Everything Within Reach
Nonfiction Essay

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Last semester the Fine Arts seminar I teach at New College in Vermont College of Norwich University was visited by a graduate student from the Harvard School of Education as part of his dissertation research into the meanings of on-line education. During a conversation at the start of the semester, he asked me, “What is teaching?” I told him. A teacher is a crazed butler. Though hired to open doors and windows and to bring you things you need, a crazed butler runs around banging open all the doors and windows, lugging out everything within reach. It’s the student’s job, with such diligent assistant, to decide which doors to enter, which things turn out useful.

The layered windows and scattered resources of the Web lend themselves to the basement-to-drawing room metaphor. However, the crazed butler image didn’t emerge for me in conjunction with using an electronic campus for teaching, as I do in New College. Rather, it popped up in my first frantic semesters teaching in the Adult Degree Program within which student-directed distance learning was conducted, at that time, completely via exchanges of typed and overscrapped paper. I’ve been teaching on the Vermont College campus, where both New College and the Adult Degree Program are located, for about ten years. The federal grant that gave New College a start has ended. In an academic climate of pressure to adopt new technologies, pressure to market our programs amid greater competition within distance learning than we’ve ever had before, we’re facing difficult decisions about how to take our campus forward. In order to think through our options in a way that preserves our dedication to progressive education, we’re reflecting on the means and the meanings of our teaching. I find I’m sifting through more than these past few years. To properly care for my identity as a teacher, I have to look at what motivates me to teach, what experiences shaped me as a learner, what about my teaching is chipped and dusty, where to polish, where to sweep.

I suppose it should be no surprise to me that the questions I find most pressing about teaching in this new format are the same questions that led me to conceive of teaching as butlering in the first place. I teach in the arts. I’m interested in the ways art can be used for social change. I’m more fascinated by the stories that are told in the laundry than those of the front parlor. I’m not interested in accruing charismatic power. I’m interested in finding opportunities to engage the many forms of intelligence needed for the kitchens and the garden sheds of good art.

New College was invented in part because it appeared to the Adult Degree Program faculty that a larger proportion of younger students than older had difficulty managing the self-paced schedule of independent study through distance learning. Our hope was that a format of frequent contact and greater opportunity for student collaboration would provide the needed extra support. In my seminar, for instance, students post to the electronic campus four times a week. Most of the interaction is asynchronous, meaning students are not necessarily on-line at the same time, but add their contributions to the discussion by pre-set due dates. Unlike completely on-line programs, New College, at the start of every semester and again at the end of the year, gathers in blue jeans and parachute crinkle, our real pink haired, mud soled students to look for a week in each other’s faces, squash our chairs in a lumpy circle. At these brief residencies, students enter individually designed independent studies and faculty designed group seminars. Our electronic campus, for the rest of the year, provides group conference areas where students and faculty can contribute to common discussions as well as rooms we arrange in the orders we prefer for individual conversations between students and faculty mentors.

The fact that I have the obligation to grant and deny credit annoys me. It interferes with my stance as an ally to students. I wish it would go away. Since it’s built into my paycheck, however, I give it watchful attention. I give credit for engagement in a vigorous dialogue. I give credit for the act of expansive experimentation in art. I give credit for lateral and analytical thinking. I don’t give credit based on the quality of anyone’s artwork. It’s not my business. I’m proud that academic institutions have protected and promoted the arts when it is often otherwise abandoned. I think the value for students in enrolling in college to study art is very similar to the value for faculty in teaching. We get to hang out with other people who gab and grow pensive in articulation of each move, who apprehend the capacity of art. The control I can employ in my own poetry has sharpened in the exercise of discussing student art. I hope to offer that same opportunity to students. Though that process of articulation can be tracked academically, I’m not fond of the credentialing of art.
I began teaching when I was forty. I'd just finished graduate school. Before that, I had spent ten years nursing my babies and pregnant again. Before that, I worked as a typist, and then, after I got my B.A., as a minor, crabby bureaucrat. I was glad to have quit work to have babies. I didn't appreciate the better job I'd gotten with my B.A., one that required my concentration but didn't capture my interest. I had been happy in many ways as a Typist B for the State of Vermont. It was a job that allowed me time to dream. I didn't really have to concentrate on what I was typing to get it right. Then, too, it was my first job with a livable paycheck.

My expenses were minimal at that time, having just moved at age twenty to Barre, Vermont from Toronto with my equally young, equally Typist B husband. I had left the University of Toronto, hiking a new bend in the irresistible present; one year of school to go. I'd already left the University of Michigan a couple of years previous to that, in order to accompany and situate my soon-to-be husband in Canada in case he'd been drafted. He wasn't. Newly seated in typist jobs in Vermont, we paid for our brand new Volkswagen Beetle with $2,000 cash. The car cost more in emotional terms, considering both sets of our Jewish parents knew the clutch of the Volkswagen as the engine cog of the Nazi party. In 1972, my newly egalitarian husband and I each parcelled an amount from our joint income we could claim as venture funds. I remember our purchases from the Edmund Scientific Company catalog, a wood boxed microscope and heavy, black binoculars for me; a red enamel bellied telescope for my husband. It was an age of unbounded horizons.

In those years, in central Vermont, the combined salaries of a Typist B and a Personnel Researcher for the State of Vermont was enough to purchase not only an ocular microscope, a red enamel bellied telescope for my husband. It was an age of unbounded horizons.

At work I was equally agog, confronted and invited by wondrous technologies. Not only was I there at the installation of a self-correcting IBM Selectric, I was soon booming down the controversial new, award-winning, billboard-banning Interstate, then lumbering up granite and asbestos-tailed dirt hills in a lead-lined trailer to repeat, "Take a deep breath and hold it." a hundred times a morning, X-raying the bared chests of miners and stonecutters. The X-raying was a seasonal sideline to the typist job. The same Jewish parents who shunned Volkswagens had also and understandably persuaded me of the machine-like obedience of bureaucrats, those parents having only recently bitten their nails through the televised testimony of the Eichmann trial. How odd, then, to find myself in with a tight bunch of bureaucrats utterly devoted to each day's fieldwork, the protected oversight of mining and stone shed worker safety. Their pride steamed over coffee in front of the tiled Victorian fireplace where the secretaries clacked, was far closer to the labor allied values of my mother's family than I could have imagined.

The Office of Industrial Hygiene was controlled by a cantankerous and fragile voiced, ex-labor organizer and his "office wife," my boss, the other secretary. Desk tops at work were furnished with the histories of heartbreakingly fought and won battles to end the inevitability of workers' early death from silicosis, "white lung disease." I learned to recognize the trails of silicosis on the older stone cutters' ghostly negatives, filed the thick manila envelopes broad and tall as sandwich board placards, under Inactive, when they were dead. Back in my rollered typing chair, I heard the Great Depression bootlegging up and down the Green Mountains, such defiance of law having kept many a quarry widow and her children shod and fed. My boss's bragging parade of grand-children in marvelous, worrisome escapade, marched backward through stories of an Italian immigrant community that were like and unlike the stories I grew up with in my Jewish neighborhood back home.

At the same time, I was enrolled in independent study at Goddard College in the Adult Degree Program. In mid-December my husband and I moved into the shell of our newly roughed-in log house with two week's supply of firewood and no other way to keep the plumbing or our noses from freezing. We had running water in the basement only, to which there were as yet no stairs from the main floor. Each night we carried our dirty dishes down the ladder in a golden Rubbermaid basin and then up again to let them dry in the "kitchen" of our booming cathedral acoustic log cabin. We kept our clothes on the second floor in a bedroom with no flooring. Inching across the bare joists, we ferried our clothes from a closet rod hung like a playground monkey bar in the gaping second story air to dress in front of the small Jotul wood stove downstairs. We'd been in such a hurry to get the roof on before snow that we'd put in the log rafters, felled byours truly, with the bark still on them. Evenings we bent over backwards with the claw of a hammer, ripping off streamers of pitch soaked pine bark, studying the strange inscriptions encoded there by pine beetles. When I wasn't at work or clawing and hammering on the house, I was reading Abraham Heschel, Michael Novak, Huston Smith, penning the pages to a B.A. with a concentration in Religious Studies, at last. I didn't read many women. It was the early 1970's. Back at the office, in those days, I was introduced to strangers as The Girl.

Downstairs in the basement laboratory of the Office of Industrial Hygiene buzzed the cloud chamber into which peered a radiological engineer and at his elbow a drop jawed Typist B. The office, part of the Vermont State Health Department, was responsible for monitoring emissions from the Vermont Yankee nuclear power plant. I was receiving
experiential credit and fulfilling distribution requirements by learning to manipulate the machinery in the stone faced basement. It was there that I saw with my own amblyopic eyes, not the sub atomic particle itself, but its track. I read Heisenberg, also disapproved by my parents, was forever changed by the realization that it was in manipulating not a graspable thing but a metaphor, you get a nuclear sized bang.

Vermont at that time was in the throes of what is sometimes called the hippie invasion. The Office of Industrial Hygiene was absorbed by the new federal OSHA administration. The old director retired. There was a new Health Commissioner who wanted to hire a friend, John Froines, to direct the VOSHA program. At that time I was the only member of the staff young enough to identify the name, John Froines, as one of the Chicago Seven. My co-workers, those of the labor ideals that had so matched my family’s, didn’t recognize him. I think about these fractures in my assumptions of what older adults were like, their similarities to my parents, their strange knowledge and their even stranger ignorance, at times when I’m blank screens and rap beats away from my students. By the time the newspapers got hold of Froines’ name, the staff at VOSHA I had thought left wing began to panic that a member of the Chicago Seven would have access to information about a nuclear power plant. They lectured me on his probable ties to Soviet Russia. Left wing, right wing, it was an education. This was the response, in the 1970’s, I thought would help me keep my job when finally questioned by the outgoing director for not telling Froines’ identity: “My husband told me I shouldn’t get involved.”

My B.A. consisted, eventually, of the major in Religious Studies at Goddard, enough credits for a major in Chinese language and literature from the University of Toronto had I stayed there, and a year as an intended English major at the University of Michigan. I’d left Michigan in 1970, drugged and disillusioned along with many in my generation. Among my stronger memories of my college education is memorizing large amounts of, “Do you have a pen? I want a pen. Here is the pen,” Chinese dialogue, while tossing a ball around a parking lot with my soon-to-be husband. I also remember the A+ I got on a project for an honor’s history course in which I enlarged the doodles I’d drawn in the gigantic Ann Arbor lecture hall. I can still see in my mind the round, banded chest of Nestor The Windbag. I think of that often when standards are raised for debate in our system of progressive education. I still doodle. I’ve begun a new series in faculty meetings. This one is a series of self-portraits, equally banded and puffed, called Visiting Assistant Part Time Professor Chalmer. Could be worse. I credit my boss, Roger Cranse, for establishing the staffing of our new program with contracts for a full year with benefits for part time faculty. I think advocacy for part time faculty ought to be cast in epic verse. For now I’ve doodles.

Along with teaching at Vermont College, I have for the past ten years led story-telling workshops at an arts-based day center for frail elders in a region of once sustainable, now impoverished hill farming and logging known as Vermont’s Northeast Kingdom. The people who attend the workshop have led tiring but satisfying work lives, inventing and preserving what they needed, often without finishing even high school. It’s not hard for me to imagine, when I hear their stories of restless curiosity and ambitious, non-stop hoisting, kneading, face to the wind, the authors of those problem solving tales, if raised today, drugged and seated for years in diagnoses such as ADHD. The act of sitting for long stretches, of crafting written language for analysis and reflection, though it brings joy to some of us and benefit, when done in humility, to others, is a skill with particular and limited uses. I see the current practical necessity for a college degree. I see its uses and notice their edges. I suspect the zeal with which college is promoted is sometimes tinged with the motives of a business scam. I’m grateful for a broadening of access to college. It’s the necessity of college for earning a living that bugs me. By the time I began teaching adults, I understood that learning occurs in many settings, that it is integrity that drives the engines of learning, and that the format of college, with its stress on academic scholarship, isn’t that important. Those three beliefs are fundamental to my continued identity as a butler.

They are also the experiences and assumptions I brought with me to the planning team of New College. Our program is distinguished from the Adult Degree Program, not so much by our use of an electronic campus as by our acknowledgment of the world as our students’ campus. Half of the semesters a student spends in New College must include experiential, community-based components. They must use their bodies, move more than eyes across a page or a screen, fingers over a keyboard. They may move their entire lives around the globe while still enrolled.

Students in New College complete a set of four, six-credit seminars to fulfill distribution requirements. I teach the Fine Arts seminar, Identity/Express. Students read and discuss in common a series of books: some artist narratives, some aesthetics, some politics, developmental psych. They make use of a specific protocol for critiquing each other’s three original art projects, which they submit electronically. Each conducts an individual research project. My favorite assignment is Arts Alive, in which students attend to art each week in their communities, identifying and defining art for themselves, and writing about it with reference to specific questions. Billboards, private C.D. collections, light fixtures, entire buildings, various performances both formal and informal, have been selected and discussed.

It’s hard, given our small enrollment and the very few years of our experience, to generalize about the success of
our experiments. Last semester, when the Harvard graduate student was visiting, all five students enrolled in the Fine Arts seminar successfully finished the semester. This semester, half the class, two students of four, are badly behind so far. It’s possible that I was teaching better last semester when Harvard was watching. It’s possible the students were more fully committed when Harvard was watching. On the other hand, last year I had no new students in my seminar. This year, all but one student is new. Perhaps I neglected to recognize and make up for the missing cultural transmission sustained previously by experienced students.

One of the strange aspects, for me, of teaching mainly younger students in New College after learning to teach in the Adult Degree Program, is forming an identity for myself as a teacher a generation apart from the students. Two of my children are now also in college. With them, I wear an apron, a nightgown. I fuss over my children and worry about them. I buy them clothes and watch them tear apart the challah they’ve smelled baking in my kitchen ever since they slept in a soft sack on my back. I gnaw the gristle off my youngest son’s leftover chicken bones. Once, I swear it will be the last time, I said to some New College students, “Okay, kiddies….” I was quickly reprimanded: “We came here to get away from that.”

And, of course, this strange process of constructing an identity is tied up for me with piecing together my life as a woman. I was born in 1951, a decade in which many girls in white, middle class homes saw their mothers yoked to the morning’s aspirations of the good wife, the ring around the collar, “He noticed!” home maker. Unlike those girls, I was the daughter of a single, professional woman whose smart heeled steps out the door every morning made it clear to me that work was something I, too, had a right to adore. I liked my typist job, although I did object to its working title, The Girl. I loved the slow, slurpy years at home with infants. Didn’t love economic dependence. I’m grateful that the change from secretary to professor didn’t entail, as it does for some women in my generation, a constant battle to remember I belong here. I’m irritated by any suggestion that someone wouldn’t have seen the intelligence I brought to work as a secretary as clearly as they see me now. I take encouragement from something I heard once from an admirable old lady who said, “Like most women my age, I’ve been several people and lived a few lives.”

Actually, I had a breakthrough last semester in lessening the generational distance I sometimes feel from students. It’s embarrassing how obvious the solution should have been. The seminar was just beginning. Students were starting to post their responses to the Arts Alive assignment. Their writing was hesitant, a little superficial. I’d been wallowing in lazy thinking myself for the first year or two, saying things to myself like, “Students this age just don’t have the life experience they need to reflect in complex ways like older students do.” Red flags should have been waving, but weren’t. Finally, in exasperation, I decided to show them how it’s done. I completed the assignment myself, taking the opportunity to talk about the ways a performance I’d attended touched the racial positioning I felt myself inherit and embody as a member of a successful immigrant minority in the latter half of the American twentieth century. All I had to do, it turns out, was treat young adult students like the adults they are. The rest of the semester proceeded on a very different note. The student who had called me on my use of “kiddles” left for a different school.

Still, I find myself inevitably positioned at a generational distance, and identified with people my own age. Once I received a hand-made necklace at semester’s end from a student who wrote in a note that her own mother hadn’t understood her and in my class she’d been recognized in ways she hadn’t been before. I was pleased that the semester had gone well for her. Yet, as I stood in my kitchen, torn package in hand, my heart was instantly with my student’s mother. “I’ll do this for your kid,” I spoke in the air, as if somehow my plea would travel to her ear. “Pray someone does it for me.”

Personal involvement with students’ lives is structured into the mentoring model in use at New College and in all the undergraduate programs on the Vermont College campus. Within our model of student-directed learning, students define themselves as the subjects of their own learning. That doesn’t mean students study themselves as subject matter. It means that what they write about is the effects the resources they find have on their lives, on their thinking and on their actions in the world. This is true in New College, with our electronic campus, as much as in the Adult Degree Program. At the end-of-year residency last year, I was pleased to hear my seminar students describe the semester’s exchanges with the word, intimacy. On the other hand, I’m aware of the dangers a climate of emotional intimacy can bring to an academic institution where I am in a position, for instance, to grant and deny credit. For me, those dangers are magnified by the discipline within which I teach. In the arts, the material students hand in is crafted from their own lives. It becomes the subject of criticism, entwined with the process of bestowing or withholding credit. I have found it helpful to plant as wide a protective hedge as possible around those personal aspects of academic work, while still inviting the vulnerability that is essential for the making of art.

One of the ways I attempt this is to create ground rules for myself and students in responding to art. The first ground rule in my study groups and seminars is that we don’t ask personal questions of artists. We comment only on the actual art. Within that construct, we describe the emotional impact the artwork has on us as audience members; not on what we guess was the emotional derivation of the artwork for the artist. Artists, themselves, are free to talk about any aspect of
the work, including, if they wish, the emotional underpinning for its creation. Often that artist’s statement, made after hearing critique, will illuminate some gap it’s useful for the artist to hear between her or his intent and the effects on others of the work.

I also insist that students refrain from evaluating fellow students’ artwork, either positively or negatively. I observe those same restrictions myself. It’s a lot harder than it sounds to rule out not only the words good and bad, but all their synonyms and euphemisms, like powerful, The Bomb and cool. What’s left to us, if we succeed, is a clear and specific articulation of artistic decisions. That articulation gives those engaged in the exchange a huge boost in the levels of control we can bring to the next stages of work. It also helps to slow down the development of a stultifying group aesthetic. At the end of the process, artists must ask of only themselves if the effects they heard described in critique match their own intentions. The other inevitable questions, do they like it and do they like me, are given, at least structurally, less prominence.

Most of the time students understand right away the damage to the creative process that can be inflicted by the callous use of negative judgments. What’s harder to grasp is the subtle tyranny of approval, its implied discouragement of experiments that don’t match the critic’s own aesthetic values. It’s also useful to explain the inhibiting effects of pseudo psychoanalysis masquerading as artistic critique. If I write a short story that has in it a murder, and I’m asked by my peers upon review to explain how this murder is related to unresolved anger at my parents, I probably won’t write about murder again, at least not for that group. Lately, in preparation for final presentations in residencies, I’ve begun teaching students ways of fielding questions to re-direct a public conversation back to the ideas embedded in the art, rather than into the private psyche of the artist. I feel very protective in that way of artists presenting in a talk-show culture.

It could be that the anonymity of on-line learning environments might have a freeing effect for shy artists. Certainly it’s democratizing, in that unlike the exchanges in live classrooms, deliberate, introspective thinkers get equal, uninterrupted access to the discussion. But the intimacy we strive for in New College requires the development of trust within a shared, creative process that is best established, as far as I know, in each other’s company.

The very first thing students learn in the seminar that I teach is how to make a mess and leave it. Over and over, through wordless, sculpting conversations with rocks, with choreography, with odd collections of junk, students construct temporary assemblages and analyze them to see how form relates to meaning. I want them to get to know their own bodies as the ultimate malleable medium. I want them to know before they part company, they can rely on each other for specific, practiced feedback, for encouragement to keep making a mess. Safety, creative freedom, is crucial to every step forward in learning. At least once a semester I tell someone the story of the baby and the growth error. A baby learns to crawl before she walks. She gets up, falls down. She takes a few steps. Tries again. At that point it takes her much longer to walk across the room than it did to crawl. Her parents somehow refrain from telling her, give it up. You were better off before. They scoop her up in their arms and take her falls lightly, as does she.

That story doesn’t lose its importance to me. At one point, I cornered myself in an ethical crisis in teaching. I was trying to convince my students to adopt that attitude of bemused tolerance toward their own growth errors, while still scolding myself. Eventually, I had to recognize the lie. What I’ve come to discover, these past few years, is that it’s not because of mean spirited judgment but in spite of it that I learn. I admire the risks taken by artists. No amount of encouragement is ever too much.

We take all the New College students to live performances of Shakespeare when they’re here on campus. It’s what’s playing at the local professional theater that time of year. Each residency, before the show, my students memorize a few passages from the play of the year. They memorize their lines four different ways: by silent, individual reading, by listening without visual stimulation, by listening while bouncing a ball, by partnered mentoring. Their main job is to notice which methods work best for them so they can make use of those strategies when they’re away from campus.

I’m experimenting, still, to develop teaching methods that can translate from the live classroom to the on-line campus. I’ve adopted an exercise invented by my colleague, Nadell Fishman, in which students listen to the same poem three times, and each time write something different in response to it, an invitation to think beyond the first, obvious thought. I add in my own observation, discovered on a day I mismanaged the schedule, that interrupting each of those responses is better than letting students finish before they start a new response. I think there might be some relationship between this and the fast paced, screen based imagery that surrounds us. No matter, it seems multiple starts allow students to return to their ideas with an assumption that there is more to do. It’s an oddly effective way to counteract the internal signals that sometimes flash, like a pop-up dialogue box: it is now safe to shut down thinking. These exercises have useful effects for me as well as for students. Later, when everyone is minimized within closed windows of cyberspace, when one day I am irritated with a student who is late or sloppy with an assignment, the picture I want in my mind is that student’s own face, round pupils, round grin cracking in delight at his own creation.

My first assumption was that on-line communication would favor highly verbal learners, those for whom written reflection would yield maximum benefit. My experience
doesn't support that. One student who appears to be making good use of the program is a somewhat nomadic musician, an aural learner for whom actual laughter, changing landscape, is paramount in learning. He doesn't, for instance, make use of the "coffee house" conference area on our electronic campus that we keep open for informal exchanges during the semester. In independent study, he writes a single batch of reflective papers once a month to respond to his reading and to the experiential components of his studies, which combine travel, foreign language study and the practice of musicianship. Another similarly gregarious student completed a senior thesis that combined the authorship of an extended monologue performed at residency, with experiential training from a comedy troupe with whom she performs in Boston, and an academic literature review within her particular branch of psychology. That student made frequent use of mid-month check-ins, short questions on process, requests for moral support. Another student, a quiet, reflective reader, finds it necessary to check in maybe once between monthly submissions of her book responses and creative writing. Those three students are representative of others in the arts who seem to thrive within our format for mentored independent study. And yet, there are those who don't finish the semester, start out strong in residency and drift off, often within the first few weeks of the on-line portion of the semester. Because we're so personally engaged with our students, when that happens New College faculty pick up the phone to offer whatever encouragement we can. Our total enrollment has been so small that every loss of a student has devastating effects within seminars and study groups.

We're still trying to figure out how to improve our retention rates. Right now in our on-line faculty forum we're debating the use of synchronous chats. I don't like them all that well. I worry they favor fast typers and I get bored waiting for the slow ones. The funny thing is, students look forward to them. I know there must be something valuable in things students like. I just haven't quite factored out the useful bits of that format. So far, I haven't assigned any weight to chats for credit. Last night in seminar we held the second of three synchronous chats. One student, strong in creative and analytical skills, a good writer who had completely drifted away from seminar, showed up for the chat. I don't know, at this point, if he'll be able to make up the work he's missed. But I couldn't help wondering if more frequent chats would have provided the extra connection to keep him involved for the more deliberate, asynchronous discussions. Might an electronic campus offer multiple ways for engaging with course material, a choice as to which one a student would use to fulfill requirements for credit? Sometimes the electronic campus at New College feels a little like Oz: People come and go so quickly here. It's at once intriguing and exhausting to invent teaching methods for this new format.

In general what I'm aiming for in varied ways is to remain an ally to learning. I know there are enormous pressures in most students' lives that erode the attention they can give to schoolwork - illness, pervasive and exhausting racism, family trouble, poverty. When I know of trouble, I try to remind students that in holding tight to their own education, they're making themselves stronger for fighting the world's cruelties. Sometimes college just has to wait. Recently a prolific student who takes pride in accuracy asked that I delete a message in which I had explained something she'd missed in the assignment. At first I was going to do as she asked, not wishing to prolong her embarrassment. Upon reflection I realized the position more allied with learning would be to stand with her explicitly against those voices that shame students for errors, that insist mistakes be kept invisible.

Because we are so relationship based in our teaching on this campus, from time to time as faculty we talk about the therapeutic role of education and of art, in students' lives. There are enormous differences between the practice of therapy and the practice of teaching. I think it's essential that those differences are closely guarded, lest we imagine our jobs as granters of credit extend into realms in which we have no business wielding power. One of the goals of art is to let conflict rise to its ultimate climax. Finding ways to communicate well about art while allowing the conflicts within it to surface, is the skill I'm trying to master in teaching. I do acknowledge the therapeutic effects of making art. (There are also therapeutic effects, if more limited in scope, in a really good game of ping pong.) People go to art, in the making and the receiving, to learn how to live. That's something larger than the limited scope of skills for which we can in good faith give college credit. Clergy, therapists, those who butter to the soul, don't give credit. A college degree is fine. As a credential for making art, it misses the point.

I try my best to use structures that minimize my ability to impose my own aesthetic preferences onto my students. In defining myself as a butler, I attempt to create a structure in which I can make unlimited suggestions under the express condition that students have total freedom to reject each and every one of them, to take them only if they further the students' purposes.

I grew up in a very dense settlement of Jews, a kind of village neighborhood at the northern end of Buffalo. I didn't really think about conversational style, about food or my admiration for a sculpted nose, those corners and curves of ethnic life, as a daily discontinuity until I moved to Vermont and for the first time knew myself as a member of a cultural minority. Since then, however, that understanding has informed my politics, my teaching and my art. Statistically, Vermont is a very white state. Because our enrollments draw from the entire nation and in smaller numbers, from the world,
our student population at Vermont College is slowly diversifying. Faculty appointments are lagging. In part that’s because our parent University, Norwich, hasn’t funded many full time positions. It bothers me that students of color, for instance, don’t have many opportunities to work with faculty mentors who are experientially knowledgeable about the richness of their own cultures. Too few faculty members have experiential knowledge of living as members of a minority in a dominant culture. For me, teaching and art are both acts of creating, maintaining and challenging culture. I want to ally with students in facilitating the articulation and choices of living within cultures. I don’t see the job of white teachers as that of sitting back to wait for racial consciousness to arrive with and receive its maintenance from faculty of color.

My approach to creating contexts for discussions of race and other cultural questions is influenced by two non-academic experiences. Several years ago I attended a dialogue group in Germany for descendents of Holocaust survivors and descendents of Nazis. It was there I first heard, from the Germans, a definition of social responsibility that distinguished between the wheel-spinning demand for absolution from social guilt, and the useful acknowledgment of responsibility, as opposed to guilt, for one’s country’s history, its future and its present. Of course that experience was complex for me in many ways, as the daughter of a German born Jewish father who was delivered to the U.S. directly from Dachau. However, the pertinent point here is that I took back home with me a new possibility for understanding myself as white in America.

Since then, I’ve tried to educate myself among writers and thinkers who are examining whiteness and the possibilities for anti-racist work. More recently, I’ve co-founded a dialogue group with African American and European American women who meet here in Montpelier to talk about race and racism as it’s enacted locally. I’m often charmed to think I have reached the age of almost fifty before putting myself in the position to listen and talk deeply about race in America. I’ve begun to see how important it is, if I imagine myself as someone who can teach anti-racist thinking, to continually engage in a process of self-questioning. I’m especially grateful for an interracial setting in which I can see my own processes of racist thinking first illuminated and then unraveled. It’s not fun, but by now I anticipate the relief when, after the necessary tugging apart, another knot of racial tightness is released.

In the course of attending the German-Jewish dialogue, I became very aware that I didn’t want to sit through the cataloguing and disposal by Germans of the remnants of anti-Semitism with which they still struggle. That part was their job to do for one another, not mine, thank you very much. As a white teacher, then, one job I see myself adopting is sticking with white students as their allies in that not very fun process of examining racism. Somebody has to be willing to listen to the mistakes in thinking as they unwind, accept the mess on the way to a more creative, anti-racist consciousness. Although on-line identities may become fluid, questions of cultural identity do not dissolve on-line.

My hope and assumption is that throughout the semester my students will talk about art they make and art they attend, with express reference to the cultures in which they move. Sometimes it’s especially hard for white students to identify or describe their cultures. I invite students to locate themselves as artists by naming environments: What growing things, buildings, people did you see as a child on the way to school? How did your family land in the homes it’s occupied? Family structures, definitions of work and play, all become topics for deepening an awareness of one’s culture and its relation to others. I don’t think it’s necessary to try, as teachers, to fix student racism. It’s presumptuous to think of fixing students at all. Students are endlessly eager to grow, on their own. We should assume their integrity. Creating contexts from which students can take new questions into their larger lives is both reasonable and possible.

The ideas I’ve developed for teaching have grown out of an environment in which our faculty is given the freedom to invent our own seminars. Our University Curriculum Committee passes on templates for seminars. Within that basic structure and the commitment to cover the disciplines, faculty members at Vermont College follow our own interests. It’s harder for full time faculty to be innovative. They are overloaded with students and committee work. Most don’t receive adequate release time to develop the new ideas they’re pressured to invent. This year Vermont College will separate from Norwich University and unite with The Union Institute, bringing together two prominent progressive institutions devoted to independent study in higher learning and offering degree programs at the bachelor’s, master’s, and doctorate levels. In a climate of excited planning for the new Union, it seems possible to hope that new full time faculty positions will be created and that faculty development will be supported in ways particularly adapted to our methods of mentoring students in independent learning. I couldn’t teach well if I didn’t have time for my own work. Maybe I spent too many years as a stay-at-home mother. By now I don’t like buttoning up students’ snowsuits to watch them go out in the bright sun. I want my own snowsuit. I like to wave to my students over the throwing and the shivering and the making.

Teaching on-line presents particular quantitative problems. Already I have a repetitive stress injury from working long hours at the mouse and the keyboard. I’m such an anxious person that in characteristic fashion I threw myself frantically into the task of teaching on-line and managed to injure myself during my first semester in ways I might not have done had I taken it a bit slower. From what I hear these
injuries are permanent. I also worry about isolation. In New College we have a faculty conference on-line restricted for our use. This helps, some. Students have one of their own that we can’t access. The faculty meets in person maybe once a month. There are new programs growing on campus that don’t have residential components. Could I stand that further degree of physical isolation? Maybe for a semester or two at a time, at most. I think on-line access to learning opportunities is a good idea. It will work for some people some of the time. I appreciate the freedom to adapt my teaching hours to the quirks of my larger life. Cycling in and out of on-line and face-to-face teaching seems reasonable to me.

It worries me that people need college degrees to pull in a decent income. I don’t think it’s likely that two of our young students living together, working as typists today could afford in one year a new car, a wood lot and a telescope to set in awe upon it. It upsets me that people who don’t really want to learn the specific skills of academic scholarship have to endure it. I’m glad to have been part of the invention of a program in which students can combine experiential education, the quick switches in youth of allegiance, of identity, of location, with independent study. I want students to be able to make a buck at the same time they see how people far from home, match and don’t match the values they absorbed in their parents’ arms. I want them to know their learning springs from desire. I want them to know their lives are useful. These are basic principles of progressive education. I work here as butler, boot to the door, click at the window.