BEACON
The Thesis Journey of Elizabeth Abernethy
MFA Design for Social Innovation
The School of Visual Arts
2015
I, Elizabeth Abernethy, am creating an open-source carpooling system for public school teachers in rural North Carolina in order to create stronger workplace support networks and ultimately reduce burnout.
Education has been a long-running interest of mine—though it took me until now in my life to realize just how much it meant to me. In college, I worked at the Distance Education Center for North Carolina State University, working on developing digital content for massive online courses and developing alternative ways to present materials. I also volunteered weekly with a literary social justice group: reading in English and Spanish with underprivileged children and discussing controversial social issues with them such as race and sexuality. I even volunteered briefly in education abroad, working with a group in the Dominican Republic that essentially hosted another full school day for children after they got out of the only 2-3 hours of required school provided by the city they lived in.

Without actively knowing it—design and education crossed paths in my life several times before graduate school. My experiences, combined with the experiences of others, left an uneasy feeling in my gut. As designers, we are constantly imagining the better versions of everything—and the educational sphere has a lot of room for improvement.

Before I came to DSI, I watched my little brother struggle through school. He was smart—with an IQ well above average—but school was a tremendous pain for him. The pacing was too fast or too slow. He got in trouble for putting his own spin on his assignments. He had little to no chance to bring what he truly loved into his classes, and for someone who had a hard time sitting still during lectures—he spent a lot of time in and out of strenuous testing sessions. We knew he was making progress as we watched him grow and change over the years—but his report card didn’t. It had my wheels turning.

A year ago, in the midst of a massive educational reform in the United States, I set out to see what role standardized testing played in the bigger movement and how design could facilitate the transitions taking place. The state of New York was pioneering the Common Core State Standards and the exams that came with them. It was the first state in the nation to offer pilot tests in its schools and everyone was watching with anticipation. The integration of Common Core, however, came with polarizing side effects.

“If I don’t do well on this test, then I won’t get into a good school, and if I don’t get into a good school—I won’t get a good job and have a good life.”

I remember freezing in disbelief when I turned on the TV last year and heard that quote. Even more shocking is that when I looked up to see who was speaking, I saw a small, 5th grade boy in Midtown Manhattan who was lined up to take his middle school placement exam. My heart sunk, trying to understand why a 5th grader would have to worry so much about one, singular test. Then it fell even deeper—I knew the kid was right. The placement test would determine what school he would go to next year, and therefore,
it would also determine how good his teachers would be, what kind of people he would meet along the way, what kinds of activities and experiences he would be exposed to, and ultimately draw a path for him for the next several years of his life. All in one exam.

I started asking any teacher I knew or could get a hold of what they thought of Common Core – gauging a mixed bag of responses. While teachers everywhere seemed to generally rejoice at the sound of higher educational standards and more critical thinking being taught in schools, Common Core happened so suddenly that teachers were left scrambling to completely re-draft their year’s curriculum and were shoved into lengthy training workshops in order to keep their jobs, all at the last minute. For teachers in well-funded, high performing schools – the transition was only minimally inconvenient, but for teachers in poorer districts, Common Core’s rapid implementation was crippling. No one seemed prepared for Common Core. The stress that it caused on every level of the command chain was evident, and communication started to break down.

Students that are usually high performing were bringing home failing grades with the higher standards in place. Parents of these children didn’t understand and began blaming teachers for their child’s shortcomings. Teachers became targets. Administrators put extra pressure on them to succeed so their school would receive more funding for the implementation. Teachers with already under-performing students felt hopeless in a system that continually pushed them further down as their students crept even further away from the benchmarks. All stakeholders seemed to be stunned from the changes and didn’t know how to communicate their pain with one another.

I started to immerse myself in the system, studying education in the United States through the focused lens of its biggest school system: The New York City Department of Education. I had to learn more about Common Core and its effects on the city.

With the first run of Common Core exams being run in the spring of 2014 – the city anxiously awaited its first results. When the test scores for each participating school were announced in early summer, I dug in. Studying web development at General Assembly at the time, I used my new coding skills to build a site that could represent the data and let me explore it for myself. That’s when I saw the gap first hand.

**RESEARCH QUESTION #2**
Can communication design help reduce the friction initiated by the rapid implementation of the Common Core State Standards between parents, teachers, and students?

**DESIGN GOAL #2**
How might we create a communication tool for school stakeholders to help them understand the implications of Common Core testing?

I started looking into what was plaguing low-performing schools in the outer boroughs and discovered that they were stuck in a continuous reinforcing loop.

I found out that a few of my classmates at General Assembly used to teach in New York City – so I asked them to take a look at all of this information and Common Core data with me. What I didn’t know at the time was that my conversation with them had some bigger commonalities than I could gather from the questions I was asking them. Even though I was asking them specifically about test scores and low-performing outer borough schools – they were telling me something else.

All four of them had quit teaching and were now training to be programmers because they saw programming as more valuable than teaching. They told me they could live better lives as a programmer and then volunteer with educationally-related activities in their free time. This was my next lead.
RESEARCH QUESTION #3
Is there a trend of teachers leaving the profession on a larger scale? Is it a local problem or a national one?

The answer was yes – and it wasn’t just big, it was massive. I started reading everything I could about teachers quitting and going somewhere else. It was bigger than I could have ever imagined – and yet, it remained fairly under the radar in the roaring spaces of buzzier “EdTech” and “Ed Reform.” Experts in the field debated teacher vacancies and I quickly found language surrounding it: teacher turnover, attrition, and burnout. Whatever you called it, it was happening across the nation, and the interesting thing was that no one really knew what to do about it.

I started to explore reasons why this is happening – but like the larger school systems themselves, there were a lot of variables at play here as well.

LONG HOURS
LOW PAY
TARGETS OF ATTENTION
OUT-NUMBERED
+ TRAPPED IN CLASSROOM

} Work Conditions

FRUSTRATION
ISOLATION
WITHDRAWAL
+

} Emotional States

LACK OF SUPPORT
CHANGING ED. SYSTEM
+

} Other Stressors

BURNOUT

That’s when I came across an article ranking the best and worst states to teach in, based on everything from average starting salaries and employment rates to class sizes. I scrolled down the list to find New York, which ended up doing surprisingly well, and then started to look for North Carolina – my home state. Known for its excellent universities, North Carolina was nowhere to be found, until I hit the bottom of the list. Ranked 51st out of 51 states (including D.C.), the Tarheel State sat occupying the last slot. I knew this was my chance to re-direct my efforts to somewhere I knew very well: my home.

So, I started to look at the turnover rates for North Carolina in 2014:

North Carolina
2014

14.33% Average State Turnover Rate

734 No. of teachers who left NC last year to teach in another state

1,000 No. of teachers who quit teaching to change careers

600 No. of teachers who had quit their positions in Wake County by April of 2014

In addition to this, North Carolina is also overwhelmingly rural with 85 out of 100 counties falling into the rural category. I immediately realized that the solutions being implemented in New York wouldn’t work here, where many miles physically separate schools and teachers. Something new would have to happen.

Now that I had a basic understanding of who was leaving, I needed to know the other side of the coin: who is staying?

RESEARCH QUESTION #4
Who are the positive deviants? What is keeping them from leaving?

I started to ask teachers what made them come into work every day. A new pattern started to emerge from their responses. Many teachers see teaching as a calling – something that gives them feelings of meaning and power, and something that they were destined to do. People with a calling will work harder and longer simply because they find their jobs rewarding. It seemed like this was what was keeping most teachers around – even if it only meant for a few more years. Their attachment to their job was strong, even at the worst of times.
I started to look at parallels in other fields.

**RESEARCH QUESTION #5**
How do businesses in other fields retain their best employees?

**RESEARCH QUESTION #6**
What factors create a happy workplace environment?

A study at the University of Pennsylvania discovered that workplace happiness consisted of 3 things: positive emotions (Feelings), engagement (use of strengths while doing gratifying work), and meaning (strong connections with other people in the workplace). Ultimately, the better people feel about their workplace relationships, the more effective workers they become. My conversations with teachers told me that the engagement was there (because of their strong callings), but the connections were what was lacking. I heard over and over again: “I wish I had more support.”

I decided that is where I would go from here on – a focus on creating support for teachers. Involving community, communication and facilitation – this was something I could sink my teeth into. If I could create stronger relationships within a single school, I believed that a few of the other variables preventing teachers from enjoying their careers would be improved: communication channels would open up, teachers could share workloads, ideas, and information about classroom management, and more.

**DESIGN GOAL #3**
How might we create strong support communities for isolated public school teachers in North Carolina in order to increase their teacher efficacy and ultimately improve teacher retention.
A NEW FOCUS
Designing Support Networks for North Carolina’s Teachers

PROCESS SNAPSHOT

13
Hours of Audio Recordings Captured from Interviews and Conferences

15
Conversations with Active Teachers

100
Ideas for Thesis Presented

3
Education-specific Conferences Attended

4
Conversations with Ex-Teachers

2
Surveys filled out by current and retired teachers

9
Direct Conversations with Subject-Matter Experts

3
School Visits

264
Number of Articles Bookmarked under “Thesis” in my Browser

7
Documentaries Watched
Now that I had identified a niche in the research in which to intervene, it was time to think of how to do that. The first step was blue sky brainstorming and ideation, focused loosely around the idea of support and stress relief for teachers. It was at this point in the process that I was intensely studying the composition of a teacher’s day, so I diversified my ideas along their daily schedules, trying to make the most of the time they had in school and seeing if it could be used in any other way.

From the list of 100, a sorting process began. The first pass-through eliminated 40 ideas from the set: ideas that were the least interesting, least connected to the main idea, or just ones that were “tired.”

The second pass-through selected 10 ideas that were the most interesting, most challenging, and the ones with the most potential. From there, I found myself hovering around 3 main ideas: commuting, lunchtime, and physical message boards.

I started to flesh them out and give them names to make them more tangible. It’s from here that my first prototype was born.

Below are some of the ideas that came out of the initial 60 that survived the first pass-through.

### VOLUNTEER TEACHER ASSISTANTS
Utilizing retired teachers as volunteers to assist with grading, classroom management, and more.

### REVOLVING CLASSROOMS
Let teachers sign up for other classrooms for a change of pace for themselves and their students. Possibly a logistical nightmare.

### PROBLEM BOARDS
Put up a special bulletin board in the teacher’s lounge for anonymous advice. Let people post questions and provide answers.

### OFFICE HOURS
Gather community volunteers (retired teachers) to host hours in the teacher’s lounge for drop-ins, providing help with advice or paperwork if needed.

### LOUNGE TRANSFORMATION
Pop-up day spas in the teacher’s lounge. Why not make it a relaxing environment instead of a drop-in, pop-out location?

### DEPARTMENTAL LUNCH BREAKS
Gather all teachers from one discipline together during lunch so that they can share in planning time and utilize each other.

### TEACHER CARPOOLING
Schedule a bus route that picks up teachers instead of children, so they can ride to school together, too.

### EARLY MORNING COFFEE
Come in early for planning time with focused coffee groups of teachers.

### HELPBOXES
Put a box on every teacher’s door during the day where they can pass notes to each other and ask for help.

### TEACHER HOUR
Carve a special period into the day for teachers to work and plan together. Students can use this time for homework.
Children ride to school together on the bus – why can’t teachers ride to school together, too?

That was the premise of my first prototype, and the premise of it’s name: SchoolBus. Coming from a culture where the independence of having a car of your own is an important birthright – I knew it would take more than a good idea to open up teacher’s minds to carpooling.

In our first year of DSI, Jaimie Cloud of The Cloud Institute shared with us Dr. David Rock’s “SCARF Model”: a psychological study of human reward and resistance based around 5 principles:

**STATUS**
A person’s relative importance to others

**CERTAINTY**
Concerns with being able to predict the future or see the outcomes of a scenario.

**AUTONOMY**
A sense of control over the events at hand

**RELATEDNESS**
Safety with others; Of being friends rather than foes.

**FAIRNESS**
Perception of fair exchanges between people.

The idea behind SCARF is that all human actions trigger either ‘primary reward’ or ‘primary threat’ circuits of the brain in relation to the above structures. Knowing what the parameters are, which ones you are triggering, and if they are positive or negative reactions can help you to balance out your ideas so that they aren’t rejected. Luckily, not all of the parameters need to be in ‘reward’ state in order for an idea to be accepted. As long as the reactions are fairly balanced and primarily positive, acceptance is easier in the short and long term.
With carpooling, autonomy is immediately threatened. You lose control of when you can wake up, which way you drive, and what time you’ll have to leave for school or work. This perceived attack on autonomy can cause other outcomes to be seen as more bleak, for example, the act of carpooling might be therefore judged as unfair, since you see yourself as having to compromise your freedom for someone else, especially if you have to drive them.

With that in mind, I tried to construct a prototype that would trigger equal amounts of positive reactions to overcome the immediate negative autonomy reaction that I anticipated from participants.

**Process and Development**

To do that, I adopted an Uber model for my SchoolBus prototype. The idea behind SchoolBus was that it would alleviate concerns of autonomy by providing them with other benefits they wouldn’t get from driving to school alone: drivers would pick them up and drop them off each day for 3 days and provide them with breakfast in the morning and snacks after school. This way, my teachers would save gas money, not have to drive in the morning, and get food.

I recruited two community volunteers: one to drive the morning shift, and one to drive the late shift, both mothers from the community (one my own mom).

From there, I recruited participants. I reached out to someone I knew at a local middle school, a guidance counselor who has a close relationship with teachers, and asked her for help with recruitment. I drafted a formal recruitment email, created a signup document, and an initial survey for interested participants to fill out in order to select participants.

Once enough people signed up, I selected two that lived relatively close to each other and had the closest matching schedules: one librarian and one science teacher: Ruth and Rae.

From here, I introduced the riders to each other, and then to my drivers in two ways. First, I had the drivers call each rider to confirm their home addresses and their schedules, as well as to ask them about preferences for beverages and snacks. Second, I sent a confirmation email to the riders with their weekly itineraries, a photo of both drivers, their contact information, and what car they would be driving.

On the drivers’ end, I prepared them with as much information as possible, as well. I sent them basic information about who they would be picking up, provided them both with a map and directions to each teacher’s house with pre-planned routes, and gave them a 2’ magnet for the side of their cars to signify their participation in the program for the riders upon pick-up.

Each day, I would ask the drivers and the riders for their feedback as to how things were going. We were ready to roll.

**DAY 1**

Both teachers knew of each other, but didn’t actually know each other personally. They spent the day discussing general formalities: children, families, and loosely, work.

**DAY 2**

The magic started: teachers began to vent and strategize together as they discussed how to manage behavioral issues in their classrooms. They also discussed school-wise issues.

**DAY 3**

Teachers have developed a friendship and have planned dinner for next week together. Teachers looked forward to discussing work on the way home.

**WHAT I HOPED TO LEARN:**

Carpooling has some innate benefits, of which, I hoped my participants would get a taste:

**Financial:** By using SchoolBus, my teachers would get to leave their cars parked for 3 days, saving them money on gas.

**Environmental:** By only taking one car, emissions are reduced.

**Personal:** Riders would be introduced to someone new, and would have a chance to talk before they get to school – hopefully having a positive influence on their work day.

I also hoped that the experience was positive enough that they would recommend it to others.
Overall, this prototype showed me that informal mentorship in the form of carpooling had the potential to have a much larger impact than existing mentorship programs because it not only improved their work lives, but their lives at home.

**Next Steps**

I invited my prototyping committee: drivers, riders, and guidance counselor who helped to recruit over for dinner at my house to talk about the future of carpooling. Each participant got a certificate.

During the night, I didn’t bombard them with activities. Teachers are naturally resistant to more structure, but enjoy leisure time – especially off hours. Anything they can do to get their minds off of their day helps, so we ate and talked.

We talked about the experience, their lives, my life, their schools, my school, and ultimately, how to create a more sustainable experience. That is when two things happened. First, one of my riders said:

“You know, this would just be perfect for my daughter.”

Her daughter is a first-year teacher at a local elementary school and doesn’t have the chance to work with any other teachers there, often leaving her alone to struggle through the daily grind.

Second, they asked me what it would be like to have teachers drive each other to school. That is exactly where we went next.
Email Confirmation for Prototype

SCHOOLBUS
A school carpooling system for the rest of us

WELCOME ON BOARD THE BUS!
Thank you for choosing SchoolBus for your transportation to and from school. In order to facilitate a smooth and safe journey for all, we request your cooperation:
- Please be on time and ready to board the bus.
- Please ensure your personal belongings are securely placed.
- Follow the instructions of the bus driver.

Your drivers will call to confirm your scheduled pick-up/drop-off times today or tomorrow.

THANK YOU for choosing the SchoolBus Project.

YOUR ITINERARY
Wednesday, February 11th
Thursday, February 12th
Friday, February 13th
Arrive at 92630 Warren T. 11:00 AM
Departure from 92630 Warren T. 3:00 PM

TOOLS

MEET SCHOOLBUS
A friendly school carpooling system for the rest of us

LaunchRock for sign-up page

MEET SCHOOLBUS

PHOTOS
Day 1
Day 2
Day 3

Typeform for preferences

LaunchRock for sign-up page

Photos Day 1
Photos Day 2
Photos Day 3

Photos Day 1
Photos Day 2
Photos Day 3
CERTIFICATE OF PARTICIPATION

We greatly appreciate the active participation of

In our volunteer-based pilot program of SCHOOLBUS teacher car-pooling system at NEWTON-CONOVER MIDDLE SCHOOL from February 11-13, 2015.

You are our pioneer. We are sincerely grateful for you.

Cheryl Heller
Program Chair

Elizabeth Abernethy
Student, MFA Design for Social Innovation

Jeffrey Franklin
Thesis Advisor

Invitation to Thank You Dinner

SEE YOU TUESDAY!

Join us for a night of dinner, drinks, and warm conversations.

We can’t wait to see you! Don’t worry about bringing anything - just yourself!

Here is Gina’s number in case you’re running late:

5:30 pm

Newton, NC

(We are the white brick house across from Grace Church)
I started looking everywhere for teachers with carpooling experience, but if it is happening – it isn’t talked about. I reached out to a few individuals that blogged about it or posted a video, but got no responses.

That is when I found Dr. Stella Erbes, a Ph.D. at Pepperdine University in California who teaches new teachers how to teach.

A teacher herself for 12 years, Stella wrote a book What Teachers Should Know But Textbooks Don’t Show, giving new teachers pointers into the real struggles of being a teacher: discussing power dynamics, communication, classroom management, and somewhere in between: her experiences with carpooling during her time as a high school teacher.

I scheduled time to talk with Stella and the conversation we had was incredibly pivotal at this point in the process, providing validation of the idea of carpooling and its importance in creating support for teachers, both new and veteran.

Stella taught me about how the system works currently for new teachers across the US, and how most schools are trying to implement induction programs now to help give their new teachers solid ground to build upon during their first 1-3 years. She also talked with me about the importance of matching riders.

Stella told me the first year of teaching is commonly called the “Sink or Swim” year because some teachers just can’t pull out of it – in fact, most can’t. Within 1-3 years, Stella said that 60-80% of new teachers will leave the profession – and that is why she is spending her time at Pepperdine studying the positive deviants that are staying. What makes them different?

We discussed pro’s and con’s of existing systems for teachers and what barriers might be in their way of success – but most interestingly, Stella told me about an emotional roller coaster that teachers experience during their first year.

The phase of disillusionment is exactly where a mentor can help – keeping a new teacher from feeling alone in the fight, and giving them someone to help guide them back above water.
The Birth of Beacon

Named after the lighthouses that grace North Carolina’s coasts, Beacon was born, my second prototype and final deliverable from my thesis journey.

Beacon, a teacher carpooling system, was an attempt to correct the imbalances from the first prototype of SchoolBus and create a more sustainable system of carpooling support networks.

What is Beacon?

Beacon is a flexible, informal carpooling mentorship system that teachers can implement on their own at their schools. Beacon understands that time is essential and that life happens, so it is designed to be as flexible as you are. Beacon consists of carpooling and phone-pooling.

Carpooling

Teachers alternate driving so that repayment isn’t necessary, and together, they figure out their schedules. Each day, they ride to and from school with each other.

Phone-pooling

On the days that carpooling doesn’t happen – you will always have someone to call, even if it’s not until the end of the day when you both get home. This gives teachers the flexibility that they need to get involved at school, and the support they need on the days in between.
PROTOTYPE #2

#BeaconCarpool

In an attempt to test my new idea, I launched the #BeaconCarpool challenge.

Though the message only reached as far as my own personal social networks could carry it – it lead me to Teigan and Ann, English teachers in Marietta, Georgia. Teigan, a 2nd year teacher, told me that she met Ann, a teacher with 13 years of experience, through a mutual friend during her first year of teaching and that they have been carpooling together for a year now.

They happily accepted the challenge, and for a week, Teigan and Ann posted photos of themselves on their carpooling adventures, and shared with me the benefits they’ve experienced from it so far.

“In carpooling with a fellow teacher and friend has given me the support that I need to endure my first two years of teaching. Seriously, teaching can be hard.”

OVERALL TAKEAWAYS

Carpooling is easier when someone else introduces you to the idea; Ex: Ann had carpooled before at a previous school.

Carpooling extends beyond the carpool; Ex: Ann and Teigan talk to each other on their days off as well.

Carpooling gives you an accountability buddy for more than just teaching; Ex: Ann and Teigan go to the gym together, too!

Carpooling gives teachers someone to experience the highs and lows of their days with.
Next Steps

The prototype challenge lead me to two realizations: One, stories like Teigan and Ann’s need to be shared in order to build trust in the system. The benefits are far and many, but the hump of getting over initial fears of independence is large and daunting. Two, carpooling starts with the teachers, not the administrators, but administrators can provide rewards for carpooling teachers.

From my prototype, I learned that I needed to remove as many barriers as possible for teachers to make it easy to adopt. To do that, I needed to provide them with the tools to make it as easy as possible for them to start a system like this on their own - because teachers don’t need any more on their plates than they currently have. Starting a mentorship program that benefits both new and veteran teachers should be easy, fun, and free - and that is what I needed to give them. In order to do that, I talked with Teigan about what she thought teachers would need to be able to start something like this - and that is when we decided to build a toolkit together.

What’s in the toolkit?

- **Pitch decks:** teacher-to-teacher / teacher-to-administrator
- **Guidelines and instructions:** match-making planning activities
- **Branding and community building:** templates for stickers, shirts, and magnets

This starter kit could easily give any teacher at any school the materials that they need to start a carpooling mentorship program.

By providing teachers with pitch decks (for both administration and to pitch to fellow teachers), the groundwork was already done for them as to why it might be a good idea to adopt such a program in their school.

By providing teachers with guidelines as to how to match carpooling pairs, schools could ensure that their matches are beneficial to both parties.

By including the options for brand-based materials, schools could start to not only build a community of members within itself, but connect to a larger body of mentors within their counties, states, and ultimately, the nation.

Open-Sourcing Beacon

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MAJOR LEARNINGS

The toolkit experience is the ultimate manifestation of my thesis work. By providing teachers around the country with a free kit of parts that they can take and make their own, the project can continue to grow organically - even without me involved in it after graduation.
The process of developing Beacon was messy and often times unpredictable. At many times, I felt like I was experiencing the same emotional roller coaster as the first-year teachers that I was working with. Throughout the process, there were many highs and lows - of which I have attempted to summarize here:

**Project Successes**

Choosing to focus a thesis entirely around creating relationships in the workplace was slightly unorthodox - and there were many times where I received feedback accordingly, however, I take great pride in making and sticking to that choice. Designing an environment for these relationships to take place is just as important as designing physical or digital tools to enable a service - which I ultimately ended up doing as well.

Connecting two people that share similar life experiences can go a long way for both parties involved, and can uncanny benefits both inside and outside of work - as shown by both of my prototypes and conversations with outside experts.

Teachers are a difficult population to work with - and although they are more than willing to "help a student out with a project," they are incredibly busy and overtaxed as it is. That is why another huge success of this project was finding a way to make existing time work in their favor. By utilizing their daily commutes as a mentorship offering, one that is flexible and informal, teachers are able to make the most our of their days without adding extra meetings or requirements to their lives.

**Project Setbacks**

When you are working in a culture that equivocates driving with personal freedom - anything that threatens to take away that freedom seems like a threat. One of the hardest parts for me was knowing that all of these benefits exist from participating in carpooling, yet watching people time and time again turn away from it because of perceived inconvenience. That is when I called upon my upbrining in North Carolina and decided to also spread this project via word-of-mouth: as it is much more likely to be adopted and accepted if someone you know and respect tells you about a positive experience they had.

Another setback is that an actual full-throttle working pilot system was not able to be implemented within the timeframe that I had. As mentioned earlier, working with schools is difficult - especially when you are also in school, and often, the timing just doesn’t align properly. With that being said, there were many times where it was difficult to communique with the schools (during testing seasons or at the start of new semesters), and many times where our priorities did not align. That is ultimately why working through individual teachers proved to be more successful, and quicker, than working through the school itself.

**Personal Learning & Growth**

I followed education as my initial thesis path because it is the ultimate design problem, ultimately affecting, exacerbating, minimizing, or creating all of the other problems we see on a regular basis. Everything from poverty to food issues to human rights can be reflected in the education system.

While wandering down the endless tunnel of thesis research, I watched myself come in and out of many routes and focuses. Even when I thought the path was clear, it turned. Things that seemed like clear-cut solutions were only scratching the tip of a massive, underwater iceberg. Issues that popped up within the system were often gray: were they the results of something or causing something? Often times it was both. That is when you know you’re deep within something complex, living, and worth spending time on.

One of the most influential turning points for me was early on in the research phase. Coming out of a summer web development intensive course, I was almost 100% sure that a digital tool would be the answer to a lack of support: connecting teachers to each other. I started attending EdTech conferences and talks to see what else was out there, and talking to teachers using new tech in their classrooms – that
is when I realized how far off I was from the truth. Shiny, new, and digital are not always the answer. Technology is created by people – and people shape technology with their intentions, ideas, brilliance, and biases. Like design, technology is not always altruistic. Some issues are deeper than a screen, and can’t be fixed with an app.

That is the case with education. A lot of people are focusing on building new devices, gear, and applications for schools to alleviate symptoms of bigger, underlying issues nested deep within layers of complex political, socio-economical, and psychological creations of the past few hundred years in the United States. Often times, these band-aid solutions only create more pain somewhere down the line, or relocate it to somewhere else temporarily – but most often, do not alleviate it completely.

The best part of working in the field of social innovation is that you get to work with people, and if you listen closely enough without imposing your own judgment into it – you might just hear what their problems really are and be able to help them.

Beacon might not be the clear-cut, life-saving gift that keeps all teachers ever from quitting – but it is a start to something deeper and a return to something important: creating stable and fulfilling work environments for teachers, the people who are raising the future generations of our country, and the ones who might be creating or solving the problems of our future.

At the end of this, I’ve learned that you can’t skip steps, and that sometimes you have to trace a problem back a few layers in order to find something that will reach what you want to reach in the way that you want.

We need to have open eyes, open minds, and open ears to find it – and open arms to welcome others into the process, because the problems we’re solving are bigger than one person.

They were created by many, so they must be solved by many.
THANK YOU

The Thesis Journey of Elizabeth Abernethy

MFA Design for Social Innovation
The School of Visual Arts
2015