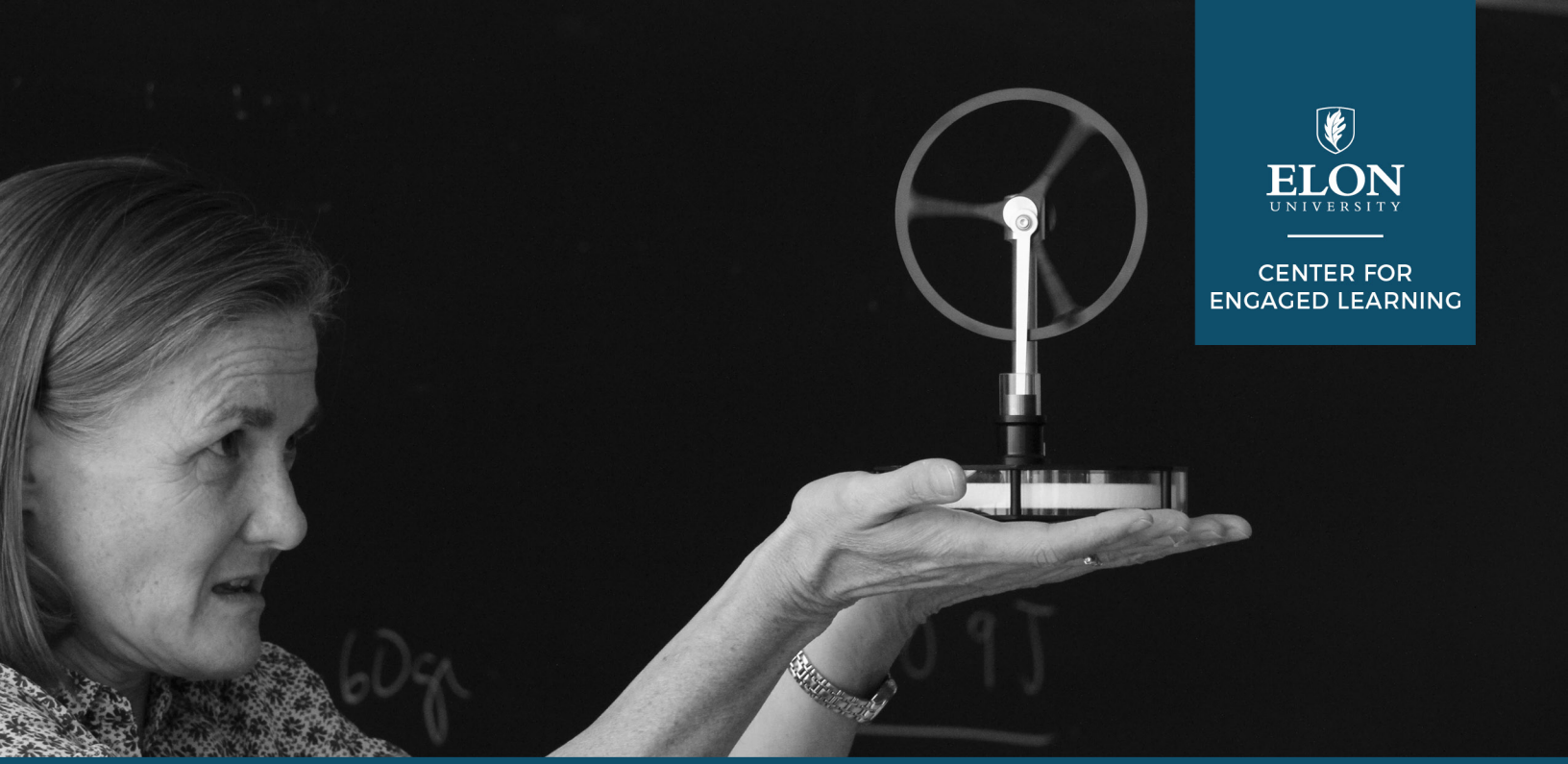


ELON UNIVERSITY

CENTER FOR ENGAGED LEARNING

What Teaching Looks Like

Higher Education through Photographs

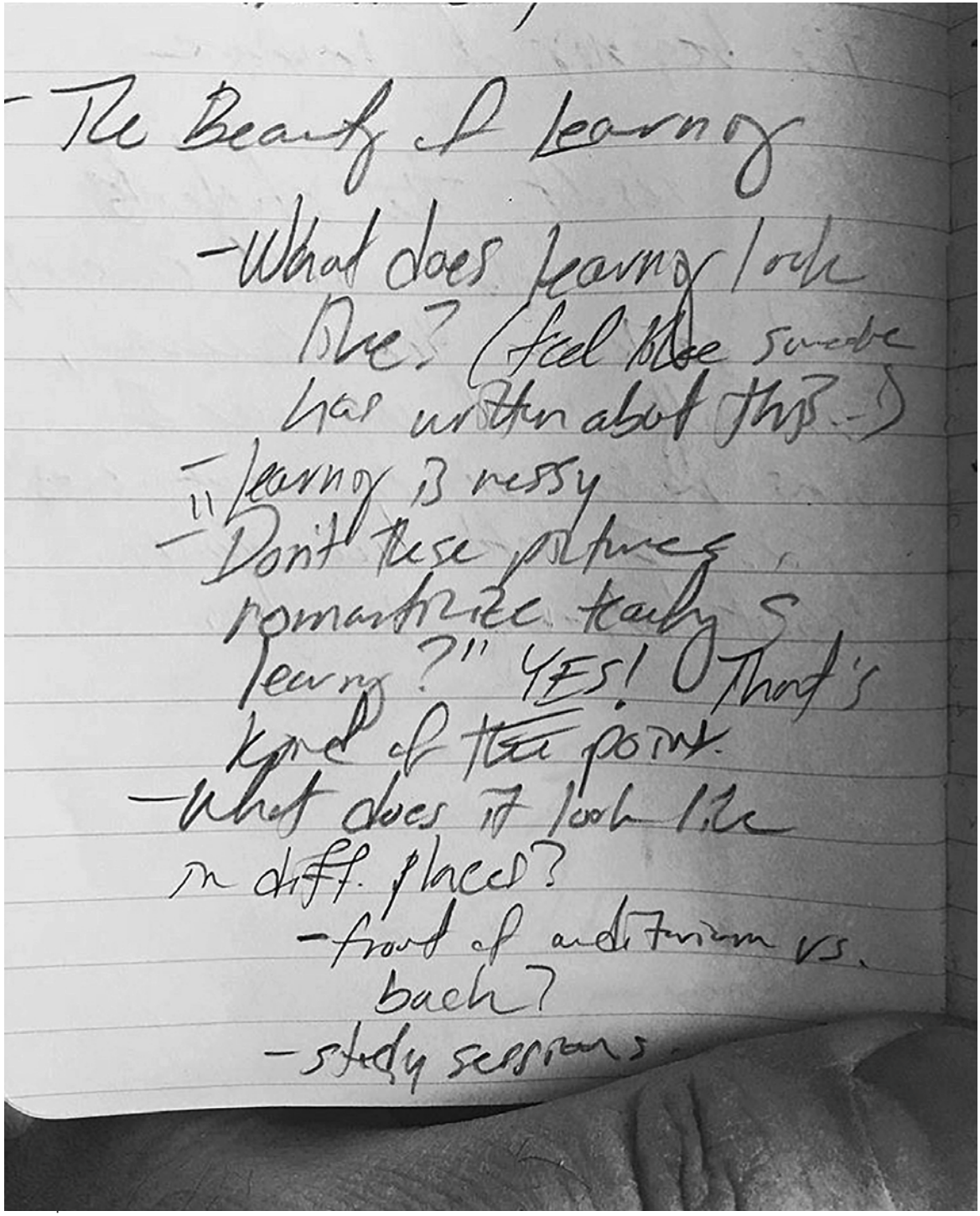
Cassandra Volpe Horii and Martin Springborg

OPEN ACCESS BOOK SERIES

Elon University Center for Engaged Learning
Elon, North Carolina
www.CenterForEngagedLearning.org

Series editors: Jessie L. Moore and Peter Felten
Copyeditor and designer: Jennie Goforth

Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Horii, Cassandra Volpe | Springborg, Martin
Title: What Teaching Looks Like: Higher Education through Photographs / Cassandra Volpe Horii and Martin Springborg
Description: Elon, North Carolina : Elon University Center for Engaged Learning, [2022] | Series: Center for Engaged Learning open access book series | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2022939540 | ISBN (PDF) 978-1-951414-07-8 | ISBN (pbk.) 978-1-951414-06-1 | DOI https://doi.org/10.36284/celelon.oa4
Subjects: LCSH: College teaching – Pictorial works | College teachers – Pictorial works



3.01
A page from Martin's notebook, written while photographing an office hour study session at a doctoral institution.

CHAPTER 3

Productive Chaos

The Messy Nature of Education

It's a little chaotic at the beginning. . . . Students are handing in papers, reports, and picking up . . . cards. . . . A lot of times I can joke around with them. I get to know them. . . . You can tell who is having a good day, who is having a bad day. . . . [There are] many [photos] where you really can't tell what exactly is happening. . . . [I] like the interaction of students, the blurred hand and action."

—STEM instructor and participant in The Teaching and Learning Project, master's institution

Paradoxically, photography's tendency to be literal-minded, to render extraordinary things matter-of-factly, plays right into the fantastical.

—Wendy Ewald (2001, 71)

Learning Is Messy

While making photographs during an open, multi-section statistics group study session, I had a sudden realization about my maybe-secret purpose in *The Teaching and Learning Project* (first-person statements in this chapter are in reference to Martin Springborg). At that moment, I was enveloped in a fairly chaotic scene: amidst hundreds of students studying for an upcoming statistics exam. Students had no. 2 pencils with teeth marks wedged behind their ears. Papers and calculators were handed—or thrown—across tables. Laptops were propped on end and held in the air for optimal group viewing. It was loud, audibly and visually.

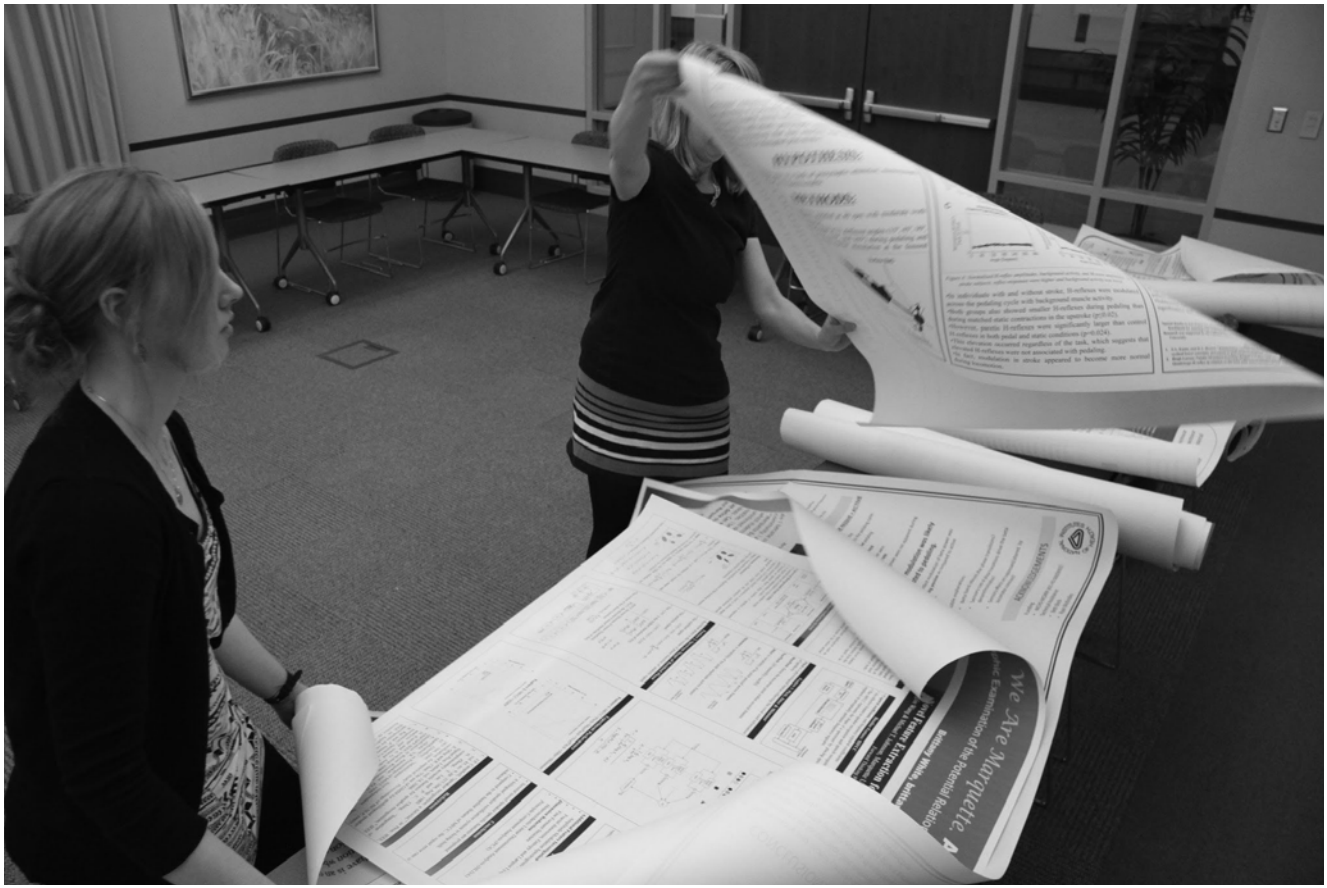
3.02–3.03
Sequence of two photographs: Students in a statistics course at a doctoral institution engage in discussion during an office hour.

To an outsider, I'm sure this room would have appeared to be the antithesis of a model learning environment. But there was learning happening here. In fact, I paused to reflect on the beauty of the learning process I was witnessing. I asked myself what learning looks like, in more than a rhetorical way, jotting the note to myself that appears at the beginning of this chapter. Really, I thought, what are we led to believe learning should look like? When we think of photographs or any other images of teaching and learning, we most likely envision the quiet classrooms, libraries, and other spaces so often repeated in both Western and

non-Western media and art (University of Minnesota, n.d.). These old images we've held of teaching and learning, if once the standard, no longer apply. No, I thought, this scene playing out in front of me, this is learning. Learning is messy. Learning is beautiful.

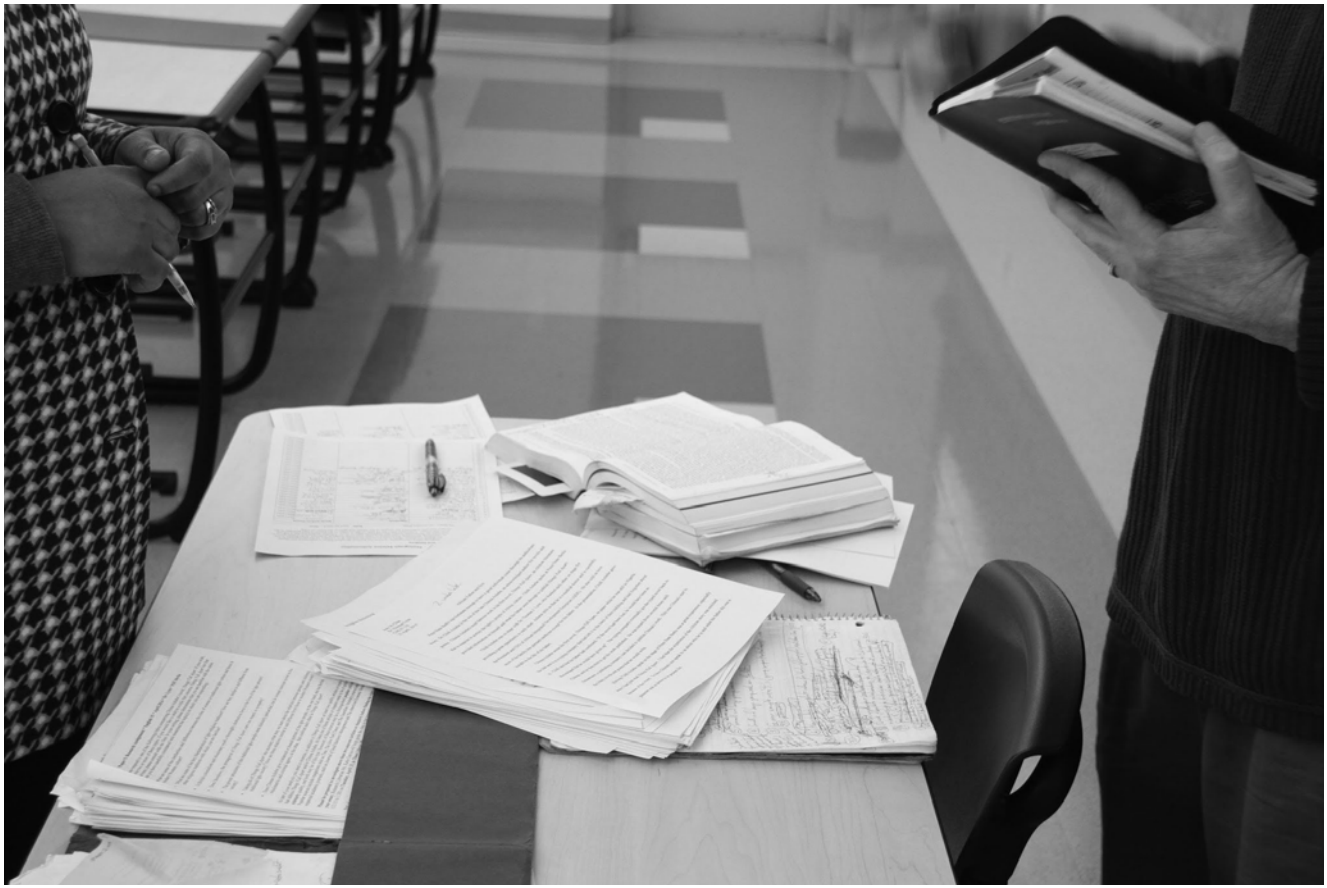
Ira Shor and Paulo Freire, in *A Pedagogy for Liberation*, also arrived at the conclusion that education is inherently an aesthetic experience—"a permanent process of formation" and "necessarily an artistic one" (1987, 118) due to the creativity and holistic perception involved in such deep and personal change. This process also involved, for Shor and Freire, "creative disruption" and asking "students to reperceive their prior understandings and to practice new perceptions as creative learners with the teacher" (116), as well as "inviting students to recreate themselves as listeners and speakers" and "reinventing the visual and verbal aspects of the classroom [as] two ways of addressing the destructive arts of passive education" (117). In essence, they argued for more mess and more beauty in learning.

The choices made in a learning environment impact students' whole-being encounters with learning and their process of becoming themselves, their formation. Together, these choices and processes form an aesthetic experience—one that taps into the hard-to-describe realm of the beautiful, the sublime, the chaotic, the fascinating, the wonderous, and other qualities that are deeply felt and sensed, and are powerful potential sources of meaning-making. But we want to stay close to the images here and not get too philosophical; look up aesthetics and you'll quickly get a sense of where that discussion can go. This chapter explores photographs where the messy and wondrous nature of teaching and learning are especially present, where the aesthetics of what teaching looks like are especially accessible, and what they might mean for our changing understanding of higher education.



3.04
A writing center director and faculty member in English hangs posters with a student prior to class at a doctoral institution.

3.05
An arts faculty member at a mixed baccalaureate/ associate's institution shuttles supplies during a drawing class.



3.06
A student visits with a faculty member after a comparative literature course at a baccalaureate institution.

3.07
Students at a doctoral institution participate in a guided study group in chemistry.

In the broader collection of photographs in *The Teaching and Learning Project*, it would have been easy to make visual decisions to depict chaotic scenes like the ones here as just that—chaos, as in utter disorder and confusion—and convey to a viewer an environment of anti-learning. Instead, some of my photographs go the other direction and border on romanticizing these kinds of scenes and the learning that takes place within them—an inclination that might make sense. As we've discussed in earlier chapters, the education part of higher education hasn't always been highly regarded, and we are inclined to want to show you what is wonderful about it.

As a photographer, I am certainly not alone in finding a sense of beauty in chaos. I have been inspired by American photographer Emmet Gowin, who found and represented in his photographs beautiful disorder and meaning in subjects from everyday life, in family scenes, in people aging and dying, and in a wide range of emotions and contexts. As Gowin—himself a university faculty member who taught for nearly four decades—put it, "The photograph is able to synthesize what is before the camera in a way that we, ourselves, cannot. The beauty of this synthesis would be the fact that it is a reintroduction to reality. No one view better than another but fresh, something we could never have dreamed up" (Caponigro 1998).

In the end, I have tried with my photographs to neither portray the inherent disorder in teaching and learning as negative, nor idealize it as more appealing than it really is. Rather, I hope to show you what is real and what is beautiful; what is happening and what is possible. One of our participants, a technical/professional instructor at a baccalaureate institution, captured this contradiction well, noting that what stood out in the photographs were the "random things in the classroom that drive me nuts! For example, the cleaning supplies, chairs, printers, the flip paper that has been there forever. I do like teaching in this classroom,

however, because it's conducive to interaction. The classroom seems less formal because of some of the chaos or disorganization in the environment."

This discussion, too, walks a fine line between romanticizing and avoiding the chaos, especially when we start talking about the nature of the beauty therein. It's hard to describe a visceral, aesthetic idea in a form other than its original. It's like learning: the layered complexity that emerges through interactions between teachers and students cultivates the kinds of contained, messy challenges that lead to deep growth—where students are secure enough to risk new ways of thinking and being, and pushed enough to need to grow. This process is necessary for civic discourse, understanding and addressing complex phenomena, and engaging in uncomfortable yet productive collaboration. Ultimately, we find beauty in the mess, beauty in portraying the chaos through photographs, and "beautiful risks" (Beghetto 2019) and courage in entering into transformative teaching and learning. Teaching and learning are anything but stifling and serene, and contemporary images of these activities should be just as dynamic as the acts themselves.

It is important in this endeavor to raise up the reality that not everyone finds a positive aesthetic experience in the facets of learning that are messy. Debra Busman, who teaches courses in creative writing and social action at a Hispanic-serving institution with a large population of students from farm-working families, explains: "For these students, as well as for other first-generation students of color and working class white students, told from the jump that they were not *college material*, the very fact of their presence at a university is a charged act of political resistance. . . . [Taking] control of their own narrative . . . can be especially risky for students whose previous success was conditioned upon the very premise of silence and obedience. Many students from working class school districts have been taught that to be a 'good student' meant that you were quiet, well-behaved, that you stayed below the radar" (Busman 2017, 49). For some

students, then, participating in less-structured creation and discovery in class can be more a source of danger than learning.

Students take risks to learn. Instructors take risks to teach. Both risk letting go of order and moving into what can seem like a treacherous kind of chaos, all for the sake of remaking themselves. To be frank, I am in awe that learning ever happens, but my experience photographing, and now my ability to show those photographs to you, convinces me otherwise.

To be fair, faculty and students do not always experience such chaos. Kimberly Dark explains: "When I think of teaching, at the college and university levels in particular, the structure of the experience offers safety first. I make a syllabus. We meet at a prescribed time and place and we move through the planned material. . . . We learn by following the examples we've been given, and, at first, the structure of the role *professor* is the life jacket that keeps us afloat. . . . Students do their job and I do mine" (2017, 26–27). Those expected structures are what many of the photographs in this chapter deviate away from. Rather, they may represent what Dark articulates as "favorite moments" in teaching: "when I have a plan, held loosely, a command of the material and a desire to discover more . . . how I just stay present—and risk failing—as I bring that material to students" (29). In recognizing the beautiful messiness of learning, and forgiving when it doesn't work perfectly, the photographs in this chapter may give you the opportunity to explore in new ways your aesthetic understanding of teaching and learning.

Teaching Within Chaos

Similar themes of beautiful, vital chaos emerge when visualizing faculty work; we posit that making sure to include the chaos in visual representations is important for several reasons. The first is clarity about entering the profession of postsecondary teaching. Across the many colleges and universities, and in all manner of institution types photographed for *The Teaching and Learning Project*, the reality of faculty work is rarely neat and orderly. Like real images of student learning, institutions would probably not choose real images of faculty work to advertise to the general public or in faculty recruitment efforts. Yet, faculty work-life depicted in this project is already understood by graduate students entering this job market, hoping themselves to become postsecondary instructors. Either they've embraced it to some extent themselves in graduate teaching assistant roles, or they've witnessed it in their parallel work with their faculty advisors and mentors. In many respects, graduate students are introduced to the realities of faculty work as part of their education—part of the hidden curricula in all graduate programs. That curriculum can be made more transparent with authentic depictions of faculty work.

3.08
Faculty and staff observe as a faculty member in geological and planetary science guides students in an earth sciences class at a doctoral institution. View a larger version of this photograph on the book website.

3.09–3.11
Sequence of three photographs: A faculty member in neuroscience returns graded assignments as students prepare to work in small groups during a neurobiology course at a doctoral institution.

Part of the productive chaos of faculty work comes from the different aspects of what that work entails; the intertwining of those aspects are a key element of the creativity and flexibility that many faculty members experience and that draw them to higher education settings, but it also introduces complexity. Photographs in this project depict the trilogy of faculty work: teaching, service, and scholarship (Kelly 2019). These distinct but related parts of the job are more or less noticeable at some institution types than others, but are nevertheless present everywhere. Teaching includes instruction and extends beyond the classroom to office hours, advising, and other forms of student engagement. Service encompasses faculty commitments to the institution such as committee assignments, leadership roles, and peer review. Scholarship signals the generation of new knowledge; it informs teaching and contributes to broader academic and public conversations through research in one's field, creative work, publications, the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL), and other contributions. The lines between these different aspects of faculty work are rarely distinct; they are more like the overlapping bubbles of a Venn diagram, but blurred and fuzzy. Depicting these facets through photographs acknowledges and helps make sense of the importance of all three.

You have been engaging with photographic portrayals of teaching throughout this volume. Here, that work itself may look more disordered. Wiebe et al., in their introduction to an edited volume that brings together postsecondary educators' narratives of how their selves and identities come into play in their teaching, noted that "differences in teaching styles, methods, and philosophies . . . can appear chaotic and messy" (vii). They advise us to "resist the temptation to . . . reduce teaching to tidy boxes and neat platitudes that emphasize only our commonness," and instead to shine light on "our ways of being in teaching, our differences and our commonness [that] come together in a shared sense of humanity" (vii). Wiebe and co-editors sought to illuminate the messiness of teaching through postsecondary educators' stories. Here, we do so through images,

which bring a unique power and communicative potential into the complexity of college and university teaching.

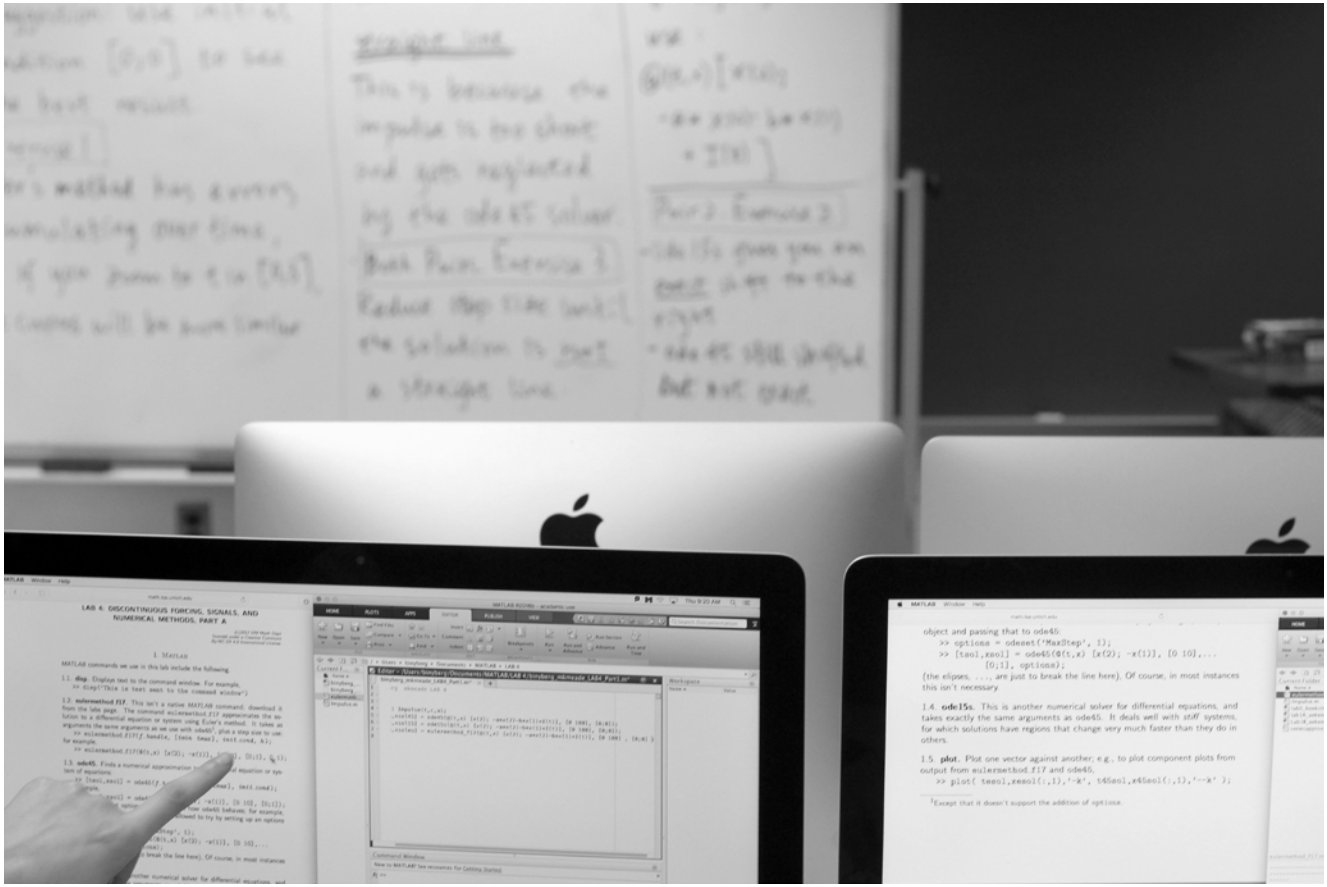
Photographs of faculty engaged in important non-instructional aspects of their work also break down popular culture's portrayal of professors and their workdays. The myth is that they spend a couple of hours in contact with their students and the rest of their time thinking deeply in idyllic silence. This popular misconception—that faculty only teach, and do so in not that many hours of the day or week—sometimes makes it difficult for those working within higher education to communicate with those who work in other sectors, to answer questions from, say, legislators who make decisions about higher education funding. Questions, like "why can't you just tell faculty what to do?" miss the deep sense of care among faculty and administrators alike, and those asking these questions seem ignorant of the gravity of responsibility through collaborative governance and the value of faculty scholarship as part of academics' identity and life's work. The photographs of *The Teaching and Learning Project* help illuminate these rarely seen aspects of faculty work, chaotic as these may sometimes be. And in that illumination, they give us a more honest portrayal of higher education—one that may help introduce the work of postsecondary faculty, along with its relevance, to the public conversation.

3.12
A faculty member in biostatistics facilitates a class discussion at a doctoral institution.

3.13
Students retrieve graded assignments after a physics class at a doctoral institution.

3.14
A faculty member in dance leads students in a modern dance class at a doctoral institution.

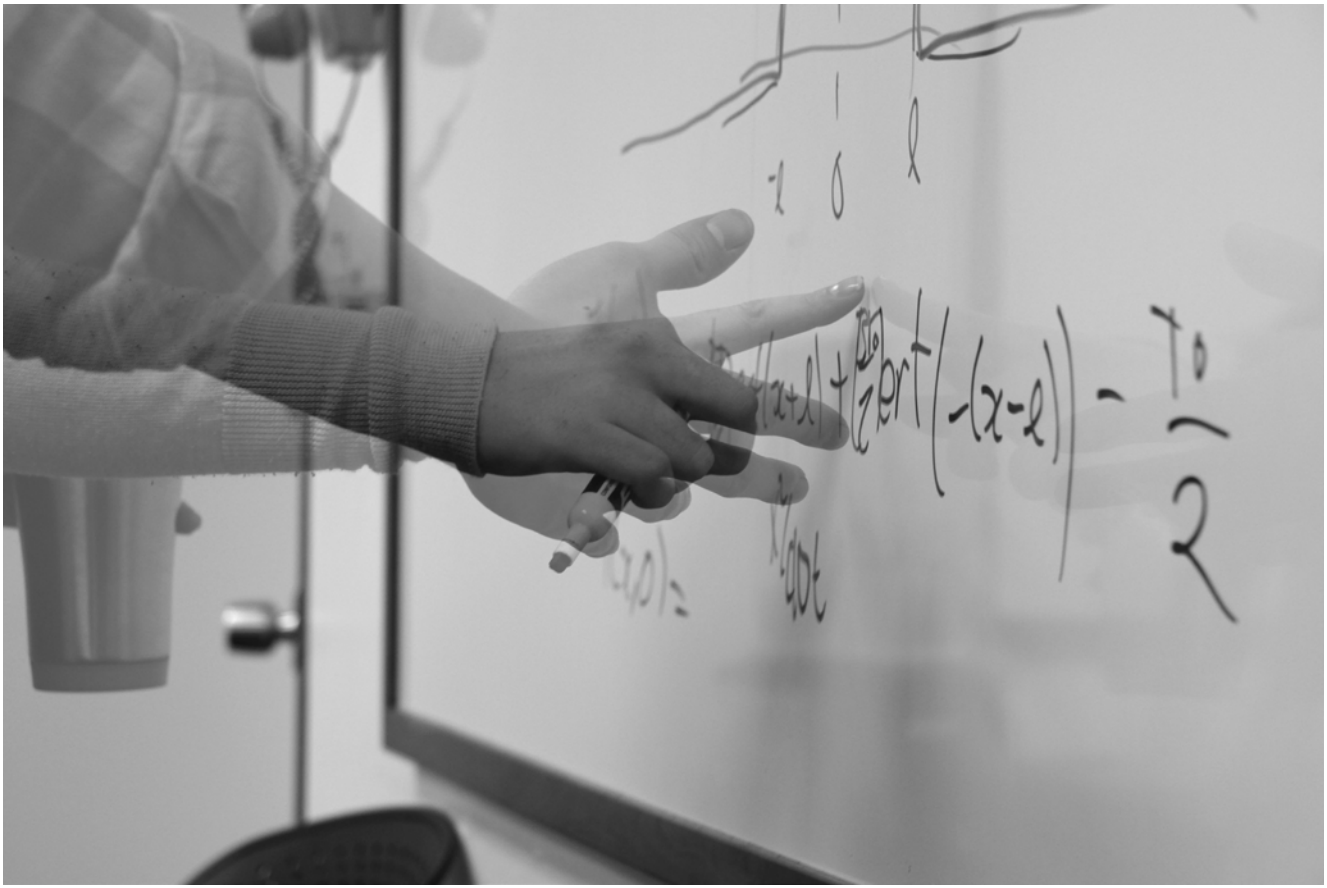
3.15
Students stretch during a modern dance class at a doctoral institution.



3.16
Students compare work during a mathematics lab at a doctoral institution.

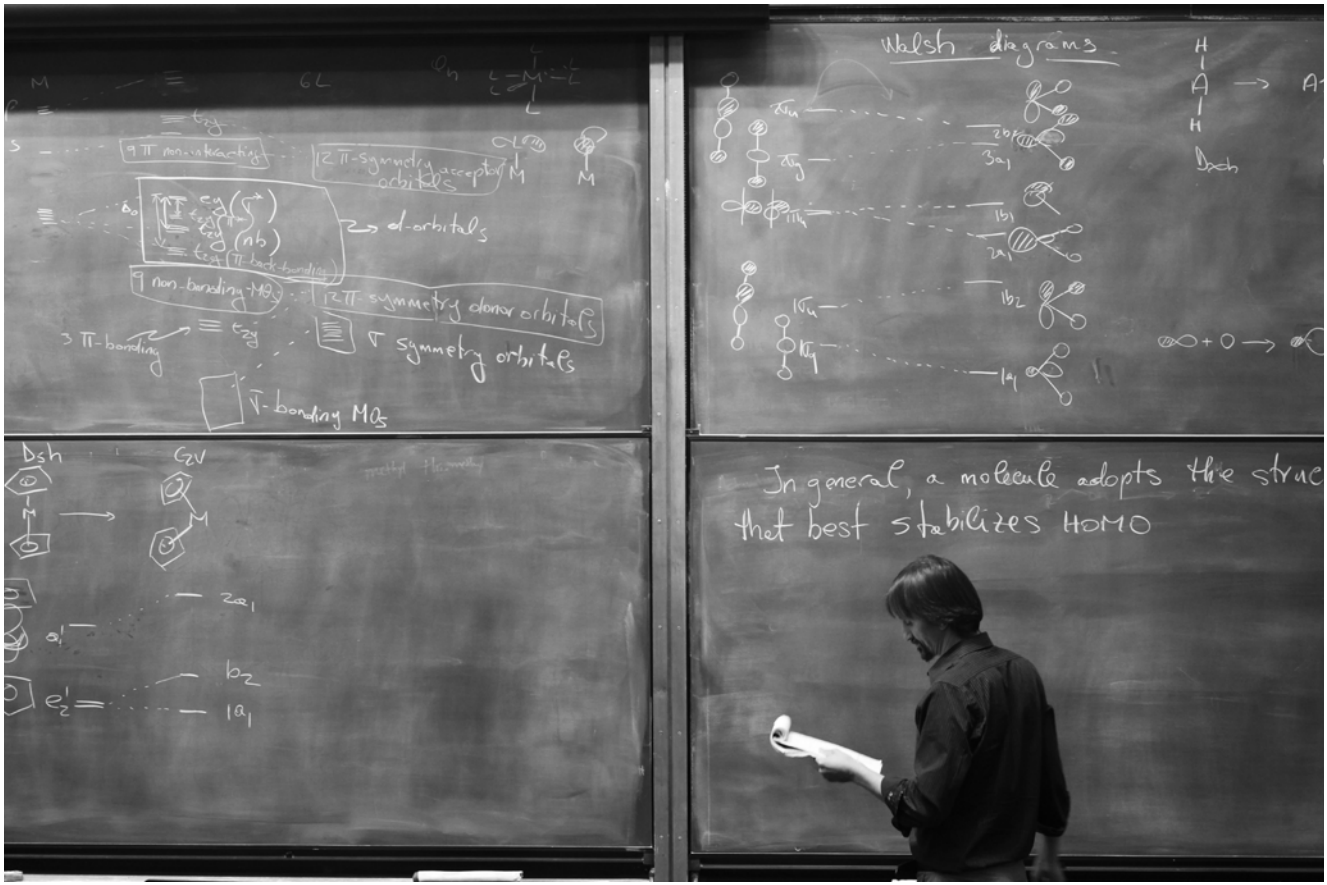
3.17
Students engage in discussion during a statistics office hour at a doctoral institution.

3.18
Specimens in a geology classroom at a doctoral institution.



3.19
Multiple overlapping exposures show students working in teams during an earth sciences class at a doctoral institution.

3.20
A student solves problems on a dry-erase wall in a writing center at a doctoral institution.



3.21
A faculty member in chemistry references notes during a chemistry class at a doctoral institution.

3.22
Students present work in a photography class at a doctoral institution.

3.23
A faculty member in kinesiology guides students in a martial arts class at a baccalaureate institution.

3.24
Students analyze plant samples during a population biology class at a doctoral institution.

3.25
Students work during a chemical engineering lab at a doctoral institution.

Questions for Further Reflection

- What are your beliefs about how orderly or messy teaching and learning should be? How do you think those beliefs might influence your approach to teaching?
- To what extent do the images that portray teaching and learning in your institution embrace or hide any of the untidy aspects of teaching? In what ways are these representations helpful or unhelpful?
- When might instructors and students need more order and organization and when might exploring some degree of chaos or disorder be helpful? Why?
- What aspects of teaching do you consider to be beautiful? What might the benefits be for instructors and institutions if there were greater recognition of the ways in which teaching and learning can be exquisite?