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Telling Transitions At The Table: Re-Served Seats of Higher Learning?

Dorothy Lander
Saint Francis University, dlander@stfx.ca

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Keywords

qualitative research

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Telling Transitions At The Table: Re-Served Seats of Higher Learning?

by
Dorothy Lander[±]

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Abstract

This paper traces the transitions of first year students and other adults of the university as they partake in an intergenerational shared inquiry at a common table. My transformative research invites students, faculty, and staff to attend to (eat) and transform (digest) the moral and political encounters in successive becomings from their speaking positions at a common table. This dialogical partaking of words disrupts the market discourse of student as consumer and re-stories the university as a service organization where all organizational actors are consuming and being consumed. Eating together and telling transitions dissolve boundaries between service and knowledge, between students and other organizational actors, between serving and being served. To transform my writing into a service encounter, I re-present my research as the serving up of a multi-storied, multi-course meal at a common table. *Bon appetit!*

Let it serve for table-talk; Then, howso'er thou speak'st, 'mong other things I shall digest it.
- *Merchant of Venice*, Act III, Scene V

The table is a versatile motif in my transformative research figuring materially and symbolically in the transitions of first year students and other newcomers to the university, including my own first year doctoral research into higher education. Metaphors organize qualitative analysis and also the reading and writing of qualitative research (see Lander, [2000a](#)). The metaphor of the table and eating "affects the interpretations of the 'facts' [in this article]; indeed, facts are interpretable ('make sense') only in terms of their place within a metaphoric structure" (Richardson, [1997](#), p. 45).

My lived experience as a manager of food service for university *board* students in a Canadian university both affects and constitutes the research "facts" that emerged in service encounters over a shared meal and shared inquiry. My multiple and conflicted selves as researcher, graduate student, service worker, and knowledge worker participate in the conversations and power relations that play out at the table in the narrative of my research in a British university and hall of residence. Randall ([1995](#)) conflates eating processes and active consumption with storying our lives. Storying and especially restorying constitute transformative research since storying transforms (*digests*) events into experience:

Our lives lack experiences because they contain either too many events or too few. . .too many events [means]. . .they cannot *digest* those events into experiences. In turn, this may increase their *appetite* for events, that is, to make up for the lack of experiences in their *diet*. Thus their eyes become bigger than their *stomach*. (p. 291, italics added)

It is my position that transformative educators and researchers can aid digestion of events by providing the occasions for students and service providers of the university to engage in dialogue and restorying around a common table.

Brew (1946) theorizes on the approach to informal education through the stomach with her statement that "the social and educative value of the meal has been increasingly realised in recent years" (p. 47). However, 50 years on, it has been my experience as a food service manager that primarily the nutritional and health value of the student board program features if the "meal" appears in higher education rhetoric or research at all. "Re-fuelling" (Brew, p. 49) is still the emphasis of the University of Nottingham's 1993-1994 Annual Report (University of Nottingham, 1994), which in praising the contribution of support staff to student success asserts that a "successful army marches on its stomach" (p. 12). van Gennepe's (1909) classic *rites de passage* proclaims eating together as pivotal to bridging transitions and yet the social importance of commensality to transitions and learning in higher education has not to my knowledge been the focus of systematic inquiry.

The rite of eating and drinking together. . .is clearly a rite of incorporation, of physical union. . . .The sharing of meals is reciprocal, and there is thus an exchange of food which constitutes the confirmation of a bond" (Van Gennepe, 1960, p. 29).

Table Talk

The Latin *tabula* referred to a board, slate or list often for inscriptions, emerging as "table" in Middle English and expanding to include the furniture sense of boards set on temporary trestles. Norman's (1972) *Tales of the Table* points to the eight-century epic, *Beowulf*, and Hrothgar's great mead hall as one of the earliest references to the table for dining: the high table with individual chairs on a dais for hosts and honoured guests and tables and benches for retainers along the sides of the hall--known in medieval usage as "sideboards." A huge silver salt cellar set in front of the place of the host and perhaps his highest ranking guests was a mark of prestige that indicated the status of the lord and his dining intimates, and effectively classified the inner circle from the excluded who sat "below the salt" (Visser, 1991, p. 122). I negotiated my entry into my doctoral research project in a British hall of residence at the high table, which survives as an artifact from medieval times. The high or top table in Anglo-Saxon custom is largely taken for granted as the place of privilege in the British college where the master and fellows dine with distinguished guests. In my research site, it was the Hall Warden and Resident Tutors and guests of the Senior Common Room (SCR) who dined at the high table. The high table finds expression in the service culture in Canadian universities in the continuing status distinctions according to food service venues, the menu selections and the accoutrements of the table, which mark off difference between students, faculty and staff.

I presented an earlier version of this paper at a Qualitative Analysis Conference and raised a spirited response from one participant, "The high table is alive and well at Victoria College here at University of Toronto." She went on to describe with disdain the partitioning arrangements that affected her as a Don in residence and graduate student: she was rarely asked to sit at the high table but unlike undergraduate students she had a standing invitation to sit in the drawing room and enjoy its fireside ambience after the meal. She wrapped up her story saying, "And it stinks."

The continuing references to room and board fees and board students can be traced to "hey borde" (Hensch, [1976](#), p.153), which predated the high table in Middle English and is distinguished from "secunde borde" and "thredde (third) for the meny borde (retainers' table)." My research is an ethical and political project that seeks to move students and service workers from the sideboards to a common table with knowledge workers of the university where together they can eat, drink, talk, and digest. My research resists historical subjects of the university classified in terms of "below the salt" and "worth his or her salt."

Telling Transitions at the Table IS Transformative Research

For my doctoral research project at the university in the UK I assembled the organizational actors of the university including knowledge workers, service workers and students including first year students to engage in storytelling about service encounters in and out of the classroom. In providing the occasions for intergenerational organizational actors to come face-to-face with role and power differences bound by service and knowledge categories, and to engage in dialogue on the learning that occurs in service encounters, I inaugurated a critical and counter-hegemonic process of reconstituting the university as a service organization. My critical intent was to counterpoise the university as a knowledge organization, with its overdetermined meanings of received "academic" knowledge and ownership of intellectual property. I deliberately staged the story-telling in traditional service settings in hall to foreground the fundamental knowledge and learning and subjectivity that is co-created in the service and hospitality context of intersubjectivity—in eating together, and consuming each other's words.

The "bi-directional relationship" (Falk, [1994](#)) of eating and conversing together at a common table undercuts hierarchical relationships and energises transitions, moving first year students and indeed any other adults in transition from outsider status to insider status. Eating together is the great leveller. Social identity, or as Lupton ([1996](#)) prefers, *subjectivity*, is energised in the act of eating together, transition as praxis in the crossing of bodily borders, crossing from substance to symbol, from food to words, from outsider to insider. "Food is a liminal substance; it stands as a bridging substance between nature and culture, the human and the natural, the outside and the inside (Lupton, [1996](#), pp.17-18).

Transition narratives are so many stories of journeys of the self reaching out to the Other, the dynamic interaction of selves as insider and outsider. Tenkasi and Boland ([1993](#)) are organization theorists who argue for the narrative basis of human cognition. They articulate the bi-directional becomings of the organization and the selves within the organization:

Individuals are not just constructing organizations through narrative, they are also, importantly constructing selves. By narrativizing their experience, individuals define not only how things work, but also who they are and what role they play (economic, social, and moral) in the patterns of causal action that are the world. (p .99)

My desire to engage in a process of reconstituting the university as a service organization as it plays out in the transitions of first year students is both personal and professional. On the personal and autobiographical level, my research offered me a voice of resistance to the practices of story-o-typing (Randall, [1996](#)) me and other service workers whose responsibilities for students' bodily needs rendered us as "other" to the knowledge workers of the academy and indeed to knowledge. de Certeau ([1984](#)) claims that the knowledge that "it is assumed there *must be*" in the daily practices of cooking, cleaning, and sewing (and I would add service operations managers) is known "only by people other than its bearers" (p. 71). We, the cooks, and cleaners, and secretaries, and service managers of the University are renters and not owners of our own know-how (de Certeau, p. 71). The intent of my autobiographical "I" is not to psychologize my marginal position but to socialize the marginality of service workers and service work in the wider critical context of the university and the first year experience. I situate my research at the entry point of first year students engaging with old hands in the joining-up process in order to contest this taken-for-granted partitioning of knowledge and service that has been reproduced in each successive generation of university students. I hold that all social science research is autobiographical (Church, [1995](#); Miller, [1993](#); Mills, [1959](#); Stanley, [1992](#)). Accordingly, my own transition from service worker to knowledge worker (see Lander, [2000b](#)) performs a counterpoising presence to my professional interest in the stories of transition of first year students and other organizational actors of the university.

My research methodology falls under the aegis of action research because it seeks to augment both the theory and practice of service in the university and the interrelated theory and practice of the first year experience. My research takes into account the three basic commitments of action research: research, which entails the generation of new knowledge; a participatory process in which facilitators, researchers and participants take some responsibility; and action aimed at altering "the initial situation of the group, organization, or community in the direction of a more self-managing, liberated state" (Greenwood & Levin, [1998](#)). In locating my research interventions at the common table where intergenerational actors eat and converse together across differences, I inaugurated research that occasions and foregrounds political and moral encounters and discourses. This coheres with the definition of action research that Kemmis and McTaggart ([1988](#)) advance: "Action research is a form of collective self-reflective inquiry undertaken by participants in a social situation in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social practices, as well as their understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out" (p. 5).

I claim my research as transformative on this basis: it is politics in the making forged in the margins of contested knowledge claims; it challenges the normative practices of partition based on gender, race, class *and* the market which take for granted that the rightful place for service and service workers is at the periphery and the rightful place for knowledge and knowledge workers is at the centre. In contesting the university as a knowledge organization and its privileging of knowledge workers and counterpoising the mutuality of embodied service

encounters at a common table, I inaugurate research with a radical agenda (Westwood & Thomas, [1991](#)). Thomas's distinction between radical and reform modes of educational research elaborates on the transformative dimension of action research: transformative research seeks to change the organization of the university at its roots (the Latin etymology of radical is *rad*-meaning root); reform seeks change that allows the preservation of the status quo. Thus my research also resonates with Grundy's emancipatory action research to "promote emancipatory praxis in the participating practitioners; that is, it promotes a critical consciousness which exhibits itself in political as well as practical action to promote change" (cited in Kemmis & McTaggart, [1988](#), p. 154).

Westwood ([1991](#)) insists that transformative research moves change projects beyond participatory action research in offering "those involved not simply a voice but a speaking position through the narrative mode"(p. 83). I want to make explicit that my research emphasizes the narrative mode in dialogical formation. Inviting speakers to tell their story and take a position will not foster democratic practices if no one is listening. I hold with Isaacs ([1993](#)) who puts attending rather than speaking at the core of the theory of dialogue "building on the premise that the effect of people's shared attention can alter the quality and level of inquiry possible at any particular time"(p. 35) . It is the deliberating, the "weighing out," the digesting, that flows from people speaking together that leads people to recognise the "underlying fragmentation and incoherence in everyone's thought" (p. 35). Dialogue in contrast to discussion and debate is not about analysing the parts but instead "*listening* for the incoherence of the whole" (p. 35).

Dialogue alters time and space since people in coming to mutual understandings even if they do not agree, begin to think and speak in an "entirely different rhythm and pace" (p. 35). The dialogue experience becomes charged with meaning.

In dialogical storytelling "every player. . .is both storyteller and audience, both spectator and spect-actor [Boal, [1979](#)], engaged in different acts of communion and agency" (Weil, [1994](#), p. 164). MacLure ([1996](#)) locates the storied and dialogical nature of transitions in the in-betweenness and unresolved oppositions that are rehearsed in action research. The narrative structure "resists the impulse to settle boundary questions" (p. 274) and offers "a way out of that dilemma of living on *both* sides of that borderline between self and other, us and them" (p. 275), insider and outsider, service and knowledge, theory and practice. I argue in MacLure's own words that her transitions project and mine qualify as *transformative* research: "In these particular narratives of becoming, first encounters with action research are often told as transformative events--moments at which new insights and excitements opened up--yet also as foreshadowed in the life course up to that point. People both 'become' and in a sense were 'always already'" (MacLure, [1996](#), p. 275).

Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivastva, [1987](#)) becomes action research in the transformative mode through critical storytelling: organizational actors begin by telling their "peak experiences," the "best of what is," the life-giving forces grounded in the collective experiences of every member of the organization, and then through vision and logic articulate the "what should be," while collectively experimenting with the "what can be" (p. 87). My first intervention in my research site of a hall of residence adapted Appreciative Inquiry. The peak experiences or quality moments in hall included many accounts of service encounters at the bar,

at the hotplate as the servery is known in the UK, and at the table. Over one academic year, I attended to the dialogue between students, service workers, and knowledge workers to produce my written research-as-story. I assembled the particulars of experience in the transitional stories in the boundaries of service and knowledge, between the in-class and out-of-class experiences, told in the here-and-now "but pulled away from the present moment to their origins in the past and their significance for the future" (MacLure, [1996](#), p. 274).

Putting a Radical Agenda on the Table

Transformative research articulates the trajectory of theory and practice. Accordingly my theory-in-use of the university as a service organization is the first order of the day. Service with its moral nuances of democracy and hospitality has been coopted by market and consumerism discourses, especially in the language of stewardship and servant-leadership (Block, [1993](#); Greenleaf, [1977](#); Spears, [1998](#)). Service is a commodity, as the inseparable partnership of goods and services in the language of the market and taxation underscores. Students are calculated in terms of inputs and outputs, customers and consumers, who "become" products of a university education. The market discourse of educational services distorts the meaning of consumption to suggest students passively consume services. By recalling that consuming is eating, a social activity, my research puts service and consuming back on the table. "Consumption is eminently social, relational, and active rather than private, atomic, or passive" (Appadurai, [1986](#), p. 31; see also Lander, [2001](#)). Falk ([1994](#)) traces consumption to its alimentary origins:

The partakers of a modern meal are no longer "dissolved" into a unity by means of the shared and incorporated food, but rather linked together through communicative (speech) acts in which the individual autonomy of those present is reciprocally respected. . . . It is precisely in modern consumption that both the duality of eating and speaking and the dynamic circle of the individualized self "sublimating" food into words manifest themselves in a most extensive and intensive way. (p. 36)

My research project intentionally distinguishes the services of the university from commodities in order to disrupt this market discourse on consumption and to recover hospitality and meaning-making as the basis of service encounters. Services are relatively intangible, that is, the services provided, whether in class or out of class, tend to be acts or processes or encounters that result in experiences rather than in the possession of some product or object (the goods of manufacturing organizations). There is solid state to goods; services are fluid and ever-changing, and once we introduce the face-to-face service encounter, infinite in relational possibilities.

Readings ([1996](#)) names the contemporary university, the university of excellence, in which excellence is calculated by performance indicators, exemplified in league tables (UK) and Maclean's annual ranking of universities in Canada in the November issue of this magazine. Readings insists that excellence as the guiding principle of the university is devoid of meaning because it is non-referential (p. 22) and has no content to call its own. I hold with Readings that this calculated and administrative view of quality serves itself as a bureaucracy based on market efficiency and is not concerned with what the University *means* for first year students or anybody else. For example, quality of student services in *Maclean's* ([1994](#)) ranking is in terms of the percentage of operating budget. The method for basing graduation rates is telling: "the

percentage of full-time undergraduate students in their second year (after the initial wave of first-year dropouts) who go onto graduate from the institution within one year of the expected time period" (Maclean's, p. 29). This quality indicator is presented uncritically disregarding the possibilities for quality outside this normative time-based understanding.

My research confronts the dominant market discourse by offering an alternative to Reading's "calculated" quality of the University. The quality of the University is "appreciated" in the stories organizational actors tell about their quality moments. Appreciation of stories demands attending to the other in dialogue. This imparts the moral dimension of meaning-making to restorying service encounters.

Mutual storytelling makes meaning and co-responsibility explicit. To tell a story is to have moral perspective. This is not the moral positioning of students or servant-leaders or knowledge workers, but of consumers dining at a common table. Storytelling makes the organizational actor's intentions explicit (Tirrell, 1990). The actor becomes a moral agent in giving an accounting of her own actions or the actions of others and in attending to the stories that others tell. In the authoring or storytelling, she reveals the consequences or possible consequences of her deeds and their impact on others. This is what engages us in listening to a story. What is going to happen to the characters as the story unfolds? This is the causal dimension of authoring. There is also a normative aspect to storytelling and author-ity; it requires the storyteller to *justify* her "decisions (and actions) to others in the community in terms of shared conceptions of both how things are and how things should be" (Tirrell, p. 117). Moral agency is refined since we develop this ability to justify "*particular* actions in terms of shared conceptions" (p. 117). Narrative structure fosters coresponsibility as the storyteller articulates events, characters, motives, feelings, and actual or possible consequences. We become moral agents, not only in the telling but in the listening to others' stories and probing for meaning. This is newcomers and old hands making meaning of the joining-up process. Tirrell animates moral perspective: "through telling and listening to stories, we learn to make subtle and not so subtle shifts in point of view, and these shifts are crucial to developing the sense of self and others necessary to moral agency" (p. 119).

Heldke (1992) asserts that the communal, relational activity of eating evokes what she calls the Coresponsible Option, an ontological position that suggests "your interests and mine are (often) *connected* to each other, grow out of each other" (p. 312). Like eating, coresponsibility is not optional and it does not valorize either the responsibilities of first year students or those of other organizational actors.

Negotiating Entry to Research at the High Table

I began my search for a research site in a hall of residence before I was even accepted as a doctoral student in the UK by writing to 12 Hall Wardens. It was not immediately apparent that I would conduct my educational research in just one hall of residence. My research proposal that was part of my application to the university emphasised educational interventions into the out-of-class experiences of first year students. I borrow from Connelly and Clandinin (1990) in understanding the entry process

as an ethical matter. . .a negotiation of a shared narrative unity. . .This understanding of the negotiation of entry highlights the way narrative inquiry occurs within relationships among researchers and practitioners, constructed as a caring community. When both researchers and practitioners tell stories of the research relationship, they have the possibility of being stories of empowerment. (pp. 3-4)

The "negotiation of a shared narrative unity" began before I was even accepted to the university. I was jobless and "between stories" (Randall, [1996](#)) in Canada, when I wrote to all 12 hall wardens asking about a tutor position that would allow me to conduct my research. I received a variety of non-committal responses. However, Vince, the Warden of Shakespeare Hall (as I will call the Warden and the Hall throughout my research story) wrote back with undisguised enthusiasm for my research theme on service: "Where have you been all my life?" This was an auspicious beginning to a research relationship.

My first meeting to plan my research participation took place at the high table in the student dining room, at the invitation of Vince, the Hall Warden. This was toward the end of the academic year and the Senior Common Room (SCR) including the Warden, Resident Tutors and faculty guests dined at the high table on an elevated platform while students of the Junior Common Room (JCR) dined in the same room beneath us. My restorying of this event transforms and digests the experience of negotiating entry to a research site across cultures.

Table 1: The High Table

The High Table

In conversation over lunch at the "high table" or the "top table" of Shakespeare Hall, I asked the Warden, Resident Tutors and other members of the SCR a naive question, concerning the origins of the tradition of the high table--naive rather than innocent, because I asked from a perspective of curiosity, the perspective of my Canadian experience with university food service. I was woefully unaware of sensitivities associated with my question. But it was not an innocent question because I had some sense that the word "high" connoted status. My curiosity stemmed from the taken-for-grantedness of professors, lecturers, and PhD candidates sitting in this elevated position separate from the students of the JCR at the long tables beneath us. Both the SCR and the JCR were eating the same food, picked up on trays from the servery, so it was clearly seating arrangements that marked off difference. I realized that I had touched a sensitive chord when the Warden and Tutors mounted a spirited defence of the high table: it offered opportunity for daily interaction among tutors and warden; it belonged to the Oxbridge tradition; undergraduates could easily identify Tutors and Warden. The following academic year, the Warden moved the diners from the Senior Common Room to the same level as the students with a reserved sign to distinguish their table from the undergraduate tables during regular daily meals. I interpret this intervention as a politically symbolic act that counters the hegemony of the high table. It traces the continual narrative trajectory toward higher moral ground.

Transitions Within Transitions

My next tale of the Christmas table reveals a special role for me as the researcher. Researcher not as participant observer but as organizational spect-actor (Boal, [1979](#)). In each case that the story of the mince pies was told to me, it was told because of my presence as a researcher and an outsider. Consider how this war story gains its utility in moving organizational actors, including first year students, from outsider to insider status because the storytellers needed a very interested outsider to tell their story to in order to identify themselves as insiders. Implicit in the first telling and hearing of this story for first year students was an acknowledgement that they had not yet become insiders. Trace also the movement from outsider to insider status for me as the researcher.

Table 2: Mince Pies No More

Mince Pies No More

When the formal Christmas dinner for Shakespeare Hall was imminent, Vince, the Warden, let the tutors know the traditional mince pies would not be on the menu. A British Christmas, the Dickensian groaning table, without mince pies? "Why?," the Resident Tutors from overseas especially wanted to know. Vince acknowledged that they had always had mince pies up until a couple years back, when a few students who had overindulged in the Christmas spirit began tossing the pies around the room, mostly targeting their mates. However, they managed to hit a couple guests at the high table, one of whom was older and quite prominent on campus. Vince was mortified! His solution? Ban mince pies henceforth. I heard this story first from Lei, the Resident Tutor from Tonga. Then, without any prompting from me, new elements of the story surfaced in the departmental meeting of Hall Management that I attended as an observer. Irene, the Assistant Hall Manager revealed that the mince tarts (not pies) were "scalding hot" and that the end of the trajectory was a bald pate at the high table. Great hilarity accompanied this story. No one was challenging Vince's decision. The next variation on the story came to me on the evening of the Christmas dinner, in conversation with Jeannie, the first-year food rep. We were raving over the sumptuous meal, and then Jeannie spoke in a hushed, conspiratorial tone of the missing item at the Christmas table. As a relative outsider and an overseas person, I would not be expected to be "in the know," I suspect. She also knew I was doing research in the Hall with a special interest in food. "Did I know that the reason there were no mince pies for Christmas, was that students had got out of hand a few years back? And they hit a few big shots at the head table." Intuitively, I knew that it would be important not to reveal that I had already heard bits and pieces of this story. Jeannie confided, "I guess Vince wasn't taking any chances, so mince pies no more."

This tale illustrates transitions within transitions and how they intersect. The other organizational actors were energising my transition by recognising me as a researcher and bringing me into the fold by telling me, an outsider, an insider story. Lei's transition as a new Resident Tutor to the

Hall was energized by telling me an insider story. This identified her as an insider to herself and to me. Vince in first introducing the story of the mince pies at his weekly meeting with his six tutors, three of whom were not British and three of whom were new to the Hall, gave cachet to the story. He was implicitly recognising that mince pies are a cultural boundary marker, distinguishing the Christmas feast in the UK from ordinary fare. The absence of mince pies at Christmas had significance. He was implicitly giving permission to the tutors to tell the tale as insiders. Irene received recognition as an insider by being able to tell the Hall lore to an outsider in the presence of her insider colleagues. And Jeannie, the fresher food rep, in her conspiratorial tones to me recognized her newfound status as an insider.

In these versions of the tale of the mince pies including my composite version, we are organizational actors seeking to tell the same old story anew and in the telling seeking to forge identities both individual and organizational. Telling transition tales is about becoming. For first year students and all organizational actors, the "coming from" is as important as the "coming to." The tale of the mince pies configures organizational transition: it traces the "coming from" and "coming to" of the organization but in the telling of the tale, organizational actors energise their own transitions.

The Power Dimensions of Transitions

At the next table, listen for the power relations that are implicated in the everyday transitions of knowledge workers, cooks (service workers) and students.

Table 3: More Stodgy Puddings

More Stodgy Puddings

Me, External Tutor and Researcher: *Any quality moments that the students have that would be surprises to the rest of the group here? That would be unknown to. . .*

Jerome, First-year Law Student and First-year Rep: *I don't know if this is my imagination but I think that, I think that the food's got better (laughter). You know when I first came, I remember, the first day, we came down in corridors and we were told that we were going to go at specific times and we came down at quarter past six and I remember getting my food and it was, you know, I eat quite a lot anyway, and it was orange juice, a main course with rice or something in it, and a pear. And I thought, "You know, this is not really what I'm used to but. . . There should be more stodgy puddings and custards and things like, that's usually what I like." (laughter)*

Ross, Head Chef: *I've got a difficult job here.*

Jerome: *I know, that's what a lot of people have said.*

Rose, Hall Manager: *Because equally there's somebody else who sits on the other side of the table who says, "I can't eat stodgy puddings. I can't eat. . ." So it's like a real....*

Vince, Professor in Engineering and Hall Warden: *Again, about communication failure and anything else like that. . . there is a point actually which again this, the student wouldn't be aware of and that is at the beginning of term actually, the kitchen staff were doing valued things with only Ross and me and the second chef. We were without, we normally have two assistant chefs as well. But one was on long term sick leave, one had just resigned and had not been replaced so we were down to two staff out of a normal four.*

Rose: *And also the dining room side of it as well. Margaret has been from the start of term and still is at the moment varying the staff. She is doing a steady job, recruiting, badgering ladies to come back, probably you'll find ladies washing your sink in the morning, peeling spuds at night as well, so you know sort of a lot of, you know cajoling, and persuading to get people to come back. It's time-consuming, not always a, a thankless task as well, but you know.*

Jerome's desire for "more stodgy puddings" brings into play both senses of "taste" and both applications of the tongue, the sensation on his tastebuds, and as an expressed preference, what food 'stands for,' acquired through acculturation. "That is what I usually *like*" and "there *should* be more" highlights that taste is both an aesthetic and a moral category (Gronow, [1993](#), p. 291), the good and the right. Jerome's moral discourse privileges culture and taste in Bourdieu's ([1984](#)) sense of food choices as "cultural capital" and Falk's ([1994](#)) sense of food categories as "a potential representation of the (higher) good. . .making social mobility possible and replacing sanctioned boundaries by social norms"(p. 83).

Rose, the Hall Manager enacts the moral ambiguity for service managers when she responds to Jerome's disappointment first in terms of the moral meaning of the "right" (justice) and then in terms of the "good" (ethic of care). Rose first sums up the moral challenge of catering in halls of residence day in and day out when she says, "But equally there's somebody else who sits on the other side of the table and says 'I can't eat stodgy puddings. I can't eat. . .'" This is a clear expression of the contractual rights of students, favouring individual rights. I could hear myself saying an approximation of this at most any meeting with Canadian students about food service. Rose's use of the word "equally" highlights the struggle to be democratic. When it comes to institutional food service, democracy fails because student expectations contradict market discourses: not only shall there be equal, impartial treatment (the public, contractarian, bureaucratic, market-oriented sphere) but at the same time individual preferences, that is, unequal, partial, caring treatment, shall be taken into account (the private, *idealised* family sphere). Hospitality implies partiality and the ethic of care, which cannot be contracted.

Vince's response to Jerome's plea for "more stodgy puddings" is one of managerial rationality. He makes the link between Jerome not having stodgy puddings for his first meal to staff shortages at this particular time. Vince's emphasis on "communication failure" implies that if the "students had been aware" of the staff shortages, they would have understood why their first meal was lacking. Vince's response is *telling* about transitions and hegemonic practices. Even though he focuses on the "particular," he does not recognise Rose's new managerial role with kitchen staff, a role that up until the 1995-96 year had been his. The organizational fact is that Ross reports to Rose. But Vince stated that "the kitchen staff were doing valued things with *only*

me and Ross and the second chef." "Only" is a marker that serves explicitly to emphasise the uncommonly lean staff complement in which Vince includes himself, but also serves implicitly to exclude Rose from "doing valued things" with the chefs. On its own, without exposure to the organizational changes and the attendant sociocultural and hegemonic practices, my critical discourse analysis would not, could not, uncover this implicit and largely unconscious meaning.

Vince's and Rose's divergent discourses regarding staff shortages support the feminist analysis that men favour rationality, objectivity, and disembodied, calculated practices and women favour an ethic of care and relationships and embodied, meaningful practices of hospitality. Vince's managerial discourse depends on the bureaucracy of organization and the hierarchical, numerical, contractual order of things: "we were down to two staff from a normal four." Talk of "sick leave" and "resigned" and "replaced" belong to a managerial discourse. Holmer-Nadesan (1996) argues that managerialism and patriarchy are inextricably linked since men have traditionally occupied positions of managerial authority and have dominated organizational discourses. "Patriarchal significations may seem 'natural' when invoked by a less ubiquitous discourse such as managerialism"(p. 56). Paradoxically, Rose, Manager by title, uses a relational discourse to give identity to her staff: the Dining Hall Supervisor was "doing a steady job, recruiting, badgering ladies to come back."

Rose's staff are embodied: "You'll find ladies washing your sink in the morning, peeling spuds at night as well." Rose and Vince mark out the gendered boundaries between knowledge workers and service workers, the mind-body dualism of higher education. Vince as the knowledge worker, a PhD lecturing in the engineering department stresses *knowing*: "the student wouldn't be *aware*." Rose, as a service operations manager and whose staff are service workers and "ladies," stresses *doing*. Witness Rose's generous use of the continuous verb which actively embodies her staff, filling the space of organization with a pulsating rhythm: *varying*, *recruiting*, *badgering*, *washing*, *peeling*, *cajoling*, *persuading* and even *time-consuming*. Rose's "ladies" are embodied and interacting with students and this is reflected in her relational discourse and an ethic of care: "You'll find ladies washing *your* sink." This is not the impersonal, indefinite "you" and "your"; she was addressing her remarks directly *to* Jerome, situating her response in the particularities of this student missing the stodgy puddings he was "used to."

Vince, on the other hand, spoke *about* the student as customer in the abstract: "The student wouldn't be aware." The actors he refers to are gender-neutral and identified by role. Rose does not challenge Vince's managerial discourse, and her exclusion from it; she seems to go along with it in her double concurrence: "and *also* the dining room side of it *as well*." Holmer-Nadesan (1996) names this 'Identification' (Pecheux, 1982) when "individuals accept the identities provided in the dominant discourse" (p. 58).

Rose opens up the space of action finding the surplus of meaning to the managerial discourse in a relational and gendered and action-packed service discourse. She makes clear that they are "ladies" engaged in this activity, repeating "ladies" twice and referring to Margaret by name as the person "recruiting, badgering the ladies." The concrete detail she provides is charged with agency. Rose's discourse is infused with an ethic of care, recognizing the students whom she addresses as "you" and the supervisory staff who have a "thankless task."

This layering of the organization explicates the links between the transition of the first-year student, Jerome who missed the stodgy puddings he was used to, his "cultural capital," and the transition of organizational actors who were in new roles with new demands, related to the organizational transition.

Transitions from Food to Words

The Head Chef's story on Table 4 locates organizational practice and eating practices in historical process.

Table 4: The Head Chef Remembers

The Head Chef Remembers

Ross, Head Chef: *Formal dinners or functions now are much nicer than they were 28 years ago (laughter). When I first started all students had to come down in cap and gown for formal dinners--suits, cap and gown. I mean it was formal, and that was twice a week. And, you know, there was no noise. All you could hear was knives and forks. And, you know, people were afraid to talk. It was just so formal. But nobody enjoyed it. It was a tradition but you know that's sort of gone away. Mixed halls have come along and you know, everybody enjoys themselves. Whether the students come for the food doesn't really matter as long as they enjoy themselves and you know, appreciate, not what I do, but what everybody does, you know, that does, just by looking through the doors, that sort of feedback goes straight to the staff in the kitchen. And you know, it's quite important.*

Ross configured food service in the present by pulling the significance of food service for the future out of the past of his long experience. His emphatic intonation of "28 years ago" gave *author-ity* to his story that was to follow. He had "been there." Ross was telling a moral story about food service when he explained that what "doesn't really matter" is the food, thereby implying that what "does really matter" is students "enjoying themselves" and "appreciating what everybody does." This is the Head Chef recognising food as symbol paramount to food as re-fuelling. To Ross, service quality and hence food quality are more about the quality of the social interaction the experience engenders than the nutritional or presentational quality of the food. By contrast, formal dinners of the past were about the mechanical functionality of eating: "There was no noise. All you could hear was knives and forks. And, you know, people were afraid to talk." The juxtaposition of noisy tools, the knives and forks, next to "people. . .afraid to talk" has the effect of reducing people to noisy but uncommunicative objects, to the metallic clashing of knives and forks. This echoes Falk's (1994) pre-modern eating community in which the ritual, shared common meal (communion) was silently incorporated into the eating community and speech was secondary to eating. This strikes the paradox of Ross's remembering sounds of the past in connection with the speech function of the "mouth and tongue" over and above the taste

function of the "mouth and tongue." Ross's story traces the shift from food to words, eating to speaking, communion to communication, formality to informality, ritual to sociability.

Clearing the Tables

At the completion of this multi-storied and multi-course meal, everyone is free to go their separate ways. As the host to this research and as a student services educator, I stay on to clear the tables, wash up, and reflect on the quality of the service encounter. And to reflect on what it means for practice. And to reflect on the impact of my methods of action research for my participants, for student services practitioners, and for my own practice. How did my transformative research balance research, participation, and action (Greenwood & Levin, [1998](#))? In terms of generation of knowledge, I conclude on the basis of my research that non-teaching staff and especially student services practitioners actively attend to the climate of hospitality for first year students, helping them negotiate their way across the service and knowledge terrain of the university.

Now that I am a teacher and knowledge worker in the university, I remember that what I know best and do best for students and other organizational actors in transition is service work (see Lander, [2001](#) on "Back to the Future of the Service University"). Since my return to Canada in 1997, I have not sustained contact with my UK research site and the research participants so my description of their liberating actions is limited to the time frame of the research--1995 to 1997. The movement of the high table for the Senior Common Room to the same level as the Junior Common Room is an exemplar of politics in the making. This altering of the initial situation of the group suggests movement in the direction of service-oriented democratic reform but falls short of revolutionary action research (Greenwood & Levin, [1998](#), p. 8). This exemplar accords with Thomas's radical definition and Westwood's ([1991](#)) transformative research on a small scale. During the 2 years in the UK, research participants would come up to me outside of the formal research conversations and tell me their most recent "quality moments." I have continued my work as an action research practitioner, using appreciative inquiry, in the Canadian university where I now teach graduate students in adult education. A specific action that grew out of my doctoral research is comparative research of exemplars of quality moments in the UK research site and in a Canadian university (Lander, [2000c](#)). I propose a "provocative proposition" that spans two continents and constitutes the action dimension of appreciative inquiry: "Quality *is* service."

In re-membling the participatory process of my transformative research-- the conversations and shared inquiry at the common table--I can recognize our desires and appetites and the risk for ourselves and others, both in the eating and in the storytelling. Storytelling and the shared meal emphasize the mouth intermediating a two-way flow which relates the eaters and the tellers to each other and to the university as a whole in representational and constitutive terms. The social, cultural whole of the university is represented and created interactively in terms of sharing, serving and being served. The boundaries between giver and receiver are blurred. My research articulates first year students and other organizational actors at a common table telling and listening to each others' stories of transitions. It conceives "of the subject as a position, a place where different systems intersect"(Bal, [1991](#), p. 156). It is a conception of the eating, digesting, consuming subject as embodied, social and relational. It is a conception of the subject and

organizational actor as an embodied place of meaning modelled on the mouth (Falk, [1994](#)) where stories and systems grow out of each other through our interconnectedness, and flourish through the coresponsibility of the human project. Through narrative and dialogue and eating together at a common table. Who eats and who is eaten by? (Who sees and who is seen?) (Who speaks and who listens?) (Who acts and who is acted upon?) And who does not? Why? Why not? How? What if...? Derrida's ([1991](#)) *Bien* of eating the Good and the Right, reinforces the ethic of eating and consuming that embodies my transformative research project as a moral search for and moral construction of the subjects and agents in the organization we call university. And the moral construction of subjects and agents in transition, at their vulnerable points. The story and the system of the university as a knowledge organization and the story and the system of the university as a service organization are articulated at their very boundaries. Derrida's ([1991](#), p. 115) conception of eating well captures this semiotic articulation:

The infinitely metonymical question on the subject of 'one must eat well' must be nourishing not only for me, for a "self," which given its limits, would thus eat badly, it must be *shared*. . .and not only in language. "One must eat well" does not mean above all taking in and grasping in itself, but *learning* and *giving* to eat, learning-to-give-the-other-to-eat. . . .It is a rule of offering infinite hospitality.

Learning-to-give-the-other-to-eat is articulating service to knowledge, constructing the subjectivities of the first-year students and other organizational actors. It is recognizing and energizing organizational actors in transition. It subtends the "infinite hospitality" of the university in the student dining room, in the JCR and SCR, in the classroom, and in our representations of research and learning. Learning-to-give-the-other-to-eat involves addressing self to other. And it is practised in the transformative research of mutual storytelling at a common table, articulating first year students and other organizational actors to the serving-knowing university.

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Author Note

⁺*Dorothy Lander* is Assistant Professor, Department of Adult Education, St. Francis Xavier University, Antigonish, Nova Scotia. She acts as faculty advisor to graduate students in a distance learning program leading to a Master in Adult Education. Her continuing research interest in student services education, eating/consumption, and organizational learning are reflected in her doctoral thesis through the Department of Continuing Education, University of Nottingham, UK: *Telling Tales Out of School: Author-ising the University as a Service Organisation for First Year Students*.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dorothy A. Lander, Department of Adult Education, Box 5000, St. Francis Xavier University, Antigonish, Nova Scotia, CANADA B2G 2W5. Electronic mail may be sent via Internet to dlander@stfx.ca.