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Documenting What's on the Shelf: Framing Educators' Identities

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DOCUMENTING WHAT'S ON THE SHELF: FRAMING EDUCATORS' IDENTITIES

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Abstract: *During the beginning of an online class in a teacher education program, an exchange about a holiday and the associated family traditions prompted the author to share the haphazard pieces of her family's lives as they were framed through the screen. Favouring the frameworks of New Literacy Studies and New Literacies, this essay showcases the connections made between what is on our shelves when teaching, while in dialogue with a fellow educator. As dialogic partners we contemplate what Pahl and Rowsell (2020) share through living literacies, what literacies and identities could be among the complexities of influencing semiotic factors. While exploring the social practices of everyday life we see our changing roles through the multimodal and multifaceted ways we frame ourselves as educators. This visual essay explores "what's on the shelf", how shelfies and identities intersect, and the everyday life of the shelf through the frame of the screen.*

Keywords: *shelfies, dialogic partners, educator identities, digital spaces, semiotics, pandemic pedagogy*

> "Can you show us your Christmas tree?"
> "Yes, will you?"
> "Which room is your tree in?'
> "Which ornament is your favourite?"

This exchange occurred near the end of term in Fall, 2020, a term of virtual teaching and learning with teacher candidates in their first semester in a pre-service Education program in Ontario, Canada. During one of my literacy courses we were taking time to chat about our own lives, and what the upcoming holiday break might entail. I had mentioned that my family celebrates Christmas and we had just pulled out all our Christmas decorations and put up our tree. As my teacher candidates asked to see the tree, in another room from my at-home office, I paused.

Figure 1: Bearded men ornaments. Found at a shop of handmade items in Vancouver, BC, I bought these curious little ornaments for my boys. Knowing that they always brought a smile to our faces, I thought they would be perfect to share.

Figure 2: Handmade ceramic Christmas tree ornament. This little tree was made by my Mom when she discovered ceramic creating. Such mementos were often shared in the hope to spark further narratives during synchronous class-time.

As I walked my laptop over to show the teacher candidates my family's Christmas decorations, I looked around at the haphazard pieces of my family's lives that were also framed through our on-screen class. My students were already invited into my home through our video-conferencing platform, where they were privy to my make-shift office, and the occasional appearances of members of my family, including the cat who imagines herself as a zoom star. Was I fine with sharing more of where I live? This is surely a question we all face, including our students, as we transform the way we work and live during this global upheaval.

Amidst the handmade, home-made, and store bought ornaments, I did share these pieces of my family story. And, some of my teacher candidates shared pieces of their lives too as family members, pets, and home renovations found themselves framed in our screens. Through our interactions, our social practices, we created a sustaining hub – a digital place of learning, teaching, sharing, a fluid space – one intentionally named a *kibbitz* by Remi, a teacher candidate, as we became more acquainted with each other while engaging with course work. This locality of our kibbitz, our virtual neighbourhood (Appadurai, 1996) "reveal the entanglements of people and matter" (Pahl & Rowsell, 2020, p. 27).

Situating these images and understandings, this work considers Actor Network Theory (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010; Heydon, 2013; Latour, 1996, 2005) as it showcases the complexity of influencing factors between people and materials, while learning in fluid spaces. I consider how we, the teacher candidates, and my dialogic friend interact, and intervene with each other through material semiotics as I explore 'what's on the shelf', how shelfies and identities intersect, and the everyday life of the shelf through the frame of the screen.

Figure 3: Books & an owl. The shelves glimpsed through the screen are full of books and small items. Here a wise owl on a pine cone is surrounded with books by Neil Gaiman, Irish faerytales, and other works of fiction. Be wise, or, as Gaiman shares in *Art Matters* (2018), at least pretend. Besides, "the world always seems brighter when you've just made something that wasn't there before" (Gaiman, n.p.).

Favouring the frameworks of New Literacy Studies (Pahl & Rowsell, 2012) and New Literacies (Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear, & Leu, 2008; Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, Castek, and Henry, 2013), narratives and images showcase the connections made between the texts and objects on my shelves when teaching and while in dialogue (Bakhtin, 1981) with a fellow educator, Shannon. Together, as dialogic partners, we contemplate what Pahl and Rowsell (2020) share through *living literacies*, the seeing, disrupting, hoping, knowing, creating, and making of what literacies and identities could be. Thinking about the books on my shelves, Shannon remarked: "I wonder if we may have similar tastes in literature to spark a conversation. Books are something I can often begin conversations with, so I may really try to see some of the titles in an attempt to feel less awkward in discussion."

Figure 4: Books, a truffula tree, and decorated pots. In the promise of a library space, decorated pots, including one with a *truffula* tree created by one of my boys, adorn this shelf in front of books from a bygone era. Titles include A.A. Milne's *Winnie-the-Pooh* (1926), and a regaling book on *How Paris Amuses Itself* (1903) by F. Berkeley Smith. All have been lovingly passed down, sparking interest with each new owner. As an educator, each class is often intertwined with texts, sometimes taken directly from these shelves.

Shannon is an educator, focusing on Communications, who also has a collection of books to draw from during teaching. "I can be very purposeful in what shows on camera. I have situated things so that the lens really focuses on me, the plants and turtle art behind me. Just out of sight (below the camera) on the floor, there are usually piles of books. Books I want to read, books from the library for my daughter, books I am using to create new courses."

Figure 5: Shannon's office. Shannon also had conversations with her students around what was framed through the digital lens: "Students have noticed the turtle art and mentioned them. We have discussed that turtles represent a message of 'slow down' to me."

Disrupting assumptions about who we are as educators and letting our students into our lives was a focal point during our exchange. We both shared stories about our cats making surprise appearances in our virtual classrooms, often sparking commentaries about the pets living our students' homes. As we talked about our students 'seeing' into our lives we both want to be relatable, but we also both check what's behind us before beginning class. As Shannon said, "I check the camera to see what they can see and I move all the 'mess' (which is my real life!)." Shannon "prepares the stage and the character of what I think a professor should look like. It's a challenging dichotomy of how I see myself and how I want my students to see me… I film my walking and talking (lecture) videos in outdoor areas around our region and my students will

sometimes ask if I live near a certain location. That's not something I am comfortable with them knowing. I wish I didn't care and could feel comfortable chatting with them about local spots we all like."

Figure 6: Changes in desk scenery. With everyone working, schooling, and living in the same space, my office area altered from the Fall of 2020 to Spring of 2021. Behind me now sits an old china cabinet, which originally housed books, topped with Blue Mountain ceramic bowls, an odd clock, a painting of Yoda by my youngest child, and a box. The box contains hair fasteners from the 1950s, complete with feathers and silk flowers. Strangely, the teacher candidates never asked about the box.

Figure 7: But Shannon wanted to know, "what is in that hat box?".

While exploring the social practices of everyday life we see our changing roles through the multimodal and multifaceted ways we frame ourselves as educators. Our entangled personal boundaries have become more evident in online spaces (Merchant, 2008, 2020). Objects set upon shelves become part of conversations and often entice more stories about related items, such as requesting the title of a book on a shelf or what is in a box.

Inquiries into how our shelves are framed disrupt our everyday lives, and our teaching and learning lives. These dialogic moments also make space for new relationship building, creating a more knowing community. In *Figure 8* we are included in an inviting "What if…?", to consider any surprises in uncovering what our identities as educators entail (Pahl & Rowsell, 2020, p. 127). As we engage with each other through the frame of the screen, in relation to what's on our shelves, the interlaced stories of what we imagine and make furthers our own understandings about our identities as educators in virtual spaces.
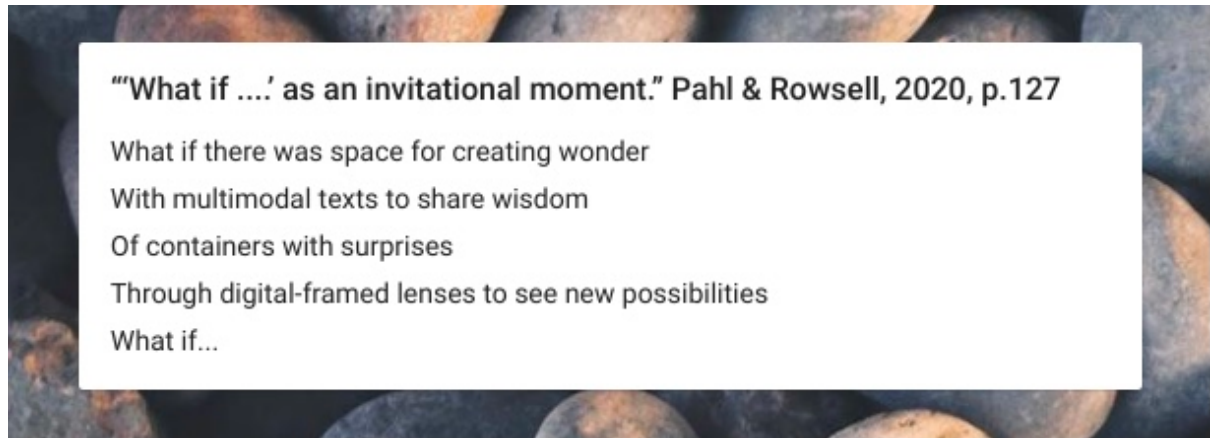
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Figure 8: What if? poetry. Consider Kate Pahl & Jennifer Rowsell's invitation, and Linda Christensen's work with Adrienne Rich's essay, through *Padlet*, a digital sharing platform. Add to the discussion by designing and sharing a poem at https://padlet.com/litteachjones/whatifshelfies

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