, consider others’ viewpoints and to apply those understandings to problem solving. Robinson also describes literacy habits in his definition of “civil literacy.”

Civil literacy, a complement to civic literacy, has to do with the character of the relations we seek to establish with our words and in our engagements with other members of our literate communities — with the modalities of conversations and contacts. Its essence is a willingness to listen — especially to listen to others whose voices so often go unattended.... (Robinson 14-15)

Literacy habits are dialogic and again, while we typically reserve the language for a different type of learning, he is speaking about a set of competencies that guide the ways that students interact with information and find relevance to that information. I began to see the ability to find relevance as integral in particular for civil literacy habits.

These conversations in my own teaching and with Anna forced me to think seriously about the relationships between literacy and relevance, as well as to ask questions about appropriate pedagogy that might be more aligned to this definition. The pedagogy might also be described as a “dialogic strategic relevance,” borrowing the term “strategic” from Wilhelm, Baker and Dube (30). “Dialogic strategic relevance” is democratizing because it makes transparent the dialogue with text through an acknowledgement of the importance of relevance to both literacy and literature. Dialogic relevance also draws from the work of literacy teachers that emphasize habits as a means of empowering students to enact their own dialogues with texts, but also emphasizes a critical edge that should be a part of dialogic classrooms that invites students to enter these dialogues with attention to the power of their voice among other voices.

Crucial to a concept of dialogic relevance pedagogy is the way that a teacher views the reader and the text. In *making meaning with texts*, Louise Rosenblatt suggests that transactions with texts are characterized by the belief that meaning does not reside in either the text or the reader alone, but that meaning is created in a relationship developed between the reader and text. In her argument, Rosenblatt suggests “meaning is being built up through the back-and-forth relationship between reader and text during a reading event” (Rosenblatt xix). While there are interpretations that are not valid, based on the text, there is not one central meaning of the text, either (Rosenblatt 23-24). The relationship and dialogue that Rosenblatt describes are parts of a reciprocal conversation between the reader and a text.

According to Rosenblatt, one of the key components of the transaction is the belief that the reader will transact differently with the text depending on the purpose of the reading. The reader’s “stance” adjusts along a continuum:

A stance reflects the reader's purpose. The situation, the purpose, and the linguistic-experiential equipment of the reader as well as the signs on the page enter into the transaction and affect the extent to which public and private meanings and associations will be attended to. (Rosenblatt 10)

These moving pieces, what the reader will attend to, fall along what she calls an “efferent-aesthetic continuum” (Rosenblatt, *The Reader* 27). The difference between an efferent and aesthetic reading is the “reader's focus of attention during the reading-event” (Rosenblatt, *The Reader* 23). The efferent stance refers to the gathering of information. By contrast, “[i]n *aesthetic reading, the reader's attention is centered directly on what he is living through during his relationship with that particular text*” (Rosenblatt, *The Reader* 25). Rosenblatt emphasizes that no particular text calls for any one specific type of reading, nor does one have more value than the other. Rosenblatt's transactional reading theory is also critical because not only does she suggest that meaning is made in the interchanges between the reader and the text, but she also suggests that each reader's transaction is equally important and suggests the nature of a dialogic classroom that values such transactions.

Jeffrey Wilhelm responds to the issues Rosenblatt raises in terms of proposing a pedagogy that would make clear to students how to have a transaction. He argues that the teacher's role is to support the transaction, or to coach the student towards the transaction. Wilhelm's pedagogy of “strategic reading” moves teachers away from a teacher-centered approach of teaching literature to one that accommodates concerns about students' ability to read texts. He encourages teachers to be explicit in how they, as experienced readers, read a text. In *You Gotta BE the Book*, Wilhelm shares that in his classroom, one challenge that he encounters regularly is that students are more skilled and have more experience with “efferent” readings; they struggle with the “aesthetic” reading. Recognizing the importance of aesthetic reading, he attempts to scaffold for students the skills that they will need to

engage texts aesthetically (Wilhelm 23). Wilhelm's subsequent collaborative piece, *Strategic Reading*, written with Tanya Baker and Julie Dube, grapples with the nature of developing the skills of aesthetic transactions between students and texts. They consider how to "teach" more skillful aesthetic transactions by asking the question, what do "good readers do"? Wilhelm, Baker and Dube focus on teaching the strategies required for aesthetic transactions through explicit teaching (Wilhelm, Baker and Dube 11). The authors refer to "strategic reading" to encompass this category of pedagogy that focuses on making transparent the ways of reading. The idea that strategies can be made visible was similar to my experience with reading and writing workshop. The "mini-lesson" approach of the workshop model called for explicit teaching and quick application of those strategies by the students in the context of authentic assignments (Atwell 148-154).

In particular to move relevance to the center of student experience ensures that teachers do not privilege a certain type of transaction by structuring *for* students what is relevant in a text or by making the assumption that the text itself is relevant in a certain way. Rosenblatt writes:

My classroom experiences made me realize that essential to the assimilation of such social insights was a personally experienced evocation of the literary work rather than the traditional text-oriented promulgation of an interpretation by a teacher. And I had observed the value of interchange among students as a stimulant to the development of critical and self-critical reading, essential to citizens of democracy. (Rosenblatt, *The Reader* 180)

Rosenblatt suggests the importance of the relationship between student and text, the value of being a part of a community, and the reflection of a reader as an attribute of a citizen.

Wilhelm also suggests that teaching students to read aesthetically, while moving along the efferent-aesthetic continuum, matters in students' lives. He writes, "Literacy is the ability to traffic in meanings, which allows the reader to participate in democratic meaning-making

with others. Without such participation, literacy loses its ethical and democratic edge” (Wilhelm 152). Anna and I began to clarify the intersections and departures of our pedagogies and the ways that we were defining issues. Once we had a basic agreement about the importance of “strategic reading,” it was clearer that even with the focus on supporting students’ transactions, we fell short in key dialogic principles that could make these practices truly “critical” in the sense that we did not consider the ways that the strategies could move students towards dialogue.

Rosenblatt and Wilhelm’s discussion of the importance of the transaction provides a foundation for democracy in the English classroom because every individual transaction is equal through dialogue. The other participants in the community have the opportunity to revise their own transaction as well as to engage in new meaning making as a group. There is a democratic implication to the work of giving students the habits to transact with texts by finding an individual relevance, broadly defined. There is more than one way to define relevance; ideally, students should be able to engage in multiple transactions. Teacher-centered approaches are problematic because they rely on the teacher defining the answer to the question, “how is this relevant?” Or the teacher makes assumptions about what will be relevant for the student by using her own power and authority to assert that something is relevant for students. The teacher may make assumptions about what will be relevant for her students. Rosenblatt and Wilhelm invite us to consider one answer to the question “what do good readers do?” One answer is that they can both identify relevance in their transactions and use relevance to shift their transactions.

I began to identify principles of dialogic relevance pedagogy to consider that include: 1. The teacher supports students’ relevance habits as opposed to “making a text” relevant. 2.

The teacher acknowledges that relevance develops in multiple ways and supports habit development explicitly for dialogic relevance. 3. Space is created to allow students to have multiple relevance relationships and to share them within the classroom community and as they relate to the larger world outside of the classroom 4. Explicit attention is paid to the choices students already make about relevance throughout reading text and students are exposed to different ways that texts can be relevant through direct inquiry of relevance.

CHAPTER FOUR: BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE AND RELEVANCE DIALOGUE

Perhaps most significant for my own teaching and thinking about relevance, and one way that I my teaching approached some of the principles of relevance pedagogy, was my introduction to the nature of background knowledge and its connection to research. The *Boys Town Reading Curriculum* developed and described by Mary E. Curtis and Ann Maria Longo in *When Adolescents Can't Read: Methods and Materials That Work* led me to consider habits of relevance that could be engaged in thinking about background knowledge.

I began to teach “research” because Oak High School adopted the *Boys Town* course. The course was developed for high school students who are reading below grade level and is designed to advance high school student reading skills. The first course, “Foundations in Reading,” focuses on decoding and phonics. “Adventures in Reading,” the second course, centers on fluency. Comprehension is the goal of “Mastery of Meaning” course. The final course, “Explorations” was the portion that my department chair asked me to include in my 10th grade curriculum. The course’s goals were the integration of reading and writing that focused on themes (Brock). The most significant element of the Explorations curriculum is a series of research assignments for teachers to model the ways that students can respond to questions along the continuum of Bloom’s Taxonomy, and to increase students’ reading comprehension by building student background knowledge and to model for them how to ask questions (Curtis and Longo 41). The Explorations program has questions grouped according to point values that increase according to their difficulty. For example a “5 points” might be, “What is a delta?” As the difficulty increased, a “50 point question” might be, “Using data such as temperature, humidity, and frequency of storms, defend the following statement: ‘The weather in the coastal regions of Mississippi, Florida, and Alabama is more wild than

mild” (Curtis and Longo 41-2). The idea behind the program includes the goal to expand background knowledge generally, similar to E. D. Hirsch, independent of a text (Curtis and Long 42). During a summer school course, I experimented with the program and implemented it with only a small amount of tinkering. And as the authors suggest, student work and engagement was notably improved for students in my summer school course for students who failed the course during the year. During the four-hour classes, maybe it was the air conditioning, the ability to use computers, the extra motivation to pass the course to avoid taking it again, or any number of a combination of factors, but students that I had taught during the school year and who had not passed my own class, were engaged in Explorations.

Using the Explorations curriculum represented a transition in my thinking about the connection between reading and research and the ways that research contributes to habits associated with relevance. It proved important in retrospect that I veered from Explorations in ways that could extend my thinking about relevance and the influence of research on reading. I applied the program by creating questions that students would research to connect to texts that we were reading to begin to show how certain information changed their dialogue with text. I also tried to scaffold the process by not trying to teach the research paper once during the year as a big project, but rather to make mini-research assignments throughout the school year. The skills of using quotations, paraphrasing, and taking notes were all consistent in each unit of study and those skills were applied to any information that students researched.

One of my conversations with Anna about *The Great Gatsby* provided a powerful reinforcement of the issue identified by the pedagogies described above. It shows both the

import of background knowledge but also the advantage of it as well. However, it also raises questions for dialogic relevance pedagogy:

Denise: When I reread [*The Great*] *Gatsby*, I reread it because I was coming to your class... I'm reading all this stuff about Eugenics and I was like holy f***. Totally missed that.

Anna: I'm reading [*The Great*] *Gatsby* essays. You can write a 10-page paper about just about any two sentences in that novel. It is unbelievable. It's crazy. It's crazy how much he's tapping into. I f***ing love that novel. It's the only one I'm not tired of teaching.

Denise: It's funny I have some notes. Those first couple of classes when I'm sitting in the back of the room... [Anna] loves this book. She loves this book. (Personal Interview. 7 April 2011)

This snippet reveals the relationship of background knowledge and reading a text but it also shows that Anna finds a great deal about the text relevant; and I recently had a new aspect of the text become relevant. And so as our relevance relationship changed, we recognized our new relationship and understood how to put it in context with our other relevance relationships, as a “habit”.

In this example, until recently, I was not aware of the Eugenics movement, the early 1900's pseudo-science movement that attempted to prove an order and rank to “races”, nor did any teachers explicitly share the history. When I reread the text, I read lines in the text and was informed about a different layer of the text and a relevance I didn't know about. While knowing more about the text allows one to have a different transaction and to make different connections, it raises a question about what this means for the teacher. At the other end of the spectrum, Anna's comment about what she can read in two lines of texts and that she could bring so much into her dialogue with *The Great Gatsby* that she could write a ten page paper about two sentences is also telling. This raises a question for teachers about providing the opportunity for multiple relevance relationships to be a focus. How much does

background knowledge inform a reader's connection from a text to their own lives and what is the dialogic approach to relevance and background knowledge?

Undermining a traditional notion of background knowledge, Novak and Wilhelm connect the literature and the world in a way that informs dialogic relevance. In very compelling ways they attend to the connection between background knowledge pedagogy and the ways that we live in the world in their new text *Teaching for Love and Wisdom*. They discuss background knowledge and frontloading by pointing out the ways that the text can be frontloading for our lives. In their description, background knowledge is dynamic and connected to our real lives as readers.

These activities [frontloading] activate what students already care about and know, so these prior interests and knowledge can be used as resources for learning something new and also put students in situations that open them to personal and social points of contact in what they will read. What we explore in this chapter is how literature itself works in its fundamental nature as frontloading for and a gateway to life... The interconnectedness and interdependence of the self, text, and world is explored and highlighted (Wilhelm and Novak 77)

Their argument about the importance of frontloading for this type of textual engagement is a noteworthy departure with pedagogical implications for both frontloading and building background knowledge (Wilhelm and Novak 91). And while they argue to build an expectation for pleasure, dialogic relevance pedagogy suggests that teachers support student readers in building the expectation for relevance.

Dialogic relevance pedagogy seeks a connection between the student reader, text, background knowledge and relevance reciprocally. Research used in this way would not be outside of the transaction in an isolated academic pursuit, but would be used as a way to bolster the transaction by engaging students' curiosity about relevance. In an article titled "Curiosity," Donald Arnstine challenges teacher practice, and suggests that teachers should

attempt to engage natural curiosity. He points out the pedagogical implications and suggests that the conditions include “want[ing] to find things out.” He suggests that those behaviors, when they are a truly curious endeavor, are not connected to “goal directed behavior.” They have to move beyond trial and error, asking a question, or problem solving (Arnstine 2). He believes that in order for teachers to foster curiosity, teachers have to create “leisure” within the classroom, “a time during a course of study when no specific result must be achieved” (Arnstine 3). He also suggests that when students are engaging fully, they are moving from a process of “problem setting.” Problem setting occurs when things occur that are not expected:

These examples are intended to illustrate the pedagogical value of presenting students with something to be curious about. The teacher may intend that his students acquire certain kinds of knowledge, certain attitudes, or certain skills. To this extent, he may hope that his students become goal-directed. But his primary task, as a teacher, is to provide a cause for such behavior...Curiosity is an event that occurs when certain conditions are met, and it is up to the teacher to provide these conditions.... (Arnstine 5)

Arnstine makes a powerful argument for the ways that curiosity can be harnessed in a classroom. As opposed to trial and error applications for relevance, teachers can invite curiosity about it, can begin to speculate, form questions and reject some answers, and “tinker in a more systematic way” (Arnstine 5). Freire describes a similar impact of inquiry in this way, making an active and literacy based habit of these inquiries that empower students to change the ways that they transact with texts. Freire describes this saying:

For the dialogical, problem-posing teacher-student, the program content of education is neither a gift nor an imposition—bits of information to be deposited in the students—but rather the organized, systematized, and developed ‘re-presentation’ to individuals of the things about which they want to know more. (Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 93)

The role of the teacher as Freire describes it might shift our thinking about texts like *The Great Gatsby*.

Teachers often address background knowledge either by encouraging student readers to access specific background knowledge that they bring to a text or teachers provide access to a text by building background knowledge. P. David Pearson and Dale D. Johnson explain simply saying, “*Comprehension is building bridges between the new and the known*” (Pearson and Johnson 24). Dialogic relevance pedagogy approaches background knowledge not only from the standpoint of comprehension, but assuming that experiences of relevance occur not only when a student reader has background knowledge or when a teacher shares the knowledge (promoting a linear relevance as a bridge instead of a web), but instead when habits are developed that treat background knowledge dynamically as opposed to as a static entity possessed by students. Dialogic relevance pedagogy also suggests inquiry (through researching assignments) is a way to support student readers to understand background knowledge, the myriad connections to relevance within a transaction, and their choices in regards to engaging different aspects of that knowledge. These habits align with a student’s ability for “thinking and speaking that are adequate to the complexities of collective living and problem solving, to modes of listening and of responding that are sensitive to multiple voices.” (Robinson 14).

Much can be learned about the principles dialogic relevance from the focus on background knowledge prevalent in conversations about reading texts, “strategic reading,” as well as contemporary controversies about the Common Core State Standards (“Common Core State Standards Initiative”). One noteworthy example of the ongoing conversation about background knowledge is E.D. Hirsch’s argument in *Cultural Literacy: What Every*

American Needs to Know. Hirsch suggests that teachers should not isolate the teaching of skills and the teaching of facts when teaching reading (Hirsch 133). Rather, he argues that there is a body of information that makes one “culturally literate” and this specific literacy will improve students’ literacy generally (Hirsch xvii). He describes “cultural literacy” saying, “It is the background information, stored in their minds, that enables them to take up a newspaper and read it with an adequate level of comprehension, getting the point, grasping the implications, relating what they read to the unstated context which alone gives meaning to what they read” (Hirsch 2). To address what is then perceived of as a “gap” between a reader and a text, as a result of not having sufficient background knowledge or “cultural literacy,” Hirsch provides a set of information that students in America should have in their minds as readers in order to understand what they read. He sets out to define what knowledge is included (Hirsch xiv). Hirsch’s ideas highlight the problem of “who decides” what knowledge is included in this list. The idea of “cultural literacy” also implies a relationship between the student, the text and the background knowledge that is not foundationally connected to relevance. The relationship is in a sense predetermined. But, Hirsch I believe accurately describes the unfortunate ways that literature classrooms treat knowledge and interpretation where background knowledge appears fixed and something that some possess and others do not yet possess.

A second major pedagogical strand that seeks to address the connection between background knowledge and comprehension is pre-reading. Sheridan Blau in *The Literature Workshop: Teaching Texts and Their Readers* describes a term called “intertextual literacy” (a term he links to Hirsch’s “cultural literacy” in its attempt to describe the relationship of

other knowledge in reading a text) (Blau 79, 206). Blau points to “preparatory reading” as a key to supporting student readers in developing “intertextual literacy”:

But the knowledge differential between sophisticated readers and unsophisticated readers of many texts... is often trivial; and, even when it is substantial and significant, it can often be traversed fairly easily with some minimal amount of preparatory reading in related texts, so that students can acquire through their own reading rather than from their teacher’s the kind of background knowledge that is presupposed for particular canonical texts they are typically assigned in their English classes. In the meantime, teachers need to be particularly sensitive... to the often trivial and accidental nature of the prior knowledge that they themselves depend upon as readers. They need to recognize and unpack such knowledge or otherwise make it available to their students, so that in their teaching they do not exaggerate for themselves or for their students their own virtuosity as interpreters of texts and, by comparisons, the insufficiency of student readers. (Blau 206-7)

The students’ exposure to information the teacher takes for granted is a central aspect of pre-reading. Blau goes on to suggest that our role as teachers is to build student confidence by acknowledging how the teacher’s interpretations develop and also to think of the skills of this type of reading as those we might use when we travel in order to learn more about the place we are visiting (Blau 80, 95). Two pitfalls of this approach to background knowledge are that the reader could be too overly reliant on the teacher for her reading or it could shape a students’ reading based on what the teacher shares as opposed to the student’s relationship with the text (Blau 42). Both of these pitfalls also apply to the influence of background knowledge through pre-reading on students’ relevance connections.

Further investigation of the connection between background knowledge and pre-reading leads teachers to look not only at Blau’s suggestions, but also to Timothy Shanahan, Director of the Center for Literacy at University of Illinois at Chicago. Shanahan posits that pre-reading includes:

[E]xplorations of relevant “prior knowledge,” purpose setting, contextualizing the text, previews of the information in the text, and any advice for the reader (“pay special attention to” or “ignore”). I would not include in pre-reading supports aimed

at building decoding skills, fluency, grammar, or vocabulary. (Shanahan, “Practical Guidance”)

Pre-reading that attends to background knowledge is meant to set up successful student reading by providing access to information. These strategies of accessing knowledge, providing a set of knowledge generally, and preparing the student through pre-reading, while well justified by arguments about the impact of background knowledge and also through my own experiences, are being challenged within the context of the adoption of the Common Core State Standards.

The challenges leveled against these pedagogies in the context of the common core support an argument for dialogic relevance pedagogy. Catherine Gewertz in a 2012 article in *Education Week* places discussions about pre-reading next to the issues teachers face in implementation of the Common Core State Standards. Gewertz writes in “Common Standards Ignite Debate Over Prereading” about the strategies that teachers have developed and implemented to support students before reading a text and the assertion that the standards call for less pre-reading, in favor of a focus on the text. These arguments bring pre-reading’s necessity for developing readers into question. Gewertz describes, “The attacks on— and defenses of— ‘prereading’ are unfolding.... What’s triggering them is educators’ reactions to the standards and two key explanatory resources created by their architects: a set of ‘publishers’ criteria” and videotaped sample lessons” (Gewertz). The interpretation of these documents is that the intent is to move away from pre-reading towards “cold” readings.

Even as the standards’ authors insist that their aim is not to abolish prereading, but to curtail and revamp it, the debates persist, pitting schools of thought on reading instruction against one another. Teachers are asking themselves how to honor the heart of the practice, which is intended to help all students access text from a level playing field, but also to learn from its mistakes. (Gewertz)

Returning to Timothy Shanahan, he addresses the debate about pre-reading by pointing out the long history of pre-reading whose roots can be traced back to author studies, basal readers, schema theory, and “guided reading” (Shanahan). Shanahan aligns with those who suggest that too much pre-reading takes away from the actual reading of a text and gives an example of what he sees as a negative use of pre-reading.

The lessons in which the teacher just tells her students the information from the text as a prior knowledge review are readily observable. Those previews that emphasize information that is irrelevant to figuring out the text may require some examples. I would include the previews that I’ve seen for [*The Old Man and the Sea*]. Kids struggle to appreciate that book, but I promise you no matter how much pre-reading information is offered about deep sea fishing or Joe DiMaggio, students will continue to struggle since that pre-reading information fails to address what is actually hard about that Hemingway classic. (Shanahan, “Practical Guidance”)

I would agree with Shanahan that the pre-reading described is problematic, but not for the issue he points out in the example above. He suggests that for *The Old Man and the Sea*, “the type of background information to provide/ elicit should be much more emotional, psychological, and inside-the-head” (Shanahan, “Practical Guidance”). Basically, he argues, the teacher in the classroom misidentified what information needed to be shared. To cope with this problem of what information to share with student readers, in “Practical Guidance on Pre-Reading Lessons,” he suggests: limiting pre-reading in relation to the text, not revealing information that is in the text, using pre-reading to entice readers, and giving information that is connected to the purpose for reading a text. He also suggests the possibilities afforded from looking backwards from the text to an imagined author as well as thinking about pre-reading as opposed to during reading information. (Shanahan, “Practical Guidance”). He writes, “The image of a teacher so thoughtfully guiding students, never giving away too much, always being there in the nick of time with just the right amount of info is a heroic image. But if you always were to rely on this approach, you may be less

likely to stretch students out...”. And Shanahan summarized these approaches in this way, “So, briefer, more strategic and more responsive pre-reads should be the hallmarks of common core reading lessons.” (Shanahan, “Practical Guidance”). And while he addresses scaffolding for students so that they can read independently, the habits that would develop are not student-centered, still rely on the teacher to decide for a student the knowledge required for the reading of a text, and may not support students in their reading.

It is clear that the debate has raised important questions for practitioners about the impact of pre-reading on transactions and what constitutes effective pre-reading. Two classroom examples reframe the impact of this discussion on relevance pedagogy: Cris Tovani’s story about teaching Tim O’Brien’s “Man at the Well” from *I Read It But Don’t Get It* and a story from two teachers, Jacqueline Glasgow and Allison Baer, about Ishmael Beah’s *A Long Way Gone* in the *English Journal* demonstrate teachers’ attempts to use pre-reading as a way to support students. They also highlight some openings to reconsider thinking about background knowledge and comprehension. Their ideas, pushed further, suggest moving towards relevance as inquiry.

In one response to the question, “What do good readers do?” Cris Tovani argues that students should use background knowledge in order to connect the “new and the known” using explicit strategies (Tovani 63). Tovani encourages students to consciously connect text-to-text, text-to-self, and text-to-world in ways that build towards independence (Tovani 69-70). In her text, *I Read It But I Don’t Get It: Comprehension Strategies for Adolescent Readers*, she writes about teaching students to make connections to background knowledge and to ask questions based on that knowledge. She defines background knowledge as “information a reader has in her head. It is more than memory. It is a storehouse of

knowledge that provides the reader with an assortment of information. Background knowledge is a repository of memories, experiences and facts” (Tovani 64). Tovani posits that making connections between what we read and background knowledge helps readers to “relate to characters,” “visualize,” “avoid boredom,” “pay attention,” “listen to others,” and “read actively” (Tovani 73). Tovani emphasizes that drawing attention to what is familiar to the student is a pedagogical move that supports reading comprehension.

Further delving in to the complexity of the issue of background knowledge, Tovani relates teaching a Tim O’Brien short story and her experience of trying to have her students relate what they know about the Vietnam War. She has a student who feels that he has nothing to contribute to that conversation or any connections to the topics of the story. Tovani then suggests that “he needs to consider other topics related to the piece: the elderly, Asian cultures, cruelty, bullying, are all topics that will help the student who did not connect to the Vietnam War understand, ‘Man at the Well’ better” (Tovani 71). This example demonstrates that background knowledge might help make those connections for comprehension, but as Tovani describes it, this is a linear approach not a dialogic one. The background information is outside of the transaction in these examples and the background information and the text are “fixed” by the teacher through the pedagogy used to teach texts. This is a kind of fixed transaction that pivots on background knowledge as opposed to utilizing it as a central part of a relevance inquiry. By remaining fixed, and with the topics selected by the teacher, the type of relationship that a student reader will have with that text is unnecessarily prescribed. This could prohibit relevance habit development. Students would not form habits because they lack an understanding about how the teacher selected those issues as the topics to access. The process may focus on experiences that in fact might not

represent relevance within the students' transaction. Nor would it be clear from what Tovani described how these processes should take place throughout reading, although she is specifically trying to help her students understand why background knowledge is useful in reading. In some regards, the assignments described also impose a particular view of relevance for reading the text that makes many assumptions.

In many classrooms, teachers discuss the topics that they assume are central to a student's understanding of the unfamiliar topic of the text. Jacqueline Glasgow and Allison Baer in "Lives Beyond Suffering: The Child Soldiers of African Wars" in *English Journal* write compellingly about using Ishmael Beah's story from the memoir *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*. They have many other suggestions for the practical aspects of teaching a book whose topic is largely unfamiliar to students in hopes of expanding their experiences (Glasgow and Baer 74). And in terms of background knowledge, they suggest that there is information that should be in the students' heads before they begin reading:

Since the study of child soldiering is such a new and foreign topic for our students, building background knowledge is essential to the understanding of the geography, culture, and politics of the civil wars in Africa. Ethnic cleansing, religious persecution, and genocide may be foreign concepts for which students need a context before reading *A Long Way Gone* and other works suggested for this unit. (Glasgow and Baer 70)

They recommend showing a film in order "To build background knowledge and capture the hearts and minds of students" (Glasgow and Baer 71). They also include in their pre-reading a map study of Africa:

To build background knowledge and provide a context for the study of child soldiering, provide students with a map of Africa... Also, students should learn that the largest concentration of child soldiers living in the United States are the 8,000 Liberian immigrants living on Staten Island, New York. (Glasgow and Baer 71)

In another example from their classes, also showing the ways that they think about background knowledge, Glasgow and Baer describe the power of the multiple sources in developing perspectives, saying:

This mix of fiction, nonfiction, and memoir provides multiple perspectives on child soldiering from the time of their recruitment, through their brainwashing to fight and kill, to their rehabilitation or reintegration process should they survive the ordeal. (Glasgow and Baer 70)

While this use of multiple perspectives is apparently dialogic, it is actually limiting in the sense that the perspectives are all centered around one topic determined by the teacher. Multiple perspectives can isolate students' building background knowledge to one aspect of the memoirist's identity. In a reading of this memoir, for example, the teachers have guided students into a particular way of reading the main character that might not reflect the students' perspectives or the ways that they connect as readers. They conclude their essay, saying, "Learning about his [Beah's] life and the struggle and survival of other child soldiers will surely transform our students' thinking and empower them to seek other rewarding and inspiring opportunities to learn even more about their world" (Glasgow and Baer 74). While these activities emphasize background knowledge, they add certain elements into the student-text transaction. Teachers limit the potential to empower students to find opportunities because they fail to include space for students to bring their transactions into the dialogue.

These challenges were ever present in my own classroom each time I tried to think about what background knowledge to share with students. I remember collecting all of the historical references for *To Kill a Mockingbird* and trying to describe science fiction before reading *Fahrenheit 451*. But what is significant, and what dialogic relevance pedagogy seeks to address, is how to provide student choice in these relevance possibilities and to present

background knowledge as part of coming to see oneself as connected to text in a relevant way through new understandings.

Returning to Tovani's question about war and the Tim O'Brien story, a student's transaction would be different with specific knowledge about the Vietnam War. There is a difference between making "a" connection and making "the" connections that an author might expect a reader to know. Particularly, if a teacher considers the role of background knowledge in relationship with how close a reader can get to the author's intent. With this consideration, what should be made visible and presented to students as choice within their transaction is also connected to relevance through a deliberate decision connected to their intention to consider author's intent. This too is a part of a transaction and creates an opportunity to reconsider pedagogy for background knowledge within a transaction. Louise Rosenblatt raises significant questions that challenge these practices about author's intent and the role of the reader as meaning maker. Rosenblatt writes:

First and foremost, the priority of the lived- through relationship with the text should be maintained. Anything, any knowledge, that may help us to such participation is to be valued. With that clearly in mind, we can welcome any "background knowledge" that may enhance our ability to validly organize the experience generated by the text (Rosenblatt, *The Reader* 125).

But she also complicates the idea of background knowledge. She explains,

The readers' to-and-fro process of building an interpretation becomes a form of transaction with an author persona sensed through and behind the text. The implied relationship is sometimes even termed 'a contract' with the author. The closer their linguistic-experiential equipment, the more likely the reader's interpretation will fulfill the writer's intention. Sharing at least versions of the same language is so basic that it often is simply assumed. Other positive factors affecting communication are contemporary membership in the same social and cultural group, the same educational level, and membership in the same discourse community... Given such similarities, the reader is more likely to bring to the text the prior knowledge, acquaintance with linguistic and literary conventions and assumptions about social situations required for understanding implications or allusions and noting nuances of tone and thought. (Rosenblatt, *making meaning from text* 21)

Readers' transactions are influenced by the amount of background knowledge in such a way that Rosenblatt seems to suggest that there is privilege that is afforded to certain readers based on that knowledge. Generally, as Tovani, Glasgow and Baer attempted, teachers try to diminish these barriers. Anna's experiences with *The Great Gatsby* are consistent with this interpretation. We discussed:

Anna: There are so many books... like I read [*The Great*] *Gatsby* the first time without all that background knowledge and I got something out of it. Definitely not the same thing I got out of it once I knew more about it.

Denise: What was the context for your first reading? High school?

Anna: No. I actually read it in three different college courses. One professor had a totally socio-historical approach to reading literature. Everything was grounded in history. One was a totally new critical approach like nothing outside the text mattered. And the class was called "Self- Made Men and Ruined Women". It was such a cool class. But everything was like you don't need to know anything about F Scott Fitzgerald.

Denise: Biographical Fallacy

Anna: All right there [in the text]. So in some ways I was taught to privilege that view of literature. That was the philosophical bent of my university. But yeah, I agree though. Obviously you need background knowledge to understand a text, even being thirty-two and reading something.... not just education wise but life experience.... (Personal Interview. 7 April 2011)

The conversation about teaching literacy (connected to literature and reading) is altered significantly with the addition of these ideas from Rosenblatt about the nature of the transaction in respect to background knowledge and how it relates to the author's intent.

However, Rosenblatt goes on to question if the author's intention is significant and by doing so challenges the idea that relevance is linear in a way that has implications for teaching background knowledge. Since each reader is in transaction with a text, and has

unique experiences to bring to the transaction, there is arguably no way for a teacher to establish what will be relevant in the transaction. She writes:

Yet, because each individual's experience is unique, differences due to social, ethnic, educational, and personal factors exist, even with contemporaries. The reading of works written in another period bespeaks an inevitable difference in linguistic, social or cultural context. Here, especially, readers may agree on interpretations without necessarily assuming that their evocations from the text fit the author's intention. (Rosenblatt qtd. in Rosenblatt, *making meaning from text* 21-22)

Separating the author from the text and the purpose of background knowledge from author's intent, we can also see that the individual transaction remains most significant, and the transaction invites us to question background knowledge in the context of a transaction and as a meaningful part of the transaction as opposed to a precursor necessary for the transaction.

Dialogic relevance pedagogy seeks to address democratizing the relationship that students have with texts by supporting the development of habits for use of background knowledge through inquiry and research. Linear relevance assignments tend to derive from a teacher's reading of what students will need as background knowledge to improve comprehension. This is in contrast to relevance dialogue that invites the student to be involved in putting background knowledge in conversation with their reading but also to introduce background knowledge as a part of the conversation. Background knowledge can function dialogically when the text itself informs the readers' decisions. The reader can make decisions in regards to accessing and building these contexts. Dialogic relevance pedagogy supports developing habits where background knowledge itself is considered unfixed and changing. There is potential for research to become a vehicle for thinking about background knowledge and relevance in this way.

Research and background knowledge are already a significant part of the conversation about teaching reading. The authors of *Strategic Reading* describe the role of research and inquiry in developing student readers saying,

If students do not know how to get the ‘stuff’ by accessing their own background experience with life, information, or text, and if they do not know how to do the research and inquiry to procure that experience, then we must assist them in doing it. And we must help them understand that they must learn how to do so, eventually, on their own. (Wilhelm, Baker and Dube 50)

Dialogic relevance pedagogy is also about how research can give students more information to improve comprehension and develop “habits.” It is further concerned with taking special notice of relevance and how research itself is part of a transaction. Tovani also makes note of research when she talks about asking questions of a text but does not describe a connection to finding relevance:

When I want to know something, I find a source that will help me. Sometimes it is a person. Sometimes it is a book. In either case, I initiate the questioning. When one question is answered, another one usually arises. The more I learn, the more sophisticated my questions become. Through questioning, I gain new information and I am better able to apply what I have learned. (Tovani 81)

Next, Tovani moves students to question a text and to realize what answers are outside a text. But that is as far as she takes the strategy, the reader is asked to make connections to knowledge that they already have or to find a source. But the process for how to do this is key to dialogic relevance because it acknowledges how and where and what is involved in decisions about including another source in the transaction and clarifies the influence on the transaction. It also attends to the relationship between background knowledge and the text. Pedagogy about background knowledge can fill the gap Tovani identifies for a reader who does not have the background knowledge and has recognized that the information is not in the text (Tovani 93). Tovani’s suggestion to recognize what information is outside the text is

significant, but in a relevancy transaction, students are also able not only able to identify what isn't in the text, and also to put that information into the dialogue. Picking up here, we would need to be more deliberate in a dialogic relevance pedagogy about how we handle the lack of background knowledge, what to do when information is outside of the text, and to read simultaneously a piece of literature and research something that informs us in our relationship with that text. What are the skills that we use to understand ourselves in the world in those ways? How can we also make sure that in the absence of students having those skills we do not impose our own view of our students' positions in the world and deny them a personal transaction with the text?

Other pedagogical responses to the issues raised from information outside the text challenge the reader within the transaction and acknowledge the connection between background knowledge and connecting to the world. The key considerations for teachers are not to make the connection but to give students the experiences to develop the connections for themselves among the moving pieces in a transaction (including background knowledge, reader, text, world). Two pedagogical moves are described in Catherine Gewertz's article to address the issue of pre-reading pedagogy that overly prescribes the meaning of the text and only address one aspect of issues of background knowledge. One developed by Christiana Stevenson, a teacher in Indianapolis, reverses the order. First, she asks students to read a text. Then students learn the background information and based on their questions the teacher lays out as background knowledge (Gewertz). Doug Lemov, author of *Teach Like a Champion*, developed an additional method, also described by Gewertz. This is a strategy where students read fiction within a cluster of nonfiction simultaneously to build background knowledge. Lemov calls this strategy "embedded nonfiction" (Gewertz). While these strategies move

closer to relevance in the sense that students are transacting in meaningful ways with context, they do not support students in the development of civil literacy habits as the focus remains teacher-centered. But they provide pedagogy supporting a shift from “pre-reading” towards pedagogy supporting a dialogic relevance.

As I had begun to explore with my assignments as a teacher using research with texts, dialogic relevance pedagogy pushes teachers to acknowledge the dynamics of transactions. This includes curiosity, connectedness to the world, research, and the power of an inquiry into relevance itself. A reader with relevance habits understands herself as having agency related to background knowledge and the teacher views the connection to civil literacy. John Dewey’s notion of the “reconstruction of experience” helps us understand how through these different types of transactions/experiences, student readers change (Dewey, *Experience* 87). These experiences with background knowledge and curiosity can impact the students’ future experiences. Dewey explains, “experiences in order to be educative must lead out into an expanding world of subject-matter, a subject-matter of facts or information and of ideas. This condition is satisfied only as the educator views teaching and learning as a continuous process of reconstruction of experience” (Dewey, *Experience* 87). Typically, teachers ask their students to connect their own lives to a text but rarely acknowledge the other part of the transaction whereby the student is also transformed by the text and shifts both her background knowledge and experience as a result of the transaction. Through the transaction they “reconstruct their experience” and create opportunities to find new relevance connections and make choices amongst them. These habits of developing background knowledge and responding to that knowledge by simultaneously making a relevance connection can be a part of a transaction and dialogic relevance pedagogy.

CHAPTER FIVE: WHAT TYPE OF INQUIRY? RESEARCH AND RELEVANCE

I learned that Anna's year was going to culminate in a research paper. I recognized that it was a crucial pathway of our story and that the focus of our conversations would be significant to the particular ways that we were defining the connections between literature and research, dialogue and "habits," and relevance and transactions. Eventually our conversations about research again propelled us towards defining principles of relevance pedagogy and consideration of the ways that research and relevance pedagogy have a role in the continuum of transactions available for our students as readers. My thinking was pushed by the challenges that Ken Macrorie, Bob Fecho and Ernest Morrell level against a traditional research paper. While they advocate for different methodology, they share a commitment to: inquiry-based approaches to research; rethinking the significance of the format of a research paper; and encouraging a critical edge by connecting research to meaningful action.

The assignment that Anna gave and her reflections show that research has potential to provide flexibility to relevance in our transactions as a "habit". For instance, many of her reflections support the idea that students should explore their connection to *The Great Gatsby* through topics that they define themselves. She also reflects the significance in supporting research assignments towards dialogic relevance in modeling and in the focus of reflection. At the outset, what was clear was that Anna intended for students to engage deeply in the content of the literature that they studied, make connections to the wider world, and to learn habits as they worked on their research papers. Through our discussion about the assignment's outcomes, we began to connect relevance to those research goals and additionally to ask questions about the products of research and the process of research. Our

experiences, dialogue with texts written by Macrorie, Fecho and Morell, my classroom observations, a piece of student work, and conversations with each other about the particular assignment given by Anna all helped us identify the challenges in defining the desired relationship between reading and research. Ultimately, exploring these challenges reflected the value of making more complex our definition of relevance and our pedagogical focus on it. We recognized our need, in an effort toward citizen teaching, to expand our definitions and conception of research to be more dialogic and to modify our thinking about research and literature.

Anna's particular assignment, similar to many I had assigned as a teacher, represented approaches that were eventually instructive. Our myriad conversations about student work, the assignments, and theorists began to focus on relevance in a new way. We didn't realize it yet, but our emphasis on relevance and the research paper led us to consider pedagogy to foster the potential of research papers to be the catalyst for democratizing the relationship that students have with texts.

However, before continuing further, I must return to my "roots." The story returns to Canton, Ohio. My parents have used many of their visits to their grandson in Chicago to divest themselves of "stuff" from their basement. During one recent visit, their car was filled with boxes, including my diaries that my mother happily moved from her house into mine. In addition to lots of embarrassing poetry and memorabilia from high school, I found a four-page research paper that I wrote about Dylan Thomas for British Literature entitled, "Dylan Thomas's Use of Difficulty in His Poetry." On one side was the neatly organized packet of note cards with symbols in the corners to indicate the sources, and on the other side my pages of "carefully crafted language" (the teacher noted 12 comma errors on the grading sheet)

describing the way that Dylan Thomas tried to obscure meaning. Finally, I discovered the forgotten grading rubric. The areas Ms. C graded were: Grammar, Essay (including transitions, paraphrasing etc), Preparation, and Form. The comments showed that she was looking at my index cards as she read the paper. The substantive comment on the paper was “I admire your tackling of an extraordinarily complex literary master. The research itself was esoteric it took a great deal of care to comprehend and paraphrase as accurately as you did. This is truly an outstanding effort!” (March 1993). Subsequently, as a teacher, when I thought of research, the systematic approach that I learned and the resulting two-sided folder were the memories that welled up. As a student, I connected to the process, particularly its order and required organization. Yet despite the guided, and perhaps constraining aspects of the process, I also recalled my visits to the library to look at microfilm and felt that that activity was a meaningful learning experience.

Anna’s philosophy about research and her end-of-the-year research assignment echoed some aspects of my own folder experience and the thinking behind the two-sided folder research paper. Anna’s project was complicated because it was mandated across the grade levels and the process was assessed as a part of a grade level exam (students had to identify source cards on a final exam, for example). In a conversation that reflected on the assignment and the research papers, Anna describes a central challenge saying:

Anna: This is the problem I have with this paper. It feels artificial. Like we’re foisting on them what they’re going to have to do because they have such a hard time figuring it out for themselves, that level of critical thinking and because they don’t see literature as representative of real world issues. No matter how relevant, so far anyway, I’ve tried to make *Gatsby* for them, that doesn’t resonate with them. Like even though the themes should. It just doesn’t for them. So talking about the American Dream- old money and new money, they get it in the context of the novel but they don’t necessarily see the application to their own lives. (Personal Interview. 11 June 2010)

Anna's comments show her goal to "make *Gatsby* relevant" was in her view that students would see a connection between the text and their own lives from the theme of the American Dream. Additional challenges emerged and included moving the student beyond the identification of a relevant topic and connecting to the theme defined as relevant; the role of modeling the research process (a difficult and often new genre with multiple steps) as well as modeling for a class an individual relationship with text.

In sharp contrast to my own high school assignment, and as a backdrop to a conversation about inquiry research, is the work of Ken Macrorie, Ernest Morrell and Bob Fecho. These practitioners approach research through critical literacy assignments, using inquiry and dialogue to alter the ways we think about "the personal" to move towards "wider ways of knowing" described by William Ayers (158). Each shared, through experience, ways that research in their classroom created the opportunity to provide students with critical literacy habits and offered an opportunity to engage their students in the exploration of themselves and the world around them, as opposed to an isolated/isolating research experience – in retrospect, exactly like my own two-sided folder assignment. Each also offers a process that sought to use research not as a goal itself, but rather to expand our students' thinking as they begin a research project. Their work also influenced our interpretation of the results of Anna's assignment.

Ken Macrorie pushes practitioners to consider alternative ways to think about the research paper through an exploration connected to self, shifting the content from more traditional research papers. He describes in his book *The I-Search Paper*, the ways that teachers typically emphasize the genre's conventions and how those assignments stifle dialogue.

No one can give other persons knowledge, make them think or become curious. Knowledge must reside in a person or it is not knowledge; and even if that person accumulates it, without use it is—what else could it be?—useless ... Until persons become curious, start thinking, do something with their knowledge, there is no such thing as curiosity, thinking, or use of knowledge. These activities don't exist in the abstract but in individuals, who then become alive. (Macrorie 14)

Macrorie further explains, “Now I realize that other teachers and I have given so many instructions to students about the form and length of papers that we’ve destroyed their natural curiosity. They don’t want to grab books off the shelf and taste them” (Macrorie 55). As Macrorie points out, these are teacher-centered connections. The students do not engage in their own transactions in the assignments described and for some the assignments stifle curiosity and genuine use of skills and a key aspect of relevance pedagogy as well.

Macrorie makes an argument for a different kind of research paper called the “I-Search.” Instead of a typical research paper, I-Search methods require students to learn a different set of skills.

If you wish you can divide your paper into four parts, like this:

1. What I knew (and didn’t know about my topic when I started out).
2. Why I’m Writing This Paper. (Here’s where a real need should show up: the writer demonstrates that the search may make a difference in his life.)
3. The Search (story of the hunt).
4. What I Learned (or didn’t learn. A Search that failed can be as exciting and valuable as one that succeeded). (Macrorie 64)

Completing research in this way, starting from a topic that each individual student cares about, explicitly engages students in understanding the purpose of the skills that they are developing. As researchers, those skills are connected to deepening their understanding of a topic they have chosen. Macrorie also emphasizes the skills involved in the dialogue saying, “The I-Search project is designed to give you lifetime skills in listening, interviewing, reading, quoting, reporting, and writing in a way that others will profit from and enjoy” (Macrorie 71). These central aspects are connected to Anna’s goals for research. The I-

Search paper offers a move towards relevance. Macrorie's I-Search teaches students the skill of defining a topic that is connected to the students' lives, having dialogue with others to make meaning, and to reflect on the skills that they learned. In terms of relevance, through these assignments, students begin to explore relevance through self-exploration. Dialogic relevance pedagogy takes up Macrorie's challenge to rethink the purpose and skills we think of with a traditional research paper. But, the explorations encouraged are limiting as these assignments move from student out to the world and deeply explore one linear relevance connection. This valuable exercise for students can be transferred to dialogic relevance through the opportunity to explore multiple relevance connections in these ways.

Bob Fecho, in *Is This English?: Race, Language, and Culture in the Classroom*, also informs a conversation about dialogue and research and connects his students' inquiry directly to literature. His inquiries highlight the importance of what he calls "threat" and student identity in ways that expand the possibility for relevance connections. Fecho writes about how "some of [his] best friends are theorists" and explains how Louise Rosenblatt influences his teaching (Fecho 45-6). He suggests that transactions can be understood in a wider context, and writes that "a transaction still occurs between a reader and a text; however, the definition of what counts as text has widened considerably. In my conception, anything from which we can make meaning counts as text" (Fecho 45). As others in cultural studies do, Fecho expands the definition of text, Fecho uses inquiry as a way to build a relationship to the wider world and also implies that students will read/transact with the world. His argument supports how the creation of dialogic relevance relationships in the English classroom connects our students to habits across texts.

One chapter of Fecho's book titled "Why are you doing this" raises questions about "threat" and identity. The students explored different community changes in *Romeo and Juliet*, and subsequently completed an inquiry about Crown Heights based on the essential question, "what is change?" In this project all the students were initially exposed to monologues of people from the Lubavitcher Jewish community and the working class Black community who experienced tensions in Crown Heights in 1991 (Fecho 71). Fecho describes his classroom's inquiry saying,

At this point, each group proceeded on its own, devising a plan for further data gathering, distributing responsibility among group members, and increasing their knowledge base. Students accessed websites, found a variety of periodical articles on the subject, worked through books on Caribbean American culture as well as Lubavitcher Jewish culture, discovered pieces on the history of Black and Jewish relations in the United States, and contacts or attempted contact with sources within these communities both in Philadelphia and New York. All this information was compiled into a written report that was submitted for evaluation and a group presentation before a simulated audience of community stakeholders. Begun in mid-October, the work was completed by winter break, with only a self-evaluation to be completed in the new year. (Fecho 76)

In this example, students' research is connected to "increasing [students'] knowledge base" and Fecho acknowledges the ways in which his role in selecting the topic is limiting (Fecho 81). But this critical inquiry explores a relevance connection for students between literature and life focused on an exploration of culture (Fecho 86). This pedagogical move, when compared with Macrorie's, shifts this inquiry out of a linear relevance recommended by Macrorie from the reader to world by inviting a direct inquiry into the real world connected to questions raised in literature. Fecho's expansion of "text" allows him to teach students the "habits," through experience, of putting multiple texts into dialogue with each other and to research a topic that is unfamiliar, but relevant (culture). His inquiry is also dialogically relevant in the sense that understanding culture will invite multiple relevance relationships.

Fecho's belief in transactions, the importance of valuing student culture as well as providing access and challenge to the dominant culture, and the ways that students should be empowered to write themselves into the world create these relevance connections.

Beyond taking one out of one's comfort zone, Fecho talks about the importance of the theorists whom he values in making the decision to directly explore issues of race through inquiry in what he calls an element of "threat". He describes the purpose of his specific research, critical inquiry, in these terms:

It is my belief that a classroom geared to support inquiry and critique, when it is functioning well, teeters on the fulcrum of threat. There is no avoiding that. The nature of the work, coupled with the prior experiences of all stakeholders, creates varying degrees of threat within us all, individually and collectively. I could call this feeling discomfort or some other term that is less 'hot button' in nature. But in my mind, to do so is to devalue the importance of the emotion and therefore relegate it to some educational backburner. (Fecho 87)

He writes about how threat, "in this case literacy events in which one's sense of reality, belief and/or identity feels imperiled" can emerge from "learning to perceive social and political contradictions" and how that inquiry can help students to move beyond the threat (Fecho 72; 74). The aspect of "threat" may in fact signal relevance as the issues are so connected to our lives. Further, when he connects this learning to students' identities he also makes an argument about how such an inquiry is relevant. He writes:

When we ask students to make meaning of a story through either reading or writing, we are really asking them to make meaning of themselves in relation to that story and ultimately to the world they live in. They are constructing identity. The more complex the dialogue, the more complex the identities and the individual's conception of the world with which those identities transact. (Fecho 109)

From these inquiries, dialogic relevance pedagogy has to account for the ways that our social, political and economic realities are immediately relevant. The pedagogy encourages students to develop habits of incorporating those realities into their reading of texts for relevance.

Fecho clarifies the significance of this both to our assignments and also the impact on our students' identities through the experiences of the classroom. However, an additional component of student choice concerning relevance, as opposed to an inquiry into the "threat" itself, would allow student choice to be more available by placing the "threat" among other relevance relationships. While the argument that "threat" is an important aspect of relevance is clear, "threat" should not be the only consideration for teachers interested in dialogic relevance pedagogy or for student readers as a focus within an inquiry.

Ernest Morrell in his book *Critical Literacy and Urban Youth: Pedagogies of Access, Dissent, and Liberation* presents another approach to inquiry, research, and indirectly relevance. Morrell argues that teachers should not only teach students to be able to understand the world but also to "rewrite" the world, shifting the process and skills that we consider relevant to research. His argument is connected to a set of skills that would be employed by an "engaged citizen" (Morrell 115). As a practitioner of critical literacy he seeks to provide students with tools to counter unequal power distribution and social inequality. To accomplish this, he argues for the power of writing for this world and argues for research that results in a product he calls "critical text production" (Morrell 115). These texts are meant to model the type of texts that students will need to be able to produce as citizens. Morrell also argues that there is a great deal of power in students' recognition that writing is a tool for social change (Morrell 134). Specifically, Morrell observes:

There is little argument that members of our most disadvantaged populations need to acquire dominant literacies in order to participate fully in economic and civic life in the new world order.... Many scholars, however, who hail from the multicultural and critical traditions, are justifiably concerned with the unintended consequences of an exclusive focus on a narrowly defined and conceived dominant literacy agenda. (Morrell 3)

In addition to Morrell's call for our attention towards the content's relationship to hegemonic discourse, he also invites us to think about the literacy skills that we engage within our classes as they differ from those our students might naturally effectively employ. He writes:

This sort of youth-initiated pedagogy, however, requires the development and use of conceptual and technical tools that are not acquired naturally through indigenous cultural practices. Even young people who possess "critical instincts" will need to learn those essential literacy skills that enable them to powerfully navigate socially sanctioned language systems as they also attempt to speak the truth to power. In short, there is no model of critical literacy praxis that can evade a critical literacy education. (Morrell 7)

Morrell also provides his readers with the elements of those critical texts from his reading of Freire and Macedo. This suggests the influence of empowering students to respond in certain ways without the research paper's typical academic formality.

1. *Historicity*. Critical composition pedagogy must begin with students' experiences as citizens of the word. 2. *Problem-posing*. A critical composition pedagogy must embrace, as its curriculum, the real world problems and struggles of marginalized people in the world. 3. *Dialogic*. A critical composition pedagogy must entail authentic humanizing interactions with people in the world. 4. *Emancipatory*. A critical composition pedagogy must confront individual alienation and social injustice and have as its project liberation from oppressive realities. 5. *Praxis*. A critical composition must be about action and reflection upon that action. (Morrell 116)

Morrell's work is critical for making explicit the ways that "critical composition" is a central factor of relevance. He gives essential insight in to the pedagogy that can be used to engage students in this type of relevant dialogue. Morrell's pedagogy speaks directly as a reminder that inquiries into relevance have potential for creating habits and tools for change. His suggestions also highlight the challenges I encountered in my own classroom as well as in Anna's classroom. While philosophically aligned with these ideas, the reality of how they fit into pedagogy and our questions about dialogic relevance required further exploration.

Anna's research assignment presented an opportunity to consider the questions raised by Macrorie, Fecho and Morrell about how inquiry connects literature, research, and relevance.

Anna attempted to use research papers to connect students to the themes of the literature that they read throughout the year. Looking closely at the work shows us some of the barriers to relevance inadvertently built into her assignment. For example, she inserted relevance; she provided a model that had similar limitations to her students' final project in terms of relevance; and students applied relevance strategies without naming them (connecting to the experience, free writing about a connection, looking at content as opposed to theme, focusing on the mechanics of the paper). Shifting to an inquiry is significant, but Anna's experiences and our conversations suggested that it is also important to look at the focus of the inquiry. Interestingly, our own inquiry into the assignment considered the pedagogical shifts that might be needed to deepen students' ability to transact in a more dialogic way with relevance in the study of literature.

As I sat on the side or in the back of the room, students would politely hand me a copy of whatever paperwork Anna handed out. I was handed the student assignment summary and two supporting documents for the research paper. The research assignment was introduced in this way: "The topics are issues present in the United States today, and the Central Questions are those ideas explored via the literature throughout the year" (see Figure 1). The topics and questions were representative of teacher-generated connections to literature that the students read.

Figure 1: “English III College Prep- Developing an I-Search Question”

List of Contemporary Topics:	List of Central Questions:
Education No Child Left Behind Technology in the Classroom Online Learning High School Dropouts Public vs. Private Schools Illiteracy in America Standardized Testing (SAT, ACT, etc.)	Q1- What is Truth? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the world black and white, or gray? • How much does truth depend on perspective? • How much control do we have over one another? • What are the benefits of belonging to a group vs. maintaining one’s individuality? • What process do people go through to discover the purpose for life, and what elements create that meaning?
Teens The Changing American Family Sex, Violence, and Drugs in the Media Divorce Title IX	Q2- What is Freedom? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the trade-offs of assimilating or retaining one’s culture? • How has the US fulfilled its promise of ‘freedom as its culture has diversified? • What methods does the government use to control people’s freedom?” • “What are the benefits/consequences of non-conformity?”
Health Surrogate Motherhood HIV/ AIDS STDs Disaster Response (Earthquakes in Haiti, etc.) Responses to Terminal Illness Obesity Epidemic	Q3- What is the American Dream? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is an American? • How or why might people’s dreams be different? • For whom is the dream accessible, and why? Does America offer equal opportunity for all to achieve the dream? What obstacles can stand in the way of one’s dream? • What is progress? What is sacrificed in the name of progress or for the dream? • Could one’s dream change as a result of one’s life experience? • Could the American Dream be more complex than early immigrants originally thought? • Is the dream idealistic and/or unrealistic?
Politics Health Care Reform Chicago Housing Authority Chicago handgun law Second Amendment Gun Rights American’s Prison System Gay Rights Nuclear Proliferation Death Penalty Global Warming	
Technology Technology in the Workplace NASA Technology and Laziness Social Networking Sites. . .	

These open-ended questions seem to suggest inquiry invitations. As discussed earlier, the themes of the American Dream, Freedom and Truth are defined along narrow lines of relevance stemming from the class texts and are teacher-defined topics that are further defined through the questions that are suggested. It is not surprising that Anna described this research paper as “artificial.” Through our conversation she identified the source of this disconnect. She describes this saying:

Anna: I feel like the literature connection is so forced and not genuine to what we are really doing.... the skills that we’re really worried about.

Denise: So, because your focus is skills, the connections are going to be artificial.

Anna: Yeah. The paper doesn’t grow out of the literature, it is added onto the end. It’s like here’s this theme about the American Dream and now you’re connecting divorce to American Dream and *Gatsby* to the American Dream. Not like what did *Gatsby* make you want to research, like make you want to look into the 1920’s...

Denise: Do you wonder about that paper?

Anna: That would be a better paper. That would be a more genuine connection to the literature, but that’s not how our I-Search is structured. You know? That makes more sense to me. We did that more when we read *Fallen Angels* by Walter Dean Myers. Had them doing research about Vietnam, research about segregation... the black protagonist. That makes more sense.

Denise: Yeah.

Anna: And I don’t mind doing the research, what’s your question, what do you want to know about? Kind of genuine inquiry based papers great, but then forcing them to connect to the literature’s weird- it doesn’t grow out of the literature at all.

Denise: Not a goal you have.

Anna: Not really. We’re telling them the theme to focus on, furthermore. This is our theme the American Dream.... (Personal Interview. 7 April 2011)

By assuming certain themes of the text, the students are sidestepping their own transaction and pursuit of research in connection to that theme. Anna also addresses a relevance that may

exist in gaining more background knowledge and connections to a topic in literature as relevant.

In addition to the teacher created framework for understanding relevance, Anna put structures in place to support students in developing their “I-Search Questions.”

Figure 2: “Examples of how to develop I-Search questions”

Contemporary Topic	+	Central Question	=	Research Question
The Changing American Family		How or why might people’s American dreams be different?		How might living in a nontraditional family affect a person’s understanding of the American dream?
Overseas Job Outsourcing		For whom is the dream accessible and why? Does America offer equal opportunity for all to achieve the dream? What obstacles can stand in the way of one’s dream?		Whose access to the American dream has been most limited by outsourcing of jobs overseas?

The structure Anna provided for her students to use as they worked on their paper is significant in understanding the direction our conversations took. Although the templates are helpful in the sense that she is supporting struggling writers with structure for the thesis statement, it is a hindrance to relevance development and some of the connections that Anna values. The contemporary issue, similar to the central theme, does not emerge out of a transaction. The shift in ways that a dialogic relevance assignment could be aimed at

supporting the steps of a dialogic transaction with the text emerged through our discussion of student work and the outcomes of the assignment.

An additional reality of the assignment was that all of the junior level teachers assigned an “I-Search” paper. The format was modified from Macrorie’s meaning. Anna explained that she was not familiar with Macrorie’s text. Despite this, each teacher in her department assigned a research project, adapted it to meet the needs of their individual classroom, and it included a metacognitive aspect connected to I-Searching. She describes the use of the I-Search in a conversation that we had:

Anna: Every junior teacher assigns the “I-Search”. I think we have slightly different takes on it from class to class. As far as... how many pages it is, how much to incorporate literature from the year, some teachers actually have the kids write about literature in their I-search. And I did not do that...

Denise: ...[I]t’s an I-Search as opposed to a research...?

Anna: Because of the metacognitive element... That’s supposedly what it’s about.

Denise: ... I’m thinking about “metacognitive.” I’m thinking about my thinking, so I’m thinking about how I’m doing my research?

Anna: Right. What the process was like- To begin with thinking about why you’re interested in the topic. What you know about it? How you’re going to go about finding out about it? How does the research go? And then how does the writing go? You know. What do you learn about yourself as a writer/thinker? (Personal Interview. 11 June 2010)

Figure 3 describes the overall paper structure. Of particular interest to our conversations about relevance is the metacognitive piece.

Figure 3: “I- Search Research Paper Structure”

The I-Search paper is comprised of expository writing based on extensive research. It follows the claim- data- warrant pattern. Refer to the chart below for structural guidance when writing your paper.

Phase I- Introduction

Use your Phase I research proposal to explain your original interest in the topic and to describe the process that led you to your Phase II claim. (1 page)

Exposition of Phase II- Body Paragraphs

Use your note cards to prove your initial claim. Your research should support warrants that expand the Phase II claim. (3-4 pages)

Cognitive (Content) Conclusions- Conclusion

The cognitive conclusions are statements that integrate all that you learned about your topic throughout the research process. They arise from your Phase II warrants. This section contains the most broadly intellectual and academic content of the paper. This section requires creative critical thought. (FYI, some of your cognitive conclusions will be identical to the thesis statements of traditional research papers.) (1 page)

Metacognitive Conclusions- Conclusion (continued)

The metacognitive conclusions are statements that share your research experience with your reader. These conclusions often are personal and reflective. They reveal what you learned about yourself: how you learn, overcome obstacles, and/or face challenges like the research process. Metacognitive conclusions are not about your topic directly but about the journey of personal discovery that occurred as you completed this research paper. (1 page)

Works Cited Page

The metacognitive piece is a way of reflecting on relevance, but the student work that we discussed led us to wonder if the goal of dialogic relevance suggests that the I-Search paper could invite students to be in conversation about relevance as opposed to the metacognitive aspects of the work that they were doing.

While one student paper is not a representative sample, the paper below shows the type of paper that was handed in for the assignment and how the metacognitive conversation does not approach relevance directly. In it, the need for a change in focus became clear. A student, Rebecca (pseudonym), shared her paper with me; she was a high-achieving student who agreed to allow me to talk to her and with Anna about her paper. We looked at it as a concrete example of the metacognitive analysis students were doing. Rebecca wrote:

Figure 4: Excerpt from Rebecca's Paper, "The Obesity Epidemic"

Growing up down the street from my grandparents, I was always going back and forth from my house to theirs. My grandpa was always a big guy, but after being diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis or MS he began to gain more and more weight due to the fact that his brain could not send messages to his body's nerves causing him to be practically paralyzed and stuck in a wheel chair the rest of his life. Seeing my grandfather like this upset me and made me think, "How could anyone possible live their life happily like this?" My grandpa became obese because he ate the same as he did before the wheel chair and he had no way of physical activity. Thus I decided to do research on obesity, the economic problems of being obese, and treatments for obesity.

I began researching what obesity technically was. I read an article that gave me the exact definition, description, and causes of obesity. It wasn't hard to find articles about obesity but it was hard to connect my topic to these articles. I finally realized my paper should be written using my own personal inferences and how an obese person

would think. I concluded I would slim down my research to discuss the causes of obesity, the costs of being obese, and the treatments that come along with it. Based on my initial reading and the way I truly feel about obesity before I began this project, I plan to argue that no matter what, it is impossible for people who are obese to live their American Dream.

The reflections that Rebecca included in her paper about these deeply personal experiences are interesting. Technically her response met the criteria of the assignment in that she is telling the story of her interest and connection to the topic, but much is left unsaid, and there was a definite lack of personal connection between her own life and her understanding of *The Great Gatsby*, which was the book that Anna had taught in connection with the American Dream question from Figure 1. Rebecca obviously struggled in the research and making the relevance connection to literature. Additionally, within the parameters of the assignment, Anna may have created an impossible task as Rebecca's dialogue with the text was framed with artificial relationship boundaries.

When Anna and I discussed the final projects at the end of the year, I specifically asked her about the metacognitive portion of the paper. Her response trended towards modeling and the impact that it might have had in demonstrating the kinds of connections Anna was hoping for between student experience and *The Great Gatsby*.

Denise: So, how do you think that part went?

Anna: Not that great because I didn't model it- well enough, especially the conclusion. I ran out of time and energy. I didn't write a model for them for the conclusion. They were fairly weak....

Anna: It makes sense though, right? If they don't know what I'm expecting, even if I tell them that doesn't really... (Personal Interview. 11 June 2010).

The I-Search element was lacking from the finished projects. Perhaps this occurred because despite the intention, it is difficult to keep those ideas at the front of teaching especially in research because of the process elements that tend to take over because it is unfamiliar and rule-bound. But more likely, this happened because defining an inquiry as relevant through defining the topic is not necessarily enough for students to maintain a relationship to relevance. Throughout the research process, one can lose an initially relevant connection or interest in a topic.

As we began to look more closely at the products from the class and thought about the time that I spent observing, I was able to share reflections with Anna from my conversation with Rebecca. As we began to explore the challenges of the assignment, we were able to make connections to ideas about relevance. Anna described the pedagogy that she employed in order to make the paper relevant for students and mentioned the strategies of modeling, free writing, connecting to the real world, choosing topics, focusing on the process, deepening the reading and the student confidence. Each of these conversations encouraged us to think more about the connections between research and literature.

Denise: I was thinking a little bit about [Rebecca]... She said she wrote her thesis to say that obesity gets in the way of the American Dream. And I said, well do you think that's true? And she said I don't necessarily think that all these obese people are prevented from achieving the American Dream but I think I would be if I were obese.

Anna: Interesting.... What she found were the problems that stem from obesity are things that impede people from being successful. Discrimination, a lot about health, health care costs, and different complications that arise from obesity and I think also self esteem. It was fairly legitimate, I mean maybe obvious though, I guess.

Denise: What would I want a kid... thinking about...? [For example,] how in your [Master's Thesis you discuss] ethics and how they connect to the practice of decision making... What would that look like as it applied to this research paper in the same way it is applied to literature? (Personal Interview. 11 June 2010)

The answer to the question was likely that we do not know specifically what individual students think about. Ideally, they should identify the topics for themselves and they should engage with the topic in ways that would allow them to continue to connect to the topic. But this ideal proved difficult.

Anna: So I don't know. So then the research paper becomes artificial in some ways, I think.

Denise: I guess it's interesting to me. What would that step be that makes it...

Anna: I think maybe more free writing. If I left more time like what do you really think about this topic? Before we worry about what are you going to do to please the teacher as far like the research steps... and all that garbage. Like getting them more invested more genuinely invested in their topics. You know, what do you really think about this [topic]? [How] do you really think this affects people? Because when you start talking about... like especially these kids like they all have immigrant parents so they know a lot about the American Dream and you know what gets in your way. But they don't know the other side of it at all about the people who are privileged.

Denise: Right.

Anna: They don't really know what that looks like.

Denise: Or the mechanisms. This is something that I struggle with thinking about too. Is it then my role to show you the oppressive systems that are creating the problems? Do I really want you to uncover the businesses that profit from people being obese? Would that be true engagement? Would that be the ...

Anna: I always struggle with that. Because then I feel like what I'm doing is making sure they understand that they're oppressed... all the ways that you are being prevented from being successful. It's offensive. Yeah I always struggle with that. Kids are so idealistic. They're little republicans through and through. I could be anything I want. You don't want to squash that either. (Personal Interview. 11 June 2010)

The struggle we discussed was about more than a personal connection and the connection between research and relevance to the larger world in a relevant way that was missing in our thinking about the student transactions.

In her reflection of the year, Anna talked about the power of giving models to her students. She discusses the value of models in our conversation. She says:

Anna : I think the modeling that I did helped them a lot the in-process modeling as well as giving them a physical model to look at. I saw a lot of kids referencing my model. You know it was good and bad because I think that in some ways it can... they can't see any other way to do it. But it made it clearer to them what they were trying to accomplish. (Personal Interview. 11 June 2010)

The thesis of this model paper was, "There are many valid reasons to avoid eating meat."

Below is the paragraph that Anna shared with students:

Figure 5: "Phase II- Model Paragraphs"

One of the best reasons to avoid eating meat raised on traditional American farms is because of the immense suffering the animals experience in such an environment. On a hog farm, for instance, it is common practice for pigs to be weaned from their mothers just 10 days after birth, instead of the natural 13 weeks in nature, because they get bigger much more quickly on feed mixed with hormones and antibiotics (Pollan). This might not sound so bad, but because of the early weaning the pigs constantly want to suck and chew, "a desire they gratify in confinement by biting the tail of the animal in front of them" (Pollan). The animals are so depressed by their environment that they don't attempt to stop each other from the tail biting even though it is very painful. If the

pigs develop infections as a result of the tail injury, it is common practice for the farmer to club the sick pig to death on the spot (Pollan). The entire situation strikes me as completely inhumane and makes it hard to justify contributing to these practices by purchasing meat that is farmed in this manner.

Unfortunately, pigs are not the only animals made to suffer for the sake of American meat eaters. Chickens have it pretty bad, too. The American laying hen spends her entire existence in a cage too small for her to even stretch her wings (Pollan). The stress this causes the hens leads them to exhibit many completely unnatural behaviors, such as “cannibalizing her cagemates and rubbing her body against the wire mesh until it is featherless and bleeding” (Pollan). As if this weren’t bad enough, there is a practice called “force- molting,” according to which the hens are starved of food and water for “up to 14 days” in order to induce the laying of a final batch of eggs (“Coalition Asks Court...”). While I may not empathize with chickens to the degree that I do with pigs, it still does not seem appropriate to subject them to such cruel and painful practices just so that I can enjoy a tasty chicken nugget.

This model demonstrates the writing skills for research that Anna hoped her students would be able to employ in their own writing. The topic sentence is clear and the evidence is used accurately, but there is not a model of the type of deep thinking that she hoped her students would do about a topic that was meaningful for them. Her goals for this type of thinking came up in conversation. She describes them below:

Denise: So connecting to literature. Can you remind me what texts you read?

Anna: [*The Great*] *Gatsby*, *Catcher in the Rye*, those are the two big texts. And lots of short stories, a whole unit on transcendentalism, the Puritans, we do Modernism, Harlem Renaissance Poetry.

Denise: So did anyone successfully connect to a theme in this paper?

Anna: I mean very generally because the themes were so broad. The American Dream was the big one most people were writing about how some problem impedes you from achieving the American Dream. (Personal Interview. 11 June 2010)

It was interesting that during our conversations about the power of her model we realized that like the model provided by Anna, Rebecca's paper did not have a thesis statement that was connected to the themes of the text. And when I discussed her paper with her, Rebecca reiterated that she did have these struggles. She suggested that she had found the process and the content of the research paper interesting and that she learned about obesity from television. As a college-bound student she could also see the purpose of skills of research in her future. But, she also suggested that she struggled to connect this work to *The Great Gatsby*. And in addition she felt that she would have added more nuance to her thesis in order to suggest that although some people achieve the American Dream if they're obese, she would not consider it possible if she were obese (Field Notes. 27 May 2010). Her paper below shows her connections are not to the literature or theme.

Figure 6: Excerpt from Rebecca's Paper, "The Obesity Epidemic"

Being obese can cause stress not only on one's pocket book, but one's body as well.
Being obese has been known to cause many health problems such as arthritis, cancer,

diabetes, heart disease, and strokes (Wexler). I question how anyone can live happily while being obese with these health problems or with the potential risk to getting these diseases. Having these diseases not only hurts, it costs money to pay for these diseases to be treated. In the late 1990's, 12% of the national health care budget went to obesity (Wexler). This number seems to be growing every single year. "Obese individuals spent about 36% more than the general population on health-care services, compared to a 21% increase for daily smokers and a 14% increase for heavy drinkers" (Wexler). With all these huge bills for health care I cannot seem to understand how one can live their dreams while dealing with the incredible amounts of money they spend every year, along with the pain and suffering that comes with these diseases.

Anna and I discussed how the students' experiences did not fully allow them to reflect on the relevance connections that they were making and through our conversation it became clear that the confidence was also an element that developed through practice and also was significant to truly dialogic relevance and the habits of relevance:

Denise: I think there is something to this idea that you have about that there is a practice element. I'm practicing thinking. I'm practicing getting into a certain space. I'm practicing and I guess I still do wonder, especially with this project. What would be the space that you want them to get in? What questions do we, when we're doing research, ask ourselves? ... [W]hat would genuine ethical reflection be during an I-Search paper?

Anna: Well I mean as far as just the learning part of it, it would be like what am I learning about my assumptions? Or what am I learning about myself as a reader and a writer? Even things along the lines of like I can't write in a room with 25 other human beings. You know I know that I need quiet so that I can really think about things. And I wish I could get my kids to see that. I feel like they give up so quickly like I can't do this, this is too hard. And then they're done instead of this is really hard and it's going to take a while and I have to think about this. Part of this is confidence

too. I'd love for them to feel confident to know that they can do something that is difficult. You watch them. Even when you were there, they want you to walk them through it and affirm them the whole way.

Denise: [The student] had me read every sentence.

Anna: Right, right? Is this good? Is this good? Will you read my first sentence?

Anna: They really lack the confidence. Part of it is how we train them because probably most of our feedback on writing is correction of mistakes. Like I'm reading it and then reading it for mistakes.... I think that has to change at the beginning of the year probably. You know responding more to ideas and less to grammar. And that's an unfortunate byproduct of NCLB and ACT. You know like you'll be tested on commas. (Personal Interview. 11 June 2010)

Considering the students' confidence in their abilities, Anna's reflection at the end of the year suggests that shifting students towards a greater understanding relevance may act as a way to empower them in research. For example, empowerment could come from students being able to decide how *Gatsby* is or is not relevant to them and to choose amongst relevance connections.

Aside from the challenges of the lack of familiarity with the process and the relationship to the topic, I observed the assignment unfold with other challenges. There was about a month left at the end of the school year for this high-stakes assignment and because it was the end of the year, there were more interruptions for the assignment and getting behind was a problem. For example, I wrote the following in my observation log:

In Anna's classroom, there is a poster on the wall that says to "Ride the Waves of Success" with a reminder to students about Attendance, Homework, Grades and Investment. But today, most of the students do not have the drafts that are due and Anna is reminding students that there is no way that they can possibly complete their research paper if they have not done any work outside of class. She plans to collect the drafts the following day in order to give feedback for the final draft, which will be due at the beginning of the week. The class agenda shifts since the students do not have their drafts to a lesson about commas. They review the four uses of commas together as a class and then move on to a worksheet where they have to identify which comma rule is applicable. For the few students who do have their papers, they are supposed to self-edit their paper for commas. The class lulls itself into an

appropriate mood for the task at hand and the students who are sitting next to me are eager for me to check over their worksheets. These are seasoned players at the game of school. (Field Notes. 18 May 2010)

All of Anna's attempts to build relevance in the research assignment appear to fall short in a moment like this because the assignment is clearly contained within the four walls of her classroom. In addition to the class time that is spent on the scaffolding and support, she also handed out monthly calendars to help students to plan their time and also gives them documents that will help them to structure the paper.

These documents and the ways that Anna set up the paper suppose that students have been on a "a journey of personal discovery" but in fact there was a process that she set up for writing the paper that did not set up steps that support that type of journey, as is evident from Anna's own observations:

Anna: ...Next year, I want to have them choose their topics in January when they get back so they can start reading. Because I realized that part of what's frustrating is that there's no depth to the research. For example I have kids [research] about standardized tests. What a great topic. There are great books out about Standardized testing but these kids are reading 5 page articles, they're not getting a lot of really good stuff about their topics. I had a kid who is writing about the name of private security companies who are overseas, like Blackwater. So he's reading the book about Blackwater for his independent reading. That's the kind of stuff I'm basically doing- more genuine, much deeper. They're honors so they can handle it. The hard part would be time, balancing the topic early on. I think more reading and they can have more expertise on the subject. (Personal Interview. 7 April 2011)

The type of connection that Anna describes is the one that Anna would seek for her other students as a habit. Once experienced, students will be more able to do that type of relevance connection that engages them in the world outside of the classroom.

Inquiry approaches are crucial aspects of relevance pedagogy. However, while Anna's assignment appeared to have the most important qualities of an inquiry, her reflection, student work, and the models presented to her students make clear that the assignment fell

short of the goals that she had for connecting students to literature to what I later identified through this work as a dialogically relevant way. And while her goals were connected to these ideas of relevance, the constraints of her classroom limited her from thinking directly about that goal.

Dialogic relevance pedagogy invites students to use research as a means of inquiring how and why a text is relevant to them in a way that might address the challenges of Anna's assignment. The next two chapters explore how we continued to work to bring these ideas together in the following school year. Based on the stories and experiences thus far with Anna, I began to feel that student readers lack the "disposition" to approach a text with the assumption that they are already in dialogue with it and we hoped to consider this together.

CHAPTER SIX: COLLABORATING TOWARDS DIALOGIC RELEVANCE

Over the course of many years and across many tables, Dave has asked me a lot of questions. I began a paper in 2004 called “Surprises in English Education: Challenging the Notion of ‘Best Practices’ to find something ‘Relevant’” in this way,

On any given Thursday this semester, many teaching situations come together. My 10th grade students struggle to make relevant *First They Killed My Father* by Loung Ung while writing both narratives and research papers. Ms Michaels, a student teacher, struggles to make my classroom relevant for what she imagines her future classroom will be. And Amy, an undergrad who is a pre-service teacher in my Reading Methods course, struggles to make my ‘unit plan’ assignments relevant for a de-contextualized and hypothetical classroom of her future. In my effort to guide all of them to meaningful learning, I have tried to answer for each of them that burning question, ‘why do we have to do this?’ and is my teaching best answering their call for what seems to be relevance? (Gelb, “Surprises”)

And like the questions that he asked me then, in the reading of many drafts of this paper, the one that he kept asking was essentially what is possibly dialogic about teaching a skill? In my mind this question is interesting in part because Dave has been such an instrumental part of my thinking about what good teaching is, and he has also led me to the belief that I can attain those teaching skills that I do not possess through reflection and dialogue with myself, with my students, and with dialogic theorists. Each move that I make in a classroom is either something that I have tried to deliberate about beforehand, been responsive to in the middle, or reflected on afterwards. Thoughtful teachers acknowledge that actions in the classroom matter and that there are strategies that can be used to achieve goals. Even when you are doing nothing, it is doing something. I have in fact through a lot of study, thought and commitment, learned to be a more dialogic teacher. I believe those teaching skills set my teaching apart from the learning that I did in high school and equip me to teach students differently than I was taught.

I came away from my experiences at Teachers College thinking of teaching as a profession and making a distinction between “anyone” can teach and “anyone” can learn to teach. Of course there is art to teaching, but there are also skills and ways that you can prepare yourself to meet the challenges of a classroom. In a way, this is a parallel conversation that informs teaching for dialogic relevance. As a teacher you can learn to make space for students, you can learn to build relationships, and you can learn how to create a classroom community. But finding relevance is both a dialogic “disposition” and a set of habits to apply that “disposition” as opposed to a set of skills. For example, allowing “wait time” in a classroom so that more voices will be heard in a classroom discussion is an example of a “habit” that can be developed for a more democratic disposition. Or, another example is considering student voice as a critical part of classroom discourse might be considered a disposition and using journals is a habit to accommodate student voice.

Yet, teachers should also invite students to engage in dialogic transactions. The students bring themselves and experiences to a text, but text is also laden with meaning encoded by the person who wrote it. A part of dialogic relevance pedagogy is to teach our students to speak and listen to the text, understanding the social and political layers of the conversation in a “wider way of knowing” (Ayers 158). The “disposition” of reading to enhance transactions should be explicit and taught in the wider context of developing a sense of relevance and relationship to text. But how can we continue to be consistent with the two fundamental features of a truly aesthetic transaction? We would have to assume that the primacy of the interaction would be between the reader and the text. But what are our students supposed to do when they encounter information and they cannot make that connection as readers with the text?

Dialogic relevance pedagogy asks teachers and students to be in dialogue about text attending to relevance. In the same way that research papers revealed principles of relevance pedagogy, memoirs offer opportunities for students to engage with these questions because the moments that they identify as readers are actually ways that they choose to learn about the experience of others, a literacy skill with democratic potential.

However, it is the familiar shuffle of note cards and the questions about punctuation of a works cited page that can be the telltale signs of a classroom doing a research paper. Less clear is the potential for research to help us rethink reading transactions and their potential for dialogic relevance. I shared with Anna a distinction in how we used research in our classrooms.

Denise: And this is where I think it is different for you and me. My class went in the direction of research for *First They Killed My Father* so you can understand it....But I feel like you are doing research for literature, which is totally different. But, what's the bridge between reading for the context of *First They Killed My Father* and reading for the context of the *Great Gatsby* or the context of "Hills like White Elephants"? (Personal Interview. 7 April 2011)

Anna and I continued to have a discussion about background knowledge, author's intent and implied authors as well as how much reading can change over time. The reader has a stake in developing the background knowledge understanding that knowing more about the author would in some way also inform us as readers about the text.

Over time, it became clear to us that Anna and I could talk for the rest of our careers but that we were interested in thinking about what could practically change about our assignments and classrooms to make them closer to a vision of relevant and dialogic. We began to talk about what that assignment could look like. Our conversation was about aligning the "ideal and the real" and thinking about what explicit and transparent strategies we could enact as opposed to making the text relevant for our students (Vinz 52). We moved

into this collaboration with a redefined sense of relevance in the context of literacy and dialogue, with ideas about a pedagogy of relevance, and with the beginnings of a sense that research assignments have the potential to support dialogic relevance transactions if used in ways that support inquiry, particularly in relationship to background knowledge.

First They Killed My Father was the text that we chose to focus on for the unit. That choice was connected to our 2006 road trip to the NCTE conference. While we were driving we talked about our curricula. At that time, Anna was teaching an English class at a Catholic school and I was teaching 10th grade reading. We discussed our courses and mapped out her year in the car. We talked about books she could use and proposed starting the course with narratives. As we made the drive from Chicago to Pittsburgh, my sense of her teaching grew. Of the texts that we talked about on that trip, *First They Killed My Father* became a significant connection for us over the years. It was a text that we both used in our classrooms. We grappled with addressing our responsibilities as teachers of reading and writing skills and our responsibilities to address the significant content of the memoir.

The webpage for author Loung Ung describes her memoir of survival during the Cambodian Genocide and the story of the text in this way:

Born to an affluent Cambodian father and Chinese mother, Loung Ung was only 5 years old when the Khmer Rouge stormed into her native city of Phnom Penh. Four years later, in one of the bloodiest episodes of the 20th century, some two million Cambodians – out of a population of seven million – had died at the hands of the infamous Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge regime. Among the genocide victims were both Loung’s parents, two sisters, and 20 other relatives. (“Bio: Loung: Author, Lecturer, Activist”)

First They Killed My Father begins with Loung’s life in Phnom Penh prior to Pol Pot, details her experiences during the regime, describes her eventual immigration to America with some of her surviving siblings, and shares her activism to remove landmines that remain. *First*

They Killed My Father generally presents unfamiliar “content.” The approach that teachers generally take is to try to provide background information that would enable a transaction. But through our work together, Anna and I began to see some limitations to these approaches as they sidestepped the work of creating the relevant dialogue between the student and the text.

Unlike the examples we see from Tovani and Glasgow, where the teachers determine the background knowledge, the teachers could invite students to identify connections with a text for themselves, by creating reading assignments that ask the students to identify the places within the text that require background information. Both of these strategies value the same knowledge, but focus instead on the student creation of relevance. The background knowledge of both a text and the experiences of the student are moved into a transactional relationship as opposed to being introduced outside of that relationship. We should eventually ask our students to pursue these topics as they read and identify the gaps for themselves and fill them through research. This approach more closely approximates the suggestions from Lev Vygotsky about the ways that we can foster learning through attention to the “zone of proximal development” which is “*the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers*” (Vygotsky 33). An additional challenge is the way that this thinking about frontloading suggests that knowledge is closed and seemingly fixed if you do not begin a reading experience with it. Frontloading can influence a transaction and without dialogue can also artificially shape it.

My own unit from Oak High School as we read *First They Killed My Father* attempted to address background knowledge throughout the unit. The “Explorations” course that I taught in conjunction with *First They Killed My Father* was guided by principles that pushed me to think of research as an ongoing reading strategy that can be used to explore a text throughout a reading and is therefore part of an individual’s transaction. Anna and I started to foreground our thinking about pedagogy considering skills that students need to put themselves in a relationship with a text through self-directed inquiry. Although we didn’t know it at the time, this inquiry would include seeking background knowledge as a habit with a dynamic “reconstruction experience” and engages research as a quest to know as a habit of civil literacy. Anna’s experiences with *The Hunger Games* and some parallel goals she had for students to make connections contributed to our refining of background knowledge:

Anna: On a second reading you actually find that [*Hunger Games*] is a good book to teach. When I introduced very briefly the idea of totalitarianism and control and they were so adorable, they’re like “isn’t that kind of like”... Why don’t we just go in there and get those people out?.... On May 2nd, I’m on the computer and there was an article about how cell phones are being seized in North Korea. The government is taking their cell phones; they don’t want them getting news from the outside world... So print this article off and print it for my 10th period. They were so engrossed and I’m like and this is why she’s writing this book. They’re looking at me like... I’m like can you imagine someone telling you can’t talk on the cell phone. You can’t watch TV. The only TV you watch... those kids don’t even know how bad they have it. They don’t even know. Right? I mean it is so cool to see them like you know make that real world connection. And they like the book. They enjoyed reading it.

Denise: ...That’s the way that.... You wrote about “morality of democracy” about talking about Loung stealing the rice from her family. Having kids ask the question, what’s right in that situation? But I think I used to give assignments like to have them research Cambodia....

Anna: Look up Pol Pot

Denise: Right. Identify terms or get invested in the actual history. I was never good at giving them enough to make them care about... So, I think it’s interesting though, actually talking about this, there’s almost a validity to blending... If you are going to have research assignments about literature there’s a validity to almost blending the

two.... There's the contextual. You can have them research a context, segregation for *Fallen Angels*...those kinds of things

Anna: Or branch to the things that are relevant now that they don't know about. Look into North Korea. Look into China.

Denise: Right. Would you ever give a research assignment like that?

Anna: Yeah, totally, I was actually very close to trying to do that but I ran out of time. After I finished *Hunger Games*. Giving them examples of right now, places where people are living in totalitarian regimes. Especially with what's going on in the world right now.... (Personal Interview. 7 April 2011)

The experience that Anna describes reminds us that students can build the relevant connections from a text to both background knowledge and their lives, "what's going on in the world right now." The questions that are raised for us in the context of work with dialogic relevance pedagogy would be to consider in what ways this work could be done to make transparent for students how decisions were being made. For example, at what point as a reader would this background information be helpful? How did Anna make the connection to North Korea? Is there a way that students as readers could be prompted to apply the skills that Anna used? Significantly, every reader, through transactions with the text, could have different answers to these questions.

But what is missing from this classroom conversation is the ability to identify those areas that a reader wants to know about as well as the ability to find those answers. By choosing the areas for development of background knowledge, the teacher is engaging the student in their personal transaction with the text as opposed to presenting the opportunity for the student to shift their transaction along the spectrum described by Rosenblatt. In addition to wanting the use of background knowledge to be a student-centered approach to reading, it is also significant to note that if we consider these questions more dialogically, we need not assume that every student will always have, or want, to access their background knowledge

in a given transaction. For example, as a teacher I had students who literally refused to make a connection to the main character of *Speak* or *Catcher in the Rye*, regardless of the activities that I used to access experiences that I thought would resonate for them. Dialogic relevance makes an argument that students should see the power of changing their reservoir of background knowledge as they read.

Transactions with text are personal in that what we bring as our background knowledge when we are moving beneath the surface can be difficult. Part of making transactions more dialogic is also to reveal to students the ways we can move in and out of revealing this type of information about ourselves in the same ways that a text does in dialogue with us.

Denise: Do they go to the place where they evaluate making the decision about what to reveal vs. what not to? Is that part of the skill that I have...

Anna: Some of them do for sure. That's interesting.

Denise: I think so too. Clearly when [Rebecca] sits down and says she is interested in this topic because she saw something on TV about it. She gets it.

Anna: It's interesting....I would find out things about kids at the end of the year that I did not fathom that they did not want me to know about them. Totally their choice, not necessarily something I need to know about them.

Denise: What happens if . . . this came at the beginning? They wouldn't be ready for the kind of reading/analytical skills that are involved but what if there was a...

Anna: A mini metacognitive. That's why I liked what I used my last year at school- what you did- beginning the year with narrative. I really liked that. Talking about writing and they could talk about themselves; so they're interested. [They can talk about] how the writing helped them talk about themselves. I really liked that. It's not research. Then they get to choose what to talk about. Although you find out really horrible things. (Personal Interview. 11 June 2010)

In a way, I think of this as "the right to remain silent." While we need to assess our students' progress and make sure that they are learning in our classrooms, there is often a space that we do not make explicit for students: their transactions with texts, when truly relevant, may be

about topics or ideas or connections that they do not want to share. But learning how to make those choices is a powerful acknowledgment that transactions are personal.

Anna asked me if we could work together on a unit for the upcoming school year. We identified our interests in reconsidering background knowledge, research and literature in a unit about *First They Killed My Father*. The ways that we talked about her goals, allowed us to shift our thinking towards the application of dialogic relevance pedagogy. The principles that we wanted to apply were to reshape the research paper to reflect a deeper connection to text; to engage habits that could be applied to a relevance inquiry in other contexts; to acknowledge the complexity of relevance for individuals as well as the nature of a dynamic community engaged in relevance inquiries.

Our collaboration came in the planning phase of the unit as opposed to the ongoing conversations we previously had as she was teaching a unit. As we planned we rarely spoke about the practical challenges of teaching day to day and I no longer observed her classroom or collected student data. Instead we focused on unpacking the unit's goals. We discovered some possible connections to dialogue and tried to incorporate transparent and explicit relevant transactions in order to build students' capacity to read for relevance. Practically, this meant that we tried to design assignments that would have students directly inquire into relevance.

The invitation to collaborate was complicated because although we had been talking for years about the work in Anna's classroom, this was the first time that we were trying to plan, as opposed to merely reflecting. This led to a bit of a recalibration and we focused our attention on the goals that Anna had for teaching the particular book, *First They Killed My*

Father. I summarized our discussion about Anna's goals based on our prior conversation saying:

Denise: Listening to the transcript of our conversation last time, I was like, there are a few things that [Anna] is saying that are important. One is the end product is very important. You very much care about that. I kept ignoring you but you kept saying that you wanted to talk about fairness, so we should talk about that. You talked about how teaching kids about literature is very important, because you want them to know about literature. And the way that you talked about research, which I loved ... is think about how they can learn ... more about the context to understand literature better... and then you said that you wanted to think about how the author in *First They Killed My Father* expresses the difficulties that she had. Those were big takeaways.... (Personal Interview. 7 June 2011)

The goals that Anna articulates already connect reading and research. She suggests that students can learn more about the context of literature through research as well as learn about the author. Importantly, Anna describes her stance towards these issues saying both, "I think author's intent does matter. I'm not anti-Rosenblatt" (Personal Interview. 7 June 2011). This influences the ways that she thinks about research because she is using the research so that students can discover the "intended" author's meaning. In contrast, Rosenblatt describes the relationship between literature and pointing out that the relationship between the reader and the text is influenced by the readers' ability to understand the intention of the author.

Differences as to the author's intention often lead to consultation of extra-textual sources. For works of the past especially, scholars call on systematic methods of philological, biographical, and historical research to discover the personal, social and literary forces that shaped the writer's intention. (Rosenblatt 22)

In addition to reading the text, there are connections that Rosenblatt hopes students will make outside of the text and complicate the type of research that would follow from what is described above. Anna would like students to transact with the text with a particular theme of fairness, to have students think about the morality of the decisions in the book, and to reflect openly about the context of the book. From other conversations, Anna's goals for teaching

First They Killed My Father were also to encourage her students to think about the literary devices used and to learn reading and writing skills that addressed standards that she was required to teach based on her curriculum (Field Notes. 28 August 2011).

Because Anna and I have different beliefs about the role of the author in a transaction, important ideas emerged around particular intersections: in the discussion of background knowledge, the connection of relevance in the transaction with the text, and the research that one does in order to interact with text as dependent or independent of the author. We discussed it in the conversation that follows:

Denise: I agree that's definitely why we make them read it. And that's where this new argument for me that we have them read it to learn the skills that we have about loving literature.

Anna: Yeah.

Denise: But there's something about this other piece that's maybe interesting like what if they were researching to understand the content. Researching to think about the motivation of characters and then getting these skills about reading literature. You know what I mean?

Anna: Are you like ruining the literature then?

Denise: I think you're giving access to it, right? We have a lot of background knowledge that we are bringing to the table that either we're telling, kids here's the background knowledge you need to read it.

Anna: Yeah.

Denise: Or we're teaching them to read the book without really having the background knowledge.

Anna: Which in some ways I think is ok too though.

Denise: For sure. (Personal Interview. 7 April 2011)

What I struggled with in this conversation is that while we agree that you can read without background knowledge, we do not yet articulate that there might be an element of choice that we are exercising as readers whether to engage the background knowledge in our transaction.

The unit that we discussed was the first in the school year. The curriculum guide referred to it as a six-week unit on the “Autobiographical Incident.” Anna’s department chair drastically revised the curriculum over the summer to accommodate the Common Core Standards. Working in isolation from the rest of the department, he handed out curriculum maps that were aligned to the new standards. All of the assessments were derived from the skills of the new state standards and the curriculum included lots of different pieces. Particularly interesting was the fact that the standards were chosen without teacher input and also that the skills were text independent. Although a few text suggestions were made within the map, they were optional and left to the teachers’ discretion. Also interesting in the planning that Anna and I would do was the fact that the reading skills were not specifically connected to either non-fiction or fiction texts. Below is a copy of the outline that Anna was given by her department chair that was also a renewed starting point for our conversation.

Figure 7: Excerpts from Curriculum Map June 7, 2011

Unit 1: Autobiographical Incident

Focus Standards

- W.9-10.9: Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

Student Objectives

- Explore the role of local and universal themes.
- Offer insightful inferences regarding the themes of the text.

- Explore the question of “fairness” as it relates to the characters in the texts.
- Create clear, original, specific thesis statements.
- Organize concrete evidence and supporting textual details to support a thesis statement.
- Use precise language, avoiding casual language and clichés.
- Write appropriate transitions to organize paragraphs.
- Analyze how literary devices produce meaning.
- Develop and perform a short speech.

Assessments

Teacher Notes: After reading and discussing a work or pairing of works as a class, students prepare for seminars and essays by reflecting individually, in pairs, and/or in small groups on a given seminar/essay question. In this way, ideas are student generated. (Seminar/Essay assignments include more than one question. Teachers may choose one or all the questions to explore in the course of the seminar; students should choose one question for the essay.) Seminars should be held before students write essays so that they may explore their ideas thoroughly and refine their thinking before writing.

Comprehension: Comprehension quizzes on individual texts

Collaborate:

Reflect on seminar questions, take notes on your responses, and note the page numbers of the textual evidence you will refer to in your seminar and/or essay answers. Share your notes with a partner for feedback and guidance. Have you interpreted the text correctly? Is your evidence convincing? (RI.9-10.1, SL.9-10.1)

Seminar and Essay

Consider the use of the narrative form in the works of this unit. Discuss how the setting can impact the events of the plot, the characters’ actions, and the theme of the selection. Write an essay in which you use at least three pieces of textual evidence to support an original thesis statement. (RI.9-10.5, W.9-10.2, W.9-10.4, W.9-10.9, SL.9-10.1)

Seminar and Essay

Consider the works of this unit when discussing the question of “fairness.” How is the concept of “fairness” addressed in one or several works? Write an essay in which you use at least three pieces of specific textual evidence to support an original thesis statement. (RI.9-10.5, W.9-10.2, W.9-10.4, W.9-10.9, SL.9-10.1)

Unit 1 Exam

Autobiographical Incident: Write a three-page autobiographical narrative inspired by any of the works in the unit. Include a final paragraph that explains which work inspired it and how. (W.9-10.3)

Speech: Read your autobiographical incident aloud (without the final explanatory

paragraph) to the class and invite discussion about which work might have inspired it and how. (W.9-10.3, SL.9-10.6, L.9-10.5)

OR

Speech: Choose a passage from this unit (one minute maximum) and recite it from memory. Include an introduction that discusses:

- Who wrote the poem and when it was written (i.e., historical context);
- What makes it memorable or significant; and
- Words and phrases that hold special meaning in context. (RL.9-10.2, SL.9-10.6, L.9-10.5)

I was overwhelmed by the map and spent a lot of time with it, pulling it apart and trying to think about the ways that the skills were looping and the texts were interacting. *First They Killed My Father*, a text that both of us had success with in the past and had discussed before, was the text that Anna was planning to add to her unit and she received special permission to order copies. Anna asked that we talk about how to incorporate it into the unit outline she was given. Also of note is that the “official” research unit was separate and that topic was chosen to focus on Arthurian legends. It would follow later in the year.

So, with each of these goals and questions in mind, I sent Anna an e-mail with a proposal for her first day of the unit and some end of the unit assessments. The intention was to align to her curriculum mandates but also to try to address some of the issues that were raised in our conversations about moving inquiry, dialogue, and relevance to the forefront in order to improve student transactions with text through research.

Figure 8: Ideas Shared in Response to Conversation about the Revised Curriculum Map

Journal:

At the end of the unit, you will be handing in 3 journal entries. You may choose from the texts that we have read and do not have to write about all the texts.

These will have two parts:

1. A response to the readings that will prepare you for our class seminars. Your response should have the following parts:
 - a. What issue do you find compelling in the text? Why? What writing tools did the author use to get you to care about it?
 - b. How does this piece of writing reflect a time and place (setting)?
 - c. Choose one line from the text that you found really interesting. Copy the line and include the page and proper punctuation.
 - d. If you met the author, what would you say their story is about? What theme do you find in the text? How do you see that theme in your life?
 - e. Choose a writing technique from the unit list and find a place in the text that uses it. Define the technique and identify the passage using a proper citation.
 - f. Find something from outside the text to inform your understanding of the text
2. A short narrative with a beginning, middle and end that is inspired by the theme of the text.

What will be on the unit exam?

You will be asked to identify the theme of an unfamiliar passage.

The assignment above was a document that I generated based on the conversations that I had with Anna about her goals for the unit. In it, I attempted to address her school requirements (exploration of setting and writing techniques) and also make space for students to begin to develop the skills of research in small steps (choose a quote and cite it properly). Based on our previous work together I intended to incorporate guiding ideas behind this assignment. The assignment was not the only example of dialogic relevance but instead was one example of an effort to incorporate some of the principles as they applied to research. These included:

1. Research should be done at the same time as reading and should be student directed; 2. Research writing should be informal and in response to reading; 3. Student should share their research as a part of communicating about their transactions; 4. Themes can be used to inform research but should also be student generated; 5. Research skills should be taught throughout a school year to understand when to cite a source and the concept that ideas needed to be cited to allow the focus to move away from the mechanics of research.

Kathryn A Pfaffinger aptly discusses research skills in an article called “Research Paper Baby Steps” in which she suggests that the teacher break down research skills before asking students to synthesize them (Pfaffinger 75). The research should not be process-oriented but dialogue focused. Often teachers assign reading or research with an eye towards a product. A typical English classroom research paper is a classic example of such an assessment. And many research projects include a process component. Teachers collect artifacts of the process, as Anna did. These might include the note cards, annotated articles, or a metacognitive reflective piece as a part of the process. However, essentially, each of these assignments (themselves a transaction) is a record of work done after reading a text and therefore is no longer the same sort of student-centered, transaction-focused assignment that would build skills to enhance students’ transactions if they were completed during the reading of a text. Below is the assignment that grew out of those conversations, an attempt to rethink research as a tool for dialogic relevance. Yet there are still defined areas of inquiry for students based on Anna’s goals. We hoped to bridge from teacher-framed skills to student named relevance in a way that would allow us to support the development of habits/dispositions to support expanding notions of relevance:

Figure 9: Follow up e-mail to Anna from August 31, 2011

Possible Friday Plan

Journal Prompt-- 10-15 mins

10x10 Book Club Toolkit

In writing your memoirs, how do you ‘remember’? Especially since you were only 5 years old when the events contained in *First They Killed My Father* unfolded...

Memoir by definition is a collection of memories. I set out to write a story of survival for me and for my family from when I was 5 to 9. A lot of those memories I spent many years trying to forget, but I wasn’t successful. Those memories were never silent for me. In translating the memories from my heart to my head, into print and then to book form took a lot of research, including seven trips to Cambodia and many interviews with my relatives. The book told my story, but what really brought it to life was incorporating many others’ memories” (“10x10 Book Club Toolkit”).

Read together up to page 6 and discuss the Author’s Note/First Chapter- 25-30 mins

- The Author's Note ends with “this would be your story too” As you begin this book, what do you think this means?
- The first chapter has a lot of details about the setting- Phnom Penh- what details stick out to you? (Ung)

Introduce ongoing book assignments (fairness, vocabulary, and content connections) and assign first section of homework

To discuss... :)

Other ideas to substitute:

Loung’s Website- www.loungung.com

Photo slide show?

(Ung, “Loung: Author, Lecturer, Activist”)

Pol Pot's shadow- Frontline

First 14 minutes

(“Pol Pot’s Shadow”)

Dith Pran’s Last Word on NYTimes

“please everybody must stop the killing field...”

(“The Last Word: Dith Pran”)

The goal of the content connections is one idea with democratizing potential. Although teachers often share our transactions with text when we offer our interpretation of a theme or idea of a text, we rarely ask students to share with their peers the ideas that they looked up while reading. Making more visible the areas of the text that prompted the reader's research is often not a public conversation. Anna and I discussed some different technology that could be used in order to allow students to share those ideas.

Figure 10: Sample Framing Lesson from September 5, 2011

Directions: As you read, you might come across unfamiliar vocabulary, ideas, places, people, or context that you are curious about or that would help your understanding of Loung's story.

Your assignment is to collect. Find out more about it and post a link here for your classmates in the following format:

You can add as many links as you want but by the time you finish the book, you should find add at least **3 links to the page in the following format:**

Please note:

- If someone else has added term before you, feel free to add it again with an additional link
- Please add new terms in alphabetical order
- Any link is fine, but make sure the information comes from a reputable source and that it has information that you think is worth passing along to your classmates
- You can add more than 3 links but they should be connected to things that you were curious about as you read...
- At the end of the book, you will also have to turn in a brief assignment about the activity and describing the links and the experience you had finding them.

Cambodia

Page:

Link: <http://maps.google.com/>

Description of Link:

A Google map of the country and you can scroll in to see the capital Phnom Penh

Contributor: Anna

Cyclo

Page: 2

Link: Google image search for “cambodian cyclo 1970”

Description of Link:

There are lots of images to show what Loung was used to riding in and showed her class.

Contributor: Anna

Ung, Loung

Page: N/A

Link: <http://www.loungung.com/acorn.php?page=home>

Loung is the author of the book and this is her webpage. You can see pictures she posted from recent trips to Cambodia

Contributer: Anna

These assignments attempted to incorporate some of the principles of relevance that Anna and I discussed.

CHAPTER SEVEN: THE RELEVANCE OPPORTUNITY OF MEMOIR

In this chapter, I will discuss the ways that applying the principles of dialogic relevance during the reading of a memoir provides a significant opportunity to develop civil literacy habits described by Jay Robinson (14-15). The ways that readers understand themselves in relationship with others, become more informed about the experiences of others, and put ourselves into relationship with others are potential outcomes of this type of reading and relationships in the English classroom. Dialogic relevance assignments engage students in finding relevance as they read, making connections that are not limited to the teacher's reading of the text but rely on the dialogue between the reader and the text and include expanding background knowledge as a means to creating relevance. Often we think of background knowledge as information one needs to read a text, but like all aspects of ourselves we bring into our relationship with a text, background knowledge is not fixed. And by attending to it as a part of dialogic relevance, we will also engage students in civil literacy.

Civil literacy has to do with the ability and willingness to listen to others' voices and lives. As readers, this means we read with an understanding that we are attending to voices, but also give ourselves the tools to listen to the voices in such a way that presupposes we see them as relevant to our own lives. In other words, we can see how learning about others is significant to ourselves. John O'Connor argues for the use of personal writing in his book *This Time it's Personal: Teaching Academic Writing through Creative Nonfiction*. He describes a formula for a memoir saying that memoir is, "p(arts) + w(holes)= speaker's identity: in other words, we will find the art in parts and the whole amidst the holes. There is no pretense of completeness, only snapshots of a whole that is still under construction"

(O'Connor 67). As a way to foster habits of dialogic relevance, students reading a memoir would therefore have an experience of connecting themselves to texts as well as the speaker's identity, only partially represented in the text, with which they may not immediately see a connection. Also, because memoirs explicitly depict a life different from that of the reader, as we are all unique, research into the background knowledge needed to fully understand opens new contexts to students that allow them to expand their knowledge of the unfamiliar within the context of dialogic relevance and as a habit for civil literacy. These ideas resonate with those from the Professional Development organization Facing History and Ourselves. The organization explores the story of another Cambodian Genocide survivor, Arn Chorn Pond. The pedagogical framing that Facing History uses for Pond's story is "Everyone Has a Story." In a sense this explicitly points readers to the ways that we can listen to others, in particular through a story of genocide, and change the ways that we participate in our broader community (Facing History 7-14).

Memoirs present an opportunity for dialogic relevance and concern about habits of civil literacy that is discussed by Dawn Latta Kirby and Dan Kirby. They describe the genre, and their goals for using it. They refer "contemporary memoir" (CM) a genre developing over the last 20 years, in an article, "Contemporary Memoir: A 21st- Century Genre Ideal for Teens" (22-3). Their description of a CM includes: an episodic nature, narrative structure, silences in the text, unique relationship with the reader, and potential for a blend with fiction (Kirby and Kirby 24). While my own definition and use of memoir did not include these characteristics, some of the memoirs that I taught would fall into this genre. However, the ways that Kirby and Kirby articulate their interest in CM was similar to the development of my own interests in memoirs such as Loung's *First They Killed My Father*. Their interest in the genre

developed in part through their search for non-fiction, because unlike most literary fiction, the texts were not overanalyzed by critics, and also because the memoirs were closer to student experiences (Kirby and Kirby 22). They write:

Well-crafted CMs derive their power not from narcissistic recounting or triviality, nor from a text version of a reality television show, but rather from the honest unfolding of human struggles and triumphs from which important lessons are learned, significant family events are preserved, and generations of family members braid the cord of their lived experiences. For both professional and student writers, the best CMs do not read like pages from diaries or tabloids, but rather like the rich stories of literary novels. (Kirby and Kirby 23)

Ultimately, they conclude it is CM's power to help students approach the unknown as well. Their purposes for teaching the genre resonate for me and my priorities of developing habits of relevance and civil literacy. For example, as they point out, authentic questions arise with potential for research, linking nonfiction and fiction (Kirby and Kirby 25). Also, they write: "We teach CM because its themes encourage respect for difference and transformative interactions with cultural and ethnic diversity" (Kirby and Kirby 25). And further, the outcomes are that students engage with CM and may promote "self-awareness, multicultural understandings, and critical thinking....Most importantly, CM is about lives, and students have found great satisfaction in reflecting and writing about their lived experiences" (Kirby and Kirby 28). Exploring the unknown as well as the opportunities for relevance connection are sources for expanding the habits of civil literacy. Student experiences finding relevance connections from their own lives and the life of someone else simultaneously through reading memoir presents this opportunity.

However, also significant in my choice of memoirs and in my discussion with Anna was the extent to which memoirs we considered shared personal experiences about genocide or other examples of mass atrocities. The texts we choose encourage readers to put a human

experience into a larger social and political context and encourage relevance habits by inviting students to consider the individual's place within that context. Relevance is unique in a transaction with a text about genocide in the sense that the reader's relationship to the text is created within a complex context. Aside from the typical complexities of a transaction, this text and reader transaction is encompassed by the genocide context in which it was written and read. The reader and text also transact with that context in a visible way to allow teachers to make visible a habit of relevance. Because the context is genocide, relevance, while still dialogic within this context also acts as an umbrella over the transaction. In other words, the importance of the context presents a relevance for readers. Although a tool for making relevance explicit, this way of interacting with the context remains one of the options available within a transaction to further develop relevance.

From the first time I read a book from cover to cover, I have always thought of the power of a text to transport a reader to another time and place. And the power of literature to do so was evident from that first book, *The Phantom Tollbooth*. In my conversations with Anna, we often spoke about our love of reading and literature, but our deepest conversations centered around *First They Killed My Father*. I think it is a significant text for us because it is a memoir and also because it is a memoir about genocide. For Anna teaching memoirs and teaching literature have significantly different goals. Anna discusses her motivation for teaching *First They Killed My Father* saying:

Anna: You don't read *First They Killed My Father* because it is such a great amazingly written memoir. And it's a well-written memoir, but that's not why you're reading it. When you're reading *Gatsby* you're reading *Gatsby* largely because it is the quintessential piece of literature from that time period and it's a piece of art, it's a work of art. (Personal Interview. 7 April 2011)

Anna's comment leads us to ask why we teach *First They Killed My Father* and reveals a challenge in teachers assuming once stance towards relevance. Reading memoirs with accompanying research assignments (asking students to do research about points of interest within a transaction) provides opportunities for students to find relevance in other people's stories, makes real life visible in a way that allows time (to practice the habits), and creates a transaction that brings the author, the text, and the reader into a closer relationship to the world, history, and context making relevance experiences with habit forming potential readily accessible. A similar process could occur with a literary text as well but only if the goals of both reading assignments are connected to a dialogic relevance in which students themselves discover connections with the text through reading.

As a high school English teacher, my struggles with selecting texts were similar to Anna's struggles. As I tried to attend to the various responsibilities that I had to my students, my goal was always "fluency first." In other words, first and foremost, my efforts were to get my students to read and write. Trying to get them to read an entire book and to write were the first steps before I could even imagine trying to discuss literary techniques, the comma or in those days, even relevance. I was also one of those teachers who would, at the end of the year, be approached by a student who would ask me why I always chose such depressing books to read. Books like *A Lesson Before Dying*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and *First They Killed My Father* dominated my reading lists. I forced myself to select a new text each year and tried not to reinvent all the wheels, but my consistent choice was a unit where students would read memoirs and write their own stories for the first part of the school year. This was the unit that Anna and I began discussing and that she modified for her own classroom.

I started teaching Loung Ung's *First They Killed My Father* in part because of my interest in finding new memoirs that would allow students to learn more about the genre for writing workshop, when they would write their own memoir. *First They Killed My Father* was about a genocide that I knew nothing about when I began teaching it. The text did not fit in with my memoir unit in the same way as the other memoir texts did which suggested a particular view of relevance. For example, each memoir I chose might be relevant in that a young person wrote it, or was about a topic I anticipated would be of interest to my students. *First They Killed My Father* was unique; in my mind student relevance developed from learning something totally new. The relevance relationship did not develop along the typical lines of my teaching.

My response to Ung's text was connected to experiences that I had after learning about and teaching the Holocaust. As a young Jewish child, stories of the Holocaust were embedded in my bedroom library and in Sunday school. I read most of the Young Adult texts that were available on the topic and I vividly remember the mental image that I have of a young girl under a blanket as she hid in a wagon and crossed borders to get to a hiding place in *The Upstairs Room* by Johanna Reiss. The stories I read were generally about hidden children and although I knew that the Holocaust was a tragedy and had an element of personal "scary" for me, there was a lot that I did not understand about the context of these stories. My relevance relationship to these Holocaust texts grew out of having a shared aspect of our identity. Although more of the context was built in Sunday school when we studied the Holocaust and read *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl*, again for me the relevance connection my teachers focused on was the shared identity, culture, and connection to "my

history.” As they sought to help me understand my religious identity, they also tried to share this part of history as a part of my history.

I learned about the Holocaust outside of my family life for the first time in high school. I took a class on the subject and saw for the first time *Night and Fog*, a liberation video that is notable for its footage of concentration camps after liberation. It includes graphic imagery of bulldozers moving bodies into mass graves. Learning about the Holocaust in my public school was no longer in the realm of my personal identity or connected to learning about Jewish history as my past experience had framed the relevance. Because this history was not new but was being taught in a secular context for the first time, it was instructive to me about the nature of relevance as the teacher was asking me to connect in different ways to my learning that were also relevant. The teacher was redefining this important event not only in a secular way, but also in a way that did not include my personal response to the history as a Jew. Because he didn’t take into account my own relevance in the classroom dialogue, it was instructive to me in later years as I considered the particular ways that we teach about genocide when I taught the Holocaust. I chose not to bring in my personal connection and because of that exercised choice in my relevance relationship presented in the new context of high school and learned a new way to connect to a text in a relevant way.

It was with the distancing that I experienced in high school that as a young teacher, following the State of Illinois mandate to teach the Holocaust in 8th grade, I set out to teach *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl* to my mostly Polish-American students. Ignorant to the particular response that some in the Polish community have to the history of the Holocaust, I taught the unit in ways similar to strategies used with other texts. There were worksheets and timelines and character identification. At the end of the unit, I arranged for a

survivor to come and speak to the class. The principal approached me at the end of the day about my request for a small donation to be made to thank the speaker. Her reply was, “If all you needed was someone with a tattoo, I could have found someone to come for free.” I don’t remember my specific response to her, but I believe it influenced my decision to leave the school at the end of the year. The principal in that moment revealed the importance of understanding my own sense of relevance in order to account for the ways that that my own sense of relevance represented either an alignment with other readers or potentially an oppositional reading.

Sondra Perl in her book, *On Austrian Soil: Teaching Those I Was Taught to Hate*, echoes feelings that occurred for me in my teaching of *Anne Frank* that year, when I had attempted to distance myself from the history of the Holocaust. She writes:

When I first traveled to Austria, I did so as a teacher. But while there I also became a student. One of the lessons I learned is that a writing classroom offers those willing to grapple with unsettling issues a new place to stand, a place where prejudice can wither and empathy can be nourished. There is no teacher’s guide for this journey: the road to dialogue is rocky and full of pitfalls. (Perl xv)

Perl’s story puts her in dialogue with Austrian teachers who are trying to learn more about their own history of the Holocaust. Ultimately through dialogue and narrative, she tells the story of coming to know more about herself and her students and their relationship to the history, but she also positions qualities of relationships (*i.e.*, empathy) as a result of writing. Perl’s story is a helpful example of how a teacher can bring her own relevance into a dialogue with her students in ways that help students to shape her own relevance. In a sense, relevance is co-constructed when the teacher enters the space in this way. Either she enters it without a predetermined sense of her own connection or she enters the space with a

commitment to allowing students to experience a new transaction that shifts relevance from what the teacher predetermined to something that the student defines.

Anna believes that there is much to learn from the *First They Killed My Father* about the relationships that people create and maintain with each other. Anna has also had conversations about the text and about how this text speaks to issues of morality and democracy that she explored in her graduate work. In her Master's thesis, in which she grapples with the ways that literature can be used to help students to consider morality, Anna writes about two different parts of the book that she discusses with students. First, she focuses on Loung's life before the war and the pervasive social inequalities in Cambodia as an opportunity for research. Anna explains:

There are several facets of the book that provide excellent points of departure for considerations of morality and social convention. In the beginning of the memoir, for example, the narrator describes the disparities between the different social and economic classes of Cambodians, apparent even to a four year old.

I take this as an opportunity to discuss the implications of a class-based society, in which people are born into a particular economic or social class with no possibility of ever changing their situation. Obviously this issue involves a consideration of justice, and to make it a more meaningful discussion we compare the class issues in Cambodia with our own class issues here in the United States, or to get even more local, in Chicago (Nucci 1997). This topic also provides fruitful discussion on the types of structures that are in place in these different societies to ensure the maintenance of social classes. Ung makes sure to highlight the kind of education she was receiving in Cambodia, which included being taught several different languages. This was yet another way that her childhood experience differed from that of the Cambodian peasants, again ensuring her status as upper class. I invite students to consider, or possibly even research, the role that schools might play in our own society in perpetuating the existence of different classes of people. This is not a difficult topic to get into with students living in Chicago, where discrepancies in schools are easy to discover. (Smith, "Pedagogy of Morality and Democracy")

Anna hopes to use research to deepen student understandings of class structure and struggle as a way for her students to connect to the story and to pursue larger questions about the nature of justice and equality. The invitation for student research is about a very particular

topic. While her goal is to support students in making a connection between the text and the sociopolitical contexts in which they live, Anna's research assignment is isolated from the transactions that her students have with the text as readers. In other words, the connection that Anna has made from Cambodia to schools in America was not created in dialogue with the students and the students were not in dialogue with the text, rather it was teacher-centered relevance based on her own relevance transaction with the text.

Anna's approach to this text is consistent with the arguments made for unit planning and generally, can be challenging with any approach that includes a teacher making decisions before the arrival of her students. But within an assignment that is teacher directed there are also opportunities to explore relevance. Aside from using research to connect students to issues that are present both in the memoir and in students' lives, like class struggles, she also discussed the ways that the text could support conversations about decision making:

In addition to the social justice aspect of morality, *First They Killed My Father* also lends itself to consideration of more personal aspects of justice and human welfare. Later in the story, as Loung and her family battle starvation, she includes a scene in which she steals some of the family's food in the middle of the night. This situation provides an excellent opportunity for moral discussion and moral problem solving (Nucci 1997). Nucci points out that, "Moral reasoning develops when students recognize inconsistencies and inadequacies in their moral positions" (Nucci 1997). In the case of Loung stealing food, students could work in small groups to determine whether what Loung did was simply immoral because stealing is wrong, justified because she was starving to death, or somewhere in between because her actions were likely to have a negative impact on her family. The situation could also be likened to situations that the students themselves might be more likely to find themselves in, requiring them to consider positions they might not have been likely to think about on their own. (Smith, "Pedagogy of Morality and Democracy")

In this description, Anna shows the ways that she uses literature to have students "practice" and examine making choices. She wants to use literature to think about the ways that people can make "moral decisions." She also discusses the potential for research as a way for students to engage in the text by making connections to their own lives. The points of

research described and their connection to the literature are interesting. The assumption behind these assignments is that students will research a “connection” that Anna presupposes exists. In her assignment, they will explore inequalities of the social structure and consider the impact of making a difficult decision based on a need. Unlike this assignment, focus on dialogic relevance would invite students to respond to the text, learn more, and explore self-generated connections to text.

As a reader, Loung’s situation did not make me reflect in the same way that Anna did. Each time I read that section of text, I did not consider if Loung’s choice as a starving child was right or wrong, but rather saw that information as a way to help me understand more about her conditions in Cambodia during the genocide. Dialogic relevance pedagogy would invite students to view this moment not through a linear connection: “what would I do.” Rather, in a dialogue with the text, the information that one gains as a reader would support a thorough understanding of the author. This habit of learning and seeking relevance outside of one’s prior experiences and background knowledge is also an aspect of dialogic relevance. If a student brings the unfortunate experience of being hungry to her reading, her dialogue would be different in that she has an additional choice to include their understanding into their relevance connection. However, in this case, the unfamiliar becomes an invitation to model finding relevance. The experience of transacting with this moment in Loung’s life represents an opportunity for dialogic relevance pedagogy if the teacher attends to that moment as complicated and most likely with the unknown.

It is significant that Loung’s choices can be viewed as a way to reach greater understanding of the Cambodian Genocide. Authors Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub collaborated on *Testimony: Crisis of Witness in Literature Psychoanalysis, and History* and

discuss the Holocaust in a way that should be seen as a similar opportunity. The conversation between them, as a literary critic and psychologist, brought the lenses of literature and psychoanalysis to bear on a discussion of Holocaust literature and testimony. Felman and Laub suggest about the dynamic relationship between history and story in the foreword to their book:

Issues of biography and history are neither simply represented nor simply reflected, but are reinscribed, translated, radically rethought and fundamentally worked over by the text. In order to gain insight into the significance and impact of the context on the text, the empirical context needs not just to be *known*, but to be *read*; to be read in conjunction with, and as part of, the reading of the text. (Felman and Laub xvi-xv)

But Felman and Laub do more than emphasize the importance of context. They also discuss the ways that a reader is also reading that context.

We thus propose to show how the basic and legitimate critical demand for *contextualization of the text* itself needs to be complemented, simultaneously, by the less familiar and yet necessary work of *textualization of the context*; and how this shuttle movement or this shuttle reading in the critic's work- the very *tension between textualization and contextualization*- might yield new avenues of insight both into the texts at stake and into their context- the political, historical, and biographical realities with which the texts are dynamically involved and within which their particular creative possibilities are themselves inscribed. (Felman and Laub xv)

The “contextualization” and the “textualization” are key aspects for building a dialogic relevance. The text itself calls on the reader to transact with the context at the same time as the text in order to understand both. The pedagogy of dialogic relevance is concerned with the habits that are involved in this process of textualization of the context as a part of transacting with texts. In other words, we read the context as we read the text, using habits of relevance. Since their discussion is about literature and testimony of the Holocaust, Felman is speaking to the underlying desire of those texts to convey the experience of the Holocaust. However, their insight has implications for the ways that readers read other memoirs as well. Textualization of the context gives a way for dialogic relevance pedagogy to speak to the

need for students to be in relationship with context at the same time as the text and again to be in dialogue with that context, in this case the history.

They go on to discuss the importance of the reader as a “witness” particularly in stories emerging from the Holocaust. John S. O’Connor makes an interesting connection to the voice of a memoirist saying, “voice is the quality that makes our description of an event unique, distinct even from those of other witnesses to the event” (O’Connor 72). Felman and Laub write about a similar role of the reader who is unfamiliar with the context and in a sense the voice that they bring to the transaction saying:

[W]e underscore the question of the witness, and of witnessing, as nonhabitual, estranged *conceptual prisms* through which we attempt to apprehend- and to make tangible to the imagination- the ways in which our cultural frames of reference and our preexisting categories which delimit and determine our perception of reality have failed, essentially, both to contain and to account for, the scale of what has happened in contemporary history. (Felman and Laub xv)

Their discussion is particularly about the power of the testimony in the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale for which Laub played a role in as an interviewer. The description of witnessing is also linked to dialogic relevance because of the power of this type of memoir to reveal relevance in ways that we did not have when we entered a reading relationship with the benefit of background knowledge. The enormity of the experience of the Holocaust underscores a gap that our students might feel in trying to find relevance in a text that is so completely apart from that which is the known within their framework for understanding. While some make an argument that readers can connect to human emotion for example, Felman argues for an encounter with “strangeness” (Felman 7). And it is facing and confronting what to do with that unfamiliar “strangeness” that can be modeled through memoirs about genocide. In dialogic relevance, students act as “witness” to texts and by

accepting that they are entering a realm that they do not have a framework for understanding, they are able to see relevance in them dialogically.

In a chapter written by Laub titled “Bearing Witness” she discusses being a part of an interview with a survivor whose testimony included a story about the Auschwitz rebellion. In Laub’s story, she recounts how the survivor told of four chimneys being blown up. Historians who were listening took issue with the accuracy of the statement. Laub used this example as an opportunity to share how the significance of the testimony was outside of this detail and discusses the role of the listener. She argues that the listener has to be informed so that she can pick up cues in the story, but that knowledge should not get in the way of listening (Laub 61). The historians in the room were not able to learn from the story because they were distracted by a detail. A similar phenomenon might be applied to transactions with Loung’s memoir. The act of reading without information actually allows the reader to listen to the story in a more open way, invites the conversation for readers about the ways that background information might change our reading of the text and opens conversation about how and what we choose and what we choose to learn more about within the transaction.

Listening to memoirs in this way leads to moments that Laub describes in this way:

As one comes to know the survivor, one really comes to know oneself; and that is not a simple task. The survival experiences, or the Holocaust experience, is a very condensed version of most of what life is all about: it contains a great many existential questions, that we manage to avoid in our daily living, often through preoccupation with trivia.... The listener can no longer ignore the question of facing death; of facing time and its passage; of the meaning and purpose of living; of the limits of one’s omnipotence; of losing the ones that are close to us; the great question of our ultimate aloneness; our otherness from any other; our responsibility to and for our destiny; the question of loving and its limits; of parents and children; and so on. (Laub 72)

Through listening, the reader sees the larger relevance and is in contrast to the one that Anna develops through her conversation about morality, which asks for students to find the known

in an unknown situation. *Testimony* helps us to see the ways that dialogically, relevance emerges among the context, the text, and the reader in a way that opens up possibilities for future habits of civil literacy where listening to someone else's story is relevant for what it reveals about oneself in relationship to others and the world.

Felman and Laub's work clarifies the power of memoir research in dialogic relevance pedagogy. This is also an opportunity to model a habit of dialogic relevance as it requires a transaction with the reader as a witness and memoir as a testimony. Felman also however offers the particular power of memoirs about genocide through a connection to the act of bearing witness. She further points out how significant it is to consider the importance of entering text with the assumption that our dialogic relevance relationship will take place outside of what is known by the reader. The role of the reader as "witness" helps to better position relevance in the relationship between the reader and the text in a dialogic way. A reader as "witness" brings a range of choices concerning how a text is relevant.

How is the act of *writing* tied up with the act of *bearing witness*- and with the experience of the trial? Is the act of *reading* literary texts itself inherently related to the act of *facing horror*? If literature is the *alignment between witnesses*, what would this alignment mean? And by virtue of what sort of agency is one *appointed* to bear witness? (Felman 2)

The act of witnessing, in the reading of memoirs, repositions the reader's relationship to the text in a way that is significant to dialogic relevance. Just as when one witnesses an event, a reader makes choices about both what one sees and how one interprets it. The position of witness sets up a habit that is applicable to other reading as well. Because of the nature of the context and text in a memoir about genocide, the reader has a different type of relevance mandate. The mandate is consistent with the complexity of relevance; a reader has relevance relationships on multiple levels simultaneously. In other words, not to look for what one

already knows as a reader, but to pursue something that simply enhances your ability to transact with the memoir as an act of witnessing implies a responsibility to seek a relevance relationship with the text and context.

As described above, dialogic relevance can guide a teacher's approach to memoir and memoir about genocide. Anna's approach to the text with morality as a site of inquiry suggests a realization about the nature of inquiry. One site of this opportunity would have been the benefit of research assignments attached or as she describes "explore all the facets of the issues we raised":

Thus I found myself teaching a unit in Persian and Arabic literature and attempting to learn, with my students, about the similarities and differences in cultural attitudes between Muslims and Christians. While I had hoped that the unit would lead my students to increased understanding and tolerance of people from the Middle East and other predominantly Muslim regions, I realized that the way to accomplish this was not to arrange the lessons so that students would be led to these conclusions. Rather, the place to start was in my own classroom, by creating an environment in which students could experience moral growth because of their willingness to explore all facets of the issues we raised. (Smith, "Pedagogy of Morality and Democracy")

Exploring facets of issues through research is dialogic relevance and through her work on the project above, Anna came to understand a revision in her earlier thinking about the nature of teaching morality to her students that began with a focus on changing students. She wrote of that reflection saying:

My point of departure, then, founded on my perception of Stephanie, was based on the all too common premise that kids these days are bad, or lacking something, and need to be fixed. But because my goal was to "fix" students, I missed the fact that what needs to be changed are not my students, but the society in which they live, and to that end, the school in which they are expected to learn. If I am to lead them to becoming more moral people it will be through my ability to help them think critically about the world and about their place in it as well as to create an environment in which the school, or at the very least my classroom, is an extension of their community rather than an institution separate from it. Perhaps then my students and I will both be engaged in the moral endeavor of addressing and attempting to rectify the injustices that plague the world we live in rather than avoiding the

conversation that is a necessary first step in such a journey. (Smith, “Pedagogy of Morality and Democracy”)

Memoir is a good choice for modeling relevance transactions because in memoir real life is visible, and the tools that a reader uses to transact with a memoir are transferrable to enable readers to understand other stories that they encounter in life. Or, what Anna describes as the conversation at the outset of the journey towards greater understanding of the world. So, through an exploration of memoir, and with Anna’s reflection, the opportunity from witnessing memoirs to promote dialogic relevance was raised.

Also, by focusing on relevance transactions in memoirs, teachers can use pedagogy that emphasizes relevance habits through memoirs and makes clearer the range of possible relevance connections for students for a variety of texts. Kirby and Kirby in their article “Contemporary Memoir: A 21st- Century Genre Ideal for Teens,” provide helpful insight into considering the possibilities for the genre within a relevance context as well. The focus of the article is on reasons for using memoir both for reading and writing as they argue that CM moves towards the literacy techniques of novels without the burden of competing with the body of analysis created by literary critics (Kirby and Kirby 22). They also describe what can be gained from reading CM saying, “We teach CM because its themes encourage respect for difference and transformative interactions with cultural and ethnic diversity. Working with CM builds students’ awareness of numerous genres, invites students’ engagement with texts...” (Kirby and Kirby 25). The dialogic possibilities open when as teachers we focus on teaching students the “disposition” of relevance transactions. In other words, we not only ask them to understand how they are in relationship to texts but we also try to build dialogic possibility into that transaction by giving the tools for a transactions whose foundation is relevance that opens up endless possibilities for transactions.

Building research assignments into memoir reading assignments is one way to develop these habits. In the experience from the assignment Anna gave at the end of the school year, we sought to explore the critical components of the research as a tool towards more dialogic dispositions and as a set of habits to be used within a transaction. In general, the teacher's pedagogical considerations shift research so that it is connected more directly to the literature by being taught throughout the course of a text as opposed to as an isolated assignment. Research taught in this ongoing way leaves space for students' inquiry to be within the framework of their transactions with the text. This approach calls for us to assign research connected to literature that asks students to find out how the text contributes to their own sense of what Ayers called a "wider way of knowing," and to place those wider ways of knowing into a dialogue with their prior experiences and background knowledge (Ayers 158). One concrete pedagogy to explore is asking the students to inquire into relevance as readers who look up things they do not know about in a text. They would create their own continuity of experience, described by Dewey, between themselves and the text by reading non-fiction describing these connections in ways that are of interest for the student in the context of reading (Dewey, *Experience* 35). Understanding these relationships makes the students more civilly and civically literate because the experience expands their sense of relevance through the development of habits and explicit understanding of the options available. Students would also see these processes of finding relevance in a way that allows them to approach any new text, as a habit of "witnessing." The larger purpose of research for transactional reading shifts for the teacher to support a transaction to making research a reading skill that would actually shift individuals' transactions towards dialogic relevance.

The complexity of a memoir about the Cambodian genocide allows students to explore what Laurence Langer, a Holocaust scholar, calls “choiceless choices.” He describes these as “decisions made in the ‘absence of humanly significant alternatives- that is, alternatives enabling an individual to make a decision, act on it, and accept the consequences, all within a framework that supports personal integrity and self- esteem” (Langer qtd. in Strom 312). This term describes our inability to actually understand or relate to the choices that people were forced to make in concentration camps. Loung’s situation is one such context. Anna’s assignment is really about understanding the complexity of the context as opposed to trying to think about if the situation is moral or not. She wants the students through exposure to literature, “to consider positions they might not have been likely to think about on their own” (Smith, “Pedagogy of Morality and Democracy”). This is a skill of civil literacy- the ability to consider someone else’s situation, not necessarily to put oneself into their position (Robinson 14-15). And as Langer points out, especially in the context of genocide, this is impossible, but rather to seek to understand someone else by considering ourselves, we instead seek to understand with Ayers’ sense of a wider way of knowing. (Langer qtd. in Strom 312; Ayers 158).

When we revisited our conversation about goals for teaching the book in our conversation May 17, 2011, Anna also had to grapple with the common core standards. Her department chair had asked her to teach the theme of fairness in this unit and so she was going to be exploring issues of fairness in relation to Cambodia Genocide:

Anna: I feel like it has to be more lit[erature]. Like how does the author express the difficulties that she has? Rather than the situation I feel like we have to go that route. I feel like that’s what the skills are asking for. What devices is she using to let us know how she’s grappling with the situation? Less interesting to me, but I feel like that’s what it’s asking for.

Denise: Why?

Anna: It's talking about how literary devices produce meaning. Part of me doesn't want to leave behind the craft that she uses in this. It's an amazing story no matter what but it's well crafted too.

Denise: I'm a relatively literate person. What is my response to that? She uses great detail?

Anna: I'd have to reread it to be honest.

Denise: In any possible scenario what's a good answer to that? What are the devices that are available to a writer?

Anna: Imagery, they don't have to be particularly nuanced for sophomores. They'll say something is imagery but won't say why that's significant. Why does one use imagery in a story like that?

Denise: I guess. What you would be getting at though is why imagery is valid.

Anna: Why imagery is valued in a story about genocide?

Denise: They're writing about imagery as opposed to the themes of the book.

Anna: Can they do both? Can they talk about how the device affects the theme?

Denise: So let's play that out. If the theme is how are individuals resilient in the face of tremendous atrocity and you've asked the students to think about the literary device, what's the paper about?

Anna: She uses imagery to make the point that one must cling to one's identity.

Denise: So is the meat of that paragraph about... "clings to the identity" or "describing the imagery"? Is the topic sentence the imagery part? Is the meat of the paragraph describing the imagery?

Anna: I hope not.

Denise: I'm just trying to imagine writing this paper

Anna: I'm hoping that it would be more like here's a snippet of text where she uses very vivid detail and in that detail here's the point I think she's making about how important. That's what I would hope for. Maybe that's asking too much? (Personal Interview. 17 May 2011)

A tension in this dialogue is again connected to relevance. This tension arises from the fact that we are addressing the role of the crafting of the memoir as well as explicitly using the text for the issues that they raised about the context for the story. But for me, the craft is unconnected to the notion of relevance and will be a difficult paper to write. Refocusing this assignment to think about dialogue, instead of literary devices might be an opportunity to find non-fiction textual support to deepen the understanding of what the author was trying to tell in her experience.

For example, when I worked with Loung's story at Oak Street, I engaged students with the text and assigned research topics as well. For the most part, my assignment emphasized learning more about the genocide and thinking about Loung's personal experience. But based on the requirements of her school, literary elements were significant for Anna. Identifying theme was an important part of the curriculum map.

Denise: But I do think the question of theme is at the root of some of our conversations of some of our conversations last time too. Like how do you define theme for kids

Anna: I have a hard time with it. They [students] want some cute truism, "live life to the fullest" you know those types of things. I try to boil it down to author's message if a work is decent it's going to be more complex than that.... (Personal Interview. 7 June 2011)

The ways that Anna and I often helped students to find a connection to a text is undialogic in the sense that we make many assumptions about our students both as people and as readers. We also do not allow for the flexibility of changing ideas about what is relevant throughout the reading of a text. We teachers say, in essence, "here is the way that you also experience inequality." In a dialogic approach, students would be invited to share their own voices. A conversation in which we explored the ideas about the source of the research follows:

Anna: And I don't mind doing the research, what's your question, what do you want to know about? Kind of genuine inquiry based papers great, but then forcing them to connect to the literature's weird- it doesn't grow out of the literature at all....

Denise: You're kind of giving up on the literature thing. Talk more about that.

Anna: I feel like the literature connection is so forced and not genuine to what we are really doing... the skills that we're really worried about.

Denise: So, because your focus is skills the connections are going to be artificial.

Anna: Yeah. The paper doesn't grow out of the literature, it is added onto the end. It's like here's this theme about the American Dream and now you're connecting divorce to American Dream and [*The Great*] *Gatsby* to the American Dream. Not like what did [*The Great*] *Gatsby* make you want to research, like make you want to look into the 1920's...

Denise: Do you wonder about that paper?

Anna: That would be a better paper. That would be a more genuine connection to the literature, but that's not how our I-Search is structured. You know? That makes more sense to me. We did that more when we read *Fallen Angels* by Walter Dean Myers. Had them doing research about Vietnam, research about segregation... the black protagonist. That makes more sense. (Personal Interview. 7 April 2011)

Anna kept returning to ideas about the canon and the importance of teaching literary elements in a way that really pushed me to think about how my own reasons for teaching literature could be folded into what she was saying. Asking our students to be more deliberate in connecting to texts that they do not find relevant is what allowed our conversation to shift towards defining both why we thought those texts are relevant and also to encourage us to find ways to make space for them to find relevance. Initially our thoughts were focused on the ways we were thinking about background knowledge and how we could more effectively consider how dialogue would contribute to students' participation in the creation of background knowledge that would inform their transactions and also challenge them to personally develop individual approaches to the habits of relevance through their experiences with memoirs and research.

CHAPTER EIGHT: NARRATIVE INQUIRY, THE DIALOGUE CONTINUES

My experience in this project is echoed in Nancy Atwell's *In the Middle*, a book that inspired my teaching from my first classroom and also influenced the ways that I would come to think about this story, memoirs, and narrative inquiry. Especially important has been the emphasis Atwell places on stories:

The word *story* can be traced to the Greek *eidenai*, which means 'to know.' As a reader I look to stories to help me understand and give meaning to my life. As a writer I tell stories so I may understand, teaching myself and trying to teach others through the actions and reactions of those 'people on the page'... This book tell stories because it's the best way I know how to reveal myself, my students, and my subject: helping kids put written language at the crux of their emotional, social, and intellectual worlds. Framing these in my own story, the evolution that brought me out from behind my big desk, invited my students to find their ways inside writing and reading, and challenged me to discover who I am in that classroom-as a teacher, learner, writer, reader, and grown-up. (Atwell 3-4)

The story of my dissertation began to feel like a series of strange coincidences that are not only part of the story but also inform ideas for practical opportunities to make reading and literature more dialogic through research. These opportunities remain challenges though to our thinking about dialogic relevance and civil literacy and the last pieces of the story helped to clarify some of the questions that we hope to return to in our teaching and learning.

When I entered the room at the Hilton Hotel for the NCTE Conference in Chicago 2011, the story came full-circle. There was literally one seat left in the room for a presentation about a research project looking at writing assessments. The seat was in the very front row by the podium, the middle of three seats—probably the last place that I would voluntarily choose to sit. I asked if it was taken to a woman's back and when she turned around, it was Anna! She introduced me to her colleague and referenced our trip to Pittsburgh in 2002. Our back and forth conversation in that presentation was the friendly update of friends who have

not seen each other in a long time. The moment gave me pause though as the narratives, both the “story” and the “inquiry,” intersected (“Stories of Experience and Narrative Inquiry” 2).

Ironically, based on our work together, the next session we decided to attend was titled, “Reading Teacher/Literature Teacher: Fresh Takes on Historic Tensions and New Directions” and the speakers included Jeffrey Wilhelm, John Schmit, Michael Smith and Deborah Appleman. The convention booklet description set up the speakers’ goals for the session saying,

Our session will explore the ways in which reading instruction and literature instruction are inextricably intertwined in our secondary classrooms. Three experienced literacy educators will offer fresh takes on how to conquer the traditional divide between reading teachers and literature teachers to help better serve all our students. (“NCTE Convention Schedule 2011”)

This session offered Anna and me an opportunity to further clarify and distill some of the ideas we were exploring together through the research process. Our conversations about relevance over the years shifted our thinking about reading, literature and their connections as well. In our experiences, memoir research pushed us to think about reading and literature in new ways.

Deborah Appleman began the session and set up the idea of the distinctions between reading and literature. She had us complete an exercise called “Why I teach Literature” that included a ranking of 10 items from which we were supposed to choose our most and least significant reason. The options were:

1. To help young people explore their own feelings about their personal experience
2. To introduce students to great literary treasures
3. To allow a multiplicity of voices to be heard, especially those previously not included in literary study
4. To develop students’ aesthetic sensibilities
5. To develop reading skills
6. To develop critical thinking and writing skills
7. To learn to ‘read the world’ from a critical perspective
8. To discuss timeless themes such as love, loss, identity
9. To create an opportunity to discuss contemporary issues
10. Other. (Appleman)

In our brief conversation, Anna and I both ranked “to develop students’ aesthetic sensibilities” last and Anna felt conflicted between two selections “to learn to ‘read the world’” and “to discuss themes.” She also said that she felt like a bad person to not have selected the option that represented personal experience (Field Notes. 19 November 2011). But the lack of a decision about which one was the most important was reflective of a tension that I saw in Anna’s classroom and my own. These questions have to do not only with one’s reason to teach literature but also connect to the ways that a teacher views relevance and also perhaps it is difficult to make these decisions in a fixed as opposed to shifting way.

Appelman’s presentation also went on to point out how despite changes in our educational landscape, our list of most commonly taught books has not changed substantially over the course of many years. She also suggested the importance of remembering that students can have the ability to decode without a real ability to comprehend texts (Appelman). And for Anna, real comprehension was important as well as real connections for students to their own lives. She spoke about this issue during this presentation. She said, *Catcher [in the Rye]* is no longer relevant for students- the students did not like Holden. Why teach it if they can’t relate? (Field Notes. 19 November 2011).

Dialogic relevance pedagogy suggests that students can choose a relevance relationship with any text when they are given the opportunity to develop habits of relevance. They can find relevance through an invitation to explore relevance as “habit” of engaging with the unknown, an element of civil literacy. Even discovering and understanding why a student rejects the text’s relevance, is in a sense a form of relevance that is a part of the web of dialogue as opposed to a linear connection. The teacher of dialogic relevance supports

students' relevance habits as opposed to making a text relevant and the answer to Appelman's question seems to reinforce our thinking.

Michael Smith picked up on Appelman's thread and spoke next about the importance of teaching students "how" and the "what" of teaching literature. He also raised the issues of central importance to the book that he wrote with Jeffrey Wilhelm called *Fresh Takes on Teaching Literary Elements: How to Teach What Really Matters About Characters, Setting, Point of View and Theme*. The principles include how difficult it is for students to transfer the skills that they learn and invited us to think about both declarative and procedural knowledge (Smith and Wilhelm 10-11). They also point out in their text how they view the importance of moving from the "known to the new" and make an argument about sequencing our classroom activities in order to continue to build on new learning (Smith and Wilhelm 13).

Dialogic Relevance pedagogy argues that the "known" is a part of the transaction that should be honored as transactional and that students should be engaged in thinking about how they want to choose to develop what is known as it relates to what is "new." In dialogic relevance pedagogy, space is created to allow students to have multiple relevance relationships and to share them within the classroom as they also relate to the larger world outside the classroom.

And finally, Jeffrey Wilhelm discussed how we create a situation that will reward learning about setting, or context. He suggested teachers use an essential question for an inquiry into the different levels of setting (Wilhelm, *Reading Teacher*). *Fresh Takes* explores these levels of setting and suggests that students gain an understanding of the ways that setting is "rule setting" (Smith and Wilhelm 71). Using a number of instructional strategies, Wilhelm and Smith write, "We believe that truly understanding setting will lead

students to develop a wide repertoire of conceptual and procedural tools of immediate use to them now and in the future as readers and writers and navigators of their personal lives” (Smith and Wilhelm 110).

Dialogic relevance pedagogy asks different, but related questions. The central question, “what is relevant” guides the inquiry in a way that invites student readers to engage in the question without limiting features that will hinder the development of “habits.”

The next day, Anna and I attended a session about Immigrant Literature for the classroom that featured Aleksandr Hemon, author of *Love and Obstacles*, Bich Minh Nguyen author of *Stealing Buddha’s Dinner*, G.B. Tran author of *Vietnamerica* and Loung Ung who wrote *First They Killed My Father* and *Lucky Child*. Later, in a conversation we both agreed with Aleksandr Hemon, who introduced the session discussing how teaching literature matters—through the process of education and reading you expand yourself into the space of other people’s experiences (Hemon). This seemed to come to fruition that night when Anna spoke to directly to Loung after the session. She told her the story of a student who contacted her years after graduating to find out the name of the book that they had read in Anna’s class in hopes that she could share it with her sister. The experience of meeting Loung clearly influenced Anna and she was excited to share the experience with her students.

Dialogic Relevance Pedagogy draws on the idea that memoir reading is important. This type of reading can be connected to civil literacy and the ways that we listen to each other and “witness”. Something different happens when we read a memoir that is significant in dialogic relevance pedagogy..

There is significance to students viewing research not as an academic skill but as embedded into the ways that they view the world. Nilda Flores- Gonzalez describes the

relationship that a student develops with her school in *School Kids Street Kids: Identity Development in Latino Students*. Her book showed how fundamental a student's identity is to his/her developing a sense of relevance about schooling. As a part of an epidemic problem of school drop-outs, she suggests that this problem does not stem from a "cultural mismatch" as some suggest, but rather that dropping out is a form of resistance to the community that is being offered by the school and the identity shifting that would be required of them. While some of the students are able to form "school kid identities," others find themselves attached to the "street kid identities." She explains,

The problem is that for too many kids, schools are not conducive to the development of socially appropriate roles. Instead, schools deprive many students of the social support, prestige, rewards, meaningful relationships, and alternative routes to achievement they need. At the same time, schools expose them to, and further drive them toward, street identities. That is, school directly contributes to the development of street kids. (Flores- Gonzalez 13)

Flores-Gonzalez's suggestion to undermine this type of response is to support students in finding and assimilating in a meaningful way the personal relevance of both the "street kid identity" as well as the "school kid identity." She also shows the support that students will need to make that shift. This type of relevance requires that the teacher form a relationship with the student that enables the student to have the space to experiment with the different identities but also to find a way to make the connections between the identities of the individuals and the connection to the larger community in concrete ways, but not unrealistic ways. She also suggests that teachers should make sure that a student is recognized as an individual as a way to prevent this rejection of possibility (Flores-Gonzalez 155-6).

These fundamental identity shifts should be noted not only for what we can learn about how students connect to their schooling experience in general, but also for how such shifts can inform our English classroom pedagogy as well. These identity experiences should

enlarge students' imaginations about their identity and allow them to find the relevance of the work that they are doing in a deeply personal way. She shows us how moving toward "dialogic relevance pedagogy" seeks to connect students' identities to the work of the classroom.

Anna and I often spoke about the academic pursuit of research as a goal for teaching the research paper.

Anna: I've had such good conversations about that this week with my juniors. We're sort of just floundering around right now. I made them read Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants." And, can we just read this and enjoy it? Do we have to talk about it...? Why are you an English teacher? Why do you do this? Why did you major in English? Those are such valid questions. In thinking about the difference between reading in the English classroom and reading as a real reader, they're right to push that question in a lot of ways. How many in this room are going to be English majors? (Personal Interview. 7 April 2011)

The students' questions also suggest a feature of building relevance for students. To address the issues of transactions as a skill that crosses over between "school identities" and "street identities" as well as beyond the narrow academic exercise.

After NCTE, I gave Anna a book. At the time, I thought that over the course of time, she had given me so much that if she never wanted to talk again, I should give her a chance for closure. But she read the book and said, "The Wilhelm book you gave me is rocking my world" (Smith, Message to Author. 7 Jan 2012). When I asked why, she said, "...loving his articulation of the theory behind why and how to teach literature" (Smith, Message to Author. 7 Jan 2012). Later, Anna called to tell me that she was going to write an NCTE proposal so that she could present some of the new ideas that she is having about her unit planning. She is interested in thinking about how the limitations of school structures, including chronological assignments of American Literature, can be overcome and is more dialogic if students do inquiries. She told me about how she has been thinking about the book

that I gave her, *Fresh Takes on Literary Elements*, for the ways that it talks about procedural vs. declarative knowledge (Smith and Wilhelm 10-11). Additionally, Anna believes teachers should focus more with her students on “how to notice what’s important.”

She decided that her new assignment would be an inquiry into *Huck Finn* about how setting affects values. She talked about including some primary sources about slavery and student poetry. Her concern was with helping students to study setting in particular. Anna recognized that she was not only shifting how she was going to conduct her inquiry unit, but also she talked about the ways that she was going to assess students by also making connections to their own lives. She also said that she has decided to “be nicer” to her students and to try to focus on one aspect of their work as opposed to noticing all that was wrong with it. This reminded me of a conversation that we had in 2009 and I wondered if she had some ways to act on these feelings and some ideas for providing success (Smith, Message to Author. 19 January 2012).

With no answers, ultimately we both learned a lot from our work together. I can see a shift in Anna’s thinking and in my own. Maybe she will directly address relevance? Our call ended with Anna thanking me for helping her think through her NCTE proposal. She noted how helpful it is to talk things through and hear your ideas out loud. I said “of course”, knowing that I too have her to thank for the same thing. I got off the phone and I realized that our conversation in many ways was a real example of the power of both dialogue and self-reflection and inquiry to affect change (Smith, Message to Author. 19 January 2012).

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APPENDIX A

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT CHICAGO

Office for the Protection of Research Subjects (OPRS)
Office of the Vice Chancellor for Research (MC 672)
203 Administrative Office Building
1737 West Polk Street
Chicago, Illinois 60612-7227

Approval Notice Initial Review (Response To Modifications)

March 2, 2010

Denise Gelb, BA., MA
English
[REDACTED]
Chicago, IL 60660
Phone: (773) 878-1604

RE: **Protocol # 2009-1080**
"Literature, Reading and the Individual"

Dear Ms. Gelb:

Your Initial Review application (Response To Modifications) was reviewed and approved by the Expedited review process on February 8, 2010. You may now begin your research.

Please note the following information about your approved research protocol:

Please remember to submit a letter of support, signed by an authorized school executive, prior to recruiting or enrolling subjects at the school. The letter of support must be accompanied by an Amendment form when submitted to the UIC IRB.

Protocol Approval Period: February 8, 2010 - February 7, 2011

Approved Subject Enrollment #: 37

Additional Determinations for Research Involving Minors: The Board determined that this research satisfies 45CFR46.404; research not involving greater than minimal risk. Therefore, in accordance with 45CFR46.408, the IRB determined that only one parent's/legal guardian's permission/signature is needed. Wards of the State may not be enrolled unless the IRB grants specific approval and assures inclusion of additional protections in the research required under 45CFR46.409. If you wish to enroll Wards of the State contact OPRS and refer to the tip sheet.

Performance Site: UIC

Sponsor: None

Research Protocol:

- a) Literature, Reading and the Individual Research; Version 2; 01/18/2010

Recruitment Material:

- a) Recruitment Script; Version 1; 01/18/2010

Informed Consents:

- a) Timetable Teacher Consent; Version 2; 01/18/2010

Phone: 312-996-1711

<http://www.uic.edu/depts/ovcr/oprs/>

FAX: 312-413-2929

2009-1080

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b) Teacher Consent Form; Version 2; 01/18/2010

Assent:

a) Assent; Version 2; 01/18/2010

Parental Permission:

a) Parental Permission; Version 2; 01/18/2010

Your research meets the criteria for expedited review as defined in 45 CFR 46.110(b)(1) under the following specific categories:

- (6) Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.,
- (7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including but not limited to research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Please note the Review History of this submission:

Receipt Date	Submission Type	Review Process	Review Date	Review Action
11/20/2009	Initial Review	Expedited	12/03/2009	Modifications Required
01/26/2010	Response To Modifications	Expedited	02/08/2010	Approved

Please remember to:

→ Use your **research protocol number** (2009-1080) on any documents or correspondence with the IRB concerning your research protocol.

→ Review and comply with all requirements on the enclosure,
"UIC Investigator Responsibilities, Protection of Human Research Subjects"

Please note that the UIC IRB has the prerogative and authority to ask further questions, seek additional information, require further modifications, or monitor the conduct of your research and the consent process.

Please be aware that if the scope of work in the grant/project changes, the protocol must be amended and approved by the UIC IRB before the initiation of the change.

We wish you the best as you conduct your research. If you have any questions or need further help, please contact OPRS at (312) 996-1711 or me at (312) 996-2014. Please send any correspondence about this protocol to OPRS at 203 AOB, M/C 672.

Sincerely,

Sandra K Costello

Sandra Costello

Assistant Director, IRB # 2

Office for the Protection of Research Subjects

2009-1080

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Enclosures:

1. **UIC Investigator Responsibilities, Protection of Human Research Subjects**
2. **Informed Consent Documents:**
 - a) Timetable Teacher Consent; Version 2; 01/18/2010
 - b) Teacher Consent Form; Version 2; 01/18/2010
3. **Assent Document:**
 - a) Assent; Version 2; 01/18/2010
4. **Parental Permission:**
 - a) Parental Permission; Version 2; 01/18/2010
5. **Recruiting Material:**
 - a) Recruitment Script; Version 1; 01/18/2010

cc: Mark Canuel, English, M/C 162
Todd Destigter, English, M/C 162

VITA

Denise Gelb

EDUCATION

B.A. in English. University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI. May 1998.

M.A. in English Education. Teachers College, Columbia University. New York, NY.
Professional Specialization Upper Middle and High School Education. May 1999.

Ph.D. in English, English Education Department, University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, IL. Research interests: literacy, critical pedagogy, and reader response. Dissertation: Dialogic Relevance Pedagogy: Encouraging Complex Reading Connections Through Memoir Research. Chair: Professor David Schaafsma. Summer 2012.

RELEVANT TEACHING EXPERIENCE

University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, IL. Mentor Teacher/ University Field Supervisor, 2004-5.

University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, IL. English Methods Instructor, 2003-6.

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS

National Council of Teachers of English.

PRESENTATIONS

2004 National Council of Teachers of English, Indianapolis, IN. “Surprises in English Education: Challenging the Notion of Best Practices to find something ‘Relevant’” as a member of a four person panel at the National Conference for English Educators (NCTE).