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Communicating and Cultivating: Exploring the Phenomenology of the Extracurricular Writing Relationship Through Narrative

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COMMUNICATING AND CULTIVATING: EXPLORING THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF
THE EXTRACURRICULAR WRITING RELATIONSHIP THROUGH NARRATIVE

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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This phenomenological study about extracurricular writing relationships is comprised of a collection of stories told through epistles, written notes and interviews. My story is also woven into this study in the form of reflections. This study explores and describes what it's like to write in an out-of-school writing relationship. It also illuminates the nature of how writing as a particular literacy practice and lived sociocultural event was experienced within relationships fostered and co-constructed outside of school—within the extracurricular. The phenomenological framework used to interpret this data carries a set of assumptions about how to understand the world. It privileges description over analysis, and narrative as a means to understand.

Thus, the themes identified that best address the research questions are broad observations about extracurricular writing relationships; they stem from observation and analysis of both transcript data and the writings shared between the couples that are thematic of the experience of writing within an extracurricular writing relationship. Indeed, this study has found that stories, co-constructed by the couples themselves, both in writing and through oral story, have taught us that in some extracurricular writing relationships proximity plays an important role; a lack of proximity allocates more time and “abstract” space for intimacy; writing to a partner is fun, enjoyable, and brings happiness both to the writer and to the receiver of the writing; the content, tone, and

purpose of the writing shifts as the relationship changes through time; individuals within the writing relationship have had experiences outside the relationship with writing, and these experiences were positive and/or instructive; routines occur that revolve around writing; rites of passage within the relationship can cause a shift in the amount of writing that takes place; and, writing fortifies the relationship, even if the amount and type of writing evolves through time. Also learned is that shared writing between members in an extracurricular writing relationship can be best described as relationship-oriented, reflective, benevolent, amusing, and/or everyday.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this project to my three children: Madelyn, Jonathon and Patrick. All three of you continually inspire me with your intelligence, humor, love and compassion.

You have my heart and my gratitude.

To my mom, Helene, and to my dad, Steve: thank you for your support and for your love. I cherish you both.

To those who have mentored me, to teachers and professors who have taught me, and to friends and family who have encouraged me, I thank you.

To every woman who has taught me that multitasking is a myth and that perfection is impossible: I am beginning to believe.

To Matt, my husband: For the words we couldn't say, for the words that couldn't be found, for the words we've decided to leave behind, and for the words we still have left to share. I am grateful for your love and for your faith in me, in us. Inspiration comes in many forms. Thank you.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research project would not have been possible if I had not read Anna Nuemann and Penelope L. Peterson's collection of essays on women and personal research, *Learning from our Lives: Women, Research and Autobiography in Education* (1997) and Lorri Neilsen's (1998) *Knowing Her Place*. These texts redefined for me what it means to be a researcher and to conduct research. These writers blazed a trail that helped me to see that my experiences—my nonlinear, nontraditional, nonacademic, personal experiences—had academic value. Intelligent, pedagogical, qualitative value. These essays taught me that I could write with an "I or a "my," refer to my experiences in and out of the classroom as they were representative of experiential knowledge, and recognize that my life could and should be woven into a research study because I am part of the story.

I am grateful to Dr. Gian Pagnucci for reaching out to me when I needed him the most, even though I had no idea who he was when he called. (Truthfully, I did, but he called when I was getting my hair cut and the blow dryers were raging.) He lit a fire under me, and I'm not sure this project would've ever reached completion without his compassionate motivation. He shared his love of narrative with me, and his passion for valuing the storyteller and her story is awe-inspiring.

I am grateful for my relationship with Dr. Gloria Park because she may not know this, but she has been a tremendous role model of mine; she is a scholar, student, mother, wife, mentor, friend and colleague. A woman whom I admire because even with all of those roles, she manages to make time for her students; she is authentic in all that she does in every way, through every word, and in every action. She will give all she

has. She taught me the word *positionality* and its value, and she helped me to discern between the concepts of methodology and epistemology. I have never met a woman with so many things to do and so many responsibilities who, even with all the balls waivering in the air in a stream of coordinated chaos, lands all the stronger and all the wiser—always true to herself. And even though she is the impetus behind my ancillary research question, which pushed my dissertation into no-man’s-land with time, I probably learned more from this area of my research than in any other portion of the study.

Finally, I am incredibly appreciative for the contributions of those couples who participated in this study. I am grateful for the time that they took to be a part of this research endeavor. These couples were willing to take time out of their own schedules to assist me in my research and to contribute to the efforts contained in this study to enhance our understanding of everyday literacy practices—of writing in the extracurricular.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter		Page
PROLOGUE	A PERSONAL LINE OF ENTRY AND EXIT	1
	Reflection 1	6
ONE	DISSERTATION STRUCTURE: A TAPESTRY OF STORIES, REFLECTIONS AND PERSPECTIVES	9
	An Introduction to Writing Relationships and the Extracurriculum	11
	Defining Writing Relationships.	11
	Writing in the Extracurriculum.	12
	Pivoting Towards Extracurricular Writing Relationships: Connecting With My Narrative Reality	14
	Considerations of In- and Out-Of-School Writing Relationships.....	19
	Orienting Towards This Phenomenon: From Where I Stood	26
	Literature Informing This Study	28
	Out-of-School Literacy Events and Practices	30
	Everyday and Out-of-School Literacy	31
	Out-of-School Literacy Research and Discovery	33
	Foundational Studies	35
	The Social Nature of Literacy.....	38
	Theoretical and Methodological Approaches Informing This Study	40
	Inquiry With Intentionality: The Research Questions	41
	The Collection of Storied Data and Identification of Participatory Couples	42
	Seeking Couples: Eligibility Criteria	46
	Statement of Potential Significance	49
	Reflection 2	51
TWO	REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE	54
	Narrative Across Fields of Study: The Turn Towards Story	54
	Defining Narrative	60
	The Narrative Scope	61
	Narrative’s Relationship with In- and Out-of-School Literacy Practices.....	62
	Narrative’s Relationship with Lived Experience and Phenomenology	65
	The Epistolary Relationship as Extracurricular Writing Practice	68
	Letter-Writing as a Meaningful and Pervasive Literacy Activity	69

Chapter	Page
	Storied Experiences and Letter-Writing 71 Letter-Writing and Relationships 73 Letter-Writing Scholarship 77 A Summary 82 Reflection 3 83
THREE	METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN 84
	Philosophy, Methodology and Methods 84 Narrative as Passage Towards Phenomenology 89 Locating Lived Experience: Objective of Research 91 Expounding Assumptions and Pre-Understandings: Bracketing and My Role as Researcher 93 Seeking the Experiences of Others: Research Sample and Data Sources 96 Participant Criteria 96 Confidentiality 97 Participants 97 Approaches to Story Collection 98 The Researcher-Participant Relationship 100 Making Connections 100 Cultivation and Collection 101 The Art and Craft of Capturing Essence: In-Depth Interviews 102 Exploring and Gathering Experiential Narrative 103 Interview Protocol 103 Ethical Considerations 104 Grasping Meaning Through Phenomenological Reflection: Data Analysis and Analytic Framework 104 Locating Themes: In Search for Meaning 105 Unearthing Thematic Threads 107 The Co-Creation of a Lived Experience: A Dialogical Analysis 107 Unpacking Meaning: Representing Experience Through Narrative 108 The Phenomenological Way: Research Activities in Relation to Narrative 109 Interpretive Descriptions: Limitations to This Study 109 Reflection 4 111
FOUR	ANGIE AND MICHAEL 113
	Couple Profile 113 Writing Profile: Angie and Michael 114 Theme 1: Relationship Writing 120

Chapter	Page
	Theme 2: Reflective Writing 121
	Theme 3: Benevolent Writing 122
	Theme 4: Amusement Writing 123
	Theme 5: Everyday Writing 124
	Joy, Commitment and Laughter: The (Re)Telling of Angie and Mike’s Story 126
	Reflection 5 136
FIVE	CLAUDIA AND MARC 138
	Couple Profile..... 138
	Writing Profile..... 140
	Theme 1: Relationship Writing 143
	Theme 2: Reflective Writing 143
	Theme 3: Benevolent Writing 145
	Theme 4: Amusement Writing 147
	Theme 5: Everyday Writing 148
	Appreciation, Affection and Folly: The (Re)Telling of Claudia and Marc’s Story 149
	Reflection 6 156
SIX	KYR AND VICTORIA 157
	Couple Profile..... 157
	Writing Profile..... 160
	Theme 1: Relationship Writing 163
	Theme 2: Reflective Writing 165
	Theme 3: Benevolent Writing 166
	Theme 4: Amusement Writing 167
	Theme 5: Everyday Writing 167
	Conflict and Courtship: The (Re)Telling of Kyr and Victoria’s Story 168
	Reflection 7 175
SEVEN	A PHENOMENOLOGICAL REFLECTION: UNDERSTANDING THE ESSENCE OF THE EXTRACURRICULAR WRITING RELATIONSHIP 177
	The Nature of the Extracurricular Writing Relationship: A Broad Landscape 178
	The Lived Experience of Writing Within an Extracurricular Writing Relationship 179
	The (Re)Telling of a Tale: Co-Constructing Meaning 182
	Pedagogical Implications and Future Directions 184

Chapter	Page
Informing In-School Literacy Practices.....	185
Future Research Possibilities.....	188
The Nature of Sharing Feedback and Peer Response	189
Final Reflections.....	190
Theoretical and Methodological Reflections.	190
Living the Phenomenological Life.	192
A Change in My Lived Experience.	193
REFERENCES.....	197
APPENDICES	214
Appendix A - Reflective Autobiographical Narrative (Electronic).....	214
Appendix B - Acquaintance Protocol	219
Appendix C - First Couple Interview	221
Appendix D - Second Couple Interview - Written Artifact Organizational Protocol	222
Appendix E - Individual-Follow-Up Interview Protocol	223
Appendix F - Informed Consent Form.....	224

LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1 Demographic Information on Participating Couples	98

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure		Page
1	Madelyn and Momma’s shared journal: Poop.	17
2	Madelyn and Momma’s shared journal: Ramona the Pest.....	111
3	Angie and Mike: A series of lists.....	124
4	Claudia and Marc: Galaxy	148
5	Madelyn and Momma’s shared journal: Relationships	156
6	Victoria and Kyr: Collage and Smooch.....	163

PROLOGUE

A PERSONAL LINE OF ENTRY AND EXIT

The impetus for this research was plain: I sought to understand the experiential stories of three couples using phenomenology by way of narrative. Informed by a sociocultural lens because I believe that both in- and out-of-school literacy practices and events are socially constructed, I asked two seemingly simple but rather complex questions: What is it like to write in an extracurricular writing relationship? And, as ancillary to this question, I asked: How do those involved in extracurricular writing relationships make sense of their experiences and the knowledge co-constructed through those experiences?

The simplicity to this study is that it is very much a study about human relationships: we all have them. They vary in degree of intimacy, length and kind, but most of us seek them out and strive, in one way or another, to cultivate them. Some do this through writing—others do not.

In my dissertation, I tell the story about a conversation I had with a professor of mine. I'll call him Mike. This conversation took place in the formative phase of topic exploration and methodology decision-making. I posed my research topic to him, explaining my personal connection:

You see, Mike, Madelyn and I have this journal where we exchange writing and it's, well, you know, everyday writing, and it started one day in a snow storm when Jon, my middle child, yes, Jon, the one who wears ties all the time, was throwing up and getting sick, and I all wanted to do was get Maddy to stop asking "When are we were going to get home?" Ya see, Mike, it was really started as a

tool for discipline. But what happened was that after I wrote to Maddy that day in the car, and she wrote back to me, and so on and so forth, we just kept the shared journal going. And on those busy nights when I can't give Maddy the attention she needs because I am busy reading articles for your class, we write to each other. We even write in doctors' offices or at the park. It's evolved. The whole process is different now. And it's funny because she is so young and can't write too much, as her vocabulary is limited, but what's curious about the whole thing is that this writing is awesome, and we are really cultivating our relationship through it—it's so much more than just communicating; we are growing our relationship as a result of the writing.

After Mike heard my story, he looked down at the notes he had been taking, then at me, nodded, and finally stated: *Hmm. Interesting.* The second thing he said was a question: *Isn't communicating in a relationship the same thing as cultivating it?* Frankly, I was stumped. Such a basic question. I immediately thought: *Of course not, one activity has to be more complex than the other, clearly. Cultivation even sounds cooler, deeper—it implies intent.* But then again, as I thought more about it, I couldn't deny that communication was certainly a part of cultivation.

So. This is where phenomenology came into the picture. And I'd like to pretend that when Mike first introduced it to me, I had some great epiphany, some super, uber-intellectual understanding of the connection between what he was telling me about this methodology, my research topic and how selecting this method of conducting research would open the avenue I needed to effectively explore the writing in extracurricular writing relationships. But I did not.

Only after I made both an academic and a personal case for the study, after I conducted the literature review, after I figured out that narrative was the best way to gather and share the data, after I made my way through the complexities of ciphering overarching lens from methodology and epistemology, after I gathered all the data from the three couples who so generously filled out incredibly long surveys and sat through interview after interview to share story after story with me, after the couples shared copious amounts of insanely personal and very romantic writing with me (causing me to feel like a voyeur at times), and only after the data was analyzed for themes that best describe what it's like to write in a writing relationship and those themes that help us to understand how they co-construct meaning of their relationship was I *finally* able to realize the value in the research, its complexity and my true purpose in doing the project.

Using phenomenology as a methodology taught me to value description. It taught me to complicate my world and to see things anew and with fresh perspective. It taught me to value story and to not judge—to see essence as a cloud of weightless but very much weighted dust spun in the air by the storyteller. It taught me that as the researcher, I should do my best to capture these particles without tampering with them. It taught me that common threads are merely shared branches in an enormous, beautiful tree—not grand narratives in process.

I learned the nature of a relationship doesn't need to be *proved*—it just needs to be explained and described, understood and illuminated. I learned there is nothing simple about writing in an out-of-school writing relationship and that writers in these

relationships write about love, about the relationship, about everyday events, and about funny stuff and that they like to share encouraging and kind words with each other.

I learned that when members of writing relationships share their story, they exchange memories, ask questions, share secrets, become silly, playful and even argumentative. I learned that when writers in out-of-school writing relationships are away from each other, the distance creates more space for intimacy, a space that is often filled with writing. I learned that with writing in relationships comes routine. And I also learned that writers who like to write will also engage in relationships in which writing plays a part, and they will continue to use writing in said relationships.

Phenomenology is about pedagogy. And I have certainly learned. This learning has seeped into the way I consider narrative, the way I approach in- and out-of-school relationships and the way I conduct and consider inquiry. So, what is it like to write in an extracurricular writing relationship? For me, it's like loving; it's like knowing you're not in love because the words won't come and they can't come because there are no words; it's like sharing a story and together telling it and retelling it and then laughing about it and wondering why we stopped; it's like connecting, communicating and yes, even cultivating.

This study is important because all stories have value. This is my story and this is the story of three couples as told by them and captured and illustrated by me. And the lessons I have learned from this research project are both personal and professional with barely a thread separating each of them—and that is just the point. Here is what I learned:

1. All research is personal; this project is a rich example of that. No matter whether the scholar is using “I” or using narrative as their tool of choice, inquiry is always grounded in subjective curiosity, which propels all inquiry forward.
2. A storyteller’s voice is her gift. It is woven into the story and in many respects, it can be the story itself.
3. If we allow ourselves to be a bit confused or muddled while conducting research, our answers and our understandings may happily surprise us. These are always the best kinds of endings.
4. Teaching, for me, has always been and will always be about relationships. I have taught many kinds of content through the years, but no matter what I teach or how I teach it, if my students don’t believe that I care about them, and if we don’t take time to know each other, then we cannot learn from each other. Shared writing is but one way and one tool to cultivate these relationships.

Reflection 1

It was a long ride back from Hershey to Johnstown, Pennsylvania in the dead of winter. The forecast that day called for over 18 inches of wet, heavy snow—snow capable of bringing down power lines, of causing schools to close their doors and of encouraging all those able to stay off the roads to do just that. We had to drive back, though. Jonathon, who was just four at the time, had started throwing-up in the hotel room, and we knew we needed to make it home. Quite frankly, the one-bathroom, one-bedroom situation was not ideal vomit conditions.

As I look back, I suppose we could've stayed. The hotel was lovely. The air in the hotel had a very distinct rich cocoa smell, and no matter where we went in the hotel, we always wanted a cup of hot chocolate. In fact, my husband Matt and I had a theory that somebody, somewhere in that hotel was charged with sending this very distinct cocoa scent through the air filters. We both agreed this was an extremely important but probably underpaid employee.

I remember thinking that there's nothing quite like the smell of chocolate mixed with whole milk when it comes shooting out of your child's mouth and lands on the shaggy carpet by the hotel bathroom. Our other two children, Patchy and Madelyn, standing closest to Jonathon, screamed in horror as the smell of sour milk reached their nostrils.

We cleaned.

We packed.

We gathered the children.

We loaded the car.

We watched the weather report.

We grabbed the essentials: plastic bags, towels, stacks of napkins, hand sanitizers (“magic soap”) and empty plastic bottles to catch the vomit.

We started to drive the three hours towards home.

“It’s going to be a rough drive,” I said to Matt. I knew I was stating the obvious, but it had to be said.

Jonathon threw up two more times on the way home. It was a disaster, to say the least. But the car ride home was the start of something very special. Madelyn and I started writing to each other during this smelly and very chaotic car ride. I’m not going to lie; it wasn’t a pleasant start to our writing relationship.

In fact, the writing began when both Matt and I couldn’t bear to hear, “I’m bored—when are we going to be home?” or “This car smells—how much longer?” one more time.

I didn’t want to yell. I’m not a yeller. I’m more of a whisper-and-evil-stare kind of parent, and Matt was driving during what we now refer to as “The Storm of the Century,” so he certainly couldn’t occupy the masses.

In pure desperation, I wrote on a piece of paper:

Maddy, honey—

Momma loves you so much. Can you please stop asking when are we going to be home? I promise—we are almost home. And I know it smells.

Momma

I handed her the piece of paper. From behind me, she grabbed it, read the message and started to write, *Momma,*

What are you doing?

Love,

Madelyn—your best girl.

Our writing relationship had officially begun—in the car, during a blizzard, in a haze of vomit. There really is no “best part” of the story. But I will never forget that when we did make it home, five hours later, a beautiful sheet of over 20 inches of snow covered our driveway, and Matt had to dig us a path to get Jonathon home and into bed.

CHAPTER ONE

DISSERTATION STRUCTURE:

A TAPESTRY OF STORIES, REFLECTIONS, AND PERSPECTIVES

The opening story, Reflection 1, is one written in contemplation of my own experiences with writing collaboratively with my then seven-year-old daughter, Madelyn. At the time of our first writing, I was looking for a way to connect with Madelyn—not because I wanted to cultivate our relationship through writing but because I wanted to calm her, to ease her discomfort in the car. Frankly, I was looking for a way to soothe her so that I could finish grading papers. I had no idea that what would begin on a few scraps of paper would develop into a journal and a nightly ritual for years to come. I didn't think of the term "extracurricular" at the time; however, I did know that our writing was for no one but us and took place in the strangest of places: cramped cars, shady bathrooms, crowded waiting rooms, make-shift beds at doctor's offices, buggy park benches and filthy floors.

Anything worth doing (and this research project was no exception) demands tremendous personal investment; there must be heart. My out-of-school or extracurricular¹ writing relationship with my daughter is the heart of this project, though I think you will see its soul is robust and extensive as the net is cast much wider than just my story. I feel privileged to have had the opportunity to enter the lives of three couples who have participated in extracurricular writing relationships. It is my reflections,

¹ Within this study, I use the term *out-of-school* or *extracurricular writing relationship* to refer to writing relationships

alongside theirs, that I showcase at the beginning of each chapter to represent a sketch, though not a complete portrait, of what it's like to write in an out-of-school or extracurricular writing relationship. These stories and sometimes the writings themselves were essential to this study as they highlight an alternate route into this research endeavor and illuminate what a traditional research framework oftentimes cannot. Frankly, they reflect my position as a participant in this inquiry and speak to the value of reflexivity throughout a research endeavor.

As is commonplace in many dissertations, I organized this study into sections that best explore and investigate the topic at hand. As this study seeks to describe and understand a phenomenon through narrative, I offer an additional reflective layer that also depicts the central premise of this study. Thus, inspired by the work of Pagnucci (2004), I believe that sharing narrative accounts throughout this research endeavor helped me and will help others to unpack the research questions at hand: What is the lived experience of writing within an extracurricular relationship, and how do those involved within extracurricular relationships make sense of their experiences and the knowledge co-constructed through those experiences?

This “collage” approach, as described and illustrated by Pagnucci (2004), is one that embraces the notion that research should be multi-dimensional as well as synthesized through numerous genres. According to Elbow (2000), a collage-like approach to writing encourages space for multiple voices. These voices are representative of tones that add to the rhythm and the message that the written piece attempts to achieve. The dialogue-like effect that a collage produces is one that is purposely crafted by the writer to add depth and texture to the writer’s communicative or

research objective. In particular, a layered research approach, one embracing multiple voices to address the research questions at hand, can be theorized as an approach to research writing that embraces a collaborative effort.

An Introduction to Writing Relationships and the Extracurriculum

Defining Writing Relationships

I first encountered the term “writing relationship” when I read Lad Tobin’s (1993) aptly-titled book, *Writing Relationships: What Really Happens in the Composition Class*. His book does not begin with an explanation of *how* classroom relationships shape reading and writing or even that relationships exist within the classroom, as this would be an obvious point, but rather *why* it is important for compositionists to focus on these relationships. Clearly, writing relationships exist and are of pivotal importance within the writing classroom. Tobin claimed that to best understand student writing and writing processes, writing teachers need to pay attention to the contextual lattice informing and shaping the writing—the contexts in which reading and writing occur. He believed we should specifically focus on classroom interpersonal relationships and that those balanced and productive relationships foster balanced and productive writing processes. Thus, he drew our attention away from acts of writing within the composition classroom and towards the individuals doing the writing and the sharing in their writing experiences—classroom members and classroom teachers. He addressed what he saw as a gap within composition studies research: “[al]though it sometimes seems as if researchers have examined almost every tiny aspect of the composing process, there is just not that much out there about interpersonal relationships and the teaching of

writing” (p. 5). Consequently, Tobin’s argument reiterated to me that the composing process is one that is social in nature.

Tobin nodded towards scholars before him who have helped pave this ideological path—namely James Berlin, Karen Burke LeFerve, and Patricia Bizzell. He also contributed to my contemplation of writing relationships as not solely relegated to the academy and the idea that writing experiences and the relationships fostered with these experiences occur within environments in and beyond the university. Tobin, therefore, inspired the following questions: What is the nature of an extracurricular writing relationship? Have “out-of-school” writing experiences been adequately unpacked, and are writing teachers making enough of a connection between in and out of school writing experiences? These questions consequently became the impetus—the heart of my dissertation study—and its central research question: What is the lived experience of writing within an extracurricular writing relationship? As ancillary to this question, I asked: How do couples within extracurricular writing relationships make sense of their experiences and the knowledge co-constructed through those experiences?

Writing in the Extracurriculum

Often seen as a pioneer through her work looking at writing taking place beyond school walls, Anne Ruggles Gere brought attention to writing taking place beyond the academy—the writing taking place within the “extracurriculum.” Her 1994 article published in *College Composition and Communication*, “Kitchen Tables and Rented Rooms: The Extracurriculum of Composition,” pivoted my attention away from the classroom and towards the extracurricular. Ruggles Gere (1994), in this article,

discussed two examples of individuals meeting in out-of-school writing groups: one in the Tenderloin District of San Francisco and the other in a community of farmers in Lansing, Iowa. Her research suggested that these two writing groups "represent a tiny portion of the enormous number of individuals who meet in living rooms, nursing homes, community centers, churches, shelters for the homeless, around kitchen tables, and in rented rooms to write down their worlds" (p. 76). Like never before in the field of composition, location mattered. Ruggles Gere, by considering place and space, asked us to untangle composition and schooling and question what writing is like beyond school walls. Essentially, it was the "where" she wanted us to consider, in addition to the who and the what. She also proposed that the extracurricular has long been omitted as a viable location where good writing, or writing that matters, occurs (pp. 78-79).

The same year Ruggles Gere shared with us her experiences with kitchen tables and rented rooms, Susan Miller's (1994) article "Textual Carnivals: The Politics of Composition" was published. Much like Ruggles-Gere, Miller shed light on the value of looking at writing within the extracurricular; she bluntly pointed to the value of bringing extracurricular writing and out-of-school writing experiences into the classroom. According to Miller (1994), as part of the expansion of English departments, attention towards the canon and the writing produced by members of this elite group took center stage while everyday out-of-school writing by everyday individuals took on a "carnavalesque" persona. In other words, the writing outside the classroom was of little value. Thus, students taking composition courses were asked to write essays divorced from real-world issues and real-world interests. Miller advocates that ignoring the

extracurriculum causes two negative consequences: it devalues student writing and it ignores the rich and textured writing experiences occurring beyond the academy.

Pivoting Towards Extracurricular Writing Relationships: Connecting with My Narrative Reality

To place these textual experiences in further context, when I initially thought about extracurricular writing relationships as a dissertation topic, I was sitting in my family room on the armchair my husband and I had purchased in a small upholstery shop in Alexandria, Virginia. My three small children (at the time, ranging in age from three to seven) and I were watching *Electric Company*, and I found my attention swaying. I thought about a book I had read as a graduate student for a research project I was working on as an aspiring secondary English educator. The book, *Novels of Everyday Life* by Laurie Langbauer (1999), discusses the everyday writing and the everyday experiences of women living in England in the late 1800s and early 1900s. According to Langbauer (1999), what is most intriguing when considering the ordinary within the everyday is not just how everyday acts function, but how we feel about their functioning, as well as the attitudes that run in tandem with these understandings.

What struck me during my initial reading of Langbauer's book, and as I recounted my experience with it, was that everyday literacy experiences are seemingly so common and so, well, "everyday," and yet they tend to be overshadowed—even ignored. Nonetheless, they are valuable, even pivotal. So as I sat looking around my family room, I wondered if my familiar surroundings, my "un-academic," everyday, extracurricular surroundings, would inspire me, possibly leading me to a dissertation topic. In truth, every writing topic in which I had invested was always personal as well as

academic in nature. So in our blue chair with its wooden claw feet and brass buttons, I decided to think about the writing that takes place in my life—my life as a mother of three, as a wife, as a scholar, as a teacher, and as a student. I realized that while I participate in a lot of academic writing, I also participate in meaningful and learned writing exercises and exchanges outside of the academy—some autonomous in nature, and others involving an exchange of writing between other members of my family and me. It is important to note that while I did see different kinds of writing as serving multiple purposes within numerous settings, I did believe, and still do, that personal writing informs academic writing, as academic writing can inform personal writing. Undeniably, the two genres have a symbiotic relationship and therefore, both hold value within and outside the academy.

Specifically, my thoughts turned to the writing journal where my daughter, Madelyn, and I exchanged bedtime notes. Here is a story:

“Momma” Madelyn said to me, gently nudging my arm, “Aren’t you going to write me back?”

“Oh, yes honey, sorry. I didn’t see the book by my side.” I replied, grabbing our journal. I quickly opened the book to Madelyn’s latest entry and read:

Momma,

What are you reading and why are you allowed to write in books, and I can’t?

Won’t you get in trouble? Oh, and what is the book about?

I love you,

Madelyn

I smiled. Turning a page in our book, I responded:

My love,

I am reading a book about writing. The book is telling me that I should close my eyes as I write. The reason I can write in my book, and you can't in yours, is because I own my book and the library owns yours.

What are you reading? Please share with me your best part of the book.

xxoo

Momma

Giggling, Madelyn responded:

Dear Momma,

Were your eyes closed when you wrote that? You are funny. Why would you close your eyes when you write?

I love you,

Madelyn

From the time we began reading, sometime after dessert but before she brushed her teeth, Madelyn and I wrote in our “mom and me” journal, passing it back and forth and back and forth until her bedtime. We didn’t actually call it our “mom and me” journal; we just referred to it as “our book.” As we fulfilled our nightly rituals and responsibilities, we sat on my queen-sized bed. We shared space and time. Madelyn was usually propped against one pillow and I on another. As we sat, we read. We silently read and we wrote. In writing, we shared curiosities, matter-of-fact comments and reading-related notes. We sometimes giggled and talked aloud, but for the most part, we put our thoughts into writing. Our writing wasn’t complex. It couldn’t be: Maddy was so young. Her ability to write was just blossoming. But it was often filled with Xs and Os and a lot

of questions. I know that through our collaborative writing we were communicating. But I also believed we were cultivating. We were fostering our relationship through writing.

Here is piece I want to share:

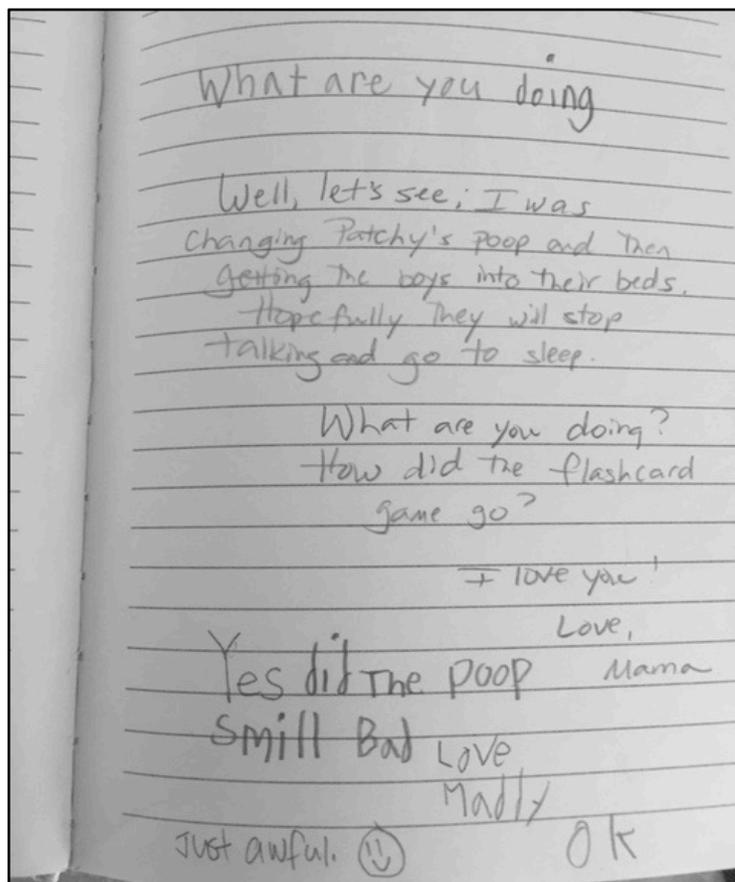


Figure 1. Madelyn and Momma's shared journal: Poop.

Reflecting on the writing that my daughter and I shared, I found myself wondering what exactly the difference is between communicating and cultivating. Then, in preparing for the early stages of this dissertation, I was asked a similar question by a reader on my dissertation committee: "Don't we always cultivate our relationships through communication?" It was a good question. I decided to seek an outside source to gain further clarity. "Cultivation," according to the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary (2011), means "to prepare or to foster the growth of something." Communication is "an

act or instance of transmittance of a verbal or written message.” Thus, cultivating implies intent to elicit growth, while communication may lack this intent. So yes, Madelyn and I were certainly sharing messages to communicate, but these messages were also embedded within layers of deep-rooted intention. My intention was to share with Madelyn how much I love her, how important she is to me, and how, no matter how busy I got, I would always make time for her. Madelyn’s intention might have been different than mine, but regardless, I’m certain there was intent. And the question posed to me earlier, “Don’t we always cultivate our relationships through communication?” was one I was eager to explore.

I also thought about the relationship narratives that my husband wrote and shared with me on each anniversary of our wedding day. I thought about the lunchbox notes, the haikus on Valentine’s Day, the cards exchanged for no reason at all and the Post-It messages my daughter leaves for me in my “special drawer” where I house my kid-crafted written, sketched, cut, marked, glitter-glued, stamped and photographic collectibles. These acts of written and graphic exchange serve many purposes, though perhaps the most curious purpose is one of relationship cultivation. The writing that passed between my daughter and me and between my husband and me was communicative, yes, but the exchanges seemed to serve a more intimate purpose than simply communication. I pondered: Were we fostering our relationship through this writing? What role did writing serve within these out-of-school relationships? What was the nature of these relationships where writing plays a role? What did these writing experiences mean? What would unfold if I listened to stories told by couples in this kind of personal writing relationship? And, as storytelling helps us to reflect on the past,

understand the present and imagine the future, how did couples collaboratively make sense of these out-of-school writing experiences through narrative? The purpose of this study, therefore, was to look at the out-of-school writing experiences of couples who are or were involved in a writing relationship and how those couples co-constructively made sense of their experiences.

This study holds that if, as Tobin (1993) argued, “the written product and the writing process always exist within—and are always shaped by—a particular network of interpersonal relationships” (p. 14), our attention must turn toward these relationships. In particular, understanding the nature of extracurricular writing relationships may inform the written products we encourage our students to craft, the written process we encourage our students to explore and the in-school writing relationships we encourage our students and ourselves to cultivate.

Considerations of In- and Out-Of-School Writing Relationships

Tobin (1993) described “writing relationships” as interpersonal relationships that productively foster writing (p. 16). Grounded within a classroom context, Tobin’s description of the role writing plays within classroom relationships serves as a heuristic for not only understanding but for also aiding in the cultivation of in-school writing relationships with and between students. Within an out-of-school context, or when writing occurs independent of the classroom within the “extracurriculum,” writing as part of a relationship can, according to Juhasz (2003), “both represent and repeat the contours of that relationship and imagine and enact different and newer ways to construct the relationship” (p. 27). Namely, writing relationships, in school or beyond its walls, are interpersonal relationships in which writing is a component. In other words,

writing informs the relationship, is part of the relationship, and is shaped through the relationship. Thus, writing relationships are relationships, either between two or more people, in which writing interactions are shared over time—either deliberately or by happenstance—and members participate in fostering that relationship. As Juhasz (2003) posited, writing within relationships “works like attunement in relation to real-life experiences” (p. 31). To put it another way, writing functions as a tool of negotiation and of imagination within the relationship; it can define the relationship, shape the relationship, help to foster the relationship, or serve as means to end the relationship.

Not unlike Juhasz’s understanding, Tobin (1993) described a writing relationship in which the interpersonal relationship is fostered through the writing. In the composition classroom, writing relationships may appear obvious, as the curriculum enforces and reinforces the social nature of writing. Less overt out-of-school writing relationships may push the writing within those relationships to the fore, or they may be pushed beyond sight. Writing within any relationship, either in or out-of-school, is as individual and as personal as the people involved. There is quite simply no one way to describe what writing can be like, what it can do and/or what it will or will not do within any given relationship. Mother-daughter relationships, as cited by Juhasz (2003), can be influenced by the act of writing—the writing can attune the relationship, mirror the relationship, build and break the relationship, and “serve as defense as well as agent for renegotiation and change” (p. 54).

While literacy scholarship has a well-documented history of looking at literacy traditions as a social practice occurring within specific cultural in- and out-of-school contexts, including ethnographic studies (e.g., Heath, 1983; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines,

1988), Vygotskian-inspired studies (e.g., Scribner & Cole, 1981) and New Literacy Studies (NLS) (e.g., Gee, 1996; Street, 1993), composition studies has focused much of its attention since the 19th century towards writing within the academy and specifically the first-year writing course (Miller, 1993; Ruggles Gere, 1994) with very little attention given to the writing experiences of everyday writers participating in everyday writing practices beyond the walls of academia. While some literacy research does point to the writing that individuals do as part of everyday life—or life within the extracurricular (e.g., Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Barton and Ivanič, 1991; Hull & Schultz, 2001; Neilsen, 1989; Scribner & Cole, 1981), looking at writing experiences beyond the academy in other social contexts where writing ensues presents fertile ground in need of exploration and discussion. While this topic is explored later in Chapter One, it should be noted that out-of-school relationship writing is but one extracurricular context from which composition studies can continue to widen its scholarly horizons.

In turning to the literature to investigate the nature of extracurricular writing relationships, I found that while much research addresses a particular kind of extracurricular writing relationship—*epistolary* or letter-writing relationships—paying strict attention to the epistolary historical landscape as well as the epistle form (the missives themselves) and epistolary purposes and content, there is little scholarship that specifically documents experiential accounts or lived-experience descriptions attained from individuals recollecting their collaborative writing experiences. In other words, we simply have not heard enough first-person stories of what it is like to write in an out-of-school writing relationship. Authors of shared writings illustrate why they write, how they write (the genre, style, tone of choice), and the writings themselves, but rarely

explore the lived experience of extracurricular writing after the writing has ceased—retrospectively considering the role writing played in the relationship.

Indeed, Stanley (2015) posited that “while there has been a decided upsurge of interest in popular cultural forms, there are some remaining lacunae regarding quotidian forms of cultural production. One such concerns letter-writing and its proxies” (p. 240). She further situated letter-writing and other forms of writing akin to this kind of writing such as notes, texts, Twitter, and email as an everyday literacy or a kind of ordinary writing. Her primary inquiry was the following: Is the letter dead? This question raised the notion of epistolary intent, which she described as the intent to communicate “to another person who is ‘not there’ because removed in time/space from the writer, and doing so with the hope or expectation of a response” (p. 242). Her study raises interesting points about the impact of digital communications on present-day forms of letter-writing, and it also raises the issue of intent and point of view or perspective. Why letters are written, how they have evolved over the course of time and to what extent certain roots of the epistolary relationship have remained consistent over time were examined in her study. What was not examined, however, is what it’s like to be a writer in a writing relationship, what it’s like to experience writing to someone else with the intent to communicate.

To further clarify this angle of study, lived experience, according to van Manen (1990), “is the breathing of meaning” (p. 36). Lived experience, an experience described as a phenomenon by phenomenologists, is one that is recognized through retrospection. In other words, by giving memory to the lived experience of writing within a relationship and as writing as a part of that relationship, meaning can be assigned to

this phenomenon. Also in attunement with a phenomenological ideology is that an appropriation of meaning assigned to a particular lived experience, like writing within an extracurricular writing relationship, is something that cannot be fully understood until the experience has passed. As stated by Willis et al. (2016), a discernable characteristic of phenomenological research “is the researcher taking the view that the human being is that sort of being who lives through events or life situations that are necessarily shaped and held within one’s consciousness pre-reflectively; that is, the human being is the type of being who is able to reflect on his being. The focus is on experience as lived” (p. 1188).

In general, we can construct and co-construct meaning from an on-going living experience. In contrast with the above mentioned phenomenological claim, a narrative viewpoint, as asserted by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), asserts that the storying of lived experiences does not happen within one dimension of time but rather along a continuum of time—looking at experiences then, now and in the future. It is towards Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) theory of temporality to which I ever so gently modify my understanding of lived experience. While I further discuss this phenomenological amendment later throughout Chapter One, as well as throughout Chapter Three, the participant criteria noted that participating couples needed to have been a member of their extracurricular writing relationship for at least one year prior to data collection. Also, if the participant couple’s extracurricular writing relationship had ended prior to data collection, it must not have ended more than three years prior to data collection. This is because the out-of-school writing relationship should not have ended so long

ago that memories have waned, nor be so fresh that experiences have little retrospective capability.

In keeping with this understanding of lived experience, the epistolary literature—comprised mainly of third-party historical interpretations of the epistolary relationship as well as the texts themselves—indicated few, if any, first-person recollected accounts of what it is like to be a member of an extracurricular writing relationship. At the inception of this study, we simply had not heard the storied experiences from the writers themselves citing what it is like to write within an extracurricular writing relationship. We also did not know how the members of these relationships construct, co-construct, and re-construct meaning through these writing relationships. Thus, narratives from relationship members looking back at their lived experiences of what it was like to be a writer in an extracurricular writing was not well-documented in the literature.

Letters focus on the content of the relationship but not on the collaborative process writers take. The missives in particular are rich data detailing the emotions and the thoughts of the letter writer while she or he is writing. Likewise, both public and private (now public) letters document rich accounts of the many purposes of letter-writing, the many types of letter-writing relationships, the many forms of letters, as well as the many autobiographical, biographical, historical, social, political, conversational and literary functions of letter-writing. Quite simply, what it's like to write in an extracurricular writing relationship and how meaning is co-constructed through these relationships as recounted by the relationship members themselves was not yet realized. The lived experience of writing within a writing relationship has received less attention than other epistolary endeavors. Much like Hlava and Elfers (2014) contended

in their study of the lived experience of gratitude as it arises with individuals, first-person accounts of what it's like to experience writing with someone in an out-of-school writing relationship can reveal more than any third-person method (p. 436).

Thus, in the present study, I listened to the stories from the storytellers themselves of what it was like to write in an extracurricular writing relationship and attempted to understand and describe the meaning the writers collaboratively ascribe to their experiences. I heard what I realized is an untold story: what it's like to be a member of an out-of-school writing relationship. Toward this end, the purpose of this study was to look at and thoughtfully illustrate the out-of-school writing experiences of couples in an extracurricular writing relationship. Inspired by Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which describes meaning making as a social process, I sought to illuminate the nature of how writing as a particular literacy practice and lived sociocultural event was experienced beyond the composition classroom and within relationships fostered and co-constructed outside of school—within the extracurricular. The theoretical underpinning, my lens, for looking at these out-of-school relationships was guided by both a narrative as well as a phenomenological approach to studying human experience. As very little documented research addresses extracurricular relationships from recollected first-hand phenomenological or narrative, the objective of this research was to provide a podium for expression to couples who were or are involved in the phenomenon of an extracurricular writing relationship and in so doing, to realize the co-constructed impact of their involvements in these kinds of relationships.

Orienting Towards This Phenomenon: From Where I Stood

As posited by van Manen (1990), “to orient oneself to a phenomenon always implies a particular interest, station or vantage point in life” (p. 40). My orientation towards “the lifeworld” is as a parent, educator and former member of an out-of-school writing relationship. Quite simply, I have pedagogic interest in the world around me, and human science inquiry is no exception. I have an interest as an individual who has experienced an extracurricular writing relationship with my daughter. I am interested as someone who believes everyday writing has educational value—in and out of the classroom. Thus, my orientation towards the phenomenon of the extracurricular writing relationships is both personal and pedagogical. And these orientations come with responsibility. As a parent, as a teacher and as a former member of an extracurricular writing relationship, I was aware of my biases and how my positionality affected my observations, my choices, and ultimately, my descriptions. Frankly, there will always be bias.

We “bracket” or suspend our beliefs of these presuppositions to grasp the nature of the phenomenon in question outside of our preconceived knowledge (Husserl, 1962). We can’t just forget what we know. However, we can acknowledge our pre-understandings explicitly to hold them specifically on the sidelines and to also play a bit of psychologically-induced Devil’s advocate with them. Thus, as noted above, I was a member of an extracurricular writing relationship. This personal relationship was not always cultivated through writing, nor was writing the impetus that drove this relationship. However, writing was part of my relationship with my daughter. And while I never imagined nor intended to cultivate our relationship through writing or for us to rely

on writing as a means to communicate, to comfort, to celebrate, to explicate or to love and to care, writing found its way into our relationship by chance. My husband and I also wrote to each other on a regular basis, usually to recap the year or to share poetry on Valentine's Day.

In addition to being a mother of three and a wife for over fifteen years, I am also a writing teacher and a doctoral student. As a teacher of high school English and as a teacher of English education, I have always placed tremendous value in fostering in-school writing relationships. Quite frankly, I can't imagine working with my students if I didn't know them—as both writers and as individuals with past writing experiences. Some of my favorite moments in the classroom are when my students walk in to the room. I try to greet them with a smile, and I try to make them feel as if their presence in our class matters. I do this by simply asking, "How are you?" And then I wait for an answer, and I listen. I try to hear what they are telling me. Likewise, if they care to know, and they usually do, I share with them why I became a writing teacher, the role writing plays in my life and how writing, for me, is a catalyst for discovery and for growth. We cultivate these class relationships together in conversation but also in writing.

I often find myself asking: How can I build a writing classroom community that fosters learning without knowing my students as writers or without understanding the role writing plays in their life beyond the academy? How can a learning community, with writing at the fore, thrive if we don't forge interpersonal relationships cultivated through writing? I continually seek to understand how I can know my students through their writing. Thus, these in-class writing relationships help me shape my curriculum as much as they are part of the curriculum.

Therefore, this present study, for me, held two personal but also professional purposes: I wanted to gain a storied sense of the role writing plays in out-of-school relationships, and I wanted to study out-of-school writing relationships to see how these personal and extracurricular writing experiences can inform in-school writing relationships.

Literature Informing This Study

Researchers are always informed by a theoretical as well as a methodological framework. The methodological perspective by which I approached this study is phenomenological in that I see the extracurricular writing relationship as an everyday lived experience or phenomenon, as well as narrative in that I believe that we live storied lives—making sense of our lived experiences through the telling and re-telling of stories. Informing these two methodological perspectives is a sociocultural lens. Thus, grounded in the sociocultural theory of learning, this inquiry is informed by the belief that literacy is a social practice (Freire, 1970/2000; Gee, 1990; New London Group, 1996; Street, 1984). In particular, a sociocultural lens provides a framework for examining how a literacy practice, such as writing within an extracurricular writing relationship, is a socially, culturally and linguistically mediated literacy practice.

Because this phenomenological study is informed by a sociocultural understanding of the way knowledge is constructed, I believe that “people come to have [or make] knowledge” through their “active engagement in the process of making meaning” (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005, pp. 13-14). I also, like other scholars before me, believe that “meaning is socially, historically, and rhetorically constructed” (Geertz, 1973). Therefore, to closely observe and illustrate the phenomenon of writing within an

extracurricular writing relationship and how meaning is afforded through these co-constructed writing experiences, I paid attention to not just the understanding of what it's like to write within an extracurricular writing relationship but also to the writing relationship—the couple—and how they share the story of their extracurricular writing relationship.

Specifically, Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky, upon whose viewpoints sociocultural theory is based, posited that cognitive and human development is largely based on social interaction. Thus, individuals learn and make meaning through socialization. According to Cole and Engeström (1993), all human activity is mediated by these cultural tools, which are embedded within social interaction. Also, contributing to the collective formulation of the individual mind, the interaction between individuals and cultural artifacts (Wertsch, 1991) has led to the awareness of collectively or socially valued goals (Whipp, Eckman, & Van de Kieboom, 2005). Therefore, for the purpose of this inquiry, I witnessed the phenomenon that is the extracurricular writing relationship by accessing the lived experiences of those involved through their narratives. In addition, after obtaining written consent, I viewed the written (either by hand or electronically) exchanges, as I saw these written artifacts as a vehicle towards understanding and illuminating the co-constructive nature of these relationships.

Sociocultural theory recognizes that literacy is a social practice. As mentioned above, sociocultural theory is based on the scholarship of Lev Vygotsky (1986) and has been expounded by numerous other scholars, many of whom I will presently discuss within the context of their contributions to our understanding of literacy as both an in and out-of-school sociocultural practice. Clearly, literacy is conceptualized by countless

individuals and in countless ways. The following section contextualizes the variety of settings where literacy does and can occur.

Out-of-School Literacy Events and Practices

Literacy scholarship's scope and sequence is complicated; it cannot be summarized with any simplicity. For that reason, in this section, I succinctly discuss literacy scholarship that specifically addresses the writing and reading activities that have helped cultivate our understanding of how out-of-school reading and writing practices function as well as their purpose. Thus, this discussion will begin with a brief overview of some key terms and ideas. I will then review scholarship looking at literacy within an out-of-school setting and then turn respectfully towards the theories and the practices that have served as an intellectual foundation for our current out-of-school literacy investigations, including this present study.

For the purpose of the present study, a working understanding of out-of-school literacy and how it relates to writing was established. Clearly, as Barton (1991, 1994) noted, the words "reading," "writing," and "literacy" have many meanings that twist and turn, connecting with each other at various points and within varying contexts. Out-of-school literacy encompasses the literacy and literate *practices* and *events* that take place in sites other than in school. These two terms are rooted deeply within ideologically-driven understandings of the role of literacy within everyday lives, with a literacy *event*, as rooted in Hymes' (1964) sociolinguistic idea of speech events, being an occasion where reading and writing ensue, while a *practice*, as rooted in the literacy scholarship headed by Scribner and Cole (1981), is an event informed by a particular cultural practice. For example, an adult sitting writing a letter with her child is a literacy

event. To what extent a leader emerges—either parent or child—and in what ways this event is procured, how it evolves, what is said and not said, and where the event takes place is informed by the influencing cultural practice. Specifically, for the purpose of this study, literacy practices, according to Barton (1994), are “the general cultural ways of utilizing literacy which people draw upon in a literacy event” (p. 37). Heath's (1983) concept of "literacy events" as "any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of participants' interactions and their interpretive processes" (p. 350) also informs this present research study's understanding of an out-of-school literacy event as one where writing used within an out-of-school context fosters an interaction between individuals.

Everyday and Out-of-School Literacy

Literacy events and practices taking place out-of-school vary in form, function and purpose. These out-of-school literacy events and practices have not always been center stage, as it has only been since the late 1960s and early 1970s when scholars, seeking for a way to solve the impending “literacy crisis” in schools, turned to not only non-industrialized or third world societies without universal and/or compulsory schooling but also to the communities and homes here in the United States of America where unstudied and misunderstood literacy events and practices were occurring every day.

What scholars found by looking at out-of-school and cross-cultural literacy events and practices was that literacy is much more than simply reading and writing. Simply stated, it's much more complicated than that. Literacy, as studied and documented by numerous scholars and through numerous cross disciplinary-driven objectives (e.g., sociolinguistics, anthropology, psychology, and literacy) is a social activity described

through literacy *practices* which people cultivate within literacy *events*. People enact different literacies—like computer, visual, political, sport, and artistic literacy—within a variety of different school-based and out-of-school sites. Also learned is that individual’s literacy practices are located in broader social relationships. And perhaps most important to this present study, we have learned that out-of-school literacy practices have the potential to inform in-school practices and that the two have a highly permeable relationship where everyday literacy practices leak into school and school-based literacy practices leak into the community and home. The most evident discrepancy stems from the cultural capital of each.

According to Barton (1991), one of the most potent misgivings about literacy is the conflicting understandings of what literacy is. In 1991, Barton asked, “How can we make sense of the writing people do in their everyday lives?” (p. 1) and then sought to address how everyday understandings of literacy fit into the general view of literacy. Through this line of inquiry, Barton unraveled an ideological disconnect between the way people view literacy practices in school and the way they understand—and often ignore—the significance of literacy practices beyond school walls. In fact, the primary purpose of Barton’s subsequent text, *Literacy: An Introduction to the Ecology of Written Language* (1994), was to help individuals, both within the academy and beyond, to understand the different ways that people discuss reading and writing and to create what at the time he considered new views of literacy (p. 2).

Cole (1995) and Schulz and Hull (2002) brought attention to the false dichotomy that exist with the consideration of in- and out-of-school literacy practices. First, out-of-school practices and in-school practices are not devoid of overlap in that out-of-school

and in-school contexts—both in terms of space and time—are highly permeable and prone to disrupt theoretical dimensions. Second, there is danger in treating, as Cole (1995) suggested, context as capable of isolationism and therefore incapable of being manipulated by various shaping factors. According to Hull and Schultz (2002), researchers may fail to adequately tackle the “school-like practice at home or non-school-like activities in the formal classroom. Such contexts are not sealed tight or boarded off; rather, one should expect to find, and one should look to account for, the movement from one context to the other” (p. 12). What we can glean from this caveat is that investigating in-school or non-school literacy practices does not necessarily mean that the literacy actions occurring within each are environment- or time-specific in that out-of-school practices can resemble in-school practices and in-school practices may often mirror out-of-school practices. Thus, while the focus of this study is on an out-of-school literacy practice, it is certainly possible that some of these writing practices will resemble in-school writing practices, as the contexts are not without overlap.

Out-of-School Literacy Research and Discovery

Hull and Schultz (2001) noted that while public discourse has always favored literacy practices rooted within an in-school setting, the last 30-plus years of literacy inquiry have moved the study of literacy and literacy practices to the extracurricular and in doing so generated key understandings of the functions of literacy within diverse out-of-school contexts. Schultz and Hull (p. 575-577), in extensively reviewing literacy scholarship within a non-school setting and from numerous and diverse historical perspectives, identified the theoretical developments in how scholars make sense of, study and discuss literacy based within an out-of-school context. They surmised that

literacy scholarship has indeed faced a dramatic and important ideological evolution—an evolution characterized by a contextual shift of focus. Hull and Schultz (2001) found that “with the realization that so many children, youth, and adults have fared poorly at schooling came the desire to understand why, and that analysis moved forward by moving away from a sole focus on classrooms and toward a broader examination of life and learning in families, communities, and organizations” (p. 602). From this finding, they asked us to turn our attention further into non-school literacy practices, calling for an examination of the relationships between these out-of-school practices with in-school literacy practices. They posited the following rationale for this continuing line of scholarship:

Given the vast gulfs that separate and continue to widen between children and youth who flourish in school and those who do not, between the privileged and the disenfranchised there is no better time for literacy theorists and researchers long practiced in detailing the successful literate practices that occur outside school, to direct their energies toward investigating potential relationships, collaborations, and helpful divisions of labor between schools and formal classrooms and the informal learning that flourishes in a range of out-of-school settings. (p. 604)

Some of this work in documenting and in analyzing the function, form and purpose of extracurricular writing and reading practices includes the work of Barton and Hamilton (1998) and Barton and Ivanič (1991), whose studies focused on the kinds of writing that adults do in their everyday “non-academic” life. Likewise, the scholarship of Camitta (1993), Finders (1997), Mahiri (1998) and Schultz (2002) highlights the literacy-

related activities that adolescents participate in on their own terms and in their own time with diary and playwriting as two examples. Other examples of considering non-school literacy practices include looking at graffiti as expanding our conceived notion of “text” (e.g., Cintron, 1991; Moje, 2000), as well as looking at internet chat groups as broadening what it is like to be literate outside of school (e.g., Lankshear & Knobel, 1997). Community literacy practices have also been given a great deal of attention within the last three decades with a lot of attention given to out-of-school literacy experiences of immigrant children and adults (e.g., Skilton-Sylvester, 2002; Weinstein-Shr, 1993).

Foundational Studies

Looking back at literacy scholarship that has contributed to both an ideological as well as an applicable framework for observing and understanding everyday literacy as well as the specific practices and functions of writing within particular social contexts, we turn to some of the pioneers in this field, including scholars such as Scribner and Cole (1981), Heath (1983), Brandt (1990), Barton and Ivanič (1991), Barton and Hamilton (1998), and Ruggles Gere (1994). Their work in out-of-school literacy theory and practice has been of much interest and inquiry in recent decades. Thus, it is imperative to visit some of these seminal strands of work advancing current understandings of out-of-school literacy as well as extracurricular writing practices.

Spearheading our understanding of the bond between literacy and cognition through research conducted throughout the 1970s among the Vai people of Liberia, psychologists Scribner and Cole (1981), building on the work of Vygotsky, sought to look at the cognitive effects of literacy in an everyday setting. Drawing on local cultural

customs in designing their ethnographic study, they discovered that the Vai individuals, while having been taught English in their government-sponsored schools and Qur'anic study in Arabic, used their native script for personal writing like recordkeeping and letter-writing. Through examining these in-school and out-of-school literacy practices, Scribner and Cole were able to look at individuals who were literate through out-of-school practices as well as those who were biliterate through both in-school and out-of-school practices. Ultimately, Scribner and Cole found that writing and reading activities foster certain kinds of thinking. They also introduced us to the notion that specialized forms of in- and out-of-school writing and reading have specialized and often distinctive effects and moved existing conversations beyond models of writing that sought to define school-based literacy as the primary authentic type. Perhaps one of the most influential contributions made by Scribner and Cole is that literacy is a highly social and contextualized practice. According to Scribner and Cole (1981), literacy "is not simply knowing how to read and write a particular script but applying this knowledge for specific purposes in specific contexts of use" (p. 236). Thus, through the work of Scribner and Cole, a desire to inform school-based reading and writing with out-of-school literacy practices was born. Later work by Scribner (1987) focused on the workplace, and research by Cole (1996) focused on after-school systems and continued to bring to the fore an effort to place value in after-school and non-school sites of literacy. In particular, those activities are more than just a thing to do for a particular length of time; rather, they serve larger literacy-driven goals.

Also shedding light on out-of-school literacy practices was Heath's (1983) ethnographic research focusing on literacy practices in different sociocultural settings

within the United States. Heath found that the residents of two dissimilar working-class communities—one White and one Black—located only a few miles apart in the southeastern United States had many out-of-school literacy traditions that mingled in diverse ways through oral uses of language. Through her documentation of the social history of writing within these communities, a term she referred to as the “ethnohistory” of writing, Heath made plain the connection between writing in familial and social settings and approaches towards in school writing pedagogy. Her work, beginning in 1981 in response to educators discussing the impossibility of teaching students how to write, exposed the potential for using ethnographic research of writing to reassess in-school writing instruction. Her work in 1981, and with the publication of *Ways with Words* (1983), supported the notion that the uses of literacy in communities and homes and among friends and family can successfully inform classroom-based reading and writing instruction. Propelling this studies earlier discussion on the overlap between in and out-of school literacy practices, Heath noted that while there is always potential for overlap, within her investigation, “neither community's ways with the written word [prepared] it for the school's ways” (p. 235). Ultimately, Heath concluded, “the place of language in the life of each social group is interdependent with the habits and values of behaving shared among members of that group” (p. 11).

To address the question of what literacy is, Brandt (1990) turned to the social and cultural influences on the process of literacy within both an out-of-school and in-school context. She addressed how literacy is to be understood, and in doing so, illustrated a connection between literacy and humanity—or cultural connectivity. That is, to be literate provides membership and commonality, and yet to be literate or to seek

literacy, for many, is not without ostracization, as literacy has the capacity to alienate as much as it can embrace. Thus, according to Brandt (1990), literacy is involvement—the involvement of all literacy experiences, local and otherwise, in and out of school. Brandt argued that literacy is a social phenomenon entrenched in the connections readers make with their text. According to Brandt, “reading is the primary means by which writers maintain involvement with [their] evolving reality” (p. 55). She contended that the reader-writer-text relationship is “embedded in diverse social practices, nurtured in talk, and valued as instrumental to various ends, individual and collective...” (p. 126). Within the framework of the present study, immersion within an extracurricular writing relationship is indicative of membership within a particular context. Thus, looking at out-of-school relationships built and sustained with writing proved to illuminate not only one’s understanding of what it is like to be in an extracurricular writing relationship but also how they contribute to literacy membership practices.

The Social Nature of Literacy

A complementary line of literacy scholarship moves our attention from the sites where literacy occurs and to the people that influence and take part in its practice. Strongly posited by sociocultural theories of literacy: Literacy is a practice that is socially constructed. The field of New Literacy Studies (NLS), informed by sociolinguistic and anthropological theories, language and teaching, led by Gee (1996) and Street (1993), points to acts of literacy as embedded within complex networks of social interaction through which meaning can be construed. As it relates to this inquiry, the NLS as an ideological shift is most recognized for studying literacy in out-of-school contexts. In

particular, the NLS makes their primary aim the meaning of everyday literacy events and their relationship to broader, culturally infused literacy practices.

Furthermore, the NLS drew a distinction between literacy practices as a tool or technical skill and literacy as a social custom embedded in notions of “knowledge, identity and being” (Street & Lefstein, 2007, p. 42). Street, one of the founding members of the NLS movement, derived his conceptualization of NLS through his work 1970s. Through participating in Iranian village life, Street (1990, 1995) identified and documented three kinds of literacies used by adults and youth: a literacy associated with Islam and taught in the Qur’anic schools (a literacy he referred to as *maktab*); a commercial/economic literacy used in the markets and in the village; and a school literacy associated with government schools. What emerged from Street’s work was a new understanding of the many kinds of literacy practices and the values or lack of value placed upon them by Western notions of literacy. Street’s (2001) ethnography exemplified that more research needs to bring to the fore the “complexity of local, everyday, community literacy practices” (p. 22). Literacy, according to Street, is simply not neutral; Western notions of academic literacy or schooling are but one kind of literacy among numerous unrecognized literacies (Street & Street, 1991). Thus, as it relates to the present study, there is a clear need to look at the literacy practices that occur outside of school. With so many kinds of literacy practices taking place beyond school walls, the extracurricular writing relationship is merely one of many literacy sites where our understandings of literacy as a practice can grow and expand. Namely, the out-of-school practice of writing within a relationship holds promise for potentially revealing how people use writing to cultivate both in- and out-of-school relationships

and how both in- and out-of-school writing relationships are conceived, fostered and sustained. Thus, this phenomenological narrative-inspired research project sought to enter a conversation already in motion about everyday literacy practices, but it diverged in that it sought to cover new ground focusing on everyday out-of-school relationships in which writing is a part.

Theoretical and Methodological Approaches Informing This Study

The focus of this inquiry was to examine the lived experience of the phenomenon of extracurricular writing relationships and how the individuals involved in these out-of-school relationships made sense of and co-constructed their experience through narrative. Indeed, like many research endeavors, one strong foundation helps build another, and this study's methodological framework and was inspired by the original work of Sabella (2010) and her phenomenological study on the lived experiences of prostitutes as illustrated through narrative. It is her phenomenological narrative study, and namely the theoretical framework by which she theorized lived experience, and how she framed her inquiry, that enthused and helped me to build my own methodological and epistemological base. Furthermore, while I have briefly discussed my understanding of the phrase "the lived experience of writing within an extracurricular writing relationship" in terms of Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) narrative understanding, I would like to further align it with Burch's (1990) description of the term, as did Sabella (2010). Thus, as Burch (1990) pointed out, the term "lived experience" can be challenging because we understand it not as a general English term but through phenomenology, as borrowed, with purpose, from the German language. In general, the term can be described as how we as individuals experience the world and then make

sense of it. The “nature” of something is examined and illustrated, or a given phenomenon can be illuminated. Burch (1990) posited that according to its source, the phrase "lived experience" is what an individual directly experiences.

Inquiry With Intentionality: The Research Questions

The lived experiences of writing in an extracurricular writing relationship also encompass how couples make sense of and co-construct meaning through their relationship and feel they are involved in this kind of out-of-school relationship. Toward this end, my study’s research question is as follows: What is the lived experience of writing within an extracurricular writing relationship? As ancillary to this question, I asked: How do those involved within extracurricular writing relationships make sense of their experiences and the knowledge co-constructed through those experiences?

As the emphasis is on the co-constructed meaning of being an adult couple, either a man and a woman, or a woman and a woman, or a man and a man involved in an extracurricular writing relationship as illustrated by the couples involved in it, phenomenology serves as the methodological framework. This particular methodology, through people’s accounts of their everyday experiences, seeks meaning. I employed van Manen’s (1990) method of inquiry for this study. Phenomenology’s purpose, according to van Manen, is to offer us a robust description of a phenomenon or lived experience—the very nature of it. He defined this kind of study as the search for understanding the essence of whatever is being examined, and he defined phenomenology as follows:

Phenomenology is the systematic attempt to uncover and describe the structures, the internal meaning structure, of lived experience. Phenomenological

human science is the study of lived or existential meanings; it attempts to describe and interpret these meanings to a certain degree of depth and richness.

(pp. 10-11)

His brand of phenomenology used four concurrent practices involving eleven steps that seek to guide a phenomenological study. The first of the four processes involved “orienting” to the phenomenon in question, creating the study and being transparent about one’s held beliefs about the experience in question. The second process consisted of investigating the lived experience. Reflecting on the phenomenon, the third process, entailed conducting a thematic analysis. And lastly, the fourth process included descriptively writing for the reader a rich outline of the phenomenon in question.

The Collection of Storied Data and Identification of Participatory Couples

Through obtaining narrative data from three couples, I created a portrait, though not a grand narrative by any means, of what it is like to write in an extracurricular writing relationship and to co-construct meaning through these experiences. This did not only advance my own pedagogic understanding (van Manen, 1990, p. 90) of the nature of extracurricular writing relationships, but it also further illuminated and solidified my phenomenological orientation towards this phenomenon. Consistent with van Manen (1990), while a reflection of the self and specifically the self-engaged within a phenomenon may pose tension in regard to the self-other dyad, it is through the self by which the other can be truly understood. Thus, as seen through a phenomenological lens, we must be cognizant of ourselves as engaged within a particular phenomenon to adequately, as well as pedagogically, reflect upon and understand an *other* as they engage within the same (yet unique to the couple) phenomenon. It is through these co-

constructed experiential stories that I sought to capture meaning as understood through the couples, including my own, within these extracurricular writing relationships.

Narrative research portrays one's ideas of the world through story; it conveys meaning through the illustration of a personal experience or experiences. And while it does not assume that a shared experience conveys a "one-size-fits-all" stance, it does privilege story over scrutiny and credits storytelling as a conduit through which meaning is made (Pagnucci, 2004; Schaafsma, 1993). Narrative as both a means and an end blends well with a phenomenological approach towards understanding the essence of an experience.

Thus, storied data was collected through a variety of means including a pre-interview questionnaire and in-depth conversational interviews with each of the three couples participating in this study. Another means was the collection of solicited samples of participants' written exchanges (e.g., email, notes, and/or handwritten letters) that helped the couples share their story or come to understand their story through looking at artifacts and later describe their story. These written artifacts were used by the participants and me to seek understanding and then later by me to describe what I had come to understand. Generally, these artifacts were used for two purposes: to engage the participants in the telling of their stories, as their exchanged writings were used to spark memories and meaning from previous writing occurrences, and to generate thematic as well as dialogical understandings of their extracurricular writing relationship.

As mentioned above, narrative data was collected through a variety of means including a pre-interview questionnaire and in-depth conversational interviews with the

three couples participating in this study, as well as through the collection and analysis of the participants written missives and artifacts. Narratives from participating couples were accessed primarily through a three-step interview process. The first interview was a couple interview in which the couples were asked to collaboratively describe the nature of their extracurricular writing relationship. The second interview was a couple interview that continued to address the nature of their extracurricular writing relationship using their written exchanges or artifacts. Both couple interviews used open-ended questions and engaged the participants in talking about and in co-constructing their lived experiences with being involved in an out-of-school writing relationship and what writing in this experience was or is like for them. Questions during these two interviews were asked only for follow-up, illumination or elaboration purposes. The third and final interview took place, as needed, for follow-up with each individual member of the relationship and consisted of me asking the individuals a handful of questions related to and depending on what was said in the first and second interviews. Many couples chose to stay together for this third phase of the interview process.

Additionally, narratives and responses to the interview questions were recorded, transcribed and then analyzed using van Manen's (1990) thematically-driven phenomenological approach. This was done in order to exhaustively understand the couples' co-constructed lived experiences. As a means of analyzing the narrative data, Riesmann's (2008) illustration of a thematic and dialogic analysis was employed (as later described in Chapter Three). Looking at emergent themes as well as at the dialogic or co-constructed nature of the participants' experiential reality brought informative insight and analytic scrutiny to the stories told and re-told. An aspect within

phenomenology worth mentioning is that a researcher does not enter into a study with preconceived expectations of what she or he will find—a hypothesis is not cultivated nor illustrated. There is no “grand narrative” created, regardless of the researcher being a member of the study or not, as a comparative analysis is not the goal of a phenomenological study. Phenomenology seeks to illuminate rather than fit ideas into predetermined categories. This was the case with the present study in which the analysis included seeing what themes and dialogic meanings emerged from the heard and read data.

As previously mentioned, according to van Manen (1990), an individual (or couple, as it pertains to the present study) is unable to truly reflect upon a lived experience while living through that experience. For instance, if one tries to reflect upon one’s sorrow while in that state of sadness, one may find that the sorrow has already been altered or perhaps even has dissipated due to a re-routing of the present emotion from sorrow to a reflection on that sadness. Ideologically speaking, a phenomenological reflection is retrospective and not introspective. According to van Manen (1990), “Reflection on lived experience is always recollective; it is a reflection on experience that is already passed or lived through” (p. 10). While I do agree with van Manen in that hindsight often proves to be 20/20, I also felt that hearing from couples while they are participating in an extracurricular writing relationship can prove informative—especially if they have been in a long-term extracurricular writing relationship and have the capacity to reflect upon years of experiences within this out-of-school writing relationship. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) also reminded us that experience is temporal (p. 19) in that experiences occur along a continuum—then, now, and in the

future. So while retrospection may offer one kind of insight and introspection another, both kinds of reflection are always in flux, never once storied but rather restoried and restoried again. Looking at a phenomenon that is past provided a certain brand of experiential reflection; however, much like Clandinin and Connelly (2000) asserted, I saw looking at extracurricular writing relationships in terms of past, present, and future as not only useful but experientially illuminating. Therefore, in order to understand extracurricular writing relationships retrospectively as well as introspectively and perhaps speculatively I sought couples who were engaged within a writing relationship and had been for at least one year *or* couples who were no longer in an extracurricular writing relationship and ended this relationship (either the writing or the relationship itself) no more than three years prior to this study. I also identified couples who were in an extracurricular writing relationship and not a writing relationship fostered for academic or professional purposes, even though they may have been personal in nature.

Seeking Couples: Eligibility Criteria

To determine eligibility, each couple was vetted to make sure they met the participation requirements. Thus, in determining eligibility, I chose to look specifically at *personal* extracurricular writing relationships as opposed to professional because I felt these kinds of out-of-school relationships produced data that was reflective of relationships that were personally sought by those involved, as opposed to relationships that were imposed by another or deemed necessary in a work-related setting. These personal relationships were romantic in nature, but they do not have to be. Personal relationships could have also included a mother-child relationship or a friend-friend

relationship among other kinds of intimate relationships. An extracurricular writing relationship, for the purpose of the present study, is characterized by its sustained duration, depth of experience, and degree of intimacy. Therefore, I first approached this study with two overlapping definitions that best outlined what a personal relationship is:

1. According to Kelley et al. (1983), “two people are in a [personal] relationship with one another if they impact on each other, if they are interdependent in the sense that a change in one person causes a change in the other and vice versa” (p. 3).
2. According to Guerrero (2009), “personal relationships are central to being human... Interpersonal relationships require that two individuals influence each other in meaningful ways, that they have unique interaction patterns, and that they have repeated interactions over time” (pp. 5-6).

Toward this end, this dissertation’s goal was to examine the lived experiences of couples in an extracurricular writing relationships and how these couples co-constructively make sense of their experiences through narrative. The purpose of this study, therefore, was to look at and illuminate the out-of-school writing experiences of couples who have, within three years’ time, ended their extracurricular writing relationship *or* of couples who are still in their writing relationship and have been in it for at least a year. To do this, the following eligibility criteria, based on the aforementioned description of what constitutes a personal relationship, were applied. At the time of this study, participants:

1. Had been a member of an extracurricular writing relationship and ended this relationship or the writing within this relationship not more than three years

- before the data was collected or were a member of an extracurricular writing relationship for one year or more as measurable through the members' description of their relationship during our initial acquaintanceship phone call or meeting.
2. Had or have an interdependence of emotions within an extracurricular writing relationship as measurable through the members' description of their relationship during our initial acquaintanceship phone call or meeting.
 3. Had promoted in the past or continue to promote the evolution of the extracurricular writing relationship through a negotiated set of disclosures as measurable through the members' description of their relationship during our initial acquaintanceship phone call or meeting.

Because a writing phenomenon such as an extracurricular writing relationship provides rich and textured data comprised of perceptions and understandings through co-constructed stories and remarks, I sought to keep the sample size intimate, looking at three couples. Also, an intimate sample size proved manageable yet equally explicative, as the phenomenon was looked at through multiple perspectives and thus, multiple voices. As phenomenology describes how *one*, or in this case, *one couple*, orients to a particular lived experience, phenomenological studies are not designed to be generalizable. That is to say, these out-of-school writing experiences and the co-constructed meanings derived from these experiences are unique to the couples involved, and while we can learn from these out-of-school writing experiences, they are neither replicable nor replaceable. Thus, interviewing more couples may not

necessarily have provided a clearer elucidation of what it means to write in an extracurricular writing relationship.

Statement of Potential Significance

By exploring the experiential stories of three couples using phenomenology by way of narrative and informed through a sociocultural lens, I convey the richness of this particular collaborative and out-of-school writing phenomenon. As I listened to the stories co-constructively told and retold through the words of the participating couples, I began to better understand the nature of an extracurricular writing relationship and what it's like to write within an extracurricular writing relationship. What I knew about these out-of-school writing relationships going into this research endeavor is that there is no question of value: to this day, I still agree with this sentiment. The extracurricular writing relationship is a social activity described through literacy practices that people cultivate within literacy events. This out-of-school literacy practice informs in-school and out-of-school events. Developing a greater understanding of this phenomenon was worth exploring.

A good research topic begins with curiosity; it also begins with our own lives, our own experiences and our own desire to understand the lives we live and the experiences that define them. A particular strategy of phenomenology is to understand the “essence” of a certain phenomenon. Often that phenomenon driving our curiosity is one that is with us in life every day. For me, out-of-school writing relationships are just that kind of phenomenon. I wrote with my daughter and my husband, but I rarely (until now) thought about what these writing experiences meant or the transferability of that meaning. Pagnucci (2004) reminded us that stories are tools for meaning-making. So I

asked then, What will these stories that we co-construct teach us about out-of-school writing relationships, and how can they inform our in-school practices?

Namely, so many of us are in out-of-school writing relationships, yet very few of us think about their capital. We rarely, if at all, think about how meaning is co-produced through these collaborative writing experiences. We don't really know how or why writing *works* within out-of-school relationships. We don't think about its permeability in and out of different social contexts. Likewise, we don't know how these out-of-school writing experiences can inform in-school writing processes and products. Writing in an out-of-school context with or between friends, family members and/or lovers, for many of us, is just part of how we communicate. We don't think about the writing exchanges; we just know that for those of us who do write, it's helpful. The exchanges are part of our culture; it's what we do. The out-of-school writing practices are a part of our lives—but what is it *like* to write in an extracurricular writing relationship? Certainly, there is value in everyday experiences and certainly, stories of what it's like to write within an extracurricular writing relationship have been worth exploring and illustrating.

Reflection 2

Dear Momma,

Sorry.

Love, Madelyn

Honey,

I am not upset with you. Please do not answer the door unless Mommy or Daddy are with you.

I love you so, so, so, so much.

Love, Momma

Dear Momma,

Ok. I love you sosososososososososososo much too. What are you doing now?

Love,

Madelyn

Dear Madelyn,

I am printing the paper I wrote today. Then, I will edit and revise it, which means I will fix it, change it, and make it better. By the way, don't forget you're having a sleepover at Meredith's Wednesday- Thursday. Make a list of what you might want to bring, okay?

Love, Momma

Dear Momma,

What to bring:

- 1. sleeping bag*
- 2. pajamas*
- 3. one outfit for next day*
- 4. underwear*
- 5. toothbrush*
- 6. bathing suit*
- 7. cookies*

Did I get it all? Me miss you.

Love,

Maddy

Dear Maddy,

I love you and will miss you tomorrow night when you are not home. But, for now my dear... READ!!

Dear Momma,

OKAY!! I love you.

Love, Maddy

This segment from our journal, a written exchange shared between a mother and her daughter, is a story—a story illustrating a writing relationship. This exchange between Madelyn and me conveys two individuals communicating in the most

uncomplicated yet profoundly loving of ways. Our relationship was cultivated through the writing, and yet it was the relationship that fostered the writing. This is my story—a piece of it, at least. But what can stories teach us and how can we learn from them? What do we already know about writing in relationships? We must first look back before glancing ahead.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

In seeking to more fully understand the life experiences of couples involved in out-of-school writing relationships through a phenomenological lens and in seeking to examine the lived experiences of couples participating or having participated in an out-of-school writing relationship through their narratives, this study combines the conceptualization of the nature of an extracurricular writing relationship through narrative terms and a discussion of the complexity of personal correspondence, namely looking at the epistolary relationship as the most theorized and practiced brand of written exchange. Hence, an appraisal of the literature will begin with a broad-spectrum discussion of what narration and narrative is and its role within various academic fields, followed by its relationship to phenomenology and lived experience. Subsequently I present an overview of the literature pointing to the epistolary practice as the most documented genre of extracurricular written correspondence, which offers valuable insight into what an extracurricular writing relationship is like, why it is important and what those who study it have said about its form and its social pervasiveness. To this end, I provide a portrait of letter-writing practice as one example of a socially situated out-of-school literacy practice.

Narrative Across Fields of Study: The Turn Towards Story

I begin with what we know about narration and narrative. Westby and Culatta (2016) began their study with an epigraph that reads: “We tell ourselves stories and live by the stories we tell ourselves” (p. 260). They described “narration” as the “act of telling a story in some type of chronological order, of fictional or real events” (p. 260). They

further defined stories that people tell about their entire lives or a series of related events as “integrated life stories” and stories they tell about single episodic experiences as “event narratives.” They posited that both event and life narratives relate to social and academic success. The relationship between the words “narration” and “storytelling” is surprisingly complex in terms of how stories are shared. While Westby and Culatta postulated that narration is an act of telling, they made no mention of form in their definition. Phillips (2012) described storytelling as an oral art form “where a teller shares a story with a live audience through dynamic application of voice, gesture and contemplating props” (p. 142). However, Brendel and Chou suggested that the concepts of “storytelling and meaning-making are inseparable” (p. 14). Thus, the telling of a good story, in any form, is worth consideration.

Huber et al. (2016) described story as fundamental to humanity and as old as humanity itself: “Throughout the ages and across cultures story continues to express the fundamental nature of humanity” (p. 214). As well, stories are “at the heart of how we make meaning of our experience in the world” (p. 214). Our understandings of story are almost as old as the stories themselves, though our ability to define story and its purpose in research is evolving. In fact, even the lexicon is taking shape.

What is story? What is narrative? Do they mean the same, and in what context is there a divide, if any? It seems that story is the word most often used when individuals are sharing an experience or a tale—fiction or nonfiction. It has a lay appearance and approach. It is the tale before the theorization, the version before the reflection, and perhaps the experience prior to consideration. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) used “narrative” to mean both the phenomenon—individuals live storied lives and share

stories of those lives—and the method of study—researchers doing their best to describe those lives and write narratives of the experience. Narrative, since earliest times, has always been acknowledged in genres such as poetry, folklore and drama. The idea of narrative has grown beyond this narrow literature-bound scope to encompass such disciplines as education, history, anthropology, folklore, theology, sociolinguistics, sociology, law, ethnography, medicine, psychiatry and psychology (Clandinin, 2007; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007; Pullman, Bethune, & Duke, 2005). Often, the research seems to most frequently use the word “narrative” when story comes under scrutiny. And indeed, over the last few decades, narrative has played a significant role in a number of different fields (Elliott, 2005; Huber et al., 2013; Labov, 2006; Mishler, 1995; Ochs & Capps, 2001; Riessman, 1993; Sunderland, 2014).

While clearly the telling and re-telling of stories is not a new phenomenon, what feels fresh is the materialization of researchers utilizing storied approaches in a variety of subject areas and the view of narratives as not only an acceptable but an important, valuable, and intelligent means of conducting research (Clandinin, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Pagnucci, 2004; Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007; Riessman, 1993, 2008). In particular, over the course of the last two decades, numerous scholars within the social sciences and the humanities have remarked on a turn toward narrative (Huber et al., 2013; Riessman, 2008; Webster & Martova, 2007).

The roles of stories, whether personal or fictional, “shape the meaning and texture of our lives at every stage and juncture” (Wetherell & Noddings, 1991, p. 1); thus, stories contribute to our understanding of the world as we live it and as we understand it

as lived by others. As posited by McAdams, Josselson and Lieblich (2001), personal stories told and retold contribute to our identities, help us to face challenges in our lives, shape how we vision the future and “help to determine the nature of our interpersonal relationships” (p. xv). Stories even help us heal; they can be therapeutic to the storyteller and to the listener (Sunderland et al., 2014). A story can be structured as the storyteller wills it to be and with each telling; the form can bend and re-shape as circumstances and contexts change. Stories can be shared through multimodal means, as described in the 1000 Voices project in which storytellers share their stories using images, text, film and audio (Sunderland et al., 2014).

A sizable volume of literature explores the role of narrative in understanding the human literacy experience inside and outside the home, in plain sight and hidden, in schools and outside of schools, and through formal and informal pedagogical practices. Through narrative, literacy stories come to life and in many cases, give life to new theories and practices. Examples of these literacy stories can be found in literacy scholarship which details the ways and forms in which literacy functions (Heath, 1983; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Street, 1994), including the in-school and out-of-school contexts (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Heath, 1983), the lives of children and adults experiencing literacy within communities and homes (Barton & Ivanič, 1991; Neilson, 1989; Sheridan, Street, & Bloome, 2000), and in everyday literacy events and activities (Camitta, 1993; Finders, 1997; Mahiri, 1998; Schultz, 2002).

According to Bruner (1987), storytelling is a human mode of thought. He wrote that a narrative “deals with vicissitudes of human intentions” (p. 16). The telling and re-telling of stories has the power to teach us about the world around us and about others

and their experiences, which may be different from our own, to engage us in the perspectives of others, and to transform how we think and assess the world (van Manen, 1990). As a means to new ways of seeing and knowing, narrative is used extensively in literacy studies (Barton & Hamilton, 1988; Heath, 1983; Moje, 2000; Schultz, 2002; Street, 1993, 1994). The use of narrative as a tool to understand and inform in-school and out-of-literacy school contexts as a social practice and as a phenomenon is still very much on the pulse of current literacy scholarship (Street & Lefstein, 2007).

It is the stories counted and recounted about literacy events and practices, told through the recollections and introspections of numerous individuals of all different ages, races, genders and ethnicities, living in a variety of different cultures and within different communities, that help guide scholars in their quest to understand what literacy is, how it functions and how it is acquired. Stories describe what illiteracy is like, help us to understand how literacy is truly a social phenomenon, and bring literacy encounters, both good and bad, to the fore. And in line with this present research endeavor, stories help us to understand what it is like to write in an extracurricular writing relationship as well as the meaning made through the storying of these lived experiences. Schaafsma (1993) viewed the process of storytelling as a rich, complex, and centering experience for both storyteller and story listener. As one of seven teachers within the Dewey Center Community Writing Project (DCCWP), a collaborative, community-based writing program in Detroit's inner city, Schaafsma discussed his, his students' and his colleagues' experiences of learning through the telling of stories as well as through the listening to the stories of others. *Eating on the Street* is a story—filled with stories—of

the power of stories. It is a book about literacy in a particular multicultural community, and it is a lesson via story about the importance of stories in not only sharing ideas about how to teach literacy but also in how to understand literacy. Schaafsma (1993) reflected on his reason for writing about his experiences with the DCCWP:

I was interested in the way in which the Dewey program, in its focus on the students' community, drew on the stories of community members, which in turn engendered stories from students. I heard these students' stories from the basis on the teachers' daily discussions about the classroom, which also took shape as stories. The teachers began telling each other stories early in our collaboration, sharing stories not only about our experiences and professional interests, but also about our lives outside teaching ... Through these stories we came to understand each other. (p. 29)

It was through storytelling that students and teachers alike reflected upon and explored their lived experiences with multiple kinds of literacy. Thus, their shared and unshared experiences with literacy reached a greater understanding. Students and teachers participating within the DCCWP recollected stories of past encounters with literacy and with students encountering literacy and through these recollections were able to make sense of their current teaching and learning experiences

Calling attention to teachers and their use of narratives, Witherell and Noddings (1991) claim that stories "can infiltrate cultural barriers, discover the power of the self, and deepen their understanding of their personal histories and possibilities" (p. 4). In addition, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) reminded us that it is through stories that we are able to instruct and be instructed. As well, Cooper (2000) posited that critical

thinking skills are developed through the creation of narratives. And finally, Rymes (2001) further contended that having an understanding how students live and experience the world can greatly affect pedagogy.

Defining Narrative

Narrative can be identified as both the process and the product. It has links with both postmodern and constructionist epistemologies (Hickson, 2016). Narrative can be seen as representation (Riessman, 1993). Narrative chronicles human experience through the creation of individual stories (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Narrative helps people make sense of their lives and is equally necessary for shaping life and lived experiences (Bruner, 1990; Dyson & Genishi, 1994, Sunderland, 2014). Narrative is related to culture, identity and language (Josselson & Lieblich, 1994; McAdams, 2003). The definition of the word *narrative* is, well, complicated, as Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber (1998) pointed out. It is a term that is evolving (Elliot 2005), and to others, an “umbrella term” (Mishler, 1986b). According to Ochs and Capps (1996), personal narrative is complicated to describe though it can be seen as spoken, seen or “embodied framings of a sequence of actual or possible life events” (p. 19) and can consist of numerous genres—one of which is epistles. One description of narrative is that it is much like text framing a storyteller’s life (Hyden & Overlien, 2004). Another is that it functions as a tool for arranging events into some sort of sequence—eventually, marking it as whole whereas sense and meaning can be made (Elliott, 2005).

In the present study, narrative data were obtained from three couples. Through collecting these storied experiences, I created an illustrative portrait of what it is like to write in an extracurricular writing relationship and to co-construct meaning through

those experiences. As described above, narrative research portrays one's ideas of the world through story; it conveys meaning through the illustration of personal experiences. Also, narrative can act as both a means and an end towards understanding the essence of particular experiences. This was well articulated in the 1000 Voices public awareness project conducted by Sunderland et al. (2014) in which multimodal storytelling was gathered to explore the lives of people with disability. Thus, in the present study, narrative is the data, as it is collected, and it also portrays an understanding of what it means to write in a writing relationship; it conveys co-constructed meaning gleaned through the storying of shared personal experiences.

While acknowledging the precise definition of narrative or "personal" narrative is still a subject of much debate. There seems to be a consensus pointing to the idea that casting experiences into a narrative form is what helps people make sense of their experience(s) (Bruner, 1990; Gee, 1985; Mishler, 1986a). Riessman and Speedy (2007) further contended that the word "narrative" is synonymous with "story" and is described and used in numerous ways and in a variety of disciplines. Clearly, the story of the term "narrative" is still in the works.

The Narrative Scope

In addition to discussing definitions of narrative and what it entails, the purpose and function of narrative should also be considered. Through a lens tailored to illustrate narrative within the field of education, Dyson and Genishi (1994) contended that all humans have a fundamental need for story. They contended that "stories help to make sense of, evaluate, and integrate the tensions inherent in experience: the past with the present, the fictional with the 'real,' the official with the unofficial, personal with the

professional, the canonical with the different and unexpected” (pp. 242). They also described stories as tools that “transform the present and shape the future” (pp. 243).

A pioneer in seeing the value of what narrative can do and what it can guide scholars to consider, Grumet (1976) cited autobiography as one of the greatest ways to gain a critical perspective on teaching and learning experiences that might otherwise go unnoticed or unearthed. Providing shape and meaning to our everyday experiences, narratives are an everyday occurrence (Brendel & Chou, 2016; Bruner, 2002; Mishler, 1986a; Rossiter, 2003). Polkinghorne (1988) described narrative as the primary structure through which our reality is meaningfully extracted. Narratives are a central and universal genre, as Ochs and Capps (1996) suggested, with our ability to narrate developing early in our developmental years. As stated by Webster and Mertova, (2007), “stories are one of the first forms of learning that children encounter” (p. 25).

While considering the scope of narrative, it is important to mention the role played by reflection. According to Hickson (2016), reflection is vital for people in exploring and making sense of the ways they “construct meaning of their experiences, interpretations and experiences” (p. 381). There is no one-size-fits-all method of reflection: when to do it, how to do it, or even why to do it. However, researchers (Reissman & Quinney, 2005) have pointed to reflection as a necessary means to unpack what a story can mean and the purpose it can serve. Critical reflection, as described by Fook and Gardener (2007), is but one potential reflexive approach.

Narrative’s Relationship with In- and Out-of-School Literacy Practices

Though they are complex, tough to define precisely, and comprised of a variety of genres (Alvermann, 2000; Ochs & Capps, 1996), narratives have a pivotal role in

helping us to create, maintain and understand our own literate identities and to inform those seeking to understand the literacy practices of others. In the present study, narrative played a pivotal role in helping me to procure and process the research questions guiding this study: What is the lived experience of writing within an extracurricular writing relationship? As well, how do those involved within extracurricular writing relationships make sense of their experiences and the knowledge co-constructed through those experiences?

In considering in- and out-of-school literacy practices through a narrative lens, Neilsen (1989) believed that literacy is not an acquired skill but one that is a reflection and creation of who we are (p. 2). Her attempt to describe literacy through narrative by stepping into the lives of three adults living in Hubbards, Nova Scotia, brought her not only closer to the literate lives of Judy, Jim and Elizabeth but to her own narrative, detailing and transforming what literacy means to her. In seeking to understand what it means to be literate, Neilsen transformed her own appreciation of literacy; her story, both constructed and re-constructed throughout her scholarly journey, brought her closer to understanding literacy.

Webster and Mertova (2007) explained narrative as “well suited to addressing issues of complexity and cultural and human centeredness because of its capacity to record and retell those events that have been of most influence on us” (p. 1). As one case, in telling the stories of the individuals living in Trackton and Roadville, a Piedmont community of the Carolinas, between 1969 and 1979, Heath (1983) argued that we can construct an understanding of a phenomenon, like literacy, through observing, understanding, illustrating and interpreting through observation what people do and the

stories that they tell. Thus, it was the stories of Trackton and Roadville and the people living in those communities that helped Heath to understand the literacy events and practices taking place within them. Heath found, through observing the literate lives of the people of Trackton and Roadville, through listening to their literacy narratives, and through creating a narrative of her own from what she learned in her experiences with living among these communities, that the children's ability to use language was very much intertwined with familial structure and the socialization practices taught from generation to generation and defined the roles that community members could assume. Narrative, in the case of Heath's (1983) work, captured the story of literacy in two communities. Her work continues to help teacher-scholars to understand, through story, how deeply engrained literacy habits and values run and how and why to alter communicative barriers between in-school and out-of-school literacy practices.

Despite wide-ranging uses exhibiting the value of narrative, there is general agreement, though not always explicitly stated, regarding the value of using narrative in research that aims to explore, among many other things, literacy experiences and events (Schaafsma, 1993). Narratives illustrating literacy experiences and events are well suited for representing certain subcultures within a society, including misrepresented groups whose stories seek to express their muffled and often covered voices (Lieblich et al., 1998), as is the case in Heath's study (1983) looking at the literacy practices of two working-class communities. Other studies seeking to advance understandings of literacy have used narrative as not only a process but also as a product to explore what literacy is, how it functions, where it resides and how it functions within communities both in homes and in schools. Examples of these literacy narratives

can be found in work which details the everyday literacy experiences of Shirley, June and Cliff (Barton & Hamilton, 1998); the story of conflict about eating on the street from the viewpoint of Schaafsma (1993) and his colleagues and students; the literacy narratives of Judy, Jim and Elizabeth, three adults experiencing literacy in everyday life (Neilson, 1989); and the story of how first-grader Michelle learned to read (Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984).

Narrative was established as the best approach to examine the lived experiences of the couples involved in out-of-school relationships. In a similar study, conducted on the lived experiences of prostitutes, "Lives in the Life: Exploring the Lived Experience of Prostitution through Narrative" (Sabella, 2010), phenomenology by way of narrative was also used and deemed as a methodology best suited to garner meaning through lived experience. Van Manen (1990) asserted that narratives are best suited for inquiries when there is an interest in how people depict their life through story, a desire to learn about what is perceived as an everyday occurrence or phenomenon, and a mindfulness to the notion that the researcher is also a storyteller (Elliott, 2005).

Narrative's Relationship with Lived Experience and Phenomenology

Scholars seeking to understand the experiences of another cannot directly access these experiences but can come to understand them through talk, text, interaction and interpretation. Riessman (1993) thoughtfully warned us that we can't allocate voice to another; rather, we can hear what another has to say, record their story and through interpretation ascribe meaning. Some have described the experiences of another as phenomena and approached it with a sense of wonder (Willis et al., 2016). Indeed, narratives often emerge as representations of the lived experiences of others.

Stories, some might say, reveal the lived experience of numerous individuals. The term “lived experience” refers to one’s involvement in and time lived through a certain experience; phenomenology is a theoretical approach to the study of these experiences. According to Eastmond (2007), phenomenology adopts the following view: “In the dynamic interplay between experience and expression, experience gives rise and form to narratives, but it is also organized and given meaning in the telling” (p. 249). Researchers, according to Eastmond (2007), provide a space to examine the meanings people ascribe to their lived experiences; narratives are not translucent versions of truth but reflect a dynamic relationship between life, experience and narrative. Specifically, phenomenological research aims to create a robust connection to experience to establish a renewed contact with experience as lived by the individuals themselves (van Manen, 1990).

Lived experience goes beyond just experiencing an event but requires, through recollective reflection, one to assign meaning to that event. According to Riessman (1993), events become meaningful *as a result of* their placement within a narrative (p. 18). Thus, one of the many goals of phenomenological research is to expound the meanings we give to our experiences as we live them in our day-to-day existence—to explain the everyday.

Specific to phenomenological inquiry is the notion that phenomenologists, in illuminating the meanings assigned to lived experiences, seek to unearth and describe the heart of a lived experience, focusing less on fact or truth and more on the *essence* of experience (van Manen, p. 10). “Essence,” a term used throughout numerous branches of phenomenology, was described by Husserl (1962), founder of

phenomenology, as what makes a thing a *thing*. It derives from the Greek *ousia*, meaning the true being of a thing (Sabella, 2010). What we look to understand when we study a particular loved experience is its essence. While phenomenology is addressed in much greater detail in the methodology section (Chapter Three) of this research study, its relation to narrative will be discussed here.

Lived experience is both the object and the source of the inquiry, from a phenomenological perspective. And it is the experiential accounts and lived-experience descriptions, shared narratively—either through oral or written discourse and through close observation and/or interview—that serve as the data in phenomenological research. But according to van Manen (1990), “lived-experience descriptions are data, or material on which to work” (p. 55); in the reflections and later thematic interpretations of the lived experience description, researchers may “come to an understanding of the deeper meaning or significance of an aspect of human experience, in the context of the whole of human experience” (p. 62).

In the next section, I look at scholarship that examines the epistolary relationship as an extracurricular writing practice, what the literature says about it, the themes that occur and recur within this genre of discourse, and how, by looking at this existing scholarship, we can broaden our understanding of what it means to write in an out-of-school writing relationship. While the literature does not directly address extracurricular or out-of-school writing relationships, it does devote considerable attention to the epistolary relationship. As one of several kinds of extracurricular writing relationships (characterized by an exchange of a common diary, electronic texts, and/or an exchange

of notes), the out-of-school epistolary relationship may shed light on the nature of extracurricular writing relationships.

The Epistolary Relationship as Extracurricular Writing Practice

Examining the practice of letter-writing is important to the present study for two reasons. For one, letters are a common form of extracurricular writing exchanged between individuals. Second, the “extracurricular writing relationship” falls under the umbrella of the “epistolary relationship.”

According to Bazerman (2000), “the letter, in its directness of communication between two parties within a specific relationship in specific circumstances...provide[s] a flexible medium out of which many functions, relationships, and institutional practices might develop” (p. 15). As well, the letter, as an object of in- and out-of-school literacy practice, functions as a transporter of text between individuals, as a purveyor of emotion and feeling, as a mediator and as a means to convey experiences, make a point, describe a scenario or share a story (Barton & Hall, 2000). Letter-writing functions as a social practice and a social phenomenon as it knows very few historical, cultural or communicative boundaries. Thus, it would be worthwhile to note that letter-writing is not only an important social practice but one that may shed light on what it means to write in an extracurricular writing relationship.

A considerable quantity of the literature discussing individuals participating in extracurricular writing relationships does involve, to varying extents, some form of letter-writing and exchange. While some literature explores the art and craft of personal correspondence (O’Shaughnessy, 2008; Shepherd, 2008), much of the literature examines epistle form (Bower, 1997; Gilroy & Verhoeven, 2000; Gurkin Altman, 1982),

epistolary practices (Decker, 1998), political, cultural and historical approaches to letter-writing which often points to specific socio-historical letter-writing practices (Favret, 2010; Rosenmeyer, 2001), and how the epistolary text serves as autobiography, in many cases looking specifically at the letter-writing practices of women (Cousineau, 1997; Kaufman, 1986). While important ideas about extracurricular writing relationships can be gleaned from fiction, such as the epistolary novel written as a series of missives and documents (for a recent example, see Shaffer & Barrows, 2009), the present study generally explores letter-writing as a social practice that may have the capacity to demonstrate how writing functions within a relationship. Specifically, the present review of literature turns toward nonfictional personal correspondence often viewed as “the intimacy of heart and mind speaking to heart and mind” (James, 1992, p. viii) across real distance and real time.

Letter-Writing as a Meaningful and Pervasive Literacy Activity

According to Barton and Hall (2000), the best and most informative practice for investigating letter-writing, including an examination of the participants, the artifacts, and the text itself, is to view it as a social practice and to study all its facets within its social contexts. Their aim in doing so is to understand more about the phenomenon of letter-writing and its role as a literate activity within society. In general, a linguistic analysis of letter-writing most often points to the form of the texts. In looking at letter-writing as a genre, a textual analysis reveals that the writer is time and again present in the letter, using the word “I” throughout and in the signing of the letter. Formal properties, like using “I” and “you” are but one area scholars look at when considering the letter form; the meaning embedded within the form is another. The roles and identities which

participants assume is another instructive method for investigating letter-writing.

Participants, for example, usually take on two roles: the reader and the writer. Also, the letter-writing practices of men may differ from those of women with the distinctions deeply embedded in sociocultural practices. Both the activity of letter-writing as well the letter as artifact point to the places, the spaces, and the materiality all invoked by this literacy practice.

As noted above, the purposes for letter-writing and for the letters themselves as posited by Barton and Hall (2000) range in scope: the letter is used to mediate an enormous variety of human exchanges, to narrate experiences, to make points, dispute points, describe situations, offer explanations and provide instructions. As well, letter-writing can occur in many forms: letters, postcards, memos, electronic mail, dialogue mail, and journals, to name a few. As Barton and Hall (2000) reminded us, almost anything can be put into the form of a letter. And while there are traditional letter forms—resembling “dear so and so” and ending with sincerity—there are also numerous untraditional forms exhibited both in print and in electronic form through a vehicle like email or Facebook where e-letters can be exchanged.

One significant contribution to our understanding of contemporary letter-writing as a significant and pervasive literacy activity comes to us from the work of Barton and Hamilton (1998), who looked at the everyday letter-writing practices in one town in England where all of the townspeople were involved in letter-writing in some way. Ultimately, Barton and Hamilton’s contribution to our understanding of everyday literacy practices is that letter-writing, existing alongside numerous other forms of personal writing (e.g., diary and poetry writing), is both a pervasive as well as an important

component in understanding out-of-school literacy practices. What they found, in particular, was that letter-writing events were both memorable as well as pleasurable to those involved. To this end, letter-writing, as one brand of writing within an extracurricular relationship, is a literacy practice used to cultivate personal relationships. At the very least, the letters exchanged among the people in this small town in England functioned as a viable part of their relationships.

Storied Experiences and Letter-Writing

As a point of deviation from the goals of the present research endeavor, with regard to epistolary relationships, there are few if any documented studies that have focused on the experiential relationship narratives as told by the writers themselves. Rather, most insights gained about the epistle relationship and the role writing plays within this kind of relationship has been gleaned from the content of the missives themselves. However, what is documented in the missives themselves are accounts from individuals involved in epistolary relationships discussing their roles as writers, their experiences with writing, and their feelings about sending and receiving missives. For the most part, these accounts are introspective and not retrospective. They do not directly address what it means to be in an epistolary relationship, which by many accounts is an extracurricular writing relationship, but rather writer addresses writer sharing thoughts and feelings about the relationship from within the relationship.

A useful example of research illustrating letters as a source of and as an inspiration for story is the scholarship of Benie Bruner Colvin (2008). In particular, Colvin's dissertation looked at letters, recipes and quilts as memoir and as heirloom tools prompting personal engagement between writer and reader. Letters, according to

Colvin, are a source of stories as well as potential sparks encouraging storytelling. Colvin wrote that letters can “paint pictures, share stories, break hearts, destroy families, or suggest budding love” (p. 10). Clearly, letters convey emotion; they carry emotion within the words that fill their lines.

An important point to note is that Colvin’s doctoral research not only looked at personal letters written and exchanged between her and family members but also examined letters written and exchanged among other members of her extended family. Thus, she was able to reflect on her own experiences of being a member of an extracurricular writing relationship. And while she did not term these experiences as such nor look specifically at the nature of extracurricular relationships, what she did unearth through her research was an understanding of how important letters are and how instrumental they are in the lives of people who write and receive them. The stories Colvin told of memoir-making through looking retrospectively at the process of letter-writing, at quilt-making and at recipe-crafting, depicted out-of-school relationships that use everyday means to cultivate everyday relationships. Letters saved and carefully stored for the purpose of sparking memory also portray the practice of letter-writing as one that serves a rich purpose—perhaps one far greater than just communication. Colvin’s research also revealed that letter-writing captures the story of individuals’ lives and what it means to co-construct meaning through a shared out-of-school writing experience. Most notably, Colvin’s study reiterated that behind every written exchange is a story.

Ultimately, as it relates to the present study, Colvin’s research suggested that a lot of questions remain unanswered and unanswerable through just looking at letters. In

other words, letters alone tell us a lot but not the entire story. Also, her study suggested that understanding the nature of what it means to write within an extracurricular relationship and to co-construct knowledge through being a member of an out-of-school writing relationship cannot be ascertained through just looking at letters or other written or quilted artifacts. Thus, the present study sought to not just look at written artifacts, such as letters, as a way to spark memories but to also procure through the stories told by the writers themselves what it is like to be a member of an out-of-school writing relationship. In general, this research endeavor, much like Colvin's, looked to written artifacts as it sought to gather a broader understanding of what it means to write within an extracurricular writing relationship.

Letter-Writing and Relationships

Some examples of missives that share content regarding what it is like to be in a writing relationship, how writing functions within this relationship, and about how writing serves personal as well as social purposes can be found in the missives of Ralph Waldo Emerson (see Emerson, E.L.T., 1962), Henry Adams (Levenson, Samuels, Vandersee, & Hopkins Winner, 1982-88), and Emily Dickinson (Johnson & Ward, 1958). Texts from these professionally literate individuals have much in common in that they are all New Englanders of upper-middle-class origin, born within a span of thirty-three years. According to Decker (1998), each began exchanging missives with members of an active epistolary family long before identifying his or her vocation as an explicitly literate one; in the biographies of each of these writers, letter-writing is a foundational literary act, a daily occurrence, an important conduit for cultural transmission, and a metaphor for "language use, human contact, and communal enterprise" (p. 11). Additionally, and

perhaps most important to the foundation of this study, each writer through the exchange of letters used language to mediate social relationships—to cultivate his or her relationships.

Decker (1998), in his illustration of the occasions of writing and receiving letters for Dickinson, Emerson and Adams, described Dickinson as using letter-writing as a means of developing and cultivating friendships, Emerson as a “reluctant” letter-writer looking for good conversation beyond the spoken and written discourse of his era, and Adams as complicating the boundaries between “public and private and political and private” (p. 12). Thus, Dickinson, Emerson and Adams, while each having unique intentions for writing and unique epistle relationships through this writing, give us a glimpse at what it means to be in an extracurricular writing relationship—and in particular, an epistolary relationship.

To provide a more cogent snapshot of what the content of a letter can illustrate about the nature of an epistolary relationship, I turn to Dickinson and Hawthorne. Dickinson in November 1854 remarked to Elizabeth and Josiah Holland, “I write you many letters with pens which are not seen. Do you receive them?” (Johnson & Ward, 1997, p. 309). Thus, to Dickinson, the letter itself is a holograph by which the agency and the content, through that of the agent, reign supreme. As Decker described, it is “mind speaking to mind without the intermediary of paper and ink” (p. 37). In many ways, the letter, the missive itself, is a physical manifestation of the feelings—the emotions—that drive, compel and characterize the writer. The letter transcends on many levels its actual physical or electronic form and serves as the conduit for a mind-to-mind or heart-to-heart exchange. Nineteenth-century writers and poets such as

Dickinson or Nathaniel Hawthorne knew well and wrote well of the complications of time and space—using letter-writing to connect and to cultivate. For example, in May 1840, Hawthorne, in a letter to his fiancée Sophia Peabody, whose location is unknown to him at the time, writes that “in the confidence that some breeze of Heaven will bear it to thee; for I suppose heart never spoke to heart, without being heard, and sooner or later finding a response” (Hawthorne, 1984, p. 461). In many ways, Dickinson’s absent pen and Hawthorne’s longing heart metaphorically embrace a communicative act that defies the materiality of the text itself. Because of Dickinson and Hawthorne’s self-reflexivity—their constant ability to reflect on letter-writing through the act of letter-writing—one can come to a more lucid understanding as to how human relationships have been not only transformed through letter-writing but how these transformations have gone on in time to inspire interest in the epistolary genre.

Much like through a content-based analysis of letters to glean what it means to write in an extracurricular writing relationship, another lens for learning about out-of-school writing relationships is through looking in general at texts that engage relationships between epistolary forms and discourses of gender, class, ethnicity, politics, culture and history. Jolly (2008), in looking at letters on contemporary feminism, contended that the women’s movements of the 1970s and 1980s produced extraordinarily intimate and expectation-driven correspondences among women who saw their relationships with one another as driven by honesty, friendship and a need for socio-political awareness. Jolly offered a look at the socio-cultural history of British and American second-wave feminism from a letter-writing point of view; she looked at the missives sent between women activists and writers and charted the revolution of

feeling, struggle, excitement, betrayal, love and companionship found within the folds of letters. Through her research, what Jolly (2008) concluded is that correspondences among women are a powerful and telling record of “women’s unprecedented willingness to prioritize the relationships among themselves...” (p. 2). More recently, Hennan (2013) examined the letter-writing of women in England during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. She found that these women engaged in the social practice of letter-writing for purposes of self-expression, the exchange of ideas with like-minded others, self-education, critical reading and polemical writing purposes (p. 1). The article pointed to the notion that these women letter writers built relationships more so with the writing than with those to whom they wrote.

Drawing on Vygotsky’s sociohistorical theory, Pole (2015) conducted a study in her Kindergarten classroom in which students were required to correspond with letters to family members. Pole learned from her field study that students improved their spelling and handwriting skills through writing letters, talked about writing during the project, wrote about themes and thoughts and connected these ideas throughout the letter-writing process. Their relationships flourished with Pole, the teacher-scholar, and with the family members with whom they shared writing: “family members looked for ways to connect to the children” (p. 125). This idea further speaks to the connective power of letter-writing. She cited that the letters would end with “write soon” and that throughout the study it became clear that the writing helped the children and their family members share stories and thus their lives.

Letter-Writing Scholarship

Perhaps it's best to begin with what we know about the importance of letters and the purposes for letter writing. This statement by Garfield (2014) is worth repeating in its totality:

Letters have the power to grant us a larger life. They reveal motivation and deepen understanding. They are evidential. They change lives, and they rewire history. The world used to run upon their transmission — the lubricant of human interaction and the freefall [sic] of ideas, the silent conduit of the worthy and the incidental, the time we were coming for dinner, the account of our marvelous day, the weightiest joys and sorrows of love. It must have seemed impossible that their worth would ever be taken for granted or swept aside. A world without letters would surely be a world without oxygen. (p. 19)

Aycock (2013) asked why letters are celebrated? Stanley (2015), two years later, inquired about the death of the letter but ultimately found that letters are in fact not “dead” but rather different. New technologies are changing the way we write, receive and imagine letters and define letter-writing practices, but the practice of letter-writing is still very much alive and well. Aycock ironically stated that the only thing better than receiving and reading letters is “reading other people’s letters to still others” (p. 55). He claimed the reason behind our love of letters is our love of good writing, and “good letters are good writing” (p. 55). He further posited that “letters are a diversion for most people, but they can make writers into literary gym rats” (p. 56), as letters are, for the most part, confessional.

The epistolary form and practice and those who write about letter-writing and those who letter-write do so for many reasons—some known and some unknown. We know that letters, for many, are viewed as the discourse of the heart—written from the heart and for the heart (Gilroy & Verhoeven, 2000). We know that letters often have a didactic purpose and are written with great transparency or concealment. They can address topics like love, war and violence, politics, morality, domesticity, travel, community development, economics and life and living. Letters can self-authenticate, represent and mediate as they can also influence, galvanize and comfort. We know that both men and women have used (and continue to use) letter-writing to cultivate friendships, romantic relationships, and personal, professional and political acquaintanceships. We know that letters can be written within multiple contexts and for purposes even unknown by the writer her or himself. We know that there is intertextuality to letter writing, a sort of “chain of being” where one letter is connected to the next and then to the next, creating a literary merger. We know that letters have the capacity to offer intimacy and engagement but that there is no promise of either, nor is there promise of reciprocity.

Indeed, a study conducted by Samaras and Sell (2013) pointed to the notion that letter-writing can be used as a way to dialogue, collaborate and critique within a pedagogical setting. In particular, their study examined students’ experiences using letter-writing designed as a tool to promote relationships among peers. The letter-writing was specifically designed to promote articulation, perspective-taking and constructive and non-judgmental feedback. The use of letters among the students was to allow them

to write with intention and therefore to offer authentic and honest dialogue and reflection.

However, an area of epistolary scholarship worth mentioning is letter-writing used for therapeutic purposes (Watts, 2000). Letter-writing has been used by therapists and psychologists as a powerful form of therapy, of creative writing and of relationship building in healthcare settings (Jolly, 2010; Stevens 2010). Moreover, Butler (2016) described narrative letter therapy that assists women and children in developing experiential testimonies. The letter-writing work is a tool “so easily harnessing internal as well as external relationships” (Butler, 2016, p. 49). In other words, this practice of letter-writing does not always involve the practice of sending and/or receiving. In many cases, letters are written for simply the practice of writing and reflection or other cathartic purposes.

Kress et al. (2016) discussed the role letter-writing plays in school counseling practices. The practice of letter-writing is part of a larger practice, narrative therapy, in which “clients begin to recreate their preferred stories” built on thoughts, feelings and behaviors. According to Kress et al., letter-writing “can serve to externalize a student from their problem, thus providing an avenue for locating support from internal sources” (p. 77). They also described it as a way for counselors to more effectively do their jobs: to foster student change and to help with successful decision-making (p. 74). Part of this success, Kress et al. posited, is due to the idea that students might be more comfortable with corresponding electronically and therefore with writing letters, a mode that could “prove to be a useful and comfortable medium for adolescent students who may be reluctant to open up to counselors in a face-to-face format” (p. 75). Stevens

(2010) took a different approach to letter-writing: as the therapist, she wrote letters to her clients for the purpose of “double-story development” (p. 46). In other words, she wrote to her clients as a way of acknowledging that she heard them and that she cared for them. Butler (2016) described a similar practice in her work as a therapist.

Another epistolary practice is the writing of letters written for oneself with little or no intent to share. Kress et al. (2011) illustrated this practice in a school counseling setting. Students were asked to write letters to their future selves. The students could role play as being the older, wiser self or as the friend. Students could offer themselves advice, praise or suggestions. Kress et al. noted that letter-writing to the self “can prove to be a beneficial technique to implement in school counseling because it provides a means for an individual to create solutions at a self-guided pace” (p. 82).

Other areas of research nodding towards understanding the role of the nonfictional or fictional epistle and the epistolary relationship through time have focused on the historical narrative of the epistolary practice (e.g., Fuller, 1972; Gilroy & Verhoeven, 2000; Warner, 1990) epistolarity and femininity (e.g., Armstrong, 2000; Brant, 2000), the culture of letters (e.g., Smith, 2000), the letter-writing practices of both unlettered and professionally literate individuals (e.g., Decker, 1998; Pallister, 1987), and the notion that many texts are simply the publication of once private correspondences or the republication of letters that have already spent within the public realm.

While few, if any, publications on epistolary relationships mention the words “first person narrative” or “lived experience” or rely on collecting first-account narratives from individuals previously participating in writing relationships, much of the work done

regarding writing relationships has focused exclusively on the notion of personal correspondence as personally or politically motivated and politically or socio-historically entrenched (Decker, 1998). Texts written about epistolary relationships address the human relationships entrenched within these practices but rarely, if ever, are first-person accounts (other than through the missives themselves) or address what it is like to be in a writing relationship. The writings themselves speak volumes, but a cultural artifact is merely one piece of the puzzle—a telling piece, but just a piece. Thus, for these reasons among others, this study sought to examine the lived experience of individuals involved in extracurricular writing relationships and how these individuals make sense of their experiences through narrative.

Surprisingly, unless through a correspondence itself, members of both unlettered and professionally literate societal spheres participating in writing relationships have very infrequently been asked to share their lived experiences as a member of a writing relationship. Letter-writing is well known to the general public as well as in academic and scholarly literature, yet for all the scholarship, the pop culture publicity, the exposure, do we really know and understand what being in a writing relationship, or more specifically, what writing in a relationship outside the academy—in the extracurricular—entails? What do the couples involved in these writing relationships have to say about what being in an extracurricular writing relationship is about? What do these coupled writing experiences and the knowledge co-constructed through those experiences mean to the relationship members? This study filled this gap.

A Summary

In studying the nature of writing in an extracurricular writing relationship and the lives of those couples in these relationships, I hope I have made obvious that there is much that can be discovered and many facets and dynamics that can be studied.

According to Barton and Hall (2000), there are many areas of letter writing that need more attention, such as letter-writing as an activity. And if so, the same is true of the nature of writing within an out-of-school writing relationship.

Reflection 3

Mommy,

It's been a while since we have written in this journal.

I love you very much.

Maddy.

Dear Maddy,

Yes it has! We should probably get back into our writing together. I had a really nice day shopping with you for all your new stuff—especially your first “you know whats.” Thanks for letting me share with you what it means to become a young woman.

I love you, very much, too!

Momma

This reflective entry is taken from Madelyn's and my shared journal. It is dated beyond the bulk of most of our entries; Maddy is a fair bit older, and thus her experiences and my response to them reflect her budding maturity. Our writing captures what a face-to-face conversation might not allow: intimacy and reflection on a tough topic. This is a phenomenon, as defined by phenomenologists, and the nature of what it is like to be and write in an extracurricular writing relationship is what I seek to understand and describe.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

Philosophy, Methodology and Methods

The research design of this study was guided by this goal: to describe what it's like to write in an everyday, out-of-school writing relationship. As is the case with most research studies, it is imperative for me to provide a clear and cogent overview of my professional as well as personal perspectives and assumptions. It is also important that I make sure that the methods I have selected are compatible with my epistemology so that there is an organic or at the very least sensible connection with my research philosophy, methodology and methods (Byrne, 2001; Riessman, 2008; van Manen, 1990).

To question the way we experience the world, for me, is the bedrock of any worthwhile research endeavor; to research is an enactment of curiosity. As noted in Chapter One, chosen research topics are never too far behind what we experience in our day-to-day-lives. According to van Manen (1990), research should not be without personal investment or be done merely for research's sake. Rather, one comes to human science with a prior interest in what it means to be a human engaged within a particular experience. Our purpose for inquiry is skillfully, naturally guided by our "orientation to the lifeworld" (p. 40). In the many houses of research, this is known as one's "positionality." For phenomenologists, it is one's orientation. I orient to life, much like van Manen (1990), as a parent and as a teacher. Of course, I am more than this. However, I have pedagogic interest in all that I am and in all that I do. I was and

continue to be sincerely interested in what it means to be and to write in an extracurricular writing relationship.

To further illustrate my passion for this research investigation, I offer a phenomenological perspective deeply rooted within my pedagogic interests: for one, I value my own as well as my students' out-of-school or extracurricular literacy experiences. Out-of-school literacy events and practices, as noted earlier, inform us not only about out-of-school literacy events but about in-school ones as well. Second, as a teacher of writing with a propensity to value involvement over detached observation, story over numbers and statistics, and spontaneity over control, I am not interested in seeking generalizations about my students and their in- and out-of-school writing and reading habits. What I am interested in knowing, instead, are their literacy stories—with writing in particular—and how they make sense of these experiences. As I, along with many others, view writing as a social practice, I am particularly interested in how couples write together and co-construct meaning through these dyadic writing experiences. Third, I place tremendous value in the teacher-student relationship—in its inception as well as its cultivation. I believe that understanding my students' writing is much more than the consideration of an act, process or a piece of writing, as it means I must also understand the individual behind and beside the writing. This is why I unpacked how out-of-school writing relationships inform in-school writing relationships, as well as how those relationships formed in school inform those fostered beyond school. According to van Manen (1990), research is a compassionate act, and researchers want to know that which is most vital to human existence. The writing

relationship, both inside and outside of the academy, is one that I find not only essential to being but also essential to being in the classroom.

My view on the nature of reality and my epistemological and methodological position is phenomenologically as well as narratively inspired in that I trust that our everyday individual and co-constructed storied experiences within the world construct and cultivate our understanding of the world. This view is informed by sociocultural theory, which points to learning and the construction of knowledge as a social process. Thus, while individual experiences inform our understanding of the world, dyadic experiences, like being in an extracurricular writing relationship, likewise create an opportunity for couples to co-constructively build knowledge of their shared lived experiences. And ultimately, it is through the telling and re-telling of stories that meaning is ascribed.

As a means to mine these lived experiences, narrative inquiry serves two purposes in this present study. First, narrative serves to construct and understand experiences, and second, narratives serve as a means to represent or share lived experiences. Much like the way Bruner (1987) understood a story as more than just a vessel of experiences, I too understand that we live stories as a way to structure perceptual experiences. Pagnucci (2004) also reminded us that if we live the “narrative life,” we seek knowledge through story. In the telling and the re-telling of stories, we learn about our experiences and therefore live through the stories of our experiences. In seeking to further process the co-constructed nature of shared experiences, the sharing of narratives generally places the storyteller and the listener within a dyad of their own. According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), “it is a collaboration between researcher

and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus” (p. 20). Reality, thus, is known through the story of the knower and through the narrativization of that story by the knower (or knowers, in the case of the present study). Consequently, an individual’s or couple’s expression of a particular experience, either through story (oral or written) or through another method can be a way for both researcher and participant to assign meaning to the nature of a particular lived experience.

An interesting point to note, however, is that phenomenology is based upon the individual’s or couple’s ability to communicate their interpretations and meanings; therefore, “the ability of the investigator to interpret such communications . . . [is] always thus second hand” (Kings & Ilberty, 2016, p. 65). Remembering is always subjective and thus, so is the meaning cultivated through this process.

In addition to the cultivation of meaning, identity-awareness also emerges through storytelling. In other words, as it informs this present study, the stories we construct or co-construct inform our understanding of our self within a particular relationship and our identity as a “couple.” Narratives help us to understand ourselves through the telling of an experience or a series of experiences. As noted above, Bruner (1987) argued that individuals actually *become* the narratives they tell about their lived experiences. Thus, individual and coupled identity emerge through the individual and dyadic telling and re-telling of a particular experience. Objectivity is not in question; rather, as described by Kings and Ilberty (2014), “description rather than explanation drives phenomenology” (p. 193). Storied data provides scholars with ideas and

interpretations that lend understanding to a particular experience; it is not the experience itself.

As such, the research methods most aligned with my epistemological and methodological position included gathering narrative accounts of couples' experiences as members of an out-of-school writing relationship. I used narratives as a means of understanding the participants' lived experiences of writing in an out-of-school writing relationship as well as how they co-construct meaning through this experience. Quite simply, my epistemological position was one that sees stories as way to access data and as the data themselves—I saw the storytellers and the stories they told as being a source and a means towards sharing their collaborative understanding of reality. I believe data exist within the perspectives and lived experiences of what writing is like for couples participating within an extracurricular writing relationship.

According to van Manen (1990), when an individual has related a valuable experience, the researcher has gained something, even though the experience and the meaning gained is intangible (p. 53). I see this belief as transferrable in that when a couple has related a valuable experience, the researcher can be enlightened through this dyadic experience, and meaning derived through this experience emerges as co-constructed on several levels—through the narrative as storied by the writing couple and through the narrative as re-told through the researcher. Thus, because of this belief, I engaged with couples who are and have been involved in an out-of-school writing relationship to collect data about their experiences through their narratives.

Narrative as Passage Towards Phenomenology

Narrative is but one way to learn about and study the experiences of others. Scholars agree that through hearing the stories of others, we can gain a sense of their reality. Furthermore, Murray (2000) contended that narratives express the lived experiences of their narrators and therefore, an analysis of narrative is very much compatible with the epistemological goals of a phenomenological perspective.

A phenomenon, as asserted by Sadala and Adorno (2002), is to be described, not explained; it is the thing itself. Phenomenology, as posited by van Manen (1990), is a methodology as much as it is a philosophy or a lens through which we can make sense of what we observe in the world; it is a method of inquiry. Phenomenology seeks to explore and understand how individuals make sense of the world around them. A phenomenological study, according to Creswell (1998), defines the meaning of a lived experience; it explores the meaning of a given experience through description—potentially through story. According to Giles et al. (2012), the objective of phenomenological research is to get as close to the original experience as possible prior to theorizing about it (p. 216). Once the experience is in view, it can then be observed and described.

Advanced by Husserl at the beginning of the twentieth century, phenomenology concerns itself with how objects and events are perceived. The founding principle of phenomenological inquiry, as described by Husserl, is that experiences should be investigated and discussed in the way that they occur and through a voice of their own. Husserl rejected the idea that objects in the world outside the individual existed independently and reliably. Thus, for Husserl, real “lived” experience dwelled in the

object itself and how it seemed (Dowling, 2007; Groenewald, 2004; Sabella, 2010; Sadala & Adorno, 2002).

A student of Husserl's, Heidegger, crafted the notion of "being-in-the-world" and examined the lived-world and lived experiences. He contended that our "being-in-the-world" is always based on perspective—that it is always temporal and always in relation to something or someone else. Consequently, Heidegger's central view of the individual as always within context is the basis for his phenomenological belief that we, as humans, are always related in one way or another to the world around us and that this relationship naturally lends itself to an interpretation of meaning (Kelly et al., pp.1-2, 2016).

Specifically, the intention of phenomenology is to faithfully remain true to the phenomenon under study by seeking to understand the lived experiences of others as they are lived by those individuals themselves. As Moran (2000) asserted, "phenomenology is seeking after a meaning which is perhaps hidden by the entity's mode of appearing" (p. 229). Primarily, at the heart of phenomenology is the forging of a connection with an everyday occurrence. As Halling (2008) reminded us, "in everyday life each of us is something of a phenomenologist insofar as we genuinely listen to the stories that people tell us and insofar as we pay attention to and reflect on our own perceptions" (p. 145). To draw on an earlier point made, the stories told by the couples who have experienced the phenomenon in question are the quintessential tools for studying phenomenological narratives of lived experiences.

Locating Lived Experience: Objective of Research

The overall objective of my study was to attempt to capture the essence of the extracurricular writing relationship and then vividly, analytically, evocatively, and uniquely describe it. As mentioned in Chapter Two, a great deal of the literature addressing extracurricular writing relationships has focused solely and perhaps narrowly on the epistolary relationship. It has also focused solely on meaning made through a singular voice and singular lens, as opposed to a co-constructed one in which meaning is ascribed collaboratively. Thus, little documented scholarship has focused on extracurricular writing relationships as perceived through narratives co-constructed and jointly shared by the writers themselves. In fact, few if any studies have turned to the very nature of this particular lived experience. Hence, while the research on epistolary form and content offers valuable information and insight, it does not focus on gathering experiential information from couples directly involved in an extracurricular writing relationship. Stories shared by couples discussing what it is like write within an extracurricular writing relationship remained an untold tale.

And so how should this tale be told? According to van Manen (1990), phenomenology asks what a particular experience is like (p. 9). Consequently, I found myself moving away from specific questions like the following: When do people engaged within an out-of-school relationship write to each other? How do writing relationships end and why do they end? Why do writers in writing relationships choose, for example, letter-writing and not emailing? As I moved away from this directive line of questioning, I moved toward the heart of what I think it means to be a member of an extracurricular writing relationship, thus asking: What is the lived experience of writing

within an extracurricular writing relationship, and how do those involved within this extracurricular writing relationship co-construct meaning through this experience? From a phenomenological perspective, my aim was to elicit wonder and curiosity about a given phenomenon, not a hypothesized series of answers.

To further extrapolate, conducting phenomenological research is inquiring about something phenomenologically (van Manen, 1990, p. 42) and thus about what something is ultimately like—pondering the *nature* is of a particular experience. Developing research questions, according to Gadamer (1975), is more about remaining open and less about drafting impermeable questions. According to van Manen (1990), “to truly question something is to interrogate something from the heart of our existence, from the center of our being” (p. 43). There is no hypothesizing within a phenomenological inquiry; there is merely wonder. Thus, as I oriented myself within a phenomenological position I wondered: Beyond school walls, what is it like to write to a loved one? To a friend? To a parent? What is it like for a mother to write to her college-bound son? What is it like to cultivate a friendship through writing? How is romance cultivated through writing? What does it mean to write together—back and forth and through a series of on-going exchanges?

Ultimately, the question that seemed to offer the best probability of understanding what I wanted to discern and discover is the one that asked about the lived experience. I knew from reading the literature that both well-known literary figures and “everyday” individuals write to communicate and to cultivate. I knew this because, for the most part, their missives tell us so—or the sociocultural or sociohistorical historians interpreting their missives tell us so. I knew that for those individuals who write letters, the purpose

for writing through time has changed in many ways and for many reasons, and yet much has remained the same. Individuals still write to other individuals to share ideas, experiences, hopes, fears, dreams, happiness and anger—even sorrow and sadness due, perhaps, to distance. And while this information is supportive, I still wanted to better understand the nature of extracurricular writing relationships—what it is like to make sense of their experiences and the knowledge co-constructed through those experiences.

Expounding Assumptions and Pre-Understandings: Bracketing and My Role as Researcher

It was Husserl (1962), in developing a phenomenological method intended to identify the main structures and facets of human experience, who suggested that researchers need to carefully consider how our everyday familiarity with experiences and objects can consequently affect the transparency and thus the precision of our inquiry optics. Husserl suggested that we “bracket” or put to the back burner the “taken-for-granted” world in order to fully focus on our observation of the everyday within that world. Bracketing, by proceeding through a series of mental unloading of preconceived notions, does not mean that researchers should fade into oblivion their previous convictions about an experience. Rather, Husserl recommended that these reductive descriptions and reflections lead us away from the distraction of our own assumptions and presumptions and toward the essence of the experience with the phenomenon.

Bracketing through reduction, or description and reflection, serves to offer the researcher a different way of thinking and reasoning about a phenomenon. Husserl’s notion of bracketing involves a complex, self-reflective process in which the researcher

involves her or himself through a systematic examination of the content of consciousness—our lived experience. Thus, my modest attempt at bracketing attempted to capture my own experience as a writer and as former member of two extracurricular writing relationships. Interesting to note, Creswell (1998) contended that a phenomenological study may be challenging for several reasons; the bracketing of personal experiences by the investigator is but one of these challenges.

As mentioned previously, I was engaged within two extracurricular writing relationships: the first one was with Madelyn, who was a seven-year-old at the beginning of the extracurricular writing relationship, and the second was with Matt, my husband of ten years at the time of the extracurricular writing relationship. Due to established criteria, noting that all participants participating in this study must be 18 years or older, I did not formally include Madelyn in the research study. However, I do share our story in numerous reflections through this inquiry. From a phenomenological perspective, my intention was not to approach the topic of what it means to write within a writing relationship as just a scholar seeking to understand an experience for the sake of contributing to the academic body. Rather, as van Manen (1990) contended, I have been more than a researcher: I have also been a writer in an out-of-school writing relationship. Therefore, while I bracketed my personal presuppositions in order to see and hear the unbiased experiences of others, I also worked to avoid separating “theory from life” (p. 151). I *oriented* myself to not just the act of inquiry but also to the experience in question.

Being a writer who was in an extracurricular writing relationship and phenomenologically inquiring about couples having participated within this type of

relationship did not present a need for generalization. Certainly, each extracurricular writing relationship experience is unique. The phenomenological lens, in a broad sense, does not seek to offer a generalization of an experience or a series of experiences. Rather, phenomenology is, according to van Manen (1990), a “theory of unique” (p. 7). In line with the goal of this present research study, therefore, I did not align the experiences of others with my prior experiences. Rather, I brought a series of unique lived experiences, experiences of writing within a writing relationship, to the fore for the purpose of developing reflective awareness. While common themes emerged upon reviewing the data, I stood phenomenologically grounded, holding that generalizations could not be made and my own experiences were not the rule of thumb.

Researchers conducting phenomenological studies set aside personal views, preconceived notions, and presumptions about the phenomenon they are studying. While this may be and was challenging, it is necessary nevertheless. Such bracketing is believed to help scholars work with data inductively. To try to not let their own ideas intrude as they seek to understand others’ meanings of their experience(s) is certainly challenging, though necessary. Bracketed for this study were the following assumptions:

- Individuals involved in extracurricular relationships do so because it helps them in cultivating their relationship.
- Individuals involved in extracurricular relationships are fond of writing and write because they feel they communicate well through this means of communication.
- While fostering a relationship through writing might not be a stated goal, it is a goal for at least one of the writers within the relationship.

- Writers within an extracurricular writing relationship do not necessarily write to receive a response but to share feelings, thoughts and day-to-day occurrences.

Seeking the Experiences of Others: Research Sample and Data Sources

As the goal of this research study was to understand the lived experience of writing in an extracurricular writing relationship, the research sample consisted of three couples who were directly involved in an out-of-school writing relationship. The form of the correspondence was secondary to the nature of the lived experiences of those involved in the extracurricular writing relationship. Namely, the exchange of text did not need to be in the form nor style of a letter, either traditional or modern. Any correspondence of a personal nature—handwritten or typed, delivered electronically or in person—was considered for this study.

Participant Criteria

To be eligible to take part in the study, each participant had to have a current or recent history of involvement in an extracurricular writing relationship of at least one year. Each participant had to either *be* in an extracurricular writing relationship that had endured at least one year *or have been* in an extracurricular writing relationship that ended no more than three years prior to this study. To further clarify, the extracurricular writing relationship should not have ended more than three years prior to interviewing for this study. Each participant had to be over 18 years of age and be able to give informed consent. In addition, participants needed to be able to speak English well enough to describe their experiences and answer interview questions. To determine eligibility, each couple was screened either on the phone or in person to make sure they met the participation requirements.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality was originally thought to be a concern due to the personal nature of the extracurricular writing relationships. Indeed, every attempt was made to protect the participants' identities. Participants were asked if their real names could be included in the study or if they preferred pseudonyms to conceal their identities. All participants granted me permission to use their real names. As such, I have used their true names as they were given to me. In addition, participants were required to sign a consent form, and these documents were kept under lock and key.

This dissertation study was approved by the Indiana University of Pennsylvania IRB, and all guidelines and recommendations related to this work were followed to ensure the ethical treatment and protection of the rights of the study participants.

Participants

Three couples were chosen to participate in this study. Table 1 shares some general information about the couples to provide brief scaffolding. More detailed portraits will be illustrated later through their stories as obtained through the interview process as well as through their writings.

Table 1

Demographic Information on Participating Couples

Participant names	Age range at the time of interviews	Amount of writing exchanged and shared with PI	Kinds of writing	Years together prior to writing	Duration of writing relationship	Nature of relationship
Angie and Michael	40-41	Over 200 pieces	Mostly handwritten letters, some cards and emails	>1	2+ years	Romantic (Dating at the beginning of the WR – now married)
Claudia and Marc	24-31	Approx. 100 pieces	Mostly cards. Some notes and short letters.	>1	2.5 years	Romantic (Dating at the beginning of the WR – now married)
Victoria and Kyr	19-20	Approx. 50 pieces	Mostly cards. Some notes in a shared book.	>1	4 + years	Romantic (Dating at the beginning of the WR – now married)

Approaches to Story Collection

My hope was to gather stories from three couples. It was necessary that both individuals involved in the relationships studied be eligible for and consent to participating in this study. As this study focused on what it is like to be a writer within an extracurricular dyad, collecting storied data from not just one member of the relationship but from both was clearly aligned with the objectives of this study. Thus, I chose to interview both members of the extracurricular writing relationship, as I felt it would provide a rich portrait of the lived experiences of the individuals involved. In-depth, conversational interviews with the participating couples served two primary purposes: to gather experiential material and to reflect upon previously gained experiential material.

According to Mishler (1986b), conversational interviews focus on the relationship between the interviewee and the interviewer, placing importance upon building rapport within a supportive and non-judgmental space. Within this genre of interview, there is, as Mishler (1986b) contended, an emphasis on reducing the asymmetry of power and instead encouraging empowerment through supporting the act of telling stories through the voices of the storytellers themselves (pp. 117-121).

My search for participants began through word of mouth on the Indiana University of Pennsylvania campus located in Indiana, Pennsylvania, and geographically stretched to Massachusetts. As I lived in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, located 45 minutes south of Indiana, Pennsylvania, I also spread the word through friends and acquaintances within this location and beyond using social media like Facebook and Twitter.

Prior to meeting the couples, I spoke with each participant on the phone or in person (depending on their geographic location) to make their acquaintance, discuss the nature of the study and address any questions or concerns they might have (see Appendix A). After speaking with and/or meeting the potential participants, determining that they meet the aforementioned criteria and receiving informed consent, I then asked each member of the couple to complete an autobiographical questionnaire. I subsequently conducted a series of three interviews with each couple that explored my research question(s). Below is the interview schedule:

- Acquaintanceship Discussion and Interview: Phone call or informal meeting with each participant—as a couple or individually (see Appendix A)

- Autobiographical Questionnaire for all Participants: Electronically filled out by participants and sent back to me prior to our first interview (see Appendix B)
- First Interview: The couple interview to gather experiential material (see Appendix C)
- Second Interview: A second couple interview exploring exchanged written artifacts (see Appendix D)
- Third Interview (as needed): Individual or couple follow-up interview reflecting on lived-experience material previously gathered (see Appendix E)

The Researcher-Participant Relationship

Making Connections

Relationships are clearly a very important component in this study. In any narrative and phenomenological study, beyond method, relationships must be considered. The relationship, whether prior or new, unquestionably has the potential to impact how the couples relate their experiences to the researcher, how they view her and position themselves during interactions with her. How the couples viewed me, wanted me to view them and positioned themselves throughout our interactions was germane regarding the findings and the implications of these findings. It was my intent to talk about the interviewee-interviewer relationship with the interviewees at our acquaintanceship interview or during our acquaintanceship phone call. As I felt the interview process was a collaborative, co-constructive one, as described by Mishler (1986b), my goal was to build rapport with the couples involved through cultivating a warm climate punctuated by the notion that we are all learning through the present

experience, that there were no “right” or “wrong” stories, and that while I was the interviewer, I was not going to impose my voice upon their stories.

Cultivation and Collection

When I considered the relationship between myself and those who consented to participate, I conducted myself as follows: if a couple expressed interest in participating in the study, I spoke to them either in person or over the phone. Within our first conversation, I was able to give them some pertinent background information about the research. I also answered any questions they had and shared my contact information with them. At that time, I also shared with the couple or individual my roles as a doctoral candidate and researcher at the Indiana University of Pennsylvania. I also shared my role as a writing teacher, and an individual previously involved in her own out-of-school writing relationships. I explained that the data collected would be used in in my dissertation and to help inform my pedagogy.

After this initial conversation, and once it had been established that the couple was in fact interested in participating, I conducted an acquaintanceship phone call and/or in-person meeting (see Appendix A) wherein I determined their eligibility to take part in the study. I also provided each individual a copy (through email if necessary) of the informed consent. During this phone call or meeting, I discussed with the couples the purposes behind the study and the procedures involved with its undertaking. I also advised them that they could withdraw at any time. Confidentiality was discussed, as were any questions that arose at that time. Finally, I encouraged both individuals to think over the study and its intent and then I scheduling the first interview. Upon formal confirmation, the interviews were conducted in locations and settings of the couples’

choice, based on where they felt most relaxed, including their homes or in more public locations such as coffee shops and cafés.

The Art and Craft of Capturing Essence: In-Depth Interviews

The in-depth interview was utilized for this study because it allowed me to gain important insight into the couple's co-constructed realities. Researchers who choose this method do so to discover and develop a research question or questions with intent to realize what people think and feel and how they make sense of their experiences. Namely, in-depth interviews enable the researcher to explore rich and textured subjects while allowing for ideas to transpire without a predetermined hypothesis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Warren & Karner, 2005). A phenomenological approach connects well with a data collection method like in-depth interviewing because in-depth interviews can offer rich, detailed, first-person accounts and facilitate the elicitation of stories, thoughts and feelings about what it is like to be and write in an extracurricular writing relationship. Participants are afforded a venue to share and develop their stories in a non-judgmental atmosphere. These in-depth interviews were conversational as opposed to highly structured in that conversational (semi-structured) interviews, according to Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009), encourage rapport-building and give participants space to think.

The interview serves two specific purposes, according to van Manen (1990): it serves as a means for collecting and exploring narrative material and as a catalyst to develop, through story, anecdotes and examples of experiences and to describe the essence of the experience itself. Another facet embedded within in-depth interviewing is the building of trust between researcher and participant. As cited by Lincoln and Guba

(1985), data collection through in-depth interviewing helps to develop a culture of connectedness with those individuals involved in a study. With this noted, it was important to successfully build and maintain trust with the couples participating in the study. Through disclosing aspects of my own extracurricular writing relationships, I put my participants at ease by encouraging a culture of both empathy and inquiry. This culture embraced us as co-investigators seeking to understand the lived experience of what it means to write and be in an extracurricular writing relationship.

Exploring and Gathering Experiential Narrative

Interview Protocol

The interviews, which were audiotaped, consisted of three interview phases: the first couple interview, the second couple interview in which written artifacts such as letters exchanged were discussed, and an individual reflective/follow-up interview. Sometimes these interviews ran back-to-back. In the first interview (see Appendix B) each couple was asked to share with me what their experience with their out-of-school writing relationship is like for them—as a couple. This first inquiry addressed the nature of the lived experience, what the experience means and how it feels to them. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) described the process of gathering field interviews as being collaborative in nature; the interview is a co-constructed text in that the interviewee (and in the present study, the interviewees) and the interviewer are intertwined both emotionally and cognitively throughout the data-gathering process. In the present study, the couple interview added another co-constructive dimension in that the couple co-constructed the story of their extracurricular writing relationship, and I, as the

interviewer, was also engaged in the newest version of the story—the latest reconstruction.

Ethical Considerations

According to Smith et al. (2009), ethical research practice is a vigorous process requiring attention throughout an entire research project but especially during data collection and analysis. They contended that an important starting point for all research endeavors is to do no harm. With this noted, one must always consider the extent to which simply discussing personal information—possibly sensitive personal information—might constitute harm for any participant. Therefore, informed consent was gained for participation in data collection as well as for the likely outcome of data analysis. With regard to the collection of narrative data, the participants had entire control of the topics covered: it was their story to tell. I was the listener, and they walked whatever paths they saw as relevant.

Grasping Meaning Through Phenomenological Reflection: Data Analysis and Analytic Framework

Narratives can be scrutinized for content, dialogical patterns, structure, emotional characteristics, tone, mood, and for the views of the storyteller (Lieblich et al. 1998; Wells, 2011), and as McAdams (1993) argued, theme, tone and imagery are essential concepts to identify when conducting a narrative analysis. Evidently there are many kinds of narratives to analyze and more than way to conduct an analysis. (Riessman, 1993). Related best to the objectives of this present study would be a phenomenological method of analysis, which in many ways favors reflection, clarification and making explicit the meaning of a particular lived experience. Another narrative method of

analysis used for the present study is a dialogic narrative analysis in which narratives are interpreted through themes and through how storytellers co-construct their stories. In other words, according to Riessman (2008), working alongside a thematic analysis, a dialogic analysis seeks to examine through close reading the interactional context informing the narrative. As Riessman wrote, “Stories don’t just fall from the sky (or emerge from the innermost ‘self’); they are composed and received in contexts” (p. 105). Looking at each of these analytical lenses—thematic and dialogic—individually, is where I will next turn.

Locating Themes: In Search for Meaning

Thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), is a method of examining narrative. And while they acknowledged that there is no clear agreement regarding precisely what thematic analysis is, they described it as a “method of identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns, subjects or themes within the data” (p. 79). According to Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2008), the identification of themes within experiential material such as narrative emphasizes both “convergence and divergence, commonality and nuance, usually first for single cases, and then subsequently across multiple cases” (p. 79). Themes, as posited by van Manen (1990), are experiential structures that help the researcher (as well as the participants through co-constructing their understanding of the themes once they’ve been selected and written about) extract interpretative elements through story. As well, van Manen described themes as being the “the experience of focus, of meaning, of point” (p. 87). At best, themes are merely simplifications of a lived experience; they are never *the* experience. Themes, in line with van Manen’s phenomenologically inspired goals, are stimulated by the researchers

desire to learn about a given phenomenon. Thus, a researcher's orientation toward a theme is pedagogically inspired in that selecting themes require not only a metacognitive awareness of the essence of any given experience but also an awareness of what the participant feels is part of or illustrative of her lived experience.

Lieblich et al. (1998) contended that narrative analysis can be classified as one focuses on form or content and on the holistic narrative rather than on one specific event or events (categorical) within the narrative. They proposed four modes of analysis: examining content in its entirety, examining form in its entirety, examining categories of content and examining categories of form.

Van Manen (1990) also offered three related means of uncovering thematic aspects. Describing themes like knots within a web of experience, van Manen asserted that themes lead us to phenomenological description after looking at them through three approaches. The first approach is a holistic one, much like that described by Lieblich et al. (1998) in which the researcher looks at the overall meaning of a text (written artifact or transcript) and offers judgment on that field text or texts. The second approach is a highlight-inspired analysis in which the researcher looks for phrases that stand out as meaningful for various reasons. The third approach is a line-by-line analysis in which each sentence is analyzed in search of the essence of a particular experience. These approaches ideally capture the themes through which meaning is found and can be systematically described. Furthermore, within one's impression of what is meaningful in any given story lies the essence of a phenomenon. Getting to a theme may involve one approach or numerous approaches.

Unearthing Thematic Threads

Much like an artist drawing an impression of a landscape, the researcher, at best, can only represent a given phenomenon through their articulation of themes, as well as through their sharing of these themes. For the present study addressing the nature of writing in an extracurricular writing relationship, I used an amalgamation of all three of van Manen's approaches to mining meaning. Specifically, I analyzed the field data—namely the stories the couples shared in their interviews with me, as well as their exchanged written artifacts—by looking at the materials holistically, by highlighting sentences, phrases and anecdotal vignettes that are thematic of the experience of writing within an extracurricular writing relationship, and by focusing on specific words and phrases that needed additional time and attention. This thematic approach helped me to address the first research question while the ancillary research question benefitted from dialogic analysis illustrated through theme.

The Co-Creation of a Lived Experience: A Dialogical Analysis

In any given research study, numerous narrative modes of analysis can be utilized in order to more succinctly engage not only what a story means but also how the meaning is informed by context. A phenomenological analysis, therefore, can employ more than one approach to understanding a story. As is this case in the present study, I analyzed what it means to write in an extracurricular writing relationship not only through theme but also through a dialogic analysis. As Riessman (2008) contended, a dialogic analysis looks at how a story is coproduced. In this study, this analysis, along with a phenomenologically inspired thematic analysis, helped pivot my attention to not just the essence of what it's like to write in an out of school writing relationship but also

how the couples share their story, the roles they play in telling their story, and how reality is constructed through their temporal interaction.

Unpacking Meaning: Representing Experience Through Narrative

Much like Sabella's (2010) well-crafted phenomenological study on the lived experience of prostitutes, this present study utilized van Manen's (1990) method of phenomenology by way of narrative. Couples' stories were used alongside written artifacts exchanged within the writing relationships and were analyzed for content and context. The content as well as the co-co constructive nature of the narratives served as field data. With regard to the research question about the lived experience of writing within an extracurricular writing relationship, stories told and read, via the couples exchanged writings, served as the means by which the experience was accessed. The framework here is socio-culturally informed and phenomenological in nature as the research questions seek to explore the phenomenon of being involved in an extracurricular writing relationship. As asserted by Van Manen (1990), one of the purposes of phenomenology is to try to comprehend the essential meaning of something, something we usually take for granted. Another purpose is to shed light on the everyday. As such, an inquiry that is phenomenological allows the information and multi-dimensional, multi-layered themes and contexts to emerge from the data on their own. The couples in this study, therefore, were asked to share their storied experiences as a member of a writing relationship through talking as well as through sharing written artifacts by use of an open-ended prompt. I interrupted as little as possible. As follows, their narratives were taped, transcribed and analyzed.

The Phenomenological Way: Research Activities in Relation to Narrative

The analysis for the above-mentioned research questions was conducted from a narrative as well as a phenomenological perspective and relied on van Manen's (1990) phenomenological method. As suggested by van Manen (1990), researchers using phenomenology should not be married to a predetermined technique or an imposed methodological scheme, as the very nature of a phenomenon implies that it is unique within each individualized experience. Thus, each study may require a unique approach. As van Manen (1990) and Riessman (2008) observed, there is no method to the method of phenomenology. Likewise, there are no specific steps, only human science research guidelines, according to van Manen (1990). Thus, as follows, are his six research behaviors, which serve as the fluid methodological framework:

Choose a phenomenon that sparks curiosity within us

1. As we live it, investigate the lived experience
2. Abstract themes from the observed lived experience and reflect on these themes
3. Illustrate and describe the lived experience through writing
4. Uphold a pedagogical relationship with the observed and described lived experience
5. Consider the holistic nature of the lived experience but also spend time considering the smaller parts within the whole.

Interpretive Descriptions: Limitations to This Study

While the present inquiry unpacked a number of thought-provoking and significant findings as later discussed in Chapters Four through Seven, it should be noted that there are a number of limitations to be considered. Some of these limitations

are clearly aligned with the ideological platform upon which phenomenology stands. For one, the number of participants is limited to three couples who discussed and described their own experiences; thus, the findings have limited generalizability. As noted earlier, generalizability is not a goal of a phenomenological study. However, generalizability does have its worth in terms of making a case to implement and foster change at a school-based level and in making predictions based on a recurring experience. And second, while various phenomenological theorists have noted that lived experience cannot be grasped as it is occurring but only reflectively as a past presence, much can be gleaned about out-of-school writing relationships from couples who are currently involved in these relationships. Another limitation, also noted earlier, is that phenomenology rests upon individuals communicating their story. Thus, the description of the lived experience can be limited to not only memory but also to the communication of that memory.

Indeed, the couples in this study were all romantically involved. As an exception, the reflections between my daughter and myself illuminate a nonromantic relationship and therefore provide some element of balance. Still, I did not originally set out to include only couples engaged in a romantic relationship for this study. This common thread among the participants certainly poses a certain kind of limitation, as the experiences may be narrowed due to the manner of relationship.

What follows is the presentation of the findings based on the use many aspects of van Manen's (1990) method of phenomenology. Every effort has been made to represent the couples' voices and experiences as authentically as possible and to share with the reader how these couples collaboratively experience and co-construct meaning

through their extracurricular writing relationship. To set a clear path moving forward, this study will examine the following two questions: What is the lived experience of writing within an extracurricular writing relationship, and how do couples within extracurricular writing relationships make sense of their experiences and the knowledge co-constructed through those experiences?

Reflection 4

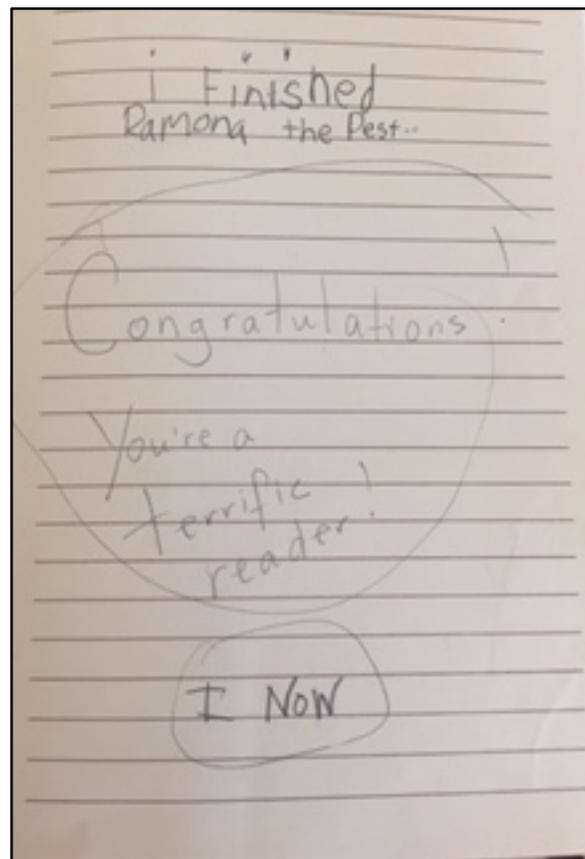


Figure 2. Madelyn and Mamma's shared journal: Ramona the Pest.

At the heart of a phenomenological study is the simplicity of essence. Yet it is often the simplest of human interactions that is the most complex and worthy of

curiosity. The story leading up to this piece is a simple one: Mamma was trying to get her readings done and Maddy was staying busy, by her side, reading her books. Upon her completion of *Ramona the Pest*, Maddy wanted to share with me her accomplishment, as it was a great triumph for her; so she wrote. And I wrote back—largely and with an exclamation point. Completing our exchange, Maddy responded: *now*. Later in our writings, Maddy reflected on this particular entry and wrote: *Momma, I learned how to spell now, and know means—I know*. I knew then, and I know more now, that this shared writing served as vehicle for sharing as much as it functioned as a system for learning.

CHAPTER FOUR
ANGIE AND MICHAEL

Couple Profile

At the time of our first interview, Angie and Michael had been married almost 15 years. According to Michael, they began writing “almost immediately” namely because their relationship was long distance. Michael is a middle school math teacher and Angie works as Director of Communications at a small, prestigious liberal arts college in Massachusetts. They live in the Berkshires right on the border between Vermont and Massachusetts. They have two children. Both Michael and Angie were in their early 40s at the time of the interview. They met soon after they earned their first college degrees in 1997. Angie was working in North Carolina as a reporter for a newspaper, and Michael was working on his second degree close to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

Angie earned an English degree from Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, and later attended Columbia University in New York and earned a Master’s degree in journalism. Michael, on the other hand, attended a large state university, The University of Delaware. He earned a degree in foreign languages and literature as well as in economics and history. He later attended Shippensburg University to earn his teaching credentials and finally earned a Master’s of Science in environmental science and policy.

Michael is the kind of man you meet and think, “I bet this guy is a good a friend, a great colleague, a wonderful son, and an even better dad.” He just has the look of a “good guy.” He stands about 5 feet 10 and has strong runner’s calves and a stocky build. He’s a marathoner, a middle school math teacher and an outdoors enthusiast.

With a warm smile and a dry laugh, his presence is inviting. Angie stands at just about 5 feet 11 with wavy chestnut hair and an extremely warm but ever so slightly coy smile; she radiates intelligence. Half Korean and half “West Coast American,” she was raised by a writer and a photographer; her parents met working for the same newspaper.

Angie and Mike met at a wedding in 1997. They both described the day they met as “hot, nonchalant, and fairly uneventful.” From the time we began the first of several interviews at their dining room table until the time we ended, Angie and Michael spun their story like a well-crafted symphony. I didn’t anticipate how symbiotic their story would be but soon realized that as their story began to unfold with the first question: “What is the story of your relationship?” that I was scarcely needed—I was but a fly on the wall: a listener, notetaker, and an agent of laughter and deep curiosity.

Michael remembers “just clicking” when the two of them met. Angie, looking away from me and right into Michael’s eyes, remembered the day:

First impressions of you were that you were really cute. I thought you looked very, I mean, physically you reminded me of Bruce Willis. You had like that kind of like what you have now, the super short haircut and you were pretty tan and he looked athletic so physically, first impression's very good and then when we started talking later in the evening, I thought you were really, you were obviously very smart and you were funny and you seemed different in your honesty, in your openness . . .

Writing Profile: Angie and Michael

I found that some of the most interesting things I learned about their writing relationship was from Michael’s pre-interview questionnaire. In section four, aptly titled

“writing in your relationship,” I asked the couples to share with me the story about how they met their writing partner. This is what Michael shared:

We met at a wedding. The bride was my wife’s college roommate and a friend of mine. It was basically a one-night stand to both of us. That didn’t work out for either of us. I called her; we talked on the phone; we started writing and that was it.

Another question asked how was writing first introduced into the relationship. Michael wrote:

I’m not sure who wrote first. I think it was me. I had bought a cool handmade stationery set in Vienna, Austria in 1993 and hadn’t really used it. Maybe I was trying to show off and be cool with my fancy paper. Who knows? Anyway, we started writing one another at least once a week while she lived in NC and I was in Central PA. We did that from August through the following June, when I moved to NC to be with her. She bought me a leather journal and my first fountain pen. I have refilled both many, many times. I think she would agree that we are together, in large part, because of our writing during that first year.

When I asked Michael and Angie to describe the way writing works in their relationship, they described it as more “electronic” now but noted that cards and letters are and were essential to their relationship. Michael wrote on his questionnaire:

We don’t just sign cards, we write sentiments, for sure. A Father’s Day card becomes a reminder of the first Father’s Day we spent in a new home or a new zip code. My wife chronicles our life through captions in photo albums, which go great with the travel journals/notebooks I often keep.

Writing was a tremendous part of the courting shared between Angie and Mike. It was a part of how they communicated, how they shared, how they grew, reminded, reiterated and complimented. Michael told me that the first email he ever wrote was to Angie. Angie, a former reporter, was not new to writing or to email when she began corresponding with Michael, and so Michael felt a great deal of pressure to impress her with his writing prowess. Now as a married couple of over 15 years, they do more than write to each other: they write cards to their kids, make lists and do other utilitarian writing. Michael stated in his questionnaire:

We bounce letters and writings off of one another, checking for “tone,” something that I often have trouble with. While I am not a communications professional, I truly appreciate that she sometimes has me edit/read over her writing. It is a huge boost to my ego when I give her a suggestion and she uses it.

According to Michael, “writing is why we are together. Comments are (or can be) fleeting; when you put pen to paper, the sentiment is real, concrete.” When I asked each member of the relationship to complete the following sentence: A writing relationship is _____, Michael wrote, “A writing relationship is one built on a solid foundation of communication.”

In the final section of the pre-interview questionnaire, I asked the participants to please feel free to share with me anything they would like to about writing, about this study, about any concerns they are having and/or about any questions they might have. I also, asked them to please use this section as a space to share any additional stories they would like to share about the role writing plays in their relationship. What Michael wrote is worth sharing in its entirety:

First off, thank you. My wife is out of town and this exercise has my mind swimming with memories of writings with, to and from her. Man, am I lucky. Writing has been such a critical part of our relationship. When we were long-distance for that first year, I would read the on-line version of her newspaper. I would read her stories, not really giving a crap about the development of the Wakefield neighborhood in annexed North Raleigh or about the other topics she was covering. (That sounds horrible!) What I did know is that I could hear her voice when I read her words and that was comforting. I even resented and could definitely tell when her stories were edited with a heavy hand by Stuart Leavenworth, her editor from 15 years ago. I read her friends' stories so I had some kind of insight before meeting them. One of our first weekends together inspired me to write about a trip to Hawk Mountain. I actually had the courage to send it around to some magazines and got it published in a small paper—the only thing I have ever had published.

Writing, in an indirect way, also made me realize that I could leave Central PA. Angela was up for a writing job in Sacramento. I offered to move across the country if she wanted me to. That was crazy to me at the time, but it felt right. I think she was offered and turned down the job, but I would have gone. Hell, I moved to NC after the school year ended.

One thing that we often say about the writing during the first year of our relationship is that it allowed us to get to know one another very deeply. Our weekends together (every other week one of us made the 7-hour drive) were often consumed with experiencing things together, making lasting memories, or

simply not being able to keep our eyes and hands off of one another. The letters exposed us in a way that I didn't anticipate. We bared our souls to and showed our comfort with one another. Things we just had to share came to us at times that we couldn't share them. Even with a 2-day lag before the letters arrived, we got to at least write in real-time, as the thoughts were forming or the events were unfolding.

I could go on all day, but I think I should probably wrap up so I can go write a card to my wife. She'll be home tomorrow and I can't wait.

Angie and Michael were prolific writers in that they not only wrote to each other, but they wrote a lot in general. Looking at Angie's background as a communications professional, it would not be far-reaching to posit that she would incorporate writing into her social sphere. Michael shared his love for writing; thus, he too would be one who writes both in and out of the relationship. From both Angie and Michael, I gathered over 200 samples of writing. These letters, cards, notes, and envelopes ranged from the time the couple first became a "couple," by their own definition, in 1997, to 1998. Though the correspondences they shared span a little more than a year, they've always written to each other and continue to do so, though not as often and for different reasons and in different ways, as I will discuss later in this chapter. Gratefully, both Angie and Michael allowed me to not only photocopy each and every piece of writing but to read many of them together—laughing, discussing, and generating oral stories on top of the written ones. Together, we co-created new stories.

Within three, three-inch binders, I hold these letters, arranged by date and color-coded by theme. Angie wrote in cursive, Michael in practically miniature block print. The

first letter is noted “first letter” and dated August 18, 1997, sent from Harrisburg, PA to Raleigh, NC, where Angie (formerly Angie Paik) used to live and work. Their first shared correspondence was from Michael to Angie; he wrote it at 12:25 in the morning. In fact, more than half the shared writings are from Michael to Angie. The letter is written on loose-leaf, spiral notebook paper, carefully ripped. It’s two pages long and written in very small, capital letters. The letter reads:

DEAR BABY FISH MOUTH,
SO, HOW GOES IT? YES, I KNOW WE JUST GOT OFF THE PHONE ABOUT
TEN MINUTES AGSO, BUT KNOW, WHAT GOOD IS AN ADDRESS IF YOU
DON’T USE IT? REALLY, I JUST FEEL MORE COMFORTABLE WITH A PEN
IN MY HAND THEN A PHONE. I GUESS IT’S SIMILAR TO THE HUNTING VS.
FISHING THING. YOU JUST CAN’T THROW A PHONE CALL BACK . . .

The letter ends:

YOU ARE SO GOOD LOOKING!-
MICHAEL.
PS. HORSES, HORSES, HORSES.

Every stationary papered letter, greeting card, 4x6 postcard, loose-leaf lined letter and notebook-ripped note is properly dated, even time-stamped. Jokes are everywhere—even the envelope stamps seem carefully selected. Envelopes are decorated with diagrams and directions. The envelopes mark their movements; the content marks the movement of the relationship. Sometimes the cards are addressed to the nicknamed other, like Michael “baby fish mouth” Schaeffer, and sometimes the envelopes indicate that the letter is just from “Angie” or the “Dread Pirate Roberts” or

“Vezinni” with no return address. The salutations evolved as the relationship evolved: in 1997 it began with “you are so good lookin’,” to “denier,” to “your always,” to “love,” to “love always,” to “all my love,” to “I love you very much,” and finally to “love always and forever.”

Theme 1: Relationship Writing

When I identified this theme, particularly with Angie and Michael, it was because I began to notice how often the couple shared their feelings about the relationship. When I asked them why they did this, they both shared with me that it was so that the other would know how they felt about them. In other words, it helped to move the relationship forward, to better the relationship, to fortify it. Sharing thoughts, ideas and feelings about the relationship itself through writing was a way to strengthen the couple’s bond; they shared with me that the more they communicated about how they felt, the closer they became. So many of Angie and Michael’s correspondences are about the relationship itself and how they feel about the relationship, how the relationship makes them feel about themselves and each other. They often would write about past relationship memories—when they first met, their first kiss, first date, and other important events. These reflections were shared by both of them and were shared often. They shared the depth of their love, how it was growing and to what extent.

In one letter, written at 11:35 p.m. in November 1997, Angie wrote to Michael and told him that she was waiting for his phone call but figured she would get started on his letter in the meantime. She continued to tell him that she was “head-over-heals, madly, uncontrollably, and without restraint or reservation” completely in love with him. Their correspondences convey how they feel about the present relationship, where it is now in

time and where they hope it will go in the future. In particular, they often wrote about how they were thinking about each other: often and always.

Theme 2: Reflective Writing

There seems to be some writing shared between Angie and Michael that is reflective in nature, perhaps brought about by the trust shared between the couple. This theme is one of the most prevalent within the writing shared between Angie and Michael. In one particular instance, Michael spent a great deal of time in the fall of 1997 reflecting upon his familial relationships and the role that they have played in his current relationship with Angie. He considered the way he was treated as a child and how he thinks that those actions may have negatively impacted his current relationship. It seems that in an earlier phone call, Angie and Michael had theorized about his childhood; in this particular letter, Michael recalled the experience.

In a letter dated January 8, 1998, time-stamped 10:30 p.m., Angie wrote to Michael:

I'm listening to Kebmo now, thinking of you, of course. It's funny how music can evoke such strong memories and feelings. Like "Stormy Weather" reminds me of the first dance, impromptu and romantic, tender and passionate, that we shared in your parents' living room on a September Friday night. Who knew then that I'd be dancing with you for the rest of my life? I'm sure of it now.

Both Angie and Michael spent a great deal of time looking back and simply sharing. At one point, Angie revealed to Michael that she felt beautiful with him but still struggled with feelings of insecurity that stem from her childhood. She wrote:

“Sometimes I look in the mirror and see that awkward twelve-year old girl who stands several inches taller than all the boys and has a round face and funny looking eyes.”

Angie and Michael cultivated their relationship by reflecting in their writing. These reflections were not just about their relationship; rather, they were also about their childhoods and their everyday lives.

Theme 3: Benevolent Writing

There was much writing that seemed to actively try to make the partner feel loved, cherished, wanted and/or desired. This writing conveyed feelings, much like that of the relationship writing; however, this content was not solely about the relationship. In one instance early on in their relationship, Angie shared with Michael, whom she addressed as “sexy boyfriend,” a “short” list of all the things she would like to experience with Michael, written on eight pages of torn narrow spiral paper. These items, she told him, were just a few of the things off “the top of my head.” She closed the letter by telling Michael that it’s a long list and it’s just the beginning and they should “get to work,” signing the epistle, “love, Angie.”

In a correspondence from Michael to Angie, where he addressed her as “hey there sweet thang,” he wrote: “By the way, I am not sure that I told you how beautiful you are when we were on the phone last night. It’s not that I forgot, because that would be an impossibility.”

Gratitude was often expressed between the couple, as was admiration. In one letter dated February 18, 1998, time-stamped 9:20 p.m., Angie wrote to Michael:

Over the last 24 hours or so my thoughts have been filled with you and your letter of resignation. I don’t think I’ve expressed to you adequately how proud I am of

you and how excited I am for us. I know you're not doing this juts for me, or even juts for us to be together. Still, it is a huge sacrifice and an enormous commitment, and I love you so much for taking this step. And when I think about the courage and passion it requires for you to leave the comfort of a job that's secure and one in which you're so respected so that you can peruse a dream, I love you even more.

In general, Michael often ended his letters with something like "thanks for everything" or "thanks for the inspiration." Gratitude and benevolence is clearly abundant.

Theme 4: Amusement Writing

Much of Angie and Michael's writing was very funny, almost playful. In fact, they told jokes, were sarcastic and silly, called each other names and made fun of others and each other. Specifically, Michael's writing can be characterized as more playful, though they both shared quite a few laughs via writing. For instance, in one correspondence from Angie to Michael written in 1997, Angie wrote: "For sheer laughs... While I was playing tennis, Holly ate two pairs of my shoes. Charming." At the bottom of a letter written by Michael, he wrote, "Do you want to 'go with me:' Circle one: yes / no."

A creative nonfiction Christmas letter written by Michael to Angela in the winter of 1997 was not by any means humorous, but Michael's play on names and reversal of life's events truly made the story entertaining. In addition, cheeky humor was Michael's forte, and his letters often included lines like the following: "Hey, I'M NAKED right now. But that would be a lie." and "Don't F*UCK with Mr. Zero" and "Bastardo! Bastardo!"

Angie and Michael wrote to each other as a form of entertainment as much as to cultivate their relationship. The following is an excerpt of a series of lists that Michael created for Angie:

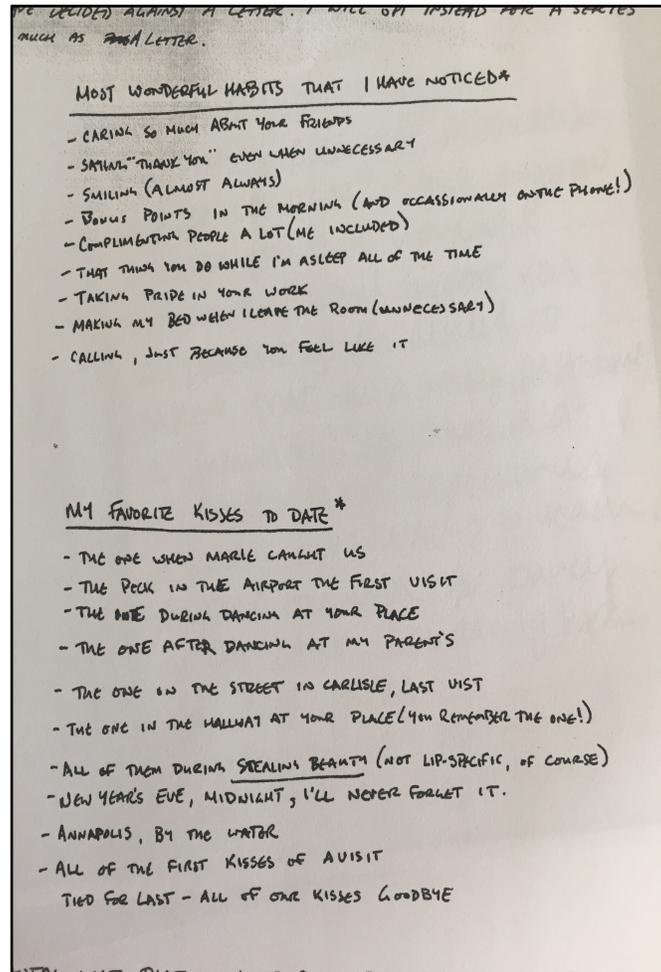


Figure 3. Angie and Mike: A series of lists.

Theme 5: Everyday Writing

In most correspondence, elements of general information are conveyed. However, in writing shared between members of an extracurricular writing relationship, it seems that this brand of communicative writing is done so that the other person can develop a clearer picture about what is going on in the life of the other if he/she cannot

be present. Information exchanged between Angie and Michael often involved location, food/drink, work/school, movies/entertainment, friends/family, purchases and pets. Often, Angie and Michael would communicate when they would next be together, down to the days, the hours and the minutes. They would also discuss where they would like to go and whom they would like to see when they did, finally, see each other. In fact, many of their correspondences were centered around their next and their previous visit. Here is a short excerpt from a letter from Angie to Michael. Angie was whimsical of a time together, missing Michael, and pondering their next visits:

Michael,

Well, I just got off the phone with you and had tears in my eyes as we said goodnight. I'm not sure why but I missed you more than ever today. Weekends apart are always toughest. It may be I'm missing you because there have been so many reminds in the last two days. Today it was finding picture frames for two photos of you, as well doing a little Valentine's shopping. Last night it was all the funny moments that I wish I could've shared with you. ... I can't wait to head to the beach again with you, to wake up on Sunday and step outside to the ocean.

... But then I fast-forward to sometime in May, we say goodbye for the last time, instead saying something else—"the next time," see you, I'll be helping you unload your stuff. I am also looking so forward to our first camping trip. I'm so glad we're taking on this new challenge together.

Love Always,

Angie

Joy, Commitment and Laughter: The (Re)Telling of Angie and Mike's Story

In looking at the 39 pages of transcribed interviews and at my notes, there is an overwhelming amount of data underscoring the duality of this couple's storytelling. The members of this writing relationship were talking not to me, the interviewer, but to each other. Angie and Michael shared their story with me from a position of joy and love. This is how they shared their story with me. This is how they made meaning of the events in their past—by laughing, by poking fun at each other, by sharing in the process of storytelling, and by savoring with fondness the writing which they see as the bedrock of their relationship. From describing how they met to co-telling the story of the first phone call, the first "I love you," the relationship and how and why they clicked, relocations, job changes, the first move-in together in Raleigh, the wedding engagement, the recollection of letters, even in sharing some of Michael's "pre-Angie" past, they wove the narrative tapestry together.

In recalling their first "I love you," Michael and Angie re-constructed the event:

Michael: I came to see you in September?

Angie: You came to see me in September, right? No, you came to see me in August.

Michael: End of August.

Angie: And then I...

Michael: So like three or four weeks after...

Angie: ...went to see you in September or was it October?

Michael: September or October.

Angie: So anyway, I went to visit him and it was a really, your, we were at your parents' house but your parents were out of town.

Michael: Uh-hmm.

Angie: And so we had this weekend of playing house basically where he cooked dinner for me and we danced in his living room, slow-danced in his living room, had this totally lovely romantic weekend.

Michael: Went for a nice hike...

Angie: Uh-hmm.

Michael: ...up a mountain, Hawk Mountain in Pennsylvania.

Angie: And then we parted without saying "I love you" and I felt really, like I really had wanted to say it but I didn't, and then we talked on the phone when I got home that night and we both admitted that we had wanted to say it in person, and we hadn't. Do you remember that conversation?

Michael: I do, I remember the conversation and I remember when I knew it when we were together is when we were having bagels at North Street. We were having bagels at this little North Street market, North Street whatever it was, in Harrisburg.

Angie: Café.

Michael: North Street Café and she looked up and it was just this smile and it was burned on my brain, no, it was just like this joy that I got from being with her and the smile, it was just like, what the hell. And I just knew and then the rest of the weekend just went great. We

were getting sandwiches I guess to take, we were getting sandwiches to take up to Hawk Mountain there?

Angie: We had breakfast there and then we went to the market.

Michael: To the market to get sandwiches. It was just...

Angie: You told me that story, I think that night on the phone, you'd said like yeah, I wanted to say at that, at the...

Michael: Right then.

Angie: ...and I felt really sad. That was like we had the, it was a really quickly serious relationship in part because of the distance. And when I left him after that first time I visited, I, that was the first time I felt really, really sad to leave him like I was a little heartbroken to leave. I might have even cried, probably not in front of you, and then I felt sad that I haven't said that I loved him so it was really serious by then.

In this exchange, Michael and Angie, together, shared the story of an “I love you” that wasn’t said but wanted to be said. Together, they recounted the event: when it occurred, why it occurred, how it occurred and how and why the event affected them as it did. This event took place early in their extracurricular writing relationship. Both Angie and Michael would later write about it in numerous letters, recounting the event, what wasn’t said, what should have been uttered and what will always be exchanged in all future encounters. Each letter from this point forward was always signed “I Love You” or “Love Always.”

Throughout our time together, Angie and Michael co-created their past and in doing so, they shaped their present and provided a vision for their future. In sharing their narrative with me, Angie and Mike would often encourage each other to remember the past and re-create the present by asking questions. Questions would serve as a dialogical tool in the following two ways:

1. To remember the past
2. To re-create the past as a joint present experience

The following excerpt from Angie and Michael's interview, at a point in their relationship when Angie was interviewing for a position in Sacramento and Michael was considering making a move to be with Angie, points to both Angie and Michael checking-in with each other to remember the past; they do this by asking questions.

Michael: I remember when you were interviewing for the job in Sacramento.

Michael: Anyway, I found or I had this gold coin that I got when I went to [??] after college, and I'd come to this realization and we've talked about a little like if she went to Sacramento? And was like, if you want me to, I'll go. And I was like, what the hell...

Angie: I had not asked him anything like that.

Michael: Nothing like that but if that's anything, I'll go. It was when I realized, you know what, it's okay to sort of jump and just try so I sent her this coin. I taped it into the card that I sent to her. It was supposed to be this lucky coin that was given by one of the people that was one of my guides there. I said keep it, it's a good luck coin. It's a

golden Yanash or something like that so I sent it to her and, to take to her interview.

Angie: When was that that I interviewed for that job? I'll find that card; it's in here?

Michael: Yeah. I don't remember.

Angie: Was it in the winter?

Michael: I think it was it was in the winter.

Angie: Like January or February or something? Yeah, that was, that was the thing that I was thinking of too, the exact same thing because that was the moment at which it really shifted, like holy shit, this is serious and he's going to move. He would move across the country for me and I didn't even ask him whether you would entertain that thought.

Re-creating the past as a joint present experience is something that Angie and Michael did through asking questions. In other words, a question would be asked and a new reality would be created, new information would be unfolded, discovered. In essence, an "ah-ha moment" would occur for one or both members of the relationship.

Here is an example of one of those dichotomous exchanges:

Angie: Yeah, I think we do text pretty regularly; it tends to be either goofy or transactional.

Michael: Lots of goofy?

Angie: Lots of goofy. I think I still have the first email he sent me by the way. Well I probably don't, I may have printed it out.

Michael: “Baby fish mouth,” baby.

Angie: Yeah I remember that very well. Yeah, we text jokes and stuff. I mean like jokey.

Michael: Yeah, not like forwarded emails but, as I was in a meeting today and someone said this word, and it’s a code word in our household.

Angie: Yesterday. That made you laugh aloud?

Michael: Yes.

Angie: Made a text, classy...

Michael: I was talking about how my children, my students were not doing very well in Tanglewood and the culture was lost and they were shushed by employees and passersby for being too loud, that’s what she said and it’s something like they’re really representing well, she said, stay classy and keep it classy or something like that. A reference to Anchorman and it was just enough to make, to lighten it, I was really stressed at that point. I was trying to find some levity and that’s why I was sharing it with her, like I’m trying to make the best of this situation and she knew exactly what to say to make me laugh and I admit, I can say it’s better.

Angie: I can make him laugh by referencing a Will Ferrell movie.

Michael: You can make me laugh...

Angie: *(laughter)*

Angie and Michael, as noted in the exchange above, discussed how their written exchanges (in this case, text messages) had lightened each other’s mood. Angie

learned that her text message to Michael made him laugh out loud. Together they both shared the narrative that their texts brought aughter and joy to each other, especially during tough moments.

Angie and Michael told the story of their writing relationship by using words of kindness, encouragement and by sharing information special to the two of them. Here is one example in which Angie and Michael recalled their early impressions of each other:

Angie: So, then I thought, okay, he's a nice guy and he's not a dumbass who goes and gets into like dumb bar fights so that was my first impression.

Michael: I thought she was really smart. I loved talking with you because I felt like even whether it was just about you or it was just in general, you give this impression that I can learn something every time we talk, whether it's about you or about something I don't know about and you did that immediately, even just talking, you were that engaging and it was nice. I also noticed how well you listened which, and it was nice and you were very open to listening. I've not always been around people who listen a lot, and I'm not from a family of people who share a lot of stuff so I think it was just really comfortable right away, I mean not to mention the fact that she was really, really pretty and is prettier now but still, that never hurts.

Specifically, the following portion of the interview underpins the idea that couples will share their feelings while they share a story—look back at the past. Angie and Michael, in looking back at an email exchange, recollected together how

their emails took some weight off their days. The writing served one purpose, but as they shared their story of what they had written, they also shared how the writing made them feel:

Michael: Well, I'm thinking back when, not really, I mean it does affect, it is our relationship but most recently when we were buying the house, there were some situations that really irked us with our real estate agent and we were at work and we couldn't talk during the day so there were, emails come back and I can check it between classes, she could check between meetings and I found that really comforting. It's almost like we were amassing our armies together and we were joining in getting our ducks in a row before we could get together and really talk to this person. When we had the moment to talk to him, we had exchanged these ideas and we were really ready and it allowed for me while I was still, I still had it on my mind during classes, it was still a way to relieve some of that pressure, know that we were together and that was really comforting to me.

Angie: For me, there are emails from him that are really meaningful that come after, like we've had a really horrible fight with Sophie for instance, or there are times when I feel not very good about my role as mother and for a lot of different reasons. And he'll send me an email that says, "You did a really great job with Sophie last night, I lost my temper and you really kept your cool and you're an amazing

mother and I really value that about you.” It’s three sentences at most but it’s like totally heartwarming and makes me feel really, really good and kind of rescues my day so those are really quite meaningful.

As Angie and Michael pondered their writing, together, they understood the significance writing plays in their life; they understood that writing is a vehicle through which they communicate but also a way for them to show immense support, compassion and kindness.

Angie and Michael were a very playful couple. Throughout all of the three interviews, they joked with me, joked with each other and even made fun of themselves. Thus, their personalities were inclined to be humorous, playful and even a bit self-deprecating. Through their storytelling, the respect that they have for each other was not only clear in the way they told their story but in the content of their story. Even in the beginning of their tale, Angie and Michael both recounted the story of “the fight that never happened” and how if the brawl had occurred, and if Michael had met his match out in the parking lot (referring to a fight from the night they first met when a drunk man approached Michael), the two would not be together today.

In another instance, they discussed Angie’s potential move to Sacramento and noted that if the move had occurred, Michael’s mother would have “killed me,” as Michael was very bound to his family and was, at the time, very rooted in a Pennsylvania Dutch culture. The following dialogue is a response to the following question: “Are you both aware of your grammar, mechanics, syntax, punctuation when you’re writing to each other?” Clearly, their response to this question shows their

playfulness with each other as well as their ability to utilize humor as a tool during the co-creation of their story:

Angie: Yeah, I mean I'll be completely frank with you, this is super snobby of me, but had he not been a good writer, when I started getting those letters, we probably wouldn't have continued dating (*laughter*). If he had been a bad writer, yeah, I would not have been impressed with him as a human being. I mean that's really shallow and super judgmental but that's something I really value.

Michael: I knew she was a writer, I mean I knew that her job was writing, I knew that I didn't want to come off looking like a schlock.

Angie: He's hyper. (*laughter*)

Michael: I know I'm hyper-sensitive to it. I'm hyper-sensitive and it has spilled over into my life everywhere. I've always tried to pay attention, but now I super-pay attention to it...

Angie and Mike were playful as they tried to make sense of the role writing played in their life. They valued laughter as a means of connecting, and this humor was very much apparent throughout their storytelling. They made meaning of their writing relationship through joyfully sharing in the storytelling process and by truly enjoying their way in and out of every story.

Reflection 5

It was just another night: I was trying to get a journal article ready for school the next day, but on this night, Maddy had gummy bears, and so did I, and we were both eager to share. Here is our exchange from that night with our shared treat:

Maddy first wrote:

I will share my candy with you if you want. I love you.

Love, Maddy

I wrote back.

Thank you for sharing. I would be happy to share my gummy bears with you as well. Do you plan on having a good morning tomorrow? If so, how do you plan to do this?

Love,

Mamma

Then, Maddy replied:

Well . . . I think I will, I plan to get up and smile to start.

I can remember smiling. I replied:

Dear Maddy,

I think this is a very thoughtful idea. What is on your schedule for tomorrow?

Heart, (drawn)

Mamma

Maddy replied:

Well. I get up. Get dressed. Eat breakfast. Brush teeth. Watch program. Put coat on and go to school. Do seatwork. Learn about God. Do Reading corner. Do phonics and math. Lunch. Play. Pray. Math. Book time. Comprehension book. Library. Write. Homework

down. Get ready to go home. Pray. Do my homework. Snack. Play. Watch TV, Computer. Dinner. Play. Dezert. Evening program. Read. Bed.

Oh, and Play with Megan and my cell phone and oh those are just guesses.

I responded to Madelyn with the following letter:

Dearest Madelyn,

What an exciting day! Your day is so busy. How do you possibly get it all done? You must be extremely organized. Guess what? It's time for . . . Kisses and Bed!

I showed the reflection on the previous page to Madelyn many years later, and we both remembered the day she wrote the entry. We remembered her time in Catholic school and laughed at all the praying. Together, we made sense of the writing and shared the story with each other as we remembered it and then, the story was ours, as we had re-created it. Co-constructing meaning is but one part of this study. Thus, as ancillary to my primary research question, I sought to understand how couples within extracurricular writing relationships make sense of their experiences and the knowledge co-constructed through those experiences.

CHAPTER FIVE

CLAUDIA AND MARC

Couple Profile

Marc and Claudia were not married when I first made their acquaintance. The day I met them, they were a young couple engaged to be married, walking their beloved Jack Russell Terrier, Maggie Sue, at a dog park in Johnstown, Pennsylvania. The couple were taking up temporary residence in Johnstown so that Marc could begin the first stage of his medical residency at the local hospital. Claudia, with a degree in Crop Science, was unemployed at the time. Knowing that Marc's location was going to be temporary, she looked for provisional employment as a secretary, and by the time our interviews began, she was employed full-time.

Claudia, five years older than Marc, was born in Salinas, California, and grew up in Monterrey County (specifically Greenfield and King City). Marc was born in Evanston, Illinois, and grew up in Los Altos, California. Both Marc and Claudia claim they are Californians through and through. Claudia, proud of her Mexican family, credits a large portion of her identity to her Latina heritage and Marc, his Greek heritage. Marc holds a Bachelor's of Science in biology from California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, and recently graduated with a medical degree and is pursuing emergency medicine.

At the time of the interview, Claudia and Marc had just been married. As a couple, they had been together a little over seven years. They were living in Erie, Pennsylvania, while Marc completed the second of three phases of his medical internship. Currently, they reside in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and have two young

children. Marc is now an emergency medicine doctor in residence and Claudia a stay-at-home mom.

Standing at about five foot nine, Marc looks like a Roman Gladiator: he is visibly muscular, covered in heritage tattoos, bearded, and flaunts a serious but sarcastic demeanor. He doesn't look or sound like your typical medical doctor, as he curses wildly and can be quite unfiltered, raunchy and hilariously uncensored. As mentioned earlier, when we first met, he was beginning his residency; by the end of our time together, he was almost completing its second phase. When I asked Marc to describe how he met Claudia, this is what he shared with me:

Hahah, well...it's very classy. We met during college. I was throwing a small party. My friend Bryan was semi-dating Claudia, and they came together. I was horribly drunk, shirtless, and no-hand wrestling with my friend Jake. Jake literally threw me into a wall, in which I got stuck into. Claudia apparently likes her men big and strong.

Marc told it like he saw it, pulling only literal punches. Claudia was much quieter than Marc, though equally passionate and expressive. Claudia has long, flowing, deep-black hair, and much like Marc, she works out regularly for both her mind and her body. She is a CrossFit fanatic and loves to spend time at the gym. She isn't quite as bold with her words as Marc, but she certainly appreciates his brand of wit and sarcasm. Appreciating dry humor, Claudia described how she met her writing partner:

I actually met Marc when I was hanging out with one of his friends. The minute I saw him I thought to myself, "That is the most handsome man I've ever seen!" And as we all know Marc he was causing a scene "no-arm" wrestling his friends

(I'll explain it later if needed, but long story short, there was a permanent ass dent in his wall for months). Little did I know that he was 19, way too young for my 24 year OLD ass! We hung out a few times and had an instant connection. He was funny and witty, not to mention beautiful and I was smitten. Took a few attempts to catch but he won me over!

Writing Profile

Much like Angie and Michael's writing profile, a lot can be learned about the nature of this couple's extracurricular writing relationship through their own writing. I looked to the pre-interview questionnaire to gain some valuable insights about Claudia and Marc's writing styles, inclinations, and practices.

In examining Claudia's pre-interview questionnaire, she noted that she wrote in her relationship with Marc because it allowed her to "express my feelings when words fail[ed] me." Throughout our time together, and in looking at the various cards, letters, notes, sticky notes and writing memorabilia, Claudia would often remark that words did not come easy to her when spoken aloud, but in writing, she could feel free to express herself openly, wonderfully carefree and with honesty. In the questionnaire, she mentioned the following: "A writing relationship is a great foundation for relationships since you are more likely/comfortable to say things with a pen and paper than in person (for us shy folk or those who have issues expressing themselves all the time)."

Similarly, in the free-write section, Claudia noted that their writing brought them closer together as a couple—then and now. She told me many times that she felt the writing they did in the beginning when they were in a long-distance relationship and the

writing they do now, though understandably different, made them who they are as a couple.

Marc's thoughts echoed Claudia's on this topic. When he was asked to complete the sentence: I write in my relationship because_____, Marc answered:

I write in my relationship with Claudia because it is a way for me to show how much I love her and think about her. I was not always good at vocalizing my feelings, so putting pen to paper was a way for her to know how much she really meant to me. I think it also showed how much I valued her because writing someone a long hand letter every week for over a year shows a lot of dedication—it made her feel that our relationship could survive long distance struggles.

And much like Claudia, Marc sees writing as a way for two people to “show their love, and show their dedication to each other. It means a lot to know your writing partner took the time to sit down and illustrate their thoughts and feeling.” When given the opportunity to free-write about his relationship with Claudia, Marc wrote:

I think a lot of the writing I did while we were apart was therapeutic – we were very unhappy and lonely for much of the year and a half due to the distance. Somehow writing those letters validated our love and made it easier to keep going. Because so many letters were about lonely and painful memories I have unconsciously blocked out a lot of the content. I truthfully cannot remember a great deal of the specifics of what I wrote to Claudia. In fact, I do not even want to be reminded of the sorrow we faced, so I refuse to read a lot of the letters that Claudia kept. I do love however, reading the happier message and letters I have

sent her over the years. Takes me back to different fun experiences and stories that we shared together.

Claudia and Marc shared with me a collection of upwards of about 130 letters, cards, notes, composed scrapbook memorabilia and photographs with detailed notes attached. I photocopied these correspondences, and together we went through many of them. Claudia and Marc sat on the couch with Maggie Sue for many of the interviews, and I, on the floor, listened to them share past stories and build new ones. Most of the correspondences were cards. I made sure to photocopy the fronts as well as the writings in the cards, as both Claudia and Marc told me that a lot of effort went into choosing the cards. No card bore a typical “Hallmark” greeting; each one had writing all over it, practically covering up the standard greeting.

Claudia’s handwriting was, as I would describe, romantic, very neat and in flowing print. Marc’s writing was, as he says, “sloppy.” He wrote in block lettering that one might traditionally call “chicken scratch.” The correspondences were filled with numerous postscripts, drawings, and pictures of dogs. Some letters were even written in Spanish. Their writings began with a delicate salutation. To Claudia, Marc writes: “Hey Baby Time,” “Babies,” “Pretty Girl,” “Hey, Hot Stuff,” “Hey Princess,” and “Hey, Baby.” Claudia, echoing the same intimacy, began her writings with the following: “Stinky Pants,” “Sweetheart,” “Honey,” “Love of My Life,” “Daddy,” and “My Dearest Marc.”

There is somewhat of an imbalance in the amount of writing. Marc wrote more to Claudia during their time apart (2½ years), while now, they claim that they write about the same amount, leaving mostly little notes on mirrors, in cars and in wallets. In

addition, Marc's writings are more traditional epistles, while Claudia's correspondences are mostly cards with notes inside.

Theme 1: Relationship Writing

Most of the writing shared between Claudia and Marc can be best described as writing that focused on their relationship. Unlike some of the other couples' writing in this study, there was less emphasis on the day-to-day and much more on the couple and their relationship. In speaking with Claudia and Marc, I surmised that this is directly linked to the distance that was often between them: their separate locations promoted writing about each other and about their feelings about the relationship. In one particular correspondence, Marc wrote: "Babies, Look how strong our relationship is sweet[y]. We should be so proud of ourselves. We are withstanding the burdens of long distance, and we are a little more than halfway done." In reading their correspondences, there were often discussions of strength and longing, of resilience and of "the finish line." As their epistles served to bridge the gap that distance created, their writings were highly volatile and packed with patient emotion. Claudia once wrote to Marc: "I know this chapter in our life is going to try both our patience but I know we have what it takes to overcome it... what's a few miles anyway—(smiley face) ha ha."

Theme 2: Reflective Writing

While Claudia and Marc often wrote about their relationship as it was at the time, they spent a great deal of ink sharing stories from the past and reliving the moments that brought them together. For example, on Valentine's Day, Marc received a card from Claudia signed "BT, Claudia, Your Girl Always," (BT means "Baby Time"). In this card, Claudia wrote: "I know this past year has been one of the hardest we've had to deal with

and it truly has made us stronger. Every day (besides your mean days) I'm reminded why I fell in love [*drawn heart*] with you 5 years ago!" In another letter dated 12/2, Claudia "your girl" wrote the following:

I'm so glad we found one another and I knew you were the one from the beginning. On this day I always remember where it all began—your persistence. Ha ha. That first Valentine's still remains one of the best moments from our past...I remember having butterflies the entire time. I was just not understanding how such a handsome guy could look at me and think I was gorgeous.

Very rarely did a piece of writing shared between the couple not have a line or more in which the writer didn't reminisce about a time when they were together, face-to-face. Claudia and Marc spent a great deal of time coping with their distance and in doing so, looking back on their past. A point to note, however, is that Claudia spent more time reflecting than Marc. In Marc's writing, he would often refer to the general nature of the relationship: the distance and looking back at the time when they were together. After a visit, Marc offered this: "Thanks so much for coming up this past weekend to hang out with me. It meant a lot to have you with me, even though I was kinda like a zombie (Please stop giggling at my handwriting, I am doing the best I can.)" In general, in looking at the whole of his writing, it was less reflective in nature and more everyday; his writing was more "in the moment," if you will.

Claudia, on the other hand, spent substantial time writing about past moments shared between them in which affection was exchanged. Her writing, as she told me, was her way of coping with the distance and commemorating the past. She would often

relive the past, telling stories of past events and moments of love and laughter. In one card she wrote:

When I first met you, like all people I had my doubts [*smiley face*]. The thought of being so close to someone frightened me beyond belief. I am so grateful that I took that chance with you 2 years ago. You have become my family, my friend and partner.

Theme 3: Benevolent Writing

As with the writing exchanged between Angie and Michael, Claudia and Marc often wrote in a manner that served to make the other feel good. Throughout Marc's writing he often complimented Claudia—her physical appearance, her intelligence, and her nature. His writing indicated pride in her accomplishments as a Cross Fit athlete and excitement for her job, her apartment and her training of their beloved dog, Maggie. In one particular card he wrote:

I am so incredibly proud of you. You looked awesome in that Cross-Fit video. Baby, think how many people get off their ass and compete in fitness competitions! You should feel really good about yourself. Your [*sic*] an amazing woman, and I am very lucky to have you in my life.

Although Claudia called Marc “mean” in an earlier piece of writing (see above), at no point in the writings shared with me did Marc appear to be anything but outwardly supportive and doting. As a medical student, Marc often referred to his anxiety with the work load, the constant testing and the general insecurity he felt and thanks Claudia for her support and love: “I love how strong you are and I admire your patience and will

power. Most women cannot go through what you are doing. It's very hard. But just remember, I love you so much. Love Always, Marc.”

Similarly, Claudia was incredibly supportive of Marc as he made his way through his medical training. I merely flipped through the collection of missives, centered my finger on a page and right away located an example of Claudia doing her best to help Marc feel good about himself and about his course of study. She wrote:

I am so proud of you and am truly lucky to have such an AMAZING man in my life! Remember to take a deep breathe [sic], take each day one at a time and know I love you forever. Heart [diagram], BT [Baby Time] and Mags.

In another card she told Marc:

I promise to be supportive of everything in your life medically! I am so proud of you! You bust your tooshie off day in and day out and that takes discipline. I know it gets frustrating at times cause [sic] other kids seem to get things quicker but you put so much heart into it and it will show when you finally do get your license. You make me want to do better for us all the time.

Claudia and Marc's writings as a whole were indicative of two people who care greatly for each other: their missives indicated that they wrote to make the other feel good about herself or himself and about the relationship. Each card seemed to be written like a vote of confidence for the other member of the relationship. Between the loving words, the nicknames, the gestures of reassurance and the sheer amount of kind missives shared, Claudia and Marc unmistakably wrote because they wanted to help the other person in the relationship feel special.

Theme 4: Amusement Writing

There is no question: Claudia and Marc had a lot of fun in their writing. Between their pet names, the cards they chose, and giggling about their dog, Maggie Sue, this couple often wrote about the funny things going on between them. In fact, they laughed their way through most of the interviews. In one written exchange, Claudia drafted in all caps: “SO ENOUGH WITH SERIOUSNESS—STUPID MAGGIE SUE is driving me insane with her wandering tendencies!” As well, Marc tended to be very humorous/sarcastic. In one missive, he wrote: “Dear Baby Time, Today, we learned about motor control and body positioning, so now I know why you get so clumsy and spill food on yourself all the time... it’s a joke take it easy, even Maggie Sue laughed.” At the close of another letter Marc wrote: “ps. Woof woof bark (That means I love you Maggie in dog language.” He also drew fun pictures to share his feelings:

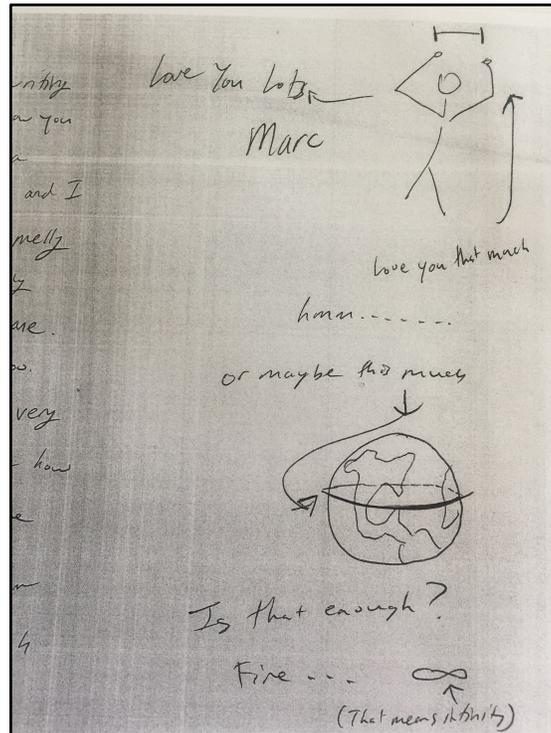


Figure 4. Claudia and Marc: Galaxy.

Claudia and Marc used humor as a way to cope with the distance and to share lightness within their relationship.

Theme 5: Everyday Writing

Claudia and Marc's everyday writing was plentiful. Marc often would let Claudia know about his study and exam schedule, and Claudia would inform Marc about the events at home, their dog, her job, and her day-to-day life without Marc. While Claudia's epistles tended to thematically focus more on the relationship, Marc spent a great deal of time informing Claudia about his day-to-day scholarly activities. When I asked Marc why he wrote so much about this, he told me it was because it was so far from Claudia's reality, and he wanted to keep her in the loop. In one letter Marc told Claudia:

Hi! This week has been decent so far. I got all afternoon off so I could study for my first pathology exam. That should be okay as long as I study my booty off. I had my random OPP lab practical today. Which is weird because last time I was one of the last people to go. So that means that I have 5-5 free weeks. I have a test the Friday you get here (my pen is out of ink), so I don't think I will have to study. I may need a couple of hours, but otherwise you will get my undivided attention.

He later signs the letter, "Love you babe, Marc. Ps. As usual give the pooping machine a hug and grab her neck fat for me."

Appreciation, Affection and Folly: The (Re)Telling of Claudia and Marc's Story

Throughout my time with Claudia and Marc, what struck me about their relationship was their ability to co-create their past—to tell their history together in a way that made sense to both of them. They came to understand the role writing played in their relationship through moments of serious but also silly affection. It was a juxtaposition of emotion that I found unique to Claudia and Marc. It was truly endearing to watch them engage in moments of sincere gratitude as they worked their way their story and then burst into conjured memories of the past that brought back laughter and harder times. The interview started with Marc referring to Claudia as "Honey." In fact, he invited her to begin the story of their relationship with this term of endearment. And much like the interview with Angie and Michael, the two wove together a past and built a present with their memories knitted together.

Together, Claudia and Marc shared with me the story of their first "I love you."

Claudia: We were on the couch. It was just me and you.

Marc: It was very nice and...

Claudia: No.

Marc: You know how you feel, why don't you just say it and then shut up.

Claudia: Yeah, you were lying on the couch and I was like do you want to watch the TV and then I don't remember how it was brought up. Maybe that's how it was.

Marc: You brought it up.

Claudia: I might have said something like, "You know Marc, I really ... I've got strong feelings for you, I think I love you," and he was like ... he took a while and then eventually he ...

Marc: Well I said, "I guess..." uh, I don't think I said anything stupid like, "That's nice."

Claudia: No so you, you reciprocated but I think it took you ... like you didn't really ... it didn't click that you felt that way at all until I said it to you and you were like, "Oh! I think I do love her too."

In another instance, Claudia and Marc were both recollecting the memory of ritual: the ritual that would occur when a piece of correspondence would be received and then subsequently read. Marc first described Claudia's ritual and then Claudia further elaborated on this routine.

Marc: She'd light candles and incense.

Claudia: I would, I would just like get comfortable ...

Marc: Put on porn. (*Laughter*)

Claudia: Like go get wine or just something

Marc: Wine!

Claudia: ... and just relax and this was like the moment in my day that I waited for.

Their recounting of these rituals together pointed to their acknowledgement of the ritual itself and potentially, their realization that they were in fact rituals.

Much like in Angie and Michael's interview, it became apparent to me that members of writing relationships, when seeking to tell the story of their relationship, will ask questions of each other to not only co-create their narrative but to also seek new understanding. Claudia and Marc often paused to ask each other questions. These questions furthered their story as much as it clarified it. In the following excerpt from Claudia and Marc's second interview, they recalled the point in the relationship when they started writing:

Marc: Well by the time I went to medical school and Claudia stayed behind and I told her before I left, to make it easier on her, I said, "I'm going to write you a letter a week every week."

Interviewer: How long had you been together at this point?

Marc: Oh, like four years.

Claudia: Yeah, four years.

Marc: About three and a half.

Claudia: But you actually started writing ...

Marc: Before that?

Claudia: Within like a month or two that you knew you were going to move away.

Marc: I did?

Claudia: Yep.

Marc: I don't remember.

Claudia: I have the cards there. Uhm, you were just writing little notes like 'I love you so much', 'Thank you for supporting me' and 'I'm really nervous about moving.

Marc: Oh, I rock!

In this next example, Claudia and Marc shared a shift in their relationship, illustrated by a change in the way they were writing to each other. In addition, not only was the content of their writing changing, but so were their roles within the writing relationship: Claudia began to write less than Marc.

Claudia: No, I just stopped.

Marc: Claudia, what made you stop?

Claudia: I don't know.

Marc: This is fun.

Claudia: Being comfortable, like being with him again and just ... I mean, I would give him like birthday cards and all like these ... you know like the ... just cards on occasion but it wasn't like that or at least it was just ... I don't know, because having him close, I didn't need that any more, um, but I still obviously on occasion write for the most part. That was like a crutch for the time being while I was away from him so ...

What was interesting about this dialogue between Claudia and Marc was their discovery of how their extracurricular writing relationship shifted as time progressed and as the distance, geographically speaking, progressed. They may have been aware of the shift at the time it occurred, but this discussion during the research process connoted a developed understanding of *why* it occurred. Together, Claudia and Marc made sense of their lived experience.

I recall sitting on the floor in their living room with my note pad, pencil and recorder, looking up at Claudia and Marc while they told their story. Together, they sat on the couch. For most of the interviews, they held hands, played with each other, and good-humoredly pushed and prodded each other around. My memory of the interviews is filled with sounds of laughter, lots and lots of cursing and a lot of noticeable energy between the two of them. Claudia and Marc were kind to each other, doted on each other, used pet names for each other. They were openly emotional, engaging often in a dialogue that I would consider packed with passion. As Claudia and Marc shared with me some of their courting rituals, I noticed how often they encouraged each other, how kind they were to each other. This example, taken from a description of their first date—a night on the beach—illustrates this very point:

Claudia: Well yeah, it was our first date, I couldn't just be like, "Am I dying?"

Marc: I know, because now you're, "I'm fucking cold. Let's go." That would be now. At the time like, "No, it's ... it's really nice."

Claudia: Yeah. I made the best of it. It was awesome and he put so much effort into it. It really flattered me. That's loving.

Marc: That's right. I brought a six pack of beer.

Claudia: See, that's love.

Marc: I still remember the beer type, baby.

Claudia: I know, and there were strawberries, and I just felt like a couple, but he was nice enough to notice that I was cold so we left.

While helping me to understand the nature of their extracurricular writing relationship, the relationship as they lived it, Claudia and Marc also relived the experiences as they had originally lived them. The stories of their relationship began to cradle the stories of the writing within the relationship. The two became intertwined. Because their correspondences shared so much about their relationship, as mentioned earlier in this study, the couples' stories, as they told them to me throughout the interviews, mirrored this same topic—while also moving further and further into stories that defined and began to redefine their relationship.

Claudia and Marc laughed often and found humor within themselves and within their relationship. When they disagreed, they would together rebuild their understanding of an event or simply drop it. In response to the inquiry, “tell me the story of your relationship?” Marc stated, “She couldn't resist me. I mean, come on now.” From there, Claudia laughed and continued on with the story about their age difference, his youthfulness, and their desire to keep things casual for quite a while in the beginning. In looking at some of their cards, the two engaged in a dialogue about how much they love each other:

Marc: This is a recent one.

Interviewer: Okay, and there is uh, for the record there is graphics on this note card of the planet. Looks like a small cellar, so not drawn to scale. It says that's the galaxy with an explanation point.

Marc: Well, because Claudia and I ... and it's like then she goes, "How much do you love me?" and I would just go like, "This much."

Claudia: No. You'd be like this.

Marc: For the record, I'm only putting my hands 12 inches apart, and she goes, "That's it?" so then I'd put it shoulder width apart. "That's it?" She's like, "I love you as much as the galaxy." I guess, oh that's better. So that ...

Claudia: Very demanding.

Marc: So, I said, "I love you as much as the galaxy and the Milky Way," Currently, not drawn to scale.

One of the ways Claudia and Marc made sense of their extracurricular writing relationship and the way writing functioned within that relationship was by being silly, by being funny. How did they look at the letters together? By laughing their way through the process. When they re-read the letters that share their history of a long-distance relationship in which each missed the other tremendously, they read them by giggling, by playfully name-calling and by retelling the bittersweet memories with a smile.

Reflection 6

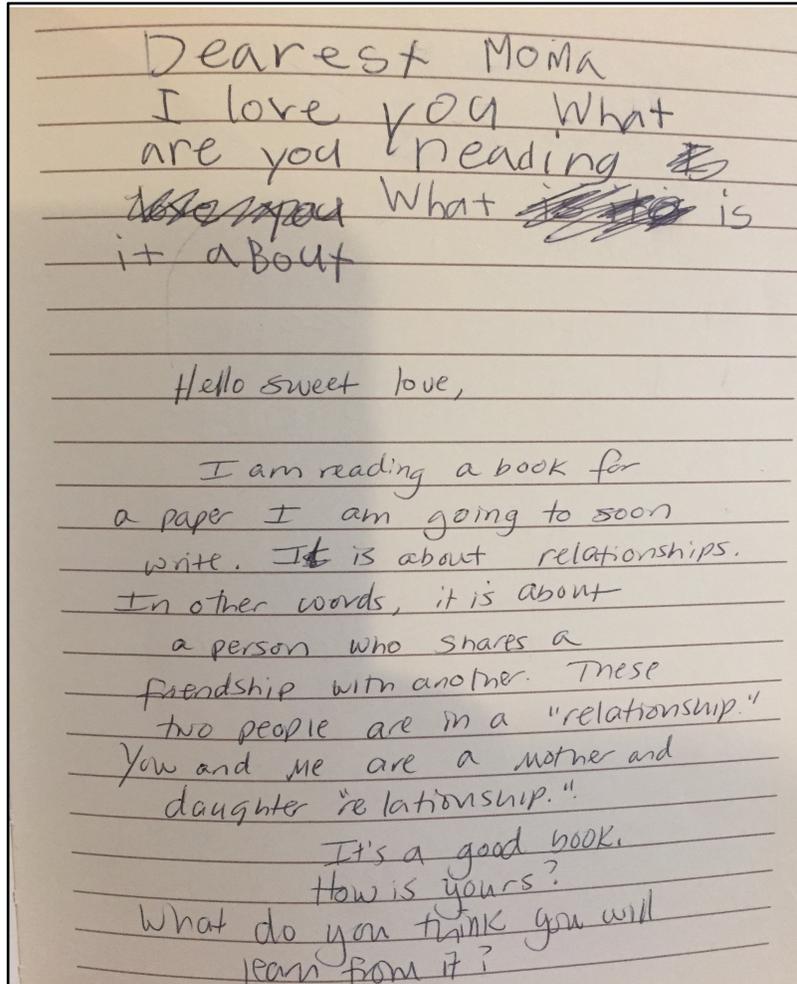


Figure 5. Madelyn and Momma's shared journal: Relationships.

This is an excerpt from Madelyn's and my journal. I recently turned to it as we were discussing this research study. I reminded her how this journey began years ago and that she was very much a part of this endeavor then and now. This story that I am telling is one that we are co-creating together. We shared the story then, and even now, it is ours for the telling.

CHAPTER SIX
KYR AND VICTORIA

Couple Profile

Kyr and Victoria, both 19, were entering their junior years in college when I interviewed them, and their relationship was moving into its third year. Thus, they had spent approximately a year together before beginning a long-distance relationship. At the time of the interview, Kyr was a student at a large state school in Pennsylvania, while Victoria was a student at a smaller state school in Pennsylvania. Both from the same area outside of Pittsburgh, they essentially spent their high school years together after meeting in 10th grade science class. Kyr and Victoria were in an active extracurricular writing relationship at the time of the interview and exchanged writing weekly, mostly cards and short notes. In her reflective questionnaire, Victoria mused about their relationship:

He always teased me about my boyfriend at the time who I claimed was the love of my life. I thought that he flirted way too much with the other girls and pretty much thought he was a joke. Senior year, I had an English class with him 8th period. He sat behind me and always gave me a smile when he came him. We would talk about my heels and he would tell a stupid joke that had all the girls laughing.

All in all, Kyr and Victoria were in a long-distance relationship for four years—though they would spend some of their summers together. Kyr and Victoria were married this past summer in East-Central Pennsylvania. Victoria is a social studies

teacher and Kyr does analysis for a business and technology consulting firm. They currently reside in Western Pennsylvania. They no longer write to each other.

The son of two medical professionals, Kyr stood tall at six foot two. With polished short brown hair and blue eyes, he spoke proudly of his Greek heritage. Specifically, at our first interview, he recounted the story of learning his name as one of his first experiences with writing:

The only thing I can really recall is first writing my name. I remember this because I had such a hard name to spell for a 5-year-old because Kyriakos isn't exactly the easiest name to spell at that age. I distinctly remember my grandmother helping me to learn how to spell my name at that time.

Kyr described himself as a typical college kid, but he admitted that he was more of a "jock" and a "flirt" in high school. An athlete, music enthusiast and academic, Kyr was raised primarily by his mom and first noticed Victoria, also raised mainly by her mom, in middle school.

Victoria was born in the Midwest but grew up in Western Pennsylvania. She was raised by her mother and learned at an early age that her dad had "abandoned them." Victoria described her mother as a "helicopter" mom who worked over 40 hours a week. Victoria was raised to value education, hard work and, more specifically, learning. With her legs tightly crossed, spine perfectly straight, sincere eye-contact and conservative attire, it was clear that Victoria paid a lot of attention to social and personal nuances, and it was these characteristics about her persona that attracted Kyr to her. However, to Victoria, Kyr was nothing more than a "flirt, eye-candy and not worth [her] time." She described her first encounters with Kyr as being teased by him, and her early

impressions of Kyr were that he “flirted way too much with the other girls.” Because of this, she “pretty much thought he was a joke.” From the get-go, there was absolutely no spark.

All three of my interviews with Kyr and Victoria took place at Starbucks. Kyr drank nothing and ate nothing, while Victoria sipped on coffee with sugar and cream. She was training to be a teacher and had recently switched her major from political science to history education. Kyr was on his way to becoming a businessman, and he was excited to begin his summer internship. My impression of the young couple was just that: a young couple. They argued—a lot. Not a mean-spirited brand of argumentation but rather a gentle kind of banter in which both had to be right. Both Victoria and Kyr had dominant personalities. When I asked Victoria to describe why she wrote in her relationship, she told me:

It helps us stay connected. Kyr and I are not the typical 20-year-old couple. We are very serious about our relationship and we tend to things out of order. For example, most couples don't get together until their Jr. year of college and go to the same college. We, however, decided to become a long distance relationship going into college our freshman year. We like to be different and goofy and that's what works for us. Most kids our age would never write as much as we do. It brings something different to the relationship. We reflect on our past writings and how it has helped us grow as a couple. Writing adds a different element instead of just texting and phone calls. It really does help us stay connected and recall memories that will last a lifetime.

Her description of why she and Kyr write was illuminating: they wrote to connect and to look back at the past. She later stated:

A writing relationship is whatever you chose to make it. My writing relationship is essential to my relationship with Kyr. We decided that it comprised of all different writings, from books to online chats to cards. A writing relationship is not defined by one set of rules or guidelines. The individuals make up what they want it to be. Every relationship is different.

What is interesting about this assertion is that both Kyr and Victoria agreed that until they were asked to be a part of this research study, they never even considered the writing to be part of their relationship; the writing was ancillary. Victoria then began to see that writing was a driving force within the relationship. Writing fueled the relationship and functioned as more than a tool of cultivation for Kyr and Victoria: it was the bedrock of the relationship.

Writing Profile

At first, writing was a way for Kyr and Victoria to express what they couldn't verbalize; it was a way for them to share their feelings and emotions about the relationship. It was also a way for them to share their frustrations and angst with the relationship. Victoria shared with me in her autobiographical questionnaire, collected prior to our interviews, that at first the writing between her and Kyr was "mushy" but later evolved into more playful writing about their day-to-day lives. She shared that Kyr was writing about "The Adventures of Victoria Anne and Kyriakos Kelly." Their extracurricular writing relationship, at the time, was two years strong, though it shifted plenty though the years and was about to shift yet again:

Our freshman year of college we wrote to each other at least 3-4 times a week. This would include our computer chats. We didn't want others to hear what we were saying so we found this would be much easier to communicate our feelings. I also sent him cards at least once a month or right before I would see him. This year we wrote each other probably a couple times a month. Since he is traveling in the summer we have decided to do something a little out of our element. We are starting a writing journal. I will start out by writing something in the journal, not sure what I'll write yet, then I will give it to him. We are hoping to get pictures and drawings in there. As well as things we want to accomplish as a couple, our bucket list so to speak.

This is not the first time the couple shared a book or co-authored piece of writing between the two. Victoria later shared:

I think the most unique writing I have experienced with Kyriakos would have had to been the book he gave me. Kyriakos and I were at a tough patch in our relationship. We were just struggling. We were fighting and just seemed nothing was going our way. It was almost at the end of the year for school and I think we just needed to be with each other. So I was mad at Kyriakos and we were both home. He came home a day before he was supposed to and surprised me. He gave me this book, *Oh The Places You'll Go*, my favorite book of all times. I opened it and saw he wrote this huge letter about how we are going to go great places and that we can make it through anything. At the bottom of the letter he wrote, Will we succeed? It's 98 and $\frac{3}{4}$ percent guaranteed. It melted my heart. He put so much thought and effort into this letter and book. It was better than

flowers, candy, teddy bear, or card because it was from his heart. It was so different and I knew that we were going to make it through anything. I have the book on my night stand and look at it almost every day. I then wrote him back in the same book and from there it continued.

Sifting through the writing shared between Kyr and Victoria was a very different experience than looking through the letters and cards exchanged between Angie and Michael or Claudia and Marc. These writers shared hundreds of emails; however, they were only able to salvage 17 of those electronic missives. They explained to me that most of their writing was electronic and were simply not saved or could not be located. Saved, however, is a collection of approximately thirty cards and one book filled with a shared journal. Victoria's handwriting made me laugh, as it was reminiscent of her personality: bubbly. On the other hand, Kyr's handwriting was quite legible, a hybrid of cursive and block and a bit sloppy. He didn't seem to like to erase, so there were words crossed out and lines pointing to where the eye should continue reading. Stickers covered the envelopes. Both cards and envelopes were littered with hearts and lipstick lip prints. There are two cards completely covered in collages (see Figure 6).

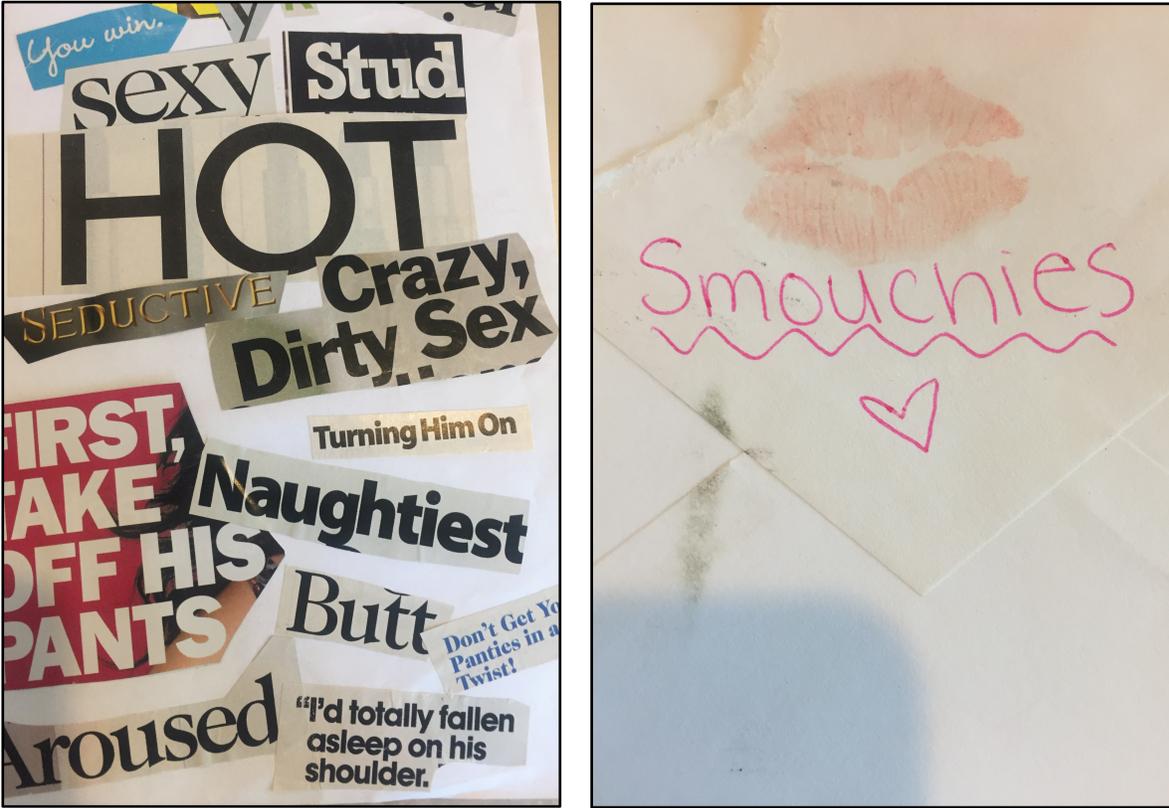


Figure 6. Victoria and Kyr: Collage and Smooch.

Theme 1: Relationship Writing

Much of the writing shared between Kyr and Victoria focused on the relationship. In one shared correspondence, Victoria wrote to Kyr about how much she loved him and the relationship and how she was looking forward to their future together:

I just wanted to say that I love you. ... You and I love each other, we are going to get married, and raise a wonderful family. Those are the most important things and we agree. ... You really do complete me and make me a better person.

As a researcher, I couldn't help but wonder if this was directly linked to their youthfulness. Their budding relationship, as seen in their writing, was all that they seemed to care to write about. And perhaps with youth on their side, this relationship

was the best and maybe the only topic to discuss. It certainly held their interest and occupied each and every written exchange. Thus, as the youngest members in this research endeavor, it is interesting to note that the theme of relationship writing was, by far, the most dominant theme throughout Kyr and Victoria's missives. Equally important to note, the writing was not always about the magical moments within their relationship but also about the trying times.

A subtheme under "relationship writing," and one that was unique to the writing shared between Kyr and Victoria, is conflict conciliation. Through writing, Kyr and Victoria made up and took time to share their afterthoughts about conflicts, disagreements or misinterpretations. As their writing indicates, these conflicts were extinguished through writing about the relationship, their love of the relationship and usually, an apology. In one instance, Kyr wrote: "I'm really sorry how yesterday turned out. I know you wanted more romance and I failed to give it to you. But even though we fight sometimes, I think we still have one of the strongest relationships around." Similarly, Victoria, addressing her email to "Poooooooookie," wrote:

I am terribly sorry for getting upset at you yesterday. I realize now (thanks to my Mom) that I don't know where I will be 10 years from now and what my finances will be like. I can tell you what I would like to happen and hope that you feel the same way, but I shouldn't get into fights about things that aren't even here yet and might not be a problem in the future.

Both Kyr and Victoria shared much of their frustrations with their relationship through their writing. Writing seems to have served as a venue for relationship discussion as much as it serves as location for relationship reconciliation for them.

Theme 2: Reflective Writing

As noted earlier, Kyr and Victoria shared writings titled, “The Adventures of Victoria Anne and Kyriakos Kelly.” Throughout these missives, which are mostly in email form, both Victoria and Kyr looked back on the experiences they have shared together; they looked back on their relationship. In one installment, Kyr wrote:

Alright [sic], so just as I promised, here is tonight’s installment of The Adventures of Victoria ANNE (with an E) and Kyriakos Kelly. This moment takes place at the end of spring semester after my finals were finally done.

Kyr went on to discuss the fights they were having and the stress they were both experiencing due to their distance and school. He then recalled when the opportunity finally arose for them to see each other: “I had finally gotten home around 12, and I remember just unpacking my stuff as quickly as possible so that I could hurry on over to your house (because we both know that I don’t like to drive in the dark.”

In addition to these suitably named reflections, both Kyr and Victoria spent ample time in their writing looking back at their relationship as they sought to appreciate the value their relationship held for each of them. Kyr wrote to Victoria at the close of her junior year:

I just wanted to give you this card to congratulate you on making it through a tough year. I know it wasn’t easy for you or for us as a couple at some points. You dealt with the worst roommate of all time and a major change and you should be commended for that. I know we had our bumps in the road this year (many of them being my fault) but I found out this year that we can make it through pretty much anything . . .

While not a dominant theme in their correspondences, the couple did take time in their writing to look back, cultivating their current relationship.

Theme 3: Benevolent Writing

Through the process of “making up” or tending to their disputes, Kyr and Victoria shared much kindness in their writing. Each member of this extracurricular writing relationship took time in writing to compliment the other. Kyr referred to Victoria as an intelligent, hard-working woman. Victoria referred to Kyr as loving and funny—someone who makes her laugh. They reconciled often in their writing and shared unkind words but did not argue in their writing. Their shared kindness was often to mend what appeared to be broken. Both Kyr and Victoria offered encouraging words about school and life; for the most part, all discussions focused on their relationship.

In this card from Kyr to Victoria, the focus was on the relationship itself:

Hey Hunny Bunny,

Just wanted to give you this card to say that I Love You! Im trying to get on the right track to WOO you haha, and I figured that a card with cats (cause you love them so much!) would be a great start. You are the best girlfriend ever and “I Could Not Ask For More” (our song).

In a letter from Victoria to Kyr, Victoria wrote:

Kyr,

Sorry if my handwriting is a little messy/shakey [sic], I’m getting emotional already. My love for you grows everyday. You really are my best friend. I’m always learning new things about you. By the weird twist of fate, we’re together,

and couldn't be happier. I'm so glad we're together. I know we can make it through anything.

Victoria signed the letter:

Always

Your cuddle bug,

Victoria (*drawn heart*)

Theme 4: Amusement Writing

In general, this couple's writing reflected a somewhat serious tone with threads of occasional laughter. The cards they shared tended to be humorous in nature, and Kyr and Victoria seemed to enjoy using pet names for each other. Ironically, they did not do this throughout the interviews—only in writing did I see this. Kyr's self-described nicknames were "Bear," "Tiger," "Bunny," or "the Greatest Boyfriend Ever." Kyr called Victoria "Hunny Bunny," "Bugga Boo," and "Hunny." Victoria signed her cards "Little Terd" and addressed cards to Kyr as "Terd with Corn" and "Babe." She also signed cards "Victoria," "the Good Girl," "Polish Princess," "Cuddle Bug," and "Tori."

As well, Kyr liked to share entertaining YouTube videos with Victoria.

Theme 5: Everyday Writing

Everyday writing is the theme that least captured what Kyr and Victoria exchanged in their writing. They wrote about everyday events infrequently. As noted previously, this couple, more often than not, wrote about their relationship—even creatively. For example, this electronic letter from Kyr to Victoria has no opening greeting:

Alright so just as I promised, here is tonight's installment of the Adventures of Victoria ANNE (With an E) and Kyr Kelly. This moment takes place at the end of spring semester after my finals were finally done. We had gone three weeks without seeing each other again, and it was really starting to wear on us because we had really been fighting a lot. .

The letter moves on describing a creative nonfictional account of their relationship.

Conflict and Courtship: The (Re)Telling of Kyr and Victoria's Story

Couples co-create and re-create their memories while sharing about their relationship, and Kyr and Victoria fit this pattern. Victoria and Kyr spent a great deal of time sharing the story of how they first met and how their relationship developed. The courting for this young couple was an enormous part of their lived past and they saw it as the foundation for the relationship's strength. The courting was filled with ups and down, misunderstandings, missed phone calls, and even break-ups and remained a topic that appeared over and over again in much of their correspondences. In our first interview and throughout almost the entire first interview, Kyr and Victoria together told the story of their courting, using their writings to help recall the details. As they told the story, they laughed, they argued, they seemed visibly annoyed at times, and most notably, they co-created and re-created the memory of saying goodbye at the end of high school—the event that marked the beginning of their writing, according to the couple.

Kyr: Before I go to school she hangs out with me at night, the night I was suppose to hang out with Sarah, and that was the day before I'm leaving. I could just tell she was sad.

Victoria: It was hard.

Kyr: She had a sad look about her. I was thinking why is she sad? We don't have a relationship; I'm not her boyfriend. Why is she sad? You could just tell. She wasn't really ready admitting it, but you could see that she was sad. I go off to school and my first weekend up there and I'm at a party and I text her and she's with her friend Renee and you could tell.

Victoria: Because he was a little happy that night.

Kyr: You were talking about me?

Victoria: I was talking about you and I got a text from him saying about the drink Everclear. I don't like alcohol, gross alcohol, and I didn't even know what it was.

Kyr: *(Laughs, nods)*

Victoria: That's how naïve I was going into college. He said, "I just took a shot of this Everclear and it was the worst thing ever." So my friend and I were looking up Everclear because we didn't know what it was. I told her I didn't know why he was texting me.

Kyr: I'm sorry to interrupt, a real quick side note, she texted to me when I got to Penn State and did say, "Hey good luck at Penn State."

Victoria: No, no.

Kyr: Yes, you did.

Victoria: No, that was the night before you were at the hotel.

Kyr: Yeah, you said, "Hey..."

Victoria: But this was the next night.

Kyr: Yeah.

Victoria: But it was nice to say good luck.

Kyr: Yeah, but she did send the first text.

Victoria: No, but that was good luck. Technically you weren't at school.

Kyr: No, that still counts. She also had me add her on Skype so we could talk when I would get to school. So she initiated that we were going to continue talking by saying, "Hey, get Skype on your computer so that we can talk."

Victoria: But it was only going to be like every once in a while. It wasn't going to be all the time.

Kyr: I think subconsciously you wanted to be more often than every once in a while. So that was the first really major communication between us once we get to school.

In telling the story of how they said goodbye prior to attending college, Kyr and Victoria revisited the memory together and in doing so, re-created it: they built the memory together and gained new knowledge about their relationship. Throughout the course of our interviews, Kyr and Victoria told many stories about the nature of writing within their relationship—what led to it, how it evolved, what it meant to them—and many stories were told in tandem.

The questions that the couples shared with one another through the interview process seemed to propel the interviews forward. As was the case with both Angie and Michael and Claudia and Mark, Kyr and Victoria used questions to help each other

describe what it's like to be and write within an extracurricular writing relationship.

These questions seemed to not only assist them in building their narrative past but also helped them to construct meaning together, to build new knowledge through the telling of their story. In this dialogical vignette, Kyr and Victoria were asked to tell me the story of how they met. Kyr began and then immediately asked Victoria to help him tell the story.

Kyr: All right, well technically we met. We started first talking a lot in 8th grade because we had a computer class together and Tori was all, I was awestruck with her. Longtime boyfriend Jason Hitchberg lives in Freeport, he did no wrong. That was Victoria's first love and then we really didn't start talking a lot until senior year because we had 8th period English together. I'm not going to lie, I use to flirt with Tori a lot in 8th period, even if she didn't like it.

Victoria: *(laughter)*

Kyr: Do you care to add something?

Victoria: No, you know.

It should be noted, however, that with Kyr and Victoria, there were decidedly fewer questions asked compared to the other two couples in the study. Perhaps this was because of their youth. Similarly, Kyr and Victoria relied more on my presence to prompt them in their endeavor to share their lived experiences as members of an extracurricular writing relationship.

As Kyr and Victoria co-created their extracurricular writing relationship, I noticed they argued more than the other couples. I cannot specifically attribute this to any one

specific variable. As noted earlier, two central variables that could have played a role were their age and the length of the relationship—20 months. These variables could very well have affected the confidence that the two members had in the relationship, their ability to reflect deeply on the relationship, and their understanding of the relationship itself—then and now. Retrospection and well as introspection, whether individually or collaboratively created, requires some level of mature thought, and it would be my guess that both Kyr and Victoria’s youth played a pivotal role in the way they co-created their stories, the form through which the stories were conveyed and the knowledge that was ultimately gained through the experience. Nonetheless, in addition to argumentative, albeit playful, relationship banter, Kyr and Victoria would compliment each other subtly, as well as share secrets from the past and words of encouragement. Here is an example that highlights an exchange of encouragement and kindness:

Victoria: I’m a very old fashioned person, so I wanted that exchange of letters and that type of romantic thing. That’s what the goal was. So I was sending it hoping I would receive in some sense.

Kyr: I did it in a different way.

Victoria: Aw.

Kyr: I did it through the computer.

Victoria: In the beginning I was trying too hard and he wasn’t trying hard enough.

Kyr: She was coming on strong. But she always gave her heart.

Victoria: I was, because that’s what I wanted.

As stated above, Kyr and Victoria shared the story of their extracurricular writing relationship often through dialoging in and out of disagreements. Ironically, these disagreements in the telling of their relationship seemed to mirror the way the relationship was formed, the way it was and is cultivated, and how it evolved. It can be posited that Kyr and Victoria seemed to thrive within a writing relationship marked with disagreements and humorous jabbing. In the following excerpt from their first interview, Kyr and Victoria were talking about pet names they had for each other and the use of pet names in their writing with each other:

Kyr: My roommates used to make fun of me for it because she told them about it and then they started to make fun of me for it. Polish Nail.

Victoria: Polish Nail and Greek Hammer, that's was our, these were roommates. I think Ricky probably...

Kyr: Yeah, Rick started calling her the Polish Nail.

Victoria: The names kind of change. Like right now...

Kyr: You never call me Pookie.

Victoria: Pookie from the wanted poster. I don't know why I called you Pookie. It was like on the first one I sent you. Because they go back from our freshman year. There's like 600 messages.

Kyr: Babe. The biggest thing I use in real life are Babe and Honey.

Victoria: Not Honey. *[Audible]* Ugh.

Victoria was very annoyed with Kyr during this exchange and then they quickly and rather happily moved onto the next topic, writing and saying, “I love you,” when another small squabble erupted:

Victoria: Yes, I want to like, come on, we’re dating, not liking. The next phase was I love you, and he wasn’t saying it.

Kyr: I never said I love you.

Victoria: And I was being so upset because I wanted, because I felt that and wanted him to feel that and I was like it’s been six months he should start feeling that.

Kyr: *[Audible]* UGH.

Victoria: Like, come on, come on.

Through these narratives marked with minor squabbles, Kyr and Victoria shared stories of pet names and of first “I love yous”. In their experience, it seemed that playful bantering and disagreements brought discussions about their writing to life—giving it new life.

Reflection 7

Throughout my time as a doctoral student, there was no drafted argument, no research project, and no academic presentation that didn't begin with the personal, and this research endeavor is no exception. Within the academy, it certainly wasn't the norm and maybe it still isn't, but it was the only way I could make sense of spending an unbelievable amount of time with my head in a book or with my fingers dancing across a keyboard.

I can recall one of my early presentations as a student of composition; I wrote about the language of silence, about my brother's suicide, about the silence one endures in surviving a suicide. Presenting my findings to the class, the film I had created moved forward on its own, slide after slide. I couldn't utter a word as the pictures of my brother streamed intensely forward on the screen capturing his story, my story, the story of his life, its tragic end and then the deafening, lonely silence. The class was captivated. Some wept. Throughout most of the eight-minute presentation, I stood, bent over, crouched behind the podium, weeping, hiding. At the close, after the final picture of my brother and me flashed across the screen and the references streamed by, I wiped my eyes, stood barely tall and hoped my voice would find me. I couldn't speak. Luckily, my professor asked my peer colleagues if there were any questions. There were none. Sweet relief. My professor then asked me if I had purposefully remained silent to convey my point, if the silence was part of my presentation, my plan all along: I wiped my eyes one last time and muttered, Absolutely.

Later that night, my professor emailed me and thanked me for a touching presentation. He told me it was unforgettable. His comment, his sentiment, was

unforgettable. As well, I received numerous supportive emails from classmates. Their writings conveyed love and gratitude. I wrote each and every one of them back. Of no surprise, however, we never spoke of my presentation again—not in class, nor out over coffee or with a beer in hand. It was only in writing where we shared such warmth about such a complicated, personal matter. I will never forget that presentation. I will never forget those shared letters, shared words, and I will never forget that all good research begins with what we love.

This reflection illustrates the personal nature of this research endeavor, as well as the role writing can play between individuals. It punctuates the very idea that writing often gives us our voice when our ability or our availability is lost. It is writing that provides passage for communication, for cultivation. It was my very own writing relationship, an out-of-school writing relationship with my daughter and with my husband that was the impetus for this study. As well, we know that writing is a vehicle for learning; it is a socially-constructed activity. In thinking about the previous reflection, it wasn't until my peer colleagues emailed me that I truly was able to process the experience of my own silence in coping with my brother's suicide—its effect on me and the knowledge that was conveyed and acquired. Likewise, the creation of the presentation itself—formulating the research question, gathering the information, collecting the photos, deconstructing, constructing and reconstructing the story and systematically shaping all the information in a way that my peers could process the information—helped me make sense of this lived experience.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL REFLECTION: UNDERSTANDING THE ESSENCE OF THE EXTRACURRICULAR WRITING RELATIONSHIP

Tobin (1993) inspired the following questions: What is the nature of an extracurricular writing relationship? Have “out-of-school” writing experiences been adequately unpacked, and are writing teachers making enough of a connection between in and out of school writing experiences? These questions thus became the impetus—the heart of my dissertation study—and its central research question: What is the lived experience of writing within an extracurricular writing relationship? As ancillary to this question, I asked: How do couples within extracurricular writing relationships make sense of their experiences and the knowledge co-constructed through those experiences?

In sorting through the pages of transcribed data, the pre-interview questionnaires, the epistles, the hand-drafted sticky notes, the birthday, Valentine’s Day and conciliatory cards, as well as the interview notes, I learned that the lived experiences of individuals involved in extracurricular writing relationships can be thematically portrayed. These themes provide common threads between the couples; they can be described as common denominators but certainly do not mark sameness. More clearly, “themes” are topics, ideas, or maxims; as posited by van Manen (1990), they are experiential structures that help the researcher extract interpretative elements through story. They are simplifications of a lived experience; they are never *the* experience, as the storytellers are within a state of retrospection while also in a constant state of introspection, revising and recreating their past and present realities.

Further, the themes I identified that best address these research questions are broad observations about extracurricular writing relationships that stem from watching, listening and taking note; they are what I have learned—statements derived from an amalgamation of the interviews, the interview notes, the epistles, and all shared writing. In particular, identified themes were generated through a line-by-line analysis of the field data by selecting dialogical sentences, phrases and anecdotal vignettes that are thematic of the experience of writing within an extracurricular writing relationship. I examined what it means to be a writer within an extracurricular writing relationship by analyzing selected pieces of the couples' stories and their statements.

The Nature of the Extracurricular Writing Relationship: A Broad Landscape

Much like a photographer capturing a mood, the researcher, at best, can only represent a given phenomenon through her articulation of themes as well as through the sharing of these themes. Van Manen (1990) recommended using recognized themes as a starting point for conversation with participants in the study. Throughout the interview process, these co-constructed themes often served as catalysts for conversation among the participants.

The lived experience of writing within an extracurricular writing relationship, the nature of a writing relationship, why it occurs, how it is cultivated, and for how long it occurs is complex and context-driven. Lived experience, according to van Manen (1990), "is the breathing of meaning" (p. 36). Lived experience, an experience described as a phenomenon by phenomenologists, is one that is recognized through retrospection. In other words, by giving memory to the lived experience of writing within a relationship, meaning can be assigned to this phenomenon. Bruner (1987) further

reminded us that narratives provide structure to experience; stories help us to make sense of our lived experiences and “build the very events of a life” (p. 15). Thus, it is through the couples’ stories where certain maxims emerged, helping to define these relationships. Stories, co-constructed by the couples themselves both in writing and through oral story, have taught us that in some extracurricular writing relationships:

1. Proximity plays an important role
2. A lack of proximity allocates more time and “abstract” space for intimacy
3. Writing to a partner is fun, enjoyable, and brings happiness both to the writer and to the receiver of the writing
4. The content, tone, and purpose of the writing shifts as the relationship changes through time
5. Individuals within the writing relationship have had experiences outside the relationship with writing, and these experiences were positive and/or instructive
6. Routines occur that revolve around writing
7. Rites of passage within the relationship can cause a shift in the amount of writing that takes place
8. Writing fortifies the relationship, even if the amount and type of writing evolves through time

The Lived Experience of Writing Within an Extracurricular Writing Relationship

There are a variety of topics about which the couples wrote. The tone, subject and genre of the missives shifted in various directions, without notice, and with the evolving nature of the relationship. A phenomenon such as writing within a relationship outside of school is as unique as the relationship itself. How can we describe the nature

of what it's like to write within an extracurricular writing relationship? What can the writing reveal? The writing itself has tremendous phenomenological value as it allows us to connect to the life situation of "extracurricular writing within a relationship" as it was stamped in time; the letters have provided preservation of the "former." They illuminated the story of a lived situation—the feelings, the emotions and the events that took place as the correspondences were written.

Throughout my examination of the three couples' correspondences, I asked myself, akin to van Manen's (1990) phenomenological approach (p. 87), the following question: What is the meaning? In trying to understand the nature of what it means to write within the phenomenon known in this research study as the extracurricular writing relationship, I formulated five themes which are at best a simplification of an incredible amount of meaning. The five themes allowed for this experience to not only be understood but to be described. Capturing a lived experience is much like riding wave: each time you ride it, it's different. The themes noted here provide structure, form, shape. It's important to note, however, that the creation of themes have pedagogical purpose: we may learn and come to understand the lived experience about that which we inquire. Five themes emerged from an examination of the three couples involved in this study: Angie and Michael; Claudia and Marc; and Victoria and Kyr. And it is through their co-constructed, experiential stories—their letters, notes, cards and correspondence—that I identified thematic meaning. Recognized common themes illustrated what the couples wrote about, how they wrote and how they addressed each other, and thus shed light on the nature of writing within a writing relationship. However, as with the interpretation of all stories both phenomenologically and narratively, there is

no “one-size-fits-all” stance. Each relationship and each correspondence was unique and told its own story. Thus, to expound on the assigned themes, I let the writers and the writings speak for themselves.

Indeed, there were five key themes that described the content of the writing shared between the couples in this study and thus, these themes addressed the question, What is the nature of writing within the extracurricular writing relationship? These five key themes were as follows: Relationship Writing, Reflective Writing, Benevolent Writing, Amusement Writing and Everyday Writing. I hope these themes helped to illustrate, in some way, the nature of the extracurricular writing relationship.

To put it another way, the shared writing between members in an extracurricular writing relationship can be best described as:

1. **Relationship-oriented:** Writing that focuses on the relationship
2. **Reflective:** Writing that looks back in time and is introspective in nature
3. **Benevolent:** Writing shared with the intent to compliment or to offer praise or encouragement
4. **Amusing:** Writing that is entertaining in nature. This writing may seem humorous or untraditional (e.g., a funny picture within a card, an entertaining YouTube video inserted into an email, a homemade love test)
5. **Everyday:** Writing that is about the commonplace (e.g., life events, day-to-day routines)

Thus, through sharing storied vignettes found within the couples’ writings and by attempting to assign meaning through the allocation of themes that best portray what I encountered in the data, I gained a clearer understanding of the essence of the

extracurricular writing relationship and more specifically the lived experience of writing within an extracurricular writing relationship.

The (Re)Telling of a Tale: Co-Constructing Meaning

As ancillary to my primary research question, I sought to understand how couples within extracurricular writing relationships made sense of their experiences and the knowledge co-constructed through those experiences. This sociocultural lens through which I explored my primary research question and then further examined the field data I collected provided a framework for examining how a literacy practice such as writing within an extracurricular writing relationship is a socially, culturally and linguistically mediated literacy practice. Because this phenomenological study was informed by a sociocultural understanding of the way knowledge is constructed, it is important to reiterate that I believe that *how* couples shared their stories and what they learned about their lived experiences through storytelling is the collective construction of meaning. As stated by Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2005), “people come to have [or make] knowledge” through their active engagement in the process of making meaning (pp. 13-14). Therefore, to irradiate the phenomenon of writing within an extracurricular writing relationship and how meaning is afforded through these co-constructed writing experiences, I have studied the writing couple in an extracurricular writing relationship as they shared their writing past through story.

In order to best analyze the co-constructed stories as shared by the couples, I chose to utilize another narrative method of analysis: a dialogic narrative analysis whereby narratives were interpreted through themes and through how storytellers co-construct their stories. As noted earlier in this study, numerous narrative modes of

analysis can be utilized to more succinctly engage not only what a story means but also how the meaning is informed by context. A narrative analysis, therefore, can employ more than one approach to understanding a story. As Riessman (2008) argued, a dialogic analysis looks at how a story is co-created. In examining how couples share their stories, I conducted a dialogical analysis. This brand of analysis, according to Riessman (2008), looks at both thematic and structural elements and “expands from detailed attention to a narrator’s speech—what it said and/or how it is said—to the dialogic environment in all its complexity” (p. 137).

Something I did not predict when I began this research endeavor was how robust and textured the data would be in terms of the ways the couples told their stories and in what they learned about their lived experiences while storytelling. I had initially hypothesized that the couples would engage with *me* throughout the interviews and that my presence would create a certain kind of intrusion. This was not the case. I found that this area of the study, while ancillary, had a tremendous impact on not only the analysis of the field data but on the data itself. In fact, the question “How do couples within extracurricular writing relationships make sense of their experiences and the knowledge co-constructed through those experiences?” became the impetus to more copiously understand my primary question: What is the lived experience of writing within an extracurricular writing relationship? This lends credibility to the notion that a researcher’s lens is truly the filter through which she sees.

Certainly, I turned to a phenomenological stance to gauge the meaning and make sense of this lived experience I was observing. Four central themes emerged from the data. The following themes emerged from my dialogical analysis addressing

the question, How do couples within extracurricular writing relationships make sense of their experiences and the knowledge co-constructed through those experiences?

1. Couples co-create and re-create their memories while sharing about their relationship.
2. Couples often ask each other questions to recall events in the past.
3. Couples, while storytelling, share compliments, secrets, feelings, and words of encouragement.
4. Couples, while storytelling, participate in playful, banter-like behavior, disagree, as well as be humorous with each other.

Pedagogical Implications and Future Directions

Phenomenological inquiry informs us that research is undoubtedly pedagogically oriented. In other words, both our inquiry and our data-driven learned text needs to be pointed towards education in a way that we do not see the text as functioning for itself but rather as serving a greater purpose. Van Manen (1990) told us that to do “research, to theorize, is to be involved in the consideration of the text, the meaning of dialogic textuality and its promise of pedagogy—for pedagogic thinking, and acting in the company of children” (p. 151). And while the motivation for this study was personal, it was clear from the beginning that I am more than a mother who was involved in an extracurricular writing relationship; I am also a teacher, and with that comes an interest and a responsibility to both learn and teach. Thus, what pedagogical implications can be gleaned from this research study?

Informing In-School Literacy Practices

I would be remiss if I didn't first return to Tobin's text (1993), *Writing Relationships; What Really Happens in the Composition Class*. It was here that I was first introduced to "the writing relationship" and its connection to academia. Tobin wrote about writing in teacher-peer relationships marked with support and stimulation. It was Tobin who reiterated for me that much like the writing I did between friends and family, the writing in the classroom is largely relational as well. Collaborative writing can take many forms. Of course, Don Murray (1979) blazed this trail with his work on writing and conferencing in his article aptly titled, "The Listening Eye: Reflections on the Writing Conference."

And not long after him, Anne Ruggles Gere (1987) pioneered the idea that writing collaboratively, *in groups*, happens both in the academy and outside. The concept of writing together wasn't new in this dissertation study, as the practice has had many titles: "writing groups, using the partner method, helping circles, collaborative writing, response groups, team writing, writing laboratories, teacherless writing classes, group inquiry technique the round table, editing sessions, writing teams, workshops, and peer tutoring" (p. XX). However, what Ruggles Gere described for us was the phenomena that writing collaboratively, in a relationship, with a goal in mind, existed beyond the academy, beyond school. And this shared writing was of value, instructional; it counted for something. It was writing that had a pedagogical history developed long before composition gained its rightful place in the academy.

She wrote about the social dimension of writing, the involvement of human interaction and noted that writing doesn't happen in isolation, though she did not negate

the idea of the solo author, as there is ebb and flow to our work as writers. Giving credit to educational theorists like James Moffett, Donald Murray, Ken Macrorie, and Ken Bruffee, who advocated for and theorized the social nature of contemporary writing groups, Ruggles Gere expanded the writing group territory beyond educational institutions. Later, she (1994) published an article with NCTE titled “Kitchen Tables and Rented Rooms: The Extracurriculum of Composition” in which she further punctuated the idea that when we theorize composition, we must expand our notion of where writing takes place. Location is to be considered, and the extracurricular should not be neglected.

It was this piece about writing in the extracurricular that inspired me to think about how important writing is in our everyday lives. Thus, it seemed important to ask: given what we have observed about writing relationships taking place within the extracurricular, what can we transfer back into the academy or educational institution? Most importantly: writing is as much a tool for cultivating as for communicating; it can launch a relationship forward, and it can provide much needed nourishment.

Everyday writing, the writing of informal pieces like letters or notes, has a place in the classroom if we deem our relationships with students to be paramount; as long as we want students to cultivate their own identities, this everyday writing is essential. Writing shared between two people provides a forum where stories can be exchanged, unpacked and understood. Letter-writing and its proxies like email, Twitter, and online messaging promote connectivity and through time, cultivation.

With its inception in the in the field of nursing, narrative pedagogy considers the encounter of story exchange to be the point of learning. Indeed, as individuals reflect

upon and examine the narratives of their lives, the process of sharing this experience creates a robust learning occurrence for both the storyteller and the listener. In addition, storytelling in the classroom is a teaching tool. Using everyday writing as a tool for story exchange can promote this dialogue; the cumulative or patterned acts of written exchanges, like writing letters, are a developing story in itself.

What I learned from getting to know Angie and Mike, Claudia and Mark, and Victoria and Kyr, particularly through their stories about writing and through their writings, was that their shared writing was much more than an exchange of words; it was much more than communication between two individuals, and in many ways, more than the themes I've ascribed (a tool of cultivation, a mechanism for keeping in touch). The shared writing was the heart of the relationship; it was its nourishment. Much like a body needs water to survive, the writing for these couples aided in their survival. As I see it, the writings, which conveyed feelings on numerous subjects, were as much a part of their relationship as the feelings themselves.

When I first began working on this dissertation, I was a doctoral student and a teaching assistant working with young writers. As I worked on the last few chapters of this study, many years later, more years later than I would like to admit, I worked as an English teacher in a high school. My position changed: the students are younger, the curriculum more diverse and the hours quite abundant. But one thing has remained consistent: the teacher-student relationship is paramount. Without trust in the classroom, without a strong connection between my students, and myself, the writing falls flat. One of my favorite things about teaching high school English is having time to spend with students; it is the time spent each day learning about their lives, figuring out

what makes them tick, and helping them to configure and reconfigure their goals that makes my teaching worthwhile to me. The writing, in many ways, is how I get to know them. Of course, we write for so many purposes: we write to persuade, to compare, to expose, to inform, to grow. In my classroom, for my students and for me, we write to cultivate our relationship. We write to nourish and to propel us forward.

Future Research Possibilities

One of the greatest but most rewarding challenges for me was trying to process phenomenology as both an epistemological stance and a methodology. Wrapping my head around the concept of “essence” as described by Merleau-Ponty (1962) wasn’t as easy as it seemed given how popular the word is within our modern-day vernacular. In seeking to understand the nature of the lived experience of writing within the extracurricular writing relationship, I began to see the beauty of phenomenology as a means to access a point of curiosity. Van Manen (1990) captured it best when he wrote that phenomenological inquiry is “an artistic endeavor, a creative attempt to somehow capture a certain phenomenon of life in a linguistic description that is both holistic, and analytical, evocative and precise, unique and universal, powerful and sensitive” (p. 39). He went on to explain that an appropriate topic for a phenomenological inquiry would be one that questions the nature of a “certain way of being in the world” (pp. 39-40).

What I always found so fascinating about phenomenology as a way of looking at and processing an inquiry was that there is no hunt for facts but rather a desire for description. The search for meaning, phenomenologically speaking, is an everyday event in which reflection evolves into clarification and then into explication. The meaning of each phenomenon is multi-dimensional; it has many layers and cannot easily be

defined. In addition, a phenomenological inquiry must begin with the researcher's interests, and it is the researcher who must see the lived experience in question as a true phenomenon. This guides the inquiry, as does her own orientation or positionality. Thus, what I began to understand about phenomenology was that the research question and topic, the researcher, and the collected data all stood on equal ground: all experiences mattered. My lived experiences, the lived experience in question and the lived experiences of the couples in my study were all important to the outcome of this project. I didn't fully understand this until close to the end—how all the pieces fit together and couldn't function unless they fit equally. Phenomenology allows the subjects to speak for themselves, yet as a methodology, it also acknowledges that the lived experience is ascribed meaning by those who are experiencing it and by those inquiring about the phenomenon.

The Nature of Sharing Feedback and Peer Response

Moving forward, I see myself conducting a study of another lived experience that is capturing my attention at the moment: How does a student experience peer writing feedback? I am seeking to understand and describe the interactions that take place between students when they are engaged in the process of sharing writing. Re-reading Peter Elbow's text, *Everyone Can Write: Essays Toward a Hopeful Theory of Writing and Teaching* (2000), got me thinking about the trust that students develop with each other through their writing and the sharing of their writing. In an early section within the text, Elbow wrote about the various steps one can take to make the experience of writing easier and better:

It also helps to trust our similarities with others and our connections to them, and to find links between our experiences and theirs. Indeed, it helps enormously to work with others—actually writing companionably with others (with tea and cookie breaks), and sharing and responding to each others' writing in an atmosphere of trust and support. We can come to experience writing as a social, almost communal activity, rather than essentially lonely. (xv)

Elbow's sentiment, clearly linked in many ways to this research endeavor—the cultivation of trust within the writing relationship and the act of writing communally—helps me to see that there is much to be observed about the experiences of student relationships in the writing classroom and the way writing functions within these relationships.

Final Reflections

Theoretical and Methodological Reflections

Choosing phenomenology and narrative as a means to understand and describe the nature of writing with the extracurricular writing relationship came with its own set of challenges. Without a doubt, researchers are always informed by a theoretical as well as a methodological framework. The methodological perspective by which I approached this study was phenomenological, in that I see the extracurricular writing relationship as an everyday lived experience or phenomenon, as well as narrative, in that I believe that we live storied lives—we make sense of our lived experiences through the telling and re-telling of stories. This sounds relatively simple, but initially, I was overwhelmed with the menu of possibility. More or less, I realized that I had to make a greater commitment to one over the other. It's not that I didn't understand the relationship of the two

methodologies, as this is clearly discussed in Chapter Three, but that the nuances of each theoretical approach and the mindset of how to think narratively or think like a phenomenologist had me befuddled. A phenomenologist thinks narratively, but a scholar who favors a storied approach to inquiry doesn't always ponder the world seeking to better understand lived experience or the nature and meaning of something or a given phenomenon. There are many reasons why stories are collected, analyzed and illustrated, and it isn't always to glean *essence*. Clearly, I chose phenomenology, but it was the nuances of each method of inquiry that both excited me and caused my head to spin.

Here is what I know: an inquiry method is a way of researching a question: "The questions themselves and the way one understands the questions are the important starting points, not the method as such" (van Manen, 1990, p. 1). But method is organically connected to question, as questions are better answered when the method for inquiry simply makes interpretive sense. More importantly, the research approach one adopts "ought to maintain a certain harmony with the deep interest that makes one an educator (a parent or teacher) in the first place" (van Manen, 1990, p. 2). Van Manen's phenomenological point of view, to do research questioning the way we experience the world and to seek to understand human phenomenon, is a philosophy that, in my opinion, is all-encompassing; it is a way of seeing, understanding and describing something that truly interests us. This research methodology can work in tandem with narrative, as a methodology (in fact, it has to), but to truly engage in phenomenological research, one must monogamously embrace phenomenology. To study the essence of something, to see something as a phenomenon, to seek to

understand what it means to be human through the study of a phenomenon, is truly unique to phenomenology. Stories give phenomenology life. Without story, a phenomenological researcher cannot gather essence, better understand the phenomenon or describe the phenomenon so that we can all learn about its humanity.

Living the Phenomenological Life

Story is essential to phenomenological research and description, but phenomenology is a way of life, a way of living and of capturing meaning. When I think back to my first reading of Pagnucci's (2004) *Living the Narrative Life*, I'm embarrassed to admit that I was confused by the concept of living the "narrative life." I couldn't figure out the inherent connection between research theory and life. Pagnucci shared that "when we live the narrative life, we learn to trust more in stories. We choose them more consciously, share them more eagerly, and preserve them more carefully" (p. 54). The Greek definition of "theory" means contemplation or a sight. A theory is a way we see the world; it is how we live in the world, and I imagine, if our theory is robust, it crosses the line between the professional and the personal, the abstract and the concrete, the self and the other. We are guided by theories; beliefs shape our habits and cross over, back and forth, into all walks of our life. Like Pagnucci lives the narrative life as a seeker and teller of stories, through this study and some of the methodological complications that occurred, I have realized that I ascribe to a phenomenological way of seeing and being in the world. This is my vantage point; it is how I see and make sense of the world. I do this through gathering and sharing stories. Phenomenological theory holds that there is much to be learned from our everyday experiences and that no two experiences are the same, just as no two individuals are the same. I ascribe to

phenomenology because it favors the everyday, the uniqueness of the individual, the story, the description of what something is like, and most of all, the humanity that we all crave to understand.

A Change in My Lived Experience

Conducting and writing a dissertation is no easy task; it's not pretty, and I was warned. I recall a member of my dissertation committee (who has since retired) telling me to kiss my three young children goodbye for a few years, plan a day each week to spend with my husband, and work, work, work or this "thing" will never get done. Each time we met, we always had what I liked to call "the warning" conversation, as he told me this more than once. Sitting in his office, I would nod and agree and think to myself, "yeah, right, I got this." In other conversations with a different member of my dissertation committee, we would discuss all the people who simply never finish their dissertation. The ones who let the time slot for completion slip away, who would forever be NAME-comma-ABD. And I remember saying with great confidence, "That will never be me" and even thinking, "How could those people spend all that time on that research and not finish the project?" It seemed preposterous, downright asinine.

In looking back, there were a handful of forces that drove this dissertation into motion. Many of them I have written about at numerous points throughout this paper, but one I have let trail behind. I would like to explain further at this juncture. The writing I shared with my daughter, Madelyn, had the most profound influence on this study. To this day, her journal inspires me, and the stories I have shared about our writing describe an extracurricular writing relationship as I have known one to be. And even though we no longer journal with each other, and she is a bold and effervescent pre-

teen, we often text and leave notes for each other. As a mom struggling to understand her twelve-year-old daughter, I often think about returning to our extracurricular writing relationship. Our face-to-face communications are frequently riddled with miscommunications and lost moments. Our written words of the past allowed for a softer honesty when our daily tensions soared or when life was distracting. She left me a note on my bed the other day kidding with me about emptying the dishwasher and vacuuming the house; she signed it, “I love you, mamma.” It’s sitting on my dresser. Just this morning, I thought about leaving Madelyn a note to let her know that no matter what she may think, the truth of the matter is that she is always loved. I’m hoping we can resurrect this out-of-school writing practice, as I’m certain the writing will help us cultivate the love we share for each other, and we could use some work with communication, too.

Madelyn’s and my extracurricular writing relationship was by far the most profound impetus for this project—it was and still is the force that drives me forward as I look for inspiration near the end. On the other hand, my husband and I, though we are now separated, also exchanged writing in our relationship, as I mentioned in the earlier chapters of my dissertation. This was mainly writing that Matt shared with me on holidays and once a year on our anniversary. Initially, our relationship, our extracurricular writing relationship, was going to be a part of this study, but as our relationship began to evolve through the years, I felt great discomfort in not only sharing our writings but in reading his writings. They brought me pain, and quite frankly, it nearly stalled my entire dissertation. It took me quite a while to realize this.

I recall sitting down at my computer getting ready to write a first entry of what I had planned would be a dialogic journal shared between the two of us. The plan was to write to each other and share our ideas about our own writing relationship. Since I was conducting the study, I certainly couldn't interview us, and so the journal seemed like an organic way to get both Matt's and my ideas on paper—to write, to dialogue. Our writing would be shared with each other, and we would go back and forth for a certain amount of entries. To be honest, I can't quite recall the number. The truth is that on the day I sat down at my computer, I stared and stared at the screen and typed: *Dear Matt*, but that was all I could do—I had nothing more to say. Quite frankly, I felt empty, a bit like a fraud, hopeless, like I couldn't complete the project at all let alone this part of it. I became the personification of failure. It was an early sign, for me, that my relationship with my husband was missing something very important—there were no more words; there was nothing left to write.

That summer we were moving away from Indiana a few hundred miles south and east to York, Pennsylvania. Luckily, I had conducted all my interviews the summer prior to our move. If I hadn't, I'm not sure I would have ever been able to complete this project. There are moments when I still doubt. It took a call from my dissertation chair to get me moving again, and I'm grateful for his call. But in truth, I was scared to resurrect the project. My dissertation, to me, was more than just a research undertaking; it was in many ways a beacon of truth. And as I began to sift through the couples' letters and cards, it both saddened and overjoyed me to bear witness to such a phenomenon; it was a phenomenon shared between couples—one I didn't share with my husband.

In Barton and Hall's (2000) text, *Letter Writing as a Social Practice*, one chapter explicitly focuses on the love letters shared between Bir Bahadur and Sarita (p. 199). The couple resided in the Nepali village of Junigau. Laura Ahern conducted an ethnographic study looking at the issues surrounding incipient literacy and social change in rural Nepal. The concept of a "love letter" was quite new to this village, and Ahern captured this epistolary genre's growth within the concrete social contexts of courtship and marriage. In one letter from Bir Bahadur to Sarita, he wrote: "Sarita, love letters, even within the give and take of conversation, remain in the form of a true trace until the end of life" (p. 206). At no point throughout this dissertation do I refer to the couples' letters as shared love letters, though they certainly are. The letters I have read, the hundreds of written pieces shared between the three couples all convey warmth, dedication to the relationship and a timelessness, much like Bir Bahadur referred to earlier. The written word almost has a raw quality to it, and it's a phenomenon that's not easy to describe. But if love can be captured, I'd say it's best captured in writing. That, for me, is perhaps the best kind of extracurricular writing relationship.

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Appendix A

Reflective Autobiographical Narrative (Electronic)

Thank you so much for taking the time to complete this questionnaire. The purpose of this autobiographical reflective questionnaire is threefold: For one, it will help me to gain a better understanding of you—your personal and professional background. Second, it will present an opportunity for me to begin the process of understanding what it's like—for you—to write in your relationship. And third, it will present an opportunity for you to begin reflecting upon your writing relationship prior to our first couple interview.

As well, some of the questions on this questionnaire are very straight forward (i.e. What is your educational background?). However, other questions are less directive and ask you to conjure memories and/or recall past feeling and/or events, stories. As this research study is one that places writing at the fore, I recommend that, whenever possible, you use your personal writings to conjure memories and/or as a “spark” to answer questions. Also, please feel free to refer to these writings as you recount your stories whenever applicable.

Directions: Please answer the following questions individually—*without your writing partner*. Please try to be as descriptive as possible and answers each questions to the best of your ability. *Only answer questions that you feel comfortable answering*. Also, as this is an electronic document, please use as much space as you need for each question. All answers will be kept confidential.

Part 1. Demographic Inventory

1. Name:
2. Nickname:
3. Age/Year Born:
4. Where were you born?
5. Where did you grow up?
6. Where do you presently reside?
7. Please describe your educational background:
8. Please describe the educational background of your parents:
9. How would you describe your socio-economic status? Growing up? And now?
10. What is your marital status?

Part II: General Experiences with Writing

11. Can you describe your experiences with writing as a child—at home?
12. Can you recall a particular story—a memory you might have—of you writing as a child?
13. Can you describe your experiences with writing in school?
14. Can you recall a particular story—a memory you might have—of you writing as a child in school?
15. How do you, in general, use writing in your day-to-day life?
16. What kinds of “other” writing relationships have you had over the course of your life—not including the one you are presently engaged in with your writing partner?

Part III: General Background Information about the Relationship

17. How long have you been involved in your writing relationship?
18. How often do you write to each other?
19. Does one person in the relationship typically write more than the other? (Please describe)

Part IV: Writing in Your Relationship

20. Tell me the story of how you met your writing partner.

21. How was writing first introduced into your relationship?

22. How would you describe the way writing works in your relationship?

23. Can you share with me a story about a time you've used writing in your present relationship?

24. What kinds of writing do you engage in together?

25. How would you complete this sentence: I write in my relationship
with _____ because

26. How would you complete this sentence: A writing relationship is

27. Did you use any of your shared and/or personal writings to help you answer any of the above questions and/or "spark" memories to guide you in answering any of the above questions? Underline one: Yes or No

Part V: Free-Write

28. In this section, please feel free to share with me anything you would like to about writing, about this study, about any concerns you are having and/or about any questions you might have. Also, please use this section as a SPACE to share any additional stories you would like to about the role writing plays in your relationship.

Again, thank you.

M5glennon@verizon.net

814-254-6247

Appendix B

Acquaintance Protocol

Prior to formally interviewing the participating couples, I will first speak with each couple together and in person, or each individual separately either in person or the phone (depending on their geographic location) to gain an initial acquaintance with them. During this informal meeting or phone call, I will discuss the nature of the study and address any questions or concerns they might have. This meeting or phone call will determine whether they meet the eligibility criteria. It is during this meeting where I will spend time discussing informed consent in great detail. If both members of the relationship are eligible to and desire to participate in the study, I will ask them to please sign the informed consent form (see Appendix E). If necessary, I will send them a hard copy of the form and ask that they mail it back to me with their signature.

Informal “Getting Acquainted” Procedures:

1. Go over the informed consent (3 copies: two for each member of the relationship and one for me)
 - a. Give them time to read the form on their own and together discuss it.
 - b. Address some of the pertinent issues like, freedom to withdraw, confidentiality, and discuss any kind of questions or issues that they might have about the study during the data collection.
2. Discuss my dissertation study and my own involvement in and understanding of extracurricular writing relationships.
3. Discuss how data will be collected, recorded, and analyzed
4. Discuss the general nature of the interview protocol.

5. Discuss how their exchanged writings—their written artifacts—will be used throughout the interview process. Ask the participants if they would be able to begin gathering some of these written artifacts.
6. Set-up the first interview, if possible.
7. Answer any questions they may have, and let them know that if any concerns arise during the data collection, they should feel free to let me know.

Appendix C

First Couple Interview

- Why?
- How?
- When?
- Can you tell me more about that?
- Take me back to...Could you further elaborate on this?
- Tell me what you were thinking?
- How did you feel?

Appendix D

Second Couple Interview - Written Artifact Organizational Protocol

The purpose of this second couple (dyad) interview is to explore the written artifacts exchanged between the relationship members. The collected written artifacts will be used to help spark memories as well as to help continue tell their co-constructed story. The written artifacts will be used throughout the second interview, and they will also be collected and then analyzed after the interview. All collected written artifacts, both original and copied documents, will be returned to the participants once the data is analyzed.

I will use the following labeling protocol throughout the collection and analysis of the written artifacts:

1. Type of writing (i.e. personal letter, note, etc.).
2. Purpose of the writing (i.e. to share news or express a loss).
3. To whom and by whom the written artifact was written—using the pseudonyms previously applied.

Appendix E

Individual-Follow-Up Interview Protocol

- Tell me how you became involved in an extracurricular writing relationship.
- What keeps/kept you involved?
- What is it like to be in a writing relationship?
- What role does writing play in the relationship?
- What keeps you writing?
- For what purpose(s) does the writing hold?
- Can you imagine what your relationship would be like without writing?
- How would you complete this sentence: I write in my relationship with _____ because _____.
- How would you complete this sentence: An extracurricular writing relationship is _____.
- Could you share with me some instances where you _____.
- Tell me how your extracurricular writing relationship ended (if the woman or man is no longer involved in the writing relationship)
- What kinds of writing relationships have you had over the course of your life?
- What is something you'd like everyone to know about your relationship?
- What, if any, were the positive, negative and neutral aspects of being in a relationship where writing plays a role?

Appendix F

Informed Consent Form

Working Title: Exploring the Lived Experience of Extracurricular Writing

Relationships Through Narrative

You are invited to participate in this research study. The following information is provided in order to help you make an informed decision whether or not to participate. If you have any questions please do not hesitate to ask.

Purpose of Study: The purpose of this study is to research the lived experiences of couples who are or were members of an out-of-school or extracurricular writing relationship. For the purpose of this study, I am seeking couples who meet the below out-of-school writing relationship criteria:

Eligibility Criteria:

- Couples who are presently in an out-of-school writing relationship and have been in this relationship for at least one year OR
- Couples who are no longer in an out-of-school writing relationship and have ended this relationship no more than three years ago.
- Couples who would describe their present or former out-of-school writing relationship as a *personal* relationship characterized by an interdependence of emotions as well as a negotiated set of disclosures that have helped the relationship to develop.
- All participants must be 18 years of age at the time of the study.

Procedures: Participation in this study will involve three interviews: two couple interviews where I will interview both members of the relationship together and one individual interview where I will speak with each member of the relationship separately. Each interview will be no longer than 60-90 minutes.

Use of Written Artifacts: I will also be asking for copies of personal documents (e.g. letters, notes, emails) of your choosing that represent the writing exchanged within your out-of-school writing relationship. We will look at these artifacts together to spark memories and then, with your permission, I will also examine the artifacts as part of my analysis.

Benefits and Risks to Participants: There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this research and responses will be considered only in combination with responses from other participants. You may find the interview experience enjoyable, and you will have a documented narrative of your relationship with your writing partner. I will also return any and all original written artifacts that I may borrow throughout the study.

Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal: Your participation in this study is voluntary. You will not be required to share any personal information nor documentation against your wishes. You are free to decide not to participate in this study or to withdraw at any time without adversely affecting your relationship with me. If you choose to participate, you may withdraw at any time by notifying the Project Director, Dr. Gian Pagnucci, or me. Upon your request to withdraw, all information pertaining to you will be destroyed. If you choose to participate, all information will be held in strict confidence.

If you are willing to participate in this study, please sign the statement below.

Researcher: Melanie Glennon, PhD Candidate
Indiana University of Pennsylvania
English Department, Leonard Hall, Indiana, PA
15701
Phone: 814-254-6247
Email: byvq@iup.edu

Project Director: Dr. Gian Pagnucci
English Department Chair
Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Leonard
Hall, Indiana, PA 15701
Phone: 724-357-4788
Email: pagnucci@iup.edu

This project has been approved by the Indiana University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (Phone: 724-3557-7730).

VOLUNTARY CONSENT FORM

I have read and understand the information on the form and I consent to volunteer to be a subject in this study. I understand that my responses are completely confidential and that I have the right to withdraw at any time. I have received an unsigned copy of this informed consent form to keep in my possession.

Name (please print): _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____ Phone where you can be reached: _____

Best days and times to reach you: _____

Email Address where you can be reached: _____

You may use my real name in your dissertation document ____yes ____no

I certify that I have explained to the above individual the nature and purpose, the potential benefits, and possible risks associated with participating in this research study, have answered any questions that have been raised, and have witnessed the above signature.

Date: _____ **Investigator's signature:** _____