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Ethical Issues in the Conduct and Communication of Ethnographic Classroom Research

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In this paper, I discuss two ethical issues central to the conduct of any ethnographic research: the representation of truth and confidentiality. The first issue relates to a fundamental assumption of the ethnographic paradigm, namely that truth and reality are perspectival, contextual, and multiple. Moreover, in the field of art education, areas of knowledge and expertise between researcher and researched often overlap. Observations, interpretations, and their articulation are shaped by the situated knowledge, beliefs, and commitments of the art researcher. The way we address this issue affects the very process of conducting ethnographic research—data collection and analysis—eventually shaping the voice and form of the product. The second issue of confidentiality concerns the product and its dissemination to members within and outside the researched setting. More than following a contract or a formula, ethical considerations are guided by a search for a deeper understanding, as well as a cultivation of a curious, compassionate frame of mind.

Researchers in education (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Bresler & Stake, 1992; Denzin, 1994; Peshkin, 1988; Walker, 1980) increasingly have come to value the personal and political nature of the field. Part of the value is reflected in an increased interest in the unique circumstances of school programs and performances. The classroom community and societal contexts become more than abstract variables.

The commitment of researchers using ethnographic methods to focus upon the personal and political renders ethics central to those methodologies. The underlying assumptions of the qualitative paradigm necessitate different types of ethical considerations from the ones used in the positivist paradigm. These underlying assumptions include the following:

1. **Complexity.** Teaching and classroom life are highly complex phenomena and cannot be reduced to simple variables.

2. **Contextuality.** As reality is shaped by many factors, the understanding of a setting or an issue (which, by definition, is manifested within some setting) always involves the understanding of relevant contexts.

3. **Social reality.** Since social reality is constructed culturally and individually, it is by definition, multiple.

4. **Subjectivity.** As objectivity is impossible, subjectivity should be acknowledged, examined, and negotiated rather than suppressed. Researchers are always situated within social reality and carry with them their subjectivities and values.

5. **Interpretation and meaning.** Causal explanation, control, and prediction are impossible. Because interpretations are constructed and multiple, the same
activity may be interpreted in different ways by the different participants according to their relationship to the phenomenon under study (e.g., teacher, student, principal, parent) as well as their personalities and values.

To gain multiple interpretations and expand empathic understanding, researchers typically use the methods of prolonged observations and semi-structured interviews. Here, the researcher is the primary instrument for gaining personal knowledge. Prolonged stay is necessary in order to develop familiarity and determine important issues. Prolonged stay also establishes participant trust which allows a researcher access to what is often a semi-private setting and observation of participants behaving naturally. Similarly, interviews are built on the researcher being perceived as a trustworthy person, (rather than, for example, an official imposed from above), evoking what Michael Kompf has termed the ethics of disclosure (Kompf, 1993).

Thus, the very same characteristics that typify and render ethnographic research potentially insightful and meaningful—immersion in the field, close observation of others' behavior, thoughts, and feelings, making public that which is typically private, recognition and exposure of values—can cause hurt, pain, and harm. Conducting ethnographic research with participants more closely resembles constructing meaningful relationships than signing a contract. These relationships are, or should be, defined by both parties. From the participants’ point of view, instead of the simple decision of participating or not, they are involved in the shaping of their own participation. The skillful negotiation of their flexible and evolving roles requires constant sensitivity to other perspectives. As a consequence, traditional procedures such as consent forms are no longer sufficient.¹

In the field of curriculum, areas of knowledge and expertise between researcher and researched often overlap. Observations, interpretations, and their articulation are shaped by situated knowledge, which includes the beliefs and commitments of the visual art researcher. Researchers’ immersion in the field evokes questions of involvement and participation: should the observer become involved in the situation being studied? If so, how? There are many types of involvement (e.g., help, advice, feedback) which can involve different participants (e.g., students, teachers, principals). There are also multiple gradations and styles of involvement. Involvement is shaped by ethical and epistemological stances and, in turn, interacts with these stances. The stronger the researcher’s involvement, the more central ethical issues become.

Different research paradigms call for different ethical considerations (Lincoln, 1990; Wax, 1979). Kompf (1993) has pointed out that the guidelines for ethical conduct in inquiry originate from the discipline of psychology and are derived from its traditional definition of the prediction and control of behavior. Accordingly, associated practices and accepted ethical concerns reflect a positivist orientation to the study of human behavior which can be characterized by the dominance of the experimenter or scientist in the conditions and circumstances of the study. The language of “science” permeates the positivist research environment and includes such terms as subjects, trials, and controls. Such terms carry the connotation of rigidity, accuracy, and other such attributes that

¹ This is especially true since their dynamics, significance, and meaning are not clear-cut (May, 1987).
have traditionally been associated with scientific credibility. However, these positivist guidelines for the ethical conduct of inquiry are inadequate for the types of research examining individuals’ *lived experience*. While the compelling nature of information gained through personal disclosure methods gives voice and provides an inside-out view of educational practice, the process and products of such endeavors may be understood and anticipated with increased efficacy through the application of guidelines customarily applied to counseling and psychotherapy (Kompf, 1993).

The consideration of ethics is made even more essential because of the commitment of researchers using qualitative methodology as a reflective stance on the research process and on its intellectual/emotional/political outcomes, including power relationships between researcher and researched. Indeed, with the increasing popularity of ethnographic research, there is growing concern over the possible need of a code of ethics for ethnographic researchers, manifested in major research conferences such as the American Educational Research Association (see, for example, Bogotch, Roy, & Stack, 1993; Bresler, 1994b; Mathison, Cornett, & Ross, 1993; May, 1987; Osborne, 1994; Sabar, 1994); scholarly books and textbooks on research methodologies (Cassell & Wax, 1980; Punch, 1986), and textbooks of qualitative research (Berg, 1989; Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Bogdan & Taylor, 1975; Crowl, 1993; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Lancy, 1993; Schratz, 1993). In the *Handbook on Qualitative Research* (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994), a chapter on ethics is placed prominently in the first part on locating the field (Punch, 1994). The topic of ethics is addressed in a number of other chapters dealing with methodological issues. Definitions of ethics in textbooks’ methodological chapters range from the general to the specific. Bogdan and Biklen (1992), for example, define ethics in research as the “principles of right and wrong that a particular group accepts” (p. 49). Several textbooks refer to research codes of ethics as addressing individual rights to dignity, privacy, confidentiality, and avoidance of harm (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Punch, 1986).

Formats shape the type of contents and issues examined. Ethnographic works in book form (Freeman, 1979; Meyerhoff, 1978; Peshkin, 1986; Stoller, 1993) often discuss in detail the deep personal involvement in the setting and with participants’ lives, emergent role conflicts, and the physical and emotional strain for the researcher involved in observational studies.2

Unlike within the field of general education, ethical issues are seldom raised in the arts education literature.3 In this paper, I reflect on two distinct, but interrelated issues, which are central to the conduct of any ethnographic research, and in particular to case-study classroom research: the representation of truth and confidentiality. The first issue relates to a fundamental assumption of the ethnographic paradigm, namely that truth and reality are perspectival, contextual, and multiple. The way we address this issue affects the very process of conducting

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2 The interest in emotions in ethnographic methodology is highlighted in Kleinman & Copp (1993) who dedicate a monograph to the theme of emotions in fieldwork discussing such topics as negative feelings, identifying with participants, and acting like scientists.

3 Due, perhaps, to the few ethnographic books. A notable exception is the area of anthropology of arts (Forrest, 1987; Price, & Price, 1993).
ethnographic research—data collection and analysis—eventually shaping the
voice and form of the product. The second issue of confidentiality is triggered by
the product, its publication, and dissemination. Both issues involve power rela-
tionships between researcher and researched and affect other ethical issues like
the researcher’s reciprocity and the researched ownership and control of data.
The use of visual information, which can be so insightful and reveal additional
ways of knowing that may be of particular interest to a researcher in visual arts
(Collier, 1967; Mehan, 1993; Walker, 1993), pertains to both domains and presents
another dimension for ethical consideration.

Traditionally, the body of literature in ethics has addressed the notions of oblig-
atation, moral principle, justification of acts under principle, and justification of
principle by argument (Addelson, 1991). Moral change has been defined only as
a change to bring activities into conformity with principles, with no other sort of
moral change acknowledged. Addelson, representing feminist and other contem-
porary thinkers in ethics, regards moral revolution as not only making principles
and activities consistent, or with greater applicability to what is conceived of as
justice, but also as the creation of values (Addelson, 1991, p. 21). Such creation
of values is at the core of current ethical discourse and provides a foundation for
this paper.

**Data Collection and Its Articulation**

Representation of truth is based on ontological and epistemological world
views, yet it carries important implications for ethics. Since ethnographic
methodology deals with multiple realities that are constructed, the simple rec-
ommendation of “telling the truth” is no longer sufficient. With no single truth
available, researchers are confronted with the question of whose truth: The
researchers’ truth? The truth of the participants? Which of the participants? These
decisions shape research design and data collection, define the allocation of time
and energy for different voices, and shape the form and voice of any research
reports.

May has wisely commented that to hold ethical dilemmas encountered in our
field as personal, rather than as generic problems pertaining to the field, is to
ignore the possibility of critical dialogue and a better articulated code of conduct
(1987). Following her advice, I illustrate in this paper selected dilemmas relating
to the representation of truth from my own research. I believe that reflecting upon
our own problems and deliberations, revealing our errors, mistakes, miscalcu-
lations, and misjudgments (Walker, 1980) is useful so others can learn from our
own experience. (If, indeed, writing is conducive to one’s own thinking, as I
often find in the process of writing, then this reflection facilitates our own grasp
of the meaning and implications of what we do.)

In a three year study (Bresler, 1994c, 1995; Stake, Bresler, & Mabry, 1991), I
examined the operational arts curricula of classroom teachers and arts specialists
in three elementary schools. Data sources included intensive observations as well
as open-ended and semi-structured interviews. Examining the notion of school
art, I found that art in school and out-of-school are distinct, though reflexive
forms. Within a variety of contents and pedagogies, there was one particular
style, which I labeled rote, imitative, or teacher-centered (Bresler, 1994c) that
seemed to be prevalent in classroom teachers’ use. The following vignette captures some of its characteristics.

**Bunny Hats for the Spring Frolic**

9:26 p.m. Today’s project is bunny hats. The second graders are preparing for tomorrow’s “Spring Frolic,” an annual play for parents and guest classes. Betty Jones takes out crayons as students move chairs to form horizontal lines facing her. She holds her bunny hat high above her head. “Let me show you what we’re going to do.” She motions to Johnny to stand up and places her hat on him. “What do you think you look like?” Johnny, switching from leg to leg: “I look silly.” Teacher protests: “You’re not looking at yourself. Trust us, you look cute. [To the class]: Do you want to do one of these? [approving voices] I already traced the pattern. First you need to put some eyes on it. I’m going to give you a choice. You can have pink eyes or blue eyes.” With heavy demand for pink, Jones gets more pink paper from her desk and hands it to Matt to distribute. Ears, eyes, nose, and whiskers are to be constructed in that order. Jones instructs: “Okay, I want you to hold it so that the ears are going down on your paper. No, turn it around, put it flat down, so that the ears are down. Now, where do you think the eyes should go?” Lucy suggests right in the middle. Jones cautions: “Don’t put them too high. Put them about half way, about like that. You can make them as big or as small as you want. Now we need a nice, big pink nose. Then you’re going to cut the black paper in some skinny strips and make some whiskers. If you have your scissors—Remember? Yesterday I reminded you, I said you need scissors and glue—if you got your scissors, you may start cutting your pink, your blue, and your black. How many whiskers do you think you should cut?” Matt says three, other voices echo. Michael says six. “Why six, Michael? Everybody else is saying three, how come you said six?” Michael: “Three on one side, three on the other.” Jones: “That’s right. Maybe you could do eight. But don’t do any more than eight because then it will be all whiskers.”

Bunnies proliferate as children cut, glue, and paste. At 9:45, Jones reminds them to put their names on the back of the hat. Passing from one student to another, she checks that things have been done correctly, compliments (“I see some real nice bunny ears here”) and—the final sanctification—staples the hat. Now she holds the finished product high: “Okay. Our first bunny. Yeah!!” Josh, the creator, smiles. “And here is another bunny.” Children put their bunny hats on, showing their bunnies to friends. There is some tidying up. Most students, though, are doing math at this point, with bunny hats on. (Stake, Bresler, & Mabry, 1991)

The tone of the vignette reflects my puzzlement and criticism of what seemed to me a simplistic rule-governed system in the class and, what I saw as its “cute” stereotypical products. I felt strongly about this because I perceived the bunny vignette to be representative of many other lessons I observed in contents, pedagogical style, and products. As I reread and rewrote this vignette in my interim report, it became clear that what I experienced as vague feelings of unease were strongly present views, creating a perspective, and a message. After several cycles of rereading and rewritings, I have eliminated evaluative sentences. Hence, my evaluations became implicit rather than explicit. Feeling in an ethical
double-bind, I asked two colleagues to read this vignette and provide me with a more distanced feedback. They assured me it did not sound harsh. Still, I struggled with whether to eliminate altogether the bunny episode.

During this process of self-deliberation, I realized I fell into the trap of subjectivism. If subjectivity is the inevitable situation of having values, dispositions, and beliefs, subjectivism is “the exalting of one’s personal orientation so that they are perceived not just as what I feel, think, and believe, but also as what is the only correct way to feel, think, and believe” (Peshkin, 1994, p. 56). Subjectivism, writes Peshkin, goes beyond subjectivity and its virtuous potential to subjectivism as orthodoxy, to what is good and ought to be. Indeed, in my case, my commitment to the ideal of fine art (rather than craft) and to scaffolding⁴ rather than rote resulted in an orthodoxy.

I later realized that a major part of this perspective was my perception of the study as a matter of ethics—not ethics of research, but ethics in teaching. As part of what I saw as the overriding commitment of teachers to the well-being of their students, I was concerned about what I perceived as the jeopardized well-being of the students in this art class. In the process, I failed to examine the significance of enculturating children to cultural symbols.⁵ But even in maintaining my disciplinary commitments, implying reform in teachers’ thinking and practice, I would argue that change has a better chance if it is based on understanding current practices and addressing current realities, rather than merely pointing at the teachers.

This issue of understanding versus judging is discussed by Carr and Kemmis (1986), who place it within a Western philosophical tradition. They refer to Aristotle, Hegel, and Marx who argued that any distinction between what humans are and what they ought to be (and hence between description and prescription) is misleading and confusing. At any given historical moment, understanding what humans are is a matter of grasping the underlying process imminent in a present situation in terms of how a person strives to transform himself or herself in order to realize true potentialities or essence. Building on these philosophers, Habermas (1973) developed an ethical theory of self-realization, which attempts to show “how any adequate account of what human beings are provides answers to ethical questions about what they ought to become” (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, p. 140).

Reflecting on the bunny episode, I feel that a more ethical stance would aim to gain understanding through focused interviews of the emic meanings that the arts activities hold for classroom teachers. From another angle, I could have explored more deeply the history and context of the activity in order to achieve a deeper understanding of the roles and functions of holiday activities.

In part, my decisions were shaped by the lack of need to negotiate data and present teacher voice as a major voice. Voice is central within a system that

⁴ Scaffolding—supportive assistance (Rosenshine & Meister, 1992), consists of the use of modeling and procedural facilitators. Scaffolds are specific to the strategy being taught, yet general enough to allow application to a variety of different contexts.

⁵ It was only when I experienced years later, as a mother, the excitement when my own kids produced the Jewish bunny equivalents that I gained some empathy for this activity and its goals.
rewards publications (the privilege of university-based researchers). On one
level, it is the teacher's story. Yet, it is the researcher who typically gives it voice.
Language and jargon proficiency, cultural convention, and data collection proce-
dures (usually, one-sided questioning and observing, which is associated with
evaluating and, hence, with power), often create imbalanced relationships.
Moreover, researchers have easier access to power mechanisms such as publications
and conferences.

How do we regulate this power? Sabar (1994) believes that the code of profes-
sional ethics guarding the relationship between professional and client in general,
(e.g., teacher-pupil, physician-patient, lawyer-client) is inappropriate to teacher
research where the teacher is (or should be) more like the researcher's partner than
a client or patient. That has to do with taking initiative for the study; typically it is
the researcher who approaches the teacher, and not the other way around (as a
client asking for treatment), and it is the researcher who can gain by the researched.
Also, unlike clients in other fields who may not be well-educated, teachers are edu-
cated professionals with some knowledge of research methods (Sabar, 1994, pp.
20-21). Walker (1980) calls for a carefully formulated ethic instead of reliance
entirely upon personal trust. The trust we seek, he writes, depends on generating a
style of educational research in which methods and procedures are explicit and vis-
ible. Walker advocates playing down the personal expertise of the researcher in
order to enhance his or her professionalism. He argues for a trust similar to that
generated by doctors and police officers: "to be trusted because of what we do
rather than because 'we are people just like them' (p. 52)."

Dissemination of Material

The second issue is intimately connected to the first and pertains to the shar-
ing of data and its interpretation (i.e., the aforementioned representation of
truths) with others. Confidentiality extends not only to writing, but also to the
verbal reporting of information that the researcher has learned through observ-
ations and interviews. Confidentiality, we often assume, can be achieved by
the use of anonymity. The simple rule is that participants' identities are pro-
tected so that the information collected does not embarrass or harm them.
Issues in confidentiality include both anonymity to members of the research
setting (from each other) as well as anonymity to the larger world. In most
cases the latter is relatively simple; whereas the former, touching on the right
of individuals to maintain their dignity in the work place, is complex and dif-
ficult to achieve.

In the example from my aforementioned study (Stake, Bresler, & Mabry,
1991), I visited 30 different classes in three elementary schools. Participants
in the study included classroom teachers and aides, former and current arts
specialists, artists-in-residence, students, principals and higher level adminis-
trators, social workers, secretaries, parents, grandparents, and other commu-
nity people. The final product, a book chapter, described and interpreted con-
tents, pedagogies, and goals of arts instruction. Each chapter featured a num-

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6 For a fascinating collection of international perspectives on voice, see Schrutz (1993).

7 As Sabar (1994) has indicated, the different status of the researcher and the teacher seems not to be a
problem as long as each respects the other and keeps his or her promises, but that potential imbalance
has to be acknowledged and addressed.
ber of illustrative classroom vignettes and quotations from interviews representing key issues.

All participants received individual transcripts of their interviews and were invited to make changes and elaborations. When I completed the written report portraying the whole school, I wanted to share it with the key participants. However, the critical instances, like the one I quoted earlier, presented a dilemma. Even with pseudonyms, the teachers featured in these individual vignettes might have been identified by their peers. I considered not sharing the book, but that, too, was unethical. Rudduck (1993) points to the importance of sharing data, seeing it as a sign of respect for teachers and students by allowing others, including their everyday colleagues, to hear their voices in print. Rudduck feels that the educational system suffers already from the marginalization of certain voices (e.g., women teachers, African-American teachers, students), and that case-study research is one way of redressing the imbalance. She is also aware that what is said can sometimes be disturbing to hear and makes us uncomfortable. Presenting marginalized voices is important, however, because text commands attention and typically is associated with authority.

Some participants became, in the process of my observations and several interviews, quite involved and naturally curious about the outcomes of their involvement. Moreover, giving them the book (with a warm acknowledgment) was not only appropriate in terms of feedback, but also a matter of reciprocity, an acknowledgment of their hospitality and generosity in allowing me into their classrooms and sharing their time. This decision is complicated by the fact that anonymity is not necessarily a state that all teachers seek. I too felt that those interesting, insightful, teaching episodes I observed and documented in the otherwise rarely acknowledged classrooms deserved publicity, including identification. To share or not to share? A third possibility was to eliminate problematic vignettes from the manuscript. However, that violated what I saw as the purpose of the study: description of what was. In my judgment, not to address problematic issues would dilute and take away from the meaningfulness of the report. In the end, I chose to share, making teachers’ personalities, speech patterns, and behaviors more generic. I bore in mind that direct quotation is a powerful tool that must be carefully used. Thick description, too, can lead to identification. When a report is built up from the evidence offered by members of a working community, the personal cadences or familiar angle of a particular quotation can leave the speaker open to identification even though other more obvious markers, such as subject and status, are not disclosed.

The issue of whether to share agenda and data with participants is a debated one (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992; Eisner, 1991; Sabar, 1994). In one of the genres of qualitative methodology committed to the empowerment of participants—collaborative action research—some researchers (Clay, 1989; Noffke, 1992) suggest that when it is university-based researchers who do the writing, participants (i.e., teachers and students) should be the first to see the writing. Others suggest each of the researchers write their own section of one paper (Berkey, Curtis, Minnick, Zietlow, Campbell, & Kirschner, 1990). Still others state that all writing needs to be taken back to the teacher for comment and if there are any objections about going public, the article does not go public (Reimer & Bruce, 1994).

I suggest that ethnographic classroom research could be ethically enhanced by the same options. Do participants have the right to control what happens to
the data? Walker (1980) alerts us that control of data is an entirely different category from the validation of members’ categories. Obviously, these suggestions signal a shift in power in the conduct of research. The suggestions are a radical departure from current practice and prevalent assumptions, and have to do with a fundamental change of researchers’ responsibilities, commitments, and self-image.

Johnson (1979) suggests as an ethical guideline, that it is useful to operate under the assumption that both the identities of the location studied and the identities of individuals will be discovered. What would be the consequences of this discovery to the community? To the individuals? Is the importance of what is revealed in the publication great enough to warrant these consequences? Could you, yourself, live with these consequences should they occur?

The choice of whose representation carries implications for the final report in terms of voice, message, and sometimes political agenda. Dissemination highlights these choices and can create problematic consequences. Decisions also are guided by our perceived clientele. In the quest for ethical conduct, it is often a process of prioritizing rather than following a perceived right answer.

**Coda**

The longer I am in my research career, the more I perceive ethical dilemmas and struggle with ethical questions. These questions include: To what extent are the views and representations of the work a function of my own subjectivism? What is it that I am not representing? Do I have the same responsibility to all of the participants? Are there research issues that should not be pursued because they could harm a participant? Are there findings that should be reported differently, with more compassion? Perhaps less personally? I ask this last question, acknowledging its cost. Ethnographic research is powerful because of its personal nature. If we take away or dilute personal and concrete aspects, we eliminate an essential quality of the methodology and its reportage. A possible recommendation by some (which I have never tried) is to manufacture a vignette based on several others, to generate a hypothetical vignette. That, too, has its own obvious ethical pitfalls.

The underlying issue for me has to do with the commitment to cooperation and partnership between researcher and participants. Sabar (1994) raises excellent questions concerning informed partnership, control of interdependence between the teacher and the researcher, and partnership in interpretation of findings and reporting the research. These are central issues in any classroom research endeavor.

Moreover, ethical issues are always embedded within the context of inquiry. As compared to a positivist approach to conducting research, the time and energy allocated in ethnographic research to the relationship of researcher to the researched is unusual. As May points out, “Attention to ethical issues in the field may seem erroneous to those who feel they must press forward in all due speed in search of the most fruitful, efficient, and instrumental ways of getting what is wanted and needed to produce in this occupation at press” (1987, p. 26). Yet, by an ethical code, this allotment of time may be necessary as part of our intellectual/emotional make-up as researchers who are dependent on relationships in order to learn. In addition to its humanistic aspects, there is also the ecology of future research: exploiting human resources can make research less possible for further study.

Finally, we have to deal with our situatedness and the fact that we view the particular teaching practice through our own content and pedagogical knowledge. In
a current study of arts education in elementary schools (Bresler, Davidson, Hertzog, & Lemons, 1995), I made the choice of involving several researchers with different perspectives (e.g., art specialist, classroom teacher, artist/teacher, aesthetician). The process of analyzing and interpreting data (simultaneous to data collection), brings out differences of allegiances, values, commitments, and interpretations. In this process of teamwork, the dynamics of data collection and analysis are transformed and shape the construction of our knowledge. Negotiating these differences, I believe, creates a richer understanding. Because we bring to the interpretation more points of view, our negotiated realities are more complex and, I believe, more ethical.

Participant observation and interviewing, like marriage and parenting, are always contextual, never quite under control. In the quest to increase knowledge and understanding, we should try to increase benefits and minimize hurt. More than following a formula and expecting easy answers, ethical considerations are about a search for a more complex understanding and a cultivation of a curious, compassionate frame of mind.

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