

Finding the First Year



Finding Your First Year

When I began the project that became *Finding the First Year*, I thought of it as an effort of re-storying or re-narrating the first-year. From my vantage point, the story of the first-year was institutionally centered, focusing on retention, the notion of “building” a successful student resource by resource, fads (i.e., mindset one year, belonging the next), and empty rhetoric around access, student success, and “meeting students where they are at.” I felt, and still feel, that the above story continues to inform our mode of address as professionals in approaching the first-year as a design space and students as learners. As you will discover as you listen to *Finding the First Year*, the story I found about the first-year is not what I just listed.

I anchor my quest in the first year of my own crisis of faith in myself and my profession. This is a creative choice and a sincere reflection of how I entered the project. Additionally, throughout the series, I play with genre as a sense-making lens for what I’m seeing and continue to explore modes of address (Ellsworth, 1998). Ultimately, however, it is these simple research questions for *Finding the First Year* that guide the content of this podcast series:

- RQ1: In what ways does participatory storytelling serve as a vehicle for problem finding in the first-year experience?
- RQ2: In what ways does participatory storytelling serve as a vehicle for gaining a deeper understanding of the emotional/affective experience of faculty, students, and staff in the first-year of college?
- RQ3: How does engaging in participatory storytelling reshape the researcher’s understanding of the first-year experience?

As an arts-based work/dissertation, my project intends to do more than just answer these research questions creatively. I also want to engage with you! This is one of the core values, in

my mind, of art-based projects: they invite the audience, viewer, or listener to participate as collaborators and sense makers (Bertling, 2019). If you are considering listening to this project, there is a good chance that you are also working or learning (or heading into) a first-year of college. And with that in mind, I would like to invite you, through this professional learning packet, to find your own first-year. You can do it with colleagues, your unit, a community of practice, or on your own. This will be a flexible, adaptable resource!

Reflections and activities will be attached to six episodes: *Am I a Loser?*; *The Honeymoon Pt. II*; *Doublethink*; *Tragedy and Enshittification*; *The Minor Gesture*; and *What I Found*. Each of the six episodes will have a consistent structure. They will begin with a “My Story” section where I share with readers/listeners the backstory of this episode, discuss my methodological approaches, or share insights I had that did not make it into the formal episode. Then, in the next section, “Your Story,” I will invite you to participate in finding your first year, sometimes by playing with my methods, engaging in arts-based activities, working through your own reflections, and other quirky, fun ideas.

Importantly, I very much welcome your critique of and disagreement with what you hear in certain episodes. I began this project because I felt that the first-year was stuck, and I was stuck. If nothing else, I hope that *Finding the First Year* will be a conversation starter- that it will help others, and this bizarre landscape we call the first-year, become and stay unstuck.

So, I’m excited to welcome you to *Finding Your First Year*.

Episode One: Am I a Loser?

My Story

The opening episode sets the stage for my quest to “find the first year,” which is really a voyage of exploring whether my professional life has meaning, and whether where I work, the first year, is irrevocably broken. Framing it in this way was a creative decision. This is an arts-based dissertation, where creativity and research intermingle to evoke new thoughts rooted in the heart.

Underneath this creative decision were practical interests. What are the problems of the first year? What does it feel like to work and learn in the first year? How does this exploration change me? And, how can participatory storytelling help me answer these questions and, in effect, re-story the first year for me and others?

The theoretical tradition of critical pedagogy ran through this work and these questions. As the name suggests, critical pedagogy is concerned with the critique of educational spaces and structures (Giroux, 2011; Gannon, 2020) and the emancipation of learners from the hierarchy of educational spaces (Freire, 72; Freire, 2021), and from the oppressive structures of society (hooks, 2009). Equally important to critical pedagogy is extending problem-finding and problem-solving to students (Shor, 1992), whether they are in school or in less formal spaces (like yours!). Despite the language of critique and problems, it is a tradition of utopianist thinking and dreaming.

Throughout this episode, I list several problems, both institutional and personal. This is an act of critique. Yet, I also note that I need the voices of others, participatory storytellers, to help me understand my personal and professional crisis. I need storytellers to help me answer the research questions swirling underneath my crisis. In a sense, this is an act of critical pedagogy

because I am not assembling a task force of institutional leaders to explore my questions. To do so would re-entrench the hierarchy that may already be failing to address some of the core problems of the first-year. Instead, I invited the experiences of workers and students to help me find the first year, and re-story the experience.

Now, I am inviting you.

Your Story

Ready to become a critical pedagogue. How exciting!

- **Step One: Problem Stating**

Identify your problem first, and put it in the form of a question. For example, if you are a faculty member, you might consider something like: *Why are so many of my first-year students regularly absent? How do I get first-year students to read and prepare for class? Why do my students seem so disengaged? Why are my classes getting bigger? Why don't I have a Teaching Assistant anymore?*

As a staff member, you might consider: *Why do our positive metrics not seem to align with my lived experience? Why does my office seem to be losing resources? How do I know I am doing a good job? How am I actually contributing to student success?*

If you are a student participant, either as a first-year student or a former first-year student, you can pose problems via questions, too!

Remember, this tradition is full of possibilities and big ideas- just like *Finding the First Year*. Be practical, if you want, or think BIG!

- **Step Two: Participatory Storytelling**

Now for the fun part! Find two individuals on campus- students, faculty, or staff- and complete a brief interview or storytelling session, exploring your problem. Remember,

you are now a critical pedagogue, so you are obsessed with power. That means you should be wary of interviewing someone who either has power over you or you have power over them. This means not interviewing one of your students or a report. Instead, as I did, find people outside of your day-to-day and allow their perspectives to inform your problem.

You can take notes on this conversation, or if everyone is comfortable, record it (my recommendation). In the interest of your time, try to keep each interview or storytelling session to 15 minutes. If you get passionate, no worries, enjoy the conversation.

- **Step Three: Field Reflection**

Review your notes or audio recordings. Now, take out your phone, open up a Voice Memo or similar app, and record a field reflection on the following questions (yes, it will feel cringey to listen back to your own voice later, but trust me, it gets easier):

1. After talking with others on campus, what did you learn about your problem?
2. What did you learn about yourself in relation to this problem? In other words, is your focus on this problem a product of personal passion, preference, or history?
Is this really a “you” problem?
3. How did your understanding of the problem change after talking with others? Did you come to find that the problem itself was really just a symptom of another problem?

Now, make sure to save this recording with a title, so you can retrieve it easily later. No need to listen back just yet, we will save that “cringe” for later.

- **Step Four: Participatory Storytelling**

If working with a group or in a community of practice, share summaries of reflections next time you meet. Ponder how different people's perspectives, problems, and experiences shape your understanding of the first year.

Episode Three: The Honeymoon, Pt. II

My Story

As a research project, this is not a large-scale, quantitatively driven project. Instead, I am interested in the experiences of those who work and learn in the first year. Ana, Mirna, Carmen, Niko, and I are the storytellers of *Finding the First Year*. Together, we are exploring our experience through problems and feelings.

Informing this approach is another theoretical perspective, John Dewey's theory of experience (Dewey, 2018; Dewey, 2005; Dewey, 2007). Dewey's theory is commonly cited by those doing narrative inquiry and a subgenre of that method, narrative analysis (Polkinghorne, 1995), Narrative analysis is the process of emplotting data into a narrative, as I did in *Finding the First Year* (Kim, 2015). Dewey's theory of experience is important to narrative analysis because of its attention to continuity and interaction. Dewey wrote that all experiences a human has are built off of one another- brick by brick, creating the story wall of a person's life. We are a cascading cycle of experience, having each experience shaped by what comes before. And, the experiences we have are also the product of an interaction with the present context: where we are in time, in society, in culture, and with whom we are having the experience.

This is all important for narrative analysts like you and me, because we want to take each human experience as a product of both the past and the present. And, we want to value these experiences as true representations of what it means to be a human, this human, in this particular space.

During storytelling sessions for this episode, whether in a group or individually, I accepted my participants' experiences and sought not to question or invalidate them, but to dive deeply into them for a greater understanding of their lived experience in the first-year.

In doing so, this episode became one of contrast: students moving through the bittersweet honeymoon, and professionals anxiously awaiting another hard semester. I did not force a single outcome. You will notice that I often brought participants' summer experiences, or even the distant past, into the space. This was my nod to continuity, that the experiences of the past shape the experiences of the present. And when discussing their current experiences and contexts, I was mining the interactive dimension of Dewey's theory. For Ana, it was interacting with colleagues. For Mirna, it was interacting with a federal financial aid calendar. For Niko, it was finding a job and getting settled in. For Carmen, it was lots of things.

Mine and their lived experiences matter, not just because we are human beings meriting dignity, but also because our stories have research and scholarly value to inform the first-year. And, guess what? So do yours!

Your Story

Let's take a moment to conceptualize your problem (whatever it is now- because it can evolve) through Dewey's theory of experience.

- **Step One: The Iceberg**

I love this iceberg model! It is a great way to see "what's underneath" a problem. There are many ways to approach this activity, and this is just my adaptation from Sweeney and Meadows (2010).

I recommend printing out the iceberg model on the next page and thinking through the levels of problem, experience, interaction, continuity, and assumptions.

The problem as it's seen from
the surface



Continuity: How do past
experiences influence your
understanding of the problem?

Interaction: How does your
current context shape this
problem?

Assumptions: What
assumptions do you and
others make that keep this
problem alive?

- **Step Two: Reflection**

Review your iceberg. Now, take out your phone, open up a Voice Memo or similar app, and record another field reflection on the following questions (yes, we are doing this for a reason):

1. After completing the iceberg, what did you learn about your problem?
2. What did you learn about yourself? Your context? Your past?
3. Is your problem changing? Say more.

Now, make sure to save this recording with a title, so you can retrieve it easily later. Again, we will listen to this later!

- **Step Three: Participatory Storytelling**

If working with a group or in a community of practice, share summaries of reflections next time you meet. Ponder how different people's perspectives, problems, and experiences shape your understanding of the first year.

We will see you next time.

Episode Four: Doublethink

My Story

As we entered October, I became really interested in shaping *Finding the First Year* into a genre, though I could not quite land on the best one, the most faithful one to the data I was gathering. Greedily, I decided to use genre as a lens to think through my data. That way, I would not have to choose only one. For me, genre became something like the lenses you have placed over your eyes at the optometrist.

“Take a look at the bottom line. Is it lens one or two that helps you see it most clearly? One? Two? One? Two?”

I experienced the same thing here: “Dystopia? Muckraker? Dystopia? Muckraker?”

The decision to explore October via dystopia was a good one. It allowed me, selfishly, to view my project through two of my favorite pieces of literature, *A Brave New World* (1992) and *1984* (2024), a plus in and of itself. The decision also allowed me to draw meaning from my data that I might otherwise have missed.

Allow me to expand on this point. I chose to be an educator for many reasons, but one was my personal objection to working a market-based life. Of course, I participate in the market and benefit from it, but I did not have a career where I was active in it. I remember having a thought in college, quite clear: I do not want to take money from others while making it for someone else.

Sadly, the market economy has certainly entered the first-year of college at NAU, and my story. This incursion, this domination, brings with it a darkness for me. There is, in my view, something inherently deceptive in most sales campaigns and other corporate slogans. Living in a society that accepts the deceptiveness of market actors and a legal structure that requires firms

and corporations to maximize profits for shareholders has often left me with a sense of social corruption, of decline. Increasingly, I experience these feelings in my work in the first-year. Dystopia was a perfect genre to think through, produce through, and speak through while describing what I saw in October.

Now, let's consider what genre would best tell your story!

Your Story

Let's write a story with your problem and your recent experience in the first-year in mind. Since you probably do not have time to write a script for a podcast episode, let us choose a fun activity, the six-word story, to craft a quick story.

The inspiration for the six-word story is commonly considered to be a (highly contested) story that Earnest Hemingway told about the best story he ever saw: "For sale: Baby shoes, never worn."

I listed out a few potential six-word stories for the first-year. See what you think:

The semester ends, but the inbox doesn't.

I explain everything twice, sometimes thrice.

Campus politics age me more than students.

Meetings multiply faster than actual solutions.

Hope for change outpaces institutional velocity.

Let's do one together and see what genre might do your story justice.

Step One: Writing the Six-Word Story

Think back to the problem you have been pondering and recent events. Take a few stabs at writing your own six-word story that reflects your experience. Be patient with yourself, it may take a while to craft one you love.

- **Step Two: Choosing a Genre**

With a six-word story in mind, visit this [Wikipedia page](#), cataloguing a comprehensive list of genres and subgenres. Choose three genres (or subgenres, or mix and match) that could work to faithfully express your six-word story.

- **Step Three: Reflection**

With a six-word story in hand, and three genres, move through the following prompts.

Yes, record them on your phone. Begin by stating your six-word story.

1. What emotion or detail would using this genre make more powerful? Explicit?
Move through each genre.
2. How could this genre perhaps mislead my audience? Move through each genre.
3. What new insights emerge for me when I view my six-word story through this genre?

Now, make sure to save this recording with a title, so you can retrieve it easily later. No need to listen back just yet, we will save that “cringe” for later.

- **Step Four: Participatory Storytelling**

If working with a group or in a community of practice, share summaries of reflections next time you meet. Ponder how different people’s perspectives, problems, and experiences shape your understanding of the first year.

Episode Five: Tragedy and Enshittification

My Story

The third research question, regarding how this experience has shaped me as a practitioner, is largely addressed through autoethnography. A simple way to think of autoethnography is pull the word apart: auto, as in self; ethno, as in culture; and graphy, as in story (Autoethnography as Method, 2009). The story of self within culture.

I think of autoethnography a little like how a bat uses echolocation. A bat chirps and waits for the sound of their chirp to bounce off a surface and back to their ears. This is how they measure distance without using sight. In autoethnography, we put up a story or a reflection and throw it at the wall of culture and our society. We see what sticks, what bounces back, what hits the wall and slides down. This gives us a sense of ourselves within culture. In this way, we learn about ourselves, the culture, and how the two dance or wrestle with each other.

I approached autoethnography in this project using layered analysis, an analytical strategy where the researcher moves back and forth between personal narrative and broader theoretical, cultural, or social commentary. Rather than separating story from analysis, the two are woven together in alternating layers, hence the name. A scene from lived experience sits alongside theoretical reflection, which then gives way to another personal vignette, and so on. And you move through these layers over and over and over, often using fragments of data (Hughes & Pennington, 2017).

For me, this analysis was done by listening to field reflections (some of which you heard in this series), interviews, and listening to draft versions of these episodes. Commonly, after a listening session, I would gain new insights into the first-year and the broader culture surrounding it, and, of course, into myself.

Especially powerful was listening to my own voice as it moved through this experience. Once I got over the sound of my own voice, I was able focus on change over time, and also hear what the speaker was missing. For example, the time between writing each script, recording it, adding the music, and finalizing the work for mastering averaged two weeks per episode.

Why so long? When I would listen back to the first draft of a recording, I could hear all the pieces I was missing, not to mention vocal stumbles. So, in my recording software, I would make notes to myself about what to add, subtract, clarify, or simply delete. I have well over two hours of audio files just of recordings that, upon a second or third listen, simply did not fit the narrative I constructed. I suppose I have materials for the deluxe edition!

Then, I would add music or ambient sound. Sometimes, when I listened back to myself, the ideas colored by the music's mood would change the meaning of my words. At times, this led to a new discovery and more edit notes. At times, I just changed the music.

Adding to the time it took to create were also simple recording logistics. When recording edits, I would have to warm up my voice so I would not sound entirely different. This meant recording had to happen mid-day or later; morning voice would not do. Levels would also have to be managed, space heaters turned off, and the jangle of dog tags scrubbed as Archie, my dog, ran to the window.

As I listen to these episodes, I still find newness and challenge in them. Of course, I can hear all of the mistakes. Sometimes that is all I hear. I also find myself reconsidering some of my positions and assumptions. Surprisingly, I find myself listening to these episodes and gaining new insights about the first-year, as if it were not I who wrote and recorded them in the first place.

In all, the methods I used here and the manner in which I recorded these works give them life I did not expect. I find myself thinking about something the lead singer of U2, Bono (2022), once said about songwriting. He said that we might think of songs as our children, but really, they are our parents. We write them, yes, but then they tell us what they mean, what they are, and where to go. Sometimes I feel a little like that with this project. Like each episode I created, but now, as I listen back, they are telling me about myself and my work.

Your Story

Luckily, after the last few activities, you, too, now have audio to explore through an abbreviated, layered analysis. Trust me, this will be fun!

- **Step One: Listen**

Get out a pair of headphones, a notepad, and a pen. File by file, listen to each piece of audio at least once over. You may have to do it every now and then and deal with how you sound. Here is the good news: You sort of do and sort of do not sound like this...

Take that as you will.

- **Step Two: Reflect, Sense Make**

Consider the following questions as you listen back to your Field Recordings:

1. What was happening in my personal and professional life during each recording?
How might that have influenced my field reflections?
2. What was happening in the cultural space of my school? My society broadly?
How might that have influenced my field reflections?
3. What new insights emerge about my work, my culture, and myself after listening?

- **Step Three: Participatory Storytelling**

If working with a group or in a community of practice, share summaries of reflections next time you meet. Ponder how different people's perspectives, problems, and experiences shape your understanding of the first year.

Episode Six: The Minor Gesture

My Story

One of my favorite parts of this project was adding music and auditory texture to each episode. A long-time lover and collector of music, all genres, the opportunity to score my life was a true gift.

An interesting thing happened midway through recording these episodes, which I think merits attention when considering how music shapes meaning and how it is chosen. I shared the first episode with two committee members, who, to my overwhelming relief, liked what they heard. Dr. Nicole Bowers, who herself did an arts-based dissertation, reminded me that I needed to use audio that I had permission to use, expressly, from the publisher. I had it in my mind that I could use any audio under “free use” laws (Congress & Policy, 2011), because this project was purely educational. Nicole reminded me that, yes, that is true, but this dissertation will also need to be published through ProQuest. At that stage, I needed to use only licensed music.

After doing my best not throw up, I went back through several episodes and deleted the music I did not have permission to use. I was deeply saddened because, for a year, I curated a fine playlist of music I thought could be a good match for this project. All that time, those visualizations were for naught.

Yet, an interesting thing happened when I began using non-commercial, popular music. I found that I was biased toward using music I liked rather than choosing music expressly to match the episode's mood. In other words, my enthusiasm for certain musical pieces took precedence over the application of texture. Equally true, this popular music, in hindsight, crowded my composition, taking up valuable auditory space. Moving away from this music allowed my words and ideas space to breathe.

Changing my approach to music also allowed me additional playfulness in exploring genres in each episode. You may notice that episodes three through the final episode, seven, all share common musical touches. The Honeymoon Pt II, the muckraker episode, is mostly jazz. Doublethink, the dystopian episode, is largely electronic and synth-based. Tragedy and Enshittification is largely modern classical. The Minor Gesture, heartwarming Americana. This was entirely intentional.

A hidden gem in episode four, Doublethink is the music that closes out the episode. At the time of recording, I was learning how to use a Teenage Engineering K.O. II sampler. As I wrote and thought about dystopia, I found myself able to craft a musical composition that mirrored my intellectual pursuits. In a sense, the music I created on that sampler was another “layer” in my layered analysis and reflection process. Truly, I wish I had more time to personally score more of this work.

As a sidenote, all music for this project was purchased via [EpidemicSounds.com](https://epidemicsounds.com). With a month-to-month membership, you can download a vast array of music for use in podcasts, commercials, and so forth. They provide a wonderful service, and I am grateful they exist.

Your Story

I want to share with you the treasured experience of using music to texture your words.

- ***Step One: Choosing a clip***

Return to your field reflections. Find a clip that you find particularly interesting, moving, troubling, or evocative. I recommend looking for something about two-to-three minutes in length.

- ***Step Two: Drop it into a DAW***

DAWs, or digital audio workstations, are everywhere these days. If you have a Mac, you already have one: GarageBand. You can find many online, especially made for podcasting. [rss.com](https://www.rss.com) is free for educators and very user-friendly. I would start there if you are new to playing with audio.

With your clip in mind, drop the entire file into your DAW (most sites include very easy-to-use instructions). Use the tools to trim your file to isolate your clip.

- ***Step Three: Find your music***

Now, let's find music that gives your words space to breathe. In that way, let's stay away from commercial, popular music. Go to any site offering "open source audio." I recommend freesound.org.

Search by genre, feeling, or whatever comes to mind. Download musical clips and place them atop your field reflection. You may trim the music as well, just so you get the right parts. Sidenote: You may have to adjust the level of your music so it does not overwhelm your narration.

Try on a few different musical clips. Hear what each does to your words. Hear what changes ideas or feelings emerge from hearing your voice alongside music.

Download your composition when you're finished, and try to put it on your phone (it's very easy with Apple Music or Spotify).

Step Four: Participatory Listening

If working with a group or in a community of practice, assign one or more participants to bring a Bluetooth speaker that others can easily connect to. Have a listening party of your clips together!

Before or after each share, the creator should offer some background on the field reflection and insights into their decision-making regarding the music. As you do this, you are engaging in arts-based, autoethnographic research in a participatory setting. How cool is that!

If you want to share your work with me, I would love to hear it. Send it to:

findingthefirstyear@gmail.com.

Episode Seven: What I Found

Your Story

After listening, you know my story. There is not much else to tell. Now I, and the group (if you are in one), want to know what you found in *Finding Your First Year*.

There is no perfect way to go about this, but a good starting point is to share your problem and, from there, the discoveries you made along the way. Honestly, that is pretty much all I did.

This is also a good place to highlight where some of your findings align, depart, or contradict what you heard in *Finding the First Year*. As I noted earlier, this whole project was ultimately about getting unstuck, and a hard conversation is one good way to do that!

Thanks for listening. I hope you had fun.

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