

# Navigating Stranger Things

## Creating Bricolage in the Upside Down

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“People don’t spend their lives trying to get a look at what’s behind the curtain. They like the curtain. It provides them stability, comfort, definition.” — Murray Bauman, *Stranger Things*

We are three hybrid teacher educators at a mid-sized Northeastern university in the United States. We teach and research at a land grant university whose larger mission is research and workforce development. Like many traditional universities, the culture in which we work is shaped by neoliberal forces (e.g. Ball, 2012; Connell, 2013; Jenlink, 2016). We teach courses that could be seen as risky, those that promote social justice and equity and encourage students to think and question critically. In contrast, the culture of teacher education in our college promotes teacher training as a system of techno-rational practices. This system imposes itself on our practice as teacher educators and researchers. However, we share a commitment to non-linear perspectives, to social justice oriented teacher education, and to resisting the dominant thinking within this neoliberal space.

We sought to understand the tensions between our embodied personal and professional theoretical orientations and our reciprocal relationship with neoliberal forces. That is, how we are continuously shaped by and in turn shape our neoliberal context and resist and reproduce those forces in our practice. We offer an account of our conversations and activity and how these experiences resisted and reproduced neoliberal paradigms. We employ bricolage self-study to inquire into our examination, discussion, and questioning of our roles within our context, and how those roles inform our understandings of how we live and work against the grain and comply with the system. In sum, we use self-study to understand how we negotiate the tensions between our roles as teacher educators and researchers and the neoliberal context in which we live and work.

## Positionality and Background

We share courses and students in a traditional teacher education program and often find ourselves at odds with the conservative nature of how our school, college, and university maintains status quo systems and structures. We each have felt variously marginalized by the traditionalist and neoliberal forces that shape the broader contexts where we work. These experiences of marginalization are unique to each of us, based on our own identities and positionalities within the institution. Rebecca is a pre-tenure, tenure-track faculty member in teacher education. Her commitments to equity and interests in critical critique of institutions have resulted in attempts to guide the undergraduate curriculum in that direction as well as shift her own courses so that they are grounded in critical theory. However, she feels like she has met resistance at every level and has begun to worry about the possible material effects on her longevity at the institution. Evan was a non tenure-track lecturer

in teacher education who taught elementary social studies methods courses, graduate courses in Action Research, and coordinated the Master's program in education. The intersection of three factors (neoliberal pressures, the tenuousness of his position, and being a critical social studies educator), led to his position being eliminated as we undertook this study. It was clear to our collaborative that neoliberal forces had rendered his work dispensable as the budget for the college was revised. Tammy is also a pre-tenure, tenure-track spousal hire, meaning her spouse was working at the university and she was hired as part of a consensus agreement on part of the dean and faculty. The nature of this hiring process complicates her position within the college and at the university. She has both benefited from and is critical of advantages offered her within a neoliberal context, rendering her simultaneously complicit and resistant and problematizing her stance on issues of power, equity, and justice.

Through conversation, personal and professional, we discovered a shared interest in a non-academic, non-professional television show, the Netflix series *Stranger Things*. In *Stranger Things*, a group of young, unlikely heroes finds themselves battling secretive government forces and monsters from a parallel universe that they term the "Upside Down," a dangerous and dark reflection of the world they live in, which seems intent on invading their plane of existence. It centers a young girl who is made both vulnerable and powerful, a dichotomy that resonated with our own positionings. *Stranger Things* provided us a way to re-interpret our teaching and research process as something different, outside the dominant neoliberal narrative. We decided to use the show's concepts as part of a self-study of our engagement with neoliberal paradigms with the hope that ideas and elements from *Stranger Things* would allow us to create a free(er) space. For example, we named the system within which we work the Upside Down. Further, we sought a safe place within our Upside Down to process the disciplining forces we experienced. Thus, we termed our collaborative community Castle Byers, the name that the team of young protagonists called their private fort in the forest. For the purpose of this self-study, Castle Byers met off campus, in our homes, and other spaces far from the university, and we began each collaborative session informally. This was our safe space as we continued to work in a neoliberal universe. We used these concepts, which allowed us to examine and engage with our experiences in the Upside Down differently, as part of a bricolage that illuminated the ways we navigate individualism, negotiate market ideals, and create spaces to engage in education as a public good rather than as commodification of knowledge. Using bricolage, we laced together images and conceits to demonstrate unstable relations that produce unpredictable knowledge and practice.

## **Methodology**

In conjunction with bricolage, we employed a self-study methodology that required connectedness, a critical orientation toward power, and understandings of self as co-constituted, continuous, and becoming more to simultaneously understand and resist the forces of neoliberalism (Strom, 2015). This combination allowed us to delve into our experiences and to better understand how those experiences shaped and were shaped by the relationship between our teacher educator/researcher practice and the systems and structures of a neoliberal university. We included five characteristics of self-study identified by LaBoskey (2004) in that it is self-initiated and focused, aimed at improvement, interactive, includes multiple data sources, uses mainly qualitative methods, and employs trustworthiness as a measure of validation. In accordance with self-study methods, we systematically collected data regarding our experiences; acted as each other's critical friend in interpreting that data; and employed an innovative method analyzing that data. Because we wished to examine our experiences in terms of interconnectedness, non-linear thinking, and creativity, we

consciously chose data collection and analysis frameworks outside of the dominant structures and systems. To that end, our biographical vignettes served as one form of data collection (Ambler, 2012). Data included three initial vignettes of our experiences working within a neoliberal system, digital recordings of eight Castle Byers meetings (held weekly and biweekly), meeting notes, Google docs of shared reflection journals, and material artifacts we created. Data were used to inform the creation of bricolage. The process of bricolage, as well as the product, also became data sources. Because our collaboration emerges from different perspectives of our practice, we not only step outside ourselves (Loughran & Brubaker, 2015; Loughran & Northfield, 1998), to understand the context and conditions of our work (Schuck & Russell, 2005), but we also acknowledge that we are both researchers and researched (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2015) and as such, we must ensure trustworthiness of analyses (Schuck & Russell, 2005; LaBoskey, 2004). To that end, we acted as each other's critical friend throughout the collaborative process (Schuck & Russell, 2005).

Additionally, we employed LaBoskey's (2004) notion of trustworthiness by making visible our data, describing our methods for data analysis, and sharing the linkages between data, findings, and interpretations.

## **Bricolage**

We employed bricolage as a both/and process of data analysis (Levi-Strauss, 1962). Bricolage was introduced by Levi-Strauss (1962) as a way to conceptualize localized theorizing and problem-solving. Bricoleurs, or tinkerers, use the tools around them to address the problems they face. The concept of bricolage has been applied to teacher work and teacher knowledge because of the piecemeal and haphazard way that teachers solve problems and acquire knowledge for teaching (Hatton 1988, 1989; Huberman, 1993). Additionally, bricolage allows researchers to resist linear, positivist notions of research rooted in neoliberal ideals. Kincheloe (2001) suggested methodological bricolage is the use of "any methods necessary to gain new perspectives on the objects of inquiry" noting that when "researchers draw together divergent forms of research, they gain unique insight of multiple perspectives" (p. 687). Rogers (2012) argued that bricoleurs have aptness for creativity, that they know how to artistically combine theories, techniques, and methods. Furthermore, they can create their own methodological tools when needed. In self-study, bricolage has been used to examine creative, transdisciplinary partnerships, illustrating the revelatory power of methodological inventiveness (Pithouse- Morgan & Samaras, 2019).

Bricolage allowed us to describe and analyze our experiences within a traditional neoliberal context. As bricoleurs, we analyzed the data and navigated the neoliberal structures of our university and program, which we felt disciplined by in both overt and covert ways (Foucault, 1977). We engaged with bricolage as an arts-based methodology and sense-making process by utilizing multimodal materials. Components of our bricolage included vignettes of illustrative moments, concepts such as the Upside Down, and other materials that were at hand, which we used to make sense of our experiences. We discovered that the both/and process of bricolage allowed us to lace together our story of navigation and negotiation from an exploration of intertwined material, discursive, and conceptual elements.

## **Findings and Discussion**

We created the bricolage by individually employing a unique perspective to our experiences prior to collectively combining lenses and concepts into a cohesive framework. Based on our individual

academic backgrounds, we came to the collaboration with different orientations for understanding system change. For example, drawing from transformational resistance, Evan understood our experiences and work as “internal resistance.” He suggested that we were trying to “appear to conform” enough to meet the demands of the system that we were trying to change (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Ohrn, 1993). Tammy implemented critical post-human and new materialist thinking to further develop theoretical understandings of the self within complex systems (e.g. Barad, 2007; Braidotti, 2013; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Haraway, 2016). Rather than framing the self as a static identity, she put to work critical posthumanism and new materialist approaches that consider the self as a dynamic and always becoming force in relationship with other multiple, interacting forces amidst a constellation of elements (Strom, 2015). Rebecca drew from institutional theory and structuration, which posits that institutions are stable because individuals engage in sanctioned practices that recreate the structures through their actions (Giddens, 1984; Scott, 2008). She understood systemic change as requiring small shifts in actions that over time and with continued practice can shift the system.

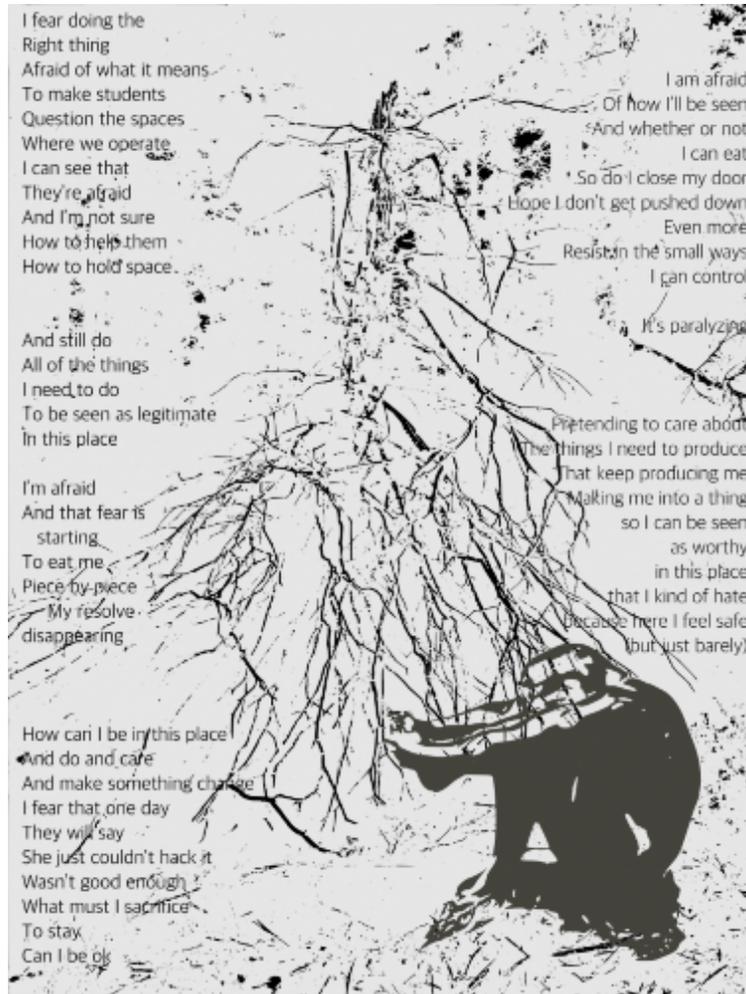
As part of our process of thinking and doing differently, we created material objects representing our experiences within a disciplining system. We utilized poetry, visual art, video, and sketches to explore our processes for navigating and negotiating the Upside Down. These artifacts and our reflections on creating them became additional data sources for investigation into how we related to our contextual realities. In particular, we noted moments of disequilibrium and discomfort that occurred to us as bricoleurs. This process, which pushed on our previously established boundaries as colleagues and researchers, created moments of dissonance as we questioned our own capacities to engage in this way and interrogated the borders of traditional research methodologies. Each artifact, while created separately, was then introduced to the group for collective sensemaking and collaborative analysis. Sharing the artifacts required a level of vulnerability that is not always a part of research partnerships. This willingness to take risks strengthened our relationships and served to stabilize Castle Byers as a place of refuge within the Upside Down. Themes that arose from this analysis include how this process allowed us to privilege emotional experiences, see ourselves as unified in resistance but divided by power dynamics, and how we are produced by neoliberal conceptions of success. Throughout this process, we elucidated how we differently collaborate, are differently role(d), and differently practice as ways of negotiating and navigating the larger system.

### ***Privileging Emotional Experiences***

Rebecca had recently begun writing poetry in order to process some of the emotional entanglements of working in the Upside Down. At first this poetry was private and felt subversive. She purposefully kept it disconnected from her professional self, because it was raw and exposed vulnerabilities. However, as we developed a community in Castle Byers and decided to explore the ways we felt marginalized by the professional system in which we operated, she decided to share her experience of poetic creation with her colleagues and use this non-professional form of writing as an opportunity to collaboratively resist. The combination of visual effect, non-linear language, and privileging of emotional experience allowed her to express and explore her positioning, her actions, and the system's effects on her in ways that she could not otherwise access.

#### **Image 1**

Poem. *Hiding*



She suggested to the other members of Castle Byers that they also engage with some form of material bricolage, which they found initially challenging because representing experience and knowledge in non-linear, visual ways was outside of the forms they typically used in relation to their academic work. They both felt that they had to have an idealized creation in mind, to begin with – a representation that they would then complete, rather than letting the act of creating guide the outcome. Their material artifacts are included below as representative of other thematic findings.

### ***Unified in Resistance, Divided by Dynamics***

While we are unified in our resistance to neoliberalism, through time, our discourse began to reveal how we are situated differently theoretically. As we continued to collaborate in Castle Byers, discussing how power operates and change occurs, distinctions and contentions arose. We interpreted this dynamic as a result of the depth and breadth of our conversations. Our theoretical orientations were rooted in our personal academic training and were powerful forces in our identities as scholars and educators. These orientations, and how we negotiated them, became one of the avenues where the institutional forces reinserted themselves within Castle Byers, prompting us to perform academic versions of ourselves and privilege professionalism, often backgrounding the emotional impacts of these intense conversations. In order to process

this experience, Evan drew models of himself and how he was making sense of a framework that decentered the individual (including himself).

## Image 2

### *Sketching Theory*



The physical models allowed him to engage with the conversations in a new way - providing a material to put in relief the similarities and differences of our perspectives and creating new possibilities for participation within Castle Byers. Bringing these artifacts to our conversations allowed for a different kind of collaboration. It revealed to the rest of us the kinds of risks and discomfort that he was engaging with as part of this collaboration. We each began working together believing we fully understood each other, but as we engaged in contentious work, we discovered misconceptions that could have easily created a rift in the partnership. The material artifacts that he shared with the group provided an external object to talk around and about. This objectification of emotional and conceptual experience opened new space because they rendered the theoretical orientations less personal. Once made material, the personal entanglements were distanced in a way that allowed for deeper analysis and collaboration.

## ***Success as One Dimensional***

Tammy started to create something material by video recording herself making a boundless puzzle, one with irregularly shaped pieces, a repeating pattern, and no edges. She felt this puzzle represented rhizomatic assemblages and wanted to record her process of exploring these in a material manner.

## Image 3

### *Non-linear Puzzle*



However, once she began trying to put the puzzle together, she became frustrated because she couldn't find any pieces that actually fit together. Her traditional expectations about what would constitute success in putting together a puzzle AND as a bricoleur creating a video that she would share with others created discomfort. So, she deleted the video, because she felt like it offered nothing of value since she had not been successful. Her experience demonstrated how the notion of productivity and successful performance reinserts itself in our processes even when we are trying to engage differently. Rather than keeping the recording of her frustrated engagement, which served as a valuable representation of working in the Upside Down by illuminating the difficulty of trying to make a change in a world that defines success narrowly and reveals the complexity of using non-traditional than tools, she removed the record of what could (by traditional definitions) be considered a failure.

### ***Differently Collaborating***

Because one of the central assumptions of neoliberalism is that human beings are inherently self-interested individuals, we understand our production within a neoliberal institution as human beings who make decisions to fulfill our own desires. To counteract these shaping forces and to guard against isolation and individualism, we collaborated in support of one another in relationships in Castle Byers. Castle Byers provided us with an opportunity to nurture our appreciative, reflective, creative, participatory engagement within the castle walls (Greene, 1980). Castle Byers was produced within each other's homes, through shared food, laughter, and conversation; produced digitally via personal text messages; and produced within a local gastropub through shared expenses, meals, and drinks. However, Castle Byers was not able to protect us from the neoliberal forces shaping the Upside Down. Neoliberalism's tentacles reached in and stole Evan through a round of budget cuts. Participating as bricoleurs helped us understand the protections afforded to Tammy and Rebecca that Evan was not able to employ due to his role.

### ***Differently Role(d)***

In *Stranger Things*, the young protagonists bring the parallel, already existing world, into fruition by interacting with a role-playing game and with a young interloper named Eleven. The notion of role playing as producing a different, already existing world, afforded Rebecca and Tammy an understanding of how our roles are produced in relationship with each other, with neoliberal forces,

and with traditional institutional values that potentially withstand those forces. For example, Rebecca and Tammy viewed their roles as tenure track faculty as protections against the reaching tentacles of neoliberalism. Their tenure track roles allowed them to research and teach against the status quo and to promote social justice and equity. However, neoliberalism's tentacles penetrated and shaped Rebecca and Tammy's protections, usurping their power and producing them as having little value to the institution in terms of their teaching and research. Consequently, they continuously navigated their low-status positions within a low-status college. In contrast, Evan did not enjoy the same protections as a lecturer. Market forces produced budget cuts that, combined with rhetoric and historical, political, and social forces, materially and discursively positioned Evan's job as low value and it was cut from the program. Conversely, Rebecca and Tammy continued to collaborate with Evan to leverage their use of digital spaces, their position within a graduate program and their perceived area of expertise to create a new program area, allowing them to commodify their knowledge and further their success.

### ***Differently Practicing***

We conceive of our teacher educator/research practice as a way to help our students differently perceive their production within the Upside Down, how they (and we) reproduce the Upside Down, and our process of navigating and negotiating the structures of the Upside Down. Through the process of bricolage, we discovered that we mobilized Castle Byers by foregrounding relationships with our students, seeking connections, providing support, and practicing vulnerability. Rather than participate in the structures and systems that promote isolation, individualism, and competition, we invited students to re-produce their conceptions of practice and think differently about schooling. Our creative approach to research meant our students became bricoleurs as they wrote poetry, read novels, and engaged with art as multiple and combined lenses.

For Rebecca, one of the outcomes of this project is a recognition that pre-service and practicing teachers need to develop skills as bricoleurs themselves. They need conceptual tools to make sense of the traditional structures and neoliberal forces. Thus, she has shifted her coursework to provide more attention to historical factors and philosophical debates that have shaped education. Her courses also provide opportunities for students to utilize creative problem-solving to make a difference in their school or personal communities through advocacy and teacher leadership. This work enabled Evan to continue deconstructing his beliefs about working with pre-service teachers to develop their skills to negotiate the tensions between their teacher education and the neoliberal educational environments where they seek employment. In the semesters following the elimination of his position, he increased his efforts to engage students in complex conversations about how they will negotiate those systems while preserving the critical educator within themselves. These conversations included spaces for students to begin thinking about how and where they could resist the forces that shape education. While already radical in his understanding of change and resistance, this study forced him to personally confront the power of neoliberal institutions. With her preservice teachers, Tammy explores teaching and learning outside formal structures of neoliberal educational institutions and then uses the differently produced knowledge and practice to view schooling as otherwise. In a class aimed at learning to unpack standards, create lesson plans, and embed valid and reliable assessments, they watch and analyze learning experiences portrayed in the Netflix docuseries *Chef's Table*, consider notions of agency and assemblage using the tradition of terroir in wine making, dive deeply into the colonizer paradigms on which schools are conceptually and physically constructed, and examine the fetishizing of data and measurement. Engaging with these seemingly unrelated ideas, seeking common threads among them, and comparing those commonalities to current

conceptions of schooling provides tools to critique the “common sense” assumptions underlying oppressive educational systems.

## Conclusion and Implications

Bricolage provided new opportunities for exploring our relationships to the Upside Down and allowed us to view the implications of resistance and reproduction of current systems and structures that would have been otherwise inaccessible. In this way our engagement with materiality (which includes the conceptual use of *Stranger Things* as a sensemaking mechanism of our own environment), mirrors how the show itself connects the material and the conceptual to create something that is at once old and new. We found that engaging materially with concepts from *Stranger Things* allowed us to explore linkages between the aesthetic, emotional, and professional in ways that are not typically encouraged within traditional scholar models. In the process of creating bricolage as data and using bricolage as a way to analyze data, we found that we were able to enhance our connectedness to concepts both material and discursive, which provided insight into how we are produced by the neoliberal context, reproduce neoliberalism, and navigate and negotiate the neoliberal system.

As teacher educators/researchers who value social justice principles and forward an equity-oriented agenda, we suggest the need to acknowledge what power does within systems and the difficulties of disruption. As bricoleurs, we may be able to better understand the reification of status quo systems and structures. We believe we need to make transparent this process of system disruption as well as our efforts at disruption in our work. It could be that we must think beyond the traditional toolbox notions and theory/practice divide that dominate the discourse of teacher education and research. Instead, we could provide students of teaching with complex conceptual frameworks to analyze the reification of the system and creative ways to disrupt its reproduction. Our next steps are to explore how we prepare teachers to become intentional bricoleurs, both in the ways they design instruction for their students, and as they intentionally navigate and disrupt the neoliberal power structures within school systems.

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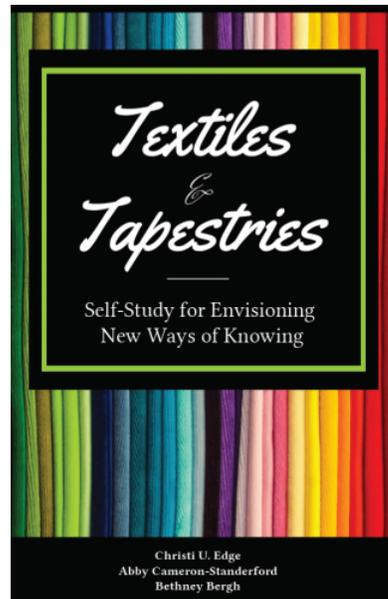
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