Dancing With Our Partners:
An exploration of story and resonance in the literacy environment

by

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for the degree of Master of Arts
Graduate Department of Adult Education and Counselling Psychology
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
University of Toronto

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Abstract

This thesis describes a study that was done with tutors and students in Frontier College’s Beat the Street: Literacy and Basic Skills program. Using a qualitative methodology, it focuses on stories of literacy, life and learning from tutors and students. The author’s own experiences, stories and reflections as a tutor are an important piece of the work. The thesis operates on and argues for the notion that people are made up of their stories, and that they interact with other people and the world through those stories. This research process revealed many ways in which tutor and student perceptions of literacy, learning, and each other were affected by their stories. It also revealed that in the overlaps between stories lies the potential for a moment of profound connection and learning the author describes as resonance. The thesis explores some of the ways resonance was perceived to enhance the literacy environment.
Acknowledgements

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To all the wonderful OISE people who I’ve met along the way, and who have helped shape my current stories, particularly to Anne Goodman, Jean-Paul Restoule, Ed O’Sullivan, and Daniel Schugurensky – thank you! And a final thank you to the rest of my large family and all of my friends – in particular my amazing brothers, sisters new and old, my grandfathers and Emily, who has shared in this process with me since the beginning.
All artwork, including poetry, in this thesis was created by students in Frontier College’s *Beat the Street: Literacy and Basic Skills* program and is reproduced here with their permission.
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Dedication

For all my grandmothers: without you, I would have no stories.
Chapter One: Introduction

Words to Live By
By Venisha Smith

1 Reproduced with permission
Ten
By Venisha Smith

Back then
When I was just ten
I thought life was
Bullshit
All I could see was
People being mean to me

I was being punished for something that
I did
But still not knowing what
I did

It seems that growing up
Was going to be rough for a girl like me
But I grew up and see things
Differently
People used to tell me
Venisha just stay positive
And you will see
In the end you will
Win.

2 Reproduced with permission
It was Sir Isaac Newton who said, ‘To every action there is always opposed an equal reaction.’ Had he been a writer, he might simply have said, ‘To every action there is a story.’

- Thomas King, 2003

After that same show, another child asked me, with a 7-year-old’s unabashable honesty: “Sir, are all storytellers professional liars, or just some of them?” I don’t remember what I told him, but what I wish I’d said was: storytellers use fiction to tell the truth, and the more stories you know, the more ways you have to tell the truth. And the more truth you know, the more courage you have to make a difference in the world.

- Dan Yashinsky, 2011
As I look around my desk, I cannot help but notice the pen, the tea, the pad of sticky notes in front of me. And I cannot help but ponder, as I have often done, the thousand connections to story that each of those items has. Perhaps it began when I was very young, this inescapable urge to muse over the stories of objects. Perhaps it began because I grew up with stories – the mythology of Greeks and Romans and Haida, the fairytales of Germany and Hans Christen Anderson, the giants of Russia and mountains east of the sun and west of the moon were never far from my imagination. Or perhaps it began when I read a very particular book, whose name and author have been lost to the shifting sands of time. I do not remember much of the story, neither beginning nor end, nor any specific morals. What I do remember, however, is the particular power of a character in the book. She – and it could have been a he, but I remember it as a woman undoubtedly due to my own day-dreamy identification as the character – was able to pick up an object, any object, and know its history. She would get glimpses of the past lives of owners, see the countries the object had traveled to. She could tell if it has been stolen, and who had stolen it, and whether the object had been party to murders or births or love or laughter. She could feel the emotions of all of these experiences – and sometimes found them overwhelming. The sheer number of stories connected through and in one object – I have never forgotten the lesson that book, perhaps unwittingly, taught me.

The lesson is that the world is full of, surrounded by, made up of stories. And every single bit of that world – every moment, every person, every object – is full to the brim with connections to a thousand and one stories. I began to play this game of connection when I was quite young – where has that pen on my desk been? Who has it touched? Who mined the materials that made it? Do they have families, children like me? Who sold it in the store? Was it a part-time summer job, or permanent employment? What were they musing on when the pen passed from their hands to the hands of the customer? What connections does this pen have to dinosaurs?

Slightly later in my life, I started to play the same game with people. When I was 12, and first off to junior high, I had a friend who used to travel with me on the bus. We took the same bus every day, and after awhile we noticed that there was a regular cast of characters, so to speak. We began to take notes, surreptitiously recording what people wore, what they read, and generally how they acted. Stories of who they were, where they were going, how they were feeling began to flow from our observations and imaginations. One woman read Mauve Binchy, and regularly got on and off the bus at the same
stop as this guy. Now, we had no idea if these two had a relationship, or for that matter if they knew each other at all – they did not talk to each other once on the bus, so my hindsight assumption is they had little or no knowledge of each other’s existence. Our twelve-year-old selves, however, decided that they were in love. Then one day, the man stopped getting on the bus at the same time as the woman. Furthermore, the title of the Mauve Binchy book of the moment was something we thought quite melancholy. The woman, we knew, was heart broken.

In 1989, Robert Coles (1989, p. 24) wrote that “few would deny that we all have stories in us which are compelling part of our psychological and ideological make-up.” I think that most people would agree that everyone has stories. Most people have heard of the expression ‘that’s the story of my life.’ Most people, if asked casually on the street, would probably be able to tell you a story or two about their morning, or their family, or what the world was like when they were children. To truly understand the power of story in learning and teaching, however, it is necessary to take our comprehension of the effects of story to another level. As William Randall (1995, p. 4) argues, it is not only about “having a story but being a story as well.” Thomas King (2003, p. 2) echoes this idea in his Massey Hall lectures, claiming time and time again that stories are “all we are.” In other words, people are made up of their stories. All the experiences they have had, ideas they have encountered, or emotions they have felt – people exist through an innumerable and immeasurable plethora of stories that they begin collecting before they are born. In my mind, people are made of stories as much as they are made of atoms – trillions and trillions of atoms, trillions and trillions of stories.

If people are made up of their stories, as I believe, then they interact with other people and the world with those stories and through those stories. People’s stories change through these relationships; they are “negotiated through the interactions between those who tell them and those who listen” (Muchmore, 2004, p. 47). Further, people’s stories act as filters through which they initially perceive a situation. All information people receive is processed through this filter in a dynamic and interactive process. When two or more people meet, there is often an overlap in stories, or bits of stories, between
them – shared ideas or experiences or understandings or emotions. Within these overlaps, there arises the possibility for the phenomenon I will have chosen to explore in this thesis: resonance.

In the following exploration of my research, I will look at the ways in which I have seen story and resonance operating in the literacy environment. Our stories affect how, when, why, what and who we hear. Resonance can create a way for us to connect through our stories to other people, ideas and experiences. I believe that both story and resonance are an integral part of a healthy learning environment, especially one that strives to be learner-centered and holistic.

How I Came To Literacy
(a bit of my story)

Once upon a time I went to India. There, I met a group of young women whose determination – and constant good nature – put me on a path I never knew existed. Together we learned how to communicate with little language in common. They showed me the power that nonformal education can have for people, and I showed them how to do compound interest rate questions in Microsoft Excel. When I returned to Canada, I knew that adult education was something that I found inspiring – a good path to pursue. So I came to Frontier College, and began as a tutor in the Beat the Street program. I also began searching for a way to learn more about this new discovery that adult education was something I might be able to apply myself to in a very real way. A web search turned up OISE, and the rest is history.

Like many other tutors before me³, I stumbled into literacy. When I went to India, I thought I would be working with children in an orphanage. Not because I particularly wanted to work with children in an orphanage – but because that’s the package the

³ One of the tutors I talked to, as another example, got into tutoring simply because she walked past Frontier College every day, thought it was a beautiful building, and wondered what went on in there! “By chance” has also been identified in other research as a reason some tutors enter literacy work (Chandler et al, 2008, p. 13).
company to which I had paid my ‘voluntourism’ money had advertised. I was not going
to save any small children – I had no such illusions. I thought, however – naively or not –
that if I went to a country, I would rather experience it through working with people who
lived there, as opposed to aloofly gawking from hotel roofs. Not that I was not guilty of
that too.

I arrived on my first day in a small town known as Colva Beach, and was greeted
by the variety of staff. They took the 20 of us out-of-country folk through the variety of
jobs that we could spend the next 4-8 weeks involved with. There were a variety of
daycares, a couple orphanages, a beach school for children. A home for elderly people.
And a morning job teaching young adult woman from what was described as a ‘slum
community consisting of migratory workers from the North.’ The jobs with the children
grew quickly. No one seemed interested in working with anyone older than 10. I didn’t
care. In the end, it was down to three of us, and the elderly home and the teaching post.
The two others decided they would go as a team to the elderly home. And so off I went to
the young woman, and a new direction in my life.

When I got home from India, I typed some combination of ‘adult,’ ‘education,’
and ‘degree’ into Google. Some how, I ended up at OISE’s website. I mentioned it to my
mother, who enthusiastically launched into a description of the wonderful course she’d
taken there a few years ago. Hmmm, I thought. The application deadline was not for a
few more months. I went back to Google, and some combination of ‘adult,’ ‘education,’
and ‘volunteer position’ went into the search engine. Frontier College’s Beat the Street:
Literacy and Basic Skills (BTS LBS) program appeared. The only way to know if I was
still interested in this adult education, I thought, was to give it another try. I took the
mandatory three-day training, and hit the ground running. I have been a volunteer tutor
now for almost three years, and there is not a day that goes by where I do not learn
something new.

By the time the point came to apply OISE, my work at BTS LBS had gotten me
thinking about the backgrounds of the students I had worked with. Although BTS LBS
has an intake and assessment process for students in which a limited amount of background information is collected, I felt I had little knowledge of my students the first time I met them. I did not know their stories, which I felt were inherently important. How could I teach someone if I had no idea who they were? What they wanted? Whether I ever got to know them then depended on a large variety of factors. After beginning my studies at OISE, I found myself wondering about how student’s previous experiences, especially those with learning and education, might affect the interactions between student and tutor.

I decided to do a practicum at BTS LBS, to learn more. The practicum consisted of a program evaluation conducted through a series of focus groups with students, tutors and coordinators. During the process, someone told me about Adam Perry’s thesis (2008), *Beyond the bunkhouse: Exploring the learning of Frontier College labourer-teachers*. After reading this account of tutor learning in another of Frontier College’s literacy programs, I became interested in the learning experiences of the tutors at BTS LBS as well. I realized how much I had learned from my time in the program, both from the students I worked with and the processes we became involved in. I wondered how other tutors were experiencing the program. Finally, as the focus groups progressed and ideas unfolded, I began to see how strongly tutors’ stories – their experiences, beliefs, motivations, emotions – affected how they came to the program. The idea for a possible thesis was born. I started with a very general area of inquiry – stories of learning from tutors and students at Frontier College. It has been ever evolving from there.

**Beat the Street: Literacy and Basic Skills**

I would like to take this opportunity to provide some context for my research. Frontier College was founded in 1899 by a man named Alfred Fitzpatrick. He believed that “we must educate the whole family wherever the work is, wherever they earn their living” (Frontier College, 2011a). According to their website, Frontier College (2011b) is
dedicated to delivering a variety of programs and initiatives guided by the following philosophy of learning:

- All individuals have a right to learn and a right to literacy so they can better participate in their community.
- We go where people are rather than expecting them to come to us.
- We use a learner-centred approach whereby learners decide what they want to learn.
- We believe that every place is a learning place.
- We value a tutorial partnership where learner and tutor respect and learn from each other.
- We value the contributions learners, volunteers and partners make in the learning experience.

The Beat the Street/Literacy and Basic Skills (BTS LBS) program is one such program run by Frontier College. BTS LBS is tailored towards delivering learning-centered programming to at-risk youth, and includes one-to-one tutoring, a once-a-week math class, and a level one reading and writing class that meets four times a week (known as the Level One LBS class). The math class is run by volunteer tutors, and the Level One LBS class is run by a paid teacher, Kaydeen Bankasingh. I refer to Kaydeen and a number of the workshop facilitators by name in this thesis. Students’ real names are only used to give credit for their artwork, except in one case in the main text when the ideas I am referring to are explicitly to do with a student’s poem. All of these individuals have given me permission to use their names.

For the purposes of my thesis, I am using ‘tutor’ to refer generally to all people who are in a teaching position (paid or unpaid) with students in the BTS LBS literacy program – this includes tutors, teachers, and workshop facilitators brought in as part of the art project component of this research – unless I am referring to a particular individual (i.e. the photography facilitator said…). People working in frontline literacy get called a lot of things – from instructor to practitioner to teacher. I have chosen tutor because I feel it carries a connotation of connection, and implies a reciprocal intimate one-to-one relationship.
The students in BTS LBS come from varied backgrounds – from those who are experiencing or have experienced drugs and homelessness to those who have graduated high school but find they still cannot read or write to their satisfaction. Many come voluntarily, and others are mandated to come by the court system – according to the coordinator, some younger adults who find themselves in trouble with the law are given the choice of going to jail or going back to school.

Tutors also come from a variety of backgrounds. Unlike some other literacy programs, careful attention is paid to who is accepted into the program – both student and tutor. Match-ups are not random, but selected carefully by the program coordinator. Despite this care, tutors and students often have widely disparate backgrounds, and arrive at the program with an assortment of experiences and literacy practices.

As a final note, BTS LBS is concerned with the broad category ‘literacy and basic skills.’ It should be noted that when I refer to ‘literacy’ in this thesis, I generally am using the term broadly to refer to reading, writing, numeracy and the host of other learning that goes on in literacy programs. In Ontario there is a specific administration and accountability structure that is associated with the term LBS. I do not use mean my use of the term LBS to apply to this regime.

A Brief Ode to Methodology

I choose to explore my questions through a qualitative research design, specifically through people’s stories as well as through observation and reflexive inquiry. Qualitative research designs are “concerned with process, context and intricate detail” (Prasad, 2005, p. 9), and can therefore illuminate tutor-student relationships, including the complexities of their backgrounds and literacy practices. Further, many of the processes I am exploring are tacit or unconscious. Listening to people’s stories reveals subtleties of learning, literacy practices, and attitudes they may be unaware of.
To this end, I conducted 6 semi-structured interviews with students (3) and tutors (3), focusing on stories of learning previous to and during Frontier College. I also ran four focus groups, one with students, two with tutors and one with paid teachers and coordinators in the BTS LBS program. Through these methods, I was able to hear about what mattered to the participants, and their perceptions of the day-to-day process of literacy learning and teaching.

I also engaged with students in the LBS Level One class in a 5-month, once a week art class. Data from this experience came from reflexive inquiry and ethnographic research. The former involved thinking and writing about my own practices as a teacher in that class, and in relation to my previous experiences tutoring. The latter entailed observing the interactions between workshop facilitators (brought in for this project) and students, as well as between students and their regular classroom teacher. This classroom project was a more intensive study than an interview or focus group, giving time and space for more complex meaning to unfold. A number of workshop facilitators completed brief emailed questionnaires to further illuminate their experiences and perspectives. I believe important details about the evolution of relationships and learning in the literacy environment were revealed even in the one class in which they were present.

I am aware of the complex role that I played as a researcher in this process. I embrace the notion that in qualitative work, the “researchers are the instrument of study and their experiences and insights are central to understanding the phenomena under investigation” (Boston, 2000, p. 399). As a tutor myself, I am located within my research as someone who has actively participated in the tutor-student relationship. I thus have my own understanding of the process, my own experiences of learning, and my own opinions about how literacy programs ought to run. As an active participant, I tried to be constantly aware of and reflexive regarding my assumptions and choices, including how my presumptions might intersect with the responses and opinions of others.

Throughout this thesis, I have chosen to interweave narrative (story) with a more
'academic' approach to writing. I have also included some student poetry and artwork. I think that some ideas are best conveyed through story and image, especially in the context of this thesis.

For a more extensive exploration of my methodological choices, please see Appendix A: Exploring (my) Research Traditions: A Methodology.

A Guide to My Thesis

Chapter Two: The Call of Stories

The second chapter of my thesis describes and explores the relationship of story to adult literacy. I start off by reflecting on the nature of story, and how it is being defined and used in my thesis. From there, I move on to consider the place of both told and untold story in adult literacy and adult literacy learning. First, I look at the place of student story in literacy programs. Although it has long been a principle of adult education to ‘start with the student,’ student stories often end up being left at the door. At BTS LBS, this dismissal of student story is not overtly the case. Many tutors, however, struggle with how and when to allow story into the literacy classroom⁴, or into their relationship with students. Further, I do not believe that the current understanding of literacy as based in discrete skills and literacy programming as job training encourages a focus on student story. It certainly does not recognize the need to allow students to explore their stories in a safe environment, using a variety of methods outside the sanctioned realm of essay writing.

⁴ Many of BTS LBS literacy tutors do not work in what many people in North America might commonly consider a ‘classroom.’ They work in whatever nook or cranny they can find in the beautiful old building that is Frontier College’s Jackes Avenue headquarters. Sometimes, I take my students outside. Sometimes, people go on fieldtrips. I will, however, occasionally refer in this thesis to the ‘literacy classroom.’ For me, the ‘classroom’ works as an easily recognizable metaphor to indicate any space in which a tutor and a student, or a tutor and several students, conduct learning.
In the final part of chapter two, I question the lack of emphasis in literacy programming on tutor story. Although many tutors at BTS LBS do think about their students’ lives, most do not seem to spend time considering the impact of their own lives and stories on their beliefs, motives, or actions relating to their work in literacy. Except briefly in tutor training, tutors are not ever explicitly asked to consider or reflect on the implications of their stories. In addition, tutors express the desire to remain focused on the student and are uncertain how much of themselves and their stories to bring into the classroom. These factors contribute to a literacy environment where tutor stories are often perceived as unimportant or irrelevant by both the literacy institution and by the tutors themselves.

Stories, however, affect how tutors and students act in a literacy program. Therefore, the next piece I consider in this chapter is the importance of reflection and critical reflection as emphasized in teacher reflective research and research-in-practice. I highlight the need for tutors to actively incorporate the sharing of their own stories into their teaching. Students, it seems, are often as curious about their tutors as tutors are about their students. Creating a space where the effects of story are critically considered, and where story can be shared when and if it is needed, can contribute to a learning environment that is positive and equitable.

**Chapter Three: We Bring Our Stories**

In this chapter I attempt to show some of the influence that people’s stories have on their assumptions, beliefs and actions in the literacy environment. I am exploring the pieces of my research findings that highlight how tutors come to literacy programs with particular understandings of literacy. These views seem to be influenced by their formal schooling experiences, their emotional connection to certain ideas like ‘reading’ and ‘math,’ and a larger story that is being told about literacy communicated through government policy and the media. This understanding of literacy is largely based in an individual model of learning that places a high value on obtaining discreet skills targeted towards gaining employment.
Limited exposure to issues such as homeless, as well as a view of literacy learners that emphasizes deficiency and individual blame may also contribute to assumptions that some tutors first have about the students who they might meet at a program like BTS LBS. I will look at a number of ways I saw these assumptions operating at BTS LBS.

In the next part of the chapter, I will look at how both student and tutor stories can affect what they expect from a literacy program, as well as what they will accept. These expectations can be formulated through both negative and positive experiences of schooling, and are rarely or never straightforward. People are made up of a multitude of stories, and carry with them a multitude of identities. Our stories, and the effects they have on our beliefs and actions, are dynamic and complex. Without active, critical reflection it can be hard to recognize the many ways in which people’s stories are affecting their assumptions and actions in a literacy program. This reflection can be beneficial for both tutors and students.

**Chapter Four: Through Stories to Resonance**

In chapter four, I narrow the focus of my discussion to look at an important phenomenon that can be enhanced by actively incorporating story into literacy programming. I call this phenomenon ‘resonance.’ Resonance can be described as a deep connection to something – an idea, an emotion, an experience, etc. – that is found through echoes in a person’s stories.

In this chapter I will first describe the story of how I came to the idea of resonance. I will look at the importance of connection in the literacy environment, and how it relates to resonance. I will then more fully describe what I mean by resonance and how I understand it to operate.

I will briefly review how resonance is referred to in the literacy. The word itself is often mentioned, but only in one case could I find it defined as a concept in itself. The
notion of emotional resonance is a more widespread, but still rarely specifically defined. The term *emotional* also, to me, only understands part of the potential of resonance. I understand resonance as a whole-body phenomenon – people can experience mental, physical, emotional or spiritual resonance. Finding resonance can open people to listening and to learning.

**Chapter Five: Resonance in the Literacy Environment**

In this chapter I explore a number of ways in which resonance operates in the literacy environment – ways that can enhance the experience of learning for both tutors and students. Resonance can help tutors and students speak and feel across story. Tutors, through moments of resonance with student story, may be able to experience moments of empathy. These moments – when critically engaged – can lead to greater tolerance of student actions, and important glimpses into student circumstances. It can also help tutors find more creative approaches to literacy teaching that are more tailored to a student’s situation and need. I caution here and in this chapter that resonance should not be thought of as a way tutors can ‘step into a student’s shoes.’ People can only know and feel through their own stories.

Tutors may also find resonance with other tutor stories. Through the process of resonance, tutors may experience a release of emotion that can help them deal with the ‘vicarious trauma’ that has recently been associated with practitioners in literacy work. Resonance may help tutors face anxiety while sharing suggestions for coping with difficult situations. Through story and resonance, tutors can also learn new approaches to teaching, and actively reflect on their own experiences, ideas, and methods of teaching literacy. Finally, connection and resonance with other tutors may lead to an increased sense of confidence in one’s work and one’s self.

Finally, I will explore the connections between resonance and relevancy. Relevancy is a principle in adult education that has long been supported by research and called for by those working in the literacy field. I believe that part of the importance of
relevancy is linked with resonance; the more relevant or relatable the material or the approach to teaching, the more likely students are to find resonance. Students may be more likely to engage if they find resonance with what or how they are learning.

Chapter Six: Finding Resonance

Resonance is not always an easy thing to achieve. In Chapter Six, I describe the ways in which I have seen tutors and students increase their chances of finding resonance – with each other, with different methods of teaching, and with the material being presented. One of the ways I have seen this happening is through movement and flexibility. Without movement, tutors risk getting stuck in ideas or ways of teaching that are not working for students. This experience can be frustrating for both tutors and students, and can significantly decrease the chances for either party of finding resonance.

I next consider the importance of relationship and of speaking to the student. Students who enter into literacy programs are often asked to give particular accounts of themselves, which can be limited by the contexts in which they are elicited. In response, some students may consciously or unconsciously don masks. Tutors and students therefore often find themselves working with student identities that are manufactured by the literacy program as opposed to critically constructed by the students. Although there may be aspects of self that remain constant, it can make it more difficult to find resonance when tutors speak to these limited and limiting manufactured identities, some of which have hardly any bearing on the realities of the students’ lives.

Building the relationship between tutors and students is an important aspect of the literacy environment for many reasons – but one of these is that an increase in relationship can help tutors and students to together explore, and refute if necessary, these manufactured identities. A stronger relationship between tutors and students also allows both parties to take risks with one another. These risks have the potential to lead to resonance.
Finally in this chapter, I will explore the underrated and often de-legitimized element of conversation in literacy teaching and learning. I will explain how I came to realize the importance of conversation despite my initial misgivings. Positioning conversation as a legitimate, and in fact essential, part of literacy work helps to take the burden off tutors who want to listen or know they must listen, but worry that they are somehow wasting learning time.

**Chapter Seven: Conclusion**

In my conclusion I share my experiences with conducting the art project at BTS LBS. Although I started the art project before I defined the phenomenon of resonance, I found that it ended up providing an atmosphere in which resonance happened in a frequent and powerful way. I attribute some of the success of the art project to the art itself – and the multiple ways of learning and knowing it contains – and some to the classroom environment Kaydeen and some of the students had spent a year building.

I go on to point out that there is much to be gained from further exploration of resonance as a distinctive concept. Further, although resonance is already happening in literacy programs, there are many ways in which the work of individuals needs to be supported by literacy institutions and literacy policy. Initiatives like the art project and other alternative approaches to teaching literacy are examples of what this support might look like. Tutors who struggle to find resonance and to let story into the classroom would also greatly benefit from a re-conceptualization of how literacy, learning, and what goes on in literacy work are understood. Finally, I re-emphasize the importance of being open to exploring how story affects both students and tutors in the literacy environment.
Chapter Two: 
The Call of Stories\textsuperscript{5}

\textbf{LARRY}  
By Nicole Healy\textsuperscript{6}

\textsuperscript{5} Taken from the title of Robert Coles’ 1989 work \textit{The Call of Stories: Teaching and the Moral Imagination}.  
\textsuperscript{6} Reproduced with permission
I AM ALIVE
By Lily Diaz

Life is you
Life is love
Life is more than what you decide.
Decide to be or to become look up and see
It’s your mom she gave life she gave love
But most of all she whipped your behind
To show you that life can be over
As soon as you say
Mom I am sorry
I wish I would have been there for you
Just like you were there for me
So in the next life I will see you with hugs and kisses
From me to you

7 Reproduced with permission
Long before there were written records, there was storytelling. We are all storytellers. Stories were central to how I learned when I was growing up and it is the stories that I heard in my literacy classroom that had huge impacts on how I conducted my practice. I heard stories of success, adversity, and of overcoming hardship and barriers. These are the stories we collect as research in the daily process of our practice. By paying attention to these stories we improve our practice; stories are also a means for participants to reclaim voice.

- Margan Dawson (2008, p. 23)

We had a story to tell about literacy work – its complexities, messiness, frustrations, excitement and small celebrations.

- Trent Valley Literacy Association (2004, p. 2)

There is a story I know. It’s about the earth and how it floats in space on the back of a turtle. I’ve heard this story many times, and each time someone tells the story, it changes. Sometimes the change is simply in the voice of the storyteller. Sometimes the change is in the details. Sometimes in the order of the events. Other times it’s the dialogue or the response of the audience. But in all the tellings of all the tellers, the world never leaves the turtle’s back. And the turtle never swims away.

- Thomas King (2003)
Introduction

The idea that stories play a large role in people’s lives is not new. In the last 30 years, the concept of narrative has become influential in disciplines as diverse as social sciences, performance studies, political thought and policy analysis, theology, and health research (Richardson, 2000. Hyvärinen, 2006). Despite this recent surge of interest, the idea of story is still uncomfortable for many people raised on a diet of positivistic notions of science and teaching. James Muchmore (2004), in his book *A Teacher’s Life*, describes his struggle to come to terms with the use of story and narrative in his research, and their importance to understanding teacher belief and practice. He (2004 p. 5) writes that:

*Through my formal education, there was always an implicit assumption that knowledge gained through empirical-analytic research was vastly superior to that which was gained through personal experience. The former was trustworthy and indisputable, while the latter was unreliable and idiosyncratic. In such a world, there was no place for the stories that my grandfather told.*

Stories, however, are essential to our understanding of our selves. We gain our knowledge through our stories – whether that story is one that our grandfather tells, or we have experienced personally, or is fed to us by Statistics Canada. Stories, therefore, are inextricably tied up with our living, and with our learning. Muchmore (2004, p. 7) came to this realization during his first year of teaching, when he experienced a “rude awakening” when “none of the models, none of the programs and none of the elaborate systems that been so highly touted when [he] was in college” seemed to work. Instead, he discovered something very different about the process of teaching than what he had been told in teacher’s college:

*Teaching, I discovered, was much more than simply implementing a set of procedures that had been deemed ‘correct’ by the experts. It involved the lives of children – not just their lives as students, but their lives outside school as well. And it involved the lives of teachers too. (Muchmore, 2004, p. 7)*
Aboriginal Knowledge

Although it is still trying to find its place in Western education, North American Aboriginal thought has long understood and espoused the importance of stories and storytelling to humans and to human living and learning. Gregory Cajete (1994, p. 117), a prominent Aboriginal professor and theorist in Aboriginal science and education, writes that:

*Humans are storytelling animals. Story is a primary structure though which humans think, relate, and communicate. We make stories, tell stories and live stories because it is such an integral part of being human.*

Thomas King has also contributed to the current North American popular understanding of the importance of story to living and learning, especially though his Massey Hall lecture series (2003, p. 95). He muses:

*Did you ever wonder how it is we imagine the world in the way we do, how it is we imagine ourselves, if not through our stories. And in the English-speaking world, nothing could be easier, for we are surrounded by stories, and we can trace these stories back to other stories and there back to the beginnings of language. For these are our stories, the cornerstones of our culture.*

Although I do not have an extensive knowledge of the various Aboriginal worldviews, I think it is important to cite the prominent role they have had in shaping my beliefs and many of the ideas I put forth in this thesis. The importance of story, relationship and holistic approaches to learning are themes that I have encountered again and again in my limited exposure to Aboriginal systems of learning and knowledge giving. I have been excited by the resonance I have found with these ideas, and they have enforced my belief in the power of these ideas while in many ways enhancing and enriching them. Although I have not been able in this thesis to fully delve into Aboriginal ways of understanding – in many ways because it is not my place – I have made use of some of the work of a few prominent Aboriginal scholars. I want to respect the importance of acknowledging and emphasizing that there are other systems of knowing in which many of the arguments I make in this thesis have been made long ago, better than I have here.
Story in literacy

In this chapter, I will explore story and its place in literacy. In the first part, I will consider the meaning and definition of the word ‘story.’ Although not an easy subject to engage with or explain, I believe it is nevertheless important to try and impart an understanding of how I am using the word in my thesis.

Following this discussion, I will move into a reflection on the intersection of adult literacy and story. Adult literacy and story have had a long but uneven relationship – research does not always reflect practice, and practice does not always reflect research. Story, however, clearly plays a vital role in the literacy environment. The importance of valuing student lives has long been discussed in adult education literature, although the idea of ‘story’ has not always been specifically focused on. My research indicated, however, that many tutors are often unsure about how to make space for student lives in literacy learning. Others wonder if they even should. Recent research on the impacts of violence on learning, however, show that many learners cannot and should not be asked to leave their lives at the door. Tutors must allow for student story – both in understanding the impacts these stories have on students, as well as giving space to the expression and exploration of these stories through a variety of methods in the classroom. In order for these practices to become an embedded part of literacy programming, the definition of literacy, and hence the perception of what literacy programs ought to do, needs to be expanded.

Finally, I will consider the implications of tutor story. Tutors do not often consider the impacts of their own experiences on their beliefs and actions, not necessarily because they do not want to, but because they are not given the chance. Teacher reflective research is a long-standing tradition (Jackson, 2004) that has shown the importance of teacher reflection on their lives and actions (Muchmore, 2004). Similar ideas have more recently been re-iterated in literacy practitioner research-in-practice theory (Jackson, 2004. Norton, 2008a). Many of the insights garnered from this research
and practice, however, have not been translated to adult literacy policy or widespread
tutor practice – I had never heard of either of these theoretical areas or the ideas they
advocated until I came to OISE. Many literacy programs, therefore, are lacking the
resources – such as counselors or regular tutor gatherings – that would allow tutors to
actively and critically explore their own stories. Further, tutors are often told not to get
‘too close’ to their students. This sentiment can, in my experience, lead to a perception of
literacy teaching that includes an unexamined discomfort around sharing personal stories.
All of these factors can lead to a literacy environment that does not recognize or examine
how differences such as gender or race might play a role in teaching and learning.

Exploring Story

*I am my complex web of stories – infinite, dynamic, constantly evolving. I live and relive
them, most of them I cannot access. Each has light, shape, texture, depth, sound, motion,
colour, taste and smell. I interact with them through a kaleidoscopic lens – shifting
prisms of whirling perspectives – contaminated/enriched with bits and pieces, built up
residue formed in the context of my colour, race, class, gender, age, ability, environment,
family, school, relationships, work, mostly unprocessed nagging, haunting, shaming,
energizing, festering, blistering scenes, snippets, narratives. I mostly live on the surface
of these stories – as they whiz and whirl outside of my reach.* (Mary Brehaut in Stewart,
2009, p. 56)

What is story? Recently, some authors have sought to detangle and lay out more
fully the complex intricacies of exactly what constitutes narrative (Richardson, 2000.
Hyvärinen, 2006) and story (Moon, 2011). Generally, however, neither term is often
satisfactorily defined (Hyvärinen, 2006. Moon, 2011). Clearly, the question is not one
with a straightforward answer. I believe, however, that it is essential to attempt to convey
how I use and understand the concept in my research. Very broadly, I understand our
stories to be everything we have experienced or felt or been told in our lives. These
stories are constantly in motion inside of us and around us. They are constantly changing,
moving, reforming and reconstituting based on our interactions with the world and our
interactions with our selves. As Sheila Stewart (2009, p. 10), in her work *Powerful*
Listening: A Practitioner Research Project on Story and Difference in Adult Literacy, tells her reader it is “helpful to think of stories as porous, rather than fixed or stuck.” We live and we breathe our stories. Stories have both unspoken and spoken interactions. Stories are relational – they are dependent on the one who carries the story, the one who tells the story, and the one who hears the story.

At this point I think it is helpful to ask the question: is there a difference between story and narrative? Researchers and writers use them both interchangeably and as distinct terms (Moon, 2011). I agree with Jennifer Moon (2011, p. 5) when she recognizes that various authors, “depending on [their] habits and or disciplinary origins, … have legitimate but differing views on this distinction.” For the purposes of this thesis, however, I feel that ‘story’ best encapsulates the ideas I am trying to explore. I believe that narrative fails to capture the potential for complexity that story holds. ‘Narrative’ for me implies a story told (whether written or spoken or drawn). ‘Story,’ on the other hand, acknowledges the unspoken and the unconscious aspect of our selves. Further, narrative is often identified as a more academic term (Stewart, 2009. Moon, 2011), whereas story seems to be me to capture a broader array of ideas and audiences; I wish for my writing to be as accessible as possible. I will, however, use narrative to refer to the specific bits of story I am writing for this thesis. The use of this term in this case will hopefully help clarify when I am referring to a specific story I have written as opposed to story in a more general sense.

The ‘unspoken’ piece of stories is an important one. Moon (2011, p. 5) introduces the word ‘unspoken’ in reference to stories to “imply aspects of situation that are perceived or conveyed or operating other than directly through the words spoken.” According to Moon (2011, p. 5), “unspoken material” can involve affect (including emotions), imagery (including visual, aural, tactile and olfactory) and ‘atmosphere.’ This unspoken piece contradicts some theorists who postulate that stories must be told to exist (see Hyvärinen, 2006 for examples). Stories can and do exist – both consciously and unconsciously – within an individual. We repeat to ourselves many inner narratives that
can guide our actions and ideas, plus we may act on knowledge, experiences and stories we don’t even know we have (Perry, 2008).

The unspoken aspect of story also extends to the relationships that stories contain – to themselves, to other stories, and to the person that carries them, tells them, or hears them. No one thing exists in a story without a relation to another thing. To use a fairytale example, the big bad wolf in little red riding hood exists in relation to other characters in the story. Why is it the big bad wolf? Well, it is ‘big’ in relation to little red riding hood, who is a little girl, and it is ‘bad’ because it is intending on eating the good characters – i.e. little red riding hood and her grandmother. The ‘goodness’ of little red riding hood is subjective depending on the perspective of the individual who carries the story. Perhaps I have a fondness for wolves, and I happen to think that those who encroach on their territory with picnic baskets deserve what they get. Or perhaps I believe that the portrayal of wild animals as ‘bad’ is anthropomorphic and silly.

If the story gets told, these constructions will depend both on the perspective of the teller – and how they tell it – and the perspective of the listener – and how they hear it and how it interacts in that moment with their own collection of stories. Because of these dynamic interactions, the same story can never be told twice, although elements of the story will remain constant (Cajete, 1994. King, 2003). Cajete (1994, p. 116), writing about myths, explains that:

*In reality, every myth is renewed with each time and in each place it is told. Myths live through each teller and through each audience that hears and actively engages them.*

So what is story? Our stories are everything we have experienced or felt or been told in our life: story is what we know or what we might know. I say might because different ideas, memories, experiences, beliefs – stories – will be present within us depending on the current circumstances and our interaction with our internal and external environment at any given moment. Our stories are created both externally (outwardly experienced or told) and internally (physically constructed through our bodies, or felt, or
reflected upon, or envisioned). We are made of pieces of the stories that our parents told us as children, the stories that society has conveyed to us – both overtly and subtly – and the adventures we have been on with our friends. We are made of the daydreams we have had, and the pain we have felt. Our stories constitute the emotional, physical, spiritual and mental aspects of our selves. It is through story that humans find meaning in their lives, because stories are all we have to connect us, in both a conscious and unconscious way, with the world. Witherell and Noddings (1991, p. 1) write:

_Stories and narrative, whether personal or fictional, provide meaning and belonging in our lives. They attach us to others and to our own histories by providing a tapestry rich with threads of time, place, character and even advice on what we might do with our lives. The story fabric offers us images, myths, and metaphors that are morally resonant and contribute both to our knowing and our being known._

We must be almost constantly engaged in story in order to make meaning of our life and of the world around us. Cajete (1994, p. 138) writes:

_Story is the way humans put information and experience in context to make it meaningful. Even in modern times we are one and all storied and storying beings. At almost every moment of our lives, from birth to death and even in sleep, we are engaged with stories of every form and variation._

We are acting through our stories, and our stories are acting through us whether we are conscious of this fact or not. I believe, however, that when we actively engage and interact with our stories – whether through writing or speaking or drawing a picture – we become more aware of our selves. We can begin to know and understand our stories, and how they might affect our thoughts, beliefs and actions. We cannot change all of our stories, or the stories that we are being told, but with active reflection and some critical thinking, we might be able to begin to control where they are leading us.
For me, it's hearing the learner’s story, their stories. And listening to the stories and the experiences. And how their experiences have shaped them and impacted on their learning. I think about all those stories. And each one is so different. And each approach even as a teacher – the approach that I would use is really different with each one of them because each one is so unique. So that really keeps me going. (Tutor)

Story and adult literacy work have a “rich history” together, with story and story-related practices playing an active role in teaching and learning (Stewart, 2009, p. 14). In recent years, there has been increased attention paid to the impact of violence on learning through the inspiring work of those such as Jenny Horsman (1999, 2008) and the practitioner-researchers in the recent work Moving research about addressing the impacts of violence on learning into practice (Battell et al, 2008). Some of this work discusses and highlights the importance of making space for student story in literacy programs. In general, however, Stewart (2009, p. 14) believes that “little conceptual work” surrounding story and the use of story has reached the field of adult literacy to guide practitioners as they work with learners.” My research shows that many tutors are unsure of how to bring student stories into the classroom – or whether they even should be. Partly this uncertainty is based in a lack of recognition in policy and research of alternate approaches to literacy that are more holistic and aware of the need to acknowledge the impact of student story on learning.

There has also only been a limited examination of the role that tutor story plays in literacy programming. According to my research, tutors do not spend a great deal of time thinking about themselves at BTS LBS. There is an attempt in the newer tutor training to open this issue in some ways, however it is limited and ends when the training ends. Tutors are unsure about how much of themselves to bring to literacy programs – worries about getting ‘too close’ are compounded by the attitude that literacy should be all about the student. Tutor story is therefore often ignored or under-explored, both at BTS LBS and generally in literacy research and policy. Tutor story is crucial, however, for tutors looking to understand their role in the literacy learning process. It is through tutor story that tutors can begin to reflect on the attitudes they bring to literacy teaching, and
comprehend more fully their interactions with students. This reflection can in turn be beneficial to tutors’ emotional, physical, mental and spiritual well-being. Further, the sharing of tutor story in a classroom setting can be valuable to evolving the tutor-student relationship and creating a safe space for students to bring their stories to the table.

Allowing for student story

Today is the first workshop I will be teaching myself, and I am nervous. It is drawing and sketching, something I know well, and use as part of my everyday life – but not something I have ever taught more than in passing. As I begin, I notice Christine in the corner. I can tell she is distracted. Typically laid back, happy, and easily focused, today she has her arms folded and is whispering non-stop to the woman next to her. There is an intense energy of discontent coming off of her, in the way she moves, and glares – not at me specifically, but at everything around her.

After the introduction, I unroll a large sheet of paper so that students can experiment with different types of materials – charcoal and markers and ink and chalk pastels. When the paper is put down on the table… oh boy does Christine let loose on it! She explodes her anger all over the page … with words and with lines and running commentary. Later, when we work on still life, Christine draws all the objects quickly and with angry enthusiasm. She is letting something out in her drawing – releasing some tension that I cannot understand. By the time we reach the break, Christine’s anger seems to be mostly spent. She comes back quieter, more focused, and prepared to get through the rest of the afternoon.

I cannot help but reflect on a few ideas that come to me as I continue the class. Christine has clearly brought her outside life – her story in that moment – to the classroom. Whatever happened to her that morning did not get left behind when she walked in the door. As I pack up the pencils and brush the bits of crushed charcoal in the garbage, I ponder the nature of regular literacy programming – what if today had been essay-writing class? How could anyone have the energy to concentrate on formal writing or editing when they were so angry and upset? I secretly think to myself that a strict environment would have been detrimental to Christine – would have fuelled anger or frustration as opposed to allowing for it to exist naturally and then dissipate. Just a thought.
Jenny Horsman (1999, p. 231), a pioneering researcher in the effects of violence on learning, observes that students are often told in literacy programs that they should set “their issues aside.” She remarks that although some students are able – and willing – to make this concession, many cannot. She believes that there is a “need for recognition that issues which surface in literacy need to be addressed in literacy” (Horsman, 1999, p. 81). Students at BTS LBS are not asked explicitly to set their stories aside. In fact, they are often centered in discussions in the classroom and between tutors. There are aspects of student story, however, that still do not have a place at BTS LBS. In part, tutors seem unsure of how to address some elements of student story. I believe that these circumstances - the incomplete incorporation of student story and tutor uncertainty – have a great deal to do with a more general lack of focus in wider literacy policy and research on student story.

As in many literacy programs across Canada, issues of emotion and spirituality are often not given space at Frontier College. The impacts of violence in these areas, as well as on body and learning, are in my experience also not usually addressed. I do not believe that these areas are intentionally neglected. In part, I think that a traditional framework for literacy programs largely still operates at the policy level. While Frontier College emphasizes some areas like flexibility, multiple intelligences and respect for student difference, other approaches have more trouble finding acceptance. When I introduced the art project, for example, I had strong support from the coordinator of BTS LBS. There was more resistance, however, from others higher in the administrative chain. What does art have to do with literacy? I was asked. A whole lot! I answered. Art has, in fact, been identified as an important approach to bringing the whole person to learning, and researchers have begun to identify the variety of ways in which art can enhance learning (Childs, 2003. Norton, 2008b. Camnitzer, 2009. John-Steiner, Connery and Marjanovic-Shane, 2010). Thankfully, with a great deal of help from the BTS LBS program coordinator, the project was given a go-ahead and was, I think, an amazing experience for everyone involved, with a variety of beneficial results.
Based on this experience, as well as other observations from this research, there often seems to be a lack of institutional support for alternative approaches to literacy that might better allow a holistic understanding of the importance student story. It is not surprising, therefore, that many tutors appear to be tentative or unsure about how to recognize or give space to student story. Although it seems that some tutors learn how to let emotion and story into the classroom, there is still a struggle to figure out how much story, and when. Most tutors, even those who say they try to bring the whole person to learning, express uncertainty over how to deal with student’s lives in the context of literacy learning:

T: I think that what we’re trying to do is a very kind of narrow problem, it’s a literacy problem. But it’s a narrow problem in a big problem. Poverty, street involvement, etc. So, I wish there was more support around dealing with those things. I mean I know how to teach literacy, but I don’t know necessarily always how to deal with a mental health issue or a, you know, if a kid has been in a shelter and they’re getting beat up in a shelter.

T: That’s where I feel really deficient is when I’ll be sitting down with a student and I’m very aware that this student has a learning disability let’s say or a mental issue. But I’m not competent to deal with that. And I feel at a real loss. I feel like it’s a disservice to them.

T: I wonder how much any of us should know about the street, if we’re trying to beat it. I mean, I don’t think we learned anything specifically about the street\textsuperscript{8}. We did some things. We had scenarios about... if someone came from, if somebody grew up having to keep their siblings off drugs and their father from killing their mother, how could they learn to read? That makes sense. I don’t know. But I mean, “streets” is a biiiig sort of mystery. To someone like me. Even though I work in the shelters.

Some tutors wondered if, and how, dealing with students’ lives could be their place:

I’m here to help [the student] with X and tell me if I am succeeding or not or tell me what [they] need different. But I just have to ignore all the rest. Unless they need you to hear and they need you to help them with something. And they’ll tell you and then you’ll try. Otherwise you’ve just got to ignore it.

\textsuperscript{8} This is a reference to the name of this program, Beat the Street, and this tutor is referring to what she had learned in tutor training.
Recent research into learning and violence, however, shows that “it is not possible to remove the impact of trauma from literacy programs” (Horsman, 1999, p. 81). What if they need you to hear something, but are afraid to start talking? What if they themselves cannot express why they are feeling the anger they are feeling, or why the particular method of teaching being used is not striking the right chord because they themselves have not been given the opportunities to reflect? Student stories can be overwhelming for tutors to deal with – a theme I will return to later in this thesis – but ignoring them can create situations that may cause students to lose interest, or be unable to learn. At the worst, it may further perpetuate the institutional violence associated with learning that some students may have already faced.

It is important to note that I am not advocating for tutors (or anyone) to feel the impetus to ever forcefully extract student story. First of all, the telling of stories can be a dangerous thing if gone about uncritically or if pushed for in an unsafe environment. Sherene Razack (1998, p. 37) cautions against the uncritical use of storytelling:

*I want to suggest, from the perspective of a community educator who also works in academe doing legal research, that there are landmines strewn across the path wherever storytelling is used, that it should never be used uncritically, and that its potential for social change is remarkable, provided we pay attention to the interpretive structures that underpin how we hear and how we take up the stories of oppressed groups.*

Nor should stories necessarily be seen as a solution to past or present situations that students are facing. As Coles (1989, p. 129) writes, "the whole point of stories is not 'solutions' or 'resolutions' but a broadening and even heightening of our struggles."

There needs to be awareness, however, of the *role* that stories play in learning. Tutors have to figure out ways to give space for stories to be explored if and when the student chooses to explore them. When we focus on story and on bringing the whole person to learning, we realize the inadequacy of the current perception of literacy learning in many literacy programs like BTS LBS. There needs to be a greater focus in policy and research on the effects of student story on learning. More time and thought
need to be given to the appropriate way that tutors can allow for student story to play a role in literacy teaching and learning in ways that are as safe as possible both for the student and for the tutor.

**A place for tutor story**

Sandra walks in, sits down. She seems distracted today, distant. I can tell because her usual smile is absent. “Hello,” she says, automatically. “Hi,” I say. “How was your week?” “Not great,” she replies. “My best friend died.” I react, I’m not sure how well. “Oh,” I say, “I am very sorry to hear that.” Sandra does not get much done that day. I understand. When she breaks down and cries, I don’t know what to do – I awkwardly hug her. She is in my thoughts that week. I am aware of the implications for the coming weeks, and I try to account for that in my approaches. I stay away from material talking about the happiness of best friends. I give her space to be distracted and am forgiving when she misses a couple of sessions. She talks a lot about the uncertainty of life, and I let her. I respond in the best way I can. I let her write about it in her journal. We both understand that the experience is affecting what she learns and how she learns. I appreciate that the dynamic of the literacy space has changed in reaction to her needs at the moment. I also realize that the particular importance of the tutoring time for her has also changed – and that the very meaning of literacy may have shifted for her as she contemplates the meaning and fleeting nature of life.

Later, when she has left the program, and I am with another student, I think about how, when my grandmother died a few months earlier, I didn’t say a thing. As a result of my grandmother’s death, I began to reflect more heavily on certain things – how important art should be in our lives (my grandmother was an artist) – how much we should value the moments we have connecting with people – the vulnerability of parents. And these new emotions and reflections affected how I approached teaching, both in the short term and in the long. In the short term, I was definitely distracted, and I know it affected both my mood and my energy. It affected what conversations I wanted to have. It affected how able I was to talk and relate to certain activities. In the long term, it pushed me towards integrating art with literacy – a profound shift in how I viewed literacy, defined literacy, and practiced literacy instruction.
Yet at the time, I don’t think about this at all – not in the way I made space for reflection about the death of Sandra’s friend. I think of my life as detached from the tutoring session. After all, it’s supposed to be about the student, right?

Many tutors struggle to understand how to bring student story into literacy programming. Most tutors I have talked to, however, do hear a lot about the lives of their students. Many of them also seem to spend time thinking about their students both inside and outside the classroom. It was clear from the interviews, the focus groups, and my own self-reflection that many tutors think about what their students want to learn and what the best way to teach their students is. Some of them think about some of the difficulties students face, or have faced. Tutors, including myself, have expressed curiosity about the interests of students, their family lives, their feelings about school, or where they might end up in the future.

Many tutors at BTS LBS do not, however, seem to spend a great deal of time thinking about themselves in the scheme of the literacy program. There is confusion, and sometimes fear, about how much of oneself tutors should allow into the student-tutor relationship: Shouldn’t we just be here for our students? What if we get too close to the students? What do our experiences in school have to do with it – aren’t we’re imparting unrelated knowledge easily separated from our pasts? Like students, however, tutors bring their stories when they enter into a literacy situation. Just as literacy programming and literacy tutors should be concerned with student story, so too should the stories of tutors have a place. Focusing on tutor story creates an environment that is better for both the students and the tutors. It allows tutors to reflect on the impact that their stories have on their attitudes and approaches to teaching, which in turn may help reduce the likelihood of tutors replicating ideas or methods that are alienating for students. Active reflection on their own story can also benefit tutors’ wellbeing.

In some cases, tutors in literacy programs – like students – are asked to leave their emotions and their stories at the door (Horsman, 1999). This request is not part of the explicit tutor mandate at BTS LBS. In the most recent tutor training I attended in 2010,
tutors discussed using personal stories as teaching tools, and as of 2009 there is a poverty/diversity training segment. This piece of the training is meant, the coordinator who introduced it said, to try and get people to think about the why of literacy work. Generally, the reaction to that particular piece of the training was positive; one tutor referred to it as “fascinating.” Tutors expressed that they thought it was important because it started a discussion about how their lives might differ significantly from those of their students – and about how these differences might mean that people could look at the world in diverse ways. In other words, it got tutors thinking about how different stories can have an effect on how people – students and tutors – think and act in literacy programs.

The training, however, is limited in some important ways. One tutor thought it might have been restricted by the fact that it focused on “just one thing” and because she did not think tutors “learned anything specifically about the street.” Further, the overall tutor training totals only nine hours – and the poverty training is only 1-2 hours within that. In my opinion, this length does not allow for a great deal of time to deal with the complexity of ideas around tutor story let alone all the practical material that has to be covered. The poverty/diversity training is also relatively new. There is no updated training for tutors, so those who have been around BTS LBS more than two years have not been exposed to these ideas. These factors constrain the actual effectiveness of this training in bringing the focus at BTS LBS to the importance of tutor stories.

Beyond this training, there is little room for tutor story to be explored at BTS LBS. Although in some programs at Frontier College, regular tutor focus groups are held, at BTS LBS there is currently no built-in, ongoing chance for tutors to reflect on their practices and actions, or challenge each other’s beliefs. It was clear from talking to tutors that many had not, at least in any great detail, thought about how their pasts might affect their attitudes or actions at BTS LBS. When I asked the tutors in the interviews to tell me a story about their own schooling experiences, all three seemed taken aback. One expressed her surprise, exclaiming “my learning experience?!” Until I started this research, I myself thought little about the effect my life had on my teaching – except
maybe to feel relieved when a session was cancelled just before an essay I needed to write was due. I had also never spent time reflecting on my own privilege, and all the effects that might have on my assumptions about teaching and learning, among other things, until I got to graduate school. If asked, I might have been able to. But I was never asked.

Tutors I talked to also expressed uncertainty about how much of themselves and their own stories to bring to the program. There was a debate regarding whether people should open themselves up completely, or remain distant and aloof. No one thought that either of these two extremes was productive – so where, tutors wondered, was the balance between them? I remember that in my tutor training we were told not to get ‘too close’ to the students. Partially, this warning was meant to discourage tutors from giving money or home phone numbers to students. There was also discussion of the emotional cost that can come from allowing too deep a friendship to develop. One of the tutors spoke about the difficulties in balancing the relationship between her and the students:

_We’ve managed to develop a good relationship, an open relationship. I would say probably the biggest difficulty in that is maintaining a professional relationship with the students. At the same time that you do develop a friendship, you know you’re going to see each other and you spend a certain amount of hours together and you’re going to work closely together over a period of months, maybe a year. So that is probably... I can say that’s the biggest difficulty._

Again, however, there is not a chance for tutors to address these issues in any regular way. The focus group was the only chance many of the attending tutors had had to voice these concerns. In many ways, therefore, tutors do have to leave their selves at door at BTS LBS. Whether it is explicit or not, tutors are not usually given room, space or reason to explore their own stories or the impact of the stories they have to absorb.

I believe that the uncertainty over how much of themselves tutors should bring is compounded by a belief that pervades literacy research and policy – that literacy should be all about the students. Sheila Stewart points out that when tutors get a chance to really share and explore their stories, there are often moments of discomfort – but these
moments do not often find voice. Whether it is to funders, the board of directors, people outside of literacy work, or tutors coming into a program, tutor story – if it’s told at all – is often simplified (Stewart, 2009). In part this simplification of story, or even failure to realize these stories exist, is due to this notion that “if literacy is all about the learners, then practitioner discomfort does not count as a topic that deserves attention” (Stewart, 2009, p. 37). This attitude was reflected in my data – tutors want to talk about students. In both focus groups, the discussions mainly focused on the students. Questions focused on tutors like “what have you learned,” although they eventually produced amazing and insightful comments, were often met with more initial hesitation. Comments made by tutors such as “my goal was to achieve whatever it was that the student was there to achieve” further illustrate this conviction.

**Bringing the story into it**

Both of these attitudes, leaving your self at the door or putting your self aside for your student, contribute to an environment in which tutor stories are often perceived as unimportant and irrelevant, especially at the policy and organizational level. This attitude particularly comes across in the literature on literacy, which is heavily student centered and rarely focuses specifically on tutor story. These stories, however, play a crucial role in how tutors act in a literacy program. As I have mentioned, people’s stories function as a unique filter through which they process the world and any interaction with that world. These stories, both heard and told, serve to “shape the meaning and texture of our lives at every stage and juncture” (Witherell and Noddings, 1991, p. 1). Robert Coles’ (1989, p. 18-19) musings in *The Call of Stories: Teaching and the Moral Imagination*, although a discussion mainly of the profession of psychiatry, contains ideas that are widely applicable including to those of us working in literacy:

> Our questioning ...had its own unacknowledged story to tell – about the way we looked at lives, which matters we chose to emphasize, which details we considered important, the imagery we used as we made our interpretations. If our job was to help our patients understand what they had experienced by getting
them to tell their stories, our job was also to realize that as active listeners we
give shape to what we hear, make over their stories into something of our own.

As tutors interact with their students, they should be aware of how their own background
might be affecting their perceptions. Stewart (2009, p. 1), writing about literacy
practitioners, comments that “differences, such as race, class, gender, sexual orientation,
culture, ethnicity, and ability, shape how people listen and hear each other.” Although the
literacy tutors, who I have met at least, for the most part may try to respect difference,
without conscious and critically-engaged reflection it may be hard to know “what old
stories, stereotypes, and aspects of our backgrounds play in our heads” (Stewart, 2009, p. 6).

There is research that shows we often act on knowledge we do not consciously
realize we possess (Perry, 2008. Mündel and Schugurensky, 2005). How can I, as a tutor,
put myself aside for a student, when I am not asked to reflect on what my ‘self’ is, and
what it might mean in regards to my assumptions and actions? How could I put
something aside when I don’t even know what it is, or how it operates within me? Even
though our stories might be buried, they are not lost. The attitude that “I am here for my
student and that’s all that matters” may sound great when it comes to learner-centered
programming, but in some ways it misunderstands learner-centeredness – how can a tutor
be providing the ‘best’ learning environment for their student, if their perception of what
makes that environment ‘good’ is based largely through their own experiences?

Reflection has been described as “a process of exploring and engaging with
experience in order to make sense of it” (Norton, 2008a, p. 14). It does not necessarily
imply “making an assessment of what is being reflected upon” (Mezirow, 1998, p. 185).
The concept of critical reflection, on the other hand, involves thinking about the “the
assumptions underlying a decision or act and on the broader ethical, moral, political, and
historical implications behind the decision or act” (Yost, Sentner and Forlenza-Bailey,
2000). I believe that both are important in the literacy environment.
Reflection and critical reflection can contribute to a more equitable literacy environment as well as bringing emotional and spiritual benefits to the tutors and students. The importance of teacher/practitioner reflection is highlighted in at least two areas of research – teacher reflective research and the more recent area of research-in-practice for literacy practitioners. In the former, engaging in self-reflection has long been thought to be an “important part of teachers’ professional growth and development” (Muchmore, 2004, p. 137). The latter has been described as an opportunity for literacy practitioners “to step back and reflect more intentionally on [their] practice” (Norton, 2008a, p. 14).

Critical reflection could potentially help tutors consciously acknowledge issues of difference and power dynamics in the classroom, as well as consider their implications. Research-in-practice, which has a strong component of practitioner reflection, has been shown to “[open] doors to greater understanding about literacy practice” (Jackson, 2004, p. 6), partially through helping practitioners “identify and express what [they] know experientially and intuitively about being a practitioner” (Norton, 2008a, p. 14). Further, the reflection inherent in research-in-practice can lead to an “increase in morale, excitement and renewed energy” for literacy practitioners (Jackson, 2004, p. 6) while generally “developing the capacities of individuals to be engaged and creative teachers as well as to contribute to making schools better places for learning” (p. 11). I think that Ningwakwe/E. Priscilla George sums up these arguments brilliantly in Horsman’s (1999, p. 190) book on learning and violence:

_Doing holistic literacy requires that literacy workers be willing to examine themselves: What are their issues? Where are they coming from? What can they do to resolve them? In doing so, they not only may better quality literacy workers, they make for themselves a better quality of life._
Student voice and the sharing of story

The tutor-student relationship is another area that can be specifically enhanced by the sharing of tutor story. Students are curious about tutors, and in my observations of the classroom seemed to spend just as much time chatting about their tutors as tutors spend chatting about them. Creating a safe space that allows for student story can be enhanced when tutors are willing to open themselves to sharing their own stories.

In talking and listening to students I realized that many of them are as interested in tutors and tutor stories, as tutors often are about students. I asked students, if given the chance, who they would interview. One student replied:

*I would say, like, my tutors. Like I already sort of interviewed them, you know, coming in. You know when you have that one on one with them where you get to find out why, you know, why they’re doing it. But more of the tutors here, you know, and to see what are their tips, because everybody has different tips on how they were... So basically just pick everybody’s brain and see like, you know, how to do things and how to approach problems.*

Another student also wished to interview a practitioner working at BTS LBS. In class, I get asked about my life fairly regularly – do I have a boyfriend, where do I live, what am I doing in school. With the exception of one student, however, who was very outspoken and seemed to have no trouble asking anyone personal questions, I felt that these kinds of questions are often asked with trepidation. What are the boundaries, real or imagined, for students asking tutors questions about their lives? Are they, or should they, be any different than what tutors are allowed to ask to ascertain what they need to know about student lives? What power dynamics are playing out when a student feels it is inappropriate to ask about the status of my relationships, but theirs might be considered pertinent to literacy tutors and coordinators in understanding a student’s learning realities?

Students also sometimes seem to struggle to understand practitioners’ motivations and teaching approaches as much as tutors struggle to understand their students. I
overheard several conversations in the art class between students debating about the qualities of the various practitioners who worked with them. One would feel that a particular tutor was too invasive, and another would adamantly defend that individual as ‘just being concerned about our lives.’ Another time, a student was talking about how a tutor was way too strict and expected way too much. Again, another student (a different one from before) offered the argument that this tutor was just trying to ‘tell it like it is,’ which all the students present seemed to appreciate.

Considering the nature of the relationship in a tutor-student situation, it is not surprising to me that students want to know more about their tutors – whether it be more about their lives and backgrounds, or more about how they approach particular problems, or more about their motivations for tutoring in literacy. Creating an opening – a safe space – for the free exchange (though not coercion) of story can lead to a strengthened dynamic between tutor and student, and a greater sense of being equitable partners. In one of our email exchanges, Kaydeen spoke about the importance of sharing story in the classroom. This particular communication also indicated the significance for her of the pieces of story that were shared between herself and the students, something that I will be exploring more in depth later in this thesis:

*Stories in general have been extremely important to the way in which the LBS class shared, communicated and formed relationships with each other. For me, relating my own personal story to the class really allowed for a special relationship to happen between 'teacher and student'. After only a few weeks working with the class, I could see that my situation and really my position in life was only one step away from all of their own. I really only possessed a stronger command of the English language, both spoken and written than the group. That's all that separated us, and was all that allowed me to have a larger set of options when making decisions for my personal life and the direction it would take. I have been for the large part of my adult life, a single, working mother, who was able to attend university and eventually land a half decent job doing something that I enjoyed. I had to live on welfare for a short time and used the services and opportunities afforded to me to leverage myself out of one set of circumstances into another. I live in social housing ... could I relate well to my students? You're damn right I could. I spoke about my situation quite a bit in the early stages of our time together, that made everyone comfortable also speaking about themselves. There was no 'you' and 'me' dynamic amongst the group, there*
was only 'us' and this became evident to everyone internal or external who spent any class time with us.

There can be understandable discomfort on the part of tutors in sharing their stories with students. Stewart (2009) writes about one such moment told by a practitioner in her research. This practitioner, in one of the research sessions, told a story about “being told by a learner that homosexuals should die, how vulnerable this made her feel as a lesbian whose friends were dying of AIDS, and how confused she was about not revealing to the learner that she was lesbian” (Stewart, 2009, p. 40). I can think of moments in my own work where conversations have gotten uncomfortable around issues like homosexuality and religious beliefs.

I have also occasionally felt tension over the appropriateness of some stories. If students are sharing with me stories about how they ‘got high’ before coming to class, how do I respond as a tutor verses as a confident? If students are telling me about drunken antics on the weekend, how suitable would it be for me to then launch into my own university escapades? As in most things in life I have found, I think the answer lies in a dynamic and ever-shifting balance. In the end, it can only be up to the tutor what they feel comfortable revealing about themselves in a moment. If we are asking our students, however, to be open to exploring their stories – many of which are difficult and full of discomfort – than we cannot remain impassive and detached statues behind our masks.

**Conclusion**

Sherene Razack (1998, p. 51) writes that those who wish to engage in critical pedagogy must “begin with how we know.” I believe that this is an approach to teaching and learning that should apply to both students and tutors. There is a lack, however, of a cohesive and build-in structure that allows for and in fact requires space to be given to reflect on the existence and explore the implication of tutor and student story in literacy environments like BTS LBS. There are often no resources given to programs like art or
creative writing that can help students and tutors more carefully and holistically explore difficult issues. At BTS LBS, there is no ongoing chance for tutors to reflect on their actions and beliefs, and on how these might be changing through their time as tutors. In the case of the tutor training, the newer bit on poverty is appreciated by those tutors who have experienced it, but it is fleeting, and its implementation relies too heavily on the work of one coordinator who happened to see its importance. Further, it opens the door to the negotiation of querying only one part of how and what we know – specifically, socio-economic status. Issues of race, gender, ability and other forms of difference are not explored nor are tutors asked to unpack their experiences of privilege or oppression in varying contexts.

Tutors have to reflect on their own stories in order to create space to allow for students’ stories. If tutors are asking students to share and explore their stories, they must be asked to think about how their own stories affect how they will look at and hear the stories of students. They must therefore be open to and aware of their own stories, and to changing those stories if needed. Stewart (2009, p. 42) writes:

> Some group members commented that in telling stories and feeling that they were heard, their practice was affected, and their thinking about literacy. Something shifted a little for them. These shifts are important in a process which is about change, changing practice and ultimately social change. We discussed that our focus on changing learners can be problematic and we became clearer that for this research a focus on change within ourselves was important, helping ourselves become more aware in our teaching, more present, flexible, and creative.

Tutors cannot ignore their own stories. In doing so, a tutor may end up putting themselves before their student without even realizing they are doing it, even while espousing the belief that they are there only for the students. Without a chance for reflection, tutors may not realize how their own lives, present and past, could affect their actions or assumptions when they engage in literacy teaching. They don’t necessarily think about how their own experiences with school might affect how they operate in a literacy program: how they teach, including both approaches to teaching and what they might think was valuable for their students to know, or how their identities as mothers or
professionals might change how they view literacy learning. In Chapter Three: We Bring Our Stories, I will be exploring these exact phenomena – and looking at some ways in which I found tutors and students bring their stories to BTS LBS.
Chapter Three:
We Bring Our Stories

Virus
By Venisha Smith

9 Reproduced with permission
I use to hate class.

I felt like they put me in the wrong class.

Always was the last to do my work.

Others used to laugh at me.

My confidence shattered like glass.

How long was this going to last?

I used to watch the time go past.

I used to skip class.

I used to settle for just a pass.

All this happened in the past.

Now it is the present, working on my future too furthering my education.
on pense ou on a les pieds
(we think from where we stand)

- Québécois proverb quoted in Sherene Razack, 1998, p. 53

What happens when we make ourselves disappear? We can’t, we don’t, but we think we should – yet we are there.

- Sheila Stewart, 2009, p. 44
Every person evolves their own personal mythology and perceives and acts through the lens of that myth of self-creation. In the process of learning and education, one’s personal myth intertwines with a group myth that has been elaborated to preserve that group’s way of life.

If one’s personal myth is wholesome and able to integrate well with the group’s myth (as espoused through its educative process), then there is resonance with that group’s view. Education and the learning that results are compatible with the norms and expectations of that group, and there is little dissonance.

On the other hand, if one’s personal myth has another cultural frame of reference or is significantly different from the educational myth of the group doing the schooling, the potential for conflict and resistance is great. (Cajete, 1994, p. 137)

There were a lot of reasons why the tutors I spoke with got into literacy. One of the reasons tutors most often articulated, however, was the desire to do something good in the world. This explanation was usually accompanied by an expression of the belief that literacy teaching could be that ‘good’ – that literacy work was important, and that it was a good way to “give back.” A study done in New Zealand in 2008 (Chandler et al, 2008, p 73) found that the top three reasons cited for entry into adult literacy, both volunteer and paid, were enjoyment of “working with adults and/or young adults, a fascination with adult literacy, and the chance to do something worthwhile.” Another study found that the “top motivator” for literacy volunteers was the “opportunity to make a difference in the life of another person” (Community Literacy of Ontario, 2005, p 33). These findings are an indication of a very particular view of literacy – that literacy has the power to change someone’s world for the better.

What expressed motivations such as this show are that people’s visions of literacy, and of what goes on in a literacy program, will be fueled by their stories. There is a reason that some people grow up believing that literacy is a force for good, or that through literacy it is possible to ‘make that difference’ in the life of another person. As I
have mentioned, a person’s stories are made of their experiences, but often these experiences are shaped by larger stories and beliefs that a society perpetuates.

In this chapter, I will be exploring some of the ways in which both tutors and students bring their stories to literacy programming – whether they are asked to or not. My research shows that students and tutors come to literacy programs for a variety of reasons, fueled by a variety of emotions, hauling with them their experiences with learning both in and out of formal schooling. What they expect to find in those literacy programs is fueled by these same motivations, experiences and emotions. How they act, the assumptions they carry with them, and finally how and what they learn is also affected by these backgrounds.

All of these findings suggest that tutors and students do not leave their lives behind when they step in the doors of a literacy environment. Their lives, past and present, affect how they act and what attitudes they have. In other words, tutors and students bring their stories to the classroom. In this chapter, I will look specifically at how tutor stories affect their definition of literacy and their understanding and assumptions about students, and how tutor and student stories affect their approach to and expectations of literacy teaching and learning. I finish by considering the importance of reflection in the literacy environment.

**Just What is This Literacy, Anyway?**

Kaydeen, Stephen and I are having a discussion. The students have gone home – we’re tired, but animated. We’re talking about literacy. Stephen has just led a workshop with the students on understanding space – the way we think about space, the way we use space, how space can transform. It was one of the more physically active workshops and the students – if laughter and excitement are any indication – loved it. Kaydeen, Stephen and I are talking about many things – capacity building, community development, top down
transplants and bottom up models. We’re shoving desks back together as we talk.

We talk about relationships, sharing stories, the class. Stephen says, “the challenge was not getting energy from the participants, but preventing dispersion of energy into personal stress, and distractions.” I’m putting back up a piece of artwork that’s fallen down.

Now, we’re talking about literacy. I say I am not sure what literacy means. Kaydeen says that she used to think she knew, but now her thoughts have changed. Now she is less sure. What is literacy, anyway? she wonders. Is it about reading and writing? Or is it more than that? Is it about expressing yourself and your stories? About confidence? About being able to write about something that matters to you not just because you can write, but also because you can think about what matters to you? She finishes. The room is clean. We go home.

When tutors come to a literacy program, they often have certain expectations, and are influenced by a particular understanding of literacy. Although in many cases these beliefs and understandings are not made explicit, partially because tutors are never asked to articulate them, they still may have a large affect on people’s actions. In my research, I found three areas that affect how tutors perceive literacy: their experiences in school, the influence of a particular and limited story of literacy, and a perception of literacy fueled by emotion.

Influences of schooling

Leading British researchers Barton and Hamilton (1998, p. 10) talk about how particular literacies, as socially embedded practices, have been “created by and are structured and sustained” by institutions such as “family, religion and education.” These institutions, they argue, tend to support particular forms of literacy. In talking to tutors and students, and in reflecting on my own stories, I began to see some of the ways in which people’s schooling might influence their understanding of what literacy is. The
Trent Valley Literacy Association (2004, p. 27), an Ontario research group, points out that:

*Expectations often stem from societal norms. In our research, the institution of school has ingrained many ideas about what we consider to be academic achievement. It is measured by marks and books completed, evidenced by grades and pieces of paper called diplomas and certificates.*

In their study with literacy practitioners, they found that “an individual’s early learning experience greatly influenced what he thought important to provide for his student” (Trent Valley Literacy Association, 2004, p. 40). For someone who has not spent a great deal of time thinking about it, therefore, to be ‘literate’ may be partially interpreted as having achieved these indicators; if I got the piece of paper called a high school diploma, I am literate. It is not surprising, then, the shock that many tutors expressed upon realizing that some of the students at BTS LBS program have actually completed most or all of high school:

*T1: I was starting to learn that some kids really did never learn how to read. And I couldn’t believe that. You know, they’ve reached 17, 18 and could not read. I was astonished by that.*
*T2: In our school systems!*  
*T1: In our school system. I literally could not believe it. […]*  
*T3: My student has got his grade 12, and he can’t read.*  
*T4: How does this happen?*  
*T5: My student as well.*  
*T6: Yah how does this happen?*  
*T7: It’s mind boggling!*  
*T1: I don’t know how this happens.*

Nor is it surprising the level of emphasis that gets placed on the GED\(^{11}\). Tutors often seem to equate the GED with literacy ‘success,’ especially when they first start the program. This emphasis, however, does tend to change over time. One tutor said:

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\(^{11}\) GED stands for General Education Development or General Education Diploma. It is the High School Equivalency Certificate in Ontario. It is used by tutors and students at BTS LBS to refer both to the certificate itself as well as to the test that procures the certificate.
When I first started here I thought it was all about getting them to the GED program. But I’ve realized it’s not.

I think that tutors often start at BTS LBS thinking that the GED ought to be the goal of the program, because obtaining the GED somehow shows that the student has ‘achieved’ literacy. In this sense, literacy is almost being equated with the GED – to achieve literacy is to achieve the GED. Again, I think this shows that tutors often carry with them a story of literacy deeply rooted in their own school experiences – to be literate, you need a certificate.

The larger story

Many tutors, myself included, do not think about literacy before coming to programs like BTS LBS because we do not have to. Our relative privilege means that we never need to critically reflect on or worry about the kinds of literacy we engage in on a daily basis. Although some people may learn all too well the meaning of literacy in society through their experiences in school, the specific issue of literacy, and what literacy constitutes, is not usually taught or addressed in conventional schooling – at least in my experience. A child might learn to read, but they do not often get asked to reflect on what it means to read, nor will many even hear of the word ‘literacy’ until the day they happen to scan the 6th page article in the newspaper lamenting the lack of it in Canada. Therefore, the definitions of literacy that tutors bring to BTS LBS may be vague, uncritical and influenced by media depictions, which are in turn often influenced by government policy and institutions such as Statistics Canada.

In a lot of literacy-based research, in the media, and in government policy, literacy is often constructed in reference to “the development and observable achievement of a clearly defined set of relatively low-level skills” (Fulford, 2009, p. 45). Within this construction, literacy is seen as located autonomously within individuals (Evans, 2005). Analysis of the ‘lifelong learning’ discourse around literacy in Europe has found a similar trend – an emphasis on the “individual, isolated learner” that “downplays
the external forces that affect people” (Tett, 2005, p. 28). At a 2010 adult education conference I attended, we discussed how this particular view of literacy could lead to students being identified not as unique people with unique goals and stories but as ‘level ones’ and ‘level twos.’ I have heard this discourse employed frequently at Frontier College – as in, “so and so has very good writing for a level one” or “all of our level ones are this and that.” I believe that this discourse problematically unifies students under a lump rubric, and can erase forms of literacy that do not reside within a narrow view of reading and writing defined by external funding agencies or the GED. Success and goals are reduced to checklists defined not by the student, but by these disconnected agencies. It also serves to focus literacy teaching on the detached depositing of discrete bits of knowledge, tutor to student. Although in the last 20 years new approaches to understanding literacy, specifically theories of critical literacy and the New Literacy Studies (NLS), are starting to have a strong influence on the way many researchers think about literacy (Fulford, 2009), much of the popular discourse surrounding literacy remains focused on an individualized, deficit model (Coffel, 2011).

I believe that when many people arrive at BTS LBS, their understanding of ‘literacy’ is influenced by this discourse – even if they are not consciously aware that this conversation is happening. Sometimes this discourse – and the very narrow and particular form of literacy it entails – can become a particularly prominent story that may override a person’s contradictory experiences of literacy and learning in school or elsewhere. One such story that I experienced myself, for example, equates literacy with grammar. I have no particular memory of being drilled with grammar worksheets growing up, but I thought that was something that might be expected of me when I first walked into Frontier College. I was told that these expectations were entirely false – and that BTS LBS in fact tried to stay as far away from this style of teaching as possible. Nevertheless, my first student got a lot of verb-adjective-noun worksheets. I have not used them since – I tried with my next student, but that failed rather spectacularly – because I have since re-worked my own understanding of what literacy is several times. Yet, for me, there was obviously some strong influence at play that fostered a belief in the necessity for
grammar sheets. Another tutor spoke of expressing similar expectations when she was being interviewed for a tutor position at BTS LBS:

*I said it in the interview – I’ve got to get out, you know, “Elements of Style” by EB White and [the program coordinator] just laughed. “You don’t need that! That’s not what we’re doing here. That’s not what we’re doing.”*

This particular tutor, interestingly, was one who commented that she had had bad experiences in school amongst other reasons because it was “too cut and dried.”

I am not trying to argue that no students benefit from the use of grammar sheets. I happen to think that a large amount of the pertinence of a tool like a grammar sheet comes from how it is introduced and used. What I am trying to show is that, as tutors, our expectations of what ought to be taught in a literacy program (which is in turn reflective of what we expect literacy to be) are being influenced by a larger story we are being told about what literacy is. We have been told it so many times, and in so many subtle ways, that we often do not even recognize that it has become part of our own stories – or why. Why would I think that teaching someone to read and write involved grammar sheets, when I myself experienced no such thing in my schooling? Why would a tutor, who hated high school but loved open-ended university-style learning, think she had to brush up on her grammar skills because she worried the subject was “not [her] forte”?

Kaydeen and I discussed our own perceptions of literacy on a number of occasions. We both thought we had had a vague and undefined understanding of literacy when we first came to BTS LBS based, as mentioned in the narrative, in narrow notions of reading and writing. In one of our email conversations, Kaydeen said:

*My understanding of literacy was the basic version, just simple reading and writing. A person who was literate was someone who had the ability to read and write.*
I think that, in part, this definition exists in many people’s minds because they are not ever asked to critically reflect on what or how they think about literacy. Many may not even spend time thinking about it at all. I wrote back to Kaydeen:

*I don’t think I thought much about literacy before I came to BTS. I think that I also based it rather squarely in reading and writing, and with that sort of ‘isn't it terrible that people can't read and write' mentality. Although if you asked me to reflect on it, I might have been able to broaden that definition, no one asked me to - so I didn't until I actually came to the BTS program and experienced 'literacy' and literacy learning for myself.*

A few tutors talked about how much of their own literacy and literacy practices they had taken for granted before coming to BTS. In the same email where she described her previous vision of literacy, Kaydeen also commented that she did not think this vision was totally inaccurate. Rather, what had really changed for her was her understanding of how being ‘literate’ could play such a large role in a person’s day to day life:

*What has really changed for me is the way in which being 'literate' affects the way an individual is able to live their life and make the best decisions for their lives given that they possess those skills. Until I had the opportunity to instruct the LBS class, I had taken for granted the fact that I could pick up anything, read it, determine if it applied to me or not – whether it was truth, fact or fiction – and could easily make commentary on it if necessary. I realized that not everyone is able to live their life this way and without the ability to read and write the decisions that you make for yourself are based on other criteria and not necessarily the writing on the wall (if you get the drift). Literacy has really come to mean power for me, or empowerment if you wish. It is one way in which we can take control of our lives, and possess the power to move our lives in the direction we choose and not a direction chosen for us. It can give us great satisfaction, respect, confidence, and pride in ourselves and that takes us a long way in life.*

Another tutor also commented on the way her time at BTS LBS had caused her to think about how being literate could affect someone’s life:

*It’s a whole other world. I was not aware of the percentage of illiteracy – I was totally not aware of that at all. I had no idea. I guess it just... think! That just writing out a form, when you go to your doctor, you know to tell them your name and address and this and this and this. There’s all of those things that I just took*
for granted. And how they must fear for ... I mean I worked with someone once that... she is just a lovely person but she was just having a very difficult time in school. And she was just afraid to go to anything where she would be asked questions, anywhere where she would have to fill out a form. And oh my gosh, you’re so good at your job but you’re having trouble with this. And that would be hidden all those years.

I just love to read

A tutor’s understanding of what literacy is or should be can also be strongly tied into their emotions. The love of reading – and the desire to share that love – is a commonly cited motivation for literacy tutors (Community Literacy of Ontario, 2005. Chandler et al, 2008). Although personally this love was not a motivating factor for me, I certainly relate to it – I love reading and grew up in a household where more often than not you’d find my mother and I wandering around the house, doing chores, with a book stuck to our faces. In one focus group, it was clear to me that this love of reading was a prominent sentiment amongst the tutors, even those who did not voice it as a particular motivation. This attitude is particularly well illustrated by the general group reaction to a tutor’s story about a perceived success:

One success I would cite... it was more of a moment of delight than a success that had anything to do with my contribution. But a couple of weeks ago we were just exchanging pleasantries and ‘how are you this morning’ and ‘gosh it’s cold.’ And my learner said, “You know, I was reading my book, and I almost missed my subway stop.” I thought that was absolutely fantastic.

The cheering following this story was enthusiastic:

That’s why I’m coming here!

Amazing!

That’s what it’s all about!

The story had struck an emotional chord. I’ll certainly admit that I was one of the tutors expressing their excitement.
I believe that this moment illustrates a moment of connection to their work that it is important for tutors to experience in a literacy program – something I will explore later in this thesis. Tutors need to feel some joy in the process of teaching. And if a student develops a love for reading, than that is a wonderful thing because I believe that anyone finding joy in anything is most likely a wonderful thing. But for some students, the joy of reading simply may not happen. They may see reading as a means to an end, or be satisfied with obtaining news from the newspaper and never sit down willingly to read a novel. There are many people in the world for whom reading is not counted as a leisure activity. And there is nothing wrong with this either. In this case, however, there may be a disconnect between a tutor’s desires for a student and a student’s own way of being in this world, which could lead to disappointment, for example, if a student shows no interest in a book the tutor loved as a child. In this situation, it would be beneficial for a tutor to pause and reflect on how their own stories might be affecting them. This reflection may help a tutor both understand and come to terms with their own emotions, as well as avoid any unconscious or unintentional projection of disappointment onto the student.

**You want me to teach what?**

Emotion may also play into the fact that a lot of tutors are uncomfortable teaching math. In my experience, many people who had good encounters with reading and writing did not particularly enjoy math in school, or thought that they struggled with it. The coordinator of BTS LBS talked about how on a number of occasions, tutors have told her that they are here for reading and writing – they cannot possibly do math. Students, however, are often looking for a broad range of instruction, including in math. One student talked to me about how she was frustrated because she was doing so well in her reading and writing, but did not see any improvement in her math – partially, she believed, because it was not something her tutor was comfortable teaching. This student thought she was going to have to get math help outside of Frontier College.
I personally had trouble with math in school. I simply could not memorize my times tables, or calculate fast enough to complete the intensive timed quizzes our grade seven teacher made us do in the first ten minutes of every class. Although for some reason I stuck with it and even got through grade 13 calculus, I also would have thought I could never have taught math – except for my experience in India.

In India, no one told me what I should be teaching the women I was working with. One of the program coordinators at some point mentioned typing, so I spent two lousy days trying to teach 20 women – with one computer between them – how to type. It was excruciatingly boring, for me and for the women. At the end of the second day, I did what I should have done in the first place: I asked them, what did they want to learn? They excitedly told me that they wanted learn how to do problems in Microsoft Excel. A previous volunteer had tried to show them, but had, they said, not succeeded. When I looked at the question the volunteer had been trying to show them in Excel, I understood the lack of success. It was a compound interest rate problem. When I asked the women whether any of them had ever learned anything to do with percentages before, only one put up her hand. Shaking off the question of why anyone would decide that was the best way to teach Microsoft Excel, I abandoned the computer entirely for the moment and got to work on the math behind the problem. I relearned it all myself, and day by day taught what I had relearned to the women with the use of charts and paper and a whole lot of gesturing. By the end of my time there, every single woman did a question tailored to her level of math accomplishment in Microsoft Excel.

In that situation, I taught math because I did not feel I had any other choice. I had asked them what they wanted to learn, and that was it. It was only this experience – this story – however that led me to say ‘yes’ when the BTS LBS coordinator asked me if I could teach math.
Who is That Person Sitting Across the Table?

It is the first day of tutor training. The tutors snack on an array of welcoming snacks, including her favourite cheese with those perfect little crackers. The building itself feels so warm – a converted manor built in the early 20th century, she was told. Bought for a dollar when a development corporation needed to bulldoze the College’s own building to make a driveway. ‘Interesting story!’ Heather thinks. ‘I hope I can work here.’ She thinks about why she is here—her own children on their way to adulthood, and her realization that so many others would not have the opportunities they had. That was ridiculous, unfair. Reading is just so important. But despite her conviction that she is here for a good cause, Heather is nervous.

Other tutors slowly gather in the converted living room. They sit in chairs, arranged around several desks in the middle of the room. Some make small talk. Others choose to sit silently, pondering their decision to come here. Heather fidgets in her chair. One minute she is sure of her choice in coming here—they can’t read!—the next she is afraid of what she might find, who she might encounter. Is she really up to the task? A woman enters the room, and introduces herself as one of the coordinators of the BTS program. She explains the history of Frontier College, and of the BTS program itself. Heather loses focus—her mind is replaying her usual walk home from work. The reaching hands and the mumbled pleas for assistance. She has a pang of anxiety as she thinks of the smell that comes off of the man who wanders the corner beside her favourite coffee shop. The unshaven mess covering his face, the incoherent babblings, her own discomfort bordering on fear—what has she gotten herself into? She cannot do it. She cannot teach the homeless, what was she thinking? This won’t work!

At break she gets up and quietly asks the organizer if she can have a few moments of her time. “I want to be here,” Heather begins. “I think that reading is so important, and that we have to give people a chance to succeed in life.” She stops, her face turning red. She is embarrassed by her discomfort, and the request she is about to make. “I’m sorry,” she starts again. “I’m sorry but I just can’t tutor an older, smelly old street person.” The coordinator looks at her. She feels judged, but the coordinator does not berate her. “Don’t worry,” the coordinator says, “You’ll be fine.”
Five years later Heather is still with the program. She sits in the interview chair, facing me. She has just finished telling me the story of who she had expected to find when she came to BTS LBS. Now she is emphatic about how inaccurate her assumptions were, calling her image “ridiculous” and “stupid:”

*That was ridiculous – that’s not who comes through the door!*

It seems that some tutors enter literacy programs with expectations or assumptions about who they are going to find sitting opposite them. These beliefs are based in a wide variety of stories – stories of socio-economic status, stories of schooling and stories of exposure to certain ideas to name a few.

Heather, the tutor whom the above narrative is in part based on, attributed her beliefs to a lack of exposure to certain people and ideas:

*If you don’t know anything about people in poverty you think stupid things like that, right? And I mean looking back on that I was like oh my god. [...] Like I had never met a kid that had been in jail before, or selling drugs, or I’d never come across those people in my walks of life ... I knew these kids were either street people or borderline street people and that’s all I knew about them. I didn’t know... I had never experienced simply the working poor or the street people or at-risk people that you don’t see. I knew absolutely nothing about them, never saw them, never encountered them. And so [visible street people] are the only ones I saw. And I thought that wouldn’t, it wouldn’t work. I’d be scared and I couldn’t tutor them.*

This lack of exposure may be the case for many tutors who come through the doors of Frontier College, as well as tutors in other literacy programs. I myself had had limited exposure to issues of poverty, and I had never experienced it myself. I had a differing perspective of people who were homeless, however, only because I have had family members for whom it has been a reality. I knew, therefore, that ‘at-risk youth’ was just a label – and not one that should be viewed with fear or trepidation.
In addition to a lack of exposure, the way blame is attributed in certain situations in North American society is part of a broader story that is being told about literacy students that some tutors may bring with them to literacy programs. Another tutor said, of students entering BTS LBS, that:

...by that time in their life [they’ve come to BTS] they’ve usually realized oh my gosh I’ve really screwed up here, and I’d better get things together just in terms of steady employment.

This sentence reveals three important - and in my experience also common - assumptions about the BTS LBS students: 1. That they are somehow responsible for their current state, and 2. That students who come to BTS LBS don’t have steady employment and 3. That the purpose or goal of BTS LBS for students is to get a job. The first of these seems to be especially embedded in a discourse of individual blame that is widespread in adult literacy. In her chapter *Learning, Literacy and Identity*, Lyn Tett (2005, p. 28) writes about the dominant understanding of students in literacy programs:

Assumptions behind literacy programs are usually that people lack knowledge and are not motivated to learn, so educators must force or encourage them back into participation. Learning is also seen as an individual choice, so society sees adults who have failed to learn the basics as somehow deficient.

Cynthia Coffel (2011) also identifies the individualistic nature of society as a factor that influences people’s perceptions of the students in literacy programs. In reflecting on her own work as a literacy practitioner working with young mothers, Coffel (2011, p. 25) writes:

I know that though I didn’t intellectually believe that the poor could pull themselves up by their bootstraps, an unconscious part of myself was influenced by the individualistic discourse which every American breathes in daily. I knew that this belief made it more difficult for me to act with compassion, even with understanding, of the young women I worked with, even though I wanted to be understanding and compassionate.

The stigma of deficiency was reflected in the perceptions of students some tutors brought with them to BTS LBS. One tutor, for example talked about her original
assumptions that the students she met with would be unintelligent, and how much that had changed:

*I’m amazed at how smart the kids are that I deal with ... They’re just really smart a lot of them and for whatever reason they lost their way. So I was really surprised about that, I thought I would be dealing with people who were not very intelligent. And you know that’s why they hadn’t been able to be successful, and that’s just absolutely not true.*

When she told this story in the focus group, a number of the tutors around her nodded in agreement. Some students are very aware of the stigma that the position of being a literacy student carries. One woman I talked to spoke about how when she first entered the program she thought her tutor would assume certain things about her – that her tutor was “-going to hear me be this and she’s going to have all these things in her mind.”

Although my research showed that some of these perceptions are changed by a tutor’s experiences at BTS LBS, it still leaves me wondering how much of these assumptions are still operating covertly in a tutor’s mind. I also cringe a little bit when I think about how the initial students a tutor works with might face these unquestioned prejudices.

It is not just tutors who may enter the program with the misconception that students are unintelligent. Horsman (1999, p. 204) talks about her findings that “many learners think they are stupid and cannot learn” when they enter a literacy program. I experienced students with this feeling over and over again as a tutor at Frontier College. When students have gotten ‘stuck’ on a task, they throw out “I can’t do this, I’m too stupid.” I have even experienced this as an apology – as in, “I’m sorry, I’m too stupid to do this.” Is this a protective barrier? It is entirely possible. Certainly, I think that it is something that was learned in school, and possibly in other aspects of the students’ lives. One of the tutors I spoke to talked about how students could carry perceptions of unintelligence with them into a literacy program:

*It’s the same old thing that we – we don’t remember a compliment but we will*
remember something negative that someone said to us. So they go through life thinking about what they don’t know, not what they do know.

Tutors that are critically aware of these issues can help learners “to think critically about their own school experiences and [work] to avoid simplistic, pathological explanations of failure at school” (Tett, 2005, p. 29).

**Approaching Literacy**

The social worker came in, and told them about Irlen Syndrome – a syndrome that affects a large number of individuals, 12 – 14% of people. It’s not recognized by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manu...
hadn’t kept trying to label him, throw him in those ‘special’ classes. There’s no way that’s going to happen to him again.

Tutor and student stories will affect their feelings about what literacy programs should be – both in how those programs deliver learning, and what that learning will look like. Their stories – including what they perceive literacy to be and who they expect to find in literacy programs – will affect how tutors and students approach literacy both in how they expect literacy to be taught and what they will accept from a literacy program. These expectations can come both from positive and from negative experiences – in other words, people come with ideas of what literacy learning or teaching should look like as well as what it should not look like. No one story guides these expectations – they are formed by a dynamic interplay of stories. A tutor or student can be influenced by multiple experiences and identities.

The Trent Valley group (2004, p. 38) writes that when, as literacy practitioners, “we come to know our students and learn about their life experiences, we often find out they have had negative learning experiences both in and out of school.” I believe these experiences often affect what a student will find acceptable in a literacy program. The narrative above illustrates an example of this. This particular student faced a great deal of labeling as a child and young adult. He told me that he thought it was useless and actually had greatly impeded his learning. When a social worker was brought in to educate the students about Irlen’s, most of the students were receptive. This young man, however, was very resistant and refused to be tested. I was not present during this time, and was only told about it afterwards by the social worker, who was perhaps less aware than I was about this student’s particular history – I only knew because he happened to be one of the students I interviewed. Although I never got a chance to ask him about it, I wonder if his resistance stemmed in part from the very negative way he talked about labeling in his interview. There certainly seemed to be an air of ‘never again’ about it.

It is not just experiences in formal schooling that can affect how a student feels about how literacy teaching should be approached. When she first joined the LBS Level
One class, one student talked about how she had felt that another literacy program she had been in was not right for her. There were a few reasons that she talked about, including that the pace wasn’t right and the material was not suited to her level or needs. She also said that the program had asked her to reveal too much of her self, and that there was too much exploration of topics that she felt uncomfortable with. She commented that they “were always trying to get me to talk about myself.” After reading Jenny Horsman (1999, p. 86), and how “‘all or nothing’ […] can frame a learner’s reactions to issues of trust, boundaries and openness,” I wonder if the last few literacy programs she had been to were unequipped or unaware of how to be sensitive to this student’s particular needs. Regardless, being aware of her opinion of her previous literacy learning experience, I was careful never to press this particular student for personal information. Sometimes, it was a matter of respectfully accepting the bits of herself she would reveal, and even though as a naturally curious human being I would really want to know more, never pushing for it. I am not sure I always succeeded, but I do know that a few months after joining the LBS Level One class, this student chatted to me about how much she liked BTS LBS – including the pace and the matching of material to her needs. Part of this, I think, was the art project, which allowed her to explore her feelings and experiences in a safer way. She was a particularly vocal fan of the art project, often weighing in with substantial commentary about holistic learning. For the group collage, for example, she cut out a picture that was essentially a rainbow of many colours. She explained why she chose it:

\[
I \text{ put this on there because it’s a spectrum. And we come from a spectrum of backgrounds and we address a spectrum of ideas.}
\]

She also commented “art is holistic” and, when we got up to do some exercises in the theatre workshop, she humorously quipped, “Ah, so we’re doing the holistic approach to education.” She is still with the program at the time of writing this, nine months later.
Not all students hated school

It would be unfair to write as if students have only had negative experiences with learning. Many have had a number of positive experiences, and I believe those are an equally important piece of their stories. It is just as essential to figure out what works for students, as to dwell on how some parts of the system have failed them. It makes sense that students are more likely to react positively to teaching approaches in a literacy program that reflect these positive experiences. For example, two of the three students I interviewed identified positive experiences with teachers when asked to tell a story about a teacher they had in school. One student talked about a teacher he had in elementary school who was “good” because, the student explained, “that was the only teacher I had who actually really took time to teach me.” Proceeding at this own pace, and being given the time to do so, was something that continually came up for this student as something he needed and appreciated. He mentioned it in the interview, and several times in the art class. Kaydeen also identified time as being important to this student – she would try and make sure her lesson plans were structured in way that gave him the time that he needed.

Another student talked in her interview about how she thought she was a visual learner – and how much she’d loved photography in high school. A year after the interview, when she heard about the art program, she asked to join even though she was not in the LBS Level One class. She had already missed the photography workshop, but she stuck with the program anyway, only missing one day and producing three beautiful and thought-provoking pieces for the final show.

Not all tutors loved school

Just as it would be wrong to talk as if all students had only had negative experiences in school, it would be wrong to write that all tutors had great experiences in school. Some tutors get into literacy due to personal difficulties with reading, writing, or general school experiences (Chandler et al, 2008). I spoke to one such tutor, who was
also present for both focus groups. She was well aware of the role that her experience with schooling played in her motivation to work at BTS LBS:

*I had very bad experiences in my schooling and I thought if I could help one student get through what took me such a difficult time to get through, then that was what, that was what inspired me.*

And at a later time: *If I can just help even one student find something in learning that would be a gift to me, also a gift to them I hope.*

This same tutor talked about how part of the inspiration to come here came from her later experiences of schooling as well. When she was 45, she went back to school – and fell in love. She talked of wanting to inspire the hope in her students that there could be love for learning:

*I decided to volunteer here simply because... I had had fairly difficult experiences through my schooling until I went to university which was just ... The highlight of my entire life. But school was not a happy experience for me. And I just wanted to work with some students – that if I could instill just one quiver of hope in them that I never had, that was my goal, and that was the reason.*

Her understanding of how literacy should be approached seemed much gentler than many of the other tutors, and she constantly emphasized the importance of patience and listening. She was also very open to alternative ways of approaching literacy – speaking about taking a class to purely talk with her student about Michelangelo, for example – as well as to different ways in which students might learn. Finally, she was open to learning – in fact, she sought it out, from her students and from her fellow tutors.

**Teachers in literacy**

Although they themselves might have had decent experiences with schooling, several tutors identified their dissatisfaction with the education system in general as drawing them to literacy programs like Frontier College. Most commonly, the tutors
voicing this opinion were former teachers. One tutor talked about how their experience with education as a teacher had inspired their involvement with Frontier College:

*I used to be a teacher before, but I hated the kind of classroom instruction. I preferred more smaller groups or one-on-one. So I thought that I was able to take... that that opportunity was here. Because I am not really a classroom person.*

Another woman, who was also a former teacher, had spent her recent years working in a shelter system. For the sake of clarity, I am going to call this tutor Linda in the following discussion. Again, these experiences gave Linda a unique view of how to approach literacy teaching – she was not fond of structure. In one of the focus groups, tutors were discussing how well they felt they knew their students the first day they’d met them. Linda remarked:

*I didn’t feel that the little piece of paper with all the little squares on it really told me anything. [...] I mean those squares don’t work for me. [...] I don’t know, like, I don’t work well with structures. And I don’t think that they do either.*

Interestingly, although she had been a teacher, she did not assume this experience would necessarily help her teach literacy. When asked what brought her to Frontier College, she told this story:

*I heard about it because I do volunteer work at a shelter for the past 6 years, and they wanted me to teach literacy there. And they said, “Ah, you can just do it.” And I said “No!” It’s actually really complicated teaching literacy, actually I knew that.*

I have heard caution expressed from both literacy practitioners and coordinators when it comes to former teachers engaging in literacy work. Linda commented:

*It’s interesting the response you get, when you say you’re a teacher. They say that ex-teachers are the worst kind at teaching literacy, some people said. And Frontier College was the only one that would agree to train me and let me work at the shelter.*
It was mentioned in both the tutor and coordinator focus group that former teachers are more likely to take an excessively structured approach. One former teacher I talked to did in fact express a wish for a more structured curriculum, however she also was willing to be flexible and did not think that “learning math along with a book” was good either.

**More than one story**

Many of the examples I have used so far in this chapter illustrate the complexity of people’s stories. Understanding a person’s beliefs, motivations and actions is always vastly more intricate than simply saying ‘he or she was a teacher.’ When I advocate for people to think about their stories, I strongly disagree with others labeling them by these stories or implementing simplistic judgments from these stories based on generalizations. People are influenced by a variety of aspects of their life. As Bettina Aptheker (1989, p. 253) writes in her book *Tapestries of Life*, there is “more than one thing is true for us at the same time.” Linda, for example, had been both a teacher and a shelter worker. This latter experience had clearly as much influence on her as had being a teacher. She told numerous stories from her experience at the shelter, and applied some of the logic of what she had seen there to what she expected to happen in a literacy program. When another tutor talked about how in a previous incarnation of BTS there had been a bouncer required at the door, Linda expressed her surprise:

*Interesting that you say that, because I also work at a homeless shelter and have for years... those guys would go berserk if there was a security guard in there!*

Another tutor was trying to figure out creative ways to teach math in the math classroom, and mentioned she was thinking of implementing a module-based program. Linda again referred to her experience in the shelter, which led to a discussion about the use of baking to teach math:

*T1: It’s interesting when you’re talking about these things like the modules and stuff ... what I do at the shelter is, they bake. They bake for 90. And I’ve seen the most amazing amazing things. Like now they have women at the shelter... and*
they bring the recipes and I bring in all the ingredients. And they don’t understand at first who they are baking for and then they realize that they are baking for the other people at the shelter. And that really gives them... we all eat it after basically, what they bake. But you know what, last time I was there, and just having women there, it used to be not. It’s a 24-hour shelter, and the men there... And I have them work in pairs, or they just pair off and I saw this guy introduce himself to the woman who was... one person holds the bowl, one person holds the mixer. And it was amazing. These are guys who are, who live on the street, and the women who live on the street, and just the fact that he introduced himself. And one person held the bowl, and the other... and then they started to sing. And I went home and I felt like I accomplished a whole lot. Just because... and [the BTS LBS program coordinator] says maybe I should bake here... but I mean, like the food... and the smell of the food, and they all come in...

T2: But what a great way to teach math too!

T3: That’s what I was thinking!

T4: Yah I actually did that with a student here, we baked a cake here in this little kitchen.

T2: That’s the way to do it!

T5: See how important fractions are!

T4: And measurements.

T1: That’s right! That’s right! That kind of module. I mean when I saw this guy introduce himself to this... I mean, ah.

T2: That would be fun. And they’d remember that.

Another tutor I spoke to was also clearly influenced by many aspects of her life. Her approach to teaching literacy was directly related to her professional experience:

What I am doing with the kids – and this is from a lot of my professional life also in terms of consultant approaches in terms of the training you get when you understand how to analyze a problem and how to come up with solutions, and how to structure what you’re doing such that you get to the end of the assignment successfully.
She also, however, related several stories in which her identity as a mother affected her choices both in coming to Frontier College, and in how she reacted to certain scenarios with her students:

_I guess the original intent was when I think about my own kids, who for all intents and purposes have everything, and the difference that that makes in kids who are supported and kids who aren’t supported. And how unfair that is just because of who happens – where you’re born or to whom you’re born. That’s so unfair. And so my kids were doing really great and so I thought wow if I can help some other kids get on the right path._

She talked about how student’s lives interfered with their ability to learn. When asked how she addressed that, she replied:

_Oh... I’m lecturing them like a mom. And I’m saying, if you don’t want to hear this just tell me to shut up. But this is what I’d be telling my own kids and this is what I know you need to do._

**Without Reflection, We Do Not Always See**

Without reflection, many of the stories that influence tutors may continue to operate in an unconscious way. Without reflection, tutors may often be unaware of how these stories are affecting their actions and their assumptions about students and literacy teaching and learning. Cajete (1994, p. 118) argues that we need to be aware of the mythology we live by in order to achieve critical consciousness:

_Since our personal stories fuel our emotions and shape our beliefs, as we come to understand the principles by which our personal mythology operates, we will become more able to participate consciously in its development._

In my research, it was clear that tutors were aware of how some but not all parts of their stories were operating. Further, it was evident that occasionally, even within the short
space of the interview or focus group, that some tutors became reflective and were able to identify areas of influence where they could not before.

Since many tutors identified having positive experiences in their schooling, one might think that the teaching styles they had encountered would influence their teaching approach at BTS LBS. I put this specific question to the three tutors I interviewed. Interestingly, the two tutors who reported having had positive experiences with schooling replied that no, they did not think that their experience with schooling affected how they approached teaching at BTS LBS. When I asked myself this same question, I realized I could not easily remember a time where I have specifically thought of something a teacher in my school did, and applied that to my lessons. I believe that because these influences do not operate overtly, they can be hard to locate or pinpoint. I do not remember, for example, how I learned to read – so I cannot say with any certainty that I do or do not use those particular activities with the students I work with. So off the top of my head it is easy to say no, my past experiences have not influenced me – especially when I have never been asked to think about it before. Besides which, as one of the tutors commented, it was "such a long time ago!"

When I take the time to reflect, however, my answer begins to change. I remember that one time in the drawing workshop I gave during the art class. In that class, I used a particular technique taught to me long ago in a summer art camp my grandmother took me to. I also borrowed from many of my high school art classes. Then I remember the long writing sessions I used to spend with my father, who was (and is) a wonderful editor of essays. How I construct an essay – and therefore how I teach someone to construct one – is heavily influenced by these sessions. When I teach math, I remember the tricks my high school math teacher taught us – the secret rule for the nine times table, or the importance of memorizing squares. One of the tutors I spoke to also changed her answer seemingly upon reflection. She ended up describing an encounter with learning that happened outside school, with her father:
R: Do think your experiences from before influenced how you teach in this program?

T: No – not at all.

R: Where does that come from?

T: I guess a lot of it is trial and error. And then I guess I actually have to attribute it, some of it to my dad. Because I remember learning math and when I would need help at night, and he was would always try and take me back to why I was doing what I was doing. And at the time it drove me crazy.

An unexpected answer to another interview question led me to wonder if people disassociate in some way from their schooling experience when they begin as literacy tutors. All three tutors I interviewed reported that they did not feel like teachers while at BTS LBS. Perhaps there is therefore, in some way, a disconnection between the teaching tutors do at Frontier College and the previous schooling they have received. Their schooling does not influence them, they might unconsciously believe, because they are not teachers themselves. I wonder too if part this disconnection may also stem from the lack of time tutors at BTS LBS have for reflection, including within the space of the interviews. In Hardwired for Hope, Gesser and Sawyer (2004, p. 147) found that many literacy instructors “modeled their styles after teachers in their past whom they respected” – these teachers, however, had the time and space of multiple teacher training courses to actively develop and reflect on their teaching influences.

I found it interesting that even the tutor who identified as a teacher, and who was in fact in charge of a math class not a one-to-one student, remarked that she felt like “more of a tutor than a teacher.” She explained that her experience teaching before BTS LBS did not affect how she acted in the program, because Frontier College was a “totally new experience.” When asked about the tutor training, however, this tutor expressed the opinion that it was not that helpful to her as she “knew already what to expect for the most part” in regards to how she would be teaching. I wonder about the apparent contradiction here between feeling that Frontier College was a new experience, while still being confident in having known what to expect. Her previous experience as a teacher seems to have at least initially left her with some presumptions about what was going to
happen. Being absorbed in the interview process meant I did not catch this inconsistency at the time, and was not able to further delve with the tutor into this interesting incongruence. I think, however, that this example is a good illustration of the multiple and even contradictory ways in which stories can shape a person’s beliefs. Conscious reflection on her part might have further illuminated the ways in which these stories were affecting her.

**Conclusion**

I think that tutors are often deeply transformed by their experiences teaching in literacy. They initially come, however, with beliefs and attitudes that are imbedded within their own stories – everything they have experienced and been told in their lives. These stories have an enormous impact on how tutors understand and approach literacy teaching and learning. Students also come with their stories, and these stories affect what they expect – or will accept – in a literacy program.

I do not think that reflection – even critical reflection – necessarily means that tutors will understand all their stories or be able to explain all their beliefs and actions. Reflection does not always mean we will see. Without the effort to reflect, however, and to critically examine how their stories are operating, tutors cannot begin to explore which of their stories are supporting a positive literacy environment for themselves and their students, and which might be having a negative impact. In his research on teacher belief and practice, James Muchmore (2004, p. 148) concludes that “authentic change” in teacher attitude and thinking “occurs only when one’s beliefs have been challenged in some way and found to be lacking.” Tutors need to be given the space to consider the consequences of their stories on their assumptions, thoughts and actions, and to recognize when they are lacking. Although sometimes a particular belief may be directly contradicted through experience – for example, with the tutor who found that the students
were all intelligent – other beliefs are more subtle and less easily flushed out without deliberate or critical reflection.

These beliefs – and how ingrained or influential on a person’s practice they are – will change completely from tutor to tutor. Further, tutors come with a variety of beliefs and ideas and these beliefs are multi-dimensional and complex. No one’s beliefs can be quickly or easily categorized into ‘right’ and ‘wrong,’ and stories can hardly ever be thought of in dichotomous terms. There are therefore no easy answers, and no manual that can be written outlining how tutors should understand or engage with their own stories. Every tutor will have to decide for themselves when and how much story to share, for example, or when to step back and let a student story unfold. There is no formula that can be taught for this process because literacy teaching and learning is too highly situated in the context of the moment. Muchmore (2004, p. 149) concludes his novel by arriving at a similar insight regarding teachers:

*This study reinforces the notion that being a teacher involves much more than simply mastering a set of skills. It also involves the development of an inner awareness – a sense of how one’s life experiences have helped to shape the beliefs and underlying assumptions that ultimately guide one’s practices. Most teachers seek a coherence between their personal theories of teaching and the practical demands of their jobs, but there is no single way to achieve this; there is no universal formula for success.*

Without acknowledging the consequence and value of story in literacy, however, supports will never be given to tutors in developing this vitally important inner awareness.
Chapter Four: Through Stories to Resonance

Knowledge, Wisdom, Power
By Rene Rivest

12 Reproduced with permission
How I Feel About Art
By Kelvin Victor

I stand proudly before you and say
Art is the reason why I am here today
It might seem hard at times, I know
But the secret is
just let it flow

Art is something you feel inside
and also something you must never hide
Whatever comes to mind at first
That’s the magic how it works

Here’s a secret from me to you
Poetry is what I love to do
At first I thought it was not my thing
but now,
Oh, what joy it brings

So to all the teachers out there
Keep it up,
‘cause my classmates and I
are those who care
You took the time to teach us art
and with art
we would like to touch your hearts

13 Reproduced with permission
An aesthetic experience is one in which your senses are operating at their peak. When you're present in the current moment. When you are resonating with the excitement of this thing that you're experiencing. When you are fully alive. And anaesthetic is when you shut your senses off, and deaden yourself what's happening. And a lot of these drugs are that. We're getting our children through education by anaesthetising them. And I think we should be doing the exact opposite. We shouldn't be putting them asleep, we should be waking them up, to what they have inside of themselves.

- Sir Ken Robinson, 2008
Introduction

I have always known the importance of stories. The more I learn, the more I am amazed at how incredibly complex stories can be – how they can simultaneously be impossible to fathom, yet essential to consider. The more I learn, the more I recognize the effect of story on everything I do, and everything I think. The more I learn, the more I wonder.

I started out in this research with the general intention of exploring stories of learning with tutors and students at BTS LBS. I ended up seeing that in some of these stories – in some moments of learning these stories were describing – there appeared to be a rather exciting and interesting phenomenon occurring. It was not a phenomenon that I had heard specifically described before, but it was one whose importance to the literacy environment became very clear to me as I observed the art class, and continued to talk to the students and tutors around me. This phenomenon got its name one day when the spoken word facilitator, Donna-Michelle, mentioned it in her class: resonance. I was struck by its power. Then I realized, re-reading my reflections and observations one day, that I had been using the word all along. It sprung out at me, and began to do the same from the texts I was reading for my research. Resonance, it seemed, was everywhere!

In this chapter I will explore my understanding of what resonance is, and how it relates to the idea of stories. I will tell in more detail the story of how I came to the idea of resonance, and how its importance to the literacy environment subsequently emerged through my research. Resonance, I believe, comes from moments of deep connection found in the echo of a story within our own. Resonance can come from mental, physical, spiritual or emotional connections – or a complex combination of any of these. Through resonance, it is possible to create or experience moments of profound learning.
Connection

She’s very fluid, easy, moving her chair around, choosing to be away from the ‘head’ of the table. By the time I get there, she’s introduced herself to everyone in the room. But she does it again more formally at the official start of the class: “Tell me your name again – I always forget names, but how could I do that? How could I forget that name?” She says to each of them in turn. She’s dynamic. She’s delightful. She’s got us all awake. A quiet force, she draws us in with big bellows of laughter, released in response to her own jokes. Then, suddenly, with her ideas. Everyone leans forward – they’re listening.

I had a wonderful woman named Donna-Michelle come in to facilitate a spoken word workshop with students as part of the art project. She was an extremely creative and inspiring person, and she said a great many things that made a great deal of sense to me, to Kaydeen and to the students. One such idea was the importance of what she called tangents. In Donna-Michelle’s view, tangents are a person’s unique paths of thought. She explained:

*Tangents are the most valuable tool in creation. Nobody but you can tell your story, because no two people ever have the same tangents.*

She went on to emphasize the importance of telling your own story:

*You must tell your own story because only you can tell it, but also because of another important fact. Somewhere in this world, someone else is living your realities. That person might be unable to speak for themselves. And maybe if they hear your story, they will find a moment of connection, and know they are not alone.*

I found Donna-Michelle moving and thought provoking, and this particular speech got me thinking about the importance of connections. Connections between people, connections between ideas and connections between stories. I have said before that I believe we live through our stories. Through my research I have been developing this idea, and discovering that we seem to learn through the connections we make between
our stories and other stories – those going on around us, those told to us, and those already inside of us. Learning, therefore, is both an individual process and a social process. It is individual in the sense that our own stories are constantly in motion inside of us, interacting and changing. Our stories, however, are socially located, and our learning also happens in relation to what is going on around us. Stories cannot exist in isolation from this external context. Therefore, as prominent learning theorist Etienne Wegner (2009, p. 209) says, learning is situated in the “context of our lived experience.”

People are constantly making connections. Hence the success of that old word game, where I say a word, and you say a word inspired by that, and we go on and on and on.

Cat
Dog
Radar
Police
G20

…would be an example of my personal progression. In any one of those connections, there is a story. Each of those stories contains a thousand chances for connections, and each of those connections is a story, and so on and so forth. What connections are made will depend on your time and space, and what stories happen to be bouncing around you and inside you at the moment. The connection between police and G20, for example, is situated in a particular atmosphere of tension that exists in Toronto right now following the 2010 G20 summit, in which some police behaved in controversial ways. The very personal connection between dog and radar is made to me through the fact that my childhood dog’s name was Radar. I have another dog now, whose name is Loki, but the connection I made to dog in that moment was Radar, because I had recently been thinking of my grandmother, who took care of Radar for years. Just think of all the stories contained in those three sentences! Stories of my grandmother, stories of my dogs, stories of other animals I have enjoyed over the years – even one story has exponential potential for connection, and for learning.

Evelyn Battell (2004, p. 81), in her research as part of the collective Hardwired for
Hope, argues “making a connection with students is a necessity, a joy and a challenge,” and one hallmark of an effective ABE/Literacy instructor. Many of the instructors she and the other researchers interviewed talked about the importance of these connections. I see these connections happening all the time in the literacy program, between students and tutors, students and other students, and tutors and other tutors. They happen in the classroom, in the focus groups, and in the hallway or kitchen where people stop to chat.

As I watched life in the literacy classroom unfold, I realized that some of these moments of connection seemed to have a more powerful effect than others. They seemed to somehow reach deeper into a person, and they appeared to have the potential to create profound moments of learning. An idea began to take shape in my mind. This idea came in the form of a powerful word that encapsulated these deeper moments of connection: Resonance. Resonance, as I have said, was another word Donna-Michelle had used in her workshop. She used it to describe a moment when you heard something “you already knew, even though you did not know before you heard it that you knew it yet.” I was very familiar with that feeling. I had been having it a lot in my graduate studies, where I had finally found – in colleagues, professors and literature – the echo of many ideas that had been floating around in my mind for years. These moments had been pivotal in my learning – formal, informal, transformational and otherwise – at OISE. When I went back over my field notes, I found the word resonance in more than one place, both before and after the spoken word workshop. I remembered the feelings of strong connection I had when Donna-Michelle was describing it. Everything fell into place.

The more I pondered resonance, the more I realized that it was a vital piece of the literacy environment. I began to observe it happening, and I saw the difference it made in a classroom. The students sat up and listened. They responded, to the facilitators and to the ideas. I began to hear stories from tutors, describing moments when ‘something clicked.’ I observed their behaviour and enthusiasm in the focus group when a fellow tutor said something that ‘sat right’ with them. I began to see the word cropping up in the literature I was reading. This resonance – it was looking like it was pretty active already. Now I just had to try and describe it.
What do I mean by Resonance?

Today is his first class. I have seen him around before – turns out he’s in the computer course. Very nice guy with a great big smile. He came because he’s interested in art, he says, maybe trying something new. We’re working on composing our own poems, based on some inspirational words generated by the class, written on the board. Kelvin is stuck. He doesn’t think the words on the wall are helping him at all. Ali, the poetry facilitator, sits beside him, and asks him if he misses home. Listening to the exchange, I’m taken aback – the comment seems way out of left field to me. Ali, however, has obviously seen something – caught something – that I am unaware of. Because there it is, that sudden moment of connection. Right there. You can almost see it flash across Kelvin’s face. It got him thinking, it got him a line that he later says brought the rest of the piece out. The line that was just in his mind, swirling around, finally he put it down and there it was, the rest came:

*I’m thinking of a number between one and ten
   Or maybe it’s my grandpa’s hen
   I ask my mom for a paper and a pen
   And come up with the number ten*

His excitement upon reading out this piece to the class was palatable. He had found something – a connection to his home country, and family, that inspired him to write, and a connection to a new medium of expression that allowed him to freely communicate his thoughts. A few months later, when asked to describe his favourite workshop, Kelvin said:

*One of my favourite programs was poetry, because I find that with poetry – poetry allows you to connect with your inner self. And, you know, just express how you feel and what you feel.*

His newfound enthusiasm for poetry continues.

Resonance has a very particular meaning in physics, in chemistry and in medical terminology. In the latter, for example, it refers to a diagnostic sound produced when tapping the chest or abdomen. It gets used, however, fairly commonly in everyday vernacular to mean something much less definably ‘scientific.’ Dictionaries vary widely
in the non-scientific definitions they present for resonance, but there were two I found that were particularly indicative of the resonance I am describing in this thesis. In the *Merriam-Webster online dictionary* (2011), one way ‘resonance’ is defined is as “a quality of evoking response,” and in the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (2004), ‘resonant’ is defined as “having a lasting presence or effect; enduring; strongly reminiscent; evocative; serving to bring to mind.” When people say something resonates with them, they generally seem to mean that that thing, whether it is an idea or an action or an emotion, has had a strong affect on them. In other words, resonance happens when people feel a deep connection to something.

I believe that we feel resonance because of our stories. The tangents described by Donna-Michelle exist because everyone has their own stories, and everyone makes their own connections through these stories. As part of our selves, these stories are constantly interacting with each other inside of us, and we are in continual dialogue with what is happening in the world around us through these stories. Our stories “[colour] how we see and what we hear, what we do” (Stewart, 2009, p. 36). This ‘colouring’ happens both consciously and unconsciously – and it is inevitable, unavoidable, and an important part of being human. When people enter into a situation, all the information they are receiving is processed through this story filter. There may be moments in which people’s stories will not match up with each other’s. Without reflection and understanding, these moments can lead to misconstruction, boredom, mistrust and a host of other negative outcomes.

On the other hand, there are almost always overlaps in stories, or bits of stories, between people – shared ideas or experiences or understandings or emotions. Within these overlaps, there arises the possibility for a powerful tool of connection, learning, reflection and transformation: resonance. Resonance goes beyond simply a shared experience. In my research, I heard what I am calling resonance described in a number of different ways, including as a place of understanding, or as an ‘ah ha!’ moment, or as when something ‘clicks.’ Originally, the word resonance comes from the Latin word resonare, derived from the word sonare meaning ‘to echo.’ Resonance can be understood
through these roots as a moment when we find an echo of an idea in ourselves – an emotional, mental, physical or spiritual echo. It occurs when an idea or experience or emotion comes into our circle of stories and echoes with another idea or experience or emotion. Resonance, therefore, comes from finding or feeling a deep connection between our selves and an idea, an emotion, a story, a way of being or doing, an experience, a sensation – there are a great number of things with which someone might find resonance.

**Resonance in the literature**

The idea of resonance is not something new, nor something I have invented. I am picking up on idea that has been around and in use for a long time. Although hardly anyone has sought to specifically focus on the word ‘resonance’ in the literature related to literacy or adult education, it pops up again and again. It is used in a variety of ways, however true to my understanding of resonance, it seems people generally use it when they want to evoke a feeling of strong connection to something. It gets used to describe connections between various literatures (D’Amico, 2009, p. 47), connections to or between particular moments in research (Eldred, Ward, Dutton and Snowdon, 2004, p. 50. Brehaut in Stewart, 2009, p. 57), and connections between encountered ideas and people’s own experiences or ideas (Soroke, 1999, p. 20, 102, 141).

I have found the word ‘resonance’ defined and described expressly in one published article pertaining to literacy and education: *Reading, writing, resonating: striking chords across the contexts of students’ everyday lives* (Mannion, Miller, Gibb and Goodman, 2009). I found the Mannion et al (2009) article after I had begun to describe resonance in my own words, yet I found that many of our ideas about resonance were related. In the article, resonance is essential used as a “framework for understanding connection” (Mannion et al, 2009, p. 324). The study was grounded, however, in a differently specific circumstance; the researchers were attempting to understand how the literacy practices university students used or valued at home might overlap with those they used or valued at school. They looked at how the term resonance (adapted from the musical term) described the “connectivity or alignment between aspects of practices
found in different domains” (Mannion et al, 2009, p. 327). Although there are therefore significant distinctions in the contexts to which we are applying the idea of resonance, many parts of Mannion et al’s understanding of resonance – including its power and applicability for learning – fall in line with my own. Particularly striking was the notion of resonance as a type of connection, and as “[capturing] the idea of relations between phenomena that are differently located” (Mannion et al, 2009, p. 327). The conception of resonance I present in this thesis is similar – a kind of deep connection that highlights and provides a framework for understanding some of the relations between people’s stories.

The term emotional resonance can be found in a wide variety of literature. The term appears in periodicals as diverse as the New Yorker and the Economist, and in a wide variety of journals including, in my brief review, those on social policy, opera, film, family therapy, and international equity in health. Although rarely defined or specifically examined, it is seemingly often used in a way that is comparable to both Mannion et al and my own notions of resonance. In my review, it appears generally to be used to describe a strong feeling of emotional connection between people and ideas, experiences, or stories.

Shrock, Holden and Ried (2004, p. 62) in their piece Creating Emotional Resonance: Interpersonal Emotion Work and Motivational Framing in a Transgender Community, define emotional resonance as the “link” between the lives of the people targeted as recruits to SMOs (social movement organizations) and the “emotional messages encoded in SMO framing.” In Christine Giese’s thesis Powerful Stories, Powerful Conversations: Using Literature to Teach for Social Justice, one of the participants, a teacher named Sherry, describes the importance and power of emotional resonance in the classroom. Giese (2008, p. 115-116) explains that Sherry believed:

... emotional resonance with particular story characters and events could foster greater self-understanding for individual students, and that shared emotional experience with a common text could create a sense of unity within the classroom community.
Sherry thought that students who experienced this emotional resonance through “deep personal connections with narratives” were likely to remember the classroom experiences and ideas throughout their lifetimes (Giese, 2008, p. 115). In both of these cases, resonance is again being used to describe a link between an encounter with an idea, an emotion or an experience and something pre-existing in a person’s life. In other words, these examples seem to support the idea that emotional resonance can be found through echoes in a person’s own stories. The latter example of Sherry’s classroom also illustrates one of the ways in which resonance can enhance learning and the retention of knowledge.

The many faces of resonance

In my review, the term emotional resonance is the one I have found most often utilized in the literature. I believe, however, that resonance it is a multi-faceted phenomenon. Resonance is found through stories, and stories are anything but one-dimensional. By their nature, stories present us with the opportunity to examine and understand ourselves from a holistic perspective. Our stories contain aspects of our physical, mental, emotional and spiritual selves – sights, smells, tastes, sighs, sounds, moments of joy, moments of fear, feelings of power and feelings of helplessness, awareness, conscious reactions and unconscious memories. Thus, all of these elements of our selves contain the possibility for us to find resonance through them.

I saw resonance operating in many different ways during my research. One tutor told a story of learning in the focus group that illustrated beautifully the power of physical resonance:

*In the classroom I’ve taught [the students] communications skills – so I’ve taught them how to summarize and how to do open questions and closed questions and what they’re for and they don’t always remember. But sometimes I’ll just say, ‘you know your body language is just screaming at me right now.’ And all of a sudden they realize 80% of your communication is body language.*

This story gave me some insight into how the students in the art class had been acting
recently. The last few classes, they had been having a great time pointing out each other’s body language to me and to each other – “Look at that body language… so and so is realllly not into this right now!” they would say if a classmate put their head down on the desk. “Someone had a good night!” they would say if a student came in smiling and exuberant. “So and so clearly doesn’t care what I have to say!” they would announce if someone was crossing their arms while they were presenting. The lesson was therefore seemingly a powerful one – it carried for weeks and was integrated into other moments of the students’ lives (and mine). I would argue that this power came from a moment of physical resonance with the students’ stories (i.e. I am slouched because I am bored, and the teacher can see that), and the subsequent learning it brought. The students felt how their body language was communicating to their teacher – and therefore understood, deeply, how 80% of communication could be body language.

I can think of many times where I saw mental resonance – what I would call a powerful connection through ideas – happening. One that sticks with me particularly was surrounding a conversation the students, Kaydeen and I had during the first art class. We were talking about why we might be doing art in a literacy program, and the discussion at one point turned to the idea that people can learn in different ways. For some students, this idea resonated deeply with their personal experiences inside and outside of school. One student in particular seemed to resonate with this notion. In the classes following, she frequently brought it up, and ended up concentrating on that for her final art pieces. During one of these discussions, she said:

The education system currently does not work for a lot of people. It does not recognize that different people learn in different ways. I want to go back into the system and change it, make it better, so that the teachers and everyone sees that there are so many ways that people can learn, and how much better that is.

I have used these examples to show ways that resonance can work on different levels with people’s stories. I do not think, however, that resonance, or any form of holistic learning, is so simplistic as to only be mental or only be physical. Just as stories are holistic and complex, we connect through them in a myriad of ways and parts of
ourselves. One moment in time may connect to one bit of a story, which is connected to several bits of other stories, which open the door to endless memories. In the case of the latter example, for example, students, particularly the one student, resonated with the idea that people learn in more than one way. I do not for a second think that for many, this mental resonance was not also attached to emotional memories of their schooling – in how it did not recognize their many ways of learning, as well as perhaps in memories of violence for some, or discouragement or anger for others. In the former example, physical resonance opened the door to thought, connection, and what I might deem mental exercise, not to mention emotion – all the enjoyment they had in the next few weeks poking fun at their classmates!

**Listening and Learning**

Today we are exploring how our stories are tied to our bodies. Remember when you were young? I ask. Did anyone here ever trace their outline, cut it out, decorate it? Most of them nod their head. There are warm smiles of remembrance. We’re going to do that again, I say. Here are your supplies – glue, fabric, a variety of beads, markers, pastels and a whole whack of magazines. I want you to use your outline, your body, to explore your stories. Try and connect your stories to the parts of your body. You can express those stories in any way you chose.

They’re off to the races. The huge roll of paper is laid out, unwound. No one hangs back. There is a lot of laughter. A couple of the outlines get redone – the hands are too big, the head malformed. Kate has helped Susan with her second rendition, after which she is declared master of the line. She helps the rest, then gets working on hers.

Once the outlines are complete, people engage with different levels of concentration. Susan is concentrated totally. She loved the vision boards – collages exploring where you would like to go in life – the class had done a couple weeks ago. In fact, she played a large role in initiating that exercise. She is really connecting her stories to the parts of her body, with her strong legs carrying her forward and some of her emotions connected to her head,
and thought. I am truly blown away, and particularly touched by her reference to the war she had been through, and how much that was a part of her.

She glues a large, clay heart bead to her outline’s chest. She said that this bead is there because she knows now she has a good heart. She describes a conversation with Kaydeen, in which they’d talked about her good nature and open heart – her willingness in the classroom to participate, the way she always welcomed any new students or facilitators. Susan says, ‘I had never thought about myself that way before – it made me realize that I am a good person who has a lot of love to give.’

Resonance can open a person to learning. Wegner (2009, p. 214) comments that we as people “pay attention to what we expect to see, we hear what we can place in our understanding, and we act according to our worldviews.” If someone hears a story or idea, or experiences something that resonates with them, they are likely to pay attention to what is going on, and they are likely to listen to what is being said. Resonance is also an interactive, socially situated experience. In my opinion, knowledge and learning are actively constructed through connection, and resonance is a deep moment of connection. It can therefore contain the potential for moments of great learning.

Opening up to listening

I went to a seminar recently where the purpose seemed to be selling us on a system of self-education meant to enlighten and transform our lives. The whole thing was a bit uncomfortable – it seemed to me to essentially be a commoditization of transformative learning – but since it went on for three hours, I had a lot of time to think. I realized that what the woman who was leading the seminar was doing, and it was very clever I thought, was taking the stories people were telling her, and basically telling them back to them – but making it sound as though she was revealing great insights. The exchanges would go something along the lines of:
Participant: I believe in doing good work, and I work really hard at trying to make the world a better place. The problem is though, I am not making any money – I don’t feel comfortable accepting money for doing these things.

Seminar Leader: So you’re a good person, who believes that the world needs to change, and that everyone needs to do their part to get it there. But you don’t want to take money because you feel you should be doing it out of the goodness of your heart.

Participant: Yah, wow, that’s exactly right, how’d you know!

Seminar Leader: So what you need to do is be able to take money from people.

Participant: Holy crap! You’re a genius!

Seminar Leader: That is what we will show you through this course.

Participant: I can’t believe it! What an amazing opportunity! I will pay $700.00 to learn what you just told me!

Mild skepticism aside, what the seminar leader was in essence doing was finding resonance with people by re-telling them their own stories. As a tactic for selling someone something, this is as old as the hills – and very smart. If you recognize yourself in what someone is saying – like the participant did in this case – you are much more likely to be open to listening to what they have to say. On the other hand, you are much more likely to stare blankly if what they are telling you seems to mean nothing (like how I feel when I read the daily horoscopes).

The same is true for learning situations. I believe that if what is being taught, or how something is being taught, finds that echo in someone’s story than people are more likely to pay attention to what they are being told. They are also more likely to be open to learning – if someone is telling you a story, and you recognize a bit of yourself or your experiences in that story, then you are more likely to wonder – well, what does this person have to say about that? Oh, I understand what they are talking about – it’s like the time I did this, or thought this. And they did what differently? Huh, interesting – I never thought of it that way! If someone is telling us a story that resonates with us, we are more likely to listen to what they have to say that is different from our story – in other words, we are more likely to learn from them (or buy something from them).
Learning through resonance

Learning is a socially situated phenomenon (Wegner, 2009). Learning, Robin Usher (2009, p. 171) notes, does “not simplistically derive from experience; rather, experience and learning are mutually positioned in an interactive dynamic.” We “continuously re-read and re-write both the world and ourselves” (Mannion et al, 2009, p. 326), and in this process, re-invent our stories. Our stories are therefore constantly changing through interaction with everything that is going on around us, as well as everything that is going on inside us – and through this process, we are learning. In this way, knowledge in a classroom can be “actively constructed in the creative encounter between the teacher’s expertise and the students’ experience, with each role conferring a distinctive kind of authority” (Tett, 2005, p. 35). In other words, the connections between people as well as between people and ideas can facilitate knowledge and learning. Resonance, because it is an interactive, socially situated moment of connection, can result in the changing of a person’s story and therefore lead to learning.

Resonance, as I have explained, represents a more powerful moment of a connection than others. Wenger (2009, p. 213) believes that learning is ongoing – it is “not something we do when we do nothing else or stop doing when we do something else.” There are moments, however, in which Wenger (2009, p. 213) claims our “learning is intensified.” I think that resonance can facilitate these intensified moments of learning precisely because the connections it entails reach us at a deeper level.

Learning through resonance can change the way a person makes meaning of the world. In the above narrative, for example, the student resonated with the idea that she had an open heart, and directly linked that with her realization that she was a good person. I want to be clear that in telling this story I do not mean to imply that any student necessarily needs someone to tell them that they are good. I am trying to show that the intersection of a person’s stories with someone else’s stories can help the person see their stories in a new light. Mannion et al (2009, p. 325) writes that learning can be explained as a “recontextualization of familiar practices which are reshaped through engaging in a
new activity in response to constraints and affordances of a new situation.” Resonance can create a new situation by providing the catalyst for people to be open to examining and changing their stories. Resonance therefore contains the possibility for a redefinition of self as well as deeper moments of reflection and learning.

**Is resonance always positive?**

Resonance does not inherently produce a positive experience for tutors or students. I believe that there will be moments when resonance may work against a tutor or a student. Echoes of negative or violent experiences, for example, may actually create blocks to learning for some students. A good example of such a block is illustrated in the narrative I told in Chapter Three about the student who resisted being tested for Irlen’s syndrome. His previous experience with being ‘labeled’ seemed to contribute to a negative feeling towards being tested for or even learning about Irlen’s syndrome. Tutors may also be negatively affected by resonance. I had one student, for example, who frequently brought up the importance of God and the church in her life. I grew up in an agnostic and occasionally even anti-religious environment. The strict adherence to religion is something that therefore resonated with my stories in ways that made me quite uncomfortable. I often found myself quickly changing the subject when God was mentioned. I was therefore blocked from learning about this particular aspect of her life.

There are likely many other examples like these ones within my data. I have chosen, however, not to focus on or explore these in this analysis. I believe that resonance is a powerful concept and there is a great deal of work to be done in understanding all the ways in which it operates in a literacy environment. Perhaps, for example, the sort of experience I describe above could be thought of as a kind of dissonance. In this thesis, however, I wanted to concentrate on the ways in which I saw resonance benefiting tutors and students.
Conclusion

Wenger (2008, p. 210) speculates that “given a chance” people might be “quite good” at learning. In order to achieve this, he advocates for learning to be rooted in social situation as opposed to within a disconnected, individualistic model. I agree – but I think part of the problem for learning in literacy situations is that sometimes students are asked or ask to learn something that is outside of their social contexts. As much as I have problems with standardized tests like the GED, I understand that it remains a goal for some BTS LBS students – or at least a step to a goal like getting into university. How then can we root learning in social contexts with a test as detached and decontextualized as the GED? I believe that at least part of the answer to this question lies in resonance. Tutors can invoke learning by listening to students, and by paying attention to ways in which something ‘clicks’ for students. These deep connections can be found through emotional processes, mental processes, physical processes and spiritual processes. It can be found through the content of learning as well as the ways and styles through which learning is approached.

Resonance plays a role in learning for both students and tutors in literacy programs. Students who are able to find resonance with material, with approaches to teaching, and with tutors will be more likely to engage, to pay attention and to learn. Tutors who are able to find resonance with students are more likely to learn from their students, and be able to find innovative and creative approaches to teaching that are tailored to students’ stories. Tutors can also learn from one another through resonance. In the next chapter, I will look more closely at the ways in which I saw resonance operating at BTS LBS.
Why Can't You Love Me For Me?

By Nelisha Dumont

Sometimes I don’t think you get me

Why don’t you just let me be

Why do you treat me like a child

I just want to be wild

There are times I think you hate me

But you just don’t get me

I don’t hate you

But why can’t you love me for me

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story is central to our work because what we do all day is take stories in, the stories of our clients, learners, friends. A woman shared her story at a conference about violence and learning. Her story of a client telling her that she can’t bear to share her story again because it is all she has left. Her story has become a commodity that she peddles to gain access to services, to shelter, to resources. What does this do to her, to her story? What is the impact? What about those of us who hear her story. How does it impact us, where does it fit into our lives? What about our story. Does it fit anywhere? If she is a woman of colour, I hear her story and it resonates with mine. My liberation is tied up in her story. It must be. It has to be. What do I do now?

- Nadine Sookermany in Stewart, 2009, p. 66

The Nigerian storyteller Ben Okri says that ‘In a fractured age, when cynicism is god, here is a possible heresy: we live by stories, we also live in them. One way or another we are living the stories planted in us early or along the way, or we are also living the stories we planted - knowingly or unknowingly - in ourselves. We live stories that either give our lives meaning or negate it with meaninglessness. If we change the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our lives.

- Ben Okri in King, 2003, p. 153

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16 (footnote in original text) Lily Walker reflects on power, “If you are here to help me, then you are wasting your time, but if you are here because your liberation is bound up in mine, then let us begin.” (Heard from Lib Spry during the Theatre of the Oppressed Workshop, Montreal, 1988.)
Introduction

We’d been working on essays for a while now. They came out, but it was a struggle, I could tell. It was boring, and it was painful having to push for more – just one more paragraph, get it down. Come on now, you can do it.

One day, I noticed something about his essay. He was taking one idea, and painstakingly extending that idea for the entirety of the paper. In his brainstorm, he had so many more thoughts. “What about this idea?” I said. He stopped working, stared at the page, then looked at me. “You mean,” he said, “You can put more than one idea in an essay?” “Yes,” I said, “Of course! In fact, you want to get at least three ideas in there.” That was it for him. It was almost a miraculous jump. His essay writing had always been OK. But it had been slow, slow and incomplete and painful. A chore. Now, he wrote an essay like it was something he could do. His ideas were complete and related and insightful.

Mary Brehaut, in a personal reflection on her part in Stewart’s work on story and difference (2009, p. 56, emphasis added), offers a wonderful description of how I understand story and resonance to work in literacy:

I try to use language (voice, gesture, writing) to translate whatever small part of this complexity I can pull out and offer – across a huge divide of diversity and difference – the doomed attempt to pass this whirling intangible energetic mist to other human beings – which, if we’re lucky, they genuinely try to pull through their own distorting lenses and filters – through their own kaleidoscope of stories. If any parts of this mist resonate enough, a few droplets of something might stick somewhere in their web. And so it goes...

Resonance in literacy is exactly that – a way of connecting with people through their ‘kaleidoscope of stories’ and leaving something behind. In a literacy environment, resonance can operate in a number of ways that enhance the experience for tutors and students. Through resonance, tutors can come to better comprehend student stories and empathize with student actions or circumstances. This empathy, if critically engaged, can lead to a more positive and productive approach to teaching better tailored to individual
student situation and need. Tutors can also find resonance with each other’s stories, which can help them face emotional stress and anxiety, and find the confidence and heart to persevere in their work. Through this resonance, there is also the possibility for tutors to learn from each other’s experiences and approaches to difficult situations, as well as actively reflect on their own experiences and teaching methods. Finally, relevancy is a principle in adult education that has long been supported by research and called for by those working in the field. I believe that relevancy is directly linked to resonance – the more relevant or relatable the material, or the approach to teaching, the more likely students are to find resonance. In finding this resonance with what or how they are learning, students may become more interested and likely to engage.

**Resonance, Empathy and Speaking Across Story**

She was always sleeping through class. Head down on the table, occasionally even snoring lightly. Once or twice she left for a cigarette, never came back. Went home to sleep, it turns out. At first I wonder, maybe she’s been out late partying. Get a little annoyed – shouldn’t she be devoting herself to her studies? Maybe she’s not so serious after all. I put up with it – she usually answers the questions she’s asked, sometimes without opening her eyes. She somehow manages to be a sleeping sponge, aware despite the apparent slumber. I remind myself that there may be other things going on in her life that I do not understand, that I don’t know about.

During the art project, a new story is revealed. She is on some heavy-duty medications. She describes, in pictures, in swirls of colour, and in flowing words, the vicious cycle of the medicine. Her resistance to the drugs, the requirement for her to be on them to maintain her housing. The terrible side effects. Her dependence on coffee, constant coffee, to keep her awake enough to function at all. She dislikes how jittery the caffeine makes her feel, but without it, she is not there at all. I have never been on anti-psychotics. I do not understand, nor will hopefully ever have to know, how they might make one feel. I was, however, on some strong antibiotics for a few weeks this year, due to a serious infection I picked up. I remember the fatigue, the sense of flatness and inability to do something as simple as walking to the subway without tiring. I remember how relieved I was when I finally got to go off the drugs, the sense
of release and freedom. I think about having those feelings day in and day out for years. All at once, I am resonating with that emotion of sheer exhaustion – and I understand with her inability to keep her head off her desk.

I have to fight to keep that story in my mind sometimes, when she is sleeping again. I have to fight to remember my own stories, to keep them present in my mind, to find that resonance, and that place of understanding. It takes patience, it takes a lot of patience. Mostly now however, backed by connection and understanding, I succeed.

Tutors faced with the situation like the one described in the above narrative may react in a number of ways. They can reject the situation, and the student. For example, they might get angry at the student’s apparent lack of interest, or perceived poor decisions, and kick the student out of the class. Tutors can also show a certain level of tolerance, without necessarily knowing the root causes of an issue. Before I knew a more illuminating piece of her stories, this tolerance is what I tried to show the student I refer to in the narrative above. Perhaps, I would say to myself, I do not know everything that is going on. I was right, of course, but it was a tough road for me, riding blind as I was.

Blind tolerance – i.e. tolerance of a situation without actually knowing the situation – is unquestionably an important element in literacy programs. Tutors frequently will not know the stories behind students’ behaviours or attitudes. It is often important to give people the benefit of the doubt and to be flexible in many aspects of teaching such as forgiving lateness, missed classes or drooping heads. In my experience, however, appreciation of or consideration for student circumstance forged through resonance will inevitably last longer, and be stronger.

In the above narrative, I did not know what this particular student was going through. How could I, having never been on anti-psychotics, or lived in social housing, or experienced any of the multitudes of other stories that make her unique? I could however, for a moment, resonate with the particular feeling of being made really, really tired by medication. For a moment, I was connected to her story. The connection helped me to appreciate some of her other behaviours – the constant drinking of coffee, the head down
on the desk, the struggle to sit through a class without the need for movement, fresh air and a cigarette. Although I could not know, I could briefly empathize. This empathy is not only an avenue to tolerance, but also has the potential for tutors to come up with creative approaches to dealing with some of the challenges students face in the classroom.

**Speaking and feeling across story**

There is little doubt that tutors have to become adept at speaking across stories. That first day with a new student, or in a classroom, all the tutors I spoke to agreed that they did not and could not know the person or people sitting across from them – despite the student information sheet produced by the intake process at BTS LBS. Tutors I talked to also spoke about the amount of time it takes to get to know students. This time-consuming relationship building process is complicated by the fact that many tutors come from markedly different background than students. Tutors often, therefore, have to find a way to connect and build relationship with students across these differences – and vice versa.

The importance of connection between student and tutor appears frequently in the adult literacy literature. In *What Goes On Here*, the Trent Valley group (2004) discusses the value of sensitivity, responsiveness, attentiveness and acceptance in the student-tutor relationship. They discuss their observations that tutors often intuitively know how to respond to certain situations with their students. In many cases, these researchers observe, tutors connect with their students at a “gut level” (p. 18). The theme of connection is also prevalent in Evelyn Battell’s (2004) contributing article in *Hardwired for Hope*. The connections between instructors and students, she writes, are a “necessity, a joy and a challenge” that effective instructors work to ensure are “rich and complex” (p. 85).

Although finding connection with students is essential, it is equally important for tutors not to fall into the trap of thinking they understand the student as opposed to just a
piece of the student’s story. The Trent Valley group (2004, p. 18), speaking about tutors, writes:

Some of us feel we have had similar life experiences and so we “know” how our student is feeling and trying to manage. We react as we would have wanted someone in our lives to. Some of us briefly step into our student’s shoes.

I am uncomfortable with the notion of, however briefly, stepping into someone else’s shoes. Although I understand the sentiment, the metaphor to me implies an action that is in fact impossible. I cannot ever be or entirely know the student I work with, for many reasons, but most importantly in this case because I cannot ever begin to understand the complexity of their stories in their entirety. I must never forget how my own stories play a role in the mix. As Battell (2004, p. 97) points out, effective tutors must “recognize where their lives differ from those of their students.” One tutor, in talking about something she had learned, spoke about the importance of recognizing the possibility of difference between student and tutor lives:

Don’t judge. You haven’t walked in their shoes. You don’t know what they’ve been through.

Another tutor told a story about a time she had made assumptions based on her own aversions:

One time we were going through words – reading words. And they were looking them up and I thought oh my god this must be so tedious for them. I said, “Do you want to skip this and do something else?” They said no, no – we like this. So I was surprised, I was making an assumption that they didn’t like what we were doing because I didn’t like it.

Although as a tutor I cannot understand students from their place – or their shoes – I can try and understand them from my own place. I can actively seek overlaps – resonances – in our stories. A practitioner in Sheila Stewart’s study (2009, p. 42) writes that “the trick” to appreciating student story is to “create a bridge between my world and the learner’s world.” Resonance can provide that bridge, in the form of mental, physical,
emotional or spiritual overlaps in each other stories. It can also help to create moments of empathy.

Empathy has been referred to as type of emotional resonance (Kodra et al, 2006). I think, however, it can come just as much from other kinds of resonance. Jeffers (2009, p. 2) provides a definition of empathy:

*Empathy, at root, allows the self to identify with the other and individuals to connect with groups. Facilitating holistic learning in the classroom and beyond, empathy is a vital resource that offers the promise of intersubjective understanding so essential to the survival of the human community.*

Resonance can lead to greater tolerance, because a tutor may be able to glimpse enough of the student’s story to achieve a moment of empathy. This moment might help a tutor realize the need to forgive missed classes, or figure out a new way to approach a lesson.

Further, this resonance can lead to approaches to situations that are based on a student’s individual needs as opposed to assumptions or generalizations. I worked with one student, for example, for whom tiredness was quickly remedied by a coffee break. Therefore every 30 minutes, which is about when he would start to fade, we would deliberately take that break. It worked marvelously. The same did not work for the student in the narrative above. The root source of her tiredness was something different – it was, quite literally, drug-induced – and sending her for coffee breaks every 30 minutes, though she willingly took them, served only to make her jittery and ultimately more exhausted. In the end, it seemed like the best way to approach her closed eyes was often to ignore them and treat her as a present member of the class in all moments. As the narrative mentions, she was remarkably adept at answering questions and participating in discussions even when it appeared as though she was asleep. Some days, when it was clear the exhaustion was getting the better of her, the best thing was to simply let her go home if she chose. By no means of course was this approach any kind of a ‘solution.’ It was an approach, however, that seemed to work well for both of us given the constraints of the situation.
How far can resonance go across differences?

In order to understand how I think resonance works, it is imperative to grasp that there are limitations to how it should be used and applied in a literacy settings. Hearing across difference is complex, as is relating across social divides. Megan Boler (1999, p. 160) writes that she does not have much faith in people’s “capacity to judge what is ‘really happening’ to others.” I agree with this sentiment and apply it to resonance – resonance does not and should not ever be thought of as a way to comprehend fully what others are going through. In Coffel’s book *Thinking Themselves Free* (2011, p. 27), Beth – one of the woman administrators at the learning center Coffel taught at – expressed her doubt that “empathy could go very far across some differences.” She discussed as an example the teachers in the program who had come from similar circumstances as some of the students. These teachers, Beth said, had “pulled themselves up” and they were unable to see why the kids they taught could not – they were of the opinion it might be because the students were “lazy” (Coffel, 2011, p. 27).

Razack (1993, p. 66) reminds us that our “different subject positions, borne out in how we know, tell and hear stories, are ignored at our peril.” Resonance does not go across differences in the sense that it does not create sameness. It does not allow us to somehow vicariously go through what others have experienced. Just because the teachers in Coffel’s book, for example, recognized or resonated with pieces of the situation students had come from did not give them the tools to know those students in their entirety. It did not, therefore, give them the right to pass judgment or to attribute the students’ performances to laziness. Resonance is felt only through a person’s own stories – and allows us only to continue to know through those stories. I therefore re-emphasize that tutors must be aware of how their own stories are affecting how they hear and what they hear.

Although I think it has important implications for the consideration or appreciation of student circumstances, I use the term empathy cautiously in this piece. I
understand what Boler (1999, p. 158) calls “the risks of passive empathy.” Passive empathy, according to Boler (1999, p. 166) is not reflective, is forged through a sense that one can put oneself in the other’s shoes, and contains the danger of “annihilating the other.” Empathy, like resonance, is “produced within networks of power relations” that should not be ignored (Boler, 1999, p. 165). Despite her warnings, Boler (1999, p. 164) still expresses the opinion that empathy “offers a connection and communication we don’t want to lose”. She explains:

*It’s possible to identify the sense in which we’ve all been hurt, but to do so without a reductive denial of specificities. (p. 165)*

Tutors therefore can form an appreciation for student circumstances that does not extend to a claim of understanding the student. They should not generalize from resonance or the moments of empathy it can create, and they must also be careful not to appropriate the experiences of others. Again, in the narrative that started this section I resonated with the feeling of inescapable exhaustion that I had felt when taking certain antibiotics. That did not mean I ‘knew’ what this particular student was feeling – I had not ‘been through the same thing myself.’

What resonance provides is only a glimpse into a piece of a story. Through that glimpse, however, tutors can find connection with the students they work with. These connections, although they are complex and contain the possibility of misinterpretation, are what we have, and we have to use them. In these connections tutors can find a guide to supporting and accepting students how they are. They can also provide context in which to base a creative and student-centered approach to learning.

**Connection, Reflection and Perseverance**

People are getting up, permission forms are being collected and handed over to me. The focus group has ended, but the room is alive with energy. People are chatting, reflecting – excited and vitalized. We have talked about some
challenging things, and in many cases failed to come to consensus or conclusion – but that does not seem to have affected anyone in a negative way, at least not in this moment. The room buzzes with continued dialogue. At some point, someone captures what everyone is seemingly feeling: “This has been really helpful,” she says. “I really enjoyed this.” There is general, animated agreement. “Perhaps,” says another tutor, “Well, I think it would be great to have something like this maybe on a regular basis … not like a lot… but once in a while the tutors could get together and exchange notes.” Absolutely. Yes. That is a good recommendation – the sentiment echoes around the room. “That could be an element of the program – that would be nice,” enthuses yet another tutor. I agree! Oh yes. Definitely that would be good.

I understand their feelings. I myself am alive with ideas, with the other tutors’ stories and with my own. I came here to lead a focus group for a program evaluation for Beat the Street – and I got lots of feedback for that. I left, however, with much more. Completely unexpectedly, I had been drawn into a circle of sharing as a tutor, not as a researcher. Other tutors’ stories had drawn out my own stories, hit nerves, fired up discussion, and been a cause for deep reflection about my own experiences and practices. What a vibrant mess of emotional release, practical tips, lively debate and above all – a refreshed sense of purpose. The focus group gave me the strength, and the will, and the inspiration to continue doing what I do.

There are many reasons that meetings such as the focus group described above are beneficial to tutors. As I wrote in the BTS LBS program evaluation report (Melville, 2010, p. 15), which highly recommended the continuation of such focus groups, “tutors can exchange resources as well as suggested techniques to use with their students.” The importance of focus groups and other tutor meetings, however, goes far beyond the practical exchange of teaching techniques. The sharing of story that is featured prominently in these conversations, in my experience, can lead to important moments of connection – and resonance. Resonance between tutors can help tutors deal with the vicarious trauma that they sometimes experience through their work. Tutors can find emotional release through resonance, as well as a chance to face their anxieties and share their approaches and suggestions for difficult situations. Resonance with stories of success and happiness can serve as a reminder that although what we do is hard, the
rewards can be incredible. Resonance between tutors, therefore, can lead to connection, reflection, moments of learning, and a spiritual, emotional, mental or even physical renewal of self.

One of the later sections in Jenny Horsman’s book *Too Scared to Learn* (1999) deals with the cost for literacy tutors of ‘bearing witness.’ Issues such as vicarious trauma, when a person who “hears the story of another person’s traumatic history experiences secondary trauma,” are traditionally described by those in counselling and therapeutic roles (Horsman, 1999, p. 276). Horsman contends that many of these experiences are equally relevant in adult literacy situations, with adult literacy tutors and instructors. In some cases, it may actually be more emotionally exhausting or damaging for tutors than therapists, as “literacy workers have little control over when they hear stories, and fewer boundaries limiting how much they will hear and what to expect” (Horsman, 1999, p. 257). Counselling support that allows tutors to refer students, or themselves, to therapists exists in some literacy programs. Most, however, do without (Horsman, 1999. Gesser and Sawyer, 2004). Literacy tutors therefore need to find places where they can share the stories they have heard, or if there are issues of confidentiality, at least explore their own reactions to these stories (Horsman, 1999. Stewart, 2009). Horsman (1999, p. 265) suggests that like “those who experience trauma, those who bear witness to it need places for connection.”

There are no counselling services for tutors at BTS LBS. There was briefly a social worker for students – a partnership between Ontario Works and BTS LBS – but unfortunately her contract was over after seven months, and she was only available on an informal, unplanned meet-in-the-kitchen basis for tutors. Therefore, the only people tutors are able to go to talk to on a regular basis are the BTS LBS program coordinator and the two other BTS coordinators who share her office. These three generally get top marks for helpfulness, support and availability. One tutor, speaking of the support system, said:
I think it’s great. Whenever I’m confused or feeling bad or wondering if I’m doing to the right thing, I talk to [the BTS program coordinators]. They’ll tell me what’s what.

This remark met with generally agreement around the focus group, and was repeated in the tutor interviews.

All three of these coordinators also work as practitioners – and I think this fact plays an important role in their ability to resonate with tutor story and struggles. I myself have had many conversations with the coordinator of the BTS LBS program – to chat idly, to plan a teaching strategy, or to blow off steam about some frustration or another I have encountered in my work. It is absolutely essential that we are able to connect through these conversations because this coordinator understands at least a part of what I am going through in a given situation. Through resonance with similar situations, the coordinator can know that when I am frustrated that a student has once again missed our meeting, it is some part annoyance for the inconvenience but also a greater part worry over whether the student is all right, and concern that they have left the program for good. The coordinator can share her own stories of struggle, and together we can find some of that emotional release and connection that I have found vital to my wellbeing as a tutor.

Despite the amazing support of the three BTS coordinators, they are not always around; they have busy schedules and a ton on their plates. Further, even though they strive to be accessible and the tutors are mostly volunteers – they are still the bosses, and I wonder if there are some conversations that tutors may not be comfortable having with ‘the boss.’ Certainly, I could feel that there was a different – and I am not implying better or worse – dynamic between the first tutor focus group, where a coordinator was not present, and the second, where one did attend. Another tutor I talked to later commented on this difference as well. I also believe that there are many moments where tutors feel the need to talk, but do not know exactly what about, or times when they may not even realize the benefits that talking and sharing stories may have. This latter was certainly my experience with the focus group, for myself and I believe for the others who attended – at
least one of who personally told me so. Sometimes, tutors face so many anxieties that I have personally have found it can be hard to begin to express them.

**Facing anxiety**

Tutors face a multitude of anxieties in literacy programs like BTS LBS. In an interview, one tutor spoke about one source of this anxiety, and how it had affected her when she first entered BTS LBS:

*I was really afraid of doing the wrong thing. That was my most significant fear when I started out. Would I screw up somehow and make it worse for them? That’s what I was really afraid of, because I didn’t know what I was doing, I had never done it before.*

She said that this feeling changed very quickly for her, as she realized that the important thing to do was to hand over control of the lesson and her teaching approach to the students. There are other tutors, however, for whom this particular uncertainty may not quickly resolve. In her research, Kate Nonesuch (2008, p. 38) found that one of the reasons some literacy practitioners were resistant to dealing with the effects of violence on learning – even if an issue came up in the classroom – was a fear of doing “more harm than good.” Other anxieties mentioned in the focus group included the right way to approach teaching, as well as whether or not ignoring the whole picture did any good for the student at all, among other things.

Stewart (2009, p. 38) points out that this anxiety can affect a literacy practitioner’s approach to teaching:

*When we become anxious and uncertain of what is happening, we may revert to simple ways of teaching or interacting with students, less developed and less reflective forms of practice.*

Through the sharing of story, tutors may be able to find resonance with each other over their particular anxieties. Through this resonance, they can acknowledge that others are
going through the same experiences, as well as create an opportunity to hear how other tutors have approached the situation. In one of the tutor interviews, the tutor and I discussed our feelings about the benefits of the focus group:

Tutor: *I think it’s good to get people... because sometimes you do feel, you must feel it too, you’re out there all on your own trying to figure out what to do, right, and it’s nice to talk to the other people who are saying the same thing.*

Rebecca: *Yah, exactly. Or even just to be like, ok, I am on the right track here, I’m not totally losing my mind.*

Tutor: *Exactly. And it’s sometimes really good, by the way, it was helpful to hear other people’s ... just everyone’s experiences, right?*

In her research, Stewart (2009, p. 5) shares a practitioner story that she and the other practitioners found to “be a kind of a-ha moment where we gained an inside look at how an experienced practitioner can respond skillfully in a delicate situation.” A practitioner in Jenny Horsman’s research (1999, p. 282, emphasis added), writing about the benefit she had found in a multi-practitioner on-line conversation, specifically mentions the importance of resonance:

*I just want to quickly add that I think this on-line conversation can be a way of taking care of ourselves. I have found myself carving out odd times of the day and night to add a little something to our discussion and value knowing that often something I write resonates with another. This can be an important way to express and/or release trauma we hold inside us and which has little or no space for expression in our work lives, depending on the contexts we work in.*

Nancy Jackson (2004, p. 9), in her report on research-in-practice, writes that when practitioners communicate with each other they can be “exposed to a larger range of ideas relevant to their own interest, including theory, policy, and other research” which can encourage their “interest in professional development.” Further, these conversations can inspire excitement through the “contagious” enthusiasm of practitioners (Jackson, 2004, p. 9). In several cases in the focus groups, tutors began to work together to come up with creative solutions to a perceived problem. For example, the two math teachers were
struggling with a number of issues in the class – particularly a high turnover rate and a lack of practical application in the standard pre-GED material:

*T1: But you know with the math, when I first came here we were given the pre-GED book and you know, follow that word for... and you know, there were days where – would I feel like coming in and sitting down for three hours and doing math page after page out of this book? And sometimes I think we should throw all the books away and set up modular systems. This is like a grocery shopping modular system thing, and this is a finance banking kind of thing, and this is a... I think it should be totally revamped. We’ve talked about that.  

...  

*T1: But our problem is we have kids coming well now once a month, the intake we’ve set will take them in the Monday of each month. So then ... how do you teach the modules? If there are only two of us and ... there could be ten kids, there could be two kids, and then they don’t show up... I mean, it’s so difficult. And that’s what’s got us stumped. You know?  

Other tutors, resonating with these particular problems, began both to tell their own stories as well as brainstorm together an innovative way that the math teachers could approach the problem:

*T2: So if they wanted to do the GED though, would that get them ready for it? Sort of math for everyday life, right? You’d have to tailor it.  

*T1: It would be math for everyday life and you’d have to tailor it... If we could sort of compartmentalize the concepts but make them really ... out there. And throw away the GED book. Sort of.  

*T3: Well you can kind of go to that after, after they get why it’s important and how it related to them. Then it’s easier to move into, well this is what will be required for the exam and how it relates to ...  

*T4: I think they have the same problem in the LINC program that they use for teaching English as a second language to immigrants. I think it’s a nightmare because they get people coming in at different stages and they have to accept them, and yet, half the class will be on one topic, or at stage of development, and then they get a newcomer... I mean, how do you...? I admire you for trying.  

The conversation went on for ten minutes. The topics ranged from using computer programs, to manual flash cards, to the possibility of incorporating baking and cooking
into the math class. People told stories from their own experiences, as well as suggested possibilities for incorporating modules and ‘practical’ applications with GED requirements.

These kinds of conversations do not necessarily lead to solutions or resolutions. Literacy work is complicated, and there is hardly ever a simple right or wrong answer to problems that can be multi-faceted and difficult to address. Sometimes, the resonance with other tutors’ stories and feelings serves only to confirm the complexity – but this confirmation can be in and of itself a source of comfort. Muchmore (2004, p. 135-136) talks about how important it was for him, as a beginning teacher, to read the stories of other teachers who “had struggled through situations similar to my own, if for no other reason than simply to have known that I was not alone.” I find it helpful to know that other tutors are having just as much trouble as I am figuring it all out. It is not just me that sometimes feels like as tutors we are failing, or at least floundering about with very little direction in the dark. It is helpful, too, to see those tutors who resonate with the struggles but remain confident in the work they do. Because of resonance, we can see ourselves, like them, overcoming the barriers we are currently facing, at least enough to gain renewed sense of confidence in ourselves and in our work.

Sharing success

Earlier in this thesis, I told a story that a tutor had shared in one of the focus groups regarding a success she felt she had had with a student:

*One success I would cite... it was more of a moment of delight than a success that had anything to do with my contribution. But a couple of weeks ago we were just exchanging pleasantries and ‘how are you this morning’ and ‘gosh it’s cold.’ And my learner said, ‘You know, I was reading my book, and I almost missed my subway stop.’ I thought that was absolutely fantastic.*

This story, and other tutors’ positive reactions to its telling, illustrate two moments of resonance. The first occurred in the moment the story describes, between the tutor and the
student. The tutor resonated with the student’s excitement over reading – specifically, the notion of getting ‘lost’ in a book. The second moment occurred when she told the story in the focus group, and everyone responded with such enthusiasm. At least five other tutors responded verbally, and generally the energy seemed very positive – everyone was smiling. Although I cannot say specifically what part of the story people were resonating with, I can describe what I felt. On my part, I resonated with three aspects of the story: the joy of reading – I miss subway stops all the time because of reading; the feeling of connecting with a student; and the excitement and delight that tutors often experience with a perceived student success.

Tutors need this third kind of connection – these moments of resonance with other tutors’ stories. There are a host of possibly positive outcomes from moments like these. In cases like this one, there is an emotional reaction that can reinforce tutors’ sense of purpose. Two of the tutors commented after hearing the story above:

*That’s why I’m coming here!*

*That’s what it’s all about!*

Stories like this remind tutors that the successes that matter – those that are often not otherwise easily reportable – can and do happen in literacy work. I know that for me and for a few other tutors I spoke to afterward, the focus group gave us a renewed drive.

Reflection

Muchmore (2004, p. 136) writes that narratives written about “teachers’ lives and careers” can serve other teachers as “tools for self-reflection.” He suggests that his own book could serve as such a tool:

*By examining the connections between my own story and Anna’s story, and actively weighing them against their own ongoing life experiences, readers may gain deeper insights into the underlying beliefs, assumptions, and experiences that shape their own teaching and research practices.* (p. 136)
Knowledge or stories that resonate but do not entirely match with their own experiences can help tutors re-imagine and re-evaluate their stories, beliefs, and selves in a new light. Resonance with someone’s account of something – even if that resonance is only with a part of their story – can serve to cause people to take pause, and to actively reflect on their own attitudes or actions in particular situations. If tutors do not entirely agree on an issue, for example, than it gives them a chance to reflect on those differences and consider their implications.

There were several moments when tutors were able to reflect on differences in the tutor focus groups. When confronted with a discussion on the extent to which literacy tutors should, or are able, to deal with issues outside of the purview of the lesson, it was clear that there were many opinions on the subject. I have quoted from parts of this conversation in other places in my thesis, and the conversation went on for too long to include it all. Here, however, are some highlights:

*T1:* The “streets” is a biiiiig sort of mystery. Do you find that too? Or do you concentrate mostly on the task at hand?

*T2:* Oh definitely the task at hand. And I figure they’ll tell you if they want to tell you. Otherwise you’re just dealing with them at face value. I’m here to help you with X and tell if I am succeeding or not or tell me what you need different. But I just have to ignore all the rest.

*T3:* But I mean maybe... maybe as an individual tutor we need to ignore it, I agree with you, ‘cause I just try to keep focused on the small successes, right? ‘Cause I’ve had many students and I’ve never felt a great success to be perfectly honest. But I’ve had lots of small successes. But I’m wondering if we’re naïve in thinking that we’re making a huge impact if we’re not addressing it holistically. Like addressing some of these issues that bring these kids ... and I don’t mean us as individuals necessarily, but as an organization.

*T2:* That’s not possible. From my perspective, that’s just not possible.

...

*T4:* I mean in an ideal world I think it’s how it should be, no question. But I don’t see it happening here.
T4: Because the mission of Frontier College is literacy. And it’s not an all encompassing...

T5: But I see what [T3] is saying too, that you have to look at broader things too... to deal with it holistically is important, to not forget about...

T4: Well because then you’re dealing with some of the barriers to learning.

During this conversation, I was personally resonating with many sides of the issue – having experienced moments in my practice where they all felt like the ‘right’ answer. Literacy is complex – and there is hardly ever a right answer. Tutors will therefore rarely come, in my experience, to any conclusions about issues such as these. It is enough, however, that a question or story resonates with a tutor in a way that gives them pause, and opens their mind to reflecting on an issue: What does violence have to do with literacy? What can I do if a student comes to the program hungry? Does being learner-centered mean that literacy teaching needs to be holistic?

There were a lot of examples of stories like this one in the focus groups – stories that made us laugh as well as those that caused more mixed emotions. All of the stories tutors told seemed to resonate with a couple of others in the group in some way or another. The experience was for me both emotionally refreshing and fulfilling. I cannot say for sure whether everyone felt the same resonance as I did, but as the group unfolded everyone spoke at least once in a way that was insightful and connected to the conversation. It was clear, too, from the comments at the end of the focus groups, and from the opinions of participating tutors I talked to later, that the focus group was something people felt was greatly needed for the tutors of BTS LBS. I believe that Horsman (1999, p. 269) sums up this need well when she says:

The literacy worker, no less than the therapist, needs adequate support for her own sake and for the sake of those with whom she works. To learn to bear feelings of helplessness, and to maintain belief in both the student’s power and her own, she needs a place to take the pain, the issues brought up for her, and to check out the appropriateness of her reactions.
Relevancy and Resonance

People are more likely to tune-in to something when it resonates with them. Just think of the cocktail party effect, first described by Colin Cherry in 1953 (Haykin and Chen, 2005) – at a party, where you are attuned only to a particular conversation you are involved in, when suddenly your attention is caught by your name being mentioned halfway across the room. Or think of a boring lecture, where your mind has drifted to what you will eat for dinner when suddenly, someone says something that connects with you and therefore catches your attention. Resonance, in a sense, can switch a person into a receptive mode by piquing their interest. Once piqued, a person is more likely to listen and actively engage with what is being said, especially when the subject material or ideas continue to find resonance with them.

The same is true of a literacy environment – students are more likely to be interested, to engage and to remember – and therefore to learn – if the material being presented in some way resonates with them. It is often very clear when resonance happens in the classroom. In the spoken word workshop, for example, a number of the students were very engaged with the ideas and actively contributing to the conversation. That people were learning was evident the next week, when I started to explain to the poetry facilitator what we had done in the spoken word class. One of the students was so excited by what she had learned that she, unasked, finished all my sentences for me.

The notion that learning should be relevant and relatable to students has been around a long time in adult education research and practice. I believe the importance of relevance is in part explained because relevance can lead to resonance. If a tutor actively seeks to place emphasis on a student’s aspirations and interests, they are more likely to find an echo in that student’s stories and in their realities. In a literacy program, students that find resonance with the material being presented – whether it be a tutor’s story or a newspaper article or a book on engineering – are more likely to be interested and engaged. They are also more likely to be open to listening and learning from that
material. The same is true if students resonate with the way material is being presented – such as through poetry or songs or painting.

**The power of a relatable experience**

From popular education to critical literacy studies, adult education theories and theorists frequently state the importance of starting from the world of the student (Knowles, Holton and Swanson, 2011). Relevancy often means that the material is in some way practical; many researchers agree that the “highest level of participation comes from people who can learn something they need to know and apply it to their lives” (Rose, 2004, p. 51). Literacy learning should make sense, matter or be useful to students (Battell, 2004), or somehow relate to issues that “derive from people’s own interests and knowledge” (Tett, 2005, p. 28). The value of providing relatable material and methods was reflected in my research, and was agreed upon by both tutors and students.

In my research, the notion of ‘starting with the student’ in order to make learning successful was frequently brought up. Both tutors and students mentioned the importance of knowing and exploring topics and ideas that were of interest to the student:

*Tutor:* I can make up my lessons about their interests, but make it educational. You’re not going to talk about camping if they’re the type of person who doesn’t like to camp.

*Student:* I like that my tutor asks about my interests – I love that.

*Tutor1:* We always choose a book that is obviously of interest to them ... it makes a difference if it’s of interest to them.
*Tutor2:* It does because of... I had a student who was forced to read something he was not enjoying. He said, “please don’t let us read that one,” so we don’t.

*Rebecca:* If you could say anything to a new tutor coming into this program, what would you say to them?
*Tutor:* I would say it’s important to get to know [the students] a little bit on a personal level ... And find out, what do they want? What do they want out of this [program] beyond what they’re writing. And this is what I keep coming back to
because I think it’s important. So, you know, get to know them a little bit and find out what their dreams are.

Students also mentioned the importance of having a tutor that shared some of those interests in common, and how they liked that BTS LBS placed special attention on elements such as interests and background in the intake process. One student commented that the BTS LBS coordinator was “good at picking tutors for us… especially at judging our characters.” Students also mentioned that they thought learning was “more personal with tutors,” and that they thought it was good that they can tell tutors what they want to learn, and that their tutors “coordinate with that.”

**Through relevancy to resonance**

I think that there are a number of reasons that relevancy is helpful and important for literacy programs. One of them, however, is that when tutors look for relevancy – when they start from the student’s interests or from students’ own perspective of their life or aspirations – students are more likely to find resonance.

In the spoken word workshop, we were having a discussion about hip-hop – what it meant to us in our lives and whether we liked it or not. One of the students said something that I think applies equally to learning as it does to hip-hop:

[Hip-hop] is all right. I like real life verses jewelry and cars. I like a story. If it’s an experience that I went though then I like it - if it has a relatable experience.

Donna-Michelle, the workshop facilitator, got visibly excited by this comment and responding by saying that she agreed – and that while everyone was free to enjoy what they liked:

**Spending money isn’t my reality!**
Everyone in the room laughed. Generally, the conversation seemed to indicate that people had little interest in listening to stories that were irrelevant to their lives. Why would we expect that to be any different for learning?

Finding resonance does not mean that the material has to be specifically from students’ lives all the time. Relevance does not just mean a tutor is limited to, for example, only teaching about countries the student has visited, or that the student should be constantly requested to write journal entries like: “This morning I ate breakfast.” Students may in fact be uncomfortable being asked to talk about their lives, or reveal parts of themselves they do not wish to (Horsman, 1999). Tutors should never think that it is necessarily to press a student for “detailed disclosures” – it can be the opposite of helpful especially for those students dealing with violence (Nonesuch, 2008, p. 40). Resonance is, again, about finding connections – connections between students’ lives and the material or ideas being presented, or connections between a way of teaching and students’ interests, or connections between particular learning activities and students’ regular pursuits. These connections can often be made not through asking for story but rather by actively and carefully listening to the story that is being told.

One tutor told a story about finding some of these connections with a student who was not particularly comfortable writing about her everyday life:

*I found the newspaper helpful in terms of my student, she felt uncomfortable keeping a journal of her daily experiences. And then she mentioned to me that she tries to read a newspaper article on the way to school. So I’ve asked her instead of writing about her personal experiences to summarize the article for me. And she’s gone through the article and underlined words that she doesn’t know. And then I’ve been able to see whether she’s gotten the context of the article from the journal. And I asked her to pick out one that she was interested in so that it was not boring for her. Instead of saying ‘I got up and brushed my teeth,’ or whatever.*

In this case, the tutor found resonance with the student through actively listening to what the student had to say. She tailored her learning activity to achieve this resonance both
through incorporating the lesson into the student’s regular pursuits, in addition to putting the student in charge of picking a topic of interest.

Just as a tutor can find a bridge to a student’s story through, for example, physical resonance with the feeling of drug-induced exhaustion, so can students find resonance with material that is not a direct representation of their lives. In a focus group, one of the tutors told this story about approaching the teaching of the Holocaust with a student:

*My student is now on Challenger Four*, and two of the lessons, sequentially, deal with Anne Frank’s diary. And we dealt with the first one and that then led to some discussion of the Holocaust. And she was very upset […] And we talked about the life of a young girl living in an attic, and I shared some personal remembrances. Where I grew up in Nova Scotia, the Dutch family that bought the farm next door when I was a very young child had in fact hidden Jews on their farm in the Netherlands during the course of the war. And subsequently told us about this much later, when I was a young adult. So I shared that story and then [the student] was quite reluctant to review the next story, which was the 2nd part of Anne Frank’s diary. And I said well let’s talk about why we’re looking at this. And she said Hitler is a really evil and awful person and I said yes he was. But let’s talk about its necessity, why it’s important why we study this now. And it is to prevent, hopefully – to recognize evil and to try and prevent it in each of our individual actions and our collective actions as a society. And I think that carried… and you know we touched upon Rwanda and a few more instances of more recent genocide as well… and she seemed reconciled with that explanation. Certainly she wasn’t happier with the emotional impact of reading the diary but I think it put it much more in context for her.

The Holocaust was not something that was specifically part of this student’s life. In fact, before this exchange she had, according to the tutor, only vaguely heard about it. Yet through resonance – emotional resonance as well as mental resonance with aspects of the world that were more currently relevant – the tutor and the student were able to explore and discuss the horror and some of the possibilities for learning it contained.

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[17] The *Challenger* series is a set of workbooks designed to assist adult learners with reading and writing.
Conclusion

Our stories can lead us down certain paths. Stories told in a setting where people are actively listening have a marvelous way of opening “the possibility for the telling of other stories” (Stewart, 2009, p. 25). I think that if given the chance, the process of learning will naturally gravitate towards resonance. When I first started the art program, I asked students what subjects they would like to focus on for their final projects. The answers were for many, though certainly not all, about subjects that people were interested in, but not necessarily connected to. One student, for example, talked about doing a photo essay on homelessness – specifically people’s callous disregard people asking for money in the street. This particular student had never, however, been homeless herself, though some of her peers had. It was certainly an interesting idea, and I think I encouraged it as much as any other. As time passed, however, the topic of the photo essay changed – through no prompting of my own. The new idea just appeared one day as the other disappeared. In the end, the student did a photo essay on the effects of verbal abuse by parents on children. It was, I believe, a topic that was much more resonate in this student’s own stories.

Whether we are students or tutors or somewhere in between – we look for connections in our work, in our lives, and in our stories. When these connections lead to resonance, it can be a profound experience of understanding, relationship, and learning. But how can we, as tutors, actively seek resonance with our students in the literacy environment? In the next chapter I will explore some of the ways I have seen tutors and students at BTS LBS move towards resonance.
Chapter Six: Finding Resonance

Figure and Words By Lily Diaz

so the man in my life is school

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Keep It Positive (A Group Poem)

CHORUS
Life is what you make it
So keep it real, don’t fake it
It’s your life to live
So keep it positive

DAHLIA HUNTER
Your life is all you’ve got
So keep it real
And never look back
It’s your life to live so keep
It positive, positive
When the world is caving
Look within your heart
To see all the positive
Within
Your life is what you make
It so Always keep it
Positive

NELISHA DUMONT
Life is tough
It sometimes may
Be rough
We have to struggle
To make it
In the end you can
Achieve
Anything you want
In life

KELVIN VICTOR
Don’t feel like it’s a mistake
Stand strong!
Be bold!
Do not break!
Whatever you do, please don’t fake
It could turn out in a mysterious way

KAYDEEN BANKASINGH
Don’t let anyone tell you it’s not true
That in life you can’t do what you love to do
What you give to others, is what you will receive
Rewards in life go far past what you believe

NICOLE HEALY
Keeping positive
Keeping real
Staying fresh
Being alive

LILY DIAZ
Life is going to be
What I choose
To see because
I will be me!

REBECCA MELVILLE
Don’t try and take what’s not there
Be everything that you’ve got
Forgive
Whether earth fire water or air
Believe
In yourself
Hold on to those around you
Who are positive

SEAN DENNIS
It is here for the taking so don’t
Be passive be active in your life
Everything is achievable so don’t let
Anyone tell you differently

VENISHA SMITH
Life they say to Believe It
And things you want, you will get
Yeah, it’s true
I see it happening to me
That’s truth
So I know that’s real, man

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19 The chorus of this group poem was written as a class in the spoken word workshop. The verses were written by individual students, as named. Reproduced with permission.
I would say it has a lot to do with the tutor herself or himself. They adapt and they ... you know it’s like dancing, you move with your partner.

- Tutor

Reality is not just what we see, but what we have learned to see.

- Ningwakwe/E. Priscilla George, 2002
Introduction

Three weeks ago I started a process, an experiment, a new and exciting exploration. What have I gotten myself into?

I don’t know how to share with them how much I am learning. I don’t know how to make it up to them when I am tired, or disorganized, or just as confused about what I am doing as they are. Such a clear outline on paper can mean nothing to what actually happens. How do I feel crushed, tired, uneasy, uncomfortable if they are not interested. Betrayed, personally affronted. The whole point is no one has to love everything, and not everyone will enjoy everything. People are as individuals.

I need to work on being clear, and open in my speaking. Talk without guiding. Express without passing judgment, or paving the way for material to emerge. I have to trust them to have minds of their own, strong minds, while minding the possible past hurt associated with any power dynamics inherent in my position as a ‘teacher,’ though I have not positioned myself overtly in this way.

Who am I and why the hell should they care what I am doing?

(Reflection, Monday November 15th)

Resonance is not always an easy thing to achieve. As I was getting more involved in this thesis, I got excited, and started to see all the ways in which resonance was working around me – in the literacy environment, and then elsewhere in my life. I was looking at the results of resonance, too, and I was in awe of its magic. I was not, however, particularly paying attention to how this magic was happening. Then one day I had a lunchtime conversation with a fellow tutor, one who I had previously interviewed. I do not remember the entire conversation, but she said one thing that struck me. She was talking about how frustrating teaching in literacy can be, and related to me that every time she finished a class, she thought to herself “was there anything that clicked today?”

She reminded me that resonance is not as easy to find as it might sound. You might think that with all of my experiences, and with all of yours, there would be plenty
of common ground upon which to find resonance. But that is not necessarily the case. In fact, it is often not the case. Stories are too complex to predict, and too dynamic to pin down – I can never know entirely what might ‘click’ with a student, or a friend for that matter, on a given day. Someone might be really interested in talking about cars one day, and babies the next. There are days when it feels, as a tutor, like nothing is connecting and maybe it never will. I wrote the reflection I included above on such a day. It was the first day I had led the art class without the regular teacher there, and only my third time with them overall. The first half of the class was particularly terrible – I was tired, many of the students were restless, and although some people seemed to be listening to what I had to say, it felt like nothing was connecting. Everyone looked completely bored. When they went on break, they were gone for 45 minutes (usually, they were gone for about 15, and as the art class progressed, sometimes they did not leave at all). The second half of the class was better, but my confidence was shaken. I would prefer never to have to repeat that day. The truth, however, is there are stretches of time like that on almost every day of teaching.

So far in this thesis, I have described what I think resonance is – a deep connection found through echoes in our stories – and the places and situations in which I observed it benefiting both tutors and students in the literacy environment. In this chapter I will explore the ways in which I have seen tutors and students improve their chances of finding resonance, as well as some of the barriers to resonance I have observed.

I identified early on in the research process the importance of movement and flexibility in literacy learning and teaching. Tutors who move – themselves and their students – are less likely to get stuck in an idea or a style of teaching that does not work for the student. Getting stuck in this way can increase the frustration of both tutors and students – and weaken the chances for either party of finding resonance.

In my experience, to find resonance tutors must also try as much as possible to speak to the student – not to the tutor’s expectations of who the student should be based on the tutor’s own assumptions, or based on the identities partially created for the
students through the process of entering a literacy program. A student’s identity, like any person’s identity, is complex. In a literacy environment a student’s identity often gets defined not entirely by the student, but by the requirements of funders and the definition of what gets counted as legitimate goals for literacy programs. Manufactured identities and masks often confuse the stories that are student-defined realities with those that are defined by the literacy program. The two are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but it can be more difficult to find resonance when tutors speak to these limited and limiting manufactured identities, as some manufactured identities will have hardly any bearing on the realities of the students’ lives. In a strong student-tutor relationship there is a greater potential that students and tutors will together explore and reject inappropriate aspects of these manufactured identities. The student-tutor relationship also plays other important roles in the finding of resonance. The build up of trust in this relationship can lead to a higher likelihood of students and tutors taking risks with each other – including risks that may lead to resonance. Finally, the chances of resonance are increased through the underrated and often de-legitimatized element of conversation in literacy teaching and learning.

**Movement**

I worked with my first student for over a year and a half. We got to know each other. I learned how she learned. I made certain worksheets, I used certain resources, I had a certain approach – together we figured out what worked. At the end of that year and a half, as often happens, her life got complicated and she had to leave. I got my second student. The first day, I confidentially brought in my worksheets, a lesson plan that my first student would have loved, and a sense of pride that I knew what the heck I was doing. Within half an hour, that all went out the window. This student was not my last student. I could have been stubborn – I could have stuck to what I knew and tried to force this other way of learning on him. But I didn’t. I couldn’t. I had to move.
People are not static. People are processes. They change and they move. And
learning, in a sense, is movement. You’re changing a little bit of your mind. In order to
learn then, you have to move. And in order to teach, you have to try to cause movement.
And you, yourself, will likely have to move.

Movement is the act or process of changing or adapting something. There are
many ways to move, or to cause movement. Tutors can change lesson plans, or topics, or
particular activities. They can change their style of delivery, or their approach to
teaching. Tutors and students can also physically move – this kind of movement is also
about change, and can lead to a change of perspective as well as the chance of physical
resonance. All manner of movement can be beneficial to learning, and contains the
possibility of finding resonance. If tutors do not move then they risk getting stuck in their
own stories – and failing to account for or acknowledge the stories of students. In this
state of ossification, the likelihood of finding resonance decreases.

Movement and flexibility are connected. By movement, as I have mentioned, I
mean the act of changing something, and by flexibility I mean a person’s level of
openness to a change, or to making a change. The tutors I spoke to identified both
movement and flexibility as extremely important elements in teaching literacy:

*T1: I think you have to be able to change direction very quickly. If what you’re
teaching is not getting through, change. Move on. Because it won’t work. They’ll
tune you out so quickly.*
*T2: What, the students will?*
*T1: The students will. I think you have to be so flexible. And that’s the first thing I
learned.*

The importance of flexibility is also echoed in the literature (Gesser and Sawyer, 2004.
Crowther, Maclachlan and Tett, 2010). Gesser and Sawyer (2004, p. 147) write that
although the instructors interviewed for the research project *Hardwired for Hope* went
“into their classrooms with very specific activities” planned, many of them “also realized
that being directive and prescriptive tended to get in the way and hinder the students from
finding their own path through learning.” One of the tutors I spoke to dismissed the idea
of being prescriptive altogether:

As long I’m getting reassurance from the student that they’re enjoying it and they’re learning, and [reassurance] from the coordinator that I’m basically on the right track, it’s like, whatever works. I don’t really care whether I’m doing something prescribed or not.

Moving into resonance

Movement and flexibility are generally good for learning situations. The ability to move and to be open to movement can also be an important element in finding resonance. Without openness to movement, tutors and students may fail to find connections or get to a place of understanding. Getting stuck can lead to frustration and boredom for both parties – and can result in both tutors and students ceasing to learn from one another.

Physically moving can help achieve physical resonance. The facilitator for the theatre workshop had everyone up and dancing and stretching and shaking about within five minutes. After six minutes, everyone was laughing hysterically and bopping around like crazy. And they were listening. His antics and the laughter they caused were the basis for physical resonance with the students. It brought us all to a place of understanding – a shared embodiment of the ideas he was trying to get across, in the case of this exercise our conception of the space around us. We connected through our movement and that opened the door to learning.

Mentally, as a tutor, you have to be open to frequently moving – changing the ideas, or the topic, or the activities, or your entire approach to how you are teaching that day. I saw tutors who got stuck – and I have gotten stuck myself – trying to push a particular way of learning or a particular piece of information that isn’t working for a student. This rigidity can result in boredom or frustration, and potentially replicate some of the negative experiences many adult literacy students experienced in their previous schooling. As one of the tutors I spoke to explained:
When I stick to the plan is when I lose her most.

Part of the reason it does not work, I think, is that if you are not open to moving it can be very hard to find resonance. Because stories are such dynamic beings, what resonates one day – what creates a connection – may not the next. I know from experience that this moment can be very frustrating. As a tutor, I have gotten annoyed – well, you told me last week you liked cars, so I got this book on understanding engines, and you seem to not care in the slightest to look at it! Stubbornness can kick in (I am the teacher, what I say goes!), or panic (that was my whole lesson!) or anxiety and a loss of confidence (I thought I knew what I was doing!) all of which can be unproductive attitudes that can cause tutors to become more entrenched in what they are doing.

One of the facilitators I invited to teach a workshop got stuck. I think he was nervous, and was initially not able to build up the rapport that other facilitators seemed to be able to achieve. I think his nervousness led to an anxiety on his part that narrowed his vision. This vision did not involve responding to the students, and only included plowing through the lesson he had planned. Keeping his back to the class, he mumbled, wrote slowly, and read from the textbook. I wrote in my reflection that day:

* A couple times he was reading out of a poetry book, which was – well, it felt to me like he wasn’t here with his own ideas, like he was just presenting what he thought a poetry class should be. It was more engaging, I felt, and I felt to other people, when he just spoke about his feelings for poetry, what poetry was about to him. There wasn’t enough room for movement in the textbook lines.

This facilitator started by telling the class his own story – and people were engaged, asking non-stop questions and requesting he read them any poetry to do with love. As he got more and more entrenched in the ‘lesson,’ however, people lost interest. Students had their heads in their hands, fell asleep, and were generally unresponsive to questions. I think he saw that, but was not confident enough – or experienced enough – to know how to move, or where to move to. So there was very little connection between him and the students during this part of the class, and no resonance that I could see. There were a lot of good things about his workshop, and the second half – where students got to write and
more actively engage – was much better. The first half, however, felt like it went on for a long time. One of the tutors I spoke to identified the importance of recognizing when to change or move away from what she had initially prepared. For her, the lesson plan was movement:

R: Do you enter a tutor session with a game plan?
T: See how the student is, what they respond to, and what they don’t respond to… and eliminate it right off the bat.
R: How can you tell if someone responds?
T: You can tell. Right off the bat… if they’re just not with it. You stop and do something different.

Open, not plan free

To be aware of the need for movement and flexibility does not mean that a tutor should saunter into a classroom goal and plan free. Nor should tutors or students be necessarily constantly flitting from topic to topic, activity to activity, unless that is an approach that works for the particular student. What I heard tutors say is important, and what I myself have encountered, is openness to movement. One of the tutors I interviewed, when asked what they would say to a tutor coming into the program, summed it up very well:

I would say have an open mind, be ready not to be regimented in your class set up. I mean I write a lesson plan for each week so I have a guide for what we are going to do. But that guide doesn’t always work, because if their goal for that day has nothing to do with the guide you’ve written then you might have to change it. And so… go with the flow, be open, be spontaneous, listen to what your student wants and needs, listen to their wants and needs – patience above all.

Movement can also mean adapting a game plan to the current circumstances. I was teaching a creative writing class one day in which I had planned to go over a bunch of ideas about literacy devices like plot and climax and narrative lines. After that I planned on getting to an activity where students would create their own timelines for a story they would be working on over the next couple of weeks. After 15 minutes, I don’t think a single person had heard a word I said. People were talking to each other, sleeping,
getting up and leaving – this level of restlessness was not the usual state of affairs. After 16 minutes I gave up on trying to have a discussion and told everyone to get up. We pushed all the chairs and tables to the side of the room, and one of the students volunteered to lead us in a round of stretching. Everyone participated. Then, and only then, I had everyone sit back down in a circle of chairs – no desks – and we plotted the timeline of Jack and the Beanstalk together while discussing narrative lines. That part completed, I gave people the option to work on their timelines on great big pieces of rolled out paper on the floor, or desk, or wherever they preferred. Of course, this technique did not work for everyone. Some people choose to sit in the corner with small pieces of paper and not participate. Some people choose to throw erasers at each other for the rest of the class. Getting up and moving, however, both physically and mentally calmed the overall energy of the classroom and allowed a number of the students to make amazing progress that day – on exactly what the original goal for the day had been.

**Speaking to the Student**

He had done beyond his assigned homework for the week. There it was, fraction added to fraction, laid out in neat little rows. I was encouraged – it was our fourth time together and I was still trying to figure out his style. We had just started fractions last week, and if this homework was anything to go by, we were going to make short work of it. I presumed he had done fractions before, judging by the mistake free page in front of me. What I had planned for today was clearly too simplistic for him, so I enthusiastically dove ahead into the next lesson. As I twittered away, I noticed a rather odd thing. Nothing I was saying seemed to register at all. He looked, for the lack of a better word, totally blank.

Confused, I thought perhaps he learned better by doing, so I brought out the next set of questions and we set to work. Or rather, I set to work. He did not seem to have a clue where to start. Perhaps, I thought, I had jumped ahead too quickly. We backtracked to the homework – adding fractions. I gave him a problem. He stared blankly. I reminded him about the need to find a common
denominator. He stared blankly. I have to admit, at this point I started to get frustrated. I do not easily nor normally get frustrated while teaching – patience being something I hold in pretty high esteem. But I could not figure out how he had done his homework. I tried to get him to explain adding fractions to me – perhaps it was my methods that did not make sense to him. I tried to back up and start at an even earlier point. Nothing was working – and he was clearly bored, and rapidly getting as irritated as I was. As we stared at each other in exasperated silence, something niggled at the back of my mind. A conversation we’d had in the second class… a confession he’d made to me… I put my pen down as realization dawned on me. “Greg,” I said, “did you do this homework yourself?” He looked at the ceiling. “Nope,” he said.

As a tutor, it is important to speak to the student in a literacy situation – not to your own assumptions or to outside expectations of who that student might be. Further, students should be supported in exploring the stories they would choose to tell for themselves – outside of the externally manufactured and potentially limiting context that literacy programs can sometimes create. What does a student define as success? What might make them happy or proud? Do they really understand the material or have you assumed they do because they ‘ought to by now’? What is truly resonating? Tutors have to actively listen to students, and be critically aware that the stories students are sharing in literacy programs are often constructed by that literacy program. Expectations manufactured by policy, such as asking students to confine their stated goals to a particular list of ‘accepted’ terms, can limit what stories students are allowed to tell. Further, the lack of relationship between students and coordinators in the initial intake process may mean students are less likely to take a risk and more likely to say what they think the coordinator wants to hear. It can be tricky to find deep and meaningful connection in this context, and the possibility of finding resonance can therefore be diminished.

**Manufactured identities and masks**

I have pointed out that stories are socially situated. Identities, which are one way in which we understand and present our stories, therefore rely in large part on external
interaction and context. Students are often required to construct their identities – consciously and unconsciously – in literacy programs. These manufactured identities are reliant on a particular context created by funder expectations, program intake processes, student’s previous experiences with education, and the limited and limiting view of literacy and learning that many literacy programs entail. These identities are not necessarily reflective of how students might construct or explain their own stories in a less externally contrived setting. Tutor and student understanding – or lack of understanding – of issues of difference such as gender, race, and socio-economic background can compound the complexity of constructing and perceiving identity in literacy programs.

Ningwakwe/E. Priscilla George (2002), talking specifically about holistic approaches to Aboriginal literacy, shows how there are different ways in which people traditionally understand the self. Most education systems, including literacy programs, do not incorporate or attempt to accommodate these alternative aspects of self. According to Ningwakwe/E. Priscilla George (2002, p. 2), “fifty percent of who we are, that is, our Spirit and Heart, is not being recognized and nurtured in the institutional education system.” There are other ways in which literacy programs may exclude facets of students’ identities. Variations in language, for example, are often treated as inferior or incorrect as the “social practices of the school and other institutions” serve to reinforce a particular “language and literacy” (Tett, 2005, p. 33). One tutor spoke to me about the challenge of working with students who spoke Patois:

T: Some of them come from different cultures, and they come with different languages and other ways of speaking, and different traditions. And even though they may speak Patois, they can read beautiful. And when I say read beautifully, I’ve had West Indian students who are reading a very nice level... but when they go to write... they cannot articulate, they cannot express themselves the way they should and I find that extremely challenging. How do you change a person’s way of speaking? You can’t do that. But all you can do is say, the way you read... that’s how you write. That’s the challenge.

R: But it’s hard, you don’t want to change how they speak.
The struggle that this tutor faced exists in large part because the style in which Patois is spoken is not considered acceptable English for writing by standardized tests such as the GED. Lyn Tett (2005), in *Learning, Literacy and Identity*, talks about the importance of accepting local dialects – in the case of her research, Scots – as the language of learning and not perceiving them “as slang or otherwise inferior to English” (Tett, 2005, p. 33).

As most students will have already been though some degree of schooling, many may have internalized these beliefs about what counts as literacy and learning. Faced with more pressure from external constructs as they enter a literacy program, they may consciously or unconsciously silence parts of their stories. Lyn Tett (2005, p. 34) writes:

*People become voiceless when others do not allow them to speak or allow them to say only what others have said, so they eventually learn how to silence themselves.*

In *Moving Research about Addressing the Impacts of Violence in Learning into Practice*, Ningwakwe/E. Priscilla George (2008) finds that both students and tutors can sometimes wear masks, or try to mask aspects of their selves. She uses a quote from Elizabeth Tisdell (in Ningwakwe/E. Priscilla George, 2008, p. 143) that I find particularly illuminating:

*So often we wear faces that others have taught us to wear, and we play roles based on gender, culture, birth order, and a host of other factors that have been defined by others – parents, teachers, institutional religions, or the dominant culture.*

Students may also construct these identities or masks to keep themselves safe from potential disappointment or hurtful experiences, especially if they have faced these in the past. The students that tutors are initially introduced to, both on paper and on person, may therefore be masked.
Peering through the mask

Resonance comes from finding an echo in a person’s stories – and if as a tutor you are teaching to a manufactured identity, you are much less likely to find that resonance. Stories told in a particular context, while not necessarily false, may not correspond with the lives that students are living outside of that context. The stories students tell in literacy programs are shaped by what is being asked, and by whom – and students will often be faced with the “challenge of what to reveal where” (Stewart, 2009, p. 43). Lyn Tett (2005, p. 29) points out that the emphasis in literacy programs is often on “standardizing literacy accomplishments through the use of tests, defining core skills, and aiming for uniform learning outcomes that others specify in advance of the learning process.” There are many kinds of outcomes, for example, that do not get counted on the typical funder-based accountability forms at BTS LBS – and these non-academic outcomes can be “key to the success of literacy learning” (Battell, 2001, p. 12). I heard many accounts of these outcomes in my research – from students getting their driver’s license to one student who overcame her fear of playing board games with her boyfriend’s family. I have also heard how tutors struggle with how to legitimize these outcomes, and have them viewed as important successes – by themselves, by students and by Frontier College as an institution.

Lyn Tett (2005, p. 29) writes that the “common way to think about literacy and basic skills at the moment is to see them as rungs on a ladder that people have to climb.” She points out that there are a number of consequences in setting up literacy programs in this way:

To define this ladder, proponents construct top-down frameworks largely in terms of prevocational and vocationally relevant literacy requirements. Consequently, they do no recognize the validity of people’s own definitions, uses, and aspirations for literacy; such frameworks are disempowering in the sense that they are not negotiable or learner-centered and not locally responsive. They define what counts as real literacy, and they silence everything else. (p. 29)
Students, therefore, are forced into constructing an account of themselves that conforms to these particular ideals. If program intake forms, for example, assume that students are in the program to get a job or to go back to school, and phrases their questions accordingly, then those are the answers the form is likely to elicit. The answers might be true, in a sense – many of the students I work with, for example, may eventually wish to get their GED. It can be an oversimplification of story, however, that ignores how students might otherwise define themselves.

It also ignores other relevant factors. Shelia Stewart (2009, p. 43) points out that there is “often a lot at stake” for literacy learners when choosing to tell a particular story; for example, “whether they are admitted to a program, and more generally, whether they are seen as ‘worthy’ of help.” Students may not have yet reached a level of trust during the intake process in which they are willing or even able to have a discussion that revolves more candidly around what they wish to achieve in a literacy program. They may not, for example, feel safe enough to say simply “you know, I am not actually really all that sure what I want to do, though I have some ideas.” Or they might not feel confident enough to say their goals out loud – as the Trent Valley group (2004, p. 29) points out:

When the student has no discernible goal at all, the goal then becomes to identify one. Yet, even this tends to ignore the steps often needed to gain the confidence to say “yes, I really want to …” because hovering in the background is – “but I never thought I’d be able to!”

Some students may also simply not have clear goals when they enter BTS LBS – I cannot help but think of my own experience here; how many times have I been asked the question “why are you taking adult education?” or “what are you going to do with your MA when you are finished?” and had no idea how to answer? One of the students I spoke to, like many a regular 19 year old, talked about how she was uncertain about her long-term goals:

My mind changes all the time with like what I want to do in my future. Like I definitely know I want to go to college, but I’m not sure exactly what I want to do.
Students, however, are asked upfront to state their long-term goals and may not wish to take the risk of saying that they do not know. They may present tutors and literacy workers with the stories they think they will want to hear (Ningwakwe/E. Priscilla George, 2008. Stewart, 2009). The Trent Valley group (2004, p. 29) discusses the discrepancy that sometimes occurs between what a student writes on an intake form, and what they later reveal:

... There is sometimes a discrepancy between our student’s listed goals on intake forms and what he tells us when he comes to trust us.

In the BTS LBS literacy program, there is a fairly in-depth admittance procedure. Just like in other literacy programs (Stewart, 2009), this intake process shapes the stories that students tell. Often, a listed goal at BTS LBS ends up being the GED. Even if it is not, I found that tutors sometimes assume it is. The manufactured identities created by this process and by tutor expectations can be damaging to students and tutors in a number of ways. For one, it can be frustrating when those two things – the realities of literacy learning and the artificial construction of manufactured identities – do not match up. Some of the tutors expressed their worry over how this construction can affect student confidence and perception of success. One said:

There’s realistic goals, and non-realistic goals. And a lot of them, they come into BTS and say oh yes, we want to do the GED. But you can tell really that they’re saying that but for a lot of them the motivation is not there. And in some cases, they either have learning difficulties or whatever, and they’re not... It’s going to be a real tough struggle to get there. And sometimes it takes a long time...

Other tutors worried that teaching for the GED would “mirror the regular system that [the students] failed in”:

T1: I think that a lot of it is the conflict between teaching for life and teaching for the GED. Because you know they won’t get a proper job without the GED. But then, as you were saying, is the GED really the goal you want to be meeting. I mean, yes, they need to get a job, and yes they need to more or less fit in, in society. But like, how is that going to work? Because then you’re setting them up,
your training for a standardized exam in a system that failed them. So I can understand why there is a conflict of interest. Like why am I going to do this exam when I can just make fast money on the side?

T2: And that’s the system that’s failed them in the first place, and then you’re trying to get them back into the system and it’s a conflict.

A student echoed this worry in an interview, revealing that she felt standardized tests such as the GED were often not a valid measurement of student knowledge:

_We were just upstairs talking in math class, when you go for your GED, you can’t like write out your problems and show them how you did it. It’s... you just bubble. And that screws people over. So they really need to change the way – how certain things are tested. Because when I am at my other school and I’m doing an exam, because it’s all multiple choice, I may not understand the question but beside the question there’s like a drawing, there’s like tons of stuff that my teacher will be like, ok, she gets it, but she doesn’t understand how to put it in the way of the test._

I believe that sometimes students who are not able to find themselves in the confines of a rigid literacy structure may get frustrated and leave.

**One tutor’s journey**

One of the tutors I talked to, who co-taught the math class, had some interesting comments that revealed a lot about student identity construction at BTS LBS. We discussed how it had taken her and her co-worker a long time to figure out that sometimes the goals students wrote down during the BTS LBS intake process were not actually what students hoped to achieve. Before this tutor and her co-worker figured this fact out, they were teaching to students’ manufactured identities constructed through that intake process. Talking about how she thought student enthusiasm could be increased she commented:

_T: To me it would be finding out what their real goals are. Not what they tell [the BTS LBS program coordinator] because that is what they think they should put. Because that’s what I think that they do. And then, go after that. So when I first_
started here I thought it was all about getting them to the GED program. But I’ve realized it’s not.

R: When would you say that changed for you?

T: Well, it probably took me a year or so to get there. You know, because, the book we have is pre-GED and I just assumed that’s where we’re headed.

She indirectly blamed a lack of student motivation on this manufactured identity. She had taught before, and enjoyed working students that were “scrappy” and motivated to learn. She did not find that here as much as in past places she had worked, she said, and she thought that in part it was precisely because what students wrote down in their assessment as their goals did not always match with what they hoped to achieve:

I think some... I think that these learners, it’s real challenge for them because they’re... One they’re that much older. It’s hard, right? It’s very independent based. And it’s hard... like [the BTS LBS coordinator] has [written] what sort of their goals are. But what they write down is not, what they are learning, is not really always what their goal really is.

She found it challenging to teach to students for whom she did not really know what they wanted to get out of the program. Several of the other tutors also mentioned that they found it challenging to figure out what students really wanted to get out of the program:

But it’s like, it’s hard to know what they’re dissembling, what they’re presenting, what they really want.

But sometimes their goals, what they say their goals are, are not really what their goals are. You know what I’m saying? Like, I just... you know, there’s a real undertone there.

Not knowing why students are there makes it difficult to teach and very difficult to find resonance – often as a tutor, teaching to a manufactured identity can result in teachers feeling frustrated and students feeling irritated, discouraged and alienated. In the narrative above, that is precisely what started to happen. I was teaching to the person who had done the homework – not to the student himself. If I hadn’t known the story he’d told me about previously letting others do his homework, I might never have figured it out.
The entire lesson would have been lost, and whatever rapport we had built up might have suffered. As it was, we still had some time in the lesson. We took a needed break, came back and started fresh – with the simple and much more fun activity of cutting paper pies into tiny, satisfying bits.

To deal with this dilemma, the math tutor and her co-worker decided to stop relying on the goals listed on the intake forms, and to start talking to students directly instead:

R: How do you find out what that goal really is?
T: We just started asking them. So, I think it was last week or the week before, I said to [the other teacher], how about we just ask them what do they want? Because I think what they tell us is different from what they’re going to write down.

They found out a lot of important information about the students they were working with in this way. For example, one of the students already had her high school diploma:

One of them... one of them already has a high school diploma. She’s studying to be a massage therapist. And wants to one day to have her own business. Ok. So that’s, you know, we have to teach probability to get through, you know, the high school diploma. She doesn’t really need that. She needs to know... you know... like her multiplication down pat. I said, “if you’re going to have your business you can’t stand there taking out a calculator every time someone’s paying.” So, that’s good for her.

Up until that time, they had been teaching this student as though she was there to get her GED. I am not sure if they assumed this identity for the student because of what was written on her form, or because what they perceived where the goals for the class as defined by the pre-GED textbook they were given to use. Either way, they were not speaking to the student herself but to expectations that were created by a manufactured understanding of what should go on in the math class. When they spoke to this student directly, they were able to tailor their teaching more appropriately to the student’s own stories and increase their chances of finding resonance. The idea of not wanting to
constantly have to rely a calculator, for example, is one that is likely to find resonance with someone hoping to run an effective business.

**Relationship**

I want to try a new way of teaching fractions. Every week I psyche myself up for it, and every week I let the time slip by without suggesting it. It’s not a big thing – I just want to go for a walk to look at windows. I figure maybe some big picture stuff might help him visualize. Ok, how many windows have a flower planter? And how many are there overall? In my head, it seems like a good idea.

But now I am in the middle of another lesson, and I still haven’t suggested it. I’m not sure why – I guess because it hasn’t been very long and I don’t know him very well yet. Also, he isn’t specifically telling me that things aren’t working for him – he sits quietly through each lesson. We move bits of paper around. He writes some numbers. I ask him if he understands – he says yes. He says he likes what we are doing. I can tell something is not working though – I can read it in his body language and his incomplete homework. I can feel it in the tension emanating off him as his feet quietly stomp off on a coffee break. I really think we should go outside and do the fraction walk. We’ll do it next week, for sure, I tell myself.

Then he doesn’t show up again, and I’ve missed my chance.

In order to get to a place where starting with and speaking to the student begins to be possible, there needs to be a strong relationship between tutor and student. Without the build up of this relationship, it may be hard for students to trust their tutors, or take risks both in their learning and in the telling of their stories. The same is true for tutors – without trust, they are less likely to hear and accept the stories students tell them. They may also be afraid to take risks in telling their own stories, or in trying new approaches to
literacy teaching. Relationship, therefore, is an important element in finding resonance in the literacy environment.

**Relationship in the literacy environment**

The importance of relationship and community are stressed in Aboriginal education and research (see for example Cajete, 1994). It is also prevalent in much of the literacy literature and research written from the perspective of practitioners. Although the term ‘relationship’ is not always easy to define, the importance of its existence in the literacy environment is definite. I cannot doubt from my experience, from my research, and from the literature, that a unique and fascinating relationship often exists between a tutor and a student, characterized by a “certain rapport” that the Trent Valley group (2004, p. 11) describe in *What Goes On Here*. This relationship is a key piece of understanding how and why learning happens in a literacy program (Horsman 1999, Trent Valley Literacy Association, 2004). It has generally been observed that a higher level of relationship between a tutor and a student results in a more positive environment for the student, as well as one in which a student is more likely to learn (Horsman, 1999. Trent Valley Literacy Association, 2004. Battell, 2004). Evelyn Battell (2004, p. 106) comments that the “successful experience of school starts with the relationship of respect and care between the instructor and the student.”

The Trent Valley group (2004, p. 11) feels the term rapport “implies that there is a connecting back and forth, not just from tutor to student, but also student to tutor.” Through many moments of connection made possible through this rapport, I saw relationship being built in my observations of the class. It was possible to observe moments of this relationship forming even in the single class the art workshop facilitators would attend. I found a good indicator of this developing relationship on these occasions was laughter. When the facilitators first came in, some of the students would crack nervous smiles at their jokes, others would look blank or uninterested. As the class would go on, however, in most cases these nervous smiles or half-hearted ‘hahas’ would turn into genuine laughter and much broader smiles. I could also see students opening up to
discussion as well – they were more likely to jump in without prompting as the class progressed. I believe both of these are indicators of a growing relationship. In the one class where there was seemingly not as much connection between the facilitator and the class, hardly anyone laughed, and it took at lot more work from Kaydeen and I to get people to participate.

**Trust and risk-taking**

Relationship can lead to increased trust between tutors and students, and therefore to a greatly likelihood that either party will take risks. Both trust and the willingness to take risks have been identified in the literature as important to student learning in literacy programs (Horsman, 1999. Horsman, 2004. Gesser and Sawyer, 2004. Trent Valley Literacy Association, 2004. Battell, 2004. Lefebvre et al, 2006). The Trent Valley group’s study with literacy practitioners came to the conclusion that risk taking was in fact “necessary for learning” (2004, p. 11, emphasis added). In *Hardwired for Hope*, Gesser and Sawyer (2004, p. 158) explain that learning “occurs within learning communities where people are able and willing to take risks.” I believe that part of this increase in learning comes because trust and risk-taking can lead to a greater chance of finding resonance.

When people take risks in a literacy program, it can mean a lot of different things. It might mean, for example, that a student tries something new – diving into fractions for the first time, for example, or reading a book whose length looks a little intimidating. Importantly for resonance, however, it can mean that a student is more likely to represent a side of themselves that they might otherwise perceive as too vulnerable. For example, taking a risk might mean saying “I don’t understand.” One tutor especially emphasized the importance for:

*Students* to say to you, *no I don’t understand*. Please say *no I don’t understand* instead of *yes, I do, when you don’t. Because that’s not good.*
Similarly, another tutor spoke about how important it was for students to tell her when something was “not working” for them:

Always I’m saying if what I’m doing is not working for you, you’ve got to tell me. So you give them that permission so they don’t feel embarrassed or hesitant or whatever the heck. Because it’s what do you want, that’s why I’m here, it’s not really what I want. So if something’s not working you’ve got to tell me, and I’ve got to change it.

If a student does not feel safe in telling a tutor that they do not understand something, or that they do not like a certain style of teaching, than the tutor may end up teaching material that is not relevant or comprehensible for the student. There can be a disconnect between who a tutor thinks they are teaching to, and who the student actually is in that moment. This disconnection can result in frustration on the part of both parties. Students may further internalize their self-doubt, not realizing that in fact it is the lack of relevant story that is the problem – not their inherent ability to learn.

With the trust and risk-taking that can come with a solid relationship, however, students and tutors are more likely to share stories, and to choose to share stories that are closer to their own perception of their lives. Talking about how it can sometimes be difficult to get to know your students, one tutor said:

I think it’s difficult to know them on that first day. Like you have to build the relationship, they have to learn to trust you. They don’t trust you, and why should they? A lot of them have a lot of reason to not trust people.

In this statement she implies that in order to know a student, tutors must work on building relationship and trust. Horsman (1999, p. 257) maintains a similar idea – she writes that it is “trust that enables sharing.”

Finally, tutors who feel comfortable with students may be more likely to take risks in how they approach teaching literacy. I mentioned before that I believe nervousness is one reason tutors may get stuck in a particular way of teaching. It can be hard to be creative or to think on your feet when you are consumed with anxiety. I have
also personally found it hard to introduce teaching ideas that are slightly outside the box when I have only just met or briefly worked with a student. The narrative at the beginning of this section illustrated one of those teaching ideas that I was, in the end, never able to implement. I feel sometimes with a new idea that I am putting a part of myself on the line. I want to hear that what I am doing is helpful – and I definitely do not want to be laughed at. You never know for sure, of course, how someone is going to react to a suggestion. As I get to know students, however, and we build our relationship together, I find that I am more comfortable suggesting new things, trying crazy ideas, and just generally being myself. I faced a lot of anxiety, for example, when I started implementing the art project. As time went on, however, I was more and more comfortable initiating lessons and discussions. I led a breathing/relaxation/visualization exercise, for example, several months into the project. I had never led one before, anywhere, and I do not think I would have considered doing it for the first time earlier on. I would have been too afraid of the potentially negative reactions from students. As it was, I was really nervous – but I forged ahead and it went amazingly. Later, one of the students commented that the breathing exercises we had done (we did a few others later) were one of her favourite parts of the whole project.

**Building relationship**

Relationship is not necessarily easy to build up – it can take hard work on the part of both the tutor and the student. The Trent Valley group (2004, p. 11) found in their research that building relationship “requires care and consistency.” In *Too Scared to Learn*, Horsman (1999, p. 257) observes that “learning to check in and share honestly may take practice” and time. Working towards this relationship, however, has important consequences regarding student learning. As Horsman (2004, p. 11) explains in a later article:

*Building in proactive approaches that develop connection and build trust may make an enormous difference to students’ ability to learn.*
These results take time, and effort. There are also a number of other complexities – the dynamics of power, for example, between the role of ‘tutor’ and the role of ‘student.’ The struggle with ideas of friendship and love are also two tricky and multifaceted notions, ones that I strongly believe need to be further explored in the context of relationships in literacy work. Despite the complexity, the gains of focusing on the relationship aspect of literacy work can be significant – including, in my experience, a meaningful increase in the likelihood of resonance.

**The Importance Of Conversation**

She’s talking about Obama. I listen – her joy and exuberance are infectious. We chatter away. At some point, I glance down at my watch. Woah! We’re fifteen minutes into the scheduled session. I start to get anxious. She wants to keep talking and she’s so thrilled – how can I stop her? My chest starts to flutter. I reduce my contribution to the conversation to nods and half mumbled agreements. Eventually, she winds down, and takes out her homework. I breathe a sigh of relief.

The next week, she’s talking about Obama again. It’s in the weeks leading up to the election, and she is in love with the future president. Every move he makes is analyzed, praised and exalted. Every speech he gives is listened to with reverence, and then pored over in the following days. And I get to hear about it. It’s wonderful. It’s amazing. And it’s giving me a nervous twitch. Every time she brings it up, I start to worry – when will we get to the lesson?

As I am walking home from Frontier College one day, I see Obama’s autobiography for sale in the window. On impulse, I go in and buy it. The next week, I give it to her. She is delighted, she hugs it, she can’t wait to go home and start reading it. I realize suddenly that talking about Obama should not be the cause of anxiety – it should be the cause for learning. We make it so. She writes essays about Obama. She comes back each week and tells me what she’s read in the book about Obama. I bring up Obama whenever the energy in the lesson starts to flag, or frustrations begin to run high. When he gets elected, we celebrate together. I have realized that talking about Obama was the lesson … for her, but more importantly, for me.
The importance of dialogue in adult education—an equal conversation between educator and learner—is “well represented in the literature” (Gesser and Sawyer, 2004, p. 150). Yet I feel that the importance of ‘just’ talking in literacy is often overlooked, or pushed to the side in discussions about what counts as learning, and as teaching, in literacy programs. Further, I have heard from some tutors that there is an uncertainty over how much ‘chatting’ should be allowed, and how much it simply distracts from the lesson. I have also struggled with this issue on some occasions. When do you say, ‘back to the lesson?’ And when do you let the talking in and of itself be the lesson?

There is a great deal of value in being open to conversation in the literacy environment. There are numerous reasons—including the release of emotions a talk might provide—that conversation is important. One of them is that the number of ways in which conversation can lead to a greater chance of resonance. Being open to talking and listening gives space for both student and tutor story to enter the classroom. It can help tutors and students learn more about each other, and build relationship through moments of connection. For tutors, conversation can lead to ideas for lessons that are more tailored to a student’s needs and lives—which, as I have previously mentioned, increases the likelihood of the student finding resonance. Tutors are also more likely to find resonance and empathy if they give space to allow the student to share their stories by encouraging a conversational setting.

**What do I mean by conversation?**

Obviously, there is a lot of talking that goes on in a literacy program. It is, after all, one of the ways that most people communicate. There is no clear line between the kind of talking I am describing here and the kind of talking that happens necessarily as part of a formal lesson. In fact, the kind of talking I am describing here can be part of a formal lesson. I have used the word conversation several times already, and I think that this word encapsulates the general spirit of what I am trying to convey. A conversation can be a chat about the weekend’s activities, or an in-depth discussion of politics. The essence of these conversations is that they are a flow of information and story exchange.
between a tutor and a student. They can be informal and casual, as well as more formal in nature. They are not necessarily directive, and, importantly, do not always have an intended lesson driving them.

**Time wasting nonsense**

I think openness to a conversation that does not have a lesson behind it is an idea that tutors, including myself, struggle with. If there is no intended lesson, than what is the point of the conversation? Is it not just wasting valuable learning time? How much talking is too much talking? What is ‘legitimate’ talking, and what is a student trying to ‘stall’ for time? One tutor, who was in the middle of telling me about how important it was to talk to students and get to know them, broke off to tell me this story:

_First of all, I ask them about themselves. I get a profile of ... and I know that perhaps in tutoring you shouldn’t spend time – and I’ve certainly read as much as I can from the tutor guidebook – you can’t be spending ½ hour talking about them and their life and their hobbies and things because – I did learn that from another seminar I want to here, which was wonderful, with an instructor, and she said, “You’ll find all kinds of different students. Some of them will take you off track, because they’ll want to talk about what they did on the weekend and that can take up the first ½ hour.” So they haven’t really done anything. And they’ve got a reason for that. Because they haven’t done their homework._

At a focus group, almost a year later, the same tutor spoke about the excitement – and learning – her and her student were experiencing talking more informally about Michelangelo:

_We’ve been doing Michelangelo. Well, we’ve got a whole other world of Michelangelo over the past couple of weeks which perhaps doesn’t have anything to do with what I just said [referring to spelling and writing paragraphs] ... but she didn’t know about the Sistine chapel, she didn’t know about the Vatican, she didn’t know about any of that. And now she’s left with a whole new world of knowledge on that. Which I think is good. It can only be good. I mean, she wouldn’t have talked about that in any other place she’s been all week._
So on the one hand, the tutor clearly thought it was important to talk about Michelangelo. On the other hand, she was worried about spending too much time talking about student’s “lives and hobbies and things.” But she also thought that it was important to talk to students to get to know them. It is an issue that is not easily resolved, and it has led to a great deal of anxiety for myself on a fair number of occasions, as illustrated by the narrative opening this section.

Jenny Horsman (1999) writes that listening to students talk about their lives and difficulties can be a burden for tutors. Whether it be friend or student, it can be hard to hear about the complexities that others may face in their lives. This burden is compounded for tutors by “the sense that listening to [disclosures] is essential but not legitimate work for a literacy worker,” which can leave many literacy workers “exhausted and shattered, but unclear why this is so” (Horsman, 1999, p. 258). Tutors can be left torn between the feeling that conversation is important or even essential, and that it is the opposite of important – time wasting chatter.

**Legitimate – Significant – Essential**

Despite the anxiety I have felt over conversation in the classroom in the past, I have come to the conclusion through this research that conversation – informal, casual chatting about the weekend conversation – is absolutely essential in the literacy environment. It plays a large role in allowing the whole person to come to literacy, and in inviting student and tutor story into the classroom. In a variety of ways, it can also lead to an increased chance of a resonance.

The students I spoke to placed a great deal of value on talking to their tutors. Completely unprompted, this idea came up again and again in the student focus group, in student interviews, and in classroom discussions. In the photography class, students were asked to take a picture somewhere in Frontier College that was representative of how they felt about Frontier College. One student took a picture of the fridge in the kitchen. She explained that it was there she got to “talk about so many things” and have “amazing
conversations” with all the people – students and staff and tutors – who were in there “always eating food.” Another student, in the focus group, talked about how her tutor always put aside half an hour at the end of each lesson just for talking – and how much she appreciated that. All three of the students in the focus group mentioned how much they enjoyed talking with their tutors – more than once. Not all the tutors I talked to were as anxious as others in spending class time in conversation, either. One tutor spoke about why she thought it was important to let students talk:

They haven’t been exposed to so much ... It’s just amazing what terrible ... I mean my learner has been in and out of foster homes, prostitution, and this... she can read, she’s brilliant. But she just has not lived. So I mean I don’t mind when I spend part of my time letting her talk about it.

Gesser and Sawyer (2004, p. 151) identify the importance of having an “interactive flow” in classroom interaction. This flow implies a general openness to discussion – a two-way street of information where tutors are learning as much from students as students are from them. Gesser and Sawyer (2004, p. 150) also stress the value of listening to “student expression” as much as possible. One of the tutors I spoke to put a heavy emphasis on the importance of listening:

Well I do lots and lots of listening. I feel you learn a lot from listening. They can tell you what they want.

Ningwakwe/E. Priscilla George (2008, p. 147) points out that listening – particularly “empathetic listening” – is not something that should be taken lightly, and is in fact a “very, very rare skill.”

Being open to student expression and focusing on this two-way flow of information are both ways of letting student story enter the classroom in ways that can lead to an increased chance of resonance. For one thing, talking and listening are a valuable way of building relationship. They are a direct way to hear and share stories, and to get to know the other person. One of the instructors interviewed in Hardwired for Hope, Wendy Tagami (in Gesser and Sawyer, 2004, p. 139) spoke about how, in the past,
she had greatly appreciated being able to interview students coming into the program. She had:

_Talked with students to make real connections by asking them about their kids, or people would come and talk about different situations. I always made a connection with students in some way and part of that was the interviewing process. I did all the interviewing._

She felt frustrated moving to a situation where she didn’t “know who her students [would] be when they [walked] into her classroom” (Gesser and Sawyer, 2004, p. 139). Some of the tutors I talked with also spoke of the importance of getting to know the student through conversation:

_I think that so many of them are guarded. I think it just takes time and, as I said, more conversation with them individually. Versus on a form. You know, get to know them a couple of months, maybe ... then we’d know better what their needs are._

Building the relationship through conversation means that tutors are more likely to get to know things about the student that are not pre-manufactured by the particulars of the literacy environment. Accordingly, the chance of a tutor finding resonance with an aspect of a student’s story – and therefore creating a possibility for empathy – is increased. Further, tutors are more likely to be able to create lessons that are relevant to students – another path to resonance. I have found out many things about students through conversation that have led to later lessons. For example, a student and I who were working together had a chat one day about how she wanted to be a nurse. When she decided she wanted to learn how to write cover letters, I made sure all the job ads she wrote letters for were for nursing jobs. The letters were a chance for her to discuss why she thought she would make a good nurse. We furthered the learning by taking apart the jobs ads and talking about why each qualification was (or was not) something that she thought would be important for a nurse to possess. It was fun and fruitful – she ended up with a perfectly written cover letter. Another student was talking with me one day about how he wanted to eventually open a limousine rental company. A couple weeks later, for essay writing homework, I had him write a letter to potential investors about why they
should invest in his company. He wrote for three pages (heads and tails over the usual half page).

Conversation – the telling of and listening to all kinds of stories – is legitimate, essential work in literacy. Making this clear reduces the stress that tutors face in coping both with the pain of listening to some students’ stories, as well as the niggling anxiety that in listening we are not doing our jobs. Horsman (1999, p. 258) concludes that:

*The sense that the pain and stories are an unavoidable aspect of adult literacy work, but not legitimate, makes it harder for each worker to take control, to decide on appropriate limits for herself, to assess ahead of time what she can cope with and what options she has available for referral and other resources. The worker may not even be able to name the best time for her to listen or be clear about at what times listening makes her work impossible.*

Knowing that conversation and stories are legitimate, and therefore being open to their use in the classroom does not make the stories themselves necessarily easier to bear, but it does take away some of the stigma from taking the time to listen. Further, tutors can actively build time into their lesson in which to listen to their students – or recognize when another part of the lesson has to be put on hold for a story to be told. Tutors can also share their own stories through this exchange, which as mentioned can increase relationship between tutor and student. There are countless benefits to allowing story to enter literacy work through conversation – an increase in the possibility for resonance is only one of them. One of the students, speaking about why they liked Frontier College, said:

*The teachers will do what we want, well, not like anything we want – they listen to us. We can talk to them and tell them anything.*

I thought this statement was interesting, and in many ways hit the nail on the head. Allowing for conversation does not mean that teachers or tutors do whatever the students want. It is a part, however, of creating a positive literacy environment, one in which tutors appreciate the value of letting students talk when they need to, and are open to letting the student guide both the conversations and the lessons.
Conclusion

Movement and flexibility – active listening – speaking to the student – relationship – conversation – all building toward resonance. If you ask many literacy practitioners, you will find that they will be familiar with the importance of these ideas. Through the process of teaching many of them have lived and learned what it means to try and create a literacy environment that is positive, safe and successful.

In the writing this chapter, it was not my intention to put the onus on literacy tutors to be the sole bearers of the responsibility for achieving resonance. Rather, I have intended to show the ways in which, in my observations, tutors and students are already achieving resonance. I also saw, however, the struggle that many tutors and coordinators faced in trying to maneuver around literacy policy that is not designed with students in mind, that purports to be learner-centered but is in fact responsible for forcing students to manufacture literacy identities in line with its expectations and within its predetermined boundaries. I saw students and tutors working hard together to overcome these limitations and open the door to allowing story to enter, and identity to be more critically explored.

I saw the blocks that both tutors and students faced – both externally and internally. The discomfort and uncertainty for some tutors around allowing conversation into the classroom, for example, or the lack of a trusting relationship that allowed either party to take risks. The narrow of view of literacy and literacy learners that people often carried with them into the program – and subsequently struggled to overcome or at least understand. The lack of support for tutors and students to learn about and deal with many of the issues of violence on learning, or to critically explore their own discomfort over difference – or ignorance of certain issues.

The onus, then, needs to be on literacy policy and literacy institutions to promote an environment in which tutors and students do not struggle to achieve resonance, but are supported and guided towards finding resonance. We need literacy programs that
emphasize the importance of relationship, and give it the time and space it needs to develop – including through conversation. Programs that recognize the importance of story, and emphasize the need for tutors to critically reflect on how their own stories are affecting how they listen to and hear students. Programs that give them space to do so by actively setting up and promoting tutor gatherings. Programs that are set up in a way that gives tutors and students the space to move – physically as well as mentally. We need to promote the continued research into the affects of violence on learning, and the education of all literacy providers in its consequences.

Literacy environments need to support the work of literacy practitioners – tutors and coordinators alike. It cannot rely on the innovative, backbreaking work of a few individuals. The magic happens, but it seems that for many it happens in spite of rather than because of broader program policy.
Chapter Seven: Conclusion

THE ROAD
By Dahlia Hunter

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I LOST MY WAY
By Sean Dennis

I was lost in the world when I lost my job
I lost my income, I lost my cool, I even lost my girl
I felt like I lost everything.
Losing my mind, losing my hair
I was confused, oppressed and stressed
I didn’t know what to do next, why did my life have to be so complex?
The money I was saving was the money I was using,
Should I look for work or go back to school?
All this happened in the middle of a recession,
I felt like my life was over that’s why I had a chip on my shoulder
If this was a poker game I lost all my chips.
Every time I think about this it makes me feel like a couch potato eating potato chips.
Almost lost hope but I still had faith;
Something had to change before I self-destruct.
Had to rearrange my life in a new direction by going back to school
To further my education…I’m happy I made this decision
I feel like I found my way now,
So anyone who lost their way, everything happens for a reason
Don’t give up!!
When one door closes, another one opens.

21 Reproduced with permission
Art is Beautiful.
Art is Freedom.
Art is History.
Art is Holistic.
Art is Power.
Art is Love.
Art is Life.

Art is a way of showing opinions
and a great way of showing emotions.

- BTS LBS Art Class Students

Power. Our stories give us power. We have been through so much,
and our bodies know that. Our stories keep us going.

- Student
It’s been a powerful six months. It’s been a learning experience. It’s been stressful, and amazing, and exhausting, and uplifting. I would do it again in a heartbeat. What else can I say? I had few expectations coming into this – I had only uncertainty and a half-formed proposal. A thought. A story to share, and an openness to listen to other stories. A hope that I could learn from the students, that they would be willing to learn from me. I had a thesis to write and the seeds of a new perception of research and adult education from theorists in areas like Participatory Action Research and Popular Education swirling around in my mind. I had a love for art, a strong appreciation for its possibilities.

I had an idea. An idea that art might be worth something. An idea that there were other ways of approaching literacy teaching than what I was currently experiencing. An idea that hey – art could be fun.

What does art have to do with literacy? they asked me.

Everything, this project has answered.

I had not thought of the idea of resonance when I started the art program. So I had no way of knowing that the art project was going to end up providing an atmosphere in which resonance would happen in such a frequent and powerful way. But there it was. Happening all around me. The results were there for all to see – marvelous, inspiring, beautiful. When the project started out, there were 5 students in the class. They came intermittently the first few weeks. People were added to the class as we went along – two students who were brand new to Frontier College, and two more who were in other BTS programs. These latter had heard about the art class from other students and were curious. In the end there were nine students, Kaydeen, and myself. Not one student dropped out in the whole five-month project – for BTS, this length of commitment is not always the norm. There were other successes as well – in the conversations we had, the artwork that was created, the laughter that we shared.

Part of the success was the amazing environment that Kaydeen had managed to create in her LBS Level One class. The other was the art itself – and the myriad of ways students found resonance through the methods, materials, and the ideas we explored.
together. It was an amazing way for stories told and experienced in a wide variety of ways to be brought to and explored in the classroom. Supporting this sort of initiative, and other alternative approaches to learning, is one way in which literacy institutions can begin to support tutors and students on their journeys to finding resonance, and allow for the importance of story to begin to permeate policy and practice.

**Kaydeen’s classroom**

I was lucky. I got to implement the art program in Kaydeen’s classroom, a space and atmosphere she had spent a year building. Watching Kaydeen interact with the students in the LBS Level One class was inspiring. There was something quite obvious from watching her interaction with her students: she knew them. She knew who to encourage, and who to leave alone. She knew who to gently praise, and who to challenge to do better. And when new students came in, she had learned how to greet them, and enfold them into the ongoing activity of the classroom. Sometimes it was a struggle – there is no doubt of that. She was tired, or sick, or the students were tired, or something was just not working that day. The important thing however, Kaydeen said, was that she and the students continued to learn together.

Throughout her time at BTS LBS, Kaydeen has let stories – her own and her students – play a role in the classroom. She has given space to the telling of stories, and space to the appreciation of the unspoken aspects of story. She has been clear of the role of her own story in affecting her motivations and her expectations, and clear that she expects that the students’ stories will have a similar effect on them. She has created an atmosphere that is positive and respectful – and into this environment I came tumbling with a pocketful of art supplies and some grand ideas. I have no doubt that the resonance many of the students were able to find through the art project was in part due to the trust and relationship that was built up in the classroom previous to my arrival there, and to the openness to exploring and recognizing story that Kaydeen had worked hard to create.
Art and literacy

The art project, as I mentioned earlier in this thesis, was a bit difficult to get off the ground. The BTS LBS program coordinator had to do a bit of work to get it approved – despite the fact I was a volunteer, the workshop facilitators were volunteers, and the supplies were donated. Mary Norton (2008b) found similar resistance from literacy facilitators, students and the wider public to arts-based literacy models in her research. By the end of the art project, however, all the naysayers I knew of seemed to be convinced. Near the end of the project, one of the students told me she had been skeptical at first, but that she was now very enthusiastic about the whole process. Other students also mentioned how much they had enjoyed the project, and how much they had learned. At the end of the project, we created a zine to commemorate the process. One of the students wrote for it:

I had the opportunity to be a part of the art class for literacy. Within the program I had completed 2 canvases of art work ... I also got to see how others learned and how I could apply it to my learning so I can feeder grow. I am happy I had this opportunity to be a part of the art class and to meet so many different people and different ways of learning. Art is a way to express your love, life, needs, wants, and so much more.........

Another wrote:

I entered the arts program a few months before it ended. In that short time, one of the things I really connected to was poetry. I love writing poems because it’s a way to express myself in an amazing way.

I believe that in art the students, Kaydeen and I found a way to move. Through art, it seemed like students were able to find methods of powerful expression that sometimes made use of words, and sometimes transcended them. I saw people reading and writing, having in depth discussions, drawing, singing, snapping photos and laughing. Our forays into different art forms brought out emotions, and multiple ways of learning and of seeing. They brought out stories – stories that could be lightly touched upon, or delved into in more depth – stories that could be explored through words, or through images, or
through emotional explosions of colours on a page. Art allowed for people to connect to parts of themselves and their stories in ways that more traditional methods of teaching literacy, in my experience, do not. At the end of the art project, we made a video explaining the project. In it, Kaydeen spoke about her impressions that the art project was a unique and worthwhile undertaking:

*This opportunity was a good chance for the students to start to explore their learning outside of the normal models of literacy, and the normal approaches to literacy that generally programs take. It has definitely added some important dimension, and some interesting conversations and opportunities that the students themselves may not have had a chance to really be a part of in any other environment, or definitely in other programs.*

As the project progressed, I couldn’t help but contrast my experience in the art class to my own previous struggles in working with learners in a one-to-one situation. For many students in this latter situation, trying to keep their interest and to get across the idea that writing did not have to be a painful struggle was unquestionably harder than with the students in the art class. As time went on, students in the art class even worked through all their breaks!

My research and this project has left no doubt in my mind that arts-based approaches “can invite people to bring their whole selves to teaching and learning and help to create environments that support learning for all” (Norton, 2008b, p. 19). The variety of art we tried and the variety of story we explored through art provided us with multiple pathways to finding resonance. Many of the examples of resonance I relate in this thesis were made possible through the art project. I do not mean to say that every student enjoyed every art class. Nor do I wish to imply that teaching integrated with art somehow eliminates issues of power and difference. Art, however, offers ways in which to critically examine one’s own story while engaging with the stories of others. It is my belief that art opens doors for students and tutors to work together. It also offers a practical option for tutors looking for ways to create a more holistic literacy experience. Within arts-based approaches there is a chance for tutors to connect on a deeper level to
students – to look for and achieve resonance – without becoming overwhelmed themselves.

Towards a theory of resonance

I have heard many tales of how much of the research and policy around literacy is based on a flawed understanding of literacy – one that is individualistic and does not take into account the socially situated nature of literacy, learning, and knowledge. I have listened to those who tell me that the North American system of education is both limited and limiting – one that perpetuates inequities and punishes those who cannot read and write in a particular manner defined by the current dominant ways of knowing. All of these stories have led me to believe that there is many a structure in literacy and in education in general that needs to be questioned, critically examined, and possibly overhauled. In the mean time, however, my research and my experience has shown me that literacy learning persists at a local level, within the relationships between tutors and students and within smaller communities that support alternative approaches to literacy such as BTS LBS. There is always room to be more critical, but we must also acknowledge the magic that happens. I believe we must try to understand how and why it happens so that others can try and achieve it. Resonance is a piece of this magic.

Resonance happens in literacy work already. Those who work in literacy with whom I have discussed it find the idea of resonance very familiar, and tell me they recognize a number of ways in which they have experienced it. As a distinctive concept, however, researchers have not yet focused on defining resonance or exploring its potential for transforming the literacy environment. There are still many questions surrounding how resonance operates: Are there other ways resonance can be found that I have not described here? What are the consequences for students and tutors of echoes that drudge up negative memories or emotions? How would students describe or understand the concept and consequences of resonance? What aspects of it might they see as important, or unimportant? Some questions I have touched upon, but would benefit from
being delved into in more depth: Could resonance end up relating to the appropriation of story? If so, under what circumstances does that occur? How can it be avoided?

Despite the number of unanswered questions, I believe that the phenomenon of resonance as it stands has a lot to offer both literacy theory and practice. I have seen resonance operating as a positive force in the literacy environment in ways that benefit both tutors and students. Searching for ways to increase the chance of finding resonance is something that tutors and students can do right now, from within the literacy learning system as it currently stands. Many alternative ways of approaching and understanding literacy, like the art project, can enhance learning for tutors and students and increase the likelihood that they find resonance, with each other, with methods of teaching, and with the material being explored.

**More than storytelling**

I want to make it clear that in this thesis what I am calling for is not just storytelling – particularly not the uncritical use of storytelling. Rather, I am calling for openness to appreciating the existence and effect that stories have on all people’s lives. These stories exist, both told and untold, in a complex relationship which each other and with the world around us. Stories are messy. They change, interact and are “porous” as Stewart (2009) claims. Some of them are violent and hurtful, and trying to connect through them can be perilous. They do not lend themselves to any sort of measurement and cannot be pinned down. So why is there a push to consider them at all? I think at least part of the reason is that stories contain the keys to our interpretation of and interaction with the world around us. If we do not look at stories, we will never be able to begin to understand how our own stories are affecting how we see, how we hear, how we feel and how we act.

A literacy environment that does not encourage tutors and students to actively and critically consider the implications of their stories cannot, in my opinion, be learner-centered. Neither tutors nor students can entirely put their stories aside when they step in
the door of a literacy program, and therefore these stories will be affecting how they act as well as the assumptions about learning and literacy they bring with them. Therefore, it is possible for tutors to have specific ideas – of good ways to teach, or presumptions about the correctness of certain literacy practices or of what students ‘need’ to succeed for example – that are based in their own experiences and fail to account for those of the student. We also may be telling stories of ourselves that obscure how we are interacting with students, and that ignore issues of difference in our work. Sheila Stewart (2009, p. 43) writes that:

As literacy workers, we may tell a “professional” story in which we are helpful and a little distant. Or we may tell a story of ourselves as here-to-help-you. Given the chaos of some learners’ lives, we may be tempted to present ourselves as the “good mother” or “good father” in ways which we can’t sustain, which wear us out eventually. We seek authenticity in teaching. We want to be present, but don’t need to disclose more than we are comfortable with. It is helpful to think about what we are not revealing and whether some of this “hiding” is squelching ourselves unduly and impacting on our teaching and our relationships with literacy work.

I further believe that programming that ignores or does not consider aspects of student stories, such as the effects of violence on learning, can not be considered learner-centered.

I have found that some tutors are more aware than others of the stories they are telling, and the stories they are being told. Some are also more sensitive to the power dynamics that play out in the classroom, and some seem to not even realize that it might be an issue. Tutors need to be open to understanding the role that story plays in the literacy environment, and to actively try to move with students towards resonance. They should also try and be critically aware of how their own stories affect how they hear those of the students. The impetus in achieving these goals, however, should not rest solely on the shoulders of tutors – they need to be supported and engaged in these kinds of efforts for their own sake as well as that of the students. Most of the people I have encountered in frontline literacy work are open to change and learning. For some, however, it may take guidance to get there. Others appear to be drowning under paperwork and restrictive
accountability measures, and it may take relief from this burden for them to truly be able to embrace the approach to literacy learning this thesis calls for.

Thus literacy programs need change from the inside, and change from the outside. There has to be support for a different way of doing things, and in fact a built in system that demands alternative approaches and understandings to literacy. There are some amazing people doing amazing things in literacy – but too much relies on these individuals. Too much is at stake when tutors enter literacy and are not asked to critically interrogate their own stories – too much is at stake when we must learn from the mistaken assumptions we put on the first students we encounter. We also cannot let tutors drown – as Horsman (1999, p. 276) aptly points out, “more space must be created in the literacy field for workers to recognize the costs to themselves, to identify a range of support and possibilities to take care of ourselves.”

Wouldn’t it be wonderful if the funder frameworks were supportive of enterprises such as the art project? If the Canadian government’s policies on literacy expanded beyond ascribing success to solely academic or job-based outcomes? I add my voices to those who are calling for a need to re-conceptualize our understanding both of what literacy is, and of what goes on in a literacy program. I urge funders and policy-makers to pay attention to what practitioners are telling them – and build in ways for students to give feedback that is sensitive to issues of power and difference. I advocate for the people who plan literacy for others to go to a student art show, and view the words and images that have spilled out everywhere. I ask them to open their eyes, and to really listen to what they might discover there.

Opening Doors

My grandfather once told me that I liked to open as many doors as I could, but that I never wanted to go through. In this thesis, I tried to go through a door. All I found is a 1001 more doors. He might have tricked me there – I doubt he expected me to find
anything else. Stories lead to stories. Doors lead to more doors. That is the nature of learning, and that is the nature of living.

This thesis, this research, reflects my self and is my own journey as much as it is anything else. I have lived through it, learned through it, and ultimately it has become a part of my stories, as much as it expresses a part of my stories. It contains within it endless connections to the stories of the people I have heard, I have read, I have laughed with, I have loved – or sometimes I have encountered simply in passing. I have tried my best to be faithful to these connections as I understood them. But I can only make the claim, here and now, that this thesis is my story. It is one of many stories that make me who I am – and since it is written down, fixed in place – it is only told from where I am standing in this moment. Of course, it will keep changing. For other people’s stories, you will have to ask them. For now, I will say this:

The Last Word

Stories are wonderful. But they can also be dangerous, volatile and full of the dynamics of power and difference. Story is never simple. But neither is working in literacy. Both can do a lot of damage – and both can illuminate new understanding and hope. We live through our stories, and our stories live through us. When our stories open us to resonance we can listen, we can move and we can dance with our partners to another story, another door, and another moment of learning together.
Appendix A:

Exploring (my) Research Traditions –
A Methodology

Introduction

I believe in the unfolding, spiraling nature of research. Research never sits still. For the purposes of writing, however, we have to pin it down to a particular moment of examination.

When I first started conducting this research, I stubbornly insisted (in my head) that my thesis was not about literacy. My research was about stories, about learning and about relationships. What did that have to do with literacy? I knew one answer to that question – everything – but I did not know the place of my research in literacy theory, at least not theory based solely on skills development and education for proper citizenship, human capital, and the GED.

I was not even sure if I liked (Canadian) literacy. I was doubtful it was founded on any sort of anti-colonial, popular education or critically radical notion – and wondered if it ever could be. Of course, I knew Paulo Freire. But Paulo Freire was not my experience with much of the literacy policy and practice approaches in Canada. So I was suspicious of literacy, as a field, and as an overarching area in which to place my research.

Despite my work as a literacy practitioner, I had no idea what academic theories of literacy looked like. Further – I did not trust them. I made the assumption that all I would find would be numbers and narrowing, exclusionary definitions. That the numbers would be tied to skills and that the knowledge and experience of those working in
literacy, in all capacities (learner, teacher, coordinator), would be reduced to unscientific, nice to hear but ultimately useless testimonial.

I did not know where to look, or how to begin tying literacy into my thesis research. Then I took a course in New Literacy Studies (NLS) with Dr. Guy Ewing at OISE, and my perspective shifted. Suddenly, ideas were falling into place. My research isn’t about one ‘literacy.’ It’s about literacies, and the broad array of social interactions and learnings that happen – back and forth, tutor and learner, learner and learner, teacher and tutor – within a ‘literacy’ program. Within NLS, I also found the research traditions I thought were more accurately able to capture the multifaceted realities of literacy learning. These research traditions focus on learners as complex social beings with their own rich knowledges, as opposed to empty, numeric failures waiting to be ‘fixed.’ Within NLS, there were narratives and ethnographic studies and all kinds of quality qualitative (and beyond) research traditions.

**Prevailing Research Approaches in Literacy**

**Legitimate knowledge in public perception and in policy**

My fears regarding research in literacy were not entirely unfounded. Although there are a wide variety of research approaches in the literacy field, the one that is seemingly given the most legitimacy in public perception and in policy is positivism. By and large, the information that Canadians receive about literacy appears to come from a series of surveys conducted by Statistics Canada – namely the International Adult Literacy Surveys (IALS). A quick web search reveals that statistics from the IALS feature prominently on the majority of Canadian not-for-profit (NFP) literacy groups’ home pages, as well as government websites pertaining to literacy.

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22 Based on a personal Internet and media review
I believe that literacy organizations rely heavily on statistics to bring much needed attention to their work. Statistics reflecting Canada’s low literacy rates, garnered from the IALS, are cited as ‘proof’ of the need to fund programs. Literacy is not alone in relaying on statistics – according to Sussman (2003, p. 6), “nearly every social, political and economic argument is backed up by statistical research.” Numbers seem to be the language that governments speak, and most literacy programs depend to a certain degree on government funding. Accountability and ‘proof’ of services to higher ups in larger institutions, Frontier College included, also rely on numbers. The people in charge want to know what can do the most good, for the most people. To this end, they need information from as many people as possible, in the most easily accessible format possible. Too often, this translates into an over-emphasis on quantifiable measures of research. Most literacy advocates, therefore, “find it impossible to move literacy issues into the spotlight onto the public policy agenda without referring to literacy rate statistics” (Sussman, 2003, p. 6).

Although positivist data can be useful in specific circumstances, it is important to understand fully what those circumstances are. Further, it is essential that a couple of surveys, done in a very particular manner, do not become the sole basis upon which policies and programming are structured. It seems to me that the prevalence of the IALS gives Statistics Canada the authority of providing the most legitimate source of literacy knowledge. There is surprising little academic or practitioner knowledge given a prominent place on not-for-profit literacy groups’ websites, with some notable exceptions such as the Canadian Literacy and Learning Network. It is important to remember that although the statistical outcomes of the IALS “may reveal a lot … they conceal as much” (Sussman, 2003, p. 8).

**Legitimate knowledge on the frontlines of literacy**

Despite the prevalence of positivism in policy and public perception of literacy, who defines legitimate knowledge in the field of literacy depends on who you ask. On the frontlines of literacy, the value of other people’s experiences and stories is paramount.
This insight first consciously dawned on me while conducting the tutor focus group. Throughout the focus group, tutors were actively seeking out each other’s stories and experiences as valuable and respected sources of knowledge. Similar results were revealed in other focus groups. Students, tutors, and teachers also all felt that the coordinators of the BTS program had important knowledge, and many had actively sought it out. Students cited each other as active sites of knowledge, and some tutors marveled at the knowledge of their students. I once heard a tutor, half joking, half in complete seriousness, quip, “she’s my tutor,” referring to her student.

What BTS LBS represents, it therefore seems, is an active and healthy web of information being passed around a frontline literacy community. Statistics do not play a large role in the day-to-day activities, or quest for knowledge, at BTS LBS. Statistics, for example, were not mentioned once in any of the focus groups that I facilitated. These observations are not limited to BTS LBS – there are a number of studies that have found that practitioners “tend to rely on their experiential knowledge” (Taylor and Savin-Baden, 2001). That does not mean, however, that certain positivist paradigms are not still operating. Positivism is particularly present in tutors’ struggles with defining success. Although it seems like tutors would prefer to define success through alternative measures like an increase in student confidence or the ability of a student to play board games, they sometimes express confusion over whether or not these successes are counted as legitimate by the literacy program. Tutors assume that what is counted as legitimate is success that can be numerically defined and goals that can be easily checked off as ‘accomplished’ – getting the GED, for example, or moving from a ‘level one’ in reading to a ‘level two.’

**Evidence based research?**

Based on these observations, it appears that on the frontlines of literacy, positivism, narrative, personal experience and story are actually co-existing in a (sometimes tumultuous) dialogue. Ideas are constantly evolving and interacting – clearly the knowledge here is neither absolute nor strictly individual, but as Elliot Eisner (1993)
says, collective and social. Through this dynamic existence, literacy happens. Learning happens. It is in these complex negotiations that there is truly a chance to explore the meaning of literacy and the events that illustrate literacy practices. There is an opportunity in that messy arena to research what \textit{actually occurs} in a literacy environment.

Unfortunately, this knowledge formation and re-formation is not (usually) seen as research – by governments or policy makers or administration, or by the tutors or teachers or students themselves. Policies and public perceptions therefore do not often reflect these diverse processes. Knowledge in these latter arenas is severely limited by the adherence to an old-fashioned hierarchy that perceives randomized control trials (RCTs) as providing the ‘best’ evidence (Taylor and Savin-Baden, 2001). Stories and experiences? Invalid. Unreliable. Unscientific. Not worthy to be called \textit{evidence}.

This dismissal is rooted in a particular understanding of ‘science’ as objective, value-free, neutral and essentially existing outside a social context. The more objective a measure of something is, therefore, the ‘better’ evidence it produces. Most people who argue for evidence-based research and evidence-based policy therefore think they have to argue for numbers. I count myself among the growing number of those who now believe, however, that \textit{all} research exists within a “constructed, tentative and framework-dependent character of perception and knowledge” (Eisner, 1993, p. 55). Statistics, for example, are said by some to mathematically reveal objective universal truths within their defined population. By their nature, however, statistics must be manipulated by those who create and utilize them. They do not exist without human hands shaping them. No research exists without human hands shaping the design including questions to be explored, hypothesis (or rather null hypothesis) to be proven, definition of terms, and sample population – to name a few important factors. I thought Eisner (1993, p. 54) put it well when he said:

\textit{The facts never speak for themselves. What they say depends on the questions we ask.}
Researchers also shape the output of their data when they decide what statistical device to use to analyze their data, and what particular numbers to report, and how they frame their report including word choice and emphasis on particular ideas. As Eisner (1993, p. 52) says, “the medium is part of the message.”

All research, therefore, is constructed (and that includes RCTs). There is no way to get around this fact. It is by no means a bad reality – in fact, quite the opposite, there is a whole world of knowledge to be explored around these constructions. It does mean, however, that people need a new scale by which to weigh good research, and good evidence. Instead of maintaining a hierarchy that relies on false presumptions of objectivity, researchers and policy makers should be asking themselves this much more pertinent question: What form of research, or research tradition, is best able to answer the questions we are asking?

Let’s take a look at a specific example: testimonials verses survey statistics. I am using the example of testimonials because they are as prevalent as IALS statistics in the public forum on literacy. For the most part, these strategically placed ‘inspirational’ stories are meant to motivate individuals to participate in or donate to a cause. Unlike statistics, however, testimonials are not seen as valid sources of knowledge. Essentially, they are a form of advertising that is usable only to attract ‘costumers,’ not to set policy or practice in. Few would ever read a testimonial and think of it as research. What is the main reason for that? Again … Statistics = numbers = hard science. Testimonials = stories = unscientific.

Testimonials, however, illuminate ideas and processes that statistics cannot. If I wish to explore individual’s unique understandings of what progress in literacy means to them, for example, I cannot use a method that pre-defines the boundaries. If I do, I confine people’s answers to my pre-existing notions of what those answers should be. Writing a story, on the other hand, gives people a chance to lay out what might be complex answers that fall well outside the boundaries of skills or job acquisition, or other easily ticked off boxes. Further, stories can highlight the circumstances surrounding a
person’s self-defined understandings of progress. Knowing these circumstances may in turn help expand or clarify those understandings. Again, which method I choose should depend on what questions I wish to explore.

In understanding how testimonials may be valuable sources of knowledge, we can begin to see how stories can be a legitimate research tool. In understanding how knowledge operates on the frontlines of literacy, we can begin to see that in fact respecting the stories and experiences of those on the frontlines of literacy as research is essential to building an accurate understanding of literacy. In seeing how all research is constructed, we can begin to appreciate that what research traditions we use should be ranked by how relevant they are to the questions we ask – not by false assumptions of objectivity. Without qualitative traditions of research, we risk missing the point, losing the meaning, and failing to see “literacy problems as learners and practitioners in programs understand them” (Sussman, 2003, p. 8).

**Who cares anyway? Why is my research relevant?**

I believe that people always have, and always will, live their life through stories because essentially, whether you look at it from a cognitive or social perspective, stories are all we have that connect us with the world. Whether or not fundamental truths exist, our only means of accessing those truths are through stories. Eventually, when enough stories are told in one way, human society creates myth. I do not use myth here as fictitious. In other words, myths are true – but they are created truths.

Myths become overarching paradigms by which humans structure their lives and beliefs. Some stories in myth are vocalized repeatedly. Others are less visible. According to Mary Midgley (2009, p.192), “every thought system … has at its core a guiding myth, an imaginative vision, which expresses its appeal to the deepest needs of our nature.” ‘Literacy’ as a concept as well as a field is no exception. Currently, a particular myth of literacy exists. Talking about all the various stories that make up this myth would take another essay, but to name a few: People who have low literacy levels do so through
some fault of their own. People who cannot read are less intelligent. The most effective literacy programming delivers skills-based curricula. If we put money into literacy programs, the economic payback will be significant down the road. People with low literacy need to upgrade their skills in order to get jobs.

Reframing and reconstituting stories can be a powerful public force. In one of my university classes, for example, we talked about the restorying of the European people who first came to Canada from settlers to invaders. Restorying is powerful because it contests blind acceptance of a current mythology by reframing, reconstituting, disputing or retelling the stories that constitute that mythology’s framework. By doing so, restorying can challenge the power myths can hold. Although my research is just one story (albeit containing many stories), it is one in a growing group that questions the current mythology that surrounds literacy and literacy practices. As I strongly believe that this mythology needs to be questioned, I believe my research is relevant and important to those seeking to create positive, meaningful literacy programming (policy makers and practitioners) as well as to those trying to understand the whys, hows, whens, whos and whats of literacy.

**My Methodological Choices**

Andrew Pickering (2009, p. 35) argues it is not important to concentrate on whether things exist, but how they exist. It is this *how*, along with the *why*, that is so often missing from statistical outcomes, including those of the IALS. It is this how and this why, which I also believe contributes to our deeper understanding of who and what, that I wished to explore in my research. A qualitative research design is “concerned with process, context and intricate detail” (Prasad, 2005, p. 9), and can therefore illuminate the how and the why in tutor-student relationships, including the complexities of people’s backgrounds and literacy practices. Similar to the research of Boston (2000, p. 399), my research questions related to dynamic, constantly transforming life experiences, concerned with
“multiple meanings, patterns and complex human relationships.” They could never have been captured in the moment of time that it takes to fill out a survey. The nuances and subtleties of the creation of meaning by tutors and students within the literacy process would simply be lost in a larger scale numerical analysis.

Further, many of the processes I explored were tacit or unconscious. In my research, listening to people’s stories sometimes revealed subtleties of learning, literacy practices, and attitudes they seemed to be unaware of. Adam Perry (2008) also found that people do not always recognize their own learning. He maintained that it was sometimes necessary to “probe more deeply … in order for participants to become aware of and make explicit the outcomes of their learning” (Perry, 2008, p. 61). People’s assumptions and attitudes, as well as some of the subtleties of their learning process, can be revealed through stories and conversations that highlight a change in people’s attitudes or perceptions, or mutual exploration through interview of an idea. It is a process that takes time, attention to detail and a willingness to explore an unexpected path – all of which call for the flexibility of a qualitative framework.

Throughout this research process I tried to remain aware of the complex role that I played as a researcher. I embraced the notion that in qualitative work, the “researchers are the instrument of study and their experiences and insights are central to understanding the phenomena under investigation” (Boston, 2000, p. 399). Being a tutor myself, I was located within my research as someone who had actively participated in the tutor-student relationship. I thus had my own understanding of the process, my own experiences of learning, and my own opinions about how literacy programs ought to run. I believe that this ‘insider’ relationship was a privileged location from which to research. As an active participant, however, I endeavored to be constantly aware of and reflexive regarding my assumptions and choices. I strove to be aware of how my presumptions intersected with the responses and opinions of others. I tried to remain as true to my connections with people’s stories, as I understood them.

With students, I was and am an outsider with a different kind of privileged location
– one of power. I tried to be conscious and critically reflective of that power relationship. I particularly sought to be attentive to the questions I asked and how they might be shaping the responses I got. Throughout, I tried to be aware of how my stories might be affecting how I heard and understood what students were telling or showing me. Further, although I was not working specifically from a participatory research framework, I believe that the students should be active contributors to the research process. Like Diane Conrad and Wallis Kendal (2009, p. 255), I think it is important that research engage students “in producing knowledge and working for change to benefit themselves.” This philosophy was part of my motivation in creating the art class. I also occasionally discussed my research within the class. If I had a chance to repeat this process, I would have tried to further a participatory framework for my thesis, especially in getting more input and feedback from the students regarding the ideas I discuss.

**My Methods**

As I have explained, my research plan was qualitative. It rested on the notion that the best way for me to explore my research questions was through story, conversation, observation, arts-based investigation and reflexive inquiry. I conducted 6 semi-structured interviews with students (3) and tutors (3), focusing on stories of learning previous to and during Frontier College. I also used material from the three focus groups that were run as part of the BTS LBS program evaluation – one with three students in the newly formed LBS Level One Class, one with 11 tutors, and one with 3 paid teachers and coordinators at BTS LBS. I ran an additional focus group with 8 tutors a year after the first one. These focus groups were semi-structured and open-ended and participants were encouraged to engage in discussions of their own design. In this way, I was able to hear about what mattered to the participants in each group, and their perceptions of the day-to-day process of literacy learning and teaching. I also heard a lot of stories. As I have explained above, I believe that stories are frequently and freely given during focus groups in part because within that form they are considered to provide valuable and valid knowledge.
I also engaged with students in a five-month, once a week art project. As a teacher-researcher, I wrote weekly reflections based on my classroom and conversational experiences. As an ethnographic researcher, I took field notes observing the interactions between workshop facilitators (brought in for this project) and students, as well as between students and their classroom teacher (Kaydeen). This classroom project was a more intensive study than an interview or focus group, and provided time and space for more complex meaning to unfold. I also had several in-depth conversations with Kaydeen, both in person and through email.

A number of the workshop facilitators also completed brief emailed questionnaires. Although I do not quote from these specifically in my research, they helped to further illuminate for me the facilitators’ experiences and perspectives. I believe important details about the evolution of relationships and learning in the literacy environment were revealed even in the one class in which they were present.

**What is the Audience for my Research?**

It was important for me to write my thesis in an accessible way. Although I have occasionally felt tickled to have people look to me as an ‘academic’ for the answer to some question, mostly it has left me embarrassed. I do not feel that there should be this great theory-practice, or academic-practitioner divide within the very broad world of literacy. Words, or certain literacy practices, can alienate some bodies from participating in particular dialogues, or engaging with certain literature on literacy and literacy practice. The essential ideas behind the words, however, are ones that I think anyone – whether student or tutor – with working knowledge of a problem can grapple with.

I would like literacy practitioners to read my research, and know that their voices and stories have a place in academia. I hope that they might realize that many of the
theories they live by every day can be as academic as any developed in a PhD’s office. I hope too that practitioners can realize the value to be found by taking the time to reflect on the theories by which they live their life, including writing down, reflexively researching, or participating in dialogues about their ideas and experiences. Practitioners can also learn from reading or discussing more traditionally ‘academic’ developed theories. My understanding of my own practices has been greatly enhanced by my time in academia. This enhancement comes from talking to peers, from hearing their experiences, from the intermingling of backgrounds and professions. It also comes from reading theory – people who have spent time thinking about what I care about, and then writing about it. If I accept that research is story, and that stories are of paramount importance to how I live my life, than academic story is just another bridge to knowledge, understanding, and growth.

I also hope that learners read or explore my research, and take me to task for anything I misunderstood or misrepresented. Or tell me where I got it right.

I hope that program coordinators and those in charge of tutor training read my research. I hope that some of the ideas, including the importance of informal learning and community process in literacy, are openly communicated and discussed in tutor/practitioner training, focus group, or workshop situations.

I hope that other academics read my research, and are inspired to create their own forms of inquiry into whatever field suits them. Perhaps I can even have some influence on their ideas, like Adam Perry did on mine. Dreaming bigger, maybe my research will be another chip in the power of the current mythology surrounding literacy and literacy construction. If I can help others get alternative ideas and theories and understandings into the literacy conversation, then maybe eventually the murmur will be loud enough to begin to affect actual policy practices (and funding structures!).

Finally, I hope I read this thesis, years later, and remember where I came from and some of the places I might have been going.
Appendix B: Sample Data Tools

Sample Informed Consent Forms

Information/Consent Letter for Students in the Art Program

Introduction

My name is Rebecca Melville. I am a student in the Master’s program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. I am interested in people’s learning experiences at the Beat the Street program. The information collected through this process will be used in my final thesis paper.

Why is this Project Being Done?

This project is looking at the learning experiences of tutors and students at Frontier College, and particularly at the relationship they develop together. It is being done to further our understanding of what goes on in a literacy program like this one.

What is Involved with Being Part of this Process?

During this art class, I will be thinking about my own interactions with people in the classroom and writing reflections based on my experiences. I will also be watching how facilitators interact with you and how you interact with each other and with the teacher, and be taking some notes.

What are the Risks of Participating in this Project?

I do not anticipate any risks for participants. The final thesis will not use any identifying information if you so wish.

What are the Benefits of Participating in this Project?

By participating in this focus group you have a chance to have your voice heard, and to talk about your experiences with education and with Frontier College. It is also a chance for you to contribute to the development of this program for your benefit and for the benefit of those who come after you. It would also contribute to our understanding of what goes on in a literacy program like Beat the Street.

What About Confidentiality?

As I mention, no names will be used in the final report. With your permission, I may be using your words and stories in the report. There will be no identifying information apart from gender in the final report.
What are my Rights as a Participant?

Your participation in this process is voluntary. You may choose to remove yourself from the project at any time up until April 30/2011 by contacting me at rebecca.festival@gmail.com.

If you decide you do not want to participate, there will be no negative consequences. It will not affect your standing or future relations with Frontier College or the Beat the Street program in any way.

Who do I contact if I have Questions?

You can email me at rebecca.festival@gmail.com if you have any questions. You can also contact my supervisor, Nancy Jackson, at nancy.jackson@utoronto.ca if you have questions about the research project.

Signatures

☐ I have read and understood all the information on this letter. I have had a chance to ask any questions I have. I agree to participate in this study. I am aware that I can withdraw from this project at any time until March 1/2011.

☐ I understand that I am volunteering my time and will not be receiving any compensation for my participation in this process.

☐ The requirements and risks of this study have been explained to me.

☐ I consent to my words being used in the final report.

☐ I consent to the use of any observations made during this class in the final report.

☐ I have been given a copy of this form.

☐ I consent to my name being used in the final thesis.

OR

☐ I would like to use an alias (please specify): _____________________________

OR

☐ I do not wish to be identified in the final thesis.

Name of Participant (Please Print):

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

Signature Date
Written Consent for Program Evaluation Student Focus Group

My name is Rebecca Melville. I am a student at the University of Toronto. I am doing this focus group because I want to hear what you have to say about your experiences with learning.

This information will be used in a report that will be given to Frontier College. The report will let Frontier College know what you think about the program.

Your name and age will not be used in the report. I may use your words and your stories in the final report.

You can contact me at: r.melville@utoronto.ca

If you would like to learn more about your rights as a research participant, you can contact the Office of Research Ethics at ethics.review@utoronto.ca or at 416-946-3273.

You can also contact my supervisor, Nancy Jackson, if you have questions about the research project: nancy.jackson@utoronto.ca

If you want:

- A copy of this written consent (until April 30/2011)
- A copy of this tape (until January 30/2011)
- A copy of the transcript
- A copy of the final report
- Any questions you have!

I, ________________________________, say that it is ok for Rebecca to record this focus group. I understand my rights, and that I don’t have to answer a question I don’t want to, and that I can leave the room at any time.

(Signature) (Date)
Information Letter for Student Focus Group
(Done originally as part of a program evaluation)

The following was the oral script for informed consent with the students; I also gave students a copy of the Tutor Focus Group Information Letter, see next sample.

Introduction

My name is Rebecca Melville. I am a student in the Master’s program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. I am interested in what you have to say about your experiences learning at the Beat the Streets program, and how it compares to your other learning experiences. The information collected in these focus groups will be used in a report for the benefit of Frontier College and for those who participate in its programs.

This is a written consent form. I will go over this form now. (will go over written form)

Now I’m going to do an oral consent process, to talk about some of the ideas on that form in more detail. When I’m finished, if you still wish to participate, I will ask you to say so out loud. I want to make sure you know that this research is confidential, and no one will know your name. I also want you to be comfortable!

Why is this Project Being Done?

This project is looking at your learning experiences before you came to Frontier College, so at school, or work, or in your family. I also want to know about your learning experiences at Frontier College, including your experience with your tutor and in the classroom. Anything you want to tell me, I want to hear! I will also be doing focus groups with tutors and coordinators. After I do these focus groups, I will be writing a report for Frontier College. The report will talk about your and other learners’ and tutors’ experiences at Frontier College, and what you think might be helpful for this program based on what you tell me.

How Many People are Taking Part in the Project?

There will be between 3 and 7 people in this focus group. No one is receiving any compensation for their participation in this focus group.

What is Involved with the Focus Group?

This focus will take about an hour. I will be asking you questions about your experiences, thoughts and feelings. You can ask me to repeat any question or to clarify what a question means. There are no right or wrong answers. If you feel uncomfortable with any question, anyone can ask me to skip it. You may also leave the focus group at any time. With your permission, I will be taping this session.
**What are the Risks of Participating in this Project?**

I do not anticipate any risks for participants. Again, if any question makes you feel uncomfortable or upset, you do not have to answer it.

**What are the Benefits of Participating in this Project?**

By participating in this focus group you have a chance to have your voice heard, and to talk about your experiences with education and with Frontier College. It is also a chance for you to contribute to the development of this program for your benefit and for the benefit of those who come after you.

**What About Confidentiality?**

This tape and the subsequent transcriptions will be kept confidentially in a secure location at my home office. No one will have access to these files except for me.

No names will be used in the final report. With your permission, I may be using your words and stories in the report. There will be no identifying information apart from gender in the final report. I will ask you for your age in the interview for generalization purposes. No specific ages will be used in the report. You do not have to tell me your age.

Please be aware that others in this focus group may talk about what was said once it is over.

**What are my Rights as a Participant?**

Your participation in this focus group is voluntary. **You may choose to remove yourself from the project at any time up until January 30/2011 by contacting me at r.melville@utoronto.ca.** You may also contact me to change your answers or withdraw from the project up until January 30/2011. At this time, the report will be prepared.

If you decide you do not want to participate, there will be no negative consequences. It will not affect your standing or future relations with Frontier College or the “Beat the Streets” program in any way.

You will receive a copy of your written consent form now. I will also give you a copy of what I am saying now in the form of an Information Letter.

**Who do I contact if I have Questions?**

You can email me at r.melville@utoronto.ca if you have any questions.
You can also contact my supervisor, Nancy Jackson, if you have questions about the research project: nancy.jackson@utoronto.ca

**When will the Final Report be Out?**

I am hoping the report will be out near the end of June. I will let you know when the report is finished. If you would like, I will send you a copy.

*Please answer the following questions with “Yes” or “No.” If you have any questions, feel free to ask me!*

Do you consent to the audio recording of this focus group?

Do you understand that you can decided not to answer any question you want, and that you may leave the focus group at any time?

Do you understand that you are volunteering your time for this focus group, and will not be receiving any compensation?

Do you understand how you can contact me, and that you may contact me to ask me any questions or to tell me that you don’t want to be part of the project any more up until January 30/2011?

Do you understand that your name will not be used anywhere in the final report, and that no one will have access to this tape or the transcription of this tape except for me?

Do you understand that this tape will be erased on January 30/2011, except for this consent part, and that the transcription will be destroyed after one year of time along with the written and taped informed consent?

May I use your words in my final report?

Do you want a copy of this audio oral consent?

Do you have any questions?

Is it ok to start the focus group?
Introduction

My name is Rebecca Melville. I am a student in the Master’s program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto.

Why is this Project Being Done?

This focus group is a chance for tutors to exchange stories and resources with other tutors and to give feedback on their experiences at Frontier College. It is a chance to openly discuss concerns and suggestions with the program coordinator and with other tutors. Some information from this focus group may be used in Rebecca’s MA thesis, which is exploring the learning relationship between tutors and students.

How Many People are Taking Part in the Project?

There will be around 10 people in this focus group.

What is Involved With this Focus Group?

This focus group will take between 1 and 1.5 hours. I will be asking you questions about your experiences, thoughts and feelings. You can ask me to repeat any question or to clarify what a question means. There are no right or wrong answers. If you feel uncomfortable with any question, you can choose not to answer.

With your permission, I will be audio recording this focus group.

What are the Risks of Participating in this Project?

I do not anticipate any risks for participants. You do not have to answer any question that makes you feel uncomfortable or upset. You may withdraw from the project at any time.

What are the Benefits of Participating in this Project?

By participating in this focus group you will have a chance to have your voice heard, and to talk about your experiences with Frontier College. It is also a chance for you to contribute to the development of this program for your benefit and for the benefit of those who come after you, as well as to the development of our understanding of how literacy programs function for students and tutors.
What About Confidentiality?

This tape and the subsequent transcriptions will be kept confidentially in a secure location at my home office. No one will have access to these files except for me.

No names will be used in my thesis. With your permission, I may be using your words and stories in my thesis. There will be no identifying information apart from gender in the thesis.

Please be aware that others in this focus group may talk about what was said once it is over. Rosita Bacchus will be joining us for this focus group.

What are my Rights as a Participant?

Your participation in this focus group is voluntary. You may choose to remove yourself from my thesis at any time up until March 30/2011 by contacting me at r.melville@utoronto.ca. You may also contact me to change your answers or withdraw from the project up until March 30/2011. At this time, my thesis will (hopefully!) be written.

If you decide you do not want to participate, there will be no negative consequences. It will not affect your standing or future relations with Frontier College or the “Beat the Streets” program in any way.

You will get a copy of this Information Letter.

Who do I contact if I have Questions?

You can email me at r.melville@utoronto.ca if you have any questions. You can also contact my supervisor, Nancy Jackson, at nancy.jackson@utoronto.ca if you have questions about the research project.

Finally, if you would like to learn more about your rights as a research participant, you can contact the Office of Research Ethics at ethics.review@utoronto.ca or at 416-946-3273.

When will my Thesis be done?

I am hoping that the thesis will be done near the end of the summer 2011. You may request a copy now or at any time by emailing me.
**Signatures**

- [ ] I have read and understood all the information on this letter. I have had a chance to ask any questions I have. I agree to participate in this study, and am aware that I may choose not to answer any question. I am aware that I can withdraw from this project at any time until March 30/2011.

- [ ] The requirements and risks of this study have been explained to me.

- [ ] I consent to my words being used in the final report. I understand that no identifying information will be used in the report.

- [ ] I consent to the audio recording of this focus group.

- [ ] I have been given a copy of this form.

**Name of Participant (Please Print)**

____________________________________________________

____________________________________________________

**Signature**

____________________________________________________

**Date**
Sample Questions

Student Interview

Part one: Background Questions

I want to begin by asking you a couple questions to get an idea of how you came to be at Frontier College.

1. How did you hear about Frontier College?
2. Why did you come to Frontier College?
3. How long have you been coming to Frontier College?
4. How long were you in school? If you left, why did you leave?

Part Two: Previous Experiences with Schooling/Other Learning

In this part of the interview, I would like to hear your stories about your experiences with school and learning before you came to Frontier College.

5. Tell me about where you went to school when you were younger.

6. Tell me a story about learning in primary school.
   - Tell me about your school experience when you were younger
   - Classroom experience?
   - Is there anything you remember learning? How was that experience?

7. Tell me a story about learning in high school.
   - Tell me about your school experience when you were older
   - Classroom experience?
   - Is there anything you remember learning? How was that experience?

8. Tell me a story about one of your teachers. Is there a teacher you remember? Why? Can you tell me a bit about them? Which subject/how old/what grade?

9. If you had a chance, what would you say to any teachers you had in school right now?

10. Tell me something about the other students in your school.
    - A story, or a memory
    - Is there any person you remember more than others? Why?
    - Your relationship with other kids at school.

11. What would you have changed in your primary school, if you could change it? High school? What do you think should change? Now? Then?
12. Tell me a story about something you learned outside of school (not at Frontier College). What was that like?

**Part Three: Experiences at Frontier College**

Now I would like to talk about your experiences here at Frontier College. I would like to know specifically how they are the same or different from your other experiences with learning, like the ones you just told me about. I would also like to know how you think your experience affects or changes how you learn at Frontier College.

13. Tell me a story about learning at Frontier College.
   - Something that happened in the classroom?
   - Something that happened with your tutor?

14. How do you feel about the classroom experience as compared to the one-to-one tutor experience? How is the learning experience compare? Does it feel different or the same?

15. Tell me about what you want, or hope, to do with the knowledge you have gotten here.

16. Do you feel Frontier College is school?

17. Do you ever think about your previous experience with school when you are at Frontier College? In what way?
   - Has anything that’s happened at Frontier College ever made you think about something that has happened before? Like something you learned? Something you experienced?

18. Do you always come to class? Why would you not come? What would you say to people who don’t come to class?

19. If you could interview someone like I am doing today, who would you interview? Why? What would you ask them?

20. Is there anything you would change about the program?

21. What is your relationship with your tutor?
   - Are you comfortable around them?
   - What was it like the first time they met you?
   - Do you feel that they listen to you?
   - Have you ever had to change tutors?

22. Did you have anything you wanted to talk about today that you haven’t?
Tutor Interview

Background Questions

I want to begin by asking you a couple questions to get an idea of how you came to be at Frontier College.

1. How did you hear about Frontier College?
2. Briefly, why did you originally come to Frontier College?
3. How long have you been coming to Frontier College?
4. How many learners have you taught here?

Previous Experiences with Schooling/Other Learning

In this part of the interview, I would like to hear your stories about your experiences with school, teaching, and learning before you came to Frontier College.

5. Tell me something about your learning experience in school.
   - a story
   - something you remember learning about

6. Tell me something about a teacher you had in school.
   - is there one you remember more than others? Why?
   - Why don’t you think you remember any one?

7. Do you have any previous experience teaching or tutoring?
   - Where, what kind of teaching, etc.
   - Any training process for that?

8. Was it similar or different to your experience at Frontier College?

Experiences at Frontier College

Now I would like to talk about your experiences here at Frontier College. I would like to know specifically how they are the same or different from your other experiences with learning and teaching, like the ones you just told me about. I would also like to know how you think your experience affects or changes how you teach at Frontier College.

9. Do you feel Frontier College is like school? Different? How about for the learners?

10. Do you think that your experience with schooling affects how you act in this program? How?
11. Did you have any goals when you came to Frontier College? What did you think you would be doing? Have you changed or adapted your idea of what you think you are doing here? What have you learned through that change?

12. Do you feel like a teacher? Do you feel like a learner?

13. What have you learned about yourself?
14. What have you learned about your learner(s)?
15. What have you learned about learning?

16. How well did you feel you knew your learner(s) the first day you met them? Has that changed?

17. What is your relationship with your learner now?

18. What did you learn in tutor training?

19. How applicable to the reality of tutoring was that training?

20. How would you compare what you learned at the training verses what you’ve learned from actual tutoring?

21. If you could say anything to a new tutor coming into the program, what would you say?

22. If you could say anything to the board of Frontier College, what would you say?

23. If a wealthy philanthropist gave you the money to change any part of Beat the Streets, what would you do with it?

24. Did you have anything you wanted to talk about today that you haven’t?
References


Lefebvre, S., Belding, P., Brehaut, M., Dermer, S., Kaskens, A., Lord, E., McKay, W., &


