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Ritualized Engrossment: Portraits of Early-Career Faculty Practicing Renewal

"Though our practice is sustainable and successful, it is highly individualized. In sharing our ritual, we hope to inspire and encourage others to develop their own authentic renewal practices. Below we highlight problems faced by early-career faculty, explain our conceptual framework of ritualized engrossment, and share vignettes of our ritualized engrossment to illustrate the impact this practical approach has upon our early-career faculty wellbeing."

Abstract

In higher education, the demands on early-career faculty often lead to mental health challenges and time poverty. This article explores two major issues that negatively impact faculty well-being: the disconnect between doctoral socialization and tenure-track realities, and the struggle to balance unrealistic expectations with sustainable practices. To address the dissonance we felt as early career faculty, we developed a renewal practice called ritualized engrossment, characterized by connection, collaboration, care, and commitment. Grounded in aesthetic approaches and using methods from portraiture and collaborative autoethnography, we present two narrative portraits illustrating the impact of this practice on our well-being. Our portraits illustrate moments when we considered the rightness of fit and our research trajectories. Our findings demonstrate how ritualized engrossment fostered vocational vitality and provided essential support for us as early-career faculty. This practical approach highlights the importance of consistent, intentional, and meaningful connections in sustaining personal and professional well-being.

Keywords

Early Career Faculty, Vocational Vitality, Ritual, Engrossment, Renewal, Burnout

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The system of higher education maximizes workload and responsibility, which contributes to mental health issues and time poverty. Faculty must negotiate productivity, efficiency, and quality of work, which no amount of time management can solve (Berg & Seeber, 2017). As early-career faculty, we are both navigating our positions' demands, trying to avoid burnout, and struggling to maintain vocational vitality. We love what we do but maintaining our occupational and personal well-being initially felt impossible. In this article, we share our practical approach in which we engaged in ritualized connection to practice renewal, maintain well-being, and prioritize vocational vitality. Though our practice is sustainable and successful, it is highly individualized. In sharing our ritual, we hope to inspire and encourage others to develop their own authentic renewal practices. Below we highlight problems faced by early-career faculty, explain our conceptual framework of ritualized engrossment, and share vignettes of our ritualized engrossment to illustrate the impact this practical approach has upon our early-career faculty wellbeing.

Early-Career Faculty Well-Being and Burnout

The early-career faculty experience has been researched to improve attrition rates and job satisfaction (Reybold, 2005; Trower, Austin, & Sorcinelli, 2001), and other issues that arise from the dissonance when transitioning from doctoral candidates to early-career faculty (McCormick & Willcox, 2019; Reybold, 2005). We discuss two major issues that negatively impact faculty well-being 1) the gap between doctoral socialization and the reality of higher education and 2) balancing unrealistic expectations of the ideal worker with sustainable practices. For this article, we define early-career faculty as faculty members in the first three years of their career after graduate school; further, in this article, we narrow our focus to the experience on a tenure track.

Complexities of Being Early-Career Faculty

Doctoral socialization is an important experience because "students are simultaneously directly socialized into the role of graduate student and are given preparatory socialization into a profession" (Golde, 1998, p. 56). Scholars recognize that this dual socialization is important, but also impossible to achieve, leaving a gap between what is learned and the awaiting reality (McCormick & Willcox, 2019; Reybold, 2005). The research, teaching, and service experiences of doctoral students often reflect a lack of balanced preparation for the numerous roles of faculty (Golde & Dore, 2001; McCormick & Willcox, 2019; McDaniels, 2010; Napper-Owen, 2012; Weidman, 2010; Weidman & Stein, 2003). According to McCormick and Willcox (2019), the dissonance experienced by this gap requires new faculty to deconstruct and reconstruct their academic identities to better fit their new professional context leading many early-career faculty members to question the rightness of fit (Morrison et al., 2011) and combat imposter phenomena with perfectionism and overcompensation (Hutchins & Rainbold, 2017). Whether suffering from the imposter phenomena or not feeling valued, the gap between socialization and reality contributes to questioning identity and belonging, and negatively impacts early-career faculty vocational vitality.

Early-career faculty are also affected by unrealistic expectations, time poverty, and navigating the political context of their new career. Higher education institutions capitalize on and promote the "ideal worker" (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2016), someone dedicated to the job who only prioritizes job-related experiences. Early-career faculty often strive to prove legitimacy to their new institutions, further amplifying the imbalance between personal and professional life (Guillaume et al., 2019). This struggle is more complex for early-career faculty because they must also navigate contextual politics and implicit norms when prioritizing and organizing their time (Coke et al., 2015; Crooks & Castleden, 2012). Ultimately, the early-career faculty experience is dominated by the need to balance internal and external expectations of research, teaching, and service; it is also haunted by the need to balance personal and professional responsibilities without burning out.

Burnout

When overall work-life balance is not achieved during the transition from doctoral student to early-career faculty, burnout occurs. Burnout is a term commonly discussed in opposition to well-being in human service professions. While this syndrome has become a buzzword since the beginning of the pandemic, burnout has been researched and linked to job dissatisfaction since the 1970s and linked to the teaching profession since the 1980s (Larrivee, 2012). Teachers are the largest group of professionals associated with this phenomenon. We must explore burnout and how it occurs to understand its relationship to the major struggles of early-career faculty.

Maslach (2003), a leading scholar on burnout, describes how careers like teaching can systematically embed core dimensions of burnout: 1) emotional exhaustion, 2) cynicism or depersonalization, and 3) reduced personal accomplishment or a lack of self-efficacy. When interacting with and caring for humans throughout the day, professionals may experience emotional exhaustion. To cope with this exhaustion, many find the need to separate themselves from others (depersonalization) or begin to view others in a negative way (cynicism). Professionals who navigate feelings of isolation and cynicism often feel less productive, successful, and efficient in their careers (reduced personal accomplishment or lack of self-efficacy). Instead of viewing burnout as a personal failure, Maslach asks professionals to consider what job-related stresses cause burnout syndrome.

These major issues of early-career faculty create significant dissonance (McCormick & Willcox, 2019) and contribute to increased emotional exhaustion. Eventually, this can feed cynicism and reduce self-efficacy. Exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced self-efficacy then become signs of diminished vocational vitality and symptoms of burnout.

At this point in the article, we intentionally choose to frame our issue as maintaining vocational vitality instead of combatting burnout. Since the pandemic, the term burnout has been utilized more frequently without the appropriate depth of this phenomenon. We align with Intrator and Kunzman's (2007) discussion of vocational vitality. They use it to describe teachers with vocational vitality as those who "remain vital, present, and deeply connected" (p. 17). Expanding upon this, they share three elements of vocational vitality as being engrossed, tuned-in, and purposeful. These teachers are enthusiastic, have a nuanced understanding of their students and the context in which they teach, and are "efficacious agents capable of challenging the status quo rather than passively adapting to ordinary contexts and approaches" (p. 17).

In our experience, one must focus on personal and vocational vitality to find success as early-career faculty. We ultimately needed to turn to each other to navigate the specific challenges of our first three years as early-career faculty. While 18 hours and over 1,000 miles apart, our weekly check-ins turned into a ritual that supported our well-being during those years; we have theorized our practice as ritualized engrossment.

Conceptual Framework

To address our need to maintain vocational vitality, we began a renewal practice characterized by connection, collaboration, care, and commitment, which we call ritualized engrossment.

While we never went to school together, we met through our shared mentor Richard Siegesmund. For Libba, Richard helped her find art education as a career path during undergrad and later became her mentor and thesis advisor for her master's degree. For Samantha, Richard was a mentor throughout her doctoral studies and her dissertation advisor. We met at an event during the 2012 National Art Education Association Convention because of his engrossment in each of us and our academic futures. Throughout the next decade, we have become close and used his teachings to guide our teaching and scholarship. We were inspired by Siegesmund's (1997) discussion of Aisthanesthai, the ability to perceive, as the English etymological root for aesthetics. Specifically, we noted Aisthanesthai, in one conjugated form, "reflects a dynamic state between subject and object with each effecting (not simply affecting) the other" (p. 118). Our conceptual framework is rooted in an aesthetic approach to living that embraces felt perception as a dynamic, impactful, pleasurable, and essential realm in our everyday lives (Dewey, 1934; Siegesmund, 1997). It is our ability to see something special in our everyday interactions that enables us to create a practice of well-being and utilize an aesthetic approach for addressing early-career faculty perceptions of burnout and maintaining vocational vitality. The following sections remain grounded in an aesthetic approach as we pull from Hofsess's (2013, 2015) writing on teacher renewal, Dissanayke's (1992) exploration of the overlap between art and ritual, and from Noddings's (1984, 1992) explication of engrossment to complete our conceptual framework of ritualized engrossment.

Renewal

Renewal is the lens through which we consider well-being. Hofsess (2013, 2015) explored teacher renewal through an aesthetic lens, understanding that renewal is a process and a relational way of being in the world. Similarly, Willcox (2017) conceived of renewal as a process rather than a product. Dalton (2015) also advocates for us to understand renewal as a continuous process but emphasizes the connections to personal and professional life. We seek an ongoing practice that aligns with the generative process of renewal. The needs and details of the process change over time to sustain our overall well-being.

Ritual

Dissanayake (1992) argued that there is a biological need to make art or make something special. She argued that "... what feels good is also usually a clue concerning what we *need"* (p. 32). Her theory of aesthetics weaves together play, art, and ritual to argue that art is a behavior or a process. Similar to our connection with renewal scholars, we embrace the process of "making special" as a rewarding need and an essential component of our well-being.

More interesting for us, is the connection Dissanayake highlights between art and ritual. For Dissanayake (1992), rituals are compelling, formalized, socially reinforcing, and bracketed. They are designed to "arouse, capture, and hold attention" (p. 46) and intentionally set apart from everyday life to embrace the nonordinary while connecting us emotionally. According to Dissanayake, rituals are often explored during transitions and performed for transformations.

Our renewal ritual was made special as we formalized our weekly check-in to hold us accountable to each other. Through telling our stories and sharing our perceptions, the weekly meetings were socially reinforced and bracketed from the course of our daily work. Our ritual created a mutual awareness that allowed us to link our experience together in an attempt to weather the transition from doctoral students to early-career faculty and in doing so, our perceptions of burnout transformed into a deeper understanding of our experiences, our institutions, and our trajectories. Ultimately, the ritual enabled us to be tuned in to each other and our complex changing contexts. We recognized the emotional commitment was not just the result of the ritual, but the essence that held it, and us, together. We argue that our emotional commitment, our engrossment (Noddings, 1984), is what made our renewal practice possible and successful.

Engrossment

Noddings (1992) defined engrossment as "an open, nonselective [full] receptivity for the one cared for" (p. 15). The receptivity described goes beyond simply getting to know someone or paying attention to them. Engrossment is aesthetic in nature because it is both the felt perception of the experience and the ability to understand in hindsight-- similar to Dewey's (1934) description of aesthetic experience. Engrossment is an essential aspect of a renewing ritual, which can address our reduced vocational vitality.

We developed a nuanced understanding of each other as educators, researchers, mentors, and friends through our engrossment. Aligned with Noddings (1984), we are committed to our relationship and dedicate consistent attention and time, demonstrating the necessary reciprocity. We have been able to provide "rational objectivity" (Noddings, 1984, p. 33) for each other to solve problems or determine new paths. We have also sat with each other's situations through engrossment in a way that is healthier than (overly) ruminating about our own predicaments.

Ritualized Engrossment

Based on the previous concepts, we conceive and practice an aesthetic approach to maintain vocational vitality through ritualized engrossment. By formalizing our weekly meetings, we created a ritual that also reflects "making special" as we prioritize and honor this experience. Our engrossment is strengthened through this ritual, but also informs the support we desire to provide each other. Both of these elements allow our ritualized engrossment to help us experience renewal weekly and at key moments of our personal and professional lives. Maintaining renewal through ritualized engrossment is critically important for our own vocational vitality.

Mode of Inquiry

We sought to understand and share our early career experiences that benefited from this ritual. Our research interests in renewal and engrossment led us to borrow from Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis's (1997) portraiture methodology and from Chang et al.'s (2013) collaborative autoethnography to explicate and share moments from our ritual. From 2019 to the present day, we have met weekly to support each other through the tenure-track process. In 2019, we began our weekly phone calls to discuss previous research, but this tradition evolved to become an honored weekly ritual in academia. In 2020, we transitioned our ritual to Zoom meetings, checking in with each other, supporting our needs, and providing the necessary time to engage in our personal research. Inspired by my institutionalized writing circle, we decided a weekly meeting on the calendar would block time that could not be interrupted by colleagues, students, and other pressing needs. Thus, our ritualized engrossment practice was born. We honored two hours every week to support each other, and remain flexible about the best use of the time; sometimes this was to brainstorm ways to better teach our students, to engage in research activities (i.e., writing IRBs, coding data, identifying grant opportunities, and writing proposals), and to navigate service requests/demands in politically savvy ways. Our meetings always began with check-ins and discussion of what was most pressing personally and professionally. Often, we transitioned into specific work time with dedicated breaks to report progress and chat. Borrowing from the Pomodoro Technique of productivity (Cirillo, 2018), we would dedicate 10-15 minutes of discussion per 45 minutes of work. This allowed us to support each other, be productive, and find ways to navigate life in academe. While the meeting day and time changed from semester to semester, we strive now to end each week with our ritual, allowing us to be personally and professionally renewed for the upcoming week. During our chats, we discussed life-changing breakups, familial health issues, and partner deployment; we also deep dive into ways to eat when time and money are lacking and the perfect balance of comfort and professionalism in conference attire. We also pushed each other to submit presentations for conferences, shared about calls for book chapters and special issues, and designed simple workshops to engage communities. This ritual moved beyond a traditional academic friendship, as we invested time in each other's lived experiences, professional successes, and tenure-track process.

Inspired by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis' (1997) questions, we began by considering "What is happening here [in our ritual], what is working, and why?" (p. 42). As we started to see our ritual as an essential part of our well-being and asked, how and to what extent did our practice of ritualized engrossment impact our perceived well-being during the early-career faculty experience? Through personal memories, archived materials, self-reflection, and conversations, we were able to collaboratively revisit key moments and consider their connection to early-career faculty well-being and vocational vitality (Chang et al., 2013). From our analysis, we were able to select the two impactful experiences to share as narrative portraits.

Portraits of Ritualized Engagement

We share the complexity and nuance of our ritualized engrossment and how it contributes to our well-being as early-career faculty. In our portraits, we illustrate moments from our renewal practices where we have needed to consider the rightness of fit of our positions and navigate our research trajectories. Each portrait was written from the individual's point of view and then reviewed with the other author to fully depict the moment.

Libba's Portrait

I am exhausted. Truly exhausted. I am still reeling from a meeting with my department chair yesterday. I do not know how long I can do this. I find myself attending extra meetings all of the time because the College of the Arts and the College of Education cannot get on the same page. Seriously, I know that we need to cut content for our degree to be at 120 hours, but trying to convince my Dean is the hard part. This will mean fewer studios and fewer course credits for multiple students. It is not something he is willing to hear. My new chair has no idea what this means to the program, the Professional Standards Commission, and what is coming down from the Governor. I keep trying to explain, but it is as if he cannot hear me. I really do not know what to do but to keep moving forward.

Frustrated by the constant waste of time, I rush to my office to gather supplies for my writing circle that is housed across campus. Today is a beautiful day in south Georgia; sunny and around 75 degrees in early November. A walk across campus will be what I need. I can see the Spanish architecture, the bustling students, and sunshine while I have a weekly check-in with Samantha. Thank goodness I am able to bounce these experiences with her. Throughout our weekly hour conversations, she has heard me grieve what I thought higher education would be and struggle to come up short-- over and over again. Coordinating my program, teaching a five-five, serving on too many committees, and still having to do an enormous amount of research… I have perfectionist tendencies and worry that this job may kill me. Can one person really do everything they are asking?

As I walk up the hill by the library, we start chatting about our lives. After venting about a conversation with my department head, I move on to a conversation with local high school art teachers. One of the teachers is retiring and her position will be posted soon. They jokingly asked me to apply. I am truly considering it. I share this option with Samantha, yet again, as I keep walking along the beautiful brick walkway toward the Camellia trail. My progress, like everything in this town, works a little slower and takes a little longer. As I am huffing and puffing (because I am getting angrier with each detail I share), I mention the list I have started to make about quitting higher education and returning to high school. I often look back on my time as a high school teacher as the best job I ever had and wonder if it would be possible.

As I walk up to the beautiful old home that houses the Center for Learning and Teaching, I sit on the porch and share my intention to apply for the high school position. Samantha listens actively and cuts me off after a few minutes… "Seriously?? No. Libba, No. You are not serious now. You cannot do this." This intervention is the first one I have heard that makes me pause. Samantha's understanding of my doctoral experience, how much I love teaching teachers, and my life goals, pride, and brain really make me rethink. She understands how to rationalize with my exhausted brain and cut through the bullshit. If it were anyone else, or if we did not have this relationship, would I be able to listen to the advice? After a few minutes, I have to go to attend my writing circle and am left considering, is this really the same at all higher ed institutions or is this just what they are asking of me in this position? Could it be different somewhere else?

Epilogue

I left that position in May of 2020. I am in a healthier, happier job and restarted the early-career faculty experience. While I still struggle with balance and burnout, I recognize that I can do this—it is possible. Finding the right fit is essential to vocational vitality and our ritual enabled me to understand not only what was problematic in my own life, but what I needed to be successful-ish.

Summary

Libba's portrait illustrates her struggle with the rightness of fit. Her doctoral socialization heavily focused on research, leaving her unprepared to maintain that love with the reality of her teaching and service load in the previous position. The incredible demands of the position made it impossible to find a balance and sustainable practice. The challenges of finding balance and sustainable practices were overwhelming. While the teaching load may have appeared manageable (5/5), the reality was far more complex. The courses often involved small class sizes, without a determined sequence for methods courses, demanding extensive preparation and differentiation. In addition, the burden of organizing practicum placements for each student in every methods course was immense, as the school required 100 hours of practicum per course. This involved individually coordinating placements, maintaining relationships with schools and teachers, and ensuring each student's experience met the program's high standards. The sheer volume of these logistical demands, on top of her teaching and administrative duties, further contributed to the unsustainable workload. Moreover, the service expectations were excessive, stretching her across fifteen committees and requiring a heavy administrative burden. She was responsible for coordinating the entire program, which included generating annual program reports and assessments, advising over 20 students, and revising the curriculum to align with several governing bodies' expectations. The lack of institutional support made it nearly impossible to juggle these responsibilities with teaching, research, and service. The workload was relentless, leaving little room for the meaningful service or scholarship that aligned with her passions. Without sustainable structures in place and under constant pressure to meet unrealistic expectations, burnout was inevitable.

The emotional exhaustion and lack of self-efficacy in her previous position led her to question her career in higher education. Our ritualized engrossment was important for helping her see that her passions, interests, and abilities did belong in higher education, but not that position (or in a high school). Samantha being able to share her perspective of Libba's situation was important for considering positions that would be an appropriate fit and fight against Libba's concerns about her professional abilities.

Since starting the new position, our continued ritual has supported Libba in recognizing the need to set boundaries early and strive to make sustainable work habits. Samantha's continued support has helped Libba recognize that making colleagues aware of personal and program needs help create successful long-term practices. More recently our meetings have focused on discussing goals and progress on the tenure track, strategies for stepping into leadership roles, and making choices about our work. Samantha has helped remind Libba to focus on the activities in academia she truly values, such as planning engaging activities for her students, serving as a reviewer for art education journals, contributing at the state and national levels, and mentoring enthusiastic students pursuing their careers. While she remains involved with committees for both the School of Education and the School of Art and Design, the expectations are now realistic, recognizing the limited resources available. Samantha's support and active listening have become an integral part of Libba's navigation of academe and ability to trust her instincts.

Samantha's Portrait

Staring at a blank Google Doc, the space feels overwhelming as I try to determine how to present my scholarship for my third-year review. Actually, this only includes my first two years but is being submitted in the first two and half months of my third year…. AND three of those semesters were impacted by COVID. Not that anyone cares. My assistantships in my doctoral program prepared me very well for service and teaching. I was able to teach or TA a wide variety of classes. I worked with the department to plan and execute visits from other scholars and work on numerous reports for the university and state. Research expectations were focused on yearly presentations at state and national conferences and, of course, finishing our dissertations. We were encouraged to have complex, rigorous dissertations. I am well prepared in research methods, both qualitative and quantitative thanks to the program's expectations.

I actually love my colleagues and feel a general sense of appreciation and respect, which I know is not the case everywhere. Even with that sense of belonging, I can feel disconnected; I sometimes feel they have a limited definition of what counts as art education research. I know my training gave me the mindset that almost anything can be looked at as art education. My work has never been student-based; I am interested in the teachers' inner workings or thinking more broadly. Engrossment and care extend to art beyond the K-12 classroom. It can be researched in a theoretical or practical way. I see our areas of interest being art education, art, and education. This often feels like more work because each of those strains functions differently. My state-level research tends to be very focused on practice, as I am trying to also accomplish service goals of recruitment and supporting local art educators' needs. I see that as a reflection of my engrossment in practice. When I move into research at a national or international level, I am more concerned with considering the impact of engrossment on thinking and decision-making in studio classrooms or a teacher's philosophy and pedagogy, or even more theoretically. Mentally juggling all this leaves me too exhausted to properly communicate the connections to this blank screen. It all takes time, time that I do not have. We are a teaching university (in a pandemic), but I feel like I am expected to continue my research as if everything is normal.

I look forward to my virtual meetings with Libba because I feel heard and can find real solutions. In other situations, I feel pressured to change my interests or how I work to meet the demands of tenure. Having watched Libba navigate her way out of a job that was not working, I know mine is working. I am still struggling to find the balance between reality and my expectations. I feel like the things I care about and want to prioritize in research are valuable whenever I get feedback outside of my institution. Especially from Libba because she can rattle off a number of related things to read, which I take to mean I am not straying away from art education or wasting time. I have 15 minutes before our meeting starts and I get back to my blank screen. I start putting in the things I did during the past year and making notes. It seems clear to me. I am happy with what I have done. I can see my productivity as consistent and relating back to engrossment and being in relationship (as cognitive processes or lived experience) within the context of art. These priorities have gotten stronger in my teaching and upcoming research projects; I just need to make this clear to everyone else.

Epilogue

I am still in this position and continue to appreciate my coworkers and department overall. Some days, I have self-doubt and worry about how others perceive my research interests. Other days, this lingering fear just makes me more determined to keep doing it to bring the entire picture to life and better advocate for my passions.

Summary

Samantha's portrait reflects her struggles connected to her research and overall trajectory at the time of her third-year review. Her doctoral socialization was unique in that she had ample opportunities to learn service and teaching, but the research emphasis was on presentations and finishing her dissertation. Taking a position at a teaching institution made her incorrectly assume there would be a similar workload to her doctoral responsibilities. She enjoys research but struggles with prioritizing it when experiencing substantial time poverty. She is torn between working with responsibilities for undergraduate and graduate students. Her institution is predominantly for undergraduates. However, she is the coordinator of the graduate art education program guiding students through sequential classes tied to their final research project, while also planning and recruiting for the next cohort. Her undergraduate course is secondary methods with a 30-40 hour field experience component with limited placement opportunities. Maintaining connections to local art teachers and classrooms goes beyond placing students. Her secondary preservice teachers also host middle and high school students on campus for workshops, exhibitions, and overall recruitment. Teachers in her area switch jobs more often than in her previous location making it very important to consistently develop new connections.

Although she is a member of the College of Humanities, Arts and Sciences she works on committees (field experience, new major orientation, curriculum working groups, and secondary senate) in the College of Education because of their direct impact on her class and students. Within her own college and department, she handles collecting data and reporting on student outcomes yearly, co-advises around 100 art education students, collaborates on all matters related to the art education major, and supports shared departmental responsibilities of recruitment and orienting new majors during some Friday morning sessions. More recently, her service work has led to leadership positions in the faculty union, the advising council to the provost, and as treasurer in her state art education organization.

These common early-career teaching and service expectations resulted in Samantha having a lowered sense of accomplishment and increased depersonalization, which impacted her research agenda and productivity. She attempted to prioritize or reframe her interests to align with her department's limited understanding of art education research and ambiguous tenure expectations. While she understands the flexibility provided within the tenure guidelines, especially in the arts, the unspoken expectations of one publication a year could have been expressed explicitly. Having research in the pipeline was not a focus of her doctoral program, leaving her less prepared to establish this immediately and in the midst of the pandemic. Producing new work yearly did not equate to a printed publication in the expected timeline due to the nature of art education publications at that time. Eventually, she did meet this goal, but with less consistency between the acceptance and final publication dates.

Engaging in our ritualized engrossment informed Libba's view of Samantha's work allowing Libba to share a more positive framing of many situations. Samantha was able to see her accomplishments more clearly because of ritualized engrossment. As Samantha was becoming more detached from her department, meeting with Libba helped her remain engaged in her profession. In one instance, Samantha felt misunderstood about feedback regarding researching sketchbooks in a high school classroom rather than her own studio course. The context made a difference; her department viewed art education research as happening in a K-12 classroom. Libba made it feel okay to want to start in the studio class, which better aligned with Samantha's current workload and would provide more information to possibly investigate the same topic in another education context later. We also discussed the need for more alignment between high school and college courses as a possibility for future research that would work for both Samantha and her department. This reinforced her research agenda and ability to advocate for her work and feel increasingly more connected to her position and department.

Conclusion

Our ritualized engrossment provided the renewal and support necessary to maintain vocational vitality and work towards overall well-being. We were able to develop deep and nuanced understandings of each other and our situations through ongoing engrossment. Our consistent ritual created trust and fostered clear honest communication. We were able to avoid unhealthy rumination over our challenges by sharing and being open to collaboratively finding solutions or simply receiving support. The depth and authenticity of our relationship allowed for our ritualized engrossment to develop into an important ritual for well-being. We do not think this would have happened if the relationship was mandated through a mentorship program or even by ourselves. We noticed and benefitted from our inherent interest in each other. We encourage early career faculty to seek out relationships and develop their own unique rituals.

To strive for ritualized engrossment, we advise you to:

- Find others that can provide mutual support and renewal. Do not allow yourself to be or feel isolated! We found being in different institutions allows us to be even more honest without worrying about repercussions and provides alternative perspectives. The quality of support we can provide each other comes from being not only art educators; we have had similar career experiences and share many values related to our teaching and research.
- Invest time into being engrossed in your own, and others, contexts and experiences. The depth of understanding is priceless when faced with difficult, confusing situations. We found the strength and depth of our connection to be renewing.
- Design opportunities for connection that are consistent and can become a ritual. We set a realistic goal for connecting based on practical needs first; feedback and collaboration related to common courses and research projects. We knew we would prioritize things connected to our work. Tying this to work and putting it in our schedule, equal to teaching a class, made us maintain the scheduled meetings and allowed it to become routine and ritual. We made our weekly meeting special and essential; because of our deep commitment to it and each other, we continue to show up and continued to practice renewal. This opportunity for connection did not take add extra burdens to our weekly list but significantly contributed to our feelings of renewal.
- Be open to compromise to support your overall well-being; between your expectations and reality, your perspective and others, now and the future. Navigating compromise allows you to take an inventory of what matters now and what you would like to work towards, then consider it within your reality. We were able to see things more realistically having a trusted, engrossed friend providing how they saw our situations.

Keep in mind that ritualized engrossment is highly individualized, and these practices must be tailored to the individuals involved. This effort toward renewal will help you maintain your vocational vitality amid the early career faculty experience.

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