Pursuing Education as Liberating Practice

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Introduction

I am writing this thesis to explore the ways school has failed me, but education has liberated me (Suli Breaks, 2012). I want to change the narrative that people are stupid or worthless because they don’t succeed in a traditional schooling system based largely on measuring success through standardized testing, rather than authentic learning. People’s lives can be changed with authentic learning, inside which there must be connection and relationship building, often leading to healing, creativity, and hope. In this paper, I want to show how you can take an unconventional route in a prestigious higher education setting as a first-generation, low-income college student and have a fulfilling educational experience that prepares you for a dynamic, fluid, always-changing, complicated world of education, social, and non-profit work. Additionally, I want to show the legitimacy of non-traditional, out-of-school-based educational spaces as equally important to traditional, classroom-based educational spaces.

Traditional teacher-student hierarchies, an over-emphasis on production equating to quality education, and strict testing standards cause difficulties in fostering authentic relationships between teachers and students, as well as students and their learning environments. As such, relationships become transactional, teachers become burnt out and feel insignificant or useless, and students learn how to academically perform for their educational system but come away retaining very little information. If failure in your educational system means you may not pass your class, lose your spot on a sports team or upset your parents or teachers, or further down the line may result in a transcript that doesn’t allow you to get into colleges that will provide you with the resources you need to move
forward in life, why would you ever try to do anything other than learn how to work the system? On paper, this results in people labeled “smart” if they successfully learn to work the system, but what about the students who are left with big ideas and desires to explore them more, but with no one to encourage them to do so, or guide them on how to start? Education is such a powerful tool. It can be a promise for a better future, used to foster hope, to oppress people, and to liberate them.

In the next section, I introduce my own experiences with, and thoughts on, education functioning in these different ways. I ground these in a revisiting of a book by Brené Brown that had a profound effect on me, and I introduce the four frames within which I explore the phases of my education: as promise, as oppression, as hope, and as liberation.

**Brené Brown—*Braving the Wilderness***

Before entering the Bi-Co, I read a book called *Braving the Wilderness: The Courage to Stand Alone*. I was absolutely enamored with this book for many reasons. Brown uses soft, kind words spoken with an internal strength and unshakable confidence that I desperately wanted to possess. This book has gone with me to more places than I can count: plane rides, sleepovers, summer camp, my first out-of-country adventure, just to name a few. There was something powerful to me about having that book with me when I went on a new adventure, even if I never opened its cover.

Sophomore year, I took a course in feminist philosophy, and we created a “feminist toolkit.” This toolkit was supposed to contain five items we would take with us to engage in effective feminist advocacy work. I chose this book as one of them because of the power it
holds for me. I believe this project helped further convince me I could create my own “toolkit” to engage in reflective, authentic, slow social justice and education work that would be meaningful and manageable for me. This project, among other things, inspired me to create an independent major through which I could apply what I learned more easily in jobs in the future because I created the path for myself, supported myself, and affirmed I can do hard things.

Brown’s first chapter, “Everywhere and Nowhere,” includes a quote from Maya Angelou: “You are only free when you realize you belong no place — you belong every place—no place at all. The price is high. The reward is great” (Brown, 2017, p. 5). I remember feeling so confused, but also put at ease, every time I read this quote. Originally, I thought it was impossible to live something like this out because I had been taught to find people and places wherever life takes me to help me belong; I had no idea what it meant to belong everywhere and nowhere, to belong to myself.

Additionally, Brown states: “Perception is a function of experience” (2017, p. 15). This is crucial in understanding my experience with my independent major, and how the experience itself, not just the content taught in my classes, helped reshape my perception of what quality education is. My first two experiences with education, as promise and oppression, describe my perception of education before experiencing my independent major. After experiencing it, my perception of education is best described through education as hope and liberation.

One practice Brown uses as she learns how to “belong to [her]self” is writing herself permission slips” (2017, p. 21). The idea came from permission slips she would write her daughter for school; she realized she could write small permission slips to herself to do something she desperately wanted to do but was too afraid to explore because of deeply held
critical habits and beliefs. Looking back at the process of developing and pursuing my major, I see that my major proposal was the first permission slip I wrote to myself in my ongoing attempt at breaking down, unlearning, and redefining what quality education means to me. Remembering that my proposal was accepted on the first round, a rare occurrence at Haverford, affirms this permission I gave myself to forge a meaningful path through Haverford. Opening my thesis with discussion of a book that has shaped my personally held beliefs, and given me the confidence to pursue an independent major and related thesis, is my most recent “permission slip” to myself. This one gives me permission to keep allowing what matters most to me to play a starring role in the things I spend the most time on. It is a permission slip to push back against creating a thesis that looks, includes, or functions in a way that fits pre-created institutional expectations, and to instead create something that is meaningful and generative to my next life endeavor.

**Personal Narrative**

**Education as Promise**

I was going through old boxes of school projects recently when I came across one of those “moment in time” projects they make you do every year in grade school; you know, the ones where they ask, “Right now, what’s your favorite color? Your favorite TV show? School subject? etc.” I was surprised when glancing at one of these old projects to see in colorful, messy handwriting, the word “Art” next to “Favorite school subject.” I chuckled to myself thinking how silly I was to say art was my favorite when there were so many other school subjects that were more important—ones I would need to get better at to succeed in school.
Then, I paused. Who had told me what I enjoyed learning and exploring in school had to serve an additional purpose of helping me succeed in school? Furthermore, how could my interest in art have been encouraged to develop skills of critical thinking, measured risk-taking, literary analysis, or creativity?

From a young age, I have done very well in school. In first grade I was permitted to read chapter books for homework because I had already flown through our simple story books. This led to me being allowed to visit the middle-school library in elementary school and the high-school library in middle school, and it led to my feeling stuck in high school. Reading was my passion project, and as long as there was a more difficult book for my young eyes to devour, I felt valid and secure in my academic path. Even though school had taught me to ignore my creativity and fit into a pre-established box, I always had the choice of higher-level, fantasy-laden books—my creative escape of choice. However, eventually I ran out of books of interest that matched my 12.9+ reading level, so I went back to the 8th-10th grade reading level books (at this point I was around 7th or 8th grade), but I was quickly told I should start reading other genres that matched that reading level.

There are two ways “promise” is functioning here. One, there is a promise I discerned from my school that if I follow their lead, do what I am supposed to do, and not ask too many questions, I will be successful. This promise showed up in high-level report cards, perfect scores on exams, and teachers consistently telling me, “You’re going to get an amazing scholarship to college, no doubt about it.” College was painted as the golden ticket; I was convinced that chasing after this promise meant I would have the chance to leave my current circumstances and attend a college where everything would magically be okay—all because I was smart. Two,
there is a promise I found in my own academic exploration—a promise of new ideas, new experiences, and the chance at a more fulfilling life. Teachers excitedly telling me I was reading “beyond” my level encouraged me to keep exploring, eager to discover what other ideas books had to offer me. The more I found subjects and materials that interested me, the more that promise started to feel like a real thing. I realized that there were countless opportunities for exploration in my future life; I just had to figure out a way to get to them and find people willing to help me in these pursuits.

Education as Oppression

Just like in 4th grade art class, my creative aspirations were being evaluated according to standardized notions of what was appropriate and didn’t require any extra effort or support. What I realized was that my school was fine with allowing me to explore openly and creatively as long as it was convenient for them and made them look good. Instead of encouraging me to continue exploring the genres I was interested in, perhaps adding more creative writing, supplemental theoretical works, and/or looking for a way to purchase books within that genre that I was interested in, they told me to read dense, classical works purely because they were “higher level.” This may have been an appropriate path of intensified study in their minds, and with the states of knowledge and reflection I had at the time, I believed they were what learning was supposed to be as well. However, looking back now, I realize I did not get much out of this. Instead, these learning practices slowly squashed my creativity and love for learning.

In high school, around grade 9, I realized I didn’t have another goal to reach for within my institution’s pre-created structures and resources, and I had no idea what my next goal
should or could be. I was taking AP-level classes and doubling up on math, and what I realized was that I would run out of classes to take by my junior year. I then decided to apply to a boarding school called The Indiana Academy for Science, Mathematics, and Humanities in Muncie, Indiana. The boarding school is publicly funded, with generous financial aid for living expenses while there, so my grandmother and mother were able to send my brother and me there for our last two years of high school. While there, I had access to a large variety of interesting academic topics, including utopian literature, literature of the Holocaust, creative writing, poetry, and women’s literature. However, what I took away from there the most was that to be academically successful, I had to be willing to run myself into the ground and produce textually grounded material to the point of feeling like a printing press. My teachers at the academy always told us that college would feel easier because of our time at the academy, and they weren’t wrong. However, while I learned a lot at the academy, the negative effects I experienced and carried forward from the intensive academic structure left me feeling burnt out before college even began.

As such, my first semester of college was anxiety ridden, and I had trouble completing simple writing assignments because I would overthink every single prompt, trying to find a way to exceed expectations and receive high-level grades. After my first semester, something felt off. COVID hit the second semester of my first year, and with that, my professors began to radically adjust their expectations for student performance. Policies like class attendance, page lengths, intensive research projects, etc. all became unimportant in the face of a large health risk. Students and teachers all took stock of the energy and resources we had around us,
learned how to communicate needs, advocate for what wasn’t being provided, and let whatever we ended up creating be enough.

So, what’s the difference between peak COVID-pandemic and my current life? Well, in some ways, a lot of things, but in others, absolutely nothing; the main difference is that during COVID, the whole world agreed that there was a large health-risk we needed to prioritize, and in doing so, learn how to protect our energy to complete the most important things. Now peak-COVID era has passed, although COVID remains a health threat, and I still have my autoimmune disease. However, I don’t have the whole world in agreement that pursuing a higher-education degree while battling my own health risks warrants an allowance to slow down, reprioritize, and protect my energy. Instead, I am back to feeling many aspects of my schooling as oppressive, like when I was at The Indiana Academy for Science, Mathematics, and Humanities.

The emergence of COVID during my college education impacted every part of my life, as well as the lives of my peers and professors. Long-used, traditional educational practices no longer worked for the state of crisis we all found ourselves in. As such, we had to reimagine what education could be. The most common change we saw was a switch to virtual learning platforms, especially “Zoom.” Virtual classrooms became ‘the norm’ to protect us all from a rapidly spreading virus that threatened our lives, and most people agreed it was better to share ideas virtually, rather than not share them at all. However, this switch did result in a lot of transition pains as we slowly learned how to move away from learning environments we were accustomed to and towards learning environments that protected our health and wellbeing. What we learned during this process is what is possible regarding education accessibility when everyone needs it to keep the world running.
These accessibility measures may have been frustrating for some people because the change of engagement methods made learning feel less accessible/more energy consuming. That is completely valid—‘Zoom fatigue’ is real! In addition to these feelings of frustration, there were also feelings of elation from the disability community. People who were previously unable to attend in-person events due to physical, energy, or other limitations were now able to click a few buttons and have a new wealth of information and experiences at their disposal. People whose ideas were once left out of discussions, or seen as ‘add-ons’ to the main speakers attending the in-person event, were now taken as seriously as everyone else. There was no more, “This person cannot attend due to health limitations, but they would like to share [insert idea].” Instead, ‘that person’ was able to personally share their ideas—adding appropriate intonation, pauses, emphasis, etc. to convey their messages exactly as they want them conveyed.

Additionally, mental health concerns, looking out for each other’s wellbeing, protecting your energy, a general *slowing down*, and a push back against educational experiences of *urgency* became common practice. Why is that? We were all figuring out how to live with the threat of an incurable virus—one that threatened our lives—so we gave each other grace. However, now that peak COVID-era has passed, these additional accessibility measures are starting to go away. The measures are being marketed as temporary, and now that our lives are, mostly, no longer endangered by COVID, those temporary measures are leaving. I agree that in-person engagements are important, but we should not ignore the extensive array of voices of people who were able to live their lives more safely and fully because of these added accessibility measures. If we take them away completely, we are taking away opportunities for
people who rely on accessibility measures to continue their educational, professional, and holistic growth. Since we have seen firsthand the success of added accessible educational measures, taking them away only benefits the comfort and priorities of able-bodied people.

When I realized fitting myself into a pre-established major would mean subjecting myself to the policies and curriculum of a department that was not created with my health condition or identity in mind, I designed my own program. People kept trying to tell me there were other ways to pursue my interest in education without the need for a completely new major and course of study. That is true. However, and this might seem counterintuitive, the topic of study was never the main point. The point was the freedom to design my own educational experience—deconstructing what I thought education was, back when I thought education only existed within the confines of a school— and fall back in love with learning for the sake of inspiring and liberating myself.

At the beginning of my first year of college, I believed I would eventually declare a philosophy major, and I thought it was silly that my college was making me wait until sophomore year to declare. Friends at other schools would tell me their major, and how they had their next four years of classes almost fully planned out for them. I remember feeling so jealous because, as a first-generation, low-income college student at a prestigious, expensive university hour away from my hometown, I was feeling incredibly lost and desperately wanted some structure. However, I did not realize at that time that I already had structure; it was just structure I had more authority to choose than my peers at other colleges. The distribution requirements at Haverford, along with their “rule of 19” stating one could not take more than 19 credits within their major to avoid over-specialization, pushed me to create a structure that
fit my emerging, ever-changing, educational interests from my first year— even if it wasn’t always what I wanted to do. In reality, even though this educational structure was eventually helpful to me, I did not fully enjoy its process of pushing me outside of my comfort zone. Early on in my journey this structure felt illegitimate because I was choosing it, instead of someone with higher authority and educational credentials than me telling me what to do.

Then, as soon as I felt I was getting the hang of choosing my own structure, pulling away from learning within pre-set, institutional confines, I was told to declare a major and start focusing intently on one subject area. To say that this felt confusing is an understatement. I was, once again, incredibly lost as I tried to figure out how to fit myself into one of the pre-established majors at the college. This may have worked well for some people who felt they fit well within their subject areas, but for a person with a background like I had, I had spent my first two years at Haverford just figuring out how to “do college” while also healing from a lot of trauma. Therefore, I had not yet figured out where I wanted to situate myself, and I had been feeling liberated with the choices I was offered my first two years.

My choice to pursue my independent major can be simply put like this: “I was not yet ready to surrender my newly found academic and personal liberation.” I had already begun the process of rejecting a need to belong within a specific, pre-established space at my college in order to do good work, and I had instead begun fostering a sense of “mattering” within myself so that I could carry that self-confidence and self-belief to other areas of my life. “Mattering” refers to an intrinsic belief that I have meaning and worth for who I am, at any moment in time, irrelevant of the space I inhabit in that moment. This is different from a sense of “belonging,”
which attaches one's sense of worth to how well, or badly, one assimilates to context (Cook-Sather, et. al., forthcoming). Therefore, I decided to propose an independent major.

**Education as Hope**

I remember feeling scared I didn’t have what it took to design and carry out a major all on my own—especially because almost everyone I talked to had something discouraging to say about the process. I was told many times that the process to apply and be accepted was immensely long, difficult, and tedious; furthermore, I was told I would be incredibly lonely without a cohort of students pursuing the same major as I was. These were always interesting responses to hear because, whether people meant it or not, it felt like they were saying my ability to be academically successful was dependent on having people around me doing the same thing. I definitely see the benefits of having a major cohort—community is a powerful force for critically engaging academic and advocacy work—but for the constantly-changing, interdisciplinary interests I held then, I needed a major cohort who would support me in that, or no major cohort at all.

After multiple advisory meetings with my academic coach at the OAR and potential major advisors, through which we worked together on drafting and revising my proposal, and several meetings with the chair of the committee on student standing and academic programs, I submitted a twelve-page proposal and two letters of recommendation, crossed my fingers, and waited. Soon after, my major was accepted, and I felt like my next two years at Haverford once again became full of possibility and excitement.
The process of applying for an independent major required me to seek out support from multiple sources, as the only clear direction I was given was a six-page document showing me how to structure my proposal. Established majors have a main Chair of their department who is both used to and expected to advise prospective majors on how to be successful. However, there is not one main person a prospective student goes to when thinking about an independent major; rather, it is up to the student to seek out and request support from student offices, faculty, staff, and their advising dean. Unless specifically stated in their job descriptions, these sought-out support systems voluntarily gave their time to help advise me in this process. When thinking about compensation and collaboration for the fulfillment of a successful major, those who have supported me the most consistently, my major advisors, have not been compensated for their additional labor. However, those who have been compensated for assisting me in this process, (e.g., they have weekly calendar spots reserved for student advising meetings, regardless of whether I book them or not), have been my secondary, ‘every-once-in-a-while’ support systems. Both my major advisors and my secondary support systems have been essential in the successful completion of my major, but both my major advisors and I have taken on extra labor that our original schedules were not created for, requiring extra discipline, time organization, and sacrifice.

This process has felt a bit chaotic and challenging to me because I did not have a specific path laid out for me to follow; however, I believe this is done purposefully. By requesting to pursue an independent major, I was telling the college I was capable of handling both the challenging nature of Bi-Co coursework and the design, revision, and navigation of a newly-created major—this is something I knew I was capable of, and the commitment I showed
to the application process convinced the college of that, too. However, this meant the end of my sophomore year looked very different from that of my peers. While my peers were attending info sessions about their majors and making new friends, I was meeting with multiple support systems on a weekly basis. I had to convince those whose research areas lined up with my prospective field of study that I was both capable of completing the work, committed to any challenges and frustrations that would inevitably arise during the process, and able to independently problem-solve because, as already stated, major advising would be an additional responsibility on top of their already-busy schedules.

Interestingly, navigating the long process of locating and requesting additional support for this major made me feel both closer to, and further away from, the college community. This is for two reasons. One, I felt closer to the college community because I recognized I was capable of exploring and creating inventive, complex topics within the institution. Two, I felt further away from the college as I realized it was completely up to me to reach out to these potential support systems to propose a new course of study; if I didn’t put the time and energy-consuming effort in to create these opportunities for myself, the college did not offer a pre-created path that I felt like I belonged within. Reflecting on this experience, I believe it is the first time I started to identify with Maya Angelou’s quote about belonging to both “every place” and “no place” (Brown, 2017, p. 5).

I definitely had the opportunity to immerse myself in other forms of educational research within the Bi-Co that would not have required me to write a long, detailed, independent major proposal. For example, I could have engaged in pedagogical partnership within the SaLT program, a program that has allowed students to engage in ongoing
pedagogical research and student-faculty partnerships, as well as complete publications as an undergraduate. However, these opportunities would not have allowed me to make the learning I experienced the focus of my educational journey.

As a first-generation, low-income, college student, I have struggled with “fitting in” to higher-education institutions. Simply put, they are not made for me—they are made to accommodate me. Additionally, I live with a rare, chronic, autoimmune disease that was diagnosed less than two years ago. The diagnostic methods for this disease are invasive, and the treatments are exhausting. What this means is the energy I have is very limited, and I have to be careful about where I choose to spend it. This has led to intensive reevaluation of my priorities and a lot of questioning the purpose of where I spend my energy.

If I had gone into a traditional major, I would have had the safety and comfort that comes from having pre-set requirements, ready-made assignments, and the fulfillment of major requirements as the only reasoning I needed to explain why I was doing what I was doing. However, pursuing an independent major meant I was constantly asked to reflect on why I had designed my course of study in a particular way, why I decided to change it (if I did at all), why I picked the readings and assignments I did, etc. As noted in previous sections, I had at first felt an incredible lack of confidence in my ability to pursue this independent major. Part of this came from dialogues from others discouraging me from pursuing it, but most of it came from me. I lacked confidence in my ability to step outside of traditional educational structures and create and pursue my own because I still felt a sense of “imposter syndrome” as a low-income, first-generation college student at a high-dollar undergraduate institution. I felt like the safest thing to do to assure my future economic and career success was to stay within the confines my
institution gave me, and that if I stepped out of them, I could risk messing things up and throwing away an opportunity to better my life.

However, while staying within institutional structures and pursuing a pre-established major might have helped me feel more secure during my four years of undergrad, I believe I would have been struck with the same feelings of being lost and confused after graduation. Feeling lost and ungrounded in my independent major while I pursued difficult topics, engaged in critical reflection, and thought about what I was capable of in my future is exactly what I needed to prepare me for life post-undergrad. Feeling lost, confused, and unsure is a common feeling for me now, and I welcome it as information that something may need to change to help me create a life that better fits me, not as a sign that I need to panic and plunge myself into an academic or vocational structure for stability and validation—especially if said structures do not feel true to the point in life I find myself in at any given moment. This newfound confidence leaves me hopeful for my future because I feel capable of creating unique, growth-oriented paths for myself, regardless of the opinions of others and amidst standardized vocational and educational pathways that people in power may prefer for me to follow.

**Education as Liberation**

Exploring education through these first three modes (promise, oppression, and hope), brought me to education as liberation. Education has functioned as liberation for me through my realization that I am capable of doing anything and changing my life by intentionally educating myself about topics, keeping an open mind, and always being open to changing pre-existing beliefs the more I educate myself. Once I realized education can function as a tool for
liberation for me, I began to wonder how it could be a tool for liberation for others, including those I will work with in the future. My extensive self-reflection made me wonder how my major has been about exploring practices of accessible and equitable education, but I then wondered, what was the result of this kind of education? What did it mean when education could exist inside and outside of the classroom in a hopeful, joyful, and relational way? During my last few years of education, there were moments where I saw accessible and equitable educational practices being carried out. During these moments, education felt different—it felt open, non-judgmental, and less anxiety inducing. In these kinds of spaces, I felt more confident and empowered to engage in critical, exploratory dialogue with my classmates and teachers. To me, this consistent, critical dialogue allows education to function as liberatory practice. Within accessible and equitable educational spaces, critical dialogue can happen more easily because of the disruption and restructuring of traditional power hierarchies.

**Conceptual Framework**

Each of the scholars I talk about below has had a significant impact on my unpacking, unlearning, and redefining of what I believe quality education to be. Through evoking the work of Paulo Freire (1970), I explore the “banking model” of education, showing how it creates oppressive educational spaces opposed to critical dialogue and authentic, growth-oriented relationships. Following Paulo Freire’s idea of being “dialogical” to enact revolutionary education, I then chose scholars whose pedagogies I believe create accessible and equitable educational spaces conducive to fostering critical dialogue (Freire, 1970, p. 86). This critical dialogue breaks down traditional power hierarchies within learning spaces (which often render
teacher-student relationships purely transactional), and builds authentic, growth-oriented relationships between teachers and students, helping education function as liberatory practice. bell hooks (1994) offers an extension of Freire’s work by discussing “education as the practice of freedom,” which pushes back against traditional educational structures imposing strict boundaries and inhibiting critical thinking and agency. Craig Nelson, Jamiella Brooks, and Julie McGurk shed light on the role of “rigor” within learning spaces, helping me explore its effect on the creation and sustainment of authentic, growth-oriented relationships and critical dialogue. Bettina Love’s (2019) discussions on “freedom dreaming” within educational spaces show me the power of imagining what liberatory education could be even when one is trapped in an oppressive educational space. Finally, adrienne maree brown’s (2017) discussion of “emergent strategy” and Rebecca Solnit’s (2004) thoughts on “hope in the dark” help me recognize the importance of enacting slow, step-by-step processes to create long-term, sustainable change within educational reform.

The Banking Model of Education

In this next section I will show how the creation of authentic, growth-oriented relationships are essential to pursuing accessible, equitable education. To understand their importance, we must first understand what happens when these relationships are not present in an educational space.

In “Theories of Change,” a course I completed with Professor Kelly Zuckerman, I wrote the following for one of the class assignments:
Freire’s “banking model of education” describes a style of education where the teacher exists as the only expert in a room full of students whose heads need to be filled with their knowledge. In turn, the students then prove their comprehension of the information through regurgitation of the exact information the teacher gave them (Freire, 71-72). This model of education is oppressive because it does not allow students chances to think for themselves; it stifles creativity, critical thinking, and, ultimately, joy in the learning process. This does very little good for students, (those being oppressed), but a lot of good for the system as a whole (those doing the oppressing), because it makes certain the next generation entering society will easily fit into the boxes society has formed for them. This form of education makes certain the next generation will not ask too many questions, make too much of a fuss, and/or demand they are treated too much better. Therefore, education as a liberating practice must do the opposite of the banking model. One way education can function as a liberating practice is through fostering, growing, and sustaining authentic relationships. Freire describes the

humanist, revolutionary educator[s]...[who] must be partners of the students in their relations with them...To resolve the teacher-student contradiction, to exchange the role of depositor...for the role of student among students would be to undermine the
power of oppression and serve the cause of liberation. (Freire, 75).

Before my exposure to Freire’s “banking model” of education, I was convinced that education was meant to feel intense, high stakes, and pressure filled; this is largely because I thought success in education meant meeting the expectations set by my educators. This view of education places teachers at a significantly higher power level than students because they are the ones setting the standards for success—often with little to no student input—but students are the ones being assessed for mastery. In a one-sided relationship like this, it is extremely difficult to engage in authentic communication because students are not used to their input being valued.

In an everyday relationship with a friend, or even acquaintance, would you tell them how you really felt about things in your life if their reaction was something like, “That sounds great, but how does it relate to what I was just talking about?” My guess is, probably not, and for good reason. We’re not inclined to engage in relationships with people who ignore our thoughts, feelings, and perspectives because they’re not adding anything positive to our lives. However, in a teacher-student relationship under the “banking model,” those are exactly the kind of relationships we are asking students to engage with. This structure creates learning moments where students try to add their opinions or perspectives to the class discussion and are shut down, and/or learning moments where a student wants to add something to the class discussions but refrains from fear of being shut down or reprimanded for getting “off topic” (i.e., straying away from the teacher’s point of view). Therefore, since one-sided relationships
are a foundational, oppresive practice upholding the “banking model” of education, the creation of authentic, growth-oriented relationships—with equal power distributions—is one way to move away from this model.

Next, I will talk about scholars who are thinking about alternative (non-“banking model”) pedagogies to create accessible, equitable education through authentic, growth-oriented relationships.

bell hooks

bell hooks is the first person I remember reading who inspired me to stop accepting education as it stands today and question how it can be used for good. As such, I consider her as my introduction into this vastly complex, ongoing conversation of equitable, anti-racist, love-oriented, diverse, community-centered education. She appeared in a few syllabi of classes I took before I began seeking out more of her work on my own. I saw her work in writing seminars as well as philosophy, education, and English courses; what deeply inspired me about her work is its ability to inspire conversations across disciplines in issues of equity and community-building. In my own journey of creating an independent major, hooks’ material showed me how exploring ideas that are applicable to a variety of disciplines, rather than existing in only one area of study, is essential to creating a more relationship-focused world. Her work can show up anywhere ideas of justice are being discussed and have something to contribute to the conversation—that is what I love about it.

In her book Teaching to Transgress, hooks has a chapter titled "Paulo Freire" where she says, "Paulo was one of those thinkers who gave me a language" (p.46). And while Freire has
given me the background I need to see the oppression in many existing educational structures today, bell hooks has given me a language to articulate how these structures have made me feel. She talks about how in grad school, “the university and the classroom began to feel more like a prison, a place of punishment and confinement, rather than a place of promise and possibility” (hooks, 1994, p.4). In the creation of my independent major, the initial area of study I locked onto was something I termed “nontraditional educational spaces.” As I wrote in my major proposal, I define these spaces as “educational spaces outside of traditional classroom environments...where critical, growth-oriented conversations are happening.” Looking back now, I realize I locked onto this because, like hooks, I had felt trapped and hurt by traditional classroom educational spaces. As a result, I did a complete 180 and began exploring education only as it occurred outside of traditional classrooms, believing that the hurt and confusion I experienced was a direct result of those classroom environments. This was helpful at first, as it encouraged me to look at what education could be when removed from oppressive classrooms as I had experienced; however, I quickly began to ignore the beauty that can happen inside classrooms as well. In short, I had again locked myself into seeing education as it stands within a certain set of circumstances, inhibiting it from functioning as liberatory practice.

As I explored my major more deeply, I realized that accessible and equitable education can exist anywhere deliberate relationship-building, ongoing critical self-analysis, and open-minded practices are employed. Until meeting the scholars mentioned below, I had only seen this kind of education occur in nontraditional educational spaces. However, these educational tools are highly transferable to traditional classroom spaces; you just have to be ready to push back against a system that tells you otherwise—a system that wants you to take your dreams
of a more just future of education and enact them far, far away, so that it doesn’t disrupt the oppressive work they are in the midst of engaging with. Similar to my experience, hooks discusses her journey finding and creating liberating education through her “dislocation” from “structured classrooms” (hooks, 2003, p. 21).

hooks sees education as freedom when she teaches shortened, intensive courses—in formal institutions—“without restrictions or fear of punishing reprisals” (hooks, 2003, p. 24). However, she only arrived at this understanding after a “dislocation.” hooks explains: “Dislocation is the perfect context for free-flowing thought that lets us move beyond the restricted confines of a familiar social order” (hooks, 2003, p. 21). The verb ‘dislocate’ is defined as “to force a change in the usual status, relationship, or order of: DISRUPT” (Dislocated Definition & Meaning - Merriam-Webster, n.d.). I love the association with “disruption” this definition has because my own experience of “dislocation” from the traditional major structure felt a lot like a “disruption” to my undergraduate experience. “Disruption” holds a negative connotation for me, reminding me of mistakes or annoyances. However, the verb “disrupt” actually means “to break apart, to throw into disorder, and/or to interrupt the normal course or unity of” (Disrupt Definition & Meaning - Merriam-Webster, n.d.). None of these things is inherently negative; they are just describing a change. However, change itself can easily be negative if there is a lack of support necessary for the individual going through the change. In the creation of my independent major, my experience felt disruptive because I had to set aside time that was not already carved into my schedule as a sophomore in college; however, my experience since the acceptance of my independent major has felt more like a productive dislocation.
This dislocation through my independent major allowed me to ask myself, “If I do not have to engage in oppressive educational structures created by others, then what kind of structure do I create for myself? How does education function if not within an oppressive structure?” I cannot emphasize enough the importance this dislocation and questioning had in my educational journey; it led me to realize that I am not doing what everyone else is, but I have structured, consistent support from my major advisors, advising deans, and academic coaches, who are encouraging me to keep engaging in my process of learning, questioning, and discovering.

Disability Studies has taught me a lot about disruptions, dislocations, and deviations from an imagined ‘norm.’ To begin, “...a growing number of scholars have argued that it is terms such as disabilities and normal and the culture created through their use, not the conditions of people themselves, that disable (Dolmage 2017; Gibson, 2020; Goodley, Lawthom, Liddiard and Runswick-Cole 2019; Hamraie 2013)” (Cook-Sather, et. al., forthcoming). When you have a disability, your body does not always function as you wish it would—it doesn’t always function in a way that makes it easy to live in a world designed for able-bodied peoples’ convenience. People with disabilities navigate our largely able-bodied world through advocating for the support we need to do so. When appropriate support is given (which can range from a small adjustment to a large, institutional policy change) people with disabilities are able to complete their work to fulfill adapted school and vocational expectations. As a person with a disability, I can attest that when I am given the kind of support I need, I can show up within my school and workspaces able to participate more fully. I can do this only when those around me are all willing to support me, and one another, to reach our collective and
personal goals. Extending this example from disability studies, we can see that differences, disruptions, and deviations from an imagined ‘norm’ are not always inherently negative if everyone is given the support they need to adjust and thrive in the change.

Cook-Sather et. al. continue, “McDermott and Varenne (1995) succinctly capture this argument: ‘A disability may be a better display board for the weaknesses of a cultural system than it is an account of real persons’ (p. 327)” (Cook-Sather, et. al., forthcoming). For example, during COVID we were not always given the kind of support we needed to thrive academically. Instead, we were often thrown into new structures and expected to adapt to them, so disruption to our normal school routines was very negative in many ways. However, in small moments during the pandemic, we all found creative ways to meet together and share our stories, research, or even just be in each other's presence. It wasn’t until we were forced by COVID to rethink how we navigate our daily lives out of necessity that we even began to think of alternative meeting options and forms of engagement separate from long-standing, able-bodied notions of ‘normalcy.’ Some of these options we still use today to offer additional forms of engagement, thereby increasing accessibility measures and encouraging creativity. In this way, disability studies can teach us how disruptions can be pathways to creativity and critical re-imaginings, and perhaps this will encourage us to push back against structures we believe are permanent (just because they have existed for a long time) in order to create more spaces in this world for people of varying backgrounds and abilities to exist, explore, learn, and grow—even if this means causing productive disruption.

This pushback against acceptable and/or normative structures of education is another way hooks sees education as “the practice of freedom” (hooks, 1994, p. 12). hooks writes:
Urging all of us to open our minds and hearts so that we can know beyond the boundaries of what is acceptable, so that we can think and rethink, so that we can create new visions, I celebrate teaching that enables transgressions—a movement against and beyond boundaries. It is that movement which makes education the practice of freedom. (hooks, 1994, p. 12)

A pushback like this to pursue “education as the practice of freedom” is well accomplished through engaging in consistent, critical dialogue within communities full of authentic, growth-oriented relationships. However, for this to happen most effectively, you first have to engage with individual, reflective work. Then, collective sharings, questionings, and pushbacks will inevitably grow stronger if the relationships are genuinely centered towards supporting the individual and collective growth of all relationship participants. In this quote, hooks “urg[es] all of us” (emphasis added) to understand and push back against boundaries inhibiting education as the practice of freedom; she is not simply urging you to push back on your own. This language suggests she sees importance in engaging in this difficult, reflective, transformative educational work in communities, not alone.

Therefore, as both teachers and students, what traditional notions do we need to push back on to encourage the creation of communities like these in formal and informal educational spaces? These kinds of communities do not immediately exist just because we see the value of them; we may enter some spaces where they do, but in most cases, we will have to engage in preliminary work, either solo or with very small groups of people, to intentionally create them.
From there, we can dive more deeply into educational reform through engaging in consistent, critical dialogue. This is kind of like playing a part in a play before a stage exists. We know our lines (key ideas from scholars), and we’ve learned our stage cues (how to act out these key ideas in our own lives), but we haven’t been given an actual stage (designated classrooms and/or informal learning spaces where critical dialogue within authentic, growth-oriented relationships is a normative, expected practice). Therefore, we’re just told to perform our play wherever we can find a space (enact critical conversations, create authentic, grown-oriented relationships, and push forward education as liberatory practice in spaces it may or may not be welcomed). As frustrating as this sounds, that’s the beauty of this work. If all educational spaces were already 100% open to education as liberatory practice, I probably wouldn’t have experienced education as promise, hope, oppression, or anything other than freedom and liberation. Pursuing the creation of educational spaces conducive to critical dialogue and authentic, growth-oriented relationships is one way we can try to make education as the practice of freedom a common-place practice.

**Rigor—Important, or Unnecessary?**

This section describes how traditional notions of rigor work against creating authentic, growth-oriented relationships in education and negatively affect a student’s academic experience. Furthermore, connecting to Paulo Freire, I show how traditional notions of rigor fit within the "banking model" of education, rendering the practice inherently oppressive. Therefore, I argue that traditional notions of rigor must be rejected in order to move away from oppressive educational practices. Craig Nelson shows examples of how rigor, when viewed in
the traditional sense, was not effective in his teaching experience. He then tells of some alternatives he implemented in his teaching that have proven more useful than traditional rigorous instruction. Jamiella Brooks and Julie McGurk take this a step further, agreeing with Nelson that traditional notions of rigor are not effective methods of learning, and showing how you can redefine rigor on a contextual basis. To do this, they suggest keeping in mind their three principles, which allow rigor to function as an inclusive, rather than an exclusive, practice. I end by asserting that when rigor functions as an inclusive practice, authentic, growth-oriented, teacher-student, and student-student relationships are fostered, and flourish.

A key theme I have wrestled with during my redefining of ‘quality education’ is the concept of rigor. In my “Exploring and Enacting Transformation in Higher Education” course, we shared our personal associations with rigor, and I want to share a few of those here. When my peers and I think of rigor, what comes to our minds is, “anxiety, suffocation, pressure, apprehension, [and] competition,” to name a few (class notes, EDUC 295, March 28, 2023). These thoughts came from a group of students attending Haverford and Bryn Mawr Colleges—two highly selective schools known for their high-quality education, often associated with academic rigor. How could it be that students who purposefully applied to institutions like ours have such negative associations with the concept of rigor? This is the kind of education we’re choosing...right? Not exactly. Personally, I chose this school because it was painted as an academically rigorous and holistic learning experience. When rigor and holistic learning come together, beautiful, thoughtful conversations full of critical thinking and personal anecdotes can result. However, without the inclusion of holistic practices, traditional, negative, notions of rigor persist.
Brooks and McGurk (2022) call for a rejection of the traditional definition of rigor, often associated with negativity, and a redefinition of rigor on a “contextual basis,” considering three key principles. These principles are:

1. Rigor, when defined apart from a deficit ideology, is necessary to teach more inclusively.
2. Inadequate definitions of rigor produce poorer learning outcomes, particularly for underrepresented and/or underserved students, and
3. Rigor is not simply hard for the sake of being hard, but it is purposeful and transparent. (Brooks & McGurk, 2022)

Taking these three principles into account, rigor can function as an inclusive practice, not just in addition to other inclusive practices, like holistic learning. Additionally, Brooks and McGurk (2022) argue that “teaching in inclusive and equitable ways” increases rigor for both teachers and students in the classroom. How can this be? When rigor is redefined to expect “higher-order understanding” on small amounts of work, rather than excessive workloads (often asking students to show mastery of an entire class syllabi), rigor does become an inclusive practice (Brooks & McGurk, 2022, citing Culver et al., 2019). “Higher-order understanding” refers to anything more than a basic/foundational level of understanding of a concept. As such, higher-order understanding requires critical thinking, self-reflection, an understanding of one’s privileges, and the ability to articulate the results of all of these practices. These practices can only be implemented if students have the agency to practice
engaging with them on a consistent basis. Additionally, these are not ‘easy’ things to ask of someone—especially because these practices are often far removed from traditional "banking-models" of education many of us grow up within. In a “banking-model” of education, the only way rigor can be defined is through excessive workload because student agency is almost completely removed from the learning model. Briefly stated: traditional notions of rigor involve a teacher assigning large volumes of schoolwork for the sake of creating difficult, lengthy learning processes for students; a redefinition of rigor as an inclusive practice involves a teacher being transparent in their reasoning for assigning work so students understand its purpose, especially if it asks students to engage in lengthy critical inquiry, writing, etc.

Craig Nelson (2010) initially believed more rigor equaled higher quality education. However, in his piece “Dysfunctional Illusions of Rigor,” he discusses his experiences teaching under this belief system, and how, upon self-reflection, he realized quality education has more to do with individualized, interactive instruction methods, rather than traditional, academically rigorous education.

For example, small group instruction, rather than hyper-individualist instruction (like that that exists in traditional lecture formats mirroring the banking model of education) has shown to increase a student’s learning (Nelson, 2010, p.179). Not only is this beneficial for students during their time in school, but learning how to communicate well and operate efficiently in small groups will dramatically help a student be successful in the workplace post-graduation.

Nelson (2010) states, “When I did poorly, I blamed my own lack of effort, not flaws in the pedagogy. More realistic view. When students fail it is often due to inappropriate
pedagogy” (p. 180). This view of education is where I believe true liberation begins. When a student begins to believe they can do well at anything—even if a skill does not come naturally to them—they will begin to look at alternative ways to learn, practice, and grow in subject areas they initially struggle in. This may push students to take more calculated risks that can push forward their academic, social, and career successes. “Colomb (1986) found that one of the hardest tasks in learning to write for college (and work) was learning to avoid all of the perfectly reasonable things that one might say or write that are not allowed by the conventions of the discipline” (Nelson, 2010, p. 181).

The Importance of Cognitively Accessible Language and More Open, Non-Exclusionary Learning Spaces in Academia

Traditional notions of rigor are not conducive to the development or use of cognitively accessible language (Grace, 2013). Traditional notions of rigor, such as something being difficult just for the sake of being difficult, is how I have experienced a lot of academic writing. We are taught that the more complicated and complex words we use, the more "academic" the writing is. Therefore, I see cognitively inaccessible language as an oppressive practice. Contrastingly, I see cognitively accessible language as one way to pursue education as liberatory practice because it allows the writer to speak in whatever voice is most natural to them, makes the most sense for their ideas (therefore encouraging their agency), and is accessible and easily understood by others.

Using cognitively inaccessible language in academic writing is traditional academic practice we unnecessarily spend time with when we could be spending more energy learning
how to improve within our discipline, and effectively communicate those ideas to as diverse an array of people as possible. Here, we are unnecessarily spending time wondering what kinds of comments and connections are okay to make in each of our respective classes. This can lead to students feeling like they have to operate in a particular fashion to fit into the stereotypical conversations associated with a certain discipline. It’s like group think, but in a more elongated, overarching fashion.

Cognitively inaccessible language functions as an exclusionary practice in academia. When academia is seen as the main "legitimate" place for teaching and learning to occur with focus, passion, and sincerity, exclusionary language that keeps people out of academia discourages a diversity of people from engaging with teaching and learning. Elizabeth Grace (2013) writes: “What happens is that in-group languages, jargons, and other forms of writing that block out a lot of people from being able to read texts written by academic specialists also serve to mark the writers as belonging to special subgroups or schools of thought” (p. 1).

Acknowledging this exclusionary practice, bell hooks writes: “...many professors see themselves as members of a chosen group, a large secret society, elitist and hierarchical, that sets them apart” (hooks, 2003, p. 22). These exclusionary practices might not hold as much weight if teaching and learning were as highly valued in non-academic spaces as they are in academia, but, as hooks continues, “the academic world remains the primary place where teaching and learning are valued, where reading and thinking are deemed meaningful and necessary work” (hooks, 2003, p. 22). My work has largely been focused on excavating the long-buried notion that any learning done in an academic space is deserving of higher importance than that done in a non-traditional education space.
Consider what is different about bringing together a group of students in an intro-level academic classroom and a group of people in a community center meeting together to discuss an issue or topic of importance to them. If we view all people as experts on their own lived experiences, then the location those people meet to discuss connections and ideas does nothing to elevate or lower the quality of learning happening, unless one location has increased support to create more equitable learning environments. We see this happen a lot in grassroots organizing, where a group of community members come together to share ideas and build a plan to better their community. When community members admit their need to learn and grow from one another’s lived experiences and expertise, the sharing of ideas—the learning and educating—is a tool for liberation. This is an example of authentic, growth-oriented relationships creating a liberatory educational experience. Individual agency is still preserved in each relationship-participant, and, simultaneously, I believe the collective support for one another’s expertise and agency encourages the group to confidently pursue social justice issues relevant to them.

From these meetings, real change can emerge (often without going through layers of ‘red tape’ that large academic institutions committed to social justice must consider before enacting it themselves). Additionally, these grassroots, non-academic organizing spaces can often be more accessible to people with diverse backgrounds because people are not considering a certain structure to fit into when sharing their ideas; they just speak freely. As such, their energy is better spent on “freedom dreaming” (Love, 2019) on how to better their community. The changes emerging from grassroots organizing often start small, but even small change has the capacity to enact large-scale, sustained change if done consistently.
Accessible & Equitable Education—The Difference Between Tolerance & Embrace of Difference

In her book *Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life*, Margaret Price explains: “[The] realization, that minds are best understood in terms of variety and difference rather than deviations from an imagined norm, is aligned with a theoretical and activist stance called disability studies (DS)” (Price, 2011, p. 4). The field of disability studies has played a crucial role in my understanding of how to create accessible and equitable educational spaces. Second semester of my first year of college, I decided to take a course titled “Critical Disability Studies,” and that course completely changed my perception of higher education. Entering the course, I had the belief that all structures created at my college were nearly perfect because they existed in the seemingly untouchable area of academia. This led to me to feel extremely anxious navigating these structures because, although I did not realize it yet, they were not created with my specific needs in mind. Contrastingly, pursuing my independent major, I have felt liberated, confident, and capable in my studies.

A clear example of this difference is between courses I have chosen for my major and courses I was taking before declaring my major. In the former courses, I needed to work with the ADA office on campus to create an accommodation letter that would allow me to learn and be assessed as equitably as possible. However, in the latter courses, I have been able to slowly feel comfortable enough to not show my accommodation letter because accommodations, differentiated learning, etc. is naturally structured into my chosen major courses. My chosen major courses do not make me feel weird, unnatural, or less deserving of engaging in quality
learning because of being a differently-abled person. Rather, they fully embrace my differences as a part of who I am and stand solidly beside me, as much or as little as I need, to ensure I can showcase my personal knowledge, talents, and beauty in our learning environments.

This is one reason I am so drawn to non-traditional educational spaces. Before encountering disability studies, I believed I was the problem when I struggled to showcase my brilliance in a traditional classroom setting. When I felt confident in my mastery of a topic in class discussions, but I failed final exams, I felt like I hadn’t tried hard enough (ignoring the countless hours I would spend studying beforehand). My brain did not understand how I was expected to write anything down on a test that we had not verbatim been told was ‘correct’ knowledge. In other words, I did not understand how I could be taught using the “banking model” of education (Freire, 1990) but tested expecting to know how to critically think and extrapolate seemingly ‘obvious’ details. Price (2011) continues: “...DS [argues] that disability is a mode of human difference, one that becomes a problem only when the environment or context treats it as such” (p. 4). In this case, I realize that the differentiation DS calls for to create equitable, accessible classrooms does not fit within the banking model of education. Since the banking model is a way of using education to oppress people, I see DS as one way education is beautifully being used to advance “education as the practice of freedom” (hooks, 1994)—encouraging people who do not feel like they belong in academic spaces to advocate for their place and/or find a new place where their difference is seen as ‘good’ rather than an ‘inconvenience.’
Joy & Hope—Not Allowing The Overwhelm of The World to Stop You From Seeing The Good

In one of my education courses, Community Learning Collaborative: Practicing Partnership, I was introduced to *Hope in the Dark* by Rebecca Solnit (2006). In this book, Solnit discusses how it can often feel like the work we do as a social justice activist is not accomplishing anything because we are still shrouded in darkness (the overwhelming amount of problems that still exist and work that still needs to be done). However, she reminds us that the small steps we take today can cause major changes in the future by pointing out the beautiful developments and changes for good we see in our current age, compared to past generations. This reminds us to remain hopeful and expectant that more good change will occur, even if we cannot yet see how, when, or where. Even though Solnit’s work is oriented towards political activism, the same principles can be applied to educational reform from a “banking model” (Freire, 1970) to “education as the practice of freedom” (hooks, 1994). Bettina Love (2019) gives us another way to remain hopeful in the dark through her discussion of “freedom dreaming” in oppressive educational spaces. Remaining hopeful amid this tough work encourages us to keep going and contributes to building authentic, growth-oriented relationships.

Also in the course Theories of Change, I wrote the following for one of the class assignments:

When authentic relationships are fostered, critical conversations that go deeper than surface-level and/or material things can more easily occur, and sustained change can be made. One form of diving deep and thinking critically about what
a new, more “just” version of the world could look like is through “freedom dreaming.” Bettina Love discusses “freedom dreaming” as the start of abolitionist teaching and describes them as “dreams grounded in a critique of injustice” (Love, 101). Regarding authentic relationships, it is easier to “freedom dream” in a shared space when you trust those you’re with will hold your critical-imaginings safe. Love talks about freedom dreaming as a necessary imagining of a better future; something that must happen in the midst of the messy current structure before a new one can ever come to fruition. Additionally, freedom dreaming is strongly connected to Black joy. Love says, “Freedom dreams are brought to life through joy and love of dark people’s light. Joy makes the quest for justice sustainable” (Love, 120).

I see “freedom dreaming” (Love, 2019) as an essential part of my own educational experience, and one I hope to encourage in my future work as an educator. Throughout my time in Bi-Co education classes, we often get stuck on the ‘impossibility’ of fixing educational injustices because there are so many of them—we feel like we have to fix everything all at once. However, Love’s explanation of “freedom dreaming” in education encourages us to pursue one small piece of the puzzle at a time. Being fully present in that one issue does not mean we immediately stop thinking about how to push against future/additional educational injustices. “Freedom dreaming” acknowledges that when we have a deep regard for fighting against issues of
educational injustice, we will never be finished with our social justice work; we just
move on to our next advocacy project.

**adrienne maree brown: Emergent Strategy**

A key idea we talk about in the Education department is the importance of enacting small change to create large-scale, sustainable change in educational justice. This is hugely important because when you are confronted with the huge scope of injustice, it can be difficult to decide where to begin. One scholar whose ideas have been extremely influential in my comprehension of how to do this is adrienne maree brown (2017) and her discussion of “emergent strategy.” brown (2017) defines “emergent strategy” as “strategy for building complex patterns and systems of change through relatively small interactions” (p. 6). To more deeply understand this, brown uses biomimicry. Biomimicry is “taking a design challenge and then finding an ecosystem that has already solved that challenge, and literally trying to emulate what you learn” (brown, 2017, p. 32, quoting Janine Benyus). For example, brown explains how ferns, with their detailed, repeated patterns of leaves from the smallest to the largest, teach us how “small-scale solutions impact the whole system, [and we should] use similar principles to build at all scales” (brown, 2017, p. 31). In the creation of educational spaces conducive to critical dialogue and authentic, growth-oriented relationships, starting small is a great way to begin.

As stated above, in the process of moving away from the banking model of education, Freire (1970) explains how effective an intentional interruption of the traditional teacher-student relationships, and the creation of relationships with teachers as a “student among students would be to undermine the power of oppression and serve the cause of liberation”
(Freire, 75). Note that he describes how just one teacher interrupting this oppressive structure will still “serve the cause of liberation.” Ultimately, a long-term goal of my work is to create as many authentic, growth-oriented relationships as possible so that multiple people are enacting education as liberatory practice on a daily basis. However, no matter the size of learning communities I encounter in my future work, the core principles of my relationship-building work will not change—building relationships is all about small personal, intentional, genuine interactions that happen over a sustained period of time to create a precedent for how future interactions will occur. As stated above, emergent strategy says “complex patterns and systems of change [will emerge] through relatively small interactions” (Brown, 2017, p. 6). In my case, I believe the more “complex patterns” that will emerge are that more people will be creating individualized, sustainable relationships from the relationships I begin with them—it’s a chain reaction. However, the beauty of emergent strategy is that it could look completely different from what I’m envisioning above, and that is okay. I just choose the interactions, relationships, projects, learning goals, etc. that feel right to me in any given moment, move forward with those choices with full confidence, giving them every chance to succeed, reevaluate (see if I’m moving closer to my intended goals), make some changes, and try again. Eventually, the small changes I make that remain through this iterative process will have been well thought through, building up a strong, long-standing system of relationship-building and educational reform.

**Future Plans**

I have spent the last four years exploring how to integrate ideas from a variety of disciplines to find solutions to increasing access to accessible and equitable education. During
this process, I have both observed and embodied the work through my own educational and life experiences.

I saw a glimpse of how my work in creating spaces of critical dialogue and authentic, growth-oriented relationships can push forward education as liberatory practice through my recent study-abroad experience. Fall semester of my senior year I traveled to Copenhagen, Denmark, where I had the opportunity to take a class titled “Migrants, Minorities, and Belonging in Denmark.” In this class I completed field research at a school for rejected, asylum-seeking children in Denmark where I saw authentic, growth-oriented relationship-building moving towards “education as the practice of freedom” (hooks, 1994). Even though the children at that school were at constant risk of deportation, they were still legally required to receive an education. The staff at this school fostered relationships with the children, constantly reminding them of their worth and offering multiple modes of engagement to accommodate varying levels of linguistic, cultural, physical, and mental knowledge and ability. They had no idea when these children would leave, or where they would go next, but they still saw purpose and importance in teaching and learning with and from them while they were there, knowing they could take those skills and memories with them in the future.

A second example is through my thesis presentation. It is typical for an undergraduate to offer a public thesis presentation for the larger campus community to engage with. However, as an independent major with an emphasis on fostering critical dialogue and creating authentic, growth-oriented relationships, I wanted to offer a public presentation that embodied the pedagogies I had been researching and reflecting on. As such, during my thesis presentation, I offered a brief overview of the ideas I had been thinking about, questions I was grappling with,
and scholars I was engaging with, then I opened up the floor for my audience to participate. I offered two brief questions: (1) How have you experienced education as promise, oppression, hope, and/or liberation? and (2) Have there been any people in your life, friends, family, academic scholars, or otherwise, that have influenced how you see education today? My goal for this segment of the thesis discussion was to break down traditional power hierarchies that say me, as the presenter, should do the majority of the talking, presenting pre-formed thoughts for the audience to digest. Just like in future educational spaces, I wanted to present my ideas while also creating space for critical thinking and dialogue to occur and authentic, growth-oriented relationships to grow. The sharing of personal stories from each audience member’s educational journeys created a space of care and respect for one another, and the overview I gave of my own work and journey acted as both a guide for my audience members to follow and set a precedent for the kind of safe, collaborative space I was encouraging amongst all of us. The result was a rich, soul-nourishing discussion where we each shared how education has functioned in our lives, made connections with one another, and left with further questions to pursue.

**Future Work: Non-Traditional Educational Spaces**

Educational spaces outside of traditional classroom environments are any place where critical, growth-oriented conversations are happening. I believe the purpose of education is to inform, inspire, and equip individuals with the tools they need to immerse themselves in subject areas they are interested in, figure out their stake in those areas, then bring their dreams within their chosen subject areas to fruition. Therefore, if a conversation is occurring
where even one of these things is happening, education is taking place, and that place can be labeled as a “non-traditional educational space.”

These spaces are important because traditional classroom spaces can often be very oppressive and inequitable, especially for individuals who are neurodivergent, dealing with trauma, etc. This oppression and inequity exists because traditional classroom spaces exist within a system that is inherently oppressive. Anyone who has a need outside of this mold is therefore viewed as disruptive, problematic, or “broken” in some way. In reality, there is nothing inherently wrong with people who do not fit into these oppressive molds; rather, it is a systemic problem that refuses to admit its inability to meet the needs of a diverse population which causes a person to feel this way. The silencing of people who dare to speak out against these systems causes a continuation of them, making people believe they are okay because they have existed for so long. However, the length of time an oppressive system exists should not be grounds for dismissing the oppression within it for the sake of familiarity, normalcy, or ease.

Separate from the oppression plaguing teaching and learning in traditional educational spaces, there is the issue of accessing these traditional spaces in the first place. Many places that are trying to break away from traditional oppressive models are, at least in America, extremely expensive. Some examples of these are Montessori, Waldorf, or nature-based schools. Additionally, even traditional educational spaces are extremely difficult for many people to access at all. This can be due to a lack of safe, reliable, and affordable transportation, an inability for someone to access education in their native language, or an inability to pay for required school fees like books, uniforms, lunches, or field trips.
I see two main ways to approach the issue of a lack of education for all people with my current academic and personal knowledge. One, I could fight for ways to connect knowledge-seeking people with current, traditional educational systems (schools). Two, I could look for pre-existing, non-traditional educational spaces to connect people to, highlight the importance of, and improve. Because non-traditional educational spaces exist in a wide variety of areas, these places may be easier to access than traditional educational spaces. Furthermore, with the hurt traditional schooling has caused me, my current interest lies more heavily in the latter option.

**Field Work and its Connection to Nontraditional Educational Spaces**

Field work is a way for students to bring concepts they are learning in a traditional, higher education, classroom setting outside of theoretical classroom discussions and into a real-life school setting. The new education studies major recently accepted by the curriculum committee in the Bi-Co contains a pathway option titled “Out of school contexts.” This closely resembles my chosen academic pathway. For the past four years, I have tried to conceptualize how to take the concepts I was learning from my education studies courses outside of traditional classroom spaces because I believed them to be highly useful, and applicable, in nontraditional classroom settings. Seeing this major specialization come to fruition gives me hope that future students will see the importance of pursuing, immersing themselves within, and creating nontraditional educational spaces.

Nontraditional educational spaces can be more accessible and equitable because of their flexibility. They are undefined, un-”institutionalized” or “systematized.” This is not to say
these educational spaces come completely separate from any issues of equity or accessibility. Each nontraditional educational space will have to deal with the histories of oppression that are relevant to them. This is where engaging with consistent, genuine self-reflection and critical thinking is essential to creating and maintaining equitable, accessible educational spaces.

Before engaging in my independent major work, I believed education as liberation could not effectively exist within formal educational spaces. This is because the pushback I felt from those in power in oppressive, formal educational systems had convinced me that liberating education was not just unwanted, but nearly impossible. Meanwhile, the embrace of liberating education I had experienced in non-traditional educational spaces had convinced me those were the spaces it had to happen within—I was confusing lack of acceptance with lack of possibility. Through a huge amount of critical reflection, dialogue, frustration, and revelation, I have been able to separate the qualities of liberating education from the spaces in which liberating education happens. This does not necessarily mean I want to continue pursuing education as liberating practice in formal educational settings, but it has made me more critically aware of assessing the structures in place in all educational settings (power structures, policies, long-standing institutional or organizational norms, etc.) to create spaces conducive to liberating education everywhere.
Works Cited


