Students as Audience

Integrating Television Narrative
into the High School Photography Curriculum

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THESIS
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SUMMARY

This is a teacher’s story. I was among a small group of educators who founded a high school. The school was the newest addition to the mayor’s controversial school reform plan; the opening was attended by local celebrities and city officials. The incoming freshmen saw their first day of school on local television news and the media attention continued throughout the year. As a teacher in the school, I had the opportunity to observe my students establish traditions and create a high school culture in our new building. I realized that the media was not only documenting the opening of our school but also that the media narrative of the American high school was influencing the school culture they were creating.

My inquiry began in my classroom. My students and I questioned, investigated and produced artifacts of the high school culture they observed on television and the high school culture they were constructing. I let my students guide me as I created an art and photography curriculum incorporating the high school television narrative. They analyzed and discussed the high schools they saw on television and film, they visited high schools across the city and suburbs, and they produced artwork. This dissertation became the story of an evolving, student-centered curriculum. I frame it within the paradigm of audience research: my students and I as participants to and spectators of television and contemporary culture.
Over the years, my students have changed and television has changed. Our school culture, fifteen years after we first opened, is now well established. The Internet has made television an interactive experience. As my students and I continue to incorporate television narrative into the curriculum, the way students interact with media and television has influenced how they learn and how I teach. By telling my story, one teacher’s story, I hope to not only begin a conversation of how investigating television and the media can motivate students but also inspire the sharing of other teacher stories in the field of educational curriculum and instruction.
1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 New Audience Research

John and Beth recently decided to get married. When their friends and family asked them “how it happened,” at first they told the truth. They had been watching Saturday Night Live\(^1\) on television, and during a commercial, John turned to Beth and said, “Let’s get married.” The disappointed reactions they received to their engagement story compelled them to devise a more romantic one, a composite of events involving a candlelit dinner and a ring. The story evolved each time they told it. One day, perhaps, even they will think it is the truth. This phenomenon, the framing of a lived experience into cultural expectations, is the starting point for my inquiry: how students and teachers negotiate television narratives with the reality of the high school experience.

In the novel, White Noise (DeLillo, 1984), two professors, Jack and Murray visit a barn that several road signs indicate is “the most photographed barn in America.” They observe the scene. Murray takes notes as people photograph the barn. After some time, he points out that no one actually sees the barn. It has become a spectacle. The photographers only see what the barn represents.

\(^1\) Saturday Night Live (1975-): Late night comedy sketch television show (imdb.com retrieved 7/14/15).
As the photographers continue to take pictures of it, they perpetuate the representation. “We’re not here to capture an image; we’re here to maintain one.”

Television epitomizes the notion of spectacle. Philosopher Jean Baudrillard calls the televised image “hyperreal”. Like “the most photographed barn in America,” the images on television are somehow more real to us than what they depict. He and others argue that in our media-rich culture, we have come to prefer the representation (1994).

Contemporary audience research, which I draw upon as my framework for the discussion of the high school television narrative, embraces this concept. We prefer the fantasy. It has become a real part of our lives. Previously, researchers of television audiences were mainly interested in studying the effect of the media on viewer behavior. For example, examining whether violent media content elicits violent behavior in viewers. In the early 1980s, however, British audience researchers took an approach more grounded in cultural studies.

Contemporary audience research, also called “new audience research”, examines the ways in which television and other mediated texts have become the lived experience of its viewers (Nightingale, 1996). Researchers Abercrombie and Longhurst write of three types of audiences. The simple audience watches a performance in a theater or sports arena; there is direct
communication between the audience and the performers. In contrast, the producers and recipients of the performance are separated by both location and time in a *mass audience*. Television viewing, including films commonly watched at home, is the best example of the mass audience. Viewing becomes a private experience. Meaning is created through personal and cultural interpretations of televised texts outside of the actual performance. Finally, appropriate to today’s technologically rich society, the researchers propose a spectator/participant paradigm they call a *diffused audience*. They argue that media has become “woven into the fabric of ordinary life”. Not only ceremonial events like engagements and weddings, but also everyday activities have become, to an extent, about performance and exhibition for an audience (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998).

...in contemporary society; everyone becomes an audience all the time. Being a member of an audience is no longer an exceptional event, nor even an everyday event. Rather it is constitutive of everyday life (Longhurst, 2007).

Being a diffused audience does not mean that we are not, at various times or even at the same time, members of a simple audience or a mass audience. For example, I was in the audience of a theater for the Chicago premiere of the independent film, *The Last Rites of Joe May* (2011). The star of the film, actor Dennis Farina, was sitting in front of me. In my mind, though, he was not an actor, nor the dying street hustler I was about to watch on the big screen. He was the suave detective from one of my favorite TV shows, *Law & Order* (1990-2010). While we waited for the film to begin, my friend was telling me a story. It was an
episode of the TV show *Modern Family* (2009-). At the beginning of the episode, two of the characters were shooting hoops in their driveway. One made an incredible shot. “Too bad we didn’t have a camera,” one said. The rest of the episode depicted the two of them trying to remake the shot so they could photograph it and put it on Facebook.

I never saw that *Modern Family* episode. I am not sure I am remembering it correctly, or even if my friend had retold the plot accurately. Yet as a photographer and a photography teacher, I was fascinated by the story. I was interested in the characters’ desire to recreate an event for the purpose of documenting it, or more accurately, for the purpose of exhibiting it (on Facebook or in a photo album or framed on the wall). The televised narrative my friend and I were contemplating exemplified the diffused audience. Unlike DeLillo’s barn that had become something else once it was determined to be “most photographed”, the performers of this event, making a great basketball shot, believed it not to exist at all unless it had spectators, an audience.

1.1.1 Creating a Spectacle

As I often do when I become interested in a concept, I presented the idea of the diffused spectator/participant relationship to my photography students. Every student in my class had a Facebook page. We created an assignment together in which they constructed an event that *did not actually happen* in order to photograph it and post it. They were to create and participate in a spectacle in
order to present it to an audience. The students could not use digital software to alter the image; the photograph itself had to be authentic.

When we looked at the final images in class, it was decided the students would not explain how they got their images. Their amusement when sharing the photos made the irony of the assignment clear: the events depicted, though
constructed, *did* take place. Sylvia did have several caterpillars on her arm. Amy did crawl into the shelf at a store and curl up as if to take a nap. Maddie did go down to Grant Park and sneak up on the stage, at least long enough to do one jump, and Juan did figure out a way to get on the roof of that building. By participating in these events, by creating images and posting them on social media, the students had simulated the diffused audience: they became both a participant in and spectator to the event. What began as a class assignment, to invent a media event, in the execution of it, had become the truth. Their resulting photographs, just as Baudrillard described the televised image, became more real than the events they proposed to depict.

1.1.2 Old Me, New Me

Next, I posed this question to my students: What would be the meaning of a photograph that is a *recreation* of an event that *did* happen, an event that had been photographed before? I introduced them to Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (1981). Barthes wrote of looking for a photograph of his mother after she passed away. He hoped to “find” her. However, “none of the pictures seemed quite ‘right’: neither as a photographic performance nor as a living resurrection of the beloved face”. None of the images captured his mother’s “being”. As he sorted through them, beginning with the most recent, he happened upon a photograph of his mother when she was five years old and decided he had finally found her essence. “I had discovered this photograph by moving back through Time” (1980, pp. 67–72). Reading these excerpts from *Camera Lucida* inspired us. If a childhood photograph can embody the essence of one’s being, then could
students capture their identity by recreating the event and re-photographing it?

Each student found an old family snapshot of themselves and recreated the moment but this time with their older selves.²

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² The project was inspired by a website we found called Young Me Now Me in which people recreate old snapshots and post them to the Internet.
The photograph that I chose for this assignment is a 4 year old me sitting at a desk, pressing the space bar of a turned off old generation computer. I do not specifically remember posing for the photo... I feel like most memories from such an early age are built from photographs and stories collected from friends and family members. I also chose this photo to commemorate my childhood in Ukraine. The progress that my family has made to give my older brother and I a better life in America is almost portrayed through the old computer versus the new, modern apple laptop (Student, 2012).

The photo I chose to use for the Old Me New Me project was a picture of me as a toddler with my aunt’s pet dog, Snowy. In the photograph I was about 3
years old. It was taken one day when I was visiting my grandparents. I don’t actually remember that moment nor when the picture was taken but I was told a story about that particular instance. I have always been allergic to dogs, but as a little kid I didn’t understand that concept at all. My mom would constantly warn me not to go by Snowy anytime we would visit her. But being a little kid I wanted to test my mom’s patience. So the picture basically shows me trying to defy my mom’s orders but looking at her in the photograph, to see if I would get in trouble or not (Student, 2012).

Referring to the found snapshot from their youth, most students wrote stories associated with the photos that were personal, but also were framed within cultural narratives. For example, the narrative of the challenging toddler: “I was told a story...I have always been allergic to dogs...I wanted to test my mom’s patience”. The narrative of the American dream: “the computer represents our family coming to America to have a better life”. In the 1995 article “Adolescent Room Culture: Studying Media in the Context of Everyday Life,” researchers look at representations of film, television and magazines displayed in teenagers rooms to identify how the media influences identity formation. They also note that teens collect and display snapshots to define themselves (Steele and Brown, 1995). Today, these collections of images would also likely be curated on a teen’s Facebook wall. The narratives from media-generated sources (posters and photographs from film and television) and the narratives created by personal photographs of friends and family become intertwined to form identity.
John and Beth’s telling of their engagement story and my students’ photographs share what contemporary audience researchers describe as performativity. Performativity results when performances are repeatedly reenacted in the course of ordinary life. A performance is an action or an event occurring in a specific time or place; performativity is a series of actions, events, and the retellings of those events that creates its own meaning. For the diffused audience, performance and performativity coexist (Longhurst, 2007). Our cultural understanding of engagements and weddings, and of childhood and teenage pranks, results from performativity. Media and televised images as well as personal snapshots and the stories we tell perpetuate and alter their meanings.

Weddings are influenced by our acceptance (or possibly rejection) of the romantic narratives generated by film, television, and magazines that publish photographs of lavish celebrity weddings but also by personal images and narratives (Boden, 2003). Beth’s mom insisted she wear make-up, get a manicure and be fitted for contact lenses for her wedding day. However, these changes to Beth’s usual appearance were not for the wedding, her mom explained, they were for the photographs of the wedding. “You don’t want to look washed out in the pictures,” she said. “And the flash will reflect off your glasses.”

The photographer in many cases becomes the de-facto wedding event coordinator. He instructs the bride and groom when and how to cut the cake,
and when and where to have the first dance. He encourages them to stroll among the tables and chat with friends and family. It is the photographer who guides the bride and groom through each expected ritual as if the wedding ceremony is only taking place so that it can be photographed.

The events my students created and photographed were not ceremonies like a wedding, but by photographing them and exhibiting them on Facebook, they became ceremonial. Similar to the basketball shot the characters tried to recreate in the episode of Modern Family, our desire to be participants and spectators, our desire to attract an audience to everyday activities, has created a “spectacularization” of ordinary life (Longhurst, 2007).

1.2 A High School Spectacle

The opening of William Jackson College Prep\textsuperscript{3} was controversial. It was the latest addition, along with five other selective enrollment high schools, to the mayor’s city school reform. Thousands of students applied for a few hundred spots based on test scores, grades, attendance, and recommendations. However, outcry over the unequal distribution of educational resources and funds diverted from the neighborhood schools was daily news (Friedman, 2007). In spite of these negative sentiments that students confronted, they felt fortunate to be at Jackson. For many, admittance seemed the only path to becoming the first in

\textsuperscript{3} The school name, William Jackson College Prep, and teacher and student names in this dissertation are pseudonyms.
their family to go to college, possibly earning a scholarship to a prestigious university. These were my students.

On the first day of school, reporters, photographers and television cameras from Chicago’s numerous news stations were waiting outside Jackson’s doors. The school security guards and police worked together to clear a path for students to enter. The CEO of the school district and the wife of the school’s namesake greeted students as they walked into the school. Mrs. Jackson rang an old-fashioned school bell in the school atrium to start classes. While some teenagers would be able to look back on a family photo, my students went home and watched their first day of high school on TV.
The media coverage lasted several weeks. There were press conferences held in classrooms. While the staff tried to keep reporters away from the students in front of the school, they were sometimes followed to the train stations and asked to comment on camera. Not only was the press interested in the school for political reasons but also the building had won numerous architecture awards. The administration was often hosting groups of architects
and school board officials. It was common for a group of visitors to be standing in the back of the classroom.

It seemed as if the students did not mind the attention; they were getting used to people coming in and out. But one day a teacher came to the department chair meeting and reported that some students said they felt as if they were on display at a zoo. After the first year, the interest died down a bit, but for the next four years, every year brought something new.

Eventually we had our first dance, first football game, first college fair, our first junior prom, then senior prom, and our first graduation. Like the first day of school at Jackson in 2000, what were ordinary occurrences in most American high schools became extraordinary. Every detail of every event was thoughtfully considered knowing we were starting traditions, and every detail was documented: photographed, videotaped, and posted. The empty walls of the building slowly filled with photographs and memorabilia of what was transpiring inside of it.

1.3  **A High School Narrative**

Nearly every American attends a high school; it is a commonly shared aspect of American life. It is ordinary. However, the high school narrative

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4 According to The National Center for Education Statistics, since 1963 more than 97% of Americans attend a public or private high school, most attending 4 years and graduating. Less than 3% of students are homeschooled nationwide (http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=65 retrieved 8/15/15).
generated by mediated texts is so pervasive that it influences our understanding of the experience. When teens talk about high school and adults reminisce about it, their personal experience is framed within the cultural representation.

It was not unusual for my students to think William Jackson College Prep was unlike other schools. Their high school experience was unique. When the students, 371 freshmen, opened the school in 2000, there were no upperclassmen. There was no established social culture, no school colors, no mascot, and no traditions. Students who chose to come to Jackson knew it would be different; still they worked hard to make it live up to their vision of an American high school.

Within the first few weeks of the school opening, the students asked the administration if they could throw a dance. They insisted it be a homecoming dance, even though our school did not have a football team for the requisite homecoming game nor alumni to attend it. “All high schools have homecoming,” they said. My students had never attended high school, yet they had a clear understanding of what high school should be like. The high school narrative is one of the most identifiable constructs in our culture (Shary, 2002).

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Student racial/ethnic background was 33.7% African American, 30.7% Latino, 28.0% Caucasian and 6.7% Asian; 37.2% low income. Statistics were taken from the Illinois School Report Card 2000 as prepared by The Illinois State Board of Education (http://www.isbe.net retrieved 8/15/15).
In 2003, the school was beginning its fourth year. A group of Jackson students asked me to be the teacher sponsor for their video club. The first movie they wanted to make was about life in a high school. They had a list of students to interview: preps, jocks, Goths, nerds, emos, metalheads, and others. One student said we would have to go to another high school to shoot some of the film. When I asked why, he said we did not have all of the groups at our school.

“Why are you including them, then?” I asked.

“Well, they are part of high school,” he said

“How do you know?”

“They are always in movies about high school.”

To examine the high school narrative it is necessary to look at genre theory. While traditionally genre theory refers to film, contemporary audience research offers a way to bridge the gap between film study and television studies. Since the 1950s watching movies in theaters has steadily declined. In contemporary society, most films are viewed on television or on computer screens. Watching movies in American culture has become a television experience, a domestic activity, and for today’s youth, a component of everyday life (Meers, 2001).

There are two distinct types of narratives within high school film genre: one told from a teacher’s perspective, the other from the students’ point of view.
The teacher-centered film usually represents the teacher as a hero who makes a profound impact on one or more students (Considine, 1985). These films tend to negatively depict the teaching profession. The teacher is typically an outsider, new to the profession, like *Blackboard Jungle's* (1955) Richard Dadier. He enters a failing school, changes student lives, and accomplishes what all of the other ineffectual teachers were unable to do (Considine, 1985).

The adults profiled in *Lean on Me* (1989), (a newly appointed principal), *Dangerous Minds* (1995), (an ex-Marine turned teacher), and *Coach Carter* (2005) (a sporting goods store owner who accepts the job of basketball coach), also serve as examples of outsiders who come in and rescue students where all others have failed. Interestingly, each of these films was based on a “true story”. But LouAnne Johnson, the real-life teacher highlighted in *Dangerous Minds*, writes on her website: “I had very little input to the movie and much of it is fiction, at times so far removed from fact as to be ridiculous...I agree with (the) contention that the movie industry seems to think that white middle-class people can walk into a ghetto and 'save the children'.” Further, as if addressing our desire to embrace the cultural representation of high school, she adds, “I don't think the Hollywood film makers are intentionally perpetuating stereotypes and simplistic plot lines. I think in some cases they genuinely believe their stories, in some cases they are trying to create a feel-good story to attract an audience” (www.louannejohnson.com retrieved 8/5/2015).
By contrast, student-centered high school films almost always feature the social lives of students and include the popular and the outcasts. The teachers are either well intended but ineffective or cruel and vindictive (Shary, 2002). Films popular in the mid 1980s still influence current high school films about student life. Many film researchers argue that *The Breakfast Club*, in particular, has influenced nearly every student-centered high school movie that followed it (Davis & Dickinson, 2004; Bulman, 2005; Kaveny, 2006; Tropiano, 2006). In the film, director John Hughes gives his characters specific roles, labeling them: Andrew, the athlete (jock); Brian, the brain (nerd); Allison, the basket case (outcast); Claire, the princess (popular girl); and Bender, the juvenile delinquent (bad boy). Subsequent high school films, with respect to Hughes and the narrative he made standard either “consciously imitated him, or consciously subverted tropes he established” (Kaveney, 2006).

Consider the main characters in the popular films *Can’t Buy Me Love* (1987), in which a nerdy outcast wins over the most popular girl in school after he initially pays her to be his girlfriend, *She’s All That* (1999), in which a high school jock falls for an unattractive girl, a school outsider, when he makes a bet that he can turn her into the prom queen, and *Mean Girls* (2004), in which a new student gets revenge after she is invited in and subsequently shunned by the A-list girl clique (imdb.com retrieved 2007). The characters are familiar but also the story these high school films tell is virtually always the same: the outsider, the student who does not fit in, eventually prevails (Kaveney, 2006) sometimes
even exacting revenge through evil. *Carrie* (1976, remakes 2002, 2013) tells the story of a shy student with telekinetic powers who gets revenge on her high school tormentors by killing the entire student body at the high school prom (imdb.com retrieved 2007).

The student revenge high school narrative is also sometimes depicted within other genres. *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (2000 - 2015) is a television series that adheres to the structure of the mystery crime drama genre: a crime occurs, a suspect is discovered through forensic clues, doubt is cast as to the suspect’s guilt, and finally, the real offender, which may or may not have been the original suspect, is revealed. In *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* season 6, episode 18, the crime is references the genre of the student-centered high school film. In the closing argument to the jury, the prosecuting attorney offers this motive for the murder of a popular teenage girl, Stacey Vollmer, by her classmate, Marlon West:

> High school, even if you are popular, a jock or a brain, it can be hell. Everyone here remembers what it was like - what it was really like. Now take a look at Marlon West. Take a good hard look. Not popular. Not a jock. Not a brain. Now imagine what it must be like to be Marlon West, day after day after day in a sociological pressure cooker of high school. This imposing, struggling outsider, like Marlon, resenting someone like Stacey Vollmer who made it look so easy to be popular, athletic, and smart...You know for the first time in his life Marlon feels like a hero. He’s not invisible anymore. He is a killer.

Because television has its own storytelling elements such as overlapping plots and over-arching storylines incorporated across several episodes and
within individual ones, it has its own unique genres including, the sitcom, the soap opera, and the primetime serial drama (Mittell, 2011). A subgenre, the high school primetime serial dramas features the high school narrative, which is almost exclusively the student-centered version (imdb.com, retrieved 2007). Because often these series are written and recorded throughout the lengthy television season, the primetime drama can be influenced by real world events and direct viewer feedback. Today, the Internet has created an avenue for instant viewer feedback. Producers can tap into fan networks and allow television to mirror modern teenage life in a way never before possible (Jenkins 2005). Long running high school dramas such as *Beverly Hills 90210* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, which aired for 10 and 9 years, respectively, often attempted to reflect current concerns of teenagers that were instantaneously emerging in the news such as date rape drugs and Internet stalking (imdb.com, retrieved 2007).

When watching a film in a theater, there is the sensation of viewing something that has already happened. Television, whether live or recorded, feels immediate as if we are witnessing the events take place (Corner, 1999). Television has the capacity to chronicle real-life in real-time. In long-running programs, television audiences watch characters grow and change over a period of time. What TV offers that no other storytelling medium can is the ability to observe a story, real or fictional, as it is evolving, and over time, alter its course. Not only do the characters grow and change, but the actors who might be
children at the beginning of a series become adults along with the audience. The nature of a long running television series includes the capacity for becoming intimately intertwined into the lived experience of its viewers.

In the year 2001, there were 60 films concurrently in production about teenagers and high school life (Scholastic Choices, 2001). Most of these films soon became available on the Internet and were repeatedly shown on television (Meers, 2001). The fall of 2003, when my students decided there were certain social groups that needed to be included in their high school film, nine out of the forty prime-time dramas on television identified teens as main characters, the most in television history. Six of them featured the high school as a primary set and focused on the social life of high school students (imdb.com, 2007).

Although William Jackson College Prep did not have all of the stereotypical social groups of the high school narrative, the students believed that any movie about high school must include them. Curiously, they believed all of the groups to exist in real life, just somewhere else. They understood the difference between reality and representation of high school life in film and television, but they were not sure where one left off and the other began.

I watched these students, beginning as freshmen, construct their own high school culture. The administration allowed them, even encouraged them, to make every decision when it came to clubs, teams, and other social aspects of the school. It was often the students who came to us and asked if they could found a newspaper, create a yearbook or start a club. As a teacher, I was fascinated by
my students' need to create the “traditional” version of a high school. They wanted the narrative they understood: the media-perpetuated cultural representation of the American high school.
2 TEACHING, LEARNING, RESEARCH, AND THE HIGH SCHOOL NARRATIVE

2.1 High School USA

Shortly after the opening of William Jackson High School in 2000, I began my doctoral studies in curriculum and instruction. I had studied photography and cinema as an undergraduate, worked as photographer for a few years and then went back to school to obtain a master's degree in art education. At the time, I had been teaching for fourteen years. Prior to my studies at The University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), I had only considered research in terms of its outcome: the statistics, developments, and discoveries I read in the news. I had never heard of qualitative (versus quantitative) research. I had discovered another way of thinking. I had thought research should provide proof. But at the same time, as an artist, I liked to observe, to look at things from every angle.

As I learned more about qualitative inquiry, I began to critically examine my experience starting a new high school. Opening Jackson was a spectacle, not just filmed and photographed for the city’s news outlets, but for us. At Jackson, the act of being in high school became a self-conscious pursuit. We became the diffused audience, both spectator and participant, documenting every decision we made to create the environment we inhabited. It was interesting to realize that although the students, as well as the teachers and administrators, believed the school could be whatever we wanted, in many ways, we were limited by our perceptions of what it means in our culture to be an American high school.
Our school had a seminar program that allowed teachers to offer classes outside of traditional coursework. I proposed a seminar called High School USA. As a photography teacher who had also studied filmmaking, I planned to introduce aspects of film and television production including decisions producers of media make concerning camera angles, editing, character development and plot. We would take a media studies approach, analyzing the messages and the power of mass media through a genre I thought would interest both the students and me: the high school narrative. The description read:

High School USA (and ABC, FOX, WB, UPN...)
Life as We Know it? Mean Girls? Napoleon Dynamite? Watch television dramas, movies, documentaries, etc. and analyze how high school life is portrayed. Have they gotten it right? Join our lively class discussions!

The seminar was popular. However, I was not surprised to find out that most students did not understand what the seminar would be when they requested it. Later, for a class assignment, students wrote that after taking the seminar they looked at both television and high school differently than they had before:

When I signed up I thought we were just going to watch TV and movies but it turned out to be so much more than that. When I watch TV now I think what are they trying to tell me about and who is telling me that story (Student, 2004).

One thing I noticed from taking this seminar, however, is about cliques. I never really looked for groups of people who just hung out together but I guess everyone is part of a little group. Even the people who you sit with at lunch are sort of a mini-clique. The movie Mean Girls really made me think about cliques. Especially the part where Janis draws a map of the lunchroom for Kady. It just made me look around and see the little branches of people. At lunch most people have a common table that they sit at with
their friends. People don’t usually switch around who they sit with and they don’t even switch tables (Student, 2004).

This seminar has made me think in a deeper way about what’s really going on in high school...An experience that happened is at lunch I was sitting with my friends and we overheard a conversation between a group of girls and they started talking about one of their other friends. That is so typical of girls can be so mean. The conversation I had with my friends (about it) probably occurred because of this seminar because I am used to thinking about these things now (Student, 2004).

The High School USA seminar also turned out to be more than I expected. I had decided that I would let the students guide the content. What they were most interested in one week determined what we would watch and discuss the next. We examined films about high school from mostly the student-centered genre but also the “teacher as hero” genre. We watched films: dramas, comedies and documentaries as well as prime time television dramas, news specials, and talk shows.

I offered the seminar four semesters, and each time the curriculum evolved in a direction I could never have planned. Current events, happenings in the school, and occurrences in my students’ lives would relate to what we were watching and steer our discussions. One day, Will, a student in my class who had recently come out as gay, wore a purple tutu to school. A security guard had reported it to the principal, who called Will to the office while we were watching the documentary film, High School (1968)6.

---

6 High School (1968) by renowned documentarian, Frederick Wiseman was included in the National Film Registry, Library of Congress in 1991.
When I introduced the film, I had mentioned to my students that our principal and both of our assistant principals would have been attending high school in the year 1968. Early in the film, before Will was escorted out, there was a scene in which a girl was called to the office because her skirt was too short. The administrator tells her that her skirt has to fall lower than her middle finger with her arm extended down her side.

When the movie ended, and we had started to write in our journals, we were surprised when Will, still wearing the tutu, returned to the seminar. The students asked him what happened.

“They told me I had to call my parents, go home and change, because my outfit was inappropriate. And I said to them, ‘That is discrimination! There is no rule against wearing a tutu.’ And they said it was not discrimination. You can wear whatever you want...but it is inappropriate because it is too short. So! I stood up. I extended my arm and showed them it was longer than my middle finger!”

The class erupted in supportive laughter. Then, someone bravely asked him: why did he wear the tutu to school. It started a thoughtful discussion not only about dress codes but also about sexuality and identity.

Catherine Cornbleth (1990) writes that curriculum is a process, “an ongoing social process comprised of the interactions of students, teachers, knowledge and milieu”. In addition to what was happening in the students' lives, my life and my interests also altered the direction of the seminar. Readings, conversations, and writings from my doctoral classes became so seamlessly
woven into my teaching, I almost did not notice. Previous to my studies in curriculum and research, I do not think I would have stopped the class and allowed Will to discuss what happened with the principal. Not only would I have felt it a disruption to my carefully planned lesson, but I also would not be in control of what he might say, or where the discussion headed next. I remembered a professor advising me, “Let them go. If they start heading over the cliff, you’re the adult in the room, you’ll pull them back.”

When the pilot episode of Life as We Know it (2004-2005), a high school primetime serial drama, caught the students’ attention, they were shocked to find out that television critics had panned it. In their journals, students had written the show as “closest to reality”, with “characters who are relatable”, including the “most realistic of teenagers we’ve seen”. By contrast, the critics had written, “Sex, sex, sex....” and “If you were to believe this show, then teenagers have nothing on their minds but sex”, and “teenage boys don’t think about sex every fifteen seconds”. The students found 16 articles and reviews, learning that one city had even pre-empted the network pilot, citing it as “indecent”. All of the reviews, from a small town newspaper to The New York Times, berated the show not only for its perceived obscenity, but also for its inauthenticity. The students wanted to write the critics and tell them that the show did accurately reflect the lives of high school students.

I was nervous to publicly acknowledge what we were watching and discussing in the seminar. In general, our administration frowned upon teachers
showing videos in class, and they were strict about showing content that might be deemed “inappropriate”. But I encouraged the students to follow through and let the critics know what they thought. I told them that in my graduate studies I was learning to write surveys. I could help them poll students and gather more evidence. They could use the qualitative data (the writings from their journals), and also include quantitative data in their letters. They proposed their plan to the administration, who after viewing the episode, asked the students to discuss it with them and defend their position. When the administration gave them permission, the students hosted a school-wide screening of the pilot episode of *Life as We Know It*, followed by a survey they had written.

The High School USA seminar students wrote to the critics with the statistics they had gathered. They emphasized that the diverse student body of our school liked the drama. The data they collected attempted to prove the show’s plotlines were true-to-life including the responses of the student body to statements like: “A boyfriend/girlfriend has pressured me into having sex”, “I have had a crush on a teacher”, and “I avoided someone at school so people would not know we were a couple.” Although only two of the critics wrote back and were rather dismissive, it did not dampen my students’ enthusiasm to continue looking at and analyzing media representations of high school life.
We are high school students at a diverse school in Chicago, Illinois. We have been studying how high school life is portrayed in the media within a seminar class once a week called High School USA. During the seminar we came across a show “Life as We Know It” and agreed that it was a great portrayal of life as high school students. We later read your review “Teenage sex dominates ABC's life as we know it” along with several others.

We held a screening of “Life as We Know It” to which over one hundred students attended. After the screening we asked people to fill out a poll in response to show and giving their opinion on the accuracy of the topics it was based upon. With this poll we were able to prove the inaccuracy of the reviews on this show who claimed it was an inaccurate and inappropriate portrayal of high school life. In your article you mentioned that “you can get away with more in theaters. On TV, all you can do is tease, which is all life as we know it does from beginning to end without a single pay off.” According to our poll, it did pay off.

Sixty-two percent of teenagers polled agreed that the show portrayed high school life accurately and eighty-two percent of all polled agreed that boys thought about sex as often as portrayed on the show. Overall, people did not only agree that the show accurately portrayed high school life but they thoroughly enjoyed the show.

When critics such as you write articles opposing the show, the show has less of a chance to remain on the air. Please give this show a chance and keep it from being cancelled. We believe that a show like “Life as We Know It” should remain on the air for other teenagers to enjoy.

Thank you,

and Students of High School USA

We also sent you a letter in the mail: we would love to hear a response.

Thanks again.

Figure 6 Press E-mail 1, 2005
Response:

et al,

A review is nothing more than one person's opinion. Any critic whose work doesn’t evoke occasional disagreement probably isn’t saying much.

There were elements of life as we know it that do reflect high school life. However, in a group of four friends to have one student involved with his teacher while one of his pals' mother is having an affair with his coach is highly unusual to say the least. The couple that included Kelly Osbourne was the one that rang truest, according to my memories of high school. My objection was the show was all about titillation without substance. In any case, reviews didn’t get life as we know it canceled, ABC’s scheduling of it in one of the toughest time periods on TV did.

Thanks for your interest,

Figure 7 Press E-mail, 1 Response, 2005
From: highschoolusa [mailto:highschoolusa@k12.il.us]
Sent: Monday, May 16, 2005 2:52 PM
To: Pierce, Scott
Subject:

Deseret Morning News
Attn: 
30 E. 100 South
P.O.Box 1257
Salt Lake City, U.T. 84110
May, 05, 2005

Dear Mr. Pierce,

We attend [redacted] High School in Chicago, which is known to be one of the most diverse high schools in the city. The past year we have been taking a class that analyzes how the media portrays high school life. Seeing as to how we are high school students ourselves, we believe that we are the best critics for any show that tries to portray high school life. We feel that “Life As We Know It” did the best job in portraying high school life. In a class of 40, the majority of the class felt that this show was the most accurate to high school life. We were astonished to hear that critics, none of which are currently in high school, criticized this show in a negative way.

To make sure that our class were not the only ones who believed strongly that “Life As We Know It” portrayed high school the most accurately, we had a screening of the first episode to our school. After watching the screening, we had the audience take a survey. According our poll, 82% agreed that boys think about sex as often as portrayed in the show. 58% of males agreed that they have a crush on a teacher. 62.5% agree that “Life As We Know It” portrays high school accurately. One student quoted that “Life As We Know It” was “True, Honest, Racy, Good Depiction of high school life” and another said that “Life As We Know It is an awesome show”.

Every week we attend this seminar class in which we hold discussions and we watch other shows. We are high school students who are at the moment going through high school experiences and we feel that we are the best critics. We wrote this letter to inform you that “Life As We Know It” really is life as we know it.

Sincerely,

[redacted] with, for, and the students of High School USA seminar
[redacted] High School

Figure 8 Press E-mail 2, 2005
RESPONSE:

Two points you may wish to consider:

"Accurate" and "good" are not synonymous. You can get an accurate view of life by looking out your window; what you see may not make an entertaining television show, however.

Your statements that "we believe that we are the best critics for any show that tries to portray high school life" and the accompanying statement that "We were astonished to hear that critics, none of which are currently in high school, criticized this show in a negative way" are fundamentally flawed.

If your line of reasoning is correct, African-Americans cannot review shows populated by white characters and vice versa. Doctors would be the best judges of medical dramas. Lawyers would be the best judges of legal dramas.

It doesn't work that way.

Thanks for your e-mail. It's nice to know you're at least thinking about what's on TV.

Scott D. Pierce
Deseret Morning News television editor

Figure 9 Press E-mail 2 Response, 2005
No matter what film or television show we viewed in High School USA, the students’ discussion would always veer towards whether or not the depiction of the high school experience was “true”. Often students would say that a film or television show did accurately reflect high school life, though not at Jackson, because they viewed our school was unique.

2.2 The Reality Effect

When I was teaching an art class of seven-year-olds several years ago, I gave them paper and crayons and asked them to draw an apple, which I had placed high upon a pedestal like a piece of sculpture. As I walked around the room, I saw nearly identical pictures of bright red apples, fat heart-shaped ones with flat bottoms, brown stems sprung from the top with one enormous green leaf standing up perfectly straight.

I asked the students, “Did you draw the apple?”

“Yes!” They replied.

“What color is the apple?”

“Red...”

“It is?” I spent a moment staring at the apple I had displayed. “What color is the apple?”

“Well,” one boy admitted, “that apple is really sort of yellow...and brown, and some green.”

“Does the apple have a stem? Does it have leaves?”
My questions caused some confusion. Still, most of the students insisted they had drawn the apple. I asked them if they had ever seen an apple that red, one with a thick brown stem and a single bright green leaf?

“But this is how you draw an apple,” they said. “This is a picture of an apple!”

Rene Magritte made a similar assertion about representation in his famous painting of a pipe. Underneath the realistically painted pipe he wrote, “Ceci n’est pas une pipe.” In English: This is not a pipe. Magritte, like my young students, was reminding us, “This is a picture of a pipe.” Unlike the iconographic nature of my students’ apples, the life-like quality of Magritte’s pipe might lead the viewer to assume his painting represented a real pipe. We cannot be certain, though, if Magritte depicted an actual pipe that he had in his painting studio or a pipe he imagined, a pipe that could exist.\(^7\)

Consider a photograph. John Berger (1980) said, “Unlike any other visual image, a photograph is not a rendering, an imitation or an interpretation of its subject, but actually a trace of it. No painting or drawing, however naturalist, belongs to its subject in the way that a photograph does.” Berger is suggesting that in a photograph, we know the subject exists. This is misleading because the represented subject of the photograph might not exist at all. Photography can lie.

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\(^7\) By viewing Magritte’s 1928 painting, there is no way to know whether or not the pipe exists in reality. However, in 1981, an art historian claimed he did not paint a real pipe. According to Silvano Levy, Magritte painted the image from a photograph of a giant pipe bolted to the outside of a Belgian cigar shop (Windsor, 1998).
The length of the camera’s lens, lighting, point of view, printing process, and several other factors can distort and misrepresent the object photographed. A building made out of paper could be constructed, lighted, and photographed in such a way that we believe it is a real building. As a familiar example, cinematographers often explode miniature reproduction of buildings to lead audiences to believe an actual building is being destroyed.

Jean-Luc Godard said, “Photography is truth. The cinema is truth twenty-four times per second” (Roud, 1970). The ability to photograph a subject in action allows film and video to further blur the line between representation and reality. As we watch an actress on screen, we are looking at a real woman in a series of images. It might appear that an event is taking place. For example, the actress, representing a character, has a conversation with another character. Several photographic images of actions, which may or may not have taken place in the order we are viewing them, are edited together to create the conversation. Film and video, although they capture real people performing real actions, can also represent events that never occurred (Armstrong, 2005). Still, just as we accept a painting and a photograph as a representation of a real subject, we accept a series of photographic images as a representation of an actual event. It is this willingness to interpret moving pictures as reality that allows audiences to appreciate the narratives produced on film and video.
The fictional is rendered realistic through the representation of actual subjects and familiar experiences in conceivable situations. At the same time, stories understood as pure fantasy also demand an element of truth. Richard Armstrong, in *Understanding Realism* (2005), explains the attempt to obtain realism in filmmaking in terms of “the reality effect” and “the truth effect.” He explains that a fictional film includes recognizable locations and believable characters in order to achieve the reality effect. Familiarity gives us a foundation for accepting the story. The truth effect is more abstract and refers to a general idea of how we experience events in the real world. In a film set in an imagined world, the truth effect incorporates relatable societal values, motivations, and perspectives allowing the audience to accept the fantasy.

*Boston Public* (2000-2004)\(^8\), was a television drama set in an urban high school. Although the program was filmed in California, the opening credits and establishing shots feature East Boston High School, a Boston city public school (www.imdb.com, retrieved 2007). On the set, the classrooms and offices were carefully constructed to resemble the inside of the school. The actors who played the students and faculty looked, dressed, and behaved as we would expect, giving the audience a sense of realism. The reality effect can be easily shattered by the inclusion of any element that does not belong in the setting or locale (Armstrong, 2005). For example, if in a *Boston Public* scene, a well-known

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\(^8\) Ironically, to the dismay of my students, Chi McBride, the actor who played the principal on *Boston Public*, visited Jackson in 2002 when he was in Chicago to see what a “real” urban high school was like.
California landmark is observed on screen, the audience’s desire to suspend disbelief is interrupted; they lose faith in the story.

_Buffy the Vampire Slayer_ (1997), another teen drama set in a high school, is a fantasy. Seemingly ordinary high school students are teen vampires, witches, and werewolves, who participate in a continuing battle of good versus evil in an imaginary underworld. Relying on the truth effect, plots are rendered believable by exploring real teenage issues. For example, Willow, a character eager to shed her high school "geekiness" uses her newly discovered ability for magic in an effort to empower herself against her enemies, both fantastic (evil demons) and real (her classmates) (Cover, 2005). Producers of television understand that some semblance of the real world is necessary to keep viewers interested.

Understanding the world requires “routine reality maintenance.” One says, “What awful weather,” expecting others to agree. When we share our thoughts with others, when we describe an event from our day, it is to reaffirm what is we know about the world. Daily conversations confirm our perceptions of what is real. In our current culture, television is part of that routine. For many, it has become their primary source of reality maintenance (Kubey & Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). In fact, an event that is not represented on television can seem unlikely, not real, because it lacks familiarity (Slade, 2002).
The high school narrative is familiar. It is part of our collective consciousness. If we expect the popular kid, the outcast, the jock, the rebel, we are likely to find them. These representations inspire credibility when they inform our actions. Stuart Hall (1997) explains, drawing on the philosophy of Foucault: “All knowledge, once applied in the real world, has real effects and in that sense at least becomes true.” Any version of high school not matching that particular representation is considered divergent, including, quite possibly, our own experience of it. When my students saw the high school represented in films and on television, they saw it as the norm.

When watching high school representations in our High School USA seminar, students would say:

“That is what high school is like, maybe not here, but most places.”

“How would you know?” I would ask, “This is the only high school you have ever been to.”

During one of these discussions, a student challenged me. He said, “OK, you’re right. Why don’t we go visit some other high schools and find out?”
2.3 **High School USA: The Field Trip**

The following semester the students and I worked together and arranged for Jackson students to be paired with and shadow students for the day at various local high schools. Jackson was a college prep selective enrollment school, so we chose a dissimilar school in our city’s district, a neighborhood high school that housed a medical assistant vocational program. We also went to a charter school for girls, a racially and economically diverse inner-ring suburban public school just outside of Chicago, and a high school in an affluent suburb. The seminar students were already skilled at observing and journaling from their analysis of film and television shows. However, I wanted to share what I was learning about ethnography and qualitative research methodology with them. Two of my professors generously offered to share their expertise with the students: one week we discussed how to take fieldnotes, followed the next week by instructions on how to interview a subject effectively.

After we had completed the school visits, I asked the students to look for code words and themes in their fieldnotes, first on their own, then by sharing their notes as a class. They taped poster-size paper to the walls with themes written on the top. Students wrote something about each school from their notes pertaining to each of the themes. At the bottom, they added Jackson for comparison. The themes they identified were: IDs, Library, Fashion, Teachers, Internet, Smoking, Drinking and Drugs, and Food and Water in Class.
Food and Water in Class, as an example, generated a lot of discussion since it was not allowed in classrooms at Jackson but seemed to be allowed in every other school.

At other schools:

*Food and drink found EVERYWHERE.*

*Everyone eats and drinks in class. Teachers don’t seem to care.*

*Allowed to eat and drink in class. Saw lots of people doing so.*
About Jackson they wrote:

Some teachers let students in eat in class- pretty lenient unless (principal's name) walks in.

Several rules we had at Jackson were not enforced at other schools: wearing IDs, having a cell phone, talking in the library. In terms of the social life of students, it appeared to be common for the Jackson students to talk to their shadows about the prevalence of drinking, drugs, and smoking at their respective schools during the visits. But, interestingly, when asked to identify themes, references to the stereotypical high school social groups they had expected to find at other schools was not listed among them. Though later, when students allowed me to look at their notebooks, observations about race and social groups/cliques were included in nearly every student's fieldnotes.

One explanation for the exclusion of these particular themes could be that we were considering displaying these posters at an end-of-semester presentation, which the administrators would attend. The students could have been choosing the themes based on their motivation to let the administration and teachers know that in other schools, students do not have to wear IDs, can eat in class, and carry cell phones. Students also, perhaps, wanted to address the issues of drinking, drugs, and smoking among students about which they believed Jackson administration to be in denial.
At Jackson:

*A lot of drinking, drugs, and partying.*

*Some (Jackson) students smoke on the corner of (nearby intersection) in front of the parking lot.*

*It seems like some (Jackson) students think it (smoking) sooo cool.*

The themes they chose to highlight may have stemmed from a desire to effect change in school rules or simply a desire to be provocative. The omission of the themes of students’ race and social life they included in their fieldnotes may have been the result of the students not finding what they saw at the other schools unique or interesting. Robert Emerson writes in “Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes” that when researchers take and interpret their fieldnotes, it is not so much about “facts” or “what happened”, but instead an active process of deciding what is significant and what is not (1995).

Race was noted in nearly every notebook, but students did not identify it as a cogent theme.

*Black and Hispanic make up school’s biggest race.*
(Student fieldnotes, Inner-city neighborhood high school, 2005)

*Primarily African American students and then some Latino students. No white.* (Student fieldnotes, All girls’ charter high school, 2005)

It is possible that the seminar students thought the racial make-up of the schools was factual, and therefore not noteworthy, but conceivably it was
because they do not see race in itself as significant. In a 2014 USA Today article, the author writes that today’s students have grown up in a world he calls “post-racial”. The most racially diverse generation in America’s history works hard not to see race as an important attribute (Toppo, 2014).

Students looked for social cliques in all of the schools but did not find what they anticipated:

*At lunch. He (the shadow student) deconstructs the lunchroom telling me which table is which (not unlike the scene in Mean Girls) “the fakers over there...nerds ova there... Asians...ganstas”* (sic)
(Student fieldnotes, Inner-city neighborhood school, 2005)

*Not really any “clicks,” as the students say, but it appears that there are from my observations.* (sic)
(Student fieldnotes, Suburban school, 2005)

*Some student groups. Two students sit by themselves.*
(Student fieldnotes, All girls charter school, 2005)
The suburban high school we visited was the only school students thought “sort of” resembled the televised high schools we had been watching in class. Still, it was not what they thought it would be.

*The school has a very nice campus and the children are incredibly nice amongst other things, the students did not seem as cliquish as I thought they might be. There were a large array of students so perhaps there was not much diversity at all as the other schools, still I never felt awkward. Although many people compare the school to the more mean girls such topics never came up.*

(Student fieldnotes, Suburban high school, 2005)

*At lunch (shadow student), three other girls and I sit. They have dull conversation about school. I mention the lack of gossip. (What I usually talk about at lunch) They say they don’t typically talk about gossip every day. What a life.* (Student fieldnotes, Suburban high school, 2005)
After each high school visit, the seminar students registered surprise that the school was not as they expected. However, the affluent suburban high school was the one they felt most resembled what they envisioned as a “typical” high school. When defining the high school film genre, Robert C. Bulman, sociologist and author of *Hollywood Goes to High School* (2005), adds an interesting perspective that might explain why.

He argues that high school films reveal our culture’s preoccupation with middle-class values. He divides high school films into urban and suburban. He further suggests that the contemporary teacher-as-hero film is primarily set in urban areas, and features middle-class teachers who enter inner-city schools to teach low-income African-American or Latino students middle-class values: hard-work, materialism, and individual achievement (2005). The heroic teacher’s purpose is to “rescue” students from the culture of poverty (See also Ayers, 1993). Teachers portrayed in *Lean on Me* (1989), *Dangerous Minds* (1995), and *Coach Carter* (2005) again serve as examples.

John Hughes, the director of *The Breakfast Club* (1985) was a product of a Chicago suburban high school, which inspired his films (Gross, 2004). The school he attended neighbored the suburban school we visited. High school films (and the prime time serial dramas inspired by the genre) are most often set in suburban high schools, and tend to feature white middle-class students, who are focused on not only “popularity, conformity, dating and sex” but also “individual
self-expression” and “finding oneself.” Teen-centered high school films perpetuate individualism, an identified middle-class value, imply attractiveness as a key to success, and suggest that once one has been defined as either an insider or an outsider, it is almost impossible to change (Bulman, 2005). The possibility of going from nerd to popular, like rising from poverty to wealth, is the fantasy of the high school narrative.

Through this field investigation, I realized students of William Jackson College Prep were subject to that middle-class fantasy. Jackson and the other city selective enrollment schools were ostensibly created to give high-achieving inner-city students the opportunity to receive a college prep education equal to their affluent peers in the suburbs (Friedman, 2007). Though our school was an urban public school, and the majority of the students were neither white nor middle class, the students understood William Jackson College Prep to be their pathway to college, a professional career, and affluence - the dream inspired by the high school narrative. The media attention began to die down after the first year, but until the day they graduated, the students of Jackson assumed the task of creating a high school that fulfilled not only their own expectations but also those of their families, teachers, administrators, and arguably, the entire city who would be the audience to its success or failure.
3 THE PHOTOGRAPHY CLASSROOM: TELEVISION AND CURRICULUM

Sarah Martin came into my classroom one day upset by what a mutual student of ours, Ellen, had said to her. Sarah had told Ellen she would issue her a pass for an uncompleted class requirement if Ellen read a collection of short stories she had compiled.

Ellen’s response was: “Fine, I’ll jump through your hoops, Ms. Martin.”

Sarah was not only upset that Ellen did not find her assignment meaningful; she was heartbroken that Ellen did not share her passion for literature. Education scholar, Deborah Meiers contends that being passionate about your subject matter is not enough to be an effective teacher. Students are motivated, she said in an interview, by teachers who are intellectually curious, who model a passion for learning, and who guide students to ask their own questions and seek their own answers (1994).

At Jackson, a common complaint among students was that teachers assigned too much homework. Admittedly, the culture of the school was that it be “rigorous”. Teachers were told by the administration to be demanding and set the bar high in order to prepare students for college. Although it was scheduled as part of a regular school day, the seminar program was ungraded, and thus considered by the students to be supplemental. Students could often
become resentful and angry if asked to do any additional work for a seminar on top of their other classes.

For this reason, I was surprised when my High School USA students created additional work for themselves. They spent time outside the seminar researching films and television shows for us to watch and discuss. The screening of *Life As We Know It*, involved writing the proposal, presenting it to the administration, creating the survey, compiling the data, and eventually sending letters to critics. This was mostly done after school and on the students’ own time. Even some of their visits to other high schools had to be scheduled on days when Jackson was closed, days students could have had to themselves.

The success of the seminar, I believe, had to do with the fact that the students and I found a common passion, a common interest. I had proposed the idea of examining films and television shows about high school life at a time when the students and I were participants in and spectators to creating a high school. While we examined the media-generated version of the high school narrative, I introduced them to the research techniques I was excited about learning in graduate school. In that sense, I embodied what Meiers suggested; I was modeling my passion for learning and intellectual curiosity. There were times when I suggested activities in which my students were not interested. We did not pursue them. The projects that students *did* take on were instrumental to answering their own questions. For example, learning to write and implement surveys for their letters to television critics. As a teacher, I could not have
created a curriculum for my students as demanding, or as rewarding, as the one we created together.

I wondered if I could bring that same level of enthusiasm and commitment from the seminar program into my photography classroom. Could I teach the necessary skills of design, lighting, and exposure through a discourse I was currently passionate about: research, television studies and the high school narrative? In the next section of this thesis, I will present the process and the products created within a photography class curriculum. By combining our shared interest in television, the high school narrative, and the photographic image, my students and I created artworks I will continue to examine through the paradigm of audience research.

In 2004 and 2005, I had been immersed in learning about research and discovered visual research studies. It prompted me to consider artists who create mixed media work incorporating photography to record personal experience. I introduced them to my students. I also presented students with the possibility of conducting a visual ethnography of high school life. Like my seminar students, my photography students were excited about the idea of examining the culture of our new school. I will show how my students and I used visual research methods and photography to explore our relationship to the high school narrative.
In the years that followed, during my teaching career at Jackson, there was increased accessibility to the Internet in our culture. It changed the nature of television viewing, creating a shared experience between the producers of media and the recipients of it. Producers and fans began using online forums to collaborate on television narratives. Fan fiction, which allowed audience members to take established characters from popular fictions and create their own works, was something in which many of my students were participating. By creating photographic images of themselves transformed into an alter ego, students explored identity and their relationship to the media as a mass audience. I repeated the project three times: in 2006, 2012 and 2015. Each time, issues of celebrity, social class and race were among the topics that emerged. In another project, students collaborated to create sets, costumes and make-up in order to make movie posters incorporating high school film narratives. Popular narratives in the students’ final works included both the romantic fantasy of the student outcast transforming into an admired insider, as well as the high school outsider seeking revenge.

In recent years, the projects in my photography classes have been inspired by competitive reality TV shows in which ordinary people, non-actors, become contestants in a televised media event. The competition contestants as well as the audience, who also participates by suggesting competition challenges and voting on the winners, personify the diffused audience of contemporary life. In one of the first shows of this genre, Project Runway (2004-) cast members are
given a limited budget for the purchase of a variety of materials in order to create articles of clothing. The show inspired a class field trip to the grocery store where Jackson students purchased items and created artwork about food consumption.

Finally, in 2010, in collaboration with a colleague, I established (and continue to contribute to) a website of one-day challenges in which students are given prompts and have 45-60 minutes to create a visual works of art.9 One-day projects incorporating toy miniatures, found objects, randomly generated slogans, cell phone apps and more, inspire collaboration and innovative solutions within a limited time frame. The timed format of these projects mimics the reality competition television shows that students enjoy, but it also reflects the trial-and-error learning style of today’s technologically savvy Generation Y students (Prensky, 2005). A sampling of the photography projects perfected by Jackson students and me will be presented in chapter six.

It has been fifteen years since William Jackson College Prep was established. During that time, I have changed. As a teacher, I have deepened my knowledge of curriculum and instruction through my study of research and audience studies. Concurrently, the students I have had the opportunity to work with over the years have changed. The way teenagers view televised media has evolved from receptive to collaborative to interactive. Today’s generation has a

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9 See the website One Shot Sure Shot: One Day Art Projects for the Secondary Classroom www.oneshotsureshot.org
DIY (do it yourself) attitude. Films and television programming can be accessed at *anytime* using instant Internet streaming devices such as Roku™, digital video recorders (DVR), or digital video disc (DVD) players attached to home television sets. Students can watch *anywhere* via the Internet on computers, laptops, and handheld devices.

My students have always been an active audience to television and technology, but the current generation also comes to class as *producers* of media, with self-taught knowledge of cell phone photography and simple video and audio editing skills (Emeagwali, 2011). Publishing their media works on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube accounts, my students are already firmly enmeshed within the diffused audience of our culture before they enter my photography class. Examining research paradigms, discussing television narratives, and reflecting on high school life as they strengthen their photography skills only serves to create a more dynamic and satisfying learning environment.

Additionally, over the years at Jackson, my students’ questions have changed. The initial Jackson students created the culture of our high school. They had a vested interest in examining the influence of the high school narrative on their perception of high school life. Current Jackson students, although certainly influenced by the cultural representation of high school in mediated texts, willingly accept the daily routines and traditions that have been established by
the students who came before them. On the other hand, for today’s students, technology has changed their relationship to media texts; not only the way they interpret the texts, but also how they think and process information. Theorist Michel Foucault contends we make meaning through personal experience and through the representations of that experience in conversations, texts, and images (Hall, 1997). In the next chapters, I illustrate how my students and I created a meaningful classroom experience not only through readings and discussions, but also through the process and production of photographic images.

In this thesis, I offer one teacher’s experience in one classroom at one point in time. My interests in photography, audience research and the high school narrative coincided with my participation in the establishment of a new high school, while at the same time, advancements in technology were changing the definition of the media audience. This resulted in a unique and evolving curriculum, the credit for which I share with the students who have guided me in its creation.
4 VISUAL RESEARCH AND THE HIGH SCHOOL NARRATIVE

4.1 Images of High School

A brochure for the United States Department of Education’s High School Initiative (2004) features photos of engaged students in hallways and classrooms, and attentive teachers leaning over students’ desk. The copy reads, “Educators across America are working to create high schools that will prepare today’s students for the complexities of 21st century life, for further education, and for careers.” The text goes on to call for increased standards, rigorous academics, and higher expectations.

Figure 12 United States Department of Education Brochure, 2004 (https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/hs/hs2004brochure.pdf, retrieved, 8/8/15)
By contrast, Jackson photography students acting as visual ethnographers of high school life offer photographs of students sleeping at their desks and breaking rules: eating in classrooms, using cell phones, and passing notes. While the students enjoyed exposing the non-compliant, I contend, their photographs reveal their own stories.

4.2 Audience Research, Visual Research, and the Art Classroom

The transition to new ethnographic, qualitative audience research as opposed to previous quantitative cause and effects analysis is sometimes called the “ethnographic turn”. Traditionally, ethnographers examine foreign cultures
as the “other”, studying the life of communities as outsiders. Contemporary audience researchers seek to see the world *through* its participants (Corner, 1991). Audience research, then, becomes a framework through which to consider ethnography as a method.

Visual ethnography within ethnographic research employs several modalities including looking at artistic artifacts existing in the culture as well as using artistic methods to gather information about that culture (O’Reilly, 2009). The intent of the photographs in the government brochure above, which are cultural artifacts, and the photographs taken by students for the purpose of research, was different. Still, both serve to illustrate what it looks like in an American high school.

Noted scholar of visual ethnography Sarah Pink writes:

*Images are ‘everywhere’. They permeate our academic work, everyday lives, conversations, our imagination and our dreams. They are inextricably interwoven with our personal identities, narratives, lifestyles, cultures and societies, as well as with definitions of history, space and truth.*

She goes on to say that when ethnographic research includes photographs, video, and other visual texts, the experience of producing and discussing the imagery becomes part of the knowledge of the culture (2007). The lived experience of high school that my students and I shared began with the media coverage of the school’s opening day, continued with the photo and video documentation of school events instantaneously displayed around the school
and online, and was further explored when we viewed and considered the televised representations of high school. As a photography teacher, it seemed natural that my students take photographs with the intent of examining the culture they created. Pink adds, “Just as images inspire conversations, conversation may invoke images.” The act of participating in the photographic research of our school culture deepens our understanding of it.

Incorporating visual research into the contemporary art classroom is a natural fit. Art education scholar, Dipti Desai “The Ethnographic Move in Contemporary Art: What Does it Mean for Art Education?” goes further to say that including visual research into the art classroom is necessary if teachers want to remain abreast to the art world. Contemporary art, she maintains, does not only blur the lines between art and craft but also has integrated the practices of other disciplines such as the social sciences and humanities. She cites Mark Dion’s artistic urban archeological digs and exhibition and other site-specific installation artists as examples. I would argue that photographers who incorporate research practices into their work process also fit that paradigm.

Candy Jernigan is an artist who employs media from drawing to photography. Her artworks are collections of objects, drawings and photographs that prove she has “been there” (Jernigan, 1999). These artistic artifacts represent a time and place much like visual ethnography represents a cultural space. Dan Eldon, a photojournalist kept detailed journals throughout his
lifetime incorporating photographs, drawings, and memorabilia documenting his travels. In both cases the artwork becomes data for their personal inquiry. The exhibition and publication of their work suggests their research falls within the paradigm of audience research: the spectacularization of the everyday.

Figure 14 (Left to Right) Candy Jernigan, Detail of “Roman Artifacts” from Evidence: The Art of Candy Jernigan (1999); Eldon, Page from The Journey is the Destination, published 2011

Jernigan and Eldon were both artists with whom I had been familiar, but my studies into research allowed me to see their work through a new lens. Curious to see if the research paradigm as an approach to creating art would motivate my students, I introduced these artists to my students. I asked them to create their own research and present their study as an artwork. Students could use any media, including photographs (either existing photographs or those taken as part of the research), appropriated imagery from the Internet, collected found objects, drawings, writings or other ephemera. They scanned the items they collected and created digital images. Using photo-imaging software they created their final compositions.

Students were given a three-week period in which to collect items, but they were also allowed to use items they had saved previously. Popular topics of investigation included: proof of friendship, the study of a romantic relationship, acceptance to college, and several students documented places, including international trips they participated in through the world language department.
Figure 15 Where I have been (Student, 2007)

Figure 16 See a penny, (Student, 2007)
The first time I presented this assignment, I asked students to find "proof" of something at school. My students were amenable, but I found the project more successful the second time, when I did not limit their research question. Although it was not a requirement when I presented the project in a following year, almost every study included some aspect of high school life. The student artwork, *Where I have been*, includes several recognizable locations at our school. And in the investigation *See a penny*, the student's inserted journal entries define whether finding a penny results in "good luck all day" through events that happened at school. “I didn’t find a penny. However, I got a progress report from two classes and has ‘A’s! “ And, “Still didn’t find a penny. I failed AP Stats test but Aced my Pre-Cal test.” (sic)

Using the concept of research-as-content for their artwork was appealing to my students. They liked posing and answering their own questions. Students were inspired by the idea that research could have a broader definition than that with which they had previously been familiar. They also enjoyed being clever and playful, like the student who wondered if she would have good luck if she found a penny. More traditional approaches to research also interested my students. When photo students were asked to participate in ethnography, a visual ethnography of high school life, it turned into a significant research study.
4.3 **A Visual Ethnography of a High School**

By way of introduction to visual ethnography, in particular, to photoethnography, we looked at traditional ethnographers such as Bronisław Malinowski, who is credited as the first anthropologist to assume the role of participant/observer. In this case, we considered his use of the photograph as a supplement to his fieldwork (Ball and Smith, 1992). Dorthea Lange’s photographs documenting the plight of farm laborers during the Depression were also examined. We looked at contemporary artist Nan Goldin’s work documenting New York subcultures along with two photographers, Sally Mann and Richard Billingham, who explore family life. I pointed out to students how these contemporary photographers approach the aesthetic of the snapshot as fine art.
Figure 18 Documentary and fine art photography (Clockwise left to right)
Dorthea Lange, Sally Mann, Nan Goldin, and Richard Billingham

(http://cdn.history.com/sites/2/2014/02/migrant-mother-by-dorothea-lange.jpg,
http://www.nomoreheroesanymore.com/imgs/news/13570_17710785874cb294c458f2.jpg,
http://www.tate.org.uk/art/images/work/P/P78/P78046_10.jpg,
Influenced by both research paradigms and artists’ works, students took turns taking photographs throughout the school for a period of two weeks. Later, as they felt more comfortable behind the camera and recognized the need for a wider range of photographs, each student photographed again. The next time each student shot one full day in his/her life as a high school student.

Students were asked to attempt to assume the role of an “outsider” and photograph only what they saw, as opposed to having a preconceived idea of what needed to be included in an ethnography of high school life. Looking at their written reflections on the project, this proved a difficult concept for some students. One student wrote that high school students were always busy and moving and he wanted that reflected in his photos. Another student remarked that even though most people see high school as students working, she did not think so. She purposely sought out students socializing for her photos.

Most students made an effort to be an observer and by doing so found the assignment enlightening. Students began noticing and questioning practices in the school they had previously taken for granted. Procedures such as scanning ID cards upon entry, the staircases the school dedicated for going upstairs and those for going down, and student interactions with security guards during the passing periods were some of the things they noted. They wondered if other schools had similar methods and if there were other ways to avoid congestion and conflict.
Naturally, as stated earlier, all researchers, whether taking notes or taking photographs, make decisions about what is significant and what is not. As participant/observers it was difficult for students to separate themselves from the high school experience that is part of their own lived experience and my students pointed that out in their reflections. Several students wrote that since they were high school students themselves it was impossible not to have a vested interest in exposing the things that affected them.

A few students noted another issue inherent in visual ethnography: the observer effect, the idea that those being studied might change their behavior because they are being observed (Collier, 1986). One student wrote that whenever he pulled out his camera students made faces and acted out for the photo. But another perceptive student embraced the observer effect. He pointed out a concept that new audience research proposes through their participant/spectator paradigm: make meaning of the world through the participants as opposed to viewing them from the perspective of an outsider. In his artist reflection he wrote that it did not matter if students posed or did something special for the camera when he took photos because he was trying to capture high school life. He figured that high school students act silly in front of the camera so those photos were as representative of high school life as the candid photos he captured.

When the students brought in their photographs, each student was responsible for coding a set of approximately one hundred and fifteen
photographs out of the more than two thousand photographs taken. They gave every photo a descriptive label. Then, students used different colors to highlight words, which suggested themes.
Examples of common themes they identified included: Rigor, Busy Work, Studying, Students in Action, Talky-Talky, Distraction, Teens Love Food, Lunchroom Antics, Breaking the Rules, Caught in the Act, Passing Congestion, Hallways, and Going up the Down Stairs. The students (and I) were surprised to
find that “eating and food” was by far the most popular theme identified. It was closely followed by “caught in the act and breaking the rules”. Interestingly, eating was not allowed in the hallways or classrooms so themes sometimes overlapped.

Figure 20 High School Life: A Visual Ethnography: Eating (Student photographers, 2005)
One student, when writing about the popular theme of food, wrote that the project made him realize the importance of the lunch period. Students eating lunch together, he wrote, not only gave them a break from their day but also it was the part of the day when students had the opportunity to socialize and connect to each other. He pointed out in the photos he looked at that during class and in passing periods, students were preoccupied and busy but that during lunch, they were smiling and happy. He saw lunch as the central part of the day, a break from the work of high school.

There were many photographs of students eating outside of the cafeteria, which was not allowed at our school. While the students had fun with all of the photographs of students breaking the rules, they were too numerous not to infer that it was a common occurrence. Many students wrote that they were surprised by how many photos they saw of students breaking rules such as chewing gum, sleeping in class, and talking on cell phones.
It is interesting to compare the students with their heads on their desks with the photos in the US Department of Education Brochure at the beginning of this chapter that asks high schools to raise standards and increase rigor. My students’ photos suggest that maybe we are already asking too much. A New York Times article entitled, “Scientist Says Sleepy Teen-Agers Aren’t Just Tired,”
explains that competitive colleges expect not just challenging course loads with high grades and high test scores, but also extracurricular activities, sports participation, work experience and community service hours.

Figure 22 High School Life: A Visual Ethnography, In Transit (Student photographers, 2005)

Although Jackson students feel fortunate to have matriculated, they also feel enormous pressure to succeed. In addition, Jackson is a selective enrollment magnet school, not a neighborhood school. Many students travel more than an hour each way via public transportation, every day. After tutoring, club meetings, sports practices, and jobs, they often are not able to start homework until late in the evening. They are exhausted.
The photos from the visual ethnography project often revealed the arduous (and perhaps boring) parts of high school. In our culture, we often concentrate on the social aspect of high school life: events like prom, homecoming, and football games, and dating, and friendships. These photographs, all taken within an ordinary school day, could not capture the activities that happen outside of the school day. In that sense, the ethnography did not reveal the high school narrative of film and television. However, like the students who were in the High School USA seminar, when students were asked about the photos and the experience, and when they reflected on upon them, they often framed it through the cultural high school narrative.

A photo of a group girls standing in front of a row of lockers prompted one student to think about the cliques of the high school narrative. She wrote that like the cliques of jocks and geeks, this photo made her think about how these girls, through their similar dress and body language, represented an effort to fit in. Others wrote of finding photos of students being part of a group and those trying to stand out. Many times they used the conventional cliques of the high school narrative to illustrate their meaning.

The high school narrative could be considered a frame of reference, then, that allows students to talk about the experience, either as the acceptance or rejection of that narrative. The visual ethnography and their study of
photography gave the students their own data to look at their high school experience with a new perspective.

As a photography teacher I was able to combine my passion for art and research with the students’ interest in televised media and their own experience of high school. In the next chapters, I present how, in subsequent years, I continued to teach photography while influenced by my study of audience research and current trends in film and television. As technologies evolved the projects evolved in terms of not only the content of the student photos but also the process of taking them. Throughout, the students and I continued to incorporate our shared experience of the American high school into our projects.
5 MASS AUDIENCE, FAN FICTION, AND THE HIGH SCHOOL NARRATIVE

5.1 Fan Fiction

As my colleague’s dangling feet disappeared with the rest of him into the ceiling, I overheard one of our students say, “Oh my god, we have the coolest teachers”.

Our weekly seminar program allowed us to teach courses outside of the traditional school curriculum but it also allowed teachers from different departments to guide multi-disciplinary projects. My friend, Dave, an English and drama teacher, and I created a seminar called Fan Fiction: Veronica Mars Comes to Jackson. The proposed idea was to write a screenplay using the characters from the television teen drama Veronica Mars (2004 –2007), a show about a popular high school girl turned outcast. But the students had a different idea; they wanted to make an unscripted video featuring a variety of characters from their favorite TV shows. One scene, based on the show Prison Break (2005-2009) involved a student escaping from school by crawling through the ducts in the ceiling. Before allowing one of the students to climb up there, Dave wanted to climb up there himself to be sure it was safe.

Fan fiction, taking established characters from existing works and incorporating them into an original narrative, is not a new concept. Consider Wide Sargasso Sea by Jean Rhys, which imagines an original story for the characters of Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre, or John Updike’s Gertrude and
Claudius, based on characters from Shakespeare’s Hamlet. Collaboration and community are the defining characteristics of fan fiction. Writers who post to fan fiction sites are fans writing for other fans. While these sites have proliferated in the age of the Internet, the origins of fan fiction could perhaps be traced all the way back to the 1920s, when fans of Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes’ books published magazines documenting the adventures of Holmes and Watson as if they were real people.

In 1967, devotees of Star Trek (1966-1969) published a magazine called Spocknalia while the television series was still being aired. When the series came to an end, frustrated fans actively started writing of the further adventures of the Enterprise crew. Gene Roddenberry, Star Trek's creator, encouraged these homages. An annual volume of short stories collected from amateur writers, Star Trek: Strange New Worlds, was published from 1998-2007 (Evans 2006). Although the avid fandom of “trekkies” was fairly well known, it was by no means unique to that television series. In the late 1980s, online fan communities began to emerge as ways for audiences to extend the fantasy of television to a parallel universe where characters reside.

Television writers joined in by creating their own websites in which the characters wrote daily Internet journals or blogs. Instead of the fans, the show’s

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writers imagined characters’ lives extended into everyday existence. Fans were able to have conversations with characters by posting comments back to the blogger (Malone, 2006). The feedback writers and producers received from the fans via the immediacy of the Internet sometimes prompted television shows to change the direction of a character’s development and storylines mid-season (Goodman, 2006).

When we created the fan fiction seminar in 2006, I deliberately chose *Veronica Mars*. It had a loyal following of young viewers, in part due to the incorporation of issues relevant to the lives of teens. Veronica solved various mysteries at her high school, ranging from the nefarious rigging of a student council election to more serious issues such as discovering who is outing gay and lesbian students on an anonymous website (imdb.com, retrieved 2007). A February 2007 Google search turned up seventy-nine pages of *Veronica Mars* postings and hundreds of fan sites in five different languages. Ironically, the ratings for *Veronica Mars* the first year were described as “very bad”. However, the relatively small but dedicated fan base, using the Internet as their forum, started an online petition explaining why the show needed more time to attract viewers. The online campaign worked: network executives were convinced, and renewed the show for another season (Goodman, 2006).

Fans have impacted the narrative of ongoing series while the season was in progress. Joss Whedon, writer/creator of another popular teen drama, *Buffy*
the Vampire Slayer (1997-2003), was surprised when online fans noticed sexual tension on the show between Buffy and a younger slayer named Faith. When the show’s writers went back and watched the actresses on screen, they agreed with what viewers observed. They responded by changing their approach to the characters’ relationship to recognize and account for the attraction (Kaveney, 2006). Unlike feature-length films, serial television programming offers time to develop characters over a number of weeks or years. Writers slowly reveal their characters’ inner world. Characters can grow and change, making them relatable to viewers (Evans, 2006).

Veerle Van Steenhuyse describes the viewing of media as a “temporal dimension of immersive reading” that transports the audience into a “transformed universe”. Drawing on the psychological theories of Marie-Laure Ryan and Mihály Csíkszentmihályi, Van Steenhuyse makes the argument that audience members can enter a flow-like state, an altered consciousness (2011). The way viewers interpret television narrative is by mentally including themselves in the plot. This is commonly referred to among researchers as “self-insertion”, the desire to imagine oneself interacting with the characters (Evans 2006).

Although online fan forums have increased opportunities for discourse among and between fans and creators, television was hardly an isolating experience prior to the Internet. When interviewing fans of the prime time soap
opera Dallas\textsuperscript{11} (1978-1991), researchers noted that even when watching the show alone, audiences’ greatest enjoyment came from the ensuing conversations about the plot and character motivations on the morning after with friends, family, and coworkers.

In a focus group participants discussed Dallas’s main character, J.R.

\textit{Reggie: Well, JR certainly doesn’t stand up for the family, he doesn’t stand up for the company, he stands up for himself and, you know, if I was the head of the family and I owned the company, I would do more things that kept the family together than I would that kept everybody apart and fighting and he doesn’t seem to be family-oriented} (Katz, Liebes, Berko 1992).

Viewers create meaning by imagining themselves as a character in the story, relating it to their own personal experiences, and discussing how they would react similarly or differently in the same situation. The advent of home Internet allows for a wider and more diverse social network in which viewers can collaboratively consider their interaction with the narrative.

In fan fiction, the act of blatantly writing oneself into the story is widely known as creating a “Mary Sue”. Mary Sue is not an ordinary character.

\textit{She’s amazingly intelligent, outrageously beautiful, adored by all around her – and absolutely detested by most reading her adventures. She’s Mary Sue, the most reviled character type in media fan fiction. Basically, she’s a character representing the author of the story, an}

\textsuperscript{11} The show was set in Dallas and chronicled the exploits of wealthy Texas oil millionaires. Many of the plots revolved around shady business dealings and dysfunctional family dynamics (imdb.com retrieved 7/6/2015).
avatar, the writer’s projection into an interesting world full of interesting people whom she watches weekly and thinks about daily (Pfleiger 1999).

Although Mary Sue is a term usually reserved to describe an indulgent writing device, the act of simply imagining what it would be like to be a powerful and admired character in a favorite television show is appealing.

For teenagers, inserting themselves into television drama allows them to consider what they might do in various situations and thus to imagine who they might become (Anderson and Cavallaro, 2002). Participating in fan fiction writing takes it further because it is a creative activity. It requires the active synthesis of a media narrative with one’s personal experience.

Audience studies researcher David Gauntlett, in “Creative and Visual Methods for Exploring Identity”, contends that when asking subjects how they might respond to a media message, they generally give instant verbal reactions. However, when asked to create an artifact, the time required to produce it results in a more thoughtful reflection. The artifacts do not have to be writings. Gauntlett contends that the world has become increasingly visual and that respondents often feel more comfortable creating visual representations of their responses (Gauntlett and Peter Holzwarth, 2006). Online fan fiction spaces often include videos, role-playing games, and photographic images (Lave and Wenger, 1991). By guiding these types of projects in the classroom, the teacher can offer
students the opportunity to reflect on their personal interpretations of popular media.

5.2 The Identity Project

I incorporated what I called the Identity Project into my photography curriculum in 2006, 2011, and 2014. I introduced students to two photographers, Cindy Sherman and Nikki S. Lee. Both explore issues of identity through their photographs of themselves. Sherman’s most well known series of work is Film Stills (1977-1980). She constructed generic fictional characters such as housewife, socialite, career woman, prostitute, and lovesick schoolgirl. She changed her identity with clothes, wigs and make-up and thoughtfully selected locations. These were not self-portraits in the traditional sense; they were not photographs of Cindy Sherman but rather roles she was trying on. She depersonalized the resulting images, making them undistinguished, by not titling them. Photos were identified by their gallery catalog numbers (Rogers, 2012).
Figure 23 Cindy Sherman Untitled Film Stills examples, 1977-81

Nikki S. Lee is a Korean born photographer whose work is part photography, part performance. Adopting the clothes, style, and behavior of New York subcultures, she immersed herself in their lifestyle for several days and sometimes months. The identities she assumed included a skateboarder, a lesbian, a Latina, an elderly woman, a Hip Hop girl, and a trailer park resident.
She would ask a friend, a member of the group or a passerby to take her photo resulting in snapshots documenting the experience (Cotter, 1999).

Figure 24 Nikki S Lee Project Series examples, 1999-2001

When I presented the Identity Project to my class, I asked my students to consider how the work of these artists deals with issues of identity, and then asked them to take their own photographs. I did not talk about fan fiction nor did
I instruct my students to become a character from a film or television show. I did not emphasize any particular identity as being more worthy or ambitious to take on. However, I did choose certain photos to show them out of the vast body of work of both artists. I showed images exploring sexuality and race and gender as possibilities students might try. By doing so I gave them permission to explore provocative images that they may have otherwise avoided. One point I did emphasize to students was to try to choose an identity markedly different from their own and to create a sense of place for their alter ego. Like fan fiction writers, they often created a “Mary Sue”: sympathetic, attractive, and powerful.

Figure 25 Student as Career Woman, 2011

As a teenager I don’t find it too difficult to change my identity. I think that I’m still trying to find who I truly am. So while doing this project, it almost felt like an audition. I wanted to try out many different personalities. At first I was doing secretaries and concert-goers, but I didn’t feel as if that was much different from who I already was. Of course I go to concerts, and
I was a secretary for six months...I wanted to embody an image that I wasn't. But I wanted to embody someone that I possibly could become. This result of this was to try and look like a professional women with class and dreams. This is someone I can aspire to be like. Not something completely out of reach but not something directly in my grasp already (Student, 2011).

Despite this student's assertion that she wanted to portray a “professional woman with class and dreams”, she dressed in a tight, short skirt, low-cut blouse and high heels. The sexiness she exhibited in the photograph was counter to the girlish, sporty way she dressed and behaved in school. The attire and posture this student adopted would generally be unacceptable in a real work place but was likely based on a career woman she saw on television. Research indicates that when teens choose role models, they often pick media generated archetypes. As children, they grow up with a limited view of the real world so television characters, and the charismatic actors and actresses who portray them, lead them to believe power and success is linked with physical attractiveness and sexuality (Anderson et al., 2003).

Other students intentionally chose to portray an identity they did not envision for themselves.

I know I will never be a street prostitute; I would never choose that for my future. I place sexuality and respect for one's body in the highest regard. Basically it goes against my principle, but also, it doesn’t fit my personality at all. I'm too shy of a person to dress myself up in a way that will grab people's attention. So, I took a chance and decided to step into the identity of a street prostitute for this assignment to see if I can transform myself into one, if I had the capabilities to step outside of myself (Student, 2011).
In my Identity Project, I attempted to portray a beaten prostitute whose situation had reached such a dismal point that she had reached out to religion for the first time in a very long time. After first receiving this assignment, I was excited to portray a life and sentiment far from anything I’d ever experienced, which was really fun to do with make-up and costuming. In creating this scenario I also hoped to raise the question of repentance and its eligibility requirements.

This was a theme I experienced rather personally during the photo shoot in the church I chose as a scene. Although I had attended services there the Sunday preceding that Monday of the shoot (which took place during a time when no services were underway), the people in the church did not offer me to sign the guest book like they did the family after me. Walking to the church I received many strange looks from people on the street and felt
estranged and ostracized. Although part of this was most likely due to my make-up created bruising and weather-inappropriate skirt. (It was snowing.) I better understood the judgment that automatically accompanies people dressed the way I was at noon on a Monday. It felt strange because in my head this woman had just undergone a terribly sad event that deserved the utmost sympathy” (Student, 2011).

This student chose a character from a narrative she had likely gotten from film or television, called the “tragic hero”, who, because they are flawed (living outside of social norms through prostitution), can never obtain his or her dream (forgiveness) (tvtropes.org 7/9/15). Unlike the student who hoped to one day be a successful career woman, this student was not using the assignment to “try on” the identity of a beaten prostitute. Instead, like Nikki S. Lee, by dressing as a prostitute and going into a public church to take the photographs, she was exploring her own identity - through empathy. She wrote in her artist statement that she wanted to depict tears in her photo because she surmised from the reactions she received from those she encountered “no one could understand the sadness because they couldn’t get past the (my) appearance.”

Lee, when talking about her Project Series, stated that the most important element when assuming a new identity was her interaction with others. In an interview with The Creator’s Project:

....I like to work with the idea of identity and my views toward it. I think the other people were important for me to identify my own identity within the
relationships with those people. In Buddhism there’s a saying that goes something like “I can be someone else and that someone else can be me as well” Thoughts like this one—thoughts that cause you to view yourself in other people’s shoes—were my main focus, so the people play a significant role….. The identity question of myself requires me to look at the relationships with myself and other people. (thecreatorsproject.vice.com retrieved 7/10/15).

Occasionally when choosing an identity, my students depicted those of a different race or ethnicity. Lee explores race specifically in her Hip Hop Project, (Japanese), School Girl Project, and the Hispanic Project.

Figure 27 The Hispanic Project, Nikki S. Lee 1998

As a Latina: “She wears lip-liner, sculpted eyebrows, hoop earrings, and flowing locks of hair piled precariously on her head, and poses impatiently with hand on hip and challenging stare”. Dayna McLeod writes in “Stretching Identity
to Fit: The Many Faces of Nikki S. Lee”. Though, she cannot change her Asian physical characteristics, our ability to see her as Hispanic perhaps says more about the viewer (2004). Lee is purposely drawing on stereotypes. This could be a difficult concept for teenagers to handle respectfully, and few students chose to cross-racial boundaries. But when they did, rather than looking at their classmates or people they knew, once again they turned to representations in the media.

Figure 28 Latina student as Bollywood Actress, 2011

*The identity I chose to represent is an Indian woman of the Bollywood culture (The Indian movie industry). The culture of India*
and Bollywood have always intrigued me. Their clothing, jewelry, and dance style are so intricate and colorful filled with that authentic feel. If I could take a trip anywhere in the world it would have to be India to explore their customs further, but since I can’t do that right now, I thought this would be the perfect opportunity to embrace the beautiful culture by taking a mini-trip to Little India on Devon (Student, 2011).

Figure 29 (Left to right)
Asian student as Soul Sister, 2006; Caucasian Jewish student as Afghani Woman, 2011
Lee states that the identities she adopts are not about race, but about culture. In “SHOPPING WITH -- Nikki S. Lee; Dressing the Part Is Her Art” from the New York Times Style Section, Lee is quoted as saying a large part of preparation for her projects is to shop, eat, go to the gym, or get a manicure at the places frequented by the cultures she joins. “Your hair, your clothes -- people have to choose, and choosing is based on your experience as well as your taste,’ Ms. Lee said. ‘Your whole culture comes out....’” (Hamilton, 2001). Being around a group of people can change where you shop, what you wear, and how you act. This, in turn, affects how others perceive you (Carpenter, 2013).

Many of my students wrote that they chose an identity, in part, because they already had the clothes and props they needed. One girl, who dressed as a 1920s flapper wrote, “...my mom had an extremely appropriate dress for the time period I chose for the assignment, so we thought that I may as well use it” (Student 2014). Another student wrote, “I just used a pair of scrubs that I got from my dad since he is a doctor” (Student, 2011). However the student who chose the Bollywood actress identity intentionally went to the neighborhood where she would find the clothing she needed, further suggesting her interest in the cultural aspects of the identity she had chosen. I had not mentioned the above article in class, but like Lee, my student’s preparation for the photograph became as important as the resulting images.

_The many stores, shops, and restaurants in Little India embody the essence of Indian culture. Here, I bought fabric that was beautifully designed with square patterns and colors of purple, teal, turquoise, and gold. The fabric is_
always cut to be 6 yards to create the traditional sari. The lady at the store taught me the pleats and folds and the way I had to wrap the fabric in order to form the traditional sari (Student, 2012).

Assuming a different race is a growing trend among contemporary artists described in the *New York Times Art Review* as “post-ethnic”. The thought is that in a multi-cultural, assimilated America, we all possess identity traits of a variety of cultures; traits so universal that defining identity in terms of race is obsolete. There is a trend among the new generation of contemporary artists to make art that is “culturally baggage-free”. Ones race can be portrayed with humor or satire, and there are endless possibilities for “self-alteration” (Cotter, 1999).

Correspondingly, in a 2014 *USA Today* article, Greg Toppo writes that today’s students grew up in a world he calls post-racial. “The most racially diverse generation in American history works hard to see race as just another attribute, no more important than the cut of a friend’s clothes or the music she likes.” A student in the article is quoted as saying: "We don’t really care if you’re purple, brown, black — it doesn’t even matter...If you’re a person, you are who you are."

At the same time, a 2012 report called “Race Forward: the Center for Racial Justice Innovation”, found that young people still found race important as it related to education, criminal justice and employment. While today’s teenagers might believe that race does not matter, or perhaps because they believe it does not matter, they feel that “social injustice” is our nation’s biggest problem
(Toppo, 2014). It is not surprising that some of my students were not afraid to deal with identities that represented a different race but at the same time others were cautious to do so.

![Student as 20s Housewife, 2014](image)

In 2014, an interesting trend emerged in the project when several of my students chose identities from a previous time period. The probable explanation (and confirmed in many students artist’s statements) is the current popularity of
historical dramas on television. Critics have attributed the trend to audiences wanting “comfort food”. Shows like *Downton Abbey*\(^\text{12}\) (2010-) and *Mad Men*\(^\text{13}\) (2007-2015) include lavishly built sets and stylish costumes that have inspired recent fashion (Mohn 2013 and Friedman 2015). But wanting to adopt the look may not be the only element to which students were attracted. A CNN reporter posits that *Downton Abbey*, featuring the commonalities between the rich and the poor, appeals to young progressive audiences. “The earl is everything so many of today’s get-tough-with-the-poor politicians are not.” Lord Grantham’s compassion towards his staff, he writes, is inline with Obama’s views on the American social contract (Mills, 2012).

The fascination with the indulgences of the 60s are illustrated in the popular television show *Mad Men* (2007-2015), which depicts smoking and drinking and sexual harassment in the work place as expected behavior. At the same time, characters find it necessary to go to self-destructive lengths to hide what they consider socially devastating: homosexuality and out-of-wedlock pregnancies. When watching these shows, audiences can take pride in knowing how far we have come in terms of health, acceptance of sexual identity, and

\(^{12}\) *Downton Abbey*: Chronicles the lives of the wealthy British Crawley family and their servants, beginning in the years leading up to World War I (imdb.com retrieved 7/7/15).

\(^{13}\) *Mad Men*: A drama about one of New York’s most prestigious ad agencies at the beginning of the 1960s (imdb.com retrieved 7/14/15).
women’s rights (Packer 2009). Teens, in particular, desire to feel as if issues of inequality do not apply to them; they are issues belonging to past generations (Toppo, 2012).

Figure 31 Student as 50s Housewife, 2014

I wanted to take on this identity because I’ve always been interested in the fashion from the 50’s and that lifestyle and thought it would be enjoyable to dress up like another era similar to the current day actresses in shows like Boardwalk Empire... The record player made the scene more believable and put the viewer back into the 50’s decade when it was common for people to be gathered around the record player instead of a TV. I also wore some pearl earrings and a pearl necklace to complete the housewife elegant look. Other props I used were a martini glass to represent my character’s age more clearly and a cigarette that I constructed as well as a glass container top that I used as an ashtray. It was very common in the 50’s for people to
smoke both indoors and outdoors and this action helped to capture the illusion that the picture was capturing a moment, an action and it was caught off guard (Student, 2014).

Figure 32 Student as Gangster, 2014

I chose to represent a thirties gangster like Al Capone... I wanted the viewer to really believe that I was a gangster so I wore the things gangsters wore. I had a few props a cigarette, a briefcase, and a gun. I used a cigarette because smoking is a bad habit and it is usually associated with bad people. I used the cigarette to convey that the gangster was evil. I used a briefcase because briefcases like this are used to carry large sums of money in movies and on TV. Since gangsters had shady and illegal businesses, they had a lot of money that’s why I used the briefcase. I used a gun because many of the gangsters killed people and I wanted to show their crimes in the picture by using the gun (Student, 2014).

Many students, both boys and girls, chose an identity of the opposite gender. This surprised me the first time I gave the assignment, but it persisted
each year with each group of students. Colleagues who viewed the photos often felt that I should not display them for fear the student might be ostracized for the suggestion of homosexuality or gender confusion. However, when asked, the students were very proud of their work and always wanted me to share their photos with the class.

It is interesting to point out that there were several students in my classes who were publicly in same-sex relationships. I also had one transgender student who had recently changed her identity, including her clothing and her name, from female to male. Our school had a large, active LGBTQ chapter, and from my perspective as a teacher, my students felt safe at our school to express their sexuality. The students who chose to cross-dress for this assignment were not the openly gay students or those who appeared to be struggling with their sexuality. In their artist’s statements students usually stated quite casually that they simply chose an identity most opposite from themselves.

Students were only required to assume one identity for this assignment, however I had one student turn in three photos of herself as three different identities. She stated her motivation was “to see how dramatically I could alter my identity”. The images reflect messages she had received about femininity and masculinity: the laughing, confident party girl, the serious, tailored career woman, and the lounging young man looking at a men’s magazine with a sexy woman on the cover.
Figure 33 Female student as *Party Girl, Career Woman, and College Boy*, 2011
Gender swapping appeared to be the only thing these students’ photos had in common. Like other students in the class, they chose a variety of identities generated from the media. They inserted themselves into the story in the same ways: as a Mary Sue, someone they would like to become, as a tragic hero (“drugged-up” drag queen, the abused housewife), or as a character from historical drama such as a paperboy or factory worker.

Figure 34 Male student as Drag Queen, 2014

For this project, I chose to become a drugged-up drag queen. I chose this identity because I really wanted to go for the extreme opposite of who I was. Not only that, but I wanted to show that others that are deemed not “normal” also go through the same struggles that we do—addiction to alcohol, drugs, and the life of the fabulous. Although all of us want to have perfect lives filled with money and joy, in reality we are no better than the ones addicted to substances (Student, 2014).
Figure 35 (Top to bottom) Female student as Male Factory Worker, 2014 (Student digitally placed her own photo into factory); Male student as Abused Housewife, 2011; Female student as Male Paperboy, 2006
5.3 **High School Movie Tagline Project**

High School Movie Taglines was another project I introduced into my classroom in 2012 that capitalized on the students’ interest in fan fiction. Students were asked to create a movie poster with a photograph based on the tagline from a popular teen film. The students worked in groups to create the photograph. For in-school photography projects, I pose complex photography and design problems so that the students can work together to find solutions and learn from each other. I introduced them to the work of Cornelia Hediger, David Hilliard, and David Hockney. All are photographers who use multiple images within their composition to create narrative. This allowed my students to be inspired by a variety of photographers and consider lighting within each individual frame, while also considering design elements such as repetition, perspective, and scale.
Figure 36 Multi-image photograph examples: (Top to bottom, left to right: Cordelia Hediger, David Hilliard, David Hockney)

Since we would be shooting the photographs at school, I gave students a list of films and taglines they could shoot during class, for example, *The Breakfast Club* (1985), about five students serving detention in the school library, *Mean Girls* (2004) in which the new girl in school makes the mistake of falling for the boyfriend of the a girl in the popular crowd, and *High School Musical* (2006), in which two teens discover their love for music (imdb.com, retrieved 7/15/15). However, many of the groups wanted to use their own favorites. Some of the student-chosen films were not set in a high school, so my students created fan fiction by inserting the established characters into high school spaces.

Figure 37 Movie Tagline Project: The laughter. The lovers. The friends. The fights. The talk. The hurt. The jealousy. The passion. The pressure. The real world. (Film: Pretty in Pink 1986) Student photographers, 2011
Figure 38 Movie Tagline Project: Once Upon a Time....Can Happen Anytime (Film: A Cinderella Story 2004) Student photographers, 2011
With the exception of the two groups above who chose the romantic teen films: *Pretty in Pink (1986)* a girl from the wrong side of the tracks must choose between a childhood sweetheart and a popular wealthy student, and *A Cinderella Story (2004)*, a downtrodden teen is excited to meet her Internet beau at the high school dance, every group chose a teen revenge or horror film. (Imdb.com retrieved 7-15-15)

Audience interest in horror predates the cinema; early horror films were screen adaptations of nineteenth century gothic novels such as *Frankenstein* (Shelley), *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (Stevenson), and *Dracula* (Stoker). By the second half of the twentieth century, horror films began to comprise everyday settings. It is the nature of the horror film to capitalize on the audience’s anxieties. Atomic age creatures/monsters resulted from the fear of nuclear war, and zombie movies represented anxiety over societal collapse. In the last 50 years, however, the modern high school has increasingly become the center of terror. Historians credit the high school horror setting to a combination of two things: film producers marketing to the under 25 demographic and secondary education becoming the nearly universal symbol for American’s anxiety-ridden transition from youth to adulthood (Grunzkie, 2015).

It should not be surprising, then, that my students chose horror films such as *Carrie (1976, remakes 2002, 2013)*, the story of a timid girl who exacts revenge through telekinetic powers on classmates who humiliate her at the high school prom. The prom is a popular narrative element in Hollywood films:
Footloose (1984), Pretty in Pink (1986), American Pie (1999), Napoleon Dynamite (2004), and particularly in horror films: Prom Night (1980), Dance of the Dead (2008), Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Next Generation (1994) (imdb.com, retrieved 7/15/15). It is the last social event where teens get to practice at being “all grown-up” in tuxes and fancy dresses. The fear of being excluded from the prom, the fear of fitting in with the right outfit, and the fraught navigation of social hierarchy that is the choosing the prom king and queen epitomizes the anxieties of the high school experience (Gleiberman, 2011).

Figure 39 Movie Tagline Project: Take Carrie to the prom. I dare you. (Film: Carrie 1976 remakes: 2002, 2013) Student photographers, 2011
Carrie is the story of revenge against not only bullies, but the institution of high school itself, where Carrie felt ostracized by nearly everyone. Even the principal cannot remember her name and calls her Cassie. This continues to be a popular theme in high school horror films (Grunzkie, 2015). School shootings in the media, beginning with the Columbine High School shootings in 1999, the deadliest and most televised, fueled the high school narrative of bullies seeking revenge. In reality, the FBI concluded that Columbine’s Klebold and Harris were not, in fact, bullied, but instead were seeking power. They reported Harris, the leader, as a self-aggrandizing psychopath, who saw the high school as a symbol of American life: destroying something so significant would bring him the most attention (Cullen, 2004).
Narratives of empowerment were reflected in most of the films my students chose to depict, again not surprising at a time when teens are inching closer to independence but are still subject to the constraints of the institution of high school. Groups chose *Election*, about an obsessive overachiever determined to become student body president, and *Jennifer's Body*, a fantasy about a high school cheerleader who specializes in killing her male classmates (imdb.com retrieved 7/15/15). A particularly gruesome film about two men who awaken in
a killer’s deadly lair, *Saw*, was chosen by one group who adapted it to the high school locker room. Each of these films examines the use and misuse of power. They were films students enjoyed watching, but they were also films students wanted to *reenact*. They enjoyed dressing up, creating bloody scenes, and assuming the role of the villain and the victimized. Part of the audience appeal of the horror genre is the pleasure of feeling safely scared. Knowing that what is happening is not real.

Figure 41 Movie Tagline Project: *She’s Evil and Not Just High School Evil* (Film: *Jennifer’s Body*, 2009) Student photographers, 2011
Figure 42 Movie Tagline Project: *Yes, There will be blood* (Film: *Saw*, 2004)
Student photographers, 2011
6 TECHNOLOGY, TELEVISION, TEACHING AND LEARNING

6.1 Technology as Lived Experience

The new drawing teacher at our school was in her twenties, just out of college. As we talked about setting expectations in her class, I explained that I thought it was a good idea to have three rules that you can enforce rather than ten rules with which you will inevitably be inconsistent. I asked what were the three things most important to her. One of my rules, for example, was not doing homework for another class while in my photography class. “Even if you finish a project,” I told my students, “I want you doing or thinking about photography for the entire class period. Look up photographers on the Internet to inspire you. Look at some of the art books around the room.”

The drawing teacher took my advice and made three rules. One, she decided, was no smartphones- no checking your email, no texting during class. When she told her students, they were shocked. Most teachers at our school, including me, allowed students to use their phones in class to look up information related to a class activity, or sometimes to listen to music while working on a project. In my class, students might watch a video on their phone to inspire a photograph. The media available on my students’ phones is part of what we do in photography class.

One day as I observed a discussion in a social studies class, a student asked a question the teacher couldn’t answer. In the past, the teacher might have said,
“I will have to get back to you on that.” Instead, he said, “Why don’t you guys look that up on your phones and see if we can find out.” Within minutes the class had an answer that deepened their discussion. Admittedly, access to a phone during class can distract students with the occasional text or email. But most teachers seemed to think the pros outweigh the cons.

In spite of her students’ complaints, the drawing teacher held firm. She explained to her students that she believed that making art was about communication. If students were texting or checking email, or even listening to music, they were participating in another form of communication. During class, she wanted them to communicate only through visual art. I was initially surprised she chose this as a rule. She was not much older than her students, and had grown up in the same technologically rich environment they had. I realized, though, her rule was not much different from mine. I wanted my students thinking about photography and not what they had to get done in another class. She wanted them engaged in the physical aspect of making art with paper and drawing materials. I wanted them to exploit technology to make art. In her class, she felt, using technology distracted them from her goal.

The drawing teacher’s rule was in response to what cognitive psychologists call the Limited Capacity Model of Mediated Message Processing (Lang, 2000). The theory states that watching television, for example, not only uses visual and auditory processing, but also the retrieval of prior information to
follow a story line or plot in both short-term and long-term memory. Several resources are needed. Studies have shown that while driving, for example, listening to music, having a conversation, or glancing at a text message significantly reduces the driver's overall response time (Reed, 2012). According to the theory, taking attention away from any motor activity, whether it is through visual, auditory, or mental processing, diminishes the resources necessary to complete the primary task.

The drawing teacher wanted her students to create complex and meaningful drawings that demand they rely upon several cognitive resources. Current models of effective teaching, such as Charlotte Danielson's, seek mastery of information presented in classrooms by asking students to hypothesize and test theories through discussion or activity (Danielson, 2013). Students are expected to invent and to be creative. Being creative is in itself an additional resource. In the book, *Handbook for Creativity*, the authors emphasize that only when new information is combined with existing understanding to solve a problem or create a product, only then can we create “new intellectual products” (Glover, J., Ronning, R. and Reynolds, C., 1989).

When drawing, students might be asked to record what they see and apply the drawing materials skillfully. They are also asked to tap into prior knowledge of composition and design. At the same time, they might be asked to create an artwork incorporating a theme from art history or popular culture or a
social issue. In a history class, a student may be asked to write a speech incorporating what they know about a famous leader, past history, and current events. Activities like these demand students rely on multiple cognitive resources.

Learning environments that emphasize invention and creativity typically favor a student-centered approach as opposed to a teacher-directed one. Educators recognize student’s interests, abilities, and learning styles in order to inspire them to be motivated, enthusiastic, and collaborative in their learning. Including technologies such as smartphones into the classroom has the potential of being a distraction, but the benefits may outweigh the risks. Students in today’s secondary classrooms grew up with technology. Their lives revolve around rapidly evolving gadgets. They use technology for discovery, innovation, networking, and collaboration (Emeagwali, 2011).

Today’s students’ everyday lives are inextricably connected to the digital world. They are accustomed to “multiple streams of information,” writes Alison Black in Generation Y: Who They Are and How They Learn. “It is an energetic generation in need of constant stimulation and challenge...” The Limited Capacity Model states only a set number of resources can be used at one time, but it also allows that we can switch back and forth between resources. And today’s students appear to be quite adept at doing so. Recent studies of children growing up in our current technologically rich society point to an evolution in
the neural pathways of the brain. They are physiologically different than those of previous generations. They process information differently (Fausto-Sterling 2000). It could be argued that having a phone and glancing at an occasional text is only a momentary distraction for today’s student, no different from a ringing bell, an announcement over the intercom, or the noise from the hallway.

Technology is appealing. It utilizes not only sound and visual graphics, but also quick nuggets of information that potentially lead recipients down a multitude of paths. Students embrace the flexibility and the speed; it has become their learning process. Alison Black writes: “Today’s students simply plunge in and learn through experimentation and active participation. Their learning is nonlinear, epitomized by jumping from one Internet site to another. Instead of reading an entire chapter in a text, they may detour to track an idea or specific information of interest and never return to the starting point” (2010).

My nephews, fourteen and twelve, love to play games. The older one liked board games like Candyland™ when he was little. But the younger one never played board games. He has always had some type of electronic device in his hand. When I visited them, it was hard to pull them away from the video games on their computer, iPad™, phone, or the family television set. I tried to join in. I asked my younger nephew, years ago when he was six, to let me play with him and his handheld video game. He taught me how to play the game. Our conversation went something like this:
“What are the rules?” I asked

“There are no rules,” he said. “See this guy. You are him. You try to get to the castle. You get points for catching these monsters before they get you. If they get you, you lose.”

“How many points do you get?”

“You’ll see when you get the points on the screen.”

“How do you get to the castle?”

“Try this path. If that doesn’t work, try that one. Keep trying until you get the right one. You will get it. Just keep trying.”

That is how my six-year-old nephew learned the game. He kept trying different routes until he “got it”. Years later, this method of learning is how my nephews approach every task. The last time I was at their house, the fourteen-year-old got a new desk for his room. It came in a big box with a lot of parts. He was almost finished putting it together when he went to attach the hutch to the desk. I noticed that the holes for the screws were located so that it would make attaching the hutch and shelves face backwards. When I pointed that out to him, he was confused.

“All of the parts fit together,” he said.

I said, “Yes, but if you look at the directions, you’ll see that the back piece of wood needs to face the other way so that the when you put the hutch on, it will face forward.”

He insisted there was no need to look at the directions. He just kept playing with the parts to see which ones fit together, and everything was
working. The fact that he had reached an obstacle did not seem to bother him. I suggested he take it apart and start over. He left the room and came back moments later with a drill. He made new holes and attached the hutch so it faced forward.

6.2 **Television Programming, Complexity, and Learning**

As technology has become more sophisticated and more entwined in our lives, televised programming has become more complex and more interactive. Steven Johnson writes in *The New York Times Magazine* that television is making us smarter. In his article, he points out that popular shows like *24*\(^{14}\) (2001-2010), *The West Wing*\(^{15}\) (1999-2006), and *ER*\(^{16}\) (1994-2009), utilize multiple characters and story arcs, complicated intellectual concepts, and technical vocabulary, giving viewers a “cognitive workout”. Whereas television shows from the late 60s, like *Dragnet*\(^{17}\) (1967-1979) as an example, had few characters and generally one storyline that began and concluded with every episode. The show *24*, on the other hand, had more than 20 defined characters, each with a unique story woven into one 44-minute episode (Johnson 2005).

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\(^{14}\) *24*: Jack Bauer, Director of Field Ops for the Counter-Terrorist Unit of Los Angeles, races against the clock to subvert terrorist plots and save his nation from ultimate disaster. (imdb.com retrieved 8/5/15).

\(^{15}\) *West Wing*: Inside the lives of staffers in the west wing of the white house. (imdb.com retrieved 8/5/15)

\(^{16}\) *ER*: The work and lives of a group of emergency room doctors in Chicago (imdb.com retrieved 8/5/15).

\(^{17}\) *Dragnet*: Detective Joe Friday and his partners investigate crime in Los Angeles (imdb.com retrieved 8/5/15).
The argument could be made, however, that instead of television making us smarter, a new generation of viewers, raised on technology, are already expert problem solvers. They are able to manage multiple cognitive resources and enjoy the challenge of more complex narratives. Television producers, in order to attract an audience, have had to create programming that meets current tastes and demands. A generation raised on videogames and the Internet like fast-paced television shows with multiple story threads.

A show like 24 cuts frequently to new scenes and sometimes has more than one event occurring within the same picture frame. The limited capacity model would suggest the viewer could not possibly keep track of the storyline considering all of the visual, auditory, and mental processing necessary (Cocciolo, 2005). However, this type of complexity is what today’s viewer wants. They want to be actively engaged. They want to rewind and watch a second and third time to decipher what is happening. The ability to watch an episode over and over on the Internet and discuss and debate the plot lines through online chat rooms makes these shows successful. In fact, it is widely accepted among cultural studies scholars that advancing technologies have not only created an active audience but also have encouraged more sophisticated narrative complexity (Mittell, 2011).
A trend in television programing more obviously influenced by technology and gaming is the reality competition shows such as \textit{Survivor}\textsuperscript{18} (2000-), \textit{American Idol}\textsuperscript{19} (2002-), and \textit{Top Chef}\textsuperscript{20} (2006-). Reality television is not a new idea. Dating back to 1948, \textit{Candid Camera}\textsuperscript{21} (1948-1950) featured real people caught in unusual situations recorded by a hidden camera. What has evolved in the genre is the competition factor. Viewers like the unpredictability. No one knows what will happen, not even the producers (Leopold 2001). Further, television producers have borrowed another subtle device from the video game: the idea that you figure out the game “as you go along”. Just as my nephew taught me his handheld video game by saying “Just keep trying different ways. You’ll get it,” the reality shows producers design the game as the show progresses (Mittell, 2011).

Reality competition shows start out with a group of contestants, not actors, who are put in situations and asked to face challenges. Watching the contestants react to the obstacles they face and choose their path creates the narrative (Johnston, 2005). From week to week, contestants on shows like

\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Survivor}: Contestants are stranded on a remote island with little more than the clothes on their backs (imdb.com retrieved 8/5/15).

\textsuperscript{19} \textit{American Idol}: Singers compete for a recording contract (imdb.com retrieved 8/5/15).

\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Top Chef}: Chefs compete against one another judged by food and wine experts (imdb.com retrieved 8/5/15).

\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Candid Camera} was updated and re-aired with new hosts in 1960-1967, and 1998-2004 (imdb.com retrieved 8/5/15).
Survivor and American Idol don’t know what they will be asked to do. In fact, recently it was leaked that contestants on the singing competition show, The Voice\textsuperscript{22} (2011-), had to sign a document agreeing, “The show can change the rules at any time,” and this is common practice among the reality shows (Kaplan, 2014).

Some hypothesize that the appeal of reality television shows among today’s youth is the human element, watching real-life contestants deal with the challenges they are given (Leopold, 2001). Non-celebrities are relatable, and through social media, many are accessible. Viewers can offer advice and play along with the competitors. When considering the current generation of learners, at first it might appear that they avoid human interaction. Allison Black writes that today’s student prefers isolation when learning; they like to figure it out on their own. She calls them perhaps the most socially isolated generation to date. However, online and through social media, they are eager to participate in discussions and add to the knowledge base. In the digital world, she writes, students love to collaborate (Black 2010).

Today’s students like frequent, quick interactions with content. They are drawn to challenges, and they do so as part of a digital community. The qualities of the reality competition television show, problem solving, speed, and exploiting individuals’ intelligences and skills, are appealing to this generation of

\textsuperscript{22} The Voice: Four famous singers mentor contestants to win a singing competition (imdb.com retrieved 8/5/15).
students. Bringing these types of tasks into the classroom, then, not only correlates with current trends in education that encourage hypothesizing and testing theories, it also satisfies the students’ desire to be resourceful and inventive. At the same time, it takes the collaboration they enjoy in the digital world and brings it to the physical world of the classroom.

One lesson I introduced to students was based on their interest in *Project Runway*, which was in its second season in 2006. The show would typically take contestants, working individually or in groups, to a fabric store with a limited budget to spend on material for an outfit. The look they were to create was based on a particular challenge such as: “design a wedding dress” or “make a uniform for a postal worker”. The very first episode, however, had the contestants make an outfit from items purchased at a grocery store (www.tv.com retrieved 6/28/15).

I introduced my class to artists whose work commented on food-nutrition, marketing and consumption. Students learned of the work of conceptual artists such as Amy Franceschini and the Futurefarmers collective, who use websites, installations, and performance art to comment on social issues such as the environmental benefits of buying from local farmers. They read about the documentary filmmaker Morgan Spurlock, and watched segments of his film, *Super Size Me* (2004). In the film, he makes statements about fast food and health by eating only at McDonalds for thirty days. They also looked at
artists who incorporated food in their art: from the simple studies of light and color of Impressionist and Post Impressionist still lifes, to statements about mass production and advertising reflected in Andy Warhol’s Campbell soup can prints.

Figure 43 Artists food art images: Cezanne, Franceschini, Warhol, and Spurlok

I divided my students into groups and gave them a budget of $2.50. We walked to the grocery store near our school, and they had 15 minutes to make their purchases. When they got back to school, they were allowed to use the computer to do research, and to use any art materials available in the room. At the end of the ninety-minute block period, they had their final works.

Figure 44 Food Art 1 Meat purse, Student artists, 2006

We made a purse out of hamburger meat and photographed it like it was in a fashion magazine. We wanted to point out the hypocrisy of some vegetarians who protest the eating of meat, yet still wear clothes and accessories, like a leather purse, made from animals (Students, 2006).
Fruit can travel many miles before it reaches the consumer, who usually don’t think about where it was grown. Fruit absorbs the CO2 emissions of the vehicle that it is traveling in, which contributes to global warming and affects the freshness of the fruit. This project is a visual representation of the average miles bananas, apples, and oranges travel to reach Chicago (Students, 2006).

Another group of students spent their 15 minutes at the grocery store gathering all of the coupons and ads they could find.
We wanted to make people aware of companies who excessively advertise, prompting consumers to buy their items. We did this by literally throwing food advertisements on (Jackson) students during lunch. In doing this we mimicked America's cooperate advertising companies who throw commercials and advertisements at the unknowing public.

The students not only enjoyed the challenge of working with unusual materials and an innovative concept, but also excelled under the constraint of time. I realized that with other projects, I had given the students several class periods to come up with a concept, make sketches, and formulate their ideas. They would consider some ideas, reject others, and vacillate over which idea was best, afraid that one idea or another might fail. A limited amount of time freed the students to go with their instincts, and it resulted in innovative artwork. Inspired once again by televised media, I began to explore the idea of a one-day art project.
6.3 Puzzle Narratives and One-Day Art Projects

Audience researcher, Jason Mittell writes that across media from video games to film to television there is a popular trend he calls the “puzzle” narrative. The puzzle narrative employs a storyworld in which there is a particular set of rules the viewer must learn and decode in order to solve the mystery. Examples in film include The Matrix\textsuperscript{23} (1999), Memento\textsuperscript{24} (2000), The Usual Suspects\textsuperscript{25} (1995), and The Sixth Sense\textsuperscript{26} (1999), stories in which we are surprised at the very end, when in a series of flashbacks the mystery is revealed. The device is possibly better realized in series television, where there is more time to gain competency. Television shows like The Twilight Zone\textsuperscript{27} (1959-1964 and 2002-2003), Lost\textsuperscript{28} (2004-2010), and Buffy the Vampire Slayer serve as examples. The key to the success of these narratives is that we are fooled,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textit{The Matrix}: A computer hacker learns from mysterious rebels about the true nature of his reality and his role in the war against its controllers (imdb.com retrieved 7/14/15).
\item \textit{Memento}: A man creates a strange system to help him remember things; so he can hunt for the murderer of his wife without his short-term memory loss being an obstacle (imdb.com retrieved 7/14/15).
\item \textit{The Usual Suspects}: A sole survivor tells of the twisty events leading up to a horrific gun battle on a boat, which begin when five criminals meet at a seemingly random police lineup (imdb.com retrieved 7/14/15).
\item \textit{The Sixth Sense}: A boy who communicates with spirits that don’t know they’re dead seeks the help of a disheartened child psychologist (imdb.com retrieved 7/14/15).
\item \textit{The Twilight Zone}: Ordinary people find themselves in extraordinarily astounding situations (imdb.com retrieved 7/14/15).
\item \textit{Lost}: The survivors of a plane crash are forced to work together in order to survive on a seemingly deserted tropical island. (imdb.com retrieved 7/14/15).
\end{itemize}
though the clues were there all along. In today’s culture, we are not as impressed with formulaic story conventions as we are entertained by uncertainty (2011).

Technology-savvy youth prefer inductive reasoning to deductive reasoning (Black 2010). They like that there is the possibility of more than one solution and a variety of ways to reach it. John Dewey wrote, “The disciplined mind takes delight in the problematic.” He goes on to say that intellectual curiosity is about active questioning. Certainty stops the process. Investigation, he contends, makes a productive use of uncertainty and doubt and directs it into inquiry (1925-1929). Students raised on technology find enjoyment in trying to find order out of randomness. In the art world, the Dada movement, which has influenced much of contemporary art, is based on the idea of randomness and play. Dada art embraces the conceptual: the appropriation of found materials and cultural artifacts and techniques such as collage, photomontage, and performance art. These types of projects, in particular, lend themselves well to asking students to question media, cultural narratives, and the world around them.

Artists, in general, are known for a willingness to embrace uncertainty as a way to inspire creativity. When the magazine Art News asked contemporary artists how they come up with ideas to start a new body of work, artist Dona Nelson said her assistant throws pennies on a canvas and draws a line around
them. Presented with a field of dots, Nelson starts connecting them. “It doesn’t have to be good,” she says. “Then I go to work.” Painter John Willenbecher states that he starts with a series of “automatic pen and brush marks with only the vaguest notion of what the finished work might look like”. William Wood adds, “The worst ideas are the ones I’ve planned out” (Gardner, 1998).

Naturally, artists work in different ways. Students must find their own process and method for working. As their art teacher, I introduce them to not only artists and artworks that might inform them, and concepts and narratives that might inspire them, but also ways of working and generating ideas that best fit their learning style. Knowing our current generation of learners favors the challenge of complex narratives, the trial-and-error method of solving problems, and immediate feedback for their efforts, lessons that incorporate these qualities makes sense.

6.4 **One Day Photo Challenges**

The one-day art challenges I have initiated in my classroom, and students have helped me perfect over the years, utilized the technology of computers and smart phones to quickly look up information. They were inspired by the problem solving strategies employed in reality competition television and media puzzle narratives, and they incorporated the concepts of play and chance in contemporary art with roots in Dadaism. These in-class projects involved random prompts, limited materials, and indefinite solutions. Restricting the project’s time frame to one class period freed students from overthinking and
doubting themselves. It also enhanced collaboration, forcing students to rely on each other’s strengths to be successful.

Over the years, as Jackson had founded its traditions and the school culture had become established, current students were less and less interested in exploring the high school narrative through the media. However, because my photo students were often taking photos during class time, the high school remained our location, our backdrop, our “set”. Organically, student photos continued to incorporate themes of the high school narrative. Even if a student activity was not directly referenced in a photo project, the inclusion of the locations around the school made reference to student life.

Spontaneous Sculptures resulted from students dividing into groups of three. Each group drew a random slip of paper from each of two containers. One contained the names of Greek gods and the other high school activities. Students, who were studying backlighting and exposure in class, visually simulated a sculpture by silhouetting one member of the group against a well-lit window. They had 45-50 minutes to research the god they had chosen, use cardboard, tape, and scraps of paper to create props, and take photos against the windows of the school atrium.
The Dada Slogan project was inspired by a website, *The Advertising Slogan Generator*\(^2^9\). At the beginning of the class period, the site was displayed on the screen in the classroom. Then, in groups, students called out an object they saw in the classroom. It was typed into the website, which generated a random advertising slogan. The student team had the rest of the class period to visualize the slogan as a photograph. Although I did not mention Dadaism or high school culture, student photographs often spontaneously incorporated \\

\(^2^9\) The Advertising Slogan Generator: http://thesurrealist.co.uk/slogan (retrieved 8/18/15)
concepts from both. Like the Dada artists whose playful artworks mock traditional art practices and frequently criticize politics and capitalist culture, student photos often referred to school routines such as waiting in line, or poked fun at ironies like the narrow lockers not wide enough to store standard student textbooks.
The slogan generator website:
http://thesurrealist.co.uk/slogan

Come One Come All to Extinguisher

Gotta Lotta Shoe

Figure 48 Dada Slogan Generator Photos
In another project, students, working in teams, blindly chose a miniature toy from a box, which they used to create a photograph of a “miniature world” in one class period. They could add other miniature items from the box or make their own with fabric and paper scraps available in the room. Finally, the students had to incorporate either an architectural element of the school building, items unique to a classroom, or a specific place in the school.

Adding an element from the school furthered the challenge of the assignment but also added to the “reality effect” as I described Chapter 2. Whereas in a television show like *Boston Public*, we might be thrown off if we see a California landmark in the background, here students have fun by purposely imagining their miniature world exists at school. What if we could slide down the staircase railing? The locations and props students chose were reminiscent of earlier projects in which students enjoyed playfully breaking some rules: touching the fire alarm, going into the faculty bathroom, and putting objects in the exhaust hood in the science lab.
Figure 49 Miniature World photos
After several years of one-day project assignments, we decided this past year to hold an event: a double-period class reenacting the reality competition television show, *The Amazing Race*\(^{30}\) (2001- ). Six students from my class planned the event. As one of the students, Jason, put it, when he introduced the project to the class: “It is going to be just like *The Amazing Race* except not as big. Instead of racing around the world, we are just going to, like, race around the school.”

The television show *The Amazing Race* is a version of the scavenger hunt. The teams are sent from location to location where they receive an envelope with a sheet of instructions telling them where to go next. It is up to the team to figure out how to get there. Sometimes they must complete a task before they can move on to the next location. For our Amazing Race, students had to complete a photographic task at each location. The first decision that Jason and the others made was not to use the paper envelopes. They insisted that the next location be *texted* to the teams. Then the teams would be in the location necessary to complete the task. I was skeptical. “Are you going to trade phone numbers with everyone in the class?” They replied that there are apps you can get for your phone so that you do not have to share your phone number. As they explained how it would work, I began to see the genius of it.

\(^{30}\) *The Amazing Race*: Multiple teams race around the globe for $1,000,000 (imdb.com retrieved 8/5/15).
Only one team member would need to have the ability to text. Since the tasks they were given would be on their cameras, it would be impossible to know if the task was completed. So the group decided that each team after completing the task on their camera, would have to take another quick photo with their phone and text it one of the leaders of the event. Then, the leaders would text back the next clue. It seemed a bit complicated, but it worked beautifully.

The tasks Jason and the others came up with were related to technology and, not surprisingly, most of them related to being a high school student. Some required the students to use their cell phone instead of their camera to take the photograph such as. “Take a “selfie”\(^\text{31}\) with a teacher.” At one location, a team member drew a slip of paper from a container. If the paper read “math”, the team would have to find a math teacher who would agree to take a “selfie” with them. Other tasks required free apps that the teams had to download and use in order to take the photograph. Most of the apps the teams needed were simulations of lenses such as a panoramic lens or a fisheye lens that students did not have on the cameras they used for photo class.

The only task I insisted on including for The Amazing Race was a portrait assignment. I had asked students to take portraits for the first in-class assignment at the start of the year. The Amazing Race was the last in-class photo assignment.

\(^{31}\) Selfie: A photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone (www.oxforddictionaries.com retrieved 8/17/15).
project. I wanted to see, and I wanted the students to see, how much they had learned about lighting, exposure, and composition. I went to a thrift store and bought old suitcases. Walt, one of the students in the planning group, helped me fill them with clothing and accessories from the drama department. Each team had to carry the suitcase around to each task. At the last location, students were to open the suitcase, wear every item, and “Take a beautiful portrait.”

I find that when students go back and look at the first images they took at the beginning of the year, they are surprised at the poor quality of the photo they had thought was excellent at the time. Just as my study of curriculum and instruction, audience research, and television narratives changed my teaching in significant but almost imperceptible ways, my students had the opportunity to realize they had, over the year, become skilled photographers.
Figure 50 Amazing Race: process photos, 2015
"Take a selfie with a math teacher"

"Take a photo pressed against the front door window of the school using fisheye lens app"

"Take a panodash picture so a team member is in the photo four times"

Figure 51 Amazing Race: Smartphone photos, 2015

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32 Panodash- Using a panoramic mode on the cell phone, the subject repositions himself in the viewing area as the photographer pans the camera.
Figure 52 Amazing Race: Portrait photos, 2015
7 CONCLUSION

This thesis is a story. What started as an inquiry, ten years ago, into how students in a newly established high school were influenced by the media-inspired cultural narrative of the American high school, turned into a journey of evolving curriculum. It is a teacher's story. And, as I tell you my story of what my students and I questioned, investigated and produced over the years, I frame it within the paradigm of the audience: my students and I as participants to and spectators of technology, television and contemporary culture. I am influenced, no doubt, by the way we have come to use technology in our society, through starts and stops, trial and error, and jumping from idea to idea as something sparks our interests. The story I tell is not always linear and direct.

When talking about fan fiction, I am reminded of artists like Cindy Sherman and Nikki S. Lee, who deal with issues of identity. When I discuss the interactive advancements in television viewing, I am distracted by the idea of the Dada artists who play with randomness and chance. My students prompt me to change the course of my curriculum when they challenge me. For example, the student who said if I did not think they understood what other high schools were like, we should go and find out. And my students surprise me with their interpretations of my assignments when they experiment with race and sexuality and gender. I struggle to conclude my story because what is exciting about teaching is that the development of curriculum and the building of a learning community are messy and repetitive and incomplete.
Sometimes as an art teacher, I will introduce a new project and the students will say, “A landscape? We did that last year.” This always makes me smile. The idea of completing a task and being done with it, the idea that there is no need to revisit an idea and see what more can be accomplished is counter to not only the artistic process (Note Monet’s 250 oil paintings of Water Lilies) but also to the practice of teaching and learning. Dewey writes that true intellectual curiosity does not hurry to conclude, it continues to doubt and question and search. It is restless (1925-1929). I do not say this to shirk my responsibility to write a conclusion, but instead to submit that I cannot pretend to do so. Instead I offer a reflection. I tell you my story in an effort to engage the academic community in a discussion of teaching, instruction, and curriculum. I submit that sharing teacher’s stories can build learning communities, enhance curriculum, and inform educational research as to the everyday life of a classroom.

7.1 Telling stories

It is human nature to look at events, to find patterns and to create a narrative. As human beings we are so drawn to stories that we will look for one even when there is none. A research study involving college students began with showing them random shapes moving across a screen. Only one of the 34 subjects reported he saw “shapes moving across a screen”. The other participants, when asked what they saw, created elaborate narratives. Two big triangles were fighting over the circle, which the students suggested represented a woman. She was “worried”. The little triangles were innocent and young, and the biggest triangle was an aggressive bully (Rose, 2011). We crave stories.
When John and Beth told their friends that they decided to get married during
the commercial break of a late night comedy show, their friends were
disappointed. We like the fantasy; we want a romantic story of an engagement.
In high school, we embrace the popular student narrative of insiders and
outsiders and the fantasy that the underappreciated outcast will eventually be
recognized and admired.

I do not propose that my story falls into the “teacher as hero” genre. In
fact, I am quite aware that my students are often smarter than I am. What I hope
is that I can be wiser. Because I have had more life experience, I have studied and
read and seen things I can share with them. They grew up with cell phones,
video games, social media, and do-it-yourself television; in that arena, they are
the experts. They frequently introduce me to websites, artists, and applications
they discover. But I can offer suggestions as to how they might incorporate them
into their work. For example, a student once showed me an app on her phone
that made short video clips with quick edits. It reminded me of a French film,
Breathless33 (1960), in which the director exploits choppy jump cuts to create
suspense. She viewed that film and was inspired to find others employing
creative and unusual editing techniques. This resulted in her production of
videos that were truly original.

33 Breathless: A small-time thief steals a car and impulsively murders a
policeman. Wanted by authorities unites with an American journalism student
and attempts to persuade her to run away with him to Italy (imdb.com retrieved
8/5/15).
My friend Dave, the English teacher I spoke of earlier, once told me that the best part about teaching was when he introduced students to something they had never seen before. He said, "You know that feeling you get when you read a book or see a movie or hear a concept that you had no idea existed - that excitement you feel - wanting to find out more? As you get older you have seen so many things and you are less likely to be surprised by something new. When you teach, you get to experience that feeling again through your students." He recalled a seminar he taught in which he introduced an obscure but exciting film director he admired. This director’s approach to directing the actors, editing, pacing and tone were very different from what the students were used to watching. Dave started the seminar with the film he thought was the most accessible, featuring a teenage girl in a dangerous relationship with an older boy. The students were captivated. In the weeks that followed, he showed students the director’s more complex and unconventional films. By then, they were already hooked.

Recall Sarah’s story. Her student, Ellen, had accused Sarah of making her “jump through hoops” when asked to read the collection of short stories she had put together. Sarah was hoping Ellen would enjoy her favorite stories as much as Dave’s students liked his favorite films. I wrote that being passionate about your subject area was not enough. A teacher has to model an intellectual curiosity that will motivate students. In the book, *The Passionate Teacher*, Robert Fried might provide further explanation. He writes that school has become a game. The
students’ job is to figure out what the teacher wants and then acquiesce. Ellen’s response that she would do whatever Sarah wanted in order to pass the class acknowledges that game. If Sarah had presented the stories in a different context, the same assignment might have elicited a more favorable response.

If Sarah had talked to Dave instead of to me, he might have given her a different perspective on her interaction with Ellen. Conversations with colleagues can inform teaching practice. When we share stories, we have opportunity to reflect on our own practice. We also participate in what was described earlier as “reality maintenance”. The transformative part of sharing stories is the *telling* (Kubey & Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Psychologists say that it is the telling and retelling of the stories that make the events real (Gopnik, 2012). We need affirmation from others that we are doing well. Telling stories is how we understand ourselves and our work.

7.2  **Teaching, Storytelling, Medium, and Audience**

The stories we tell are shaped by the means we use to transmit them (Rose, 2011). Conversations are immediate. The storyteller has a simple audience who provides instant feedback, affirmation, and also adds additional narratives, thereby expanding the storytellers understanding of the event. As my students and I were planning and completing the projects described here, I was having conversations not only with my colleagues and students but also with my professors at University of Illinois Chicago (UIC). The content and the direction
of the High School USA seminars were guided by the students’ interests but also by the feedback I received when I told stories to others in real-time.

For example, when the students wanted to have a school-wide screening of the television show, *Life as We Know It* in order to take a survey and write to the critics, I had a lot of anxiety about letting them proceed. I told the story to my advisor and he gave me perspective. We discussed the worst thing that could happen. I was a well-respected teacher at the school. I was going through the proper channels. It was unlikely I would be fired. On the other hand, the best thing that could happen was authentic learning for both my students and me.

My seminar students who wanted to have the screening were also telling their stories. Karyn told her English teacher, who was my friend Dave. After listening to her story, he encouraged Karyn to follow through with the screening and survey, giving her advice on how to best present her case to the administration. As Dewey pointed out, in order for true intellectual inquiry to take place, my students and I would have to embrace uncertainty (1925-1929). The ability to tell our stories within a learning community helps us make meaning of what is taking place and gives us the encouragement to move forward.

Stories told in books, periodicals, on television and in film have a mass audience. The producer of the communication and the audience are separated
by time and location. The story’s author makes sense of what is happening by capturing it on film or in words. The reader or viewer makes meaning of the information at another time and place, alone. As a teacher, I can tell you the story of what happened in my classroom, but the way you interpret it and how you act upon it (or not) could vary depending on a variety of factors.

The story and images I provide of the student visual ethnography might inspire teachers, for example, to focus on the way the students and I approached the photography. Taking into account the teacher’s own background and experience in art, photography, curriculum, and instruction, a teacher could create a wide variety of unique lessons. An administrator who reads my story might take note of the exhausted, hungry and stressed students the photographic inquiry revealed, and consider incorporating more time for socialization and relaxation into the school schedule. Educational researchers might consider employing students as field researchers to explore an inquiry that is of interest to them. Gottschall writes that storywriters, using words to create an image, are often compared to artists painting a picture. He argues that the written story is more like a drawing than a painting. The narrative is an outline that the reader, in another time and place, fills in with color to create their own interpretation (2012).

Finally, stories can be told through digital media and the Internet. Teacher stories told through websites, blogs, social media, chat rooms, and
texting add new layers to storytelling. The reader experience is interactive in that he or she can click links and move through the story at his or her own speed, in any order, customizing the experience and creating a unique narrative. And even though the author is physically separated from the reader by time and location as in a mass audience, the Internet can also function as a simple audience. It allows for immediate communication and evolution of the story through back and forth posting, commenting, and live chat.

In the *Art of Immersion: Why do We Tell Stories*, Rose writes:

*Then, just as we’d gotten used to consuming sequential narratives in a carefully prescribed, point-by-point fashion, came the Internet. The Internet is the first medium that can act like all media — it can be text, or audio or video, or all of the above. It’s nonlinear, thanks to the World Wide Web and the revolutionary convention of hyperlinking. It’s inherently participatory — not just interactive, in the sense that it responds to your commands, but an instigator constantly encouraging you to comment, to contribute, to join in.*

*And it is immersive — meaning that you can use it to drill down as deeply as you like about anything you want to know about.*

The Internet is a powerful storytelling tool for teachers. I communicate with my students through a class blog. I have all of my lessons posted, the schedule and due dates, troubleshooting guide if students are having trouble with an assignment, suggested links for ideas, and more. Students can search at their leisure to get the information they want. Every day the site changes telling a different story to students and their families about what is happening in class.
I also share my stories with teachers around the world in digital presentations and via the Internet. My colleague, Matt, a drawing and painting teacher at another public high school, joins me on our One Shot Sure Shot site. It features the one-day art projects based on reality competition television, puzzle narratives and Dadaism. At The National Art Education Conferences and professional development in-services across the country to which we have been
invited, we present the projects and tell stories about our successes and failures. We talk about the process in which we devise the lessons in order to inspire teachers to come up with their own one-day lessons. Having an audience in front of us makes for an interactive conversation in which we can actively discuss the benefits of our lessons in the classroom. However, it is through the Internet that we reach the most teachers. Since we started the site in 2010, we have had nearly 40,000 visitors to view our lessons as of this writing.

Figure 54 One Shot Sure Shot website/blog screenshot captured 8/15/15
Shadows From Outer Space

* Phyllis Burstein

with students at

Chicago College Prep,

Challenge:
Students make cardboard shapes and cut-outs in order to create shadows to photograph.

Materials: digital camera, cardboard, scissors, (Optional—utility knives, tape)

Process:
* Students are given a theme such as outer space. After brainstorming, they make cardboard cut-outs of objects and beings, 6"-12" in circumference.
* Students form small and/or large groups to create shadows with their cut-outs against walls and other surfaces.
* One student or the teacher photographs the scenes created with the shadows.

Lesson Expansion:
* Students can go outside or create shadows inside using bare light bulbs, flashlights, or flashlight app on a cell phone.
* A variety of prompts could be used to create scenes. Consider ways to reinforce a lesson (like a science lesson about leaf shapes or animals) or promote a school event such as a school dance or sports competition.

Figure 55 One Shot Sure Shot sample lesson and blog statistics screenshots captured 8/15/15
By sharing our stories, Matt and I can potentially enhance the teaching curriculum in other art classrooms, but we also do it to enrich our own practice. We are excited by the possibility that other teachers and students, modifying the one-day lessons to meet their own needs, will expand on our ideas. The Internet provides an ideal forum for that exchange. Teachers around the country have shared examples of our projects implemented in their classrooms. In one example, an art teacher in Iowa posted on her Facebook a project she had executed with her students. I saw the photos because she had referenced me with a link. I showed my students how this teacher and her students had been inspired by their work. (See the panodash photos displayed in chapter 6.) Her students added a twist, a narrative element to their panoramic photos. My students loved their images and wanted to try the project again. Their resulting photographs were more sophisticated and imaginative than our original project.

This is one of the stories I tell teachers at our presentation. The potential of the Internet to allow for a sharing of information between teachers and classrooms is limitless.
Figure 56 Facebook post captured 8/18/15
7.3 **Teacher Stories and Educational Research**

*Because you have seen something doesn’t mean you can explain it. Differing interpretations will always abound, even when good minds come to bear. The kernel of indisputable information is a dot in space; interpretations grow out of the desire to make this point a line, to give it direction. The directions in which it can be sent, the uses to which it can be put by a culturally, professionally, and geographically diverse society are almost without limit. The possibilities make good scientists chary.*

- Barry López, *Arctic Dreams: Imagination and Desire in a Northern Landscape*

When introduced to contemporary audience research, I was drawn to the notion that the researchers, rather than simply looking at a community as an outsider, proposed to examine the audience through the eyes of its participants. It does so by uncovering, analyzing, interpreting, and presenting the thoughts of the audience, often through interviews and participatory conversations (Reason, 2015). In order to better understand the audience, these researchers have gone into teenagers’ bedrooms (Steele and Brown, 1995), joined families in their living rooms for television viewing nights (Katz, Liebes et al., 1992), followed viewer posts on fan fiction sites (Malone, 2006), personal blogs and social media sites (Lave and Wenger, 1991), asked research participants to create artworks (Gauntlett and Holzwarth, 2006), and observed teachers in classrooms and using technology (Prensky, 2005/2006). Patrick James, a researcher and filmmaker interviewed a number of teachers, asking them to tell their stories. He suggests that film can transcend the interview and the text. The camera’s eye, he hopes, can capture the truth. But he admits:
...with each telling and retelling it becomes performance, with participants becoming performers, however, the researcher (re)performs their stories. In the film I try not to perform the other’s story; I try to listen authentically, inviting participants to tell their stories through the filmed interview. However, doesn’t my editing and “framing” influence the other’s story? (2008)

When I began this research, I was interested in examining what was happening at Jackson. I was aware that starting a new school was a unique experience that I could share. Concurrently starting my doctoral studies, building a photography program, and being thrown into the media spotlight were all elements that further influenced my teaching practice. As I recorded and reflected on what was happening in my classroom with my students, I realized what I was doing was documenting my own journey. I was the participant in and the spectator of a teacher’s story. This research is the story of my students and my classroom but it is also mine.

Although teacher stories are not widely found in education research, their importance is well noted. In the book, Teacher Lore: Living from Our Own Experience:

In the Teacher Lore Project, we specifically wanted to know more about what reflective teachers have learned from their experiences. We are convinced that this should be a greater source of insight and understanding for those who seek to become teachers and for those who strive to be better teachers.

They include three approaches: teachers telling their own stories, telling the stories of “teaching experiences”, and “commenting on and interpreting other teachers’ perspectives”. They write: “We remain convinced that conscientious
teachers reflect seriously on their work. They think and feel carefully about what they do and why they do it.” (1992).

There is no question that looking at the way teachers go about planning their classroom curriculum, and the way they interact and produce classroom products with their students, is important to the field of education. And not all teachers have the ability or the desire or the time to write down these stories. After all, the most dedicated teachers I know have built their lives around their students with little time for anything else.

I began this section with a quote from Barry Lopez, a nature writer. Although he makes no assertion to be a researcher or a scientist, I suggest that he is both. His writings about the Arctic educate the reader about the region and allow us to see, hear, smell, and feel a place. He offers what New York Times book reviewer, Edward Hoaglan, writes is a “talent for close observation, empathy, freshness and wonder” (1986). Lopez writes, “Because you have seen something doesn’t mean you can explain it.” He admits he can only give us one interpretation “The kernel of indisputable information is a dot in space” and that when doing so, “there is a desire to make this point a line, to give it direction” (1986). This reminds me of our desire to turn our experiences into narratives, to give them direction, our desire to tell stories and affirm what we know to be true.
There is no doubt that Lopez is a storyteller. He writes that he purposely stays out of the debate of politics and conservationists over the Arctic region. “I’m not qualified to dig into the political issues…. I want to elucidate a sense of place and the feelings of the human beings who are there.” (1986). His writing, though, is significant to our understanding of environment and science. Through his observations, he suggests we study animal behavior through a paradigm of human behavior; an idea once shunned by scientists but now generally accepted. By telling his story, providing his own reflections and insights about being there, unencumbered by the paradigms of science and research, he deepens our understanding and contributes to the intellectual knowledge base.

Through this dissertation, I venture to tell my story within a new venue for me, one of academic research. I present my school, my students, and the images we created together. I show my process as a teacher and a writer and implementer of curriculum. I offer it to the existing body of educational research as an example of how teachers might combine their passion for teaching and learning and for refection and research to create unique learning experiences for students.
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