Catching Up With the Self Through Education

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this paper is to think about the purpose of school and what it means to be an educated person. It is based on a narrative inquiry conducted with three participants in their 70s in order to understand what role educational experiences have played throughout their lives. The findings point to how curriculum can be used as a medium through which people meet as they design their dispositions to self, Other, and world, which is one aspect of the purpose of school. Further, the findings show that an educated person is one who thinks of him/herself as a creator of the world rather than a participant.

Keywords: curriculum theory, purpose of school, self-understanding, narrativity, narrative inquiry

RESUMÉ: Quel est le but de la scolarité? Qu'est-ce qu'une personne cultivée ? L'enquête narrative est menée chez trois participants ayant environ soixante-dix ans chacun ce qui permet de comprendre le rôle de l'acquis des études tout au cours de leur vie. D'après les résultats de cette étude, on constate que l'on peut utiliser les programmes d'études comme des moyens pour faire des rencontres tout en recherchant sa propre orientation, celle de l'autre et celle du monde ; c'est une façon de considérer l'objectif les études. Ensuite, les résultats nous montrent que la personne ayant fait des études se voit en créateur du monde plutôt qu'en participant.

Mots-clés: la théorie des programmes, l'objectif des études, la connaissance de soi, la narrativité, l'enquête narrative.

"What is education? I should suppose that education was the curriculum one had to run through in order to catch up with oneself, and he who will not pass through this curriculum is helped very little by the fact that he was born in the most enlightened age."
(Kierkegaard, 1941/1954, p. 57)

Introduction and Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to think about the purpose of school and what it means to act in educated ways. These explorations are based on a study I conducted to better understand the role school and curriculum play in a person's life long after graduation. MacIntyre (2002) noted,

> The test of curriculum is what our children become, not only in the workplace but also in being able to think about themselves and their society imaginatively and constructively, able to use the resources provided by the past in order to envisage and implement new possibilities. (p. 15)

I worked with three purposefully selected participants (Glesne, 2011; Patton, 2002) who I felt met McIntyre's requirements: Julio, Wahini, and Thomas[1] are in their 70s and have thought about themselves and their place in society imaginatively, implementing new possibilities not only for themselves but also within their professional fields. Though their early educational experiences are quite different from each other, all three have two things in common: they faced significant challenges throughout their kindergarten-12th grade circumstances and they are content about their lives and their lives' choices. Julio, academically gifted and curious, grew up in an impoverished Mexican-American family in a U.S. border town. Expected to follow tradition and become an auto parts sales clerk, his path to earn a PhD from an Ivy League university required breaking cultural barriers. Today Julio is a retired biology professor. Thomas grew up in an educated middle class family in the Northern U.S. but struggled with dyslexia and dyscalculia, which were clearly undiagnosed in the 1950s. He has become an internationally successful visual artist and teaches art at a university in the North. For Wahini, growing up in Hawaii as a girl was defined by limitations based on gender stereotypes. Today Wahini is a retired literacy professor.

Since curriculum theory, by definition, is the interdisciplinary study of educational experiences (Pinar, 2004), I used it as the theoretical framework for this study. Julio, Wahini, and Thomas went to school in the 1950s when curriculum theory was focused on developing a plan to teach predetermined knowledge. Though educational theories have changed from being mainly behaviorist to being mainly constructionist over the past 60 years, the

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[1] These names are self-chosen pseudonyms.

curriculum in the United States today is often implemented similarly to the 1950s: curricular choices are made hierarchically by people far removed from classrooms and focus on measurable a priori objectives. As Jeannie Oakes noted in the centennial AERA presidential address, despite a century of scholarship, we have made very little progress toward the diverse democracy we strive to be (Oakes, 2016). One goal of this paper is to suggest ways to utilize, rather than implement, curriculum in ways that enable people to choose their place in society and to determine their purpose, so they can actively and conscientiously contribute to a diverse democracy.

The conceptual framework for the study is narrativity, which is based on the idea that people think about their lives in the form of stories (Phoenix, 2008; White, 1980). The most important aspect of a story is its moral. Based on how a person interprets an experience, he[2] assigns a moral or "lesson learned" to it. He then authors his personal grand narrative by arranging individual experiences based on those assigned meanings rather than in chronological order. Our personal grand narrative reflects who we perceive ourselves to be, our individual and societal values, and how we place ourselves in the bigger picture of society.

In order to get a multidimensional view of the participants' values and perceptions, I collected data in the form of interviews, artifacts, memoirs, photographs, etc., as outlined in Table *1 Data Inventory by Participant* and Table 2 *Complete Data Inventory* (attached). A fundamental theme in all three narratives was that learning is a form of awakening to the self and to the place and space one inhabits. Based on this idea, I analyzed the data with focus on understanding what makes this kind of awakening possible. I found four concepts that show under which conditions learning becomes a form of self-awakening, which I visualized in Figure 1 to reflect the interdependence among those concepts. While the pyramid shows the concepts neatly contained and organized in levels, the process of becoming self-aware is not so linear but rather iterative and simultaneous, which means that the result of the preceding iteration is used as a starting point for the next one while other iterations are going on as well. This means

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[2] Much deliberation was given to the use of the personal pronoun to talk about meaning-making. I began this section by using "s/he" to be inclusive, which ended up making the already complex idea of self-understanding textually (but not conceptually) more complex. I very briefly considered the use of the pronoun "we" but found it implies an assumed voice for someone other than myself. I finally decided on using "I" and "he" as representatives for "person" with no regard for gender.

that the individual concepts, which I will elaborate below, should be understood in synthesis.

Findings and Discussion
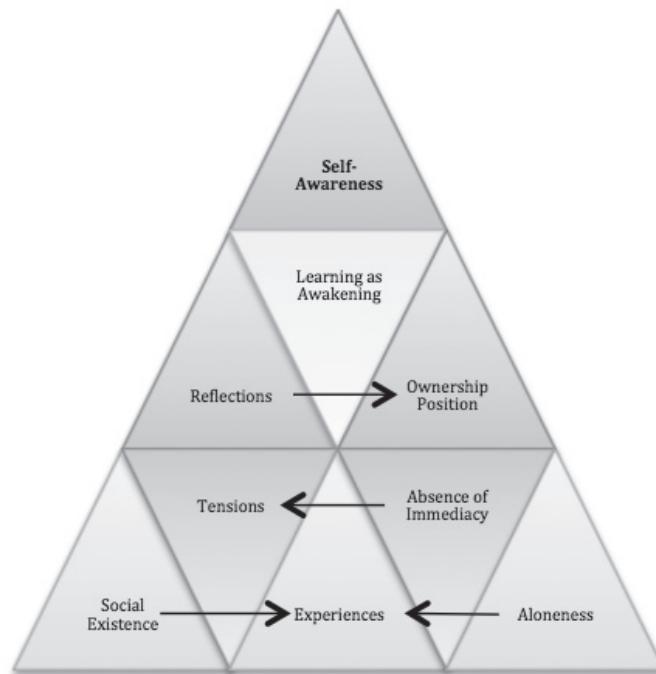
Figure 1 Synthesis of Overarching Concepts

Self-Awareness through Experiences

All experiences happen within one's social existence (Aoki, 1990/2005; Clandinin & Connelly, 2006; Dewey, 1934; Dewey, 1938; Huebner 1963/1999). In school, Thomas, due to his academic difficulties, felt "vulnerable"[3] and "put on the spot." Outside of school, he felt free to explore his curiosity, e.g. in his grandfather's basement and when playing with friends, which led him to discover his interest in structure and architecture. About his life as an architect and visual artist, he said, "My interest in structure really arrives out of my interest in making things, building things, doing things."

Julio's educational experiences were also characterized by academic Otherness albeit on the other end of the spectrum. For

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[3] The quotation marks in this section indicate *in vivo* quotes. *In vivo* derives from the root for *live* and refers to words and phrases from the actual language of the participants in qualitative data (Saldaña, 2009).

him it was his academic strengths that eventually separated him from his peers in his later school years. When asked if he had friends in school, and he shared,

> I was kind of a loner. Except in elementary. My elementary school friends never judged me. I was just one of them. But when I got to high school, some of the athletes recognized that I was able to do stuff … with words … and so I would do homework for one of the big football players. And he would protect me from everybody else. I was a scrawny little kid and so that was how we traded power. I had the power with words, and he had the power like being physical.

During his grammar school years, Julio explored his curiosities with his playmates, discovering his interest in the natural world. As he increasingly withdrew into literature, he separated himself from his peers who felt drawn to things that did not interest him, e.g. athletics.

In contrast, Wahini's grammar school experiences were characterized by her timidity and her obedience. When asked how she remembers her early school years, she replied, "I have good memories of them. But … I was very, very shy. I think I could go through a whole school day without speaking to anyone." While she continuously mastered increasing academic requirements, Wahini became more involved with her peers through the interests which she discovered for herself, e.g. writing for the local paper and the vocational home economics club.

All three participants became aware of themselves by negotiating the positions of their selves in relation to others and world (interests) as well as to themselves. These negotiations required them to explore their social existence in regard to their aloneness. Aloneness is the extent to which they understand their Otherness, which pertains to their peers and their interests (world). The space between their social relations and their Otherness is the space in which they could come to terms with what is true and what is false for them. False should be understood as that which is externally imposed on them, detrimental or out of character. True is that which allows them to further their selves, to become. Thomas made the point perfectly when he stated that the best teachers were those who left him alone to figure things out:

> You're in a sense trying to write the world in terms of your own vision, and so, to some extent, it takes a while to figure out, well, who am I? And what is the nature of my voice? What is it that I particularly want to explore or explain or deal with? And that takes a certain amount of being on your own.

It is in this space that the process of becoming self-aware takes place, a process which is continuous and life-long.

In the space between their social existence and their aloneness, Wahini, Julio and Thomas became aware of their dispositions to themselves, which enabled them to start constructing their guiding principles for their being and becoming. Kierkegaard (1941/1954) referred to this notion as one's own supervision, and Nietzsche's (1883/1978) Zarathustra declared: "'This is *my* way; where is yours?' – thus I answered those who asked me 'the way.' For *the* way – that does not exist" (p. 195). To *design*, rather than to *find*, one's way is essential to self-awareness and possible only in the space between one's social existence and one's aloneness. With this self-awareness, one can then determine one's relationships to Other by one's relationship to self *before* determining one's relationship to self by that to Other.

Tension as a Necessary Means for Becoming

All three participants experienced tensions or conflict as a great part of their early educational experiences. These tensions existed between self and Other, self and world, and, as described above, within their selves. The obvious tensions for Thomas were caused by his seeming lack of academic abilities. About his early school years he says, "Part of it was intimidation, you know, a sense of feeling of being put on the spot." For Julio, tensions consisted in his unfreedom posited by the metanarratives[4] of his times regarding Hispanics, which dictated that he get a job after high school instead of going to college. He remembered, "My father kept saying, 'What are you doing reading? You get to work. Don't be wasting your time reading. You need to work.'" Wahini's tensions emanated primarily from her shyness, which led her to think of herself as having had "a poor self-image." In all three narratives, tensions with Other and world initiated tensions with self. By engaging in those tensions, the participants were simultaneously forced and enabled to continuously face their dispositions to self. In this regard, Thomas concluded, "It's great to be unpopular, nerdy or whatever early on and then you sort of grow into the size of your feet and you become something as a result. You just become more mature and you're ready for it." The tensions they experienced led them to face their aloneness out of which they designed "their ways" in Nietzsche's sense.

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[4] The metanarrative is the story of a common history, which it legitimizes. It represents the totality of knowledge and meaning as objective truths (Lyotard, 1984).

As one is forced to face one's dispositions to self, one becomes aware of oneself. For example, Julio observed,

> When I was growing up here, I had a few friends, but in high school I knew I was not … I mean I didn't come to the realization until I got to high school that I was not like the rest of the people that were there. I was from here but not like them.

Thomas said, "It's often the conflict or the assumed conflict or whatever one wants to call it that made [people] think more about it and caused [them] to think about it in another way." And Wahini reflected on her perceptions of social tensions by saying, "I wasn't part of a clique. I don't know if there were cliques. I was not so concerned about it or affected by it."

For Wahini, Julio and Thomas, the experiences of tensions allowed them to place themselves in the greater scheme of their social existence while putting them in a position to learn what is important or *true* to them.

Agency and Ownership Position

One thing that stood out as Wahini, Julio and Thomas reflected on their lives was the way in which they positioned themselves in relation to their experiences. Each of them assumed an attitude of ownership, which was expressed in an active rather than a passive voice throughout their narratives. In other words, they did not talk about what *happened* to them; instead, each talked about what they *did*. For Wahini, her growing up in the 1950s placed a multitude of gender limitations on her possibilities. She described her life as having taken every opportunity she had created for herself while having gone one step further than the road ahead of her. The manner in which Wahini interpreted her experiences composed a narrative with focus on possibility rather than on impossibility, on what she *could* do rather than on what she *could not* do; in short, on her agency.

While Wahini never really talked directly about the tensions she undoubtedly experienced, Thomas and Julio did so matter-of-factly, never emotionally, and only after my continuous probing. For example, Julio proposed to forget negative experiences. Below is an excerpt from our second structured interview:

Julio: I can be happy where ever.
Sonja: How do you do it?
Julio: I don't know. I don't have time to be depressed. I mean, yeah, I do but ehhh it's ok. I think that if we have depression or something, anything like that is not a good thing to feel.

Sonja: But we don't choose being sad. It's not like we can help it.

Julio: No, we can't, but you can choose to keep going. Or you can just say, you know what? I gotto go do something else, you know?

Sonja: Yeah … Doesn't always work, though. There were two years of my life that I was severely depressed. Extremely sick. So bad that, mercifully, I don't have memory of those years.

Julio: Oh, good! That's excellent! That is beautiful! That's how I do it. There was … several years I was like that, too. I don't concentrate on … I guess I forget things easily. I don't pay attention to the heavy stuff. I'm focused on what stocks are going up with population problems, I'm focused on the books, I'm focused on different things.

I continued this conversation by pointing out to Julio that it seems to me he has eidetic memory since he recalled experiences with astounding detail. He admitted, "I do have good memory, but there's some things I choose not to remember because it's not important." In contrast, Wahini's narrative does not include potentially depressive or traumatic experiences. This is a choice she made either when relaying her stories to me or one that she made some time in the past, and as a result of it, those memories are displaced from her personal grand narrative.

The concept of agency and ownership position was transparent in the narratives of all three participants. Their stories are those of agents who act and narrate their lives with focus on intentionality.

Learning as Awakening

This study investigated what role participants' interpretations of early educational experiences play in their personal grand narrative. In their narratives, Julio, Wahini and Thomas told their educational experiences as a form of awakening to themselves and to the world. For Julio and Wahini, this happened in large part through their ability to read and through their love of stories. Stories, so Pulitzer Price winning author Adam Johnson (2012) noted, have the unique ability to draw us out of our private lives, in which we are stuck as a limitation of being human, by communicating to us the private lives of others. Wahini called the library her "haven," and by 4th grade, she was reading biographical fiction books that enabled her to *see* the world beyond the island she lived on. It is conceivable that her experience with stories played a role in her decision to choose a college away from the

island, seeking exposure "to the rest of the world." Julio interpreted his experiences with stories similarly. When I asked him if he experienced some form of culture shock when leaving his hometown for a college that had 16 Hispanics among 18,000 students, he replied, "No. Maybe because I had read so much about other cultures." He shared how he read books whose characters were African-American and how he tried to read their phonetically written speech out loud. In contrast, Thomas' inability to read until after 5th grade led him to awaken first to the natural world by following his curiosity about how things work. He reminisced,

> I took a piece of old glass and put it on top of a piece of sensitive paper and took it out in the yard and let the sun turn it into a picture. And then it goes dark and it was just cool. It was just really neat. So it was the mystery or the magic of it or the wow kind of thing. Or you take a magnifying glass and then heat something enough to set it on fire. I mean that in and of itself is pretty magical. You know, the sun and the light and so on focused in this way?

For Julio, this kind of awakening to the natural world happened in a similar way though it was not primarily driven by curiosity but by need. He explained,

> We would ride out here to the levee, and we would shoot the rabbits there, and then we would be able to ride home with two or three rabbits, and we would skin them and my mother would cook them. I read a lot about rifles and the bullets and the knives and what to do with the skins. It's how to use the little brains, to tan the skins when we needed to.

Julio became a biologist, Thomas a visual artist and photographer, and Wahini became a professor of literacy.

The early educational experiences as described, interpreted and placed in the narratives of the participants illuminate how learning awakened them to themselves and to their worlds. This kind of awakening enabled them to understand the individual ways in which they know the space and the time they inhabit, and how they know differently from those with whom they share that space and time. With this understanding, they were able to locate themselves in the greater scheme of things. To this extent, Julio noted, "I try to see the meaning and the significance of actions that we do today get set in the larger picture and what it means for the future, and what it means for today." This idea can be likened to a photomosaic: it is necessary to locate oneself in the picture to see one's immediate surroundings, and it is equally necessary to be

able to zoom out and grasp the whole image of which one is part and to which one contributes simply by existing. Through one's awakening to the manner in which one exists in the world, self-awareness is made possible as one's relations to self, Other and world are illuminated. This particular kind of awareness is the prerequisite to devise one's singular ways to deal with one's realities.   It is the foundation to owning one's freedom to continuously decide how to place oneself in the world.

Kierkegaard (1941/1954) noted that education is "the curriculum one had to run through in order to catch up with oneself, and he who will not pass through this curriculum is helped very little by the fact that he was born in the most enlightened age" (p. 57). Thomas, Wahini and Julio passed through this curriculum when they made experiences in the space between their social existence and their aloneness and as they reflected upon these experiences by owning them and their interpretations. They began to catch up with themselves, or to find themselves out, as they awakened to their existence in the immediate and the distant realities of time and place. This initial self-awareness enabled them to make decisions that led to higher levels of self-awareness, which tightened their agency role and ownership position in their personal grand narratives.

Significance for Curriculum Theory And Praxis

This kind of awakening or catching up with the self is reminiscent of Sartre's (1956) concept of original choice, which is the idea that at one point in life a basic existentialist choice is made from which all other choices emanate. Sartre (1956) points out that this is not an instantaneous event but one that initiates a person's consciousness of his original project[5] and then reaffirms or changes it every time the person chooses him/herself.

Julio, Thomas and Wahini made their original choice, which led up to a key experience based on which they designed their professional paths. Julio spent his early childhood hunting rabbits to help feed the family and later, as he no longer fit in socially, withdrew into books. His key experience happened when he started college and enrolled in the environmental club. He described this moment exclaiming, "It was like OH MY GOD! This is where I got to go! This is where I could do the stuff that I

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[5] One's *original project* is an idea also introduced by Sartre (1956). It refers to one's becoming through the choices one makes. Sartre (1956) suggested that an individual is the sum of his decisions, which in turn determine who he is. In other words, I am the person who made these decisions as much as I become that person.

dreamed about! I said, 'The hell with the cars and that stuff.'" Julio made this experience after he had "dropped out," which is how he refers to the summer after graduating from high school, and worked as a car parts salesman satisfying his father's request to get a job once he finished school. For Thomas, the original choice experience happened throughout his years of explorations in his grandfather's basement and was most explicitly brought to consciousness when the dean of the college he attended suggested he take a drawing class. Up until this point, Thomas had been attending college merely because it was expected of him as a White middle class male, the exact opposite expectations from those for Julio. Once Thomas took the drawing class, college started to make sense to him. Wahini's original choice seems evident in her reply to a high school guidance counselor, who explained that as a female, the best she can do is to become a teacher: "So I'm gonna be a teacher. It's the highest available for me."

The way the three participants described it, their original choice was repeatedly reaffirmed over years and at some point culminated in a decision that would become their lives' paths. From the beginning, Wahini's way of breaking through barriers, Julio's intellectual curiosity and Thomas' fascination with structure and illusion were the result of their inability to live up to or to be satisfied with how they were expected to function among others. In other words, the tension between what was expected of them and how they were, caused them to design ways of existing that bridged the gap between their selves and the world they existed in. By designing their individual ways to address the tension between self and world, they made original choices. The alternative would have been to not choose themselves but to change themselves in an attempt at conformity.

As professor of education at a Texas university, I am alarmed by my students' need for conformity. They are often primarily concerned with meeting my presumed expectations instead of owning an assignment. For example, they become insecure if I don't precisely outline the page – or word count for an assignment or its exact structure. They get flustered if I just explain its purpose and give them a rubric with the instructions to reflect on the issue at hand through a medium of their choice depending on their multiple intelligences. I am aware of the fact that this reaction is caused by prior experiences, probably made in k-12th grade classrooms where they had to follow exact templates or step-by-step instructions to make an A and were punished with a lower grade if they showed any notion of independent problem-solving

skills. After all, how much independent thinking can be tested in multiple-choice format? The point is that these are my future colleagues, and their fear of being wrong and their need for obedience makes them too docile to challenge the status quo. If they feel more fulfilled when following instructions than when experiencing the joy of figuring things out for themselves or when creating a world in accordance with their ever-evolving worldviews, they will not be educators but mercenaries in a system always intent on control.

Amid the effect the current migrant crisis has on the waning cohesiveness of the European Union and as a German, I am reminded of Hannah Arendt's (1978) notion of *thoughtlessness*. After interviewing Adolf Eichmann during his trials in Jerusalem, Arendt (1978) noted that Eichmann functioned well as long as he was given rules designed to follow an external structure. This worked for him in Germany under the Nazi regime as well as in the Israeli prison system during the trial. But in situations for which no routine procedures existed, Eichmann was helpless. Arendt (1978) concluded that it was his lack of "firm ideological convictions" (p. 4) and *thoughtlessness* that led him to become a human being who thought up and organized genocide. *Thoughtlessness* is the absence of reflectivity. Every event, experience, fact, etc. requires a person to reflect upon it before acting upon the subsequent one, which is impossibly exhausting; hence, rules and external structures facilitate an individual's way of dealing with reality (Arendt, 1978). But in lieu of individual guiding principles and dispositions, one adopts those of the next best authority and becomes its widget.

The purpose of this paper was to think about the purpose of school and what it means to be an educated person. The purpose of school, at least in part, must be to enable students and (pre-service) teachers to design their individual dispositions. For this to be possible, curriculum must be used thoughtfully, reflectively, provocatively, and humanely as a medium through which people's stories, beliefs, and epistemologies meet. The tensions experienced as one becomes open to self, Other, and to the world are a necessary element in the process of assuming agency. To assume agency is to give meaning to the world. Sartre (1956) noted, "We choose the world, not in its contexture as in-itself but in its meaning, by choosing ourselves" (p. 596). In other words, because I am an infinitesimal part of this world, I am also its creator. The world does not exist in itself so much as it exists in the ways I give meaning to it, which I do through my singular set of lenses. This kind of consciousness does not come by itself. In

fact, I want to suggest here that it is a fundamental aspect of what it means to be an educated person; hence, cultivating it needs to be part of education. It can be initiated through conversation that brings the private into the public sphere, which allows students and teachers to understand how others view their beliefs and how they question them. The purpose or goal of the conversation is not to resolve opposing truths by reaching some consensus but to make those truths visible. As a result, all can understand more deeply how their beliefs are grounded in culture, tradition and experience. In this way, students and teacher continuously check and re-check their dispositions to self while reaffirming their agency. This is what school and education must make possible in this most enlightened age.

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Data Inventory

Table 1

Data Inventory by Participant

Data Type		Thomas	Julio	Wahini
Historical Documents	Report cards	-	-	3
	Award certificates	-	-	4
	Newspaper clippings	-	1	1
	Memoirs	2	-	3
Interviews	Informal	2	5	2
	Structured	3	3	3
	Member check	2	2	2
Artifacts		1	-	-
Photographs		1	3	2

Table 2
Complete Data Inventory

Data Source	Frequency	Pages	Total
Current documents (email conversations, text messages)	continuous	About ½ page per week for 24 weeks	12
Historical documents (report cards, award certificates, newspaper clipping, memoirs)	14 documents	About 2 pages per document	28
Informal interviews	At least 6 ten- to thirty-minute interviews	2 pages summary per interview	12
Structured and semi-structured interviews	9 one-hour interviews	About 40 pages per interview	360
Member check interviews	6 one-hour interviews	About 40 pages per interview	240
Artifacts	1 object-elicitation	2 pages per object-elicitation	2
Photographs	6 photo-elicitations	1 page per photo-elicitation	6
Researcher's reflections	continuous	About 5 pages per week for 24 weeks	120
Peer reviews	7 reviews	2 pages per review	14
			Approx. 794 pages

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