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Chopping and Screwing Narrative Inquiry to Study Teacher Curoosity Curiously

Nick Kasperek & Emily J. Lahr

Abstract

This narrative inquiry draws reflexively on our own and each other's stories of becoming as curious students and teachers to explore the central questions of contemporary politically and ethically engaged curiosity studies. Taking inspiration from innovative narrative inquiry methodologies as well as the hip-hop remixing practice of chopping and screwing, we develop a methodology to think narratively and curiously about recursively interpreted experiences beyond totalizing individualism. Juxtaposing our perspectives, we aim to illuminate curious potentials in our situations for resonance. We offer our stories for consideration and propose our new narrative methodology for inquiry into other plastic, epigenetic academic dispositions.

Introduction

...burning with curiosity, she ran across the field after it, and fortunately was just in time to see it pop down a large rabbit-hole under the hedge. In another moment down went Alice after it, never once considering how in the world she was to get out again. (Carroll, 1865/1898, p. 3)

“It would seem very fitting if there are digressions in our conversation—going down rabbit holes about rabbit holes about....” We were not sure exactly where this project of trying to wrap our minds around “curiosity” would take us, but we wagered that it would be worthwhile to find out. We trusted that this

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“multilayered” (Sterner & Fisher, 2020) and “excessive” collaborative (Cannon & Cross, 2020) writing project would take us somewhere interesting and valuable, somewhere beyond the vague platitudes praising a select few as “curious” people.

Throughout our studies together, we had started to notice an unexpected convergence in our paths, or to borrow Gadamer’s metaphor, a meeting of horizons (Kim, 2016). In some ways, this convergence was completely expected, even a condition of our meeting: we had started the same Ph.D. program in curriculum and instruction at the same time. What was unexpected was the apparent convergence over the next few years in our approaches to the questions of teaching praxis and research. We come from almost diametrically opposed academic backgrounds, the empirical natural sciences (Emily) and the theoretical humanities (Nick), each tradition somewhat suspicious of the other. Questions of “hardness” and “depth” seemed like potential landmines on any path of convergence. Yet these seemed to prove inactive, defused by some alchemy of mutual curiosity about where the other was coming from and an open-minded orientation toward complexity. As we found, burrowing down any rabbit hole seemed to bring us closer, especially in the falling itself. Curiosity seemed to be our bond.

“Curiosity” is something of a buzzword, especially in education. As such, it can feel uncomfortably self-congratulatory to claim the mantle of curiosity. However, leaving it politely unmentioned and unexamined seems far riskier, forfeiting the language of curiosity and rabbit holes to the convergent and simplifying thinking of conspiracy theories and radicalization. Leslie (2014) observes, “When it comes to education, curiosity is in the odd position of being undervalued and overpraised at the same time” (p. 131), and this contradiction risks creating a lifelong “curiosity divide” between the more curious and the less curious (p. 132). As Engel (2020) emphasizes, “The path that leads from the ubiquitous inquiry of three-year-olds to the selective, probing, and sustained curiosity of the ten- or twenty-year-old is an uncertain one, riddled with potential inhibitors” (p. 83). Curiosity seems both innate and either cultivated or discouraged; in this way, it is a plastic, epigenetic disposition that might be turned on or off, or grown or dulled, or simply transformed in response to any number of influences (see Malabou, 2016). The question thus becomes how curiosity, this apparently overpraised quality, turns on and grows in people’s lives, especially in teachers’ lives—and how it might be better valued in education. We thus set out to investigate through an emergent method of narrative inquiry the vital questions raised by a new politically and ethically engaged curiosity studies: “Who can be curious, within what contexts, why, and how?” (Zurn & Shankar, 2020, p. xvii).

In exploring our own curious Bildungsromans, stories of becoming students and teachers for whom curiosity has remained a vital disposition, we aimed not to uncover a definitive or prescriptive answer to these questions, but to offer stories and interpretations for readers’ consideration (see Sparkes, 2007), as well as to develop a narrative inquiry method suited to such studies. In this paper, we thus

experiment with narrative inquiry methods to think narratively about our formative experiences, juxtaposing our perspectives on our own and each other's unfinished and shifting stories, to illuminate the curious possibilities in our respective situations, the commonalities these stories might share, and the resonances others might find with their own cultivation of curiosity in themselves or others. More importantly, we propose a chopped-and-screwed narrative inquiry method for studying curiosity and other academic dispositions beyond the isolated individual.

Literature Review and Methodology

Curiosity Studies

Curiosity has recently been taken up as a serious transdisciplinary subject of academic inquiry, as a concept and a phenomenon with important connections to politics, education, art, and science (Zurn & Shankar, 2020). Zurn and Shankar (2020) propose "curiosity studies" as its own field of study and foster "a transdisciplinary conversation about what curiosity is and what resources it holds for human and ecological flourishing" (p. xii). To ground this conversation in a shared understanding of their object, they offer three principles: curiosity is multiple, in that it varies across temporal, spatial, and social contexts; praxiological, in that it is both felt and enacted; and political, in that it is ideologically channeled but retains "a keen subversive potential" (p. xiii).

As an overpraised quality, curiosity seems capable of serving both as a neoliberal driver of innovation and performativity and as a radical driver of resistance and withdrawal from neoliberal logics. For example, Shankar (2020) describes the tensions students experience between instrumental curiosity and free curiosity at elite liberal arts colleges that include "curiosity" in their mission statements. Meanwhile, Harney and Moten (2013) describe the radically free study of those in but not of contemporary neoliberal universities, those dwelling in the undercommons: "These other ones have a passion to tell you what they have found, and they are surprised you want to listen, even though they've been expecting you" (p. 68). Thus, even if we can identify a disposition as curiosity, it is not clear which valence it will take, even in the same spaces, whether it will "entrench or invert sociopolitical hierarchies" (Zurn & Shankar, 2020, p. xx).

What is clear, however, is that curiosity matters—and studies of curiosity matter. At the personal level, it influences our choices of paths and drives us along whichever ones we take. It is unsurprising that scholarship on education has recognized curiosity as a means to its broad ends, "as a prompt to learning, growth, and exploration" (Zurn & Shankar, 2020, p. xix). Whether our paths are more deviant or more normative, curiosity can make them meaningful. Practically speaking, curiosity seems to drive education, including learning and teaching, so investigating its actual manifestations and development could offer ideas for educational cultivation. This practical relevance speaks to its social and scholarly

relevance as well. Much remains to be learned and reinterpreted regarding how people become curious, especially in educational contexts that seem to undervalue this disposition. Moreover, as Zurn and Shankar (2020) aver, “Insofar as curiosity is never abstracted from social life, its practice either supports or challenges the reigning forms of knowledge production” (p. xx). Indeed, curiosity and knowledge are inextricably bound up with each other.

Yet, as Zurn and Shankar (2020) observe, much of the more positivist research into curiosity learning science “assumes a universal human subject and simplified manifestations of curiosity: for example, raising a hand, turning an eye, asking a question, or expressing interest in trivia” (p. xix). To get at the deeper and wilder curiosity of singular subjects, what was “for Michel Foucault, ‘a certain determination to throw off familiar ways of thought and to look at the same things in a different way’” (qtd. in Zurn & Shankar, 2020, p. xx), we need a different research method that examines human agency, subjectivity, and sociality, one that enables us “to study curiosity *curiously*” (Zurn & Shankar, 2020, p. xvi). Narrative inquiry seems to offer a strong starting point for such study.

Narrative Inquiry

The foundation of narrative inquiry comprises stories and storytelling, just as our experience of the world as curious yet comprehensible is fundamentally storied. Narrative inquiry has long been recognized as a strong area of educational research (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). This research tradition is broadly defined as the investigation into how humans experience the world (Bamberg, 2012; Kim, 2016; Maynes et al., 2008). While quantitative studies are typically limited to knowledge based on an accumulation of facts, narrative inquiry broadens the scope. It allows for the interpretation and examination of many ideas that blend the aspects of telling and knowing (Brannen, 2017; Kim, 2016); as Thomas (2012) notes, “narrative is one of our most fundamental ways of making meaning from experience” (p. 209). Indeed, undertaking narrative inquiry is more than simple application—it must be a way of thinking, contextualizing, and comprehending what is written through the research (Kim, 2016).

Narrative inquiry, therefore, necessarily remains open to new interpretations, which has inspired many experiments with form. One of the most powerful is Ronai’s (1997) approach to layered accounts. She describes a layered account as “a postmodern ethnographic reporting format which allows the researcher to draw on as many resources as possible in the writing process including social theory and lived experience” (p. 7). In her own layered account, this openness to myriad data sources allowed for a powerfully evocative, moving, and polyvocal account of herself (or, her selves) in society. She was able to draw upon research, theories, imaginings, memories, feelings, others’ remembered voices, and other sources not in synthesis, but in juxtaposed layers.

Ronai (1997) was able to look inward and outward, and to complicate the assumed boundaries between them. The result aspires only to be “an interpretive resource for the reader” (p. 8), such that “readers are confronted with the things they have in common with the author” (p. 43). The final account is not a generalizable authoritative grand narrative. As she emphasizes, “There is no final answer to this conundrum—only ambivalence....There is no resolution” (p. 40). In this way, it is like consciousness itself, which is what humanistic research attempts to capture, emulate, or evoke: “processural, non-linear, dialectical, and n-dimensional” (p. 8). A curious narrative inquiry into curiosity also seems to call for this artful emulation of messiness, which takes on a legible form that readers can add to their own interpretative toolboxes but also asks readers to add their own interpretations.

Although narrative researchers often work within the same language, such as English, there is an act of mediation and translation in the writing of any narrative account, which itself is influenced by entangled internal and external factors. This recalls Shread’s (2016) claim that “translation is epigenesis”: “Translation is that process in which the text self-differentiates and thereby grows, develops, matures” (p. ix). She expands, “The epigenesis of translation is about how texts turn off and on to speak to their audience, to react to their specific contact point,” following the biological pattern of genes activating or deactivating in specific environmental conditions (p. x). In the same way, narrative inquiry as an act of translation of narrators’ stories—however coherently they are originally told—also seems epigenetic in growing dialectically with conceptualizations of audiences and meanings.

There seem to be many such layers and aspects of epigenetic mediation at play throughout the living, constructing, performing, and reconstructing of narratives. Through narrative inquiry, we can explore this mediation for the imaginative possibilities of how the world might have been and might be otherwise here and now through a subjective agency that questions the necessity of the status quo. Goodson et al. (2010) quote Bruner (1990) this way: “The function of narratives is precisely ‘to find an intentional state that mitigates or at least makes comprehensible a deviation from canonical cultural patterns’ (ibid.: 49–50)” (p. 10). This is the individual level of socially legible and justifiable deviance. For a collaborative narrative inquiry into a socially legible development of a plastic, epigenetic disposition such as curiosity, the practice and genre of Bildungsroman offers especially illuminating interpretive potential.

Bildungsroman as a Narrative Inquiry Practice and Genre

Kim and Zimmerman (2017) advance an especially valuable theoretical-methodological framework of the practice of Bildungsroman in the narrative development of dispositions. In this framework, the cultivation of dispositions is “a process of becoming—specifically, a process of discovering oneself and of

integrating oneself into one's social context" (p. 237). Rather than simply "discovering" a self, one undergoes a process of becoming that involves a "crafting" of one's habits and of one's self through "willful effort" (pp. 237–238). While this crafting implies a significant degree of agency, it is a transactional agency in the world. One must respond to the situations into which one is thrown, to the others with whom one interacts, to the multiple contexts that promote or inhibit different dispositions or different manifestations of dispositions. Dispositions are plastic, seemingly stable yet malleable, shaping one's world while also being shaped by it. This is especially true for an understanding of a curious disposition, with its disruptive and creative aspects.

Narrative Play

One potential problem with the modernist Bildungsroman, however, as with much narrative inquiry, is its individualistic framework (Feely, 2020; Cruz et al., 2021). One response is to abandon the methodology when it seems to collapse "due to its reliance on stable humanist representations of subjects" (Cannon & Cross, 2020, p. 92), to turn away from ambitions of representation entirely. Another response, however, is what Cruz et al. (2021) propose as a form of Derridean freeplay, which they call "narrative play." Dynamically responding to one another in narrative play "creates a discussion among individual narratives, smoothing them into a singular narrative of overlapping experiences, but upsetting the positivist notion that stories are totalized and individual representations of experience" (p. 4). They do not prescribe this method for all narrative inquiry, but instead call the inquirer to consider how "the topic of research may inform one's analytic strategies" (p. 10), just as Lewis (2020) proposes that "educational philosophy about curiosity would have to embody a curious form, one that is fitting for its content" (p. 104). Thus, we attempt to study curiosity curiously with an interest in the stories that involve us but go beyond us. Like Cannon and Cross (2020), we retain the potential within qualitative narrative inquiry methodology even as it slips over into "something else," perhaps more post-qualitative (p. 110).

To do so, we experiment with narrative play by cutting our stories together, shifting perspectives between first-person to third-person and shifting protagonists from one of our selves to the other. This is narrative inquiry playfully *chopped and screwed* like the communally playful hip-hop remixing practice of cutting together and adjusting the speeds of different songs' elements to (re) create something that allows for unexpected, even counterhegemonic meanings and responses to emerge (Márquez, 2014; Sinnreich & Dols, 2022), in much the same way that curiosity studies aims to offer "a way of reimagining the world" (Zurn and Shankar, 2020, p. xiii). The Houston-area hip-hop artist and mixtape producer DJ Screw, whom Sinnreich and Dols (2022) convincingly describe as a Gramscian "organic intellectual" (p. 8), pioneered chopped and screwed music in

the 1990s. This music is characterized by “a method in which records are slowed to half their normal speed (screwed) and cut and spliced (chopped) with other sounds and samples, altered and remixed as a new, hybrid tune to highlight certain beats or phrases that accentuate a song’s originality beyond its original format” (Márquez, 2014, pp. 114–115). As with research and writing collaboration (Canon & Cross, 2020, p. 91), the slowing and its associated perplexity is part of the point. Sinnreich and Dols (2022) further explain that this method also challenges listeners’ “sense of regulated temporality” through various sonic features “such as repeating vocal phrases, glitches and disruptions to the flow of the music, and phasing (layering two versions of a single source, slightly out of synch), creating an almost cosmic aural experience – vast, hypnotic, and echoey” (p. 6). In a similar way, we attempt to screw and chop our narratives in productively disruptive and expansive ways.

As Lewis (2020) has suggested is most appropriate to curiosity studies, this chopped-and-screwed narrative might work as “a form of writing that wanders, that yields to the features of curiosity that ensure it remains curious” (p. 104). Through our narrative play, we attempt a curious approach to curiosity studies, with the aim of contributing stories for consideration regarding the field’s animating questions about what enables the cultivation of curiosity in particular lives and particular contexts, as well as how these allowances might be extended to others (Zurn & Shakar, 2020). Similar to how Kim et al. (2020) used a cut-up method of poetic inquiry into affect to “shatter the neat and tidy unity of collective voice, constituting chaosmos, which is a ‘composed chaos—neither foreseen nor pre-conceived’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, p. 204)” (p. 116), we attempt a chaotic chopped-and-screwed narrative inquiry into the epigenetic, praxiological disposition of curiosity in at least some of its multiplicity.

Thus, we have developed a curious methodology of narrative play with the dialogic reconstruction of our Bildungsromans. We first exchanged written messages and then conducted an extensive conversational life-story interview in which we each shifted dynamically between interviewer and interviewee. We transcribed this interview with the help of Zoom’s automatic transcription service, narratively analyzing it to construct Bildungsromans for each other and for ourselves. While we drew heavily on the transcript to write each other’s Bildungsroman, we used it only for inspiration to write our own. We thus reconstructed our partner’s story and then our own with the different resources and audiences directing our choices in the retelling. Finally, we narratively played with the four Bildungsromans, chopping them up, screwing their pacing, and smoothing them into a new overlapping, layered narrative with a different sense of coherence and meaning, a different sense of temporality.

Narrative Play with Our Bildungsromans, Chopped and Screwed

Throughout this polyvocal narrative, our voices and stories overlap in multiple layers, though some general principles guided our narrative play: the italicized first-person narratives are later retellings of the stories told in our recorded research conversation, the third-person narratives are reconstructions of each other's story from the transcribed research conversation and additional knowledge of each other, and ellipses indicate a shift in voice or layer. We have retained a mostly chronological narrative in order to avoid epic closure and to allow for other interpretations to emerge for different readers. Nonetheless, we suggest our own initial interpretations for consideration in our framing throughout and then again in the coda.

...

I didn't always want to teach.

"I think the idea with questions is that it only brings more questions if you ask the right ones." Emily seems to crystalize her own cultivated curiosity—as a scientist, a person interested in the world and ideas, but maybe above all, a teacher—into this perspective on questions. But this wasn't always her curious disposition, at least not exactly.

It was not uncommon for me to be found covered with dirt or mud in the backyard.

...

I don't remember myself as an especially curious child.

...

She repeatedly imagines posing a question to her younger self, a self that would respond with disbelief or even disagreement: Am I who you will become? "If somebody would have asked me when I was in high school if I would have thought that I was going to do this, and you know, in X amount of years, the answer definitely would have been 'no.'" It's not a disappointed "no," but more of a bewildered negation.

...

Nick sees his experience of being taken where the world led him as a benefit: "I'm open to being distracted by, by these other things and set off of the path that I thought I was going down."

...

I have always admired scientists and especially females in science positions. Medicine, astronauts, forensic scientists, and every other profession where women were outnumbered—I admired those that succeeded there even more.

In retrospect, she imagines that possibility or potentiality as still too inchoate to recognize. It's a territory not yet on any of her younger self's maps. It's a potentiality that will be mapped through its actualization. Even now, it's not totally clear: "I really don't even know why I am the way I am."

...

My parents read to me even when I was older, making the reading a shared experience, a shared exploration into other worlds. I remember playing alone imaginatively, perched high in the tree in my backyard or creating fantastic pseudo-religious rituals with patterns in the snow. For this imaginative play, I needed some input, but a lot of the journey seemed to be within my own mind.

His curiosity wasn't one that he struggled to understand; he had always had a curious mind.

Perhaps it was a morbid curiosity, a fascination with the distant mystery of death channeled into stories of fictional murders or dramatic tragedies.

Standard curiosity he might call it, nothing special.

It's almost a shadow curiosity to the one that drives my more productive work as a teacher and as an academic. But it feels like it's inextricable, having developed with the other curiosity I value. It seems to mark my curiosity as kind of "basic," in the slang sense of commonplace, vulgar.

...

Emily grew up with a lot of potential. Her family saw it clearly and saw a future of upward mobility, the American Dream playing out for the next generation climbing the next rung up on the ladder, reaching the upper-middle class. With so many people telling her what she wanted, she thought, "Okay, yes, this is what I want to do." After all, "everything sounds cool," at least in the daydreams of an adult life with the status symbols the surrounding culture values so highly. The fantasies of children in 1990s America: Firefighter, astronaut, doctor. Doctor, that's the realistic dream for young Emily. "I think they just kind of said, this is the best option."

My curiosity occasionally got me into trouble in my youth. I got away with this though, I think, due to my intelligence. I knew much of what I was doing, but at first, my family blamed my curiosity on "child's play."

My grandmother was infatuated with the Space Race. She saved newspaper clippings of when Neil Armstrong made it to the Moon.

All I can remember is wanting more, more stories, more experiences, more of it all.

...

This moment began sparking a curiosity beyond what lies within the bindings of books.

As a recognized smart kid, I think I was given some extra leeway to learn in other ways. I was not placed in a gifted program, but my standardized test scores allowed me to join summer exploratory learning programs at a local university. My classroom grades seemed to earn me privileges for occasional off-topic explorations in regular classes too, especially because I was generally quiet and helped other students when I finished tasks early.

Growing up, he was often pushed to aspire to careers such as engineering, but Nick had other plans.

It seemed like just a matter of putting in a modest amount of time to learn what I needed, ace the tests, and get the grades. In return, I could play around a bit with the assignments that allowed creativity and divergent thinking. Or I could just play around in small-group discussions with my friends, letting them wander to the very limits of “on-topic.” More productively, I also often tried to teach my classmates where they seemed stuck, trying to understand where the stumbling block was and how they might find a path past it.

...

She was on track, running the course mapped for her, though she wasn't running it quite straight. She seemed to set up some hurdles and to zig-zag. The medical path was the traditional path of high grades and test scores, which would earn her admission into university and then into medical school.

Elementary and middle school were not my finest years as I came into my signature sarcasm. I got into trouble frequently with teachers and family members, but I probably got away with more than I should have, including perhaps even starting a small revolution in my first-grade class. Part of me thinks the revolt was against the teaching methods, though I can only speculate.

As one of the smart kids, she was often more interested in competing with her friends, winning the right to do the teasing rather than receive it. Teachers and their curricula were often an afterthought, which didn't do much to endear her to them. “I got in a lot of trouble for my mouth.”

...

Teachers and peers knew him as one of the “smart kids”; he took upper-level courses in high school, where he was given more wiggle room. He remembers getting “special treatment” in some courses, but he also remembers supporting his peers—while also using his friends' scores to compete for bragging rights when it came to testing and successes.

...



I never really did like that school always wanted you to choose what you wanted to be. There was always a career day and specific boxes we had to fall in gender-wise, for example, boys could do these things: police officer, firefighter, doctor, mechanic, etc., while girls could have these careers: teacher, librarian, mother. Sure, you could do the other jobs; they were just much harder for women.

Her mind and words seem to move a little too quickly: “There was a whole group of us. We were intelligent, and we did what we were supposed to do. And when we got bored, we would get snarky with each other.” With the retrospect of a teacher, Emily notes, “I hate the idea of the competition and GPA and all that.” But she remembers a camaraderie that outweighed her friendly competition, one that seemed mostly to neutralize any debilitating fear of failure. While she definitely did not want to fail, getting grades and scores was more just a game that she and her friends played to ward off boredom.

I immediately wrote off following the standard that was laid out for me. I was going to pave my own path no matter what it took. My family began to investigate more into what I was interested in doing with my life. I was still mostly undecided. However, then they suggested I look into the medical field—“Dr. Nelson,” they’d often call me. I’d liked the sound of that.

...

He had many opportunities to explore possibilities of what to do later in life, from academic summer camps and volunteer programs to university information sessions and leadership summits. He continued to explore and tried it all, including some things he would recognize as a definite “no” for his future.

There was no shortage of potential careers, or of career advice. Early on, I was interested in becoming a doctor, particularly a forensic pathologist, after reading a racy Michael Crichton novel in elementary school. I went as far as shadowing a doctor in my dad’s hospital when I was in middle school. My grandpa urged me to become an engineer. I thought about architecture as a career combining engineering with artistic creativity and interned in a corporate architecture office for about a year in high school before shifting my interests again. Above all, I started collecting and organizing college brochures like menus. Each brochure was attractive, as was each imagined future. But my exploration still had to pay off, to convert, somehow, all the academic capital I stood to accrue.

...

By high school, I had mostly adopted the idea that I was going to be a doctor. I took medical pathway courses, did internships, shadowed various physicians and logged hundreds of hours before college. Work was never terribly difficult for me and I often finished early, which also allowed me to get into trouble with peers

and teachers. Graduation was it—this was what I had waited for, my chance to obtain a degree in biology, a field I so loved, and finally become a doctor. However, in college, sometimes I really thought I wasn't going to get that degree.

Perhaps she could have played a different game, one more laser-focused on becoming a doctor. “Maybe my deterrent was chemistry, because I really shot myself in the foot by not taking chemistry in high school. I really should have done that.” Instead, she took chemistry in college, when “it was an absolute nightmare,” likely created as a kind of tracking or weeding-out course. Nonetheless, she struggled through chemistry, did well in biology, and eventually passed the next milestone on the medical route: just as planned, she had her biology degree. She had applied and was accepted into a graduate program in public health. The gatekeepers were signaling that she could pass through. She hadn't failed.

...

My college experience was an almost full indulgence of my curiosity. Almost every course was interesting, but religion courses quickly became the focus. There was no clear job for a religion major, but I just trusted that there was always grad school, law school, or some kind of organization. I did pretty well again academically, so the sense grew that things would work out. I felt I could take a course on Ingmar Bergman's films, on classical Indian music, on the child in religious thought, on American immigrant experiences, and on whatever else stood out in the course catalog when registration time rolled around.

...

I found that much of what I had learned in high school was not true science. I hadn't done many laboratory exercises or learned the deeper concepts of biology, and much of this science was new to me. I was finally doing science. Now, I was able to dive into true investigation and experimentation. With graduation nearing, I needed to make new decisions: Would I immediately apply to go to medical school or get a master's degree? What would I do in the meantime?

...

I never took any math courses toward an engineering career or any biology courses toward a medical career; but I loved my chemistry and physics courses. I studied abroad in India, and I applied to join the Peace Corps—following a curiosity about how people really lived in other places around the world. Again, it felt indulgent, but the people around me supported me. And again, I was pursuing curiosity in a way that yielded cachet, a curiosity that could pay off.

...

She found it just by chance, but it soon felt right, almost familiar, almost innate. “I mean, it was teaching, and I really came into that, like, it was on accident. They had a position open, I had a professor that I was close to, and they're like,



‘Hey, do you want to be the undergrad assistant?’ and I was, ‘Sure, of course I want to, what do you mean?’” This was in biology, after all. It seemed it could only aid her in her journey along the medical pathway. More than this, it was labs, where there was “so much failure involved” that failure itself seemed to lose its negative valence. This was experimentation, where she was driven on by the love of “getting to the answer, however long it took me.” This love had been growing in her labs for years, bringing her to the point where “I almost would rather it be that I don’t know the answer, because then it gives us a point to change or talk about or to do something, or to investigate further.” She glimpsed the kind of curious scientist she wanted to be.

As graduation neared, I was able to begin teaching a laboratory course in the biology department, at first it was just for a bit of extra cash but then I couldn’t see myself not doing this. I was able to interact with other students and feed their passions for science. In the back of my mind, though, I couldn’t help but think that being a teacher isn’t what my family wanted for me. I had said for years that I wanted to be a doctor. Nonetheless, I fairly quickly accepted a place in the teaching program.

This was the biology she loved. She was in the lab, feeling again like she was “getting outside and getting my hands dirty.” When she chose the teaching program, her family couldn’t quite understand why. But Emily soon saw it as a foregone conclusion: she found herself teaching the biology lab herself, which “kind of solidified the deal.” She was now becoming “that crazy science person” not just in chasing down frogs and lizards on her own, but in helping students to “kind of formulate their own hypotheses and research questions and things like that.”

Teaching in the laboratory allowed me to see science in action and support students on their journey to understanding the world around them. I liked the unknown, never knowing what kinds of students would walk in, never knowing how the labs might end up. I was going to dig deeper, explore more, ask questions, and find out everything that I could.

It wasn’t a dramatic event, and she wasn’t really following a model. It was more that she had some space to explore and help others explore, a space where failure and ignorance provided purpose for authentic investigation rather than cause for shame. While some friends found this open space of uncertainty uncomfortable, Emily leaned into that lack of closure. These friends seem to find comfort instead in routine, preferring a superficial semblance of solidity and certainty to a long, careful, probing, and destabilizing look into what is going on below the surface. Emily found that she liked to dig, despite the sense of risk.

...

From here, there is a different sense of curiosity, raising questions about the

moral goodness and necessity of curiosity. There is a curiosity that universities instill for individuals to follow their curiosity “towards finding a job, or graduating, of course,” but he looks to go beyond this.

Interactions with students and their work were a way to see their ways of thinking and living. Teaching was one of the best ways to learn about people, as well as about what I was supposed to be teaching. I found myself researching, exploring, adapting, and inventing other ways to teach English skills and various content. Topics gave me an excuse to read up on something that I'd always thought might be interesting or that I was newly inspired to delve into. When I did my first master's degree several years later in Tokyo, Japan, I honed my curiosity about philosophy and theory, finding that I really could study on my own.

Diving into curious situations himself and feeding the questions which come to mind also provides students with opportunities to ask questions and investigate what might not have a specific answer. Through his experiences, Nick is “trying to foster curiosity again in students,” in whatever way he can.

Since then, I feel like I have followed a similar pattern. I followed some curiosity, taking the leap with some unquestioned confidence that it will work out, trusting that “success” and its associated cachet would make it work somehow. It suddenly seemed like I'd discovered a rabbit hole that never ends, branching in infinite and infinitely stimulating directions. I still think that's true, that autodidacticism works to keep my life interesting and meaningful through transforming and transformative intellectual desire. But the curriculum studies Ph.D. program has restored my belief in the power of pursuing academic curiosity with others, of reading together.

...

It started to feel like there were only so many patches of dirt. After all, labs are scripted to some extent, and scientific curiosity can feel almost prescriptive in its causal logic: “do this to get this, and then if this works....” That's great, of course, as the proverbial scientific method, but Emily found that there is another curiosity, one that seems more radical and confronts ethics more directly. Enlivening this curiosity seemed to need a provocation. “Had I not been set up in this program to be able to ask those questions, and in that way, I never would have done any of that type of investigation.” She found passionate professors asking their own radical questions about the foundations of education and teaching, which encouraged her to ask her own, giving her permission to dig in new areas.

She tried out a genealogy of teaching work, and suddenly, she was a Foucauldian, even if it didn't totally make sense. There was no denying it, a genealogical approach was spreading through her writing and thinking. Everywhere she turned, there was Foucault or Deleuze. “Four years ago, I never would have

looked at anybody and said that teaching is an anti-intellectual endeavor.” Now, she has become “that guy,” the one who asks questions and makes statements that seem unsayable, unthinkable.

...

I wasn't after the superficial curiosity of finding answers or solving problems, but the curiosity of what our curiosity does and how it works, like in teaching practices from the Question Formulation Technique (QFT) and philosophy for children (P4C), and English for liberal arts approaches to language teaching. I think I want to license students' curiosity, to communicate to them that it's okay, even vital, to follow it in an ethically and intellectually committed way. I want to share with them that curiosity can give meaning to anything, and that it's a resource already there waiting for them to free it, to yield to it. It's okay if it's a "basic" curiosity, "common" in even the derogatory sense. There's something about a mystery that invites us to yield to it.

...

Now, “what we teachers do is a question.” And there’s a beauty in the interpretive possibilities of all the theories that have dealt with that question and others related to it. But there’s also a new sense of risk “because I can run down this rabbit hole and nearly never get anywhere, except for filling my head with more, you know, trivia or fashion.” In particular, she has found herself interrogating conspiracy theories and other misconceptions and controversial topics in science, driven by curiosity about how and why any of her students might find false information and theories persuasive. As a scientist, and as a teacher, she has tried to make herself a reliable source for students with science-related questions, someone who invites weird questions and can recommend paths toward good answers. “I think you’re supposed to do that as a teacher.”

Coda: Curiosity Questions and Epigenetic Dispositions

We offer up these layered narratives of relative privilege for readers’ consideration, especially about the questions Zurn and Shankar (2020) have posed for curiosity studies: who gets to become curious, which situations create affordances for curiosity, why, and how? However, we also suggest a few themes to address these questions, following Ronai’s (1997) aspiration to offer “an interpretive resource” (p. 8), even in its ambivalence. Though we have emphasized our different backgrounds that do not fully synthesize, there are certainly key resonating elements in our narratives.

These commonalities shed some light first on the questions of who, why, and in what contexts some people can be curious. Neither of us were positioned in society as overly marginalized, such as by race, class, or queerness. Instead, both of us were storied as likely inheritors of the American Dream, almost destined

to build on the safe foundations of our families, though without the immediate pressure of all the family's hopes resting on our futures. While there were challenges and practical considerations, there was no debilitating adversity that forced us to give up on the most compelling lines of our curiosity; even high-stakes tests were often points of pride and playful teasing rather than sources of panic or dread. In fact, it often seemed more impractical to us to buckle down and focus, to not to follow these lines that sustained us and led to other forms of cachet. As previous research suggests (Engel, 2020), this sense of security likely gave us the space to cultivate our curiosity. We were both recognized as smart kids with potential, which conferred the vital privilege of access to what interested us at the moment (Engel, 2020; Ruti, 2014), and similarly, it seemed to give us leeway for a little more naughtiness due to the trust we were afforded by teachers. Our supposed intelligence, and the way it suggested a possible narrative, made our curiosity socially legible, even when it manifested in deviant ways (see Goodson et al., 2010). The adults in our lives seemed to allow for at least some curiosity as “the purest form of insubordination,” following Nabokov (Benedict, 2020), if it also meant academic success.

That we turned our curiosity toward academics suggests another similarity, one which provides insight into the question of how one can be curious. Curiosity was certainly a disruptive factor in diverting us from recommended paths to normative success. Nonetheless, we seemed to justify our pursuits of curiosity as still leading to other forms of socially legible success (see Goodson et al., 2010). Indeed, educational institutions were central in licensing and encouraging our curiosity. While in our institutions there did seem to be a hidden curriculum channeling curiosity “toward problem-solving and entrepreneurial excellence” (Shankar, 2020, p. 114), we also signaled our trust that space remains for more plastic curiosity. Our narrative resonates with Benedict's (2020) observation that Carroll's Alice undermines the hegemonic inquiry of various self-serious creatures in Wonderland “by dismissively—or pretentiously—mouthing the questions legitimized by her schooling” (p. 220). We found in formal education the resources for curiosity, in all their deviance and insubordination and openness to complexity. As Kim and Zimmerman (2017) discuss, there appears to be an opening for the crafting of a self, and in our case, for a curious disposition that our self-crafting selves willfully molded. As with synapses in brains now characterized by their plasticity, our plastic selves and their dispositions seemed “able to self-organize” (Malabou, 2010, p. 59). With this in mind, we might strive to foster for other students the same sense of security, release from debilitating pressure, and access to unique interests that we enjoyed throughout our schooling.

Indeed, as our chopped and screwed Bildungsroman suggests, the apparent achievement of a curious disposition was not the heroic work of any individual (see Cruz et al., 2021), whether as the willful expression of a genetically curious student or as the mechanically produced outcome of a teacher. In this way, our narrative suggests something about curiosity itself as a disposition. The ways in

which we became curious lend credence to the conception of curiosity as a plastic, epigenetic disposition. It was not a linear developmental path for either of us, despite our retrospective storying toward the present and the future. While we resisted the simplistic totalization of humanist individualism in our telling, our narratives still show individuality's "double excess" of "an excess of reification and an excess of fluidity" (Malabou, 2010, p. 81), with plasticity situated in the middle. Plastic curious dispositions, like existence itself, seem to both receive forms and give form to themselves.

Our curious becoming was thus also not a matter of having a special inborn trait, as our childhood stories reveal no special genius; indeed, as Malabou (2010) observes, "*Plasticity forms where DNA no longer writes*" (p. 60). While we often tend to oscillate between treating curiosity as a genetic destiny or as a producible outcome for students, our stories show a messier, less deterministic process. Biesta (2020) observes that "education systems are *open, semiotic and recursive systems*" (p. 39), and it seems clear throughout our narrative that attempts of teachers or others to control the formation of our curious disposition in even a quasi-causal way would have gone awry. Further, it is apparent that our orientations shifted at various points, turning on some forms of curious dispositions and turning off others. This became a cultivation of ourselves in transaction with our worlds, that is, a simultaneously destructive and productive transformation of our intelligence in response to changing situations (Malabou, 2019). We grew into singular curious dispositions over time, in unpredictable bursts.

This epigenetic growth also points to more explicit educational considerations. When curiosity seems at once overpraised and undervalued (Leslie, 2014), it is valuable to consider whether a curious disposition is best thought of as a means to an end, an end in itself, or something more plastic in Malabou's (2010) sense of form and content folding into each other. As our narrative suggests, while a cultivated curiosity can be made to pay off in economic or idealistic educational ways, it can also radically shift how those who have cultivated this curiosity weigh and interpret potential rewards. Valuing curiosity more in educational systems might then mean respecting and extending the interpretive space within these systems, likely far beyond a narrowly gamified reinterpretation of grades and scores or an imaginative reinterpretation of college admissions promotional materials. Valuing curiosity would likely mean risking the transformation of not only singular curious dispositions but also entire educational approaches and aims, such that the purpose of the educational adventure itself might change.

Discussion and Conclusion: Chopping and Screwing Narrative Inquiry

Much is left out of the stories told and retold above, as in any narrative that takes entire lives as its scope. Much is also left out in our interpretations, as we

seek to avoid the “epic closure” of stories that are still open and continue even as we write and revise, still subject to radical retrospective restorings (Kim, 2016). We propose that the chopped-and-screwed narrative play we undertook in this paper serves as a methodology for narrative inquiry that retains the power of this open-endedness while also offering stories for consideration, reconsideration, and new resonance. We also suggest that our study illustrates that this form of narrative play is a methodology especially suited to studying curiosity *curiously* (see Cruz et al., 2021; Lewis, 2020; Zurn & Shankar, 2020). As our coda demonstrates, this methodology affords space for modest yet justified interpretive claims about the object of inquiry: in this case, the epigenetic growth of a plastic curiosity. A chopped and screwed narrative inquiry methodology facilitates a new attention to temporality, neither as the necessary unfolding of causes and effects nor as a pure event, but as epigenetic temporality. As Malabou (2016) argues, “Between an authentic temporality without maturation and a chronological vulgarity without ecstasy, epigenetic temporality unfolds at its own rhythm” (p. 176). There is also a reflexivity involved in the formation of a curious disposition, in which observation is always simultaneously transformative critique involving other temporalities (see Malabou, 2016, p. 180).

These claims are simultaneously leavened and complicated by the recursive and reflexive layers of the different voices telling and retelling different stories in different rhythms. In line with the goals of narrative inquiry, this method helped to make the modest social deviance in the stories socially legible as curiosity (see Goodson et al., 2010), though with some dissonance. We suggest that chopping and screwing a narrative can also allow more space for counterhegemonic, alternative meanings to emerge. While a delineated definition remains necessarily elusive, *curiosity* became not the buzzword of problem-solving and entrepreneurship, nor did it become the genetic property of rare geniuses, but something that problematizes, reinterprets, and diverts from paths of normative success—something far more politically and intellectually charged (see Zurn & Shankar, 2020, p. xiii). Likewise, we propose that this form of shared narrative play is especially well suited to exploring how dispositions are crafted in entanglements and transactions with worlds shared with others, in line with Malabou’s (2010; 2016; 2019) discussions of epigenesis, plasticity, habits, and intelligence. This method emphatically resists the modernist interpretive move toward totalizing individualism or positivist personal development, aiming instead for resonance and revivifying reinterpretation.

In particular, a chopped and screwed narrative inquiry strongly aligns with topics of study that require a healthy respect for the messiness of human experience, interpretation, and growth and that entail an attempt to spark further experience, interpretation, and growth. Following MacLure’s (2006) invitation to “play with the cabinet of curiosities as a figure for analysis and representation” (p. 737), we propose chopping and screwing as another generative figure for narrative analysis and representation, as it also provides a way of making exhibits

visible and free for others “to forge their own connections” with or against our provisional framings (p. 738). Further, just as MacLure’s (2013) collections strive to “slow down the facile machinery of interpretation” (p. 174), the narrative play of chopping and screwing consciously disturbs a sense of regulated temporality so that we can notice what might otherwise flash by in a moment. We suggest that for studies into curiosity, as well as into playfulness and studious dispositions, this form of narrative inquiry opens rich opportunities for forging revitalizing connections, asking “readers to become aware of their own embodied knowledge and social interactions that inform *what* they bring to the reading of a text and *how* they read that text” (Sterner & Fisher, 2020, p. 67).

Throughout this paper, we have attempted to stretch the form of narrative inquiry in curious ways, chopping the polyvocal layers and screwing the sense of regulated time, to better reflect our unfinished and shifting stories as well as the story of a plastic disposition. We were guided by the belief that stories of academic dispositions warrant telling, even when they feel uncomfortably self-aggrandizing or revealing. In this case, we reckoned with our self-identities as curious teachers, and how these identities were intertwined with socially recognized intelligence and other forms of privilege. We hope that this open examination prompts others to take on the curious cases of their own and others’ curiosities, investigating the mysteries they present and cultivating deeper curiosities along the way. We thus also aim to inspire further scholarship into the crafting of selves and dispositions, especially toward the curious study of curiosity. Our recursive narrative inquiry here has led us down another rabbit hole, where we hope others might wander with us.

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