The Many Gifts of RSI

In recent months, stakeholders at institutions of higher education have clamored to explain, analyze, and implement the concept of Regular and Substantive Interaction (RSI) in online courses. The conversation around RSI began in 2019, with the Department of Education's Negotiated Rulemaking process (Department of Education) and was formalized in a July 1, 2021, set of regulations that define the terms "regular" and "substantive," in addition to a constellation of related terms such as "academic engagement" and "instructor." RSI serves as the primary federal-level differentiator between correspondence and distance courses, with the latter providing the opportunity for students to interact with instructors predictably and requiring instructors to engage proactively with students at risk or upon their request. The rubber meets the proverbial road over the question of financial aid eligibility. Students enrolled in correspondence courses are not eligible for federal financial aid, while those enrolled in distance courses are. It is now the case that if a school wants its students to be able to use federal dollars to attend, it must find meaningful ways for its distance instructors to hear them—to know their stories, to hear their questions, to accompany them in their learning. The reasons for this are many. For instance, research has widely and consistently demonstrated that students who feel a sense of belonging retain better and report higher levels of personal well-being. It has shown as well, however, that students who identify with a group that is underrepresented in their learning space find belonging to be more challenging (Supiano). RSI foregrounds language-based interaction (writing, speaking), and in so doing, it offers a means to create a more equitable and inclusive student experience, one that both seeks and creates real community in the online space. This is a gift RSI gives us.

As a partner in a firm working with many campuses on evaluating, improving, or creating their online curriculum, I get a front-row seat to many of the conversations—conversations that are, at this point at least, largely focused on compliance, the question of what a campus needs to do to stay out of trouble. Other stops along my professional journey, however, have given me a somewhat broader

perspective on the good that RSI can do for students, for the institutions that serve them, and ultimately for the larger public sphere. I spent more than a decade as an academic administrator at one of the largest not-for-profit providers of online education in the world. From our earliest days, in the interests of educational quality and retention, we included RSI as an intentional part of our course design and structure. Classes were relatively small (25 or fewer students), and each student had multiple planned interactions with the instructor via discussion board or some other mechanism. Instructors provided timely individual feedback on assignments and had procedures in place to identify and reach out to students who were disconnecting, and they regularly offered opportunities for more interaction via phone, video conference, or some other means. Granted, not every student wanted to interact meaningfully or deeply with their online faculty members, and not every faculty member was adept at drawing out a student who preferred to stay under the radar. The opportunity to engage deeply, however, was typically there. At the time, I often thought of those digitally mediated interactions and somehow less real or meaningful than those I had with my residential students, with whom I could share a coffee or a joke about some campus happening. My perspective on this shifted later, however, when I took another job at a smaller, primarily residential campus for which engagement was a core piece of its brand identity. Working in student success and admissions there, I both observed and worked to structure a thriving campus culture, a strongly loyal student body, and a community enriched by its constant interaction. Yet it was not until March 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic upended higher education as we knew it, that I came to understand and appreciate the opportunities that text-based, digitally mediated RSI can create for engagement that reflects and embraces the real diversity of the university community.

Until Spring 2020, like many of us no doubt, I simply assumed that the sort of easy, place-based engagement that happens on a residential campus is optimal and that online does well when it in some digital way mimics those interactions. Not until COVID did many of us notice the extent to which our strong campus cultures had unwittingly created a false sense of uniformity, flattening out difference and stifling the voices of would-be contributors. Moreover, when residential campuses returned to business

more or less as usual in 2021-22, they discovered that many of the ways they had previously created engagement—orientation weeks, big "get to know each other" events, and so on—no longer worked. Dawn Meza Soufleriz, vice president for student development and campus life at Montclair State, reports that in a campus-wide survey, students remarked that they did not know how to approach someone to be a friend or to date (McMurtrie, "Last Year")—something that previously we would have taken for granted. Institutions of all stripes, then, need to approach interaction and community building deliberately, with an understanding that it will not simply happen. In this context, the structure that RSI provides presents both online and residential campuses with an opportunity to practice conversational hospitality, an important first step toward addressing the culture-wide problems that higher education aims to solve.

In the RSI space, interactions among students and instructors should be not just transactional or functional, but hospitable, characterized by a deliberate and willful posture of openness, welcome, and kindness. They should make space not just for course content but for the people learning it. Both students and instructors need to be taught how to do this: how to communicate in a digital medium, how to use language to achieve a desired end, how to address a diverse and sometimes widely conflicted audience. The Greek word for hospitality, *philoxenia*, means the love of strangers; it is a virtue to be cultivated rather than an inclination or personality trait—and it is hard to do. Derrida's essay on hospitality points to the ways in which extending hospitality makes us vulnerable. Imagine the scene of hospitality: I am at home, and I answer a knock at my door. I admit someone who is in some deep way other to me—and then the difficulty ensues. Why, in this scene, am I vulnerable, and how does my discomfort with my weakness play out? First, Derrida notes, for a space to be hospitable, it needs a door, a way in or out (61). Although this seems obvious, the point is that hospitality cannot happen without some prior decision to be open to sharing my space with another. To add to this, once through that door, the object of hospitality—whom Derrida calls the "foreigner"—introduces what he calls a clash of law systems, or a conflict in ways of doing life (79). Because the foreigner operates in a fundamentally different way than I do, answering to a different authority structure and *logos* (5), Derrida argues, encountering him means that I have to pay

attention to why I do all the things I normally don't think about. He makes me evaluate my values, my ethical stances, and my habits, and he forces me to ask hard questions about which of my typical practices are true expressions of my beliefs and which are merely custom—my own comfortable way of living in my house, my community, my nation (45). This, Derrida says, "puts me in question" (3).

One way to guard against the vulnerability that hospitality creates, Derrida suggests, is to lay down the law—a process that might be almost automatic, and typically not ill-intended. By its very nature, whether in the individual interaction or on an international scale, hospitality always prompts a "rigorous delimitation of thresholds or frontiers" (47, 49): boundaries. We might, for instance, take special care to communicate about how we do things on this, our home turf: sit here, we say, you can lay your coat there, oh! our carpet is new, so we remove our shoes. In a university setting, we do this through official documents such as the course catalog or the syllabus. Or we might enforce our "laws" in other, less explicit ways. Residential campuses do this in spades, with myriad unwritten rules about, for example, how long a person can occupy a piece of gym equipment or where a freshman should sit at a football game; knowledge of the nicknames of various campus locations; generations-old lore passed on through secret societies, Greek groups, and alumni; and traditions that are all but incomprehensible to any outside the community. For many, there is great pleasure in mastering these bits of native knowledge—of becoming an insider rather than an outsider. But the process of getting there can be alienating and painful, the opposite of hospitable and welcoming. In the distance learning space, similarly, students who behave like natives have become literate in institutional systems (Canvas, the registration system, the library), know how to get answers to their questions, have found a person or two in the call center that they feel they know, and deploy the terminology and acronyms of their field of study with a native's skill. At commencement, they hug their professors, whom they have come to think of as mentors and friends.

Derrida asks us to consider the primary role that language plays in the hospitality that our communities extend (or deny) to those seeking to join: "[The foreigner] has to ask for hospitality in a language which by definition is not his own, the one imposed on him by the master of the house, the host,

the king, the lord, the authorities, the nation, the State, the father, etc." (15). Even an act as simple as calling a foreigner by his name, Derrida notes, involves placing him in a value structure that he may not share: language functions as both a set of customs or values and a linguistic system that permits communication (133). For example, the use of the father's surname as a child's last name in British and American contexts is not shared in many large swaths of the world, including Latin America, where both the mother's and father's names make a portmanteau that a child carries through life. Leading with an individual's first name, a typical way an American introduces himself, is not a custom shared by Chinese citizens, who put their family name first as a gesture of respect to their ancestors and often, until familiarity and even friendship is achieved, include a title in the formal name as well. For us to address a Chinese person we have just met by their given name alone would create possible offense. For exiles, language is often a "means of belonging"—the homeland. It is "the home that never leaves us" (Derrida 89). So when we take from an exile his native language, we make a power play, reminding a foreigner that he does not belong. Institutions of higher education are typically rule-following places, and learning spaces, whether residential or online, tend to reward those who have learned the system and the lingo of our campuses and systems.

To be fair, campuses cannot function without clearly delineated rules, and a process of transition for students cannot be avoided; it is the price of learning to operate in a new sphere. Indeed, in the earliest days of the American university, Gerald Graff notes, the primary function of education was just this: socialization into the community (27). The point was not so much to learn how to practice an academic discipline, but to function within the system. Even today, we often take it to be a good sign when a student maneuvers through the systems the institution sanctions. To take an example: statistically—and people who watch retention indicators play these odds—a student who joins a sorority, earns a 3.5 GPA, and wears a school spirit shirt in her latest TikTok is likely to persist; those plot points foreshadow graduation in the final chapter of this student's story. In a distance learning model, similarly, we take as indicators of engagement certain data points mined from the learning management system (LMS),

frequencies of interactions with the call center, and other metrics stored in the Student Information System (SIS). Engaged students do and say expected things: they call us, they turn things in, and they register for the next term's courses. Yet knowing how to function well within a system is not the same thing as having internalized its values. It may well be the case that the 3.5 sorority-rushing student shows well as a campus statistic not because she has found her calling but because she is working hard to meet the demands of her overbearing parents, trying to escape a difficult roommate situation by spending all her time at the library, or using the sorority network to make up for her isolated, rural, first-generation upbringing. Similarly, we may learn that an online student who sometimes misses deadlines may do so not because he is sloppy or apathetic but because he is deployed with the military or unable to access reliable internet.

The third campus role I have played, English professor, has positioned me to attend to the disruptions, adjustments, questions, silences, and withdrawals that happen when non-native speakers of campus lingo attempt a substantive interaction. The moment in which the student perceives a lack of hospitality indicates far less about a student's ability to transition to an educational institution, I would argue, than with the fact that the campus has not allowed the student sufficient space to move around in the new environment—and to do so in the company of others. I know, for instance, that the particular culture and mood of any given Victorian novel emerges not from the facts it contains but from the tensions produced when its huge cast of characters goes in motion. Each character has a voice and a sphere of influence,[i] and sometimes they bump into one other. Character drives plot, which in turn shapes character. By its very nature, RSI creates the potential for these productive tensions to emerge, in that it foregrounds relationship and communication—the messy places where words bump against words and selves explore their boundaries. Character, whether it be Jane Eyre or an online learner completing a research project, is always bigger than the plot it generates.[ii]

The online interactions I had with my typically residential students in the Spring of 2020 illustrate this. Until we moved to an online meeting space, our time together had mostly been spent within the

boundaries of our four classroom walls; we sat in a circle and talked about books together, a harmonious little band. After our COVID pivot, though, my students Zoomed in from homes with stray objects in the background and the barking of unseen dogs; babysitting and landscaping jobs crowded the time usually dedicated for learning; low bandwidth impeded already-challenging attempts at communication; economic inequality typically hidden behind uniformly grungy hoodies and Converse sneakers suddenly announced itself, loud and proud. The baggage students could usually hide under their dorm room beds was there, weighing down their interactions. As an administrator, I had long been aware of the need to address and to be addressed by students' stories in an open and inclusive fashion: a quick scan of articles in NACADA publications over the last few decades reveals consistent attention to and advocacy for the varying needs of ethnically diverse student populations, other-abled students, students with specific life situations (e.g., deployed military, single parents), and so on. We do not lack sensitivity or a desire to hear students' stories. Yet, I would argue, until the new RSI framework shifted the focus from educational outcomes to outcomes *with interaction*, many campuses, especially those with online programs, had no structural reason to address students' learning contexts as part of their pedagogy. RSI gives us a mandate, and at the same time, it gives us an opportunity. A hospitable campus environment that encourages RSI has the potential, if rightly embraced, to reveal and amplify its own diversity without even a slight demographic shift.

The Rules of Campus Storytelling

Asking students to interact more with their instructors requires, of course, the use of language— and that does not come without complications. Questions of the relationship between language and equity have presented at the American university (and British universities before it) since its inception: should one have to learn to "talk the university talk" in order to earn a degree credential? While few if any explicitly wish for universities to engage in sophisticated exercises in elitist gate-keeping, in which the values of the ruling class are reproduced among the privileged few who earn a credential (Graff 83), just that sort of gate-keeping can often be the effect of the way universities handle texts, both their own and

the students'. In part, these questions about how to approach and teach interaction stem from the fact that there is no real consensus in the American university system about what purpose a degree ought to serve. Nor has there been since the first days of the American university. During the Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution, the time during which American universities found their footing, several models of education informed the American approach, including newly sprouted trade schools for the working and middle classes, research-based German institutions, and the traditional tutor system in play at both Oxford and Cambridge. To varying degrees, these embraced as their goal practical job training, the creation of new knowledge, and the molding of educated citizens, as do the universities of today.

One particularly influential stream of thought was best articulated in nineteenth-century Oxford, which took as its goal the education of citizens for public life. Oxford don J.H. Newman, who literally wrote the book on the liberal arts with his 1852 manifesto *The Idea of a University*, argues that preparation for specific careers (what he calls "instruction") belongs in trade schools, while the university ought to focus on education—the pursuit of knowledge as its own end (128). Newman's "gentleman," the product of this university education, possesses knowledge and sympathies wide and deep enough to allow him never to inflict pain on others (239), something he accomplishes by listening well, adjusting his words to suit the situation, and working for the good of those around him. Newman describes the university as a space that cultivates broad understanding and virtue in its students, making them into citizens capable of acting for the common good. One cannot work for others' good, after all, unless one understands who those others are—what they value and what they need. Matthew Arnold, another Oxonian, doubles down on education's potential to improve the tenor of society, making it more reasonable and tasteful. Like Newman, Arnold argues that a university education in "the best that has been thought and known" (*Culture and Anarchy* 79) possesses inherent value; at the same time, it serves a civic function in that it helps the newly prosperous to use their power rightly by shaping their aesthetic and moral sense (*Culture* 85, Ferreira-Buckley 200). While Arnold believes that independence, energy, and financial success could do much to raise the profile of a nation, "all the liberty and industry in the

world will not ensure these two things: a high reason and a fine culture," without which no nation can become "a *great* nation" ("Democracy" 20). In a socially mobile culture, Arnold argues, education makes it possible to collaborate for the greater good.

While Newman and Arnold focus primarily on the ways in which education shapes the individual's sentiments and tastes, Adam Smith, Hugh Blair, and a host of later Utilitarian thinkers include another term in the conversation—language. In *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, Smith endorses studying literature, as it can serve as a conduct manual of sorts for the rising middle class (Court 29-30). For Smith, free-market capitalism, the belles lettres, and bourgeois virtue form a sort of holy triad (Longaker 2), with the combination of skillful language, strong listening and storytelling skills, and cultural savvy together creating a class of rising leaders. Similarly, Hugh Blair's identically titled *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles-Lettres*, which was widely assigned in the early days of the American university system (Webster 35), describes the study of literary taste and expression as a means to achieve "a public or civic discourse fit for socializing future citizens" (Graff 42); he sees the development of taste that comes with literary study as a "civic obligation, [since] individuals exercising correct judgment could effectively shape a national sense of taste" (Downs 6). Taking the patterns evident in nature and received communal standards as his indices of taste, Blair offers a highly technical guide to correct English language usage, dissecting and critiquing passages from Swift, Addison, and others to illustrate his points (15-18). For Blair, language precedes feeling, and feeling precedes action, so learning to express oneself properly has the effect of regulating emotions, in turn making one able to act for the public good (Brinton 35-36). By this logic, teaching people to tell their own stories essentially makes them into what they desire to be. Story makes selfhood; language teaches the emotional posture that shapes identity.

Blair, like Arnold and Newman, did nothing to question the white, British, male cultural dominance of his day (Holmes 206-07); as the editors of the most recent edition of his tome succinctly put it, "Blair's is not an emancipatory rhetoric but one complicit with dominant ideologies" (Ferreira-Buckley and Halloran xxii). At the same time, Blair's faith in storytelling as a means to climb socially

aligns him in key ways with the marginalized and the mobile—those outside the center of power. Not surprisingly, Blair championed the work of Scots dialect poet Robert Burns, whose language usage was anything but standard though undoubtedly artful (McIlvanney 25-27). And Blair's own status as a minister in the Church of Scotland who taught at Edinburgh rather than Oxford or Cambridge personalizes his belief that an individual who learns to talk the talk need not proceed from the centers of privilege to have influence. Indeed, the sort of educational ware he peddled, the Queen's English, was attractive primarily to those who did not already speak it—especially entrepreneurial Americans looking to establish both their national and economic authority.

In the U.S., universities embraced this work, and it found a place among middle-class students especially, many of whom wanted to improve their personal tastes and modes of self-expression in line with their new economic power (Ferreira-Buckley 86).[iii] Early in their collective history and continuing through the twentieth century, then, American universities embraced the study of literature and the humanities, often in a sort of lock-step general education experience, as a means to ossify "common beliefs and values . . . by endowing the student with a sense of common cultural heritage" (Graff 162). The end of this exercise was to teach students to think, speak, feel, and act as the leaders they were in training to become: read the right texts; tell the right tale; feel the right feeling; be the right person. Blair's approach to language, taut with the conflicting pulls of access and gate-keeping, thus points to the tension on which the American university system was built: as we transition students into "talking the talk," do we enable them to access and influence the corridors of power (Elfenbein 27), or do we instead cull those whom we believe ought not to have been there to begin with? Do we use language hospitably, or do we use it as a shibboleth that determines whom we allow to pass through our doors? RSI, rightly deployed, will not allow us to reduce language use to a simple litmus test; rather, as we engage substantively with students on multiple occasions, we gain an understanding of the context in which they learn and move and in turn, invite them to shape our present context as well.

Yet—as with many things—it is far easier to discuss our desire to extend hospitality via RSI than to do it. One relatively fresh failure on my part comes to mind. When I was hosting a meeting in a series of Q&A sessions for incoming college students on behalf of my college's student success office, I found myself interacting with four students, one holding a puppy, one lying in bed, one seated in front of a gun rack, and one continually fielding comments shouted from off-camera. My initial, almost automatic, response was not to engage in substantive interaction with these four students, but to lay down some implicit ground rules. First, seeking an unobjectionable common ground, I picked the safest possible topic: the dog ("Is that a terrier? What is his name? Aww!"). All the while, I was trying to find a way to help the distracted student feel less awkward about his over-crowded home situation. When his own dog barked, I found my opening, saying off-handedly that he'd have no problems with studying on campus since he was already used to concentrating in the midst of background noise. He relaxed his shoulders and smiled, relieved that I had reframed his poverty as an asset. I did not, however, give a name to the less mentionable discomfort caused by both the bed and the guns; in fact, I pretended not to notice, instead asking those two students about their majors and offering a few pieces of advice about how to succeed in each of them. Pace Blair, I granted access, but I steered it through the gates that my administrative safe-sense led me to believe were the better ones—puppies, not pajamas; freshman transitions, not firearms. The end was achieved: I had communicated what sorts of "otherness" or quirk the university would welcome, and I had communicated some ground rules for functioning in the world of the campus. All was smooth, machine-like, and orderly—but not hospitable.

Yet had I allowed myself to engage more substantively with these students, this administrative exercise in creating normalcy might have ended differently and perhaps more richly. How might this look? Arguably, approaching RSI in a spirit of hospitality requires us to invite students (and instructors with them) to become more skilled communicators, adept in rhetorical self-fashioning, emotional awareness, self-expression, and civil discourse—the means by which people get to know one another. Seeing students as apprentice self-storyers will not only help us to approach our campus community with

a more inclusive mindset but will also empower our students to understand their own rhetorical and civic

contexts with more nuance. Traditionally, of course, the role of education has been to bring "the

individual, by way of his own being, into cognizance of the whole" (Jaspers 115); it helps the self to

understand and self-narrate strategically within its contexts, a process Paul Ricoeur has described as a key

developmental step toward becoming a reflective person, capable of positing the self within the world of

signs that surrounds it (46). And J.S. Mill has associated liberal individualism with the ethical burdens

attendant upon being a responsible actor in a consent-based society.[iv] Adam Smith suggests that

individuals who would enter into civil discourse would do well to read a great deal and discuss it with

others, as reading holds up a "mirror" of society, an "impartial spectator" that enables people to see

themselves as others do (*Moral Sentiments* 137).[v] This impartial spectator both shapes the moral

consciousnesses of the readers and gives them a practical vocabulary in which to communicate effectively

and with understanding (Longaker 40, 43). We talk our way to community, not by shouting our

unconsidered opinions but by sharing texts that help us to imagine one another's lives. For Smith, finding

real and robust ways to imagine one another allows human connection to occur not despite but because of

distance. He hoped that self-storying might make us, feelings and all, comprehensible to one another.

The extent to which the language of substantive interaction needs to reflect the rules of standard

or accepted usage remains a matter of some debate, and powerful voices have spoken on both sides.

Against the likes of Hugh Blair, the toweringly influential poet William Wordsworth, in his Preface to

The Lyrical Ballads, argues that to the degree that writers "indulge in arbitrary and capricious habits of

expression, in order to furnish food for fickle tastes, and fickle appetites, of their own creation" (97), so

also do they lose the ability to connect with others "in the company of flesh and blood" (100).

Wordsworth defines a poet as an individual, a "man speaking to men"—albeit a man with a very finely

tuned emotional sense that enables him to perceive shared realities with great insight (103). Similarly, the

rhetorician George Campbell, whose influence in American classrooms rivaled Blair's, joins Wordsworth

in privileging individual modes of expression and emotion over abstract rules for grammar or taste. For

Campbell, words coming from the mouths of real men, what he called the "doctrine of particularity" (Ulman 102), were authoritative, and allowed languages to self-regulate in line with how people actually talked. His pedagogy, then, focuses on helping self-storyers to engage emotionally with their audiences (Golden and Corbett 210)—something even a first-time student might manage—rather than figuring out what to talk about. Engagement happens best, Campbell argues, when the tale a person tells points itself directly at its audience: it must be believable (213), significant and recent (217), and connected in some key way to both the listener (218) and the broader world (219-20). Whately, another Oxford rhetorician, further insists on the local, specific, and particular nature of communication. Effective rhetoric, he says, should address things that matter to the speaker and that either already matter or ought to matter to his audience as well. To find this shared space, Whatley argues, a person should learn to speak naturally and, as much as possible, should narrate as himself, a process that can at first feel exposing and embarrassing (Golden and Corbett 393) but that, if completed successfully, will create a larger, richer story in which more people meaningfully find their place. Thus, an instructor looking to incorporate RSI in her courses might want to encourage students to speak from places where they already feel like an authority—their own experience, their local communities, their areas of expertise.

Done rightly, RSI provides a safe and hospitable space in which to try out new narrative selves to see how they play with different audiences; moreover, it offers opportunities for students and instructors alike to test the validity of feelings, tastes, and viewpoints against those of a much larger group. Understood as RSI, moments spent in meet-and-greets during welcome week ought not only to be places where extroverts shine and others feel awkward (though indeed, they are and likely always will be that), but also educational spaces in which individuals are given the enormous gift of being able in repeated and compressed fashion to experience themselves "indirectly from the particular standpoints of other individual members of the same social groups, or from the generalized standpoints of the social group as a whole to which he belongs" (Mead 134). Similarly, in the online space, RSI creates the potential to reclaim the space of online interaction as a realm of civil discourse for the purpose of building better

educated selves and a stronger public sphere. College success from the first moment is imbedded in story: me telling you the tale of myself in language that is my own but doing it in a skillful way that helps you to feel as I do. It is not a grafting onto some ancient tree in an exclusive arbor, but rather an invitation, given and received, to experience the world in an emotively particular and sympathetic way. To be educated is to learn to feel with another across difference, and to ask others to feel with us as well.

English Class Meets Student Success

How can instructors in all disciplines embrace this approach to RSI—articulating something that belongs to the speaker (a feeling, a value, a belief, a concern, a question, an application, a connection, a piece of knowledge) and inviting others to share it? First, in studying how our students choose to sympathize, we learn a great deal about what they value. To take an example: as a middle schooler, I lost a great many hours of sleep to *Jane Eyre*; nearly 150 years old at that point, the text nonetheless called out to me as though it had been written precisely for my misunderstood, slightly haughty adolescent self. I fell in love with Rochester and Thornfield and all things gruff and gothic, and I transferred my Hollywood affections from some *Saved by the Bell* character to Harrison Ford to mark the moment. I have read the book a dozen or more times since, and now my favorite part of the story happens away from the romance, where Jane founds a rural school and grows her own independent spirit with it. What is the story Jane tells? For a romance-hungry adolescent such as I was, it is a story of perfect, endlessly conversant love; for an adult such as I am, it is a story of making a rewarding career impact. In reading Jane—both Janes— I find "my people." And indeed, like these Janes that call out to different audiences, the self does exist within any number of sociological categories, places, and affiliations, what Jaspers calls the "absolute historicity of those who encounter one another" (27). On campuses, those of us who work with first-year students have honed this to an art: helping students to meet those with whom they are likely to find affinities, or, in Adam Smith's language, "fellow-feeling with any passion whatever" (15). Often we have done this by lining up the categories into which students may be sorted: census data, major, zip code, residence hall floor, survey responses, and so on. By this logic, it is hardly a surprise that as an educator I

sympathize most with Jane Eyre in the classroom. Statistics conjure a tale; we assume, often rightly, that we know what sort of story a student would tell about herself, and we assume that we know which listeners will find it worth their time. Yet I alone among all my demographically similar middle-school peers was captured by Jane's narrative. It spoke to me in a way it did not speak to them. And it allowed me to speak in a way that exceeded my demographics as well.

Just as the work that *Jane Eyre* has done for me has far more emotional richness than it could if it were limited to aligning me demographically with parts of Jane's story, so also do the self-disclosures students offer allow us to see them in far greater depth than their demographic categories permit. Jane's story is Jane's; it has not changed between 1843 and 1988 and 2020—yet how I receive it defines my own "formation and coherence" (Frow 16) in tandem with hers. Story initiates relationship, which shapes selfhood. Wayne Booth reads stories as "friendship offerings" that give use-value, profit, and pleasure (174), so as a reader, "if I do go on, it will be because I desire more of 'this,' whatever this kind of companionship is" (Booth 204). At the same time, we do not accept this sort of companionship passively, as though we have no say in how the relationship looks. Booth again: "If . . . I am not an individual self at all, but a character, a social self, a being-in-process many of whose established dispositions or habits belong to others—some of them even to all humankind—then . . . I should be able to embrace the unquestioned ethical power of narratives, in order to try on for size the character roles offered me" (268). At different phases in life, I embrace different aspects of Jane's character, and I point my own life's course accordingly.

Understanding students not as keepers of words that will grant or deny them entry through our gates but as storytellers looking for a receptive audience more aptly captures the way we must move forward given the overladen and often digitally mediated reality in which we now live. Campus storytelling, like some massive educational traffic circle with some travelers already in process, others looking to join, and others moving on, creates a constant and sometimes confusing interchange of signals to which everyone reacts, sometimes out of real time. Storytelling in our current digitized world is not a

one-way message delivered under perfectly controlled conditions, but a negotiation that happens among characters, all of whom both need something and have something to give. Character engages others around, pulling them into its orbit; it demonstrates its ethics in the shape of its presentation, and it engages readers' own ethical capacity as, sorting through their desires, sympathies, and goals, they respond (Bal 37). Students' responses to each other, and ours to their stories as well, tell us much about the complex layers of identification—indeed, of identity—that each of us carries, and reflecting on our own responses allows us to practice inclusive principles in a better way. I should—I realize now—have found a better way to connect with those students (whose names I admit I have forgotten) whom I now think of as "Gun Rack Guy" and "Pajama Girl." It seemed to me that as characters, the three of us did not belong in the same book. Gun Rack Guy should have been in a story about masculinity and rural culture, and Pajama Girl should have been in some sort of teen novel, where failing to offer deference to persons in authority was a badge of honor. Yet perhaps those were not the stories they intended to tell at all—or perhaps I needed to make room in my story for a voice besides my own.

Other questions ought to inform our approach to RSI as well. For instance: why does your story start here, rather than somewhere else? What is the story's overall trajectory—or to put this differently, in the big story of your life, what would progress or success look like, and what threatens it? And what are you choosing to leave out of your tale? The first of these, about where the student chooses to start her story, has been a point of discussion in literary circles since formal criticism began. Henry James refers to the process of choosing a starting-point as "the very condition of interest" (5), and he admits he finds it achingly difficult and even fear-inducing (4). Stories and the relationships within them must begin and end at some artificial place though in truth, "relations stop nowhere" (James 5); neither can the sustained interest of a reader be counted on unless it appears the story will end well, with the "presumability *somewhere* of a convenient, of a visibly-appointed stopping place" (James 6). "Men can do nothing without the make-believe of a beginning" (7), proclaims George Eliot's all-knowing narrator in *Daniel Deronda*. In short: whatever story a student tells us is by its very nature an excerpt of a much larger

whole, so the way that a student chooses to start her story tells us a great deal about what she thinks is important and interesting, both to herself and to her listeners. Three students approaching an instructor in an online math class for help illustrate this. Student #1 began his query with a statement: "I have a question about #4 on the homework." Student #2 began his with a disavowal: "I've been working on this all night, and I'm about to lose it I'm so frustrated." And Student #3 began with a self-assessment: "I'm not much of a math person, so I am having trouble with this." None at this point has asked a question—yet each has begun in a place that is meaningful. An instructor skilled in RSI will hear behind these three queries not just a question about math but also (1) a student possessed of confident ease that the instructor can help resolve an issue; (2) a student worried the instructor will think he has been lazy; and (3) a student who has decided ahead of time that she cannot learn quantitative material. To engage these students is not as simple as answering the question; it requires, instead, to engage the "why" behind where they began their queries.

In my case, when I asked our pajama-clad student how she had settled on her major (social work), she said that she didn't really know but that she'd always wanted to help people; she then said she might change if she didn't like it. It was not much of a story, but it told me enough: this was a student who felt comfortable choosing a major based on her own desires and inclinations, and the fact that she was not yet settled had not in any way made her rethink her college plans. She felt secure, perhaps too much so. By contrast, when I asked the student seated in front of the guns the same question, he offered a laser-focused answer about how his father had built a landscaping and agricultural supply business with hard work and local connections; his business degree would prepare him to assist with and eventually expand the business beyond his local community. Not surprisingly, I found it much easier to engage with the business student (whose gun rack no longer seemed important) because his story had characters, a setting, and a central conflict. To some degree, I came to know this student and his father; I envisioned their town; and I understood this student's desire to know more so he could do more, even if that would eventually mean leaving the town to which he was obviously loyal. As an administrator, I saw in the

business major a success story in the making. Yet as an educator, I would have done well to ask our pajama-clad student any number of questions to draw her into narrative: if she'd had a chance to observe social workers before, what it meant to her to help people, whether she'd like to focus on helping her home community or another, and so on. I should have invited her to write her own page in our campus book as something more than a list of "likes" and "not sures" and "maybes." I should have offered her a way to become a character in her own story. Instead, I said something about the job opportunities in that field and moved on—a missed opportunity for substantive interaction.

Just as the opening of a student's story ought to interest us, so also should its imagined end. A number of narrative theorists have discussed the different shapes that narratives' conclusions can take. Frank Kermode, for instance, has discussed the Judeo-Christian resonances of stories that end in an apocalypse, in which some sort of conflict between good and evil is followed by an unveiling that makes the deeper meaning of events clear. A good story has a decisive conclusion that makes sense of what came before. Per Kermode, "we use fictions to enable the end to confer organization and form on the temporal structure" (45); "tock" makes "tick" meaningful. When I sat on two occasions with a student in my office, I felt the pull of this sort of narrative pattern. The student, whom I will call Sarah, was initially there because she had been placed on academic probation; it was my job to talk with her about her classes, see if we could together identify a better path to success, and so on. Although Sarah had trouble identifying longer-term goals, she was able to say that in the short term, she wanted to improve her grades. Sarah readily identified what had gone wrong: she had been working too much (she was an LPN) and didn't like her anatomy teacher, and so, feeling disinclined to study, she didn't. Also, she told me, her sister had been the valedictorian, and she was studying at a more elite campus; her family believed in and supported her sister's education more than hers. Finally, Sarah told me that she had gotten in a fight with her mother's boyfriend, so she had to move into a house that was 30 miles from campus. "It was just too much," she said. "Wow," I said, and she felt affirmed. We finagled a schedule change, and we set up a better study plan for her. I talked with her some about taking control of her own story, including

imagining what success would look like over the next three years. She politely thanked me for inspiring her; we set up a date to meet again. I was not convinced the inspiration would go with her through the front doors of our building.

Yet when that second date rolled around, Sarah was ecstatic: she was getting Bs or higher in all her classes. "Why is that?" I asked. Her answer both enlightened and frustrated me: the boyfriend had moved out, and she had found her anatomy professor to be "chill." "So," I asked, "How are you going to explain last semester's bump in the road when you're asked about it in a job interview?" I was hoping to hear a *Bildung*, a story of personal growth. I was hoping Sarah would, à la Jane Eyre, talk about how the hard lessons she had learned would shape her success in the future. Instead, she told me that she was just glad she was "away from all that." While Sarah had found a better pattern, she had done so because others had found it for her. She had not owned her own story, and consequently, she still could not give herself a sense of *telos*, or progress toward a goal. Sarah returned to good academic standing, and she crossed my desk only once more—after she dropped out of classes mid-semester. I reached out to her, but she did not respond. A quick glance at her social media let me know she was leaving the area, going where, in her words, "someone would support her."

On the one hand, it seems clear to me that I had wanted Sarah's story to fit a particular shape: girl meets obstacle, girl overcomes, girl succeeds. Earl Ingersoll has discussed the ways in which such linear narratives, with meaning made between the start and the end, are both too restrictive and too masculine for the complexities of real-life (18), including, I imagine, those surrounding Sarah: a rural, female, Pell-eligible, first-generation college student from a single-parent home. On the other, though, I was right to push her to see herself as an agent in her own narrative: in her version, her success, like her failure, was a product of everyone but herself, and her mother's boyfriend, her anatomy teacher, and her overachieving sister seemed to do more to determine the plot of her life than she herself did. Sarah was a protagonist who would not plot her own story—and of course, that was because she had no end in sight. Peter Brooks defines plot as "the design and intention of narrative, what shapes a story and gives it a certain direction

or intent of meaning" (xi); plot creates meaning by managing the "internal energies and tensions, compulsions, resistances, and desires" that each character carries (xiv). Stories move because the characters in them want things to happen; students' college journeys begin when they identify a "why" behind their wish to earn a degree, and ideally, at least some of these desires will remain unfulfilled until the point of graduation. Desire creates motivation, and motivation invites a student to write her own story in a way that ends well. Indeed, as D.A. Miller argues, the only things really worth narrating are moments where desire is *not* fulfilled: those "instances of disequilibrium, suspense, and general insufficiency from which a given narrative appears to derive" (x). Sarah's failure in anatomy class could have powered her story of becoming a community health worker; instead, she did not own her ability to narrate (and hence pull the strings of) her own life's plot, so her story never really got going.

A final textual question—what is the narrator leaving out?—might inform our approach to students' narratives as well. On the one hand, students may leave virtually everything out simply because they do not know what a narrative looks like; as students earn fewer humanities credits on the average over the course of their degrees, they may face a simple lack of familiarity with typical structures of narrative, or ways to get into and out of a tale. A November 2019 article in *The Chronicle* tracks a 33% decline in numbers of history majors since 2011 and an even steeper one in the numbers of English majors (McMurtrie, "Can You Get Students Interested"). While universities scramble to reconfigure general education offerings and gateway courses, develop humanities-focused majors and certifications that increase employability, and recruit would-be humanities majors earlier and more effectively, the slide continues. So also do the numbers of general education hours students complete in the humanities; history enrollments dropped 8% between 2013-2014, according to a survey by the American Historical Association (Brookins). And as campus cost-cutting rises in priority, so also does the likelihood of eliminating offerings in areas such as Cultural Studies, Philosophy, Classics, or other traditional liberal arts fields that place narrative at the core. They may leave out key details because they think they are not relevant, because they do not believe we care, or because they find them in some way embarrassing,

inconvenient, or incriminatory. A student researching Adverse Childhood Experiences may want to do so because he is worried about his neighbor, because he is interested in making a move to teach in a less affluent school district, or, just perhaps, because it was the first topic that he saw in a list of sample topics. None of these may rise to the level of the "shareable" in a discussion board or instructor interaction—but the failure to articulate a "why" behind the topic choice surely matters.

On the other hand, students show little reluctance in other venues to tell their stories, especially if doing so will allow them to connect with others. For example, the annual "Stanford, I Screwed Up!" program, a "celebration of the epic failures in our lives and the opportunity to share, learn, and grow from them" morphed (ironically) from a loosely organized open mic-style program to a one-credit course in resiliency (The Duck). Besides this, of course, a great number of universities have embraced "tell me your story" as an almost literal gate-keeping device, using it as a prompt for an admissions essay or in freshman writing courses (Sokolik). Still others include it in marketing campaigns (see, for example, the "Moody Student Experiences" from the University of Texas Moody College of Communication) or as part of initiatives geared toward giving voice to underrepresented groups such as first-generation college students ("Stories from First-Generation"). Together, these examples demonstrate that the way we use story has not changed much, if at all, in the past two hundred and fifty years: it can guard the academic gates (Hugh Blair, admissions essays, graded assignments), disseminate community standards and values (Matthew Arnold, marketing), and provide a space—albeit an unstable one—to name ourselves in a way with which others might sympathize (William Wordsworth, first-gen testimonies, Stanford, I Screwed Up!).

In this context, we must be careful to treat these stories, even if at this moment they function mostly as cogs in our gate-keeping machinery, with the attention they deserve. To put this another way: we must embrace the possibilities of RSI to create a truly hospitable space for student voices. This is not easy work. Stories are messy things, but then again, so are people. Indeed, we need the invitation to relationship that story offers precisely because we are so fundamentally incomprehensible to one another.

We differ in deep, insurmountable ways, and we cannot mutually sympathize unless we learn how to help others imagine themselves in our plot, and ourselves in theirs as well. To be more specific: the experiences of Gun Rack Guy, Sarah, the student whose family shouted from off-screen, Pajama Girl, and Puppy Guy led them to make an enrollment deposit at the university where I worked, and beyond that, nothing could be taken for granted. Yet I trust that as students like these learn to tell their stories to one another and imagine each other's lives, they will figure out how to get along. Similarly, religiously plural cultures daily navigate deep ideological divides. Their often minimalist secularism, rather than some sort of deeper consensus based on shared values or beliefs, achieves peace in communities that house people with profound and irreconcilable differences (Bilgrami 29). Linguistically diverse communities have learned to communicate despite the usage differences of, say, a dialect speaker such as Robert Burns, a grammar enforcer such as Hugh Blair, and a plain-language poet such as William Wordsworth. The copiousness of language, even within the same broad linguistic group, forces inclusion and compromise, even as it threatens the idea of a pure and perfect culture (DeWispelare 122)—the fantasy of uniform and unified "us-ness" that so many campuses disseminate. When we choose to think of our students as storytellers, our administrative practices, including the ways in which we structure and approach RSI, must and will shift. We will not speak first of "making a transition" or "joining" the campus community, ecosystem, arbor, or whatever other term we choose to use; instead, we will listen and learn, making space in the busy, full-to-overflowing story we are writing for yet another character, and we will be richer for the shared sympathy.

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[i] Alex Woloch refers to this as the "character space" (18).

[ii] It is appropriate to use literature as a commentary on how students interact in real educational spaces for reasons both literary and philosophical. As Barbara Hardy explains, fiction imitates the structures of everyday life and can thus be used as a means to understand it (4). More famously, Martha Nussbaum, following Adam Smith's idea of the "judicious spectator," has argued that reading fiction is a productive way for a person to develop sympathies that may sharpen his ethical responses for future scenarios in which they may be tested. It is nearly a truism at this point that literature in its many forms all achieve a rhetorical function (Ulman 183).

    The interaction between self and story is one of these ways in which we use fiction to understand everyday life—why are characters, collections of writing on a page, so real? Jonathan Culler, for example, discusses the ways in which analyzing all the roles a character plays in a text fails to capture the "immense residue" that looks to the reader like selfhood; characters are bigger than the plot functions they set in motion (232). Roland Barthes names this residue "personhood," pointing out that although a character is by definition limited by the text he occupies, his existence is supplemented by something like individuality that allows his whole to be perceived as greater than his parts (191). And Alex Woloch sees the emergence of the idea of personhood in a text as a direct result of the ways that characters interact: it is "the combination of different character-spaces or of various modes *through which* specific human figures are inflected into the narrative" (32).

iii As Thomas Miller notes, by the mid-eighteenth century, English composition, literature, rhetoric, and speech were widely taught at the college level in every English-speaking place but England itself (262).

iv Amélie Oksenberg Rorty describes the movement into personhood: the "person" is the combination of the actor donning a mask and the "choices that place him in a structural system, related to others. . . The person thus comes to stand behind his roles, to select them and to be judged by his choices and his capacities to act out his personae in a total structure that is the unfolding of his drama" (309).

       How the institution of the university accomplishes this ethical and civic work has been a matter of debate for centuries. For example, Adam Smith lobbied for a university system that would replace older aristocratic structures of governance and cultural oversight with "a well-educated commercial ruling class sensitive to the responsibilities of leadership"—citizens who had both skills and communally minded ethics (Court 21)—while Hugh Blair, Matthew Arnold, and other purveyors of the belletristic tradition seemed, on the surface at least, to reproduce the elitist paradigm that Smith's dreams of mobility via education were to have upended. The university has been and may be seen as a space in which "the cultural elite reproduce themselves" (Miller 263), as a gate-keeping or credentialing wicket through which young people must pass, as an enclave of liberal politics, and as a money-making fraud.

v This educational process may be painful, but it builds character: as Smith puts it, "If we saw ourselves in the light in which others see us, or in which they would generally see us if they knew all, a reformation would generally be unavoidable. We could not otherwise endure the sight" (182). This thesis resembles that adopted by later sociologists, including Charles Horton Cooley with his conception of the "looking-glass self" and Erving Goffman with his understanding of the self as actor.