Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Busyness:
Busy Talk and its Frames, Tweaks and Heroics

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ABSTRACT

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(Under the direction of Julia T. Wood)

The purpose of this study was to explore the experience of busyness through the everyday language of an air traffic controller, a school superintendent, a social entrepreneur and a bus driver. To date, busyness has been researched as endemic to the United States. In this study, the researcher set aside a priori assumptions of busyness and listened from the ground up to busy talk. Grounded theory guided a series of site visits, audio taped interviews, follow-up conversations and correspondence to discover patterns in talk about busyness. Codes were developed through Atlas ti (qualitative research software) to interpret the data. The data led the researcher to deduce three recurring facets of busy talk: frames, tweaks, and heroics. While this talk was evident across all research sites, how individuals actually experienced busyness was wildly relative.
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“In high school, I turned in something late and nothing happened to me. It opened up the flood gates because nothing happened to me. I realized time was negotiable. Since then, I have had a boundariless sense of time at best. At worst, I’ve been late for a lot of things.”
Rosanne Haggerty, President, Common Ground

We are a busy nation. We are people who do not take or get enough vacation. We work long hours, and we just barely believe in unpaid medical leave. We suffer from ailments like Epstein Barr, chronic fatigue syndrome, stress, high blood pressure, TMJ, and carpal tunnel syndrome. Clearly, there is a price tag on our busyness. Even in our home life, we beat the drum of productivity. Just look at any holiday letter with its listing of accomplishments.

Busyness is a word associated with mobility, speed and volume. It is a packed people mover in an airport on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving. It is a meat counter on Christmas Eve. It is an executive answering one hundred emails on a Monday morning. One person’s busyness just might be someone else’s mid-morning stroll. While a multitude of meanings, both good and bad, attach to busyness the word itself is merely a descriptor of activity.

While busyness can result in ailment and angst, it is also represented in exuberant terms and in positive ways in everyday small talk. In fact, the word “busy” has replaced “fine,” “good” and “not much” as an initial response to “how are you?” or “what’s up?” Spend time listening to conversations around town and you will hear people engaged in this busy talk. On a university campus, chairs of departments vie for the title of busiest administrator. Faculty members compare
teaching loads and research productivity. Students talk about encroaching deadlines and extracurricular commitments.

Four busy people, who represented different lines of work, socio-economic class, gender, race, and life perspectives were at the hub of this interpretive analysis about the experience of busyness. The experience of busyness was interpreted through a close observation of how research participants’ talked about it. Relying on grounded theory and assisted by Atlas ti, the experience of busyness was interpreted through interview transcripts, site visit observation, email correspondence and telephone conversations.

Background

Six years ago, I reached a personal boiling point. I had two children two-years-old and under. I was sleep-deprived and work/life imbalanced. Well-versed in the self-help narrative of moving away to discover simplicity, my family and I left Durham, NC for a small town in rural Appalachia. As hall directors at Union College in Barbourville, Kentucky, we lived in a residence hall of 125 men. With room and board covered, we lingered over meals in the dining hall, got eight hours of sleep each night and took long walks around a floodwall that encircled the town. Compared to my calendar back home, my days were simple. I had one local friend and no appointment book. At the end of the academic year, we signed up for another year.

During our second year, something changed. It wasn’t our surroundings. The pursuit of simplicity was no longer enough. I rose at 5 am to write in an old
Life, Liberty

science building across campus. My partner Brian took initial steps to shift
careers from his MBA training to wellness. Instead of just reprimanding the guys
in our hall, we were more intentional in our interactions. We got busier. Secretly, I
felt relief in having more things to do.

In my prior work as a life coach, my clients often asked me to help them
“fix” their busy lives. My experience of having fled the busyness of my own life in
Durham and then welcoming a return to busyness of a different sort made me
wonder if there was really anything to “fix” about busyness. In January 2004, I
drew up a list of forty people, who lived all over the country, to interview. I bought
a recorder for my telephone and began to conduct interviews to highlight
practices that bring about “good busy”. That way, I could learn by seeking
knowledge from others.

After a couple of telephone interviews, I wanted to experience their daily
lives in person. In March of 2004, I took my first trip to the studios of Mr. Rogers
Neighborhood in Pittsburgh, PA to profile Joe Kennedy who left corporate law
and billable hours to apprentice with the children’s television star Fred Rogers.
Surrounded by the original castle, puppets, and Speedy Delivery Mr. McFeely,
Joe discovered “good busy.” He watched how his boss Fred Rogers made time
for what mattered, including waking up at 4 am every morning to work, swim,
compose music, produce a show, retire by 8 pm and wake up the next day to
start all over again. By the fall, I received travel money from the Peeler Family
Foundation to visit more of the people I had interviewed by phone. I spent a day
with a musician watching an album get made in Los Angeles, hung out in a bar with a bartender in Las Vegas and learned from a dairy farmer in Ohio how to milk a cow.

I profiled nine people from the original list of forty people I considered. Each profile offers one strategy to help people get to good busy (see Appendix A). Unlike most self-help texts that overlook any dissonance or inconsistencies in their subjects’ words and actions, my profiles explored the good alongside the challenging facets of busyness. I have used these profiles in my coaching practice and have shared the manuscript with twenty to twenty-five other readers.

Our family returned to Durham in January 2005. The research has had a profound impact on me. Since then, I have used “good busyness” as a litmus test to monitor of my own daily commitments and habits. When it was one A.M. and I was deleting old email, I asked myself “Was that good busyness?” While I cannot entirely stop myself from entering the terrain of bad busy, I am getting better at redirection.

Six months ago, I swore off the word busy (except as a research topic) and any mention of my workload or anxieties. For the most part, no one noticed. My friends, colleagues and strangers dumped their busy lists on me. I maintained the disciplined answer of “oh, everything is just fine.” The good part was that there was no opportunity for one-upmanship. The bad part was that I missed the rant. I missed the sympathy, the drama, and, yes, even the competition. I missed the bonding that occurs when people compare their busyness.
This study was designed as preliminary research to identify sensitizing concepts related to how people think and talk about busyness. Unlike my previous work that identified a “good” and “bad” busy, I did not introduce practices or models that assuaged busyness. Instead, I engaged in interviews to explore how individuals, through their language, made sense of their busyness and how it impacted the individuals, relationships, and organizational structures in their lives. What I learned from this study has informed the development of a more focused framework for studying busyness in future research.

A Review of Literature

It is impossible to tell the story of busyness without interrogating narratives for and against efficiency. Books about “slowness” bemoan the fact that most Americans only make love for thirty minutes a week (Honoré, 2004). What they don’t tell you is that Frederick Taylor (1998) and Frank and Lillian Gilbreth (1914) and their scientific management teachings are probably more responsible for bedroom brevity than any lack of individual agency. Stephen Covey (1989), with his “sharpening the saw” principle of self-renewal has set the bar high for what is expected in terms of work/life balance. Understanding that individual interpretations of busyness are tied to cultural discourses will be critical to the success of this study.

There are material consequences to busyness that are tied to daily survival. People who earn low wages or minimum wage must often work two or three jobs to make ends meet. In contrast, there is a busyness that is conveyed
as socioeconomic necessity when it is more a matter of lifestyle choices that must be maintained. There is a lot of busyness that is cast as essential and unavoidable that, in reality, is negotiable, but negotiable at a cost to material acquisition.

Busyness, per se, is not an area of study. Instead, there is vast research and diverse literature across the humanities and in popular literature that interprets busyness through broad analyses of time perception and management. Under this umbrella, I have drawn on the following eight areas of research.

*Pathology*

This first type of research constructs busyness as an ailment to be addressed through ongoing measures or, more boldly, through attempts at a cure. This literature is situated in the self-help genre and thrives outside the realm of academic scholarship. This literature offers anything from band-aid to triage by way of interventional strategies. Typically, authors open with confessional tales about their own struggles with busyness and how they were “cured” or at least made more aware of their addiction to busyness (Burton, 2007; McGee, 2005; Rechtschaffen, 1996).

Through a band-aid approach, authors encourage the reader to change “one day at a time” (Morganstern, 2004) It centers the reader as someone who is competent but who will never completely escape his or her constant state of busyness. These symptoms show up as bad habits and are treatable but inescapable. No radical measures are recommended. Instead, small, daily self-
correctives are offered as readers treat their own busyness within their existing daily framework.

Through the triage approach, authors recommend more drastic measures in the quest toward greater simplicity. Typically, the author spotlights his or her own story and serves as an evangelist for his or her own particular intervention (Bender, 1991; O'Grady, 2008). Readers are encouraged to go live with the Amish, travel the world for a year with their family, or sell their house and live in a college residence with 120 male athletes.

Striving for Efficiency

A second type of literature sees busyness not as pathology, but as the essence of capitalism. It is an experience that is part and parcel of being human. This literature draws its roots and inspiration from the nineteenth century annals of scientific management that promoted a never-ending quest for greater efficiency. Championing an approach he called the “one best way”, Frederick Taylor (1998) argued for an end to systematic soldiering and modeled an observational practice that helped industrial bosses train their workers to work more efficiently.

Frank and Lillian Gilbreth, disciples of Taylor and popularized in the movie Cheaper By the Dozen, focused on optimal motion. They departed from Taylor in that they saw their work as one that might uplift humanity (Lancaster, 2004). Their research subjects or clients were more than factory workers. They were housewives who sought greater efficiency in the kitchen and people with
disabilities (Graham, 1999).

Twentieth and twenty-first century time management literature perpetuates the historical tradition of scientific management. Characteristic of this literature is the sense that busyness can be managed. The time management matrix, advocated by Stephen Covey (1989), places responsibilities in one of four quadrants correlated by the following categories: urgent, not urgent, important and not important. David Allen, creator of the ‘Getting Things Done’ curriculum and work flow mastery, exemplifies busyness’ containment as well. Getting Things Done coaches offer promises like “managing internal distractions” and “becoming the master of your in-box” (Allen, 2008). Recently, critical communication scholars have both offered cogent critique of the time management industry and underscored the importance of engaging with a literature that has such popular appeal. While the Franklin/Covey system and Allen’s Getting Things Done curriculum may be critiqued as promoting consumerism and moral doctrine, their influence is too great to be ignored (May & Zorn, 2001; Medved, Golden & Jorgenson, 2005).

The Experience of Time

Busyness is an undercurrent in literature that concerns the experience of time. The experience of time evokes such subjects as time travel and quantum mechanics. Unlike literature that marks the progress of timekeeping over the past three millennia or instructs in proper time management practices, the experience of time research examines its relativity. Unlike literature that is
influenced by scientific management, authors do not recommend “best practices” or acquired “habits” to strengthen one’s experience with time. Instead, the experience of time is presented as an intellectual journey. Typically, the experience of time is conveyed by natural science writers, journalists and novelists (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991; Gleick, 1999; Griffiths, 2004; Grudin, 1982; Honoré, 2005; Lightman, 1993; Negroponte, 1995; Seligman, 2002; Thompson, 1967).

A more practical strain emerges from research that interprets busyness through societal implications such as the colonization of time and decreasing social capital (Melbin, 1987; Putnam, 2000). One example of research in this category studies how people’s experience of time affects their ability or readiness to take leave (Rockwell, 2002). While advice is rare or ancillary to the explanation of phenomena, valuations of busyness emerge by inference.

*Time Use*

How people actually spend their time is a field of research that characterizes the nature of busyness through an accounting of how people spend their time. Societal trends are identified through statistical research that tracks the number of hours people spend engaged in such activities as television, personal and family care, fitness and voluntarism. The findings are further categorized by gender and age (Robinson & Godbey, 1997). The Centre for Time Use Research conducts studies that ask research participants to keep time diaries to track such phenomena as time use and social justice, chronological
age and the timing of daily activities (Gershuny, 2007).

Time as Organizational Resource

The exploration of temporality in organization communication research focuses on time as a category, commodity, resource or force that, through analysis, can be better understood as a key factor in the work place (Ancona, 2001; Ballard & Seibold, 2000a, 2006b; Waller, 2001). In one study, Ballard and Seibold (2000) track how such time dimensions as separation, concurrency and flexibility in a particular group of employees affect their communication patterns and task orientation at work. In a subsequent study, Ballard and Seibold (2006) correlate an experience of time that is “delayed” or “more flexible” to people who are more oriented toward the future and tend to report “higher levels of communication load” (p. 322).

Critical communication scholarship sheds light on busyness through study of issues such as workplace tension (Trethewey & Ashcraft, 2004), emotion labor (Tracy, 2005), identity (Parker, 2002), and discourses of professionalism (Trethewey, 1999). Further, Dennis Mumby’s (1993) call for more participatory research in critical communication scholarship can be interpreted as a mandate for more studies about everyday challenges such as busyness.

Other critical communication research articulates key identities, shaped by busyness, in the work place. Collinson (2003) articulates a subjectivity at work that grows out of insecurities and is manifest through three particular identities: the conformist, dramaturgical and resistant selves. These three selves influence
how people see themselves as both subjects and objects in their workplace and how they reconfigure time and space in accord with their particular subjective selves (p.539).

**Enabling Technology**

The relationship between technology and busyness is cast with both praise and aspersion in public discourse, popular publications, and academic research. Technology is either whore to busyness or its eager accomplice. A subset of this research focuses on the interface between individuals and personal technologies such as the cellular telephone and Personal Digital Assistants (PDA) such as the Blackberry (Glotz, 2005). Findings describe the changes necessary in the workplace to deal with a busyness that often does not have a required geographic location. According to James Katz (2002), “corporate managers must deal with new forms of supervision, while employees must deal with new forms of monitoring” (p.323).

**Chronobiology**

Chronobiological research associates certain bodily functions and energy level with particular times of day (Smolensky, 2001). The morning is best for elimination. Physical performance is at its height in the late afternoon. Bodies wake up after 4 A.M. People are divided into larks and owls dependent upon when they are at their best. All of these claims can be interventional strategies to peak the efficiency of the busy person.

Chronobiological research extends beyond the individual realm to public
life, liberty and its assumptions about efficiency. In many cities in the United States, school officials have initiated a later start to the school day to help adolescents get more sleep (Kalish, 2008). Research about third shift work and circadian rhythms both reveal the perils of staying awake all night and how people learn to adapt (Tabarra, 2007). Critics of daylight saving time cite the challenges to the human body when we spring backwards and forwards (Downing, 2005). In this literature, the limits (e.g., body clock) of the human body are contrasted with the often limitless expectations of a busy society.

Work/Life Balance

The literature of work/life balance is prevalent in popular and academic scholarship (Hochschild, 2001a, 2003b; Medved, 2004a, 2006b; Wilson, 2005; Wood, 1994). It assumes that balance can be, if not achieved, an ideal to be approximated. Work/life balance research is conducted primarily by women scholars, particularly those women who face in their own lives some of the challenges that they study. While popular literature tends toward the quick fix and lists of top ten interventions, academic literature—as represented in communication scholarship—leans more toward identification of problems and articulations of useful workplace or public policy interventions.

All eight areas of research that either directly or tangentially interpret busyness provide useful insight and perspectives. Whether they articulate interventions, characteristics of time, societal analysis, or all of the above, the literature and research enriches understanding of how human beings experience
Whereas much of the research that pertains to busyness articulates the subjective experience of busyness, less attention has been paid to how people talk about their busyness. Typically, researchers accept the self-reports of busyness at face value. Yet the specifics of how people talk about their busyness has not been a focus of researchers’ attention.

With few exceptions, research that includes interpretations of busyness documents time use, interprets problems or offers solutions. Research emphasizes an analysis of workplace insecurity, societal trends or articulates the challenges for individuals. Busyness is justified as a necessary state to fuel capitalism or a scourge to good health or creativity. The data revealed by the present study is different. Busyness alone is not—or, at least, is not only-- a scourge. In fact, busy talk can be both instructive and illuminating.

Research Question

The overarching research question of this study was: How do people experience busyness? Research participants were asked how they would describe a typical workday, how they might change a particular aspect of their work lives and how they described the busyness around them. During interviews and follow-up phone calls, research participants were asked to describe some of the highlights and stressful moments while at work. Talking about busyness abstractly was avoided by asking questions that elicited details and anecdotes. For this reason, conducting the interviews during or right after the site visits was
critical. The experience of the site visit, instead of a phone call or survey, made
the interview most productive.

Research Participants and Sites

This study included four participants:

Jim Allerdice, Air Traffic Controller and Staff Specialist
Meria Carstarphen, School Superintendent
Rosanne Haggerty, Social Entrepreneur, MacArthur “Genius”
Debra Westenskow, Bus Driver

Research participants came from diverse backgrounds and work sites
(See Appendix A for fuller descriptions of participants). They were selected for
being identified as and describing themselves as busy people and for having a
job description that was commonly known as a busy profession. All participants
committed to making time in their busy lives to participate. In addition to their
own busyness, all research participants had work that required their
communication with and observation of other busy people.

All research participants were known for their humanity and achievement
in the work place. They all appeared to work tirelessly to fashion interventional
strategies in their everyday work lives. For all of the participants, this ability was
both a blessing and a curse. The bottom line was their gifts of perception made
them busier.
Method

_**Pilot Study**_

A one-month study that applied the principles of grounded theory was conducted in March 2008 to explore the experience of busyness in the workplace. The interview protocol was developed inductively to produce research data and results that captured the meanings of busyness in the lives of the research participants and not the a priori judgments of the researcher. This commitment required a careful reading and analysis of all interviews, site visit notes, email correspondence and conversations.

For the present study, I conducted four site visits in Atlanta, GA, Saint Paul, MN, New York, NY, and Durham, NC. As I conducted research on busyness, I immersed myself in the experience of busyness. I flew on ten planes, took a rush hour “Chinatown” bus from Philadelphia to New York, rode on Amtrak and took the subway. I listened to cell phone conversations in public spaces and I talked with business people and fellow travelers about their lives. I wanted to feel the pressures of busyness in my own body as I observed the experience of busyness in the research participants.

_**Procedures**_

Before I initiated field work, I prepared a standard template of expectations for contact with the research participants. This template included one site visit or extended telephone conversations with each participant. As plans for field work progressed, shadowing each research participant became a non-negotiable
aspect of this study. Four site visits were conducted, each one with different timing, content, and context. Each research participant determined the best timing for his or her site visit. (See Appendix D for detailed descriptions of site visits.)

I was clear with each participant that I would be a “fly on the wall” during his or her work day. Participants were under no obligation to entertain me or engage in conversation. They would notify their colleagues of my presence, and I agreed to step out of any private conversations.

The actual process of data collection was unique to each participant. Originally, I promised to conduct three ten-minute follow-up conversations by telephone with each research participant. I promised to talk with each participant on Fridays. This standardized procedure required modification almost immediately. There was no one specific day that was best for communication for all four of my participants. Each research participant seemed to favor different communication modes during and after the site visit. To get the best results, the research participants and I developed individualized communication plans (see Appendix B).

I conducted an audio interview with each participant before, during or after the site visit. Time for the interview was negotiated beforehand so as not to obstruct any work commitments. All audio taped interviews, except for one, took place away from work. Notes were taken throughout each site visit and telephone conversations and email exchange was saved.
Analysis Process

The data for this study included notes from telephone conversations and site visits and email correspondence. Interviews with the four research participants were audio taped; durations of interviews ranged from twenty minutes to one hour and ten minutes. These audio interviews were transcribed, resulting in over thirty pages of transcription. All of the research data were entered into Atlas ti. Once the data were entered into Atlas ti, passages were highlighted that addressed each research participant’s experience of busyness. Each passage was assigned a code through Atlas ti. This step allowed a more systematic interpretive analysis of the research data. Coding included the use of adjectives and expressions to describe busyness, words that implied an acceptance of or a resistance to dominant busyness discourses, experiences and phrases that indicated the impact of daily busyness. The goal of this analysis was to stay as close to the participants’ experience of busyness as possible.

Results

The data led me to deduce three facets of busy talk: frames, tweaks, and heroics.

The Frames of Busyness

Research participants conveyed an ongoing and dynamic experience with the boundaries of their work lives. They did so by putting a figurative frame around the responsibilities of their work lives. Drawing from participants’ talk, I define a frame as an imaginary border constructed around the work
commitments of each research participant. The frame defines the boundaries or the limits of responsibilities. It seems reasonable to think there might be a relationship between the actual circumference or dimensions of a frame (and what it includes) and the ability to navigate one’s own busyness.

As a staff specialist and the president of the local controllers’ union at Atlanta Hartsfield International Airport, Jim Allerdice’s frame was somewhat different from his days as a full-time controller. As an administrator, his responsibilities included the ongoing renovation of the Class B Air Space (the forty miles of sky around the Atlanta airport). As chief cartographer of the Atlanta skies, Allerdice knew that careful attention to framing—the renovation of air traffic patterns—would improve his colleagues’ experience of busyness and air safety.

The Class B airspace, the frame through which the controllers worked each day, was much like an inverted wedding cake defined by both miles on the ground and altitude above. Interpreting both horizontal and vertical all at once was not for the faint-hearted. For Allerdice, this frame was what he experienced every day. His busyness was three-dimensional.

Debra Westenskow, who drove a Duke Transit bus between Chapel Hill, NC to Durham, NC, was clear about the frame of her busyness. Westenskow said, “I am focused on the two side mirrors, the width of my bus and the inside of the bus. The mirrors protect us. You have always got to be in your mirrors.” “Being in your mirrors” was recognition that the competent bus driver looked backwards as she propelled forward.
Like Allerdice, Westenskow’s busyness was framed by an immediate responsibility for the lives of other people. She said “I have got the lives of loved ones in my hands and I think of my own children. I would never ever risk hurting anyone on my bus. Whoever is on the bus is a part of my family.” The combination of existing between and in her mirrors and taking care of others was what put Westenskow squarely into her frame of busyness.

As superintendent of schools in St. Paul, Minnesota, Meria Carstarphen’s frame reflected a school district of 41,000 students and 6,700 employees. Because Carstarphen’s frame (and all it contained) was not immediately visible like a radar scope and a windshield, she compensated by surrounding herself with reminders of what framed her busyness. On Carstarphen’s office walls were a map of the school district, Hmong posters (St. Paul has a large Hmong community) and pictures of her out in the community. Carstarphen was “in her mirrors” when she glanced up at any one of her walls.

As a trained photographer, Carstarphen knew how to capture action in a frame. In 2000, several of her photographs were published in National Geographic. One photograph, in particular, not only captured the essence of her hometown of Selma, Alabama but it influenced her frame in Saint Paul. This photograph of cheerleaders crossing the historic Edmund Pettus Bridge in the late twentieth century was an image she held close and was the inspiration for her current busyness in St. Paul (see Appendix C). In her life’s work, you put the
frame around young people with great potential who are often ignored by the
system and you don’t let your eye wander.

With six renovated buildings and ten under construction, Common
Ground, was making progress on its mission to end homelessness. Rosanne
Haggerty, Common Ground’s president, framed her busyness around a goal of
shelter for all and a passion to end outreach practices that sanctioned the
handing out of “leftover sandwiches and blankets” to people on the street. The
frame of her busyness was literally the frame of a roof over the head of all human
beings all over the world.

Unlike any of the other research participants, Haggerty had a frame to her
work that was neither static nor singular. In addition to Common Ground’s work
in Manhattan and its boroughs, Haggerty and her staff established an institute to
partner with efforts all over the world to end homelessness. When asked for
specific geographic locations of her many endeavors, she replied “The work site
is now increasingly my head.”

Schedules were sub-frames, a way for research participants to distinguish
between being on and off-duty to their work responsibilities. For Allerdice, this
framing came by describing the air traffic controllers’ two-week schedule and its
effects.

Airplanes fly 24 hours a day and 365 days a year. You work a week of
days. 8 A.M.-4 P.M. Then, 7 A.M.-3 P.M., 6 A.M.-2 P.M. with the last day
on a mid-shift from 11 P.M.-7A.M.. Then, you take a couple of days off.
Then, you have evening shifts, 4 P.M.-11 P.M., 11 A.M. -7 P.M. It is
constantly rotating shifts. The day after a mid-shift I am worthless. I feel
like crap. Shoot. Some folks after a mid-shift are out on the golf course at 8. I come home and go to bed.

Allerdice, the other administrators, and the training staff talked about how happy they were to get their weekends and holidays back after moving away from full-time air traffic control. With a 9 A.M. to 5 P.M. schedule, they were more in control of their daily framing of busyness. But they missed the action. They missed talking in the pilots’ ears.

Recently, Westenskow was offered a job as a bus dispatcher. The job offered a secure sub-frame, a 9 A.M. to 5 P.M. job with better pay. On paper, it sounded perfect but she missed the students and the other bus drivers. Two months into her new job, she quit and went back to driving a bus from 4 P.M. until 12 Midnight and took a day job at Home Depot. She didn’t have time now for much other than what encompassed her sub-frame and she said she wouldn’t have it any other way.

Carstarphen and Haggerty did not have fixed sub-frames. They did not have to juggle mid-shifts or two jobs. So, they created their own sub-frames that, at moments, included the middle of the night. Carstarphen said “when I am sleeping, I will wake up and get a sticky note and write stuff.” Haggerty reported working into the wee hours and rising with the first daylight. Self-imposed or mandated from above, schedules and routines provided sub-frames inside the frames of busyness.

For all research participants, it was critical not only to know the parameters of their busyness but to know when they had stepped outside of the
frame. Allerdice said, “A lot of the stress you carry around with you. You have been barking orders all day to pilots and you come home and you try to do that to your wife and it is does not work real well.” When Allerdice barked orders to his wife, he knew he had at least one foot outside his frame.

Because Westenskow drove an express bus, she was constantly reckoning with the question of whether or not to step outside of her sub-frame to stop and pick up someone who might have been in harm’s way.

I was watching this man in a wheelchair going up Franklin Street, going up that hill. When I saw him last, he was near the top of the hill. The guy lost control over his wheelchair and rolled back into a ditch. A woman was pointing down there with a flashlight. There were police and an ambulance. I had watched him 2 or 3 loops and then all of sudden I did not see him. They are all my children, even if they are adults.

The story provided a window into Westenskow’s busyness. Her sense of responsibility extended not only to everyone who was on the bus; it encompassed every being in view. Few people would have even taken note of the guy in the wheelchair. Westenskow knew she made a commitment to getting the bus from one campus to the other in one half hour. If she had stopped, she would not have been able to meet the demands of her schedule. As she saw the guy in the ditch, she felt pain in her decision to adhere to her sub-frame.

*The Tweaks of Busyness*

As an air traffic controller at the busiest airport in the world, Allerdice’s frame was the radar scope. Whatever was going on inside the radar scope defined his days. The quarter inch blips that signified airplanes, the runways, the fix points and the sixteen paths out of and four into Atlanta Hartsfield were daily
realities and peppered his dialogue with pilots. The communication between controller and pilot included a flurry of incremental units per second. Knots, altitude, degrees and miles were all deciphered in rapid fire succession. All of the symbols and terms defined what was inside Allerdice’s frame.

Inside the frame of busyness, research participants made hundreds of small tweaks to their activities and relationships. Based on the data in this study, I define a tweak as a small adjustment, a fine tuning process, or the act of making a slight change. When problems arose inside the frame of work, research participants described making tweaks. These tweaks allowed research participants to enact repair within their frames and to attend to unanticipated urgencies. With due diligence, these tweaks allowed research participants to stay in the middle of their frame instead of slowly drifting away from their daily responsibilities.

When commentary between pilots and controllers was synchronized, managing tweaks was a tango. When they weren’t synchronized, Allerdice described immediate and real danger.

There are only two kinds of controllers, those who have or those who will—face emergency situations. If we told a pilot to climb to 10,000 feet and they climbed to 11,000 feet… we have to separate them from other aircraft or other airspace.

Apparently, these circumstances—in which tweaks did not occur—happened more frequently than any frequent flyer would like to imagine.
Carstarphen’s daily tweaks were aimed at educating the historically ignored. These students were the truants, students of color, students with special needs, and white children in poverty. While Minnesota was one of the top three states in the country for education, it was third from the bottom in graduating African-Americans. When Carstarphen talked about people in the district who had low expectations for students of color, they enacted the “soft bigotry of low expectations.”

This “soft bigotry” was evident in one neighborhood’s reaction to Carstarphen’s proposal to “repurpose” the Homecroft Elementary School.

Carstarphen provided a mocking but truthful response to her critics:

I know y’all don’t like to hear about special ed. kids. No one gives a flip when special ed. kids go into poor communities. They will never step foot in your front yard. We’ll bus them in and bus them out.

Carstarphen’s deputy later transformed the above into more delicate language.

Carstarphen and her staff realized that soft bigotry would not go away with an eloquent response. It would require tweak after tweak in the future to change impassioned, but in her mind, errant perspectives.

The only way for Carstarphen and the school district to bring about lasting change for those identified as at-risk was through daily tweaking. Carstarphen’s tweaks came in the form of speeches that articulated soft bigotry, telephone conversations and the creation of new initiatives that responded to the latest data. She traveled with a pink highlighter and a ballpoint pen to tweak every letter or memo in sight. The only way to fight this soft bigotry, she believed, was
to encourage —teachers, staff, students and parents—to make tweaks to their actions and perspectives.

For Westenskow, tweaks and mindful observation were what made her a safe driver. She said “I see things way before they happen. I see blinking lights and I slow way down.” Unlike other bus drivers who pumped the brakes down hills and in traffic, Westenskow hardly ever applied hers. How she drove and anticipated change before it happened exemplified her approach to busyness.

It was Westenskow’s mom who insisted that her children be aware of their surroundings. This directive shaped Westenskow’s busyness. Instead of just watching out for traffic and flashing lights, she tracked her surroundings constantly. As we passed by the President of Duke University’s home, Westenskow said “I can tell you what time most people go to bed on most of my routes. I know what time President Broadhead goes to bed — about 10:15—except for basketball games.”

Behind the wheel, Westenskow never stopped tweaking to avoid other drivers’ bad habits, pedestrians, bicyclists, and the perils of road construction. It rained steadily the night I rode with Westenskow. That day, she witnessed twelve accidents before I got on the bus. One driver passed her bus and realized he would not make it through the red light. He applied his brakes and his car did a donut in the middle of the intersection and ran off the road. Westenskow said, “Someone was watching over him.” That someone was Westenskow.
Westenskow’s accounts of her work as a bus driver demonstrated how she made her own life busier through keen observation and compassion. Once a passenger threw up on her bus. Instead of being mad, Westenskow said she was glad he threw up on the bus and not in his sleep. On weekends, she always made sure that drunk people were not planning to drive once they got off her bus. Westenskow said to them, “You’re not going to drive.” Westenskow summarized her ability to tweak in the midst of busyness as just being “nosey.” Being mindful of traffic signals emanated from the same impulse as observing when President Broadhead went to bed.

*The Heroics of Busyness*

Based on the data in this study, I define heroics as dramatic language that describes one’s work and its importance. Busy talk of heroics was evidenced in actual events during the site visit, recall of past heroic actions and phrases that were peppered into conversations. Heroic language helps the research participants feel a sense of belonging and pride in their profession. It is also an opportunity for commiseration.

During my site visit to Atlanta, a controller was visibly shaken as he talked with Allerdice about a pilot who had not followed controller instructions and began to descend too quickly. Allerdice turned his chair to face the controller and began to minister, acting as if there was no one else in the room except his colleague in need. In this moment, I witnessed Allerdice as counselor to his colleague, tempered only by the desire to bring about safety in the skies.
Carstarphen determined that she would be most effective as a high profile administrator. On the day of the site visit, she went to Como High School to teach a photography class. During the class, she shared her list of heroes from the civil rights movement to inspire the students. She described them as people who protested and walked many miles in their suits, white socks, garters and high heels. The students weren’t all that inspired. They were inspired, however, by the story of how Carstarphen, while strapped to the hood of a convertible car, photographed the cheerleaders crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge. For the students, Carstarphen was larger than life in that moment (see Appendix C).

Allerdice described being an air traffic controller in heroic terms. It is “a blast. It is like being a PhD. It is the top, the pinnacle. Some folks are satisfied at the level of traffic they are at. I wanted to see if I could do it. I always thought I could succeed.” Every controller and administrative staff member I met shared their stories of ascent to Hartsfield International, the world’s busiest airport. The strategy was always the same. Excel at a mid-sized airport like Raleigh, New Orleans or Lansing. With hard work, all roads led to Atlanta.

Only the best controllers survived was a recurrent theme with regard to the heroics of busyness. Bob Richards (2006) described similar claims of controllers at Chicago O’Hare by saying “…if you ever came to work to give less than 110 %, you would probably drown in the flood of O’Hare Airplanes” (p. 123).

Allerdice described the heroics of busyness in another way.
It (air traffic control) is not just something that anyone can do. You hear fire fighters say the same thing. To know that what you do is important, that you are affecting millions of lives every year (everyone in our facility). It is an awesome responsibility.

If it wasn’t the fire fighters, it was commentary about doctors and how they cared for thousands fewer people than the controllers.

In a similar vein, Westenskow said, “I’m not busy when I am asleep. I don’t even sit down to eat. I don’t know when there is a down time. I prefer to stay busy.” Westenskow’s heroic language defined her as a woman who knew her limits but constantly chose to exceed them.

Haggerty’s phone calls had a touch of the heroic. A phrase or a couple of words added dramatic texture to a mostly straightforward conversational style. When a colleague called to provide notice, she said “I’m not going to have a meltdown that you are leaving.” A few minutes later, Haggerty followed up with a call to the departing colleague’s supervisor and said: “You must be apoplectic.” In response to a phone call with a funder, she described her own life by saying “It’s the first day of calm in two weeks. I’m grateful I’m not running for a plane. Your life must be crazy too.”

Summary

In this study about the experience of busyness, frames, tweaks and heroics were three key facets to the busy talk heard in the language of the research participants. Frames defined the parameters within which research participants’ envisioned their daily responsibilities. Tweaks were the small adjustments research participants made to stay inside their frames and to keep
everything else in the frame working well. Heroics fortified the research participants as they pursued their life’s work. Recognizing frames, tweaks, and heroics allows us to see the experience of busyness not through static lists of accomplishments but through constant negotiations between selves and others.

The three facets of busy talk were dynamic and interdependent. While the frame was the most fixed of the three facets, one tweak was enough to alter the frame’s borders. Haggerty worked inside a frame provided by Common Ground’s six buildings, but what happened when new properties were acquired? Being effective at work meant revisiting and revamping the frames often.

Heroics were tweaks writ large. Heroic statements and stories reminded the research participants that their actions mattered and their visions were important. But too many heroics kept the research participants from their everyday responsibilities. When Allerdice counseled fellow controllers in crisis, he did so heroically and it took time away from his administrative tweaks. Frames were only so big. A balance had to be struck between everyday tweaks and heroic acts.

How the research participants talked about busyness was revealing. How they framed, tweaked and described the heroics of their busyness revealed the great diversity in their everyday experiences of busyness. Prior research that focused primarily on efficiency as the experience of busyness often offered universalized conclusions or blanket formulas (Covey, 1989; Morganstern, 2004; Rechtschaffen, 1996). Even research on the experience of time, which is broad
in scope and inquiry, still presented universal descriptions of temporal circumstances (Griffiths, 1999; Grudin, 1982; Honoré, 2004; Klein, 2006). While the quest for efficiency is a dominant narrative across existing research about busyness, it is by no means the only possible interpretation. The person engaged in heroic busy talk might not be optimally efficient, but the inspiration he or she gains from such talk possibly leads to even greater accomplishment as well as job satisfaction.

Directions for Future Research

Inspiration for future research, is, in part, derived from the limitations of this particular study. A primary limitation was being unsure that I was observing busyness without staging. I have no real idea if what I witnessed was representative of a typical day or if the activity level was somehow edited or enhanced to impress me. Further, interactions between and among colleagues and the public were most likely influenced by the fact that the research participants were being observed by a researcher (Wickstrom & Bendix, 2000).
The following amendments are possible ways to address the above concern and to further useful research:

Refiguring Field Work Protocol

There are several possible additions to the fieldwork protocol that would strengthen the outcome of the research. First, colleagues could be formally interviewed to gain insight into their perspectives on individual research participants. Second, instead of one site visit, two or three would provide richer data and allow the researcher to further blend in with the research site. Third, research participants could gather to compare and contrast their busyness.

Intensive Focus on One Research Site

I have been invited to pursue future research with Allerdice and the air traffic controllers in Atlanta. I am interested in pursuing a more in-depth look at this work environment and extend the research to others in the airline industry.

Impact of Busyness

I am interested in how people’s work busyness impacts their personal lives. This topic was mostly tangential to this research study. I am also interested in further exploring how people with big dreams or work boundaries translate their work into smaller assignments.
APPENDIX A

The Research Participants

Jim Allerdice, Staff Specialist and Air Traffic Controller

Jim, 48, attended Purdue University for a year, entered the United States Air Force and became an air traffic controller. Since 1991, he has been an air traffic controller at Hartsfield International Airport in Atlanta, Georgia. In 2005, he became a staff specialist and has had supervisory responsibilities for over 80 air traffic controllers. He is married with two grown children.

Meria Carstarphen, Superintendent, St. Paul Public Schools

Meria, 38, is a 1992 graduate of Tulane University with a master’s degree from Auburn University and an Ed.D from Harvard University. She has worked in superintendents’ offices in Ohio, Tennessee and Washington, DC. She has been superintendent in Saint Paul, Minnesota since 2006. She is married.

Rosanne Haggerty, Founder, Common Ground

Rosanne, 47, graduated from Amherst College in 1983. Currently, she is pursuing her doctorate at New York University in sociology. She founded Common Ground in 1990. She was the recipient of the MacArthur “Genius” award in 2001. She is married with two grown sons.

Debra Westenskow, Bus Driver, Duke University Transit

Debra, 55, graduated with a double associates degree from Phillips Junior College and has been with Duke University Transit in Durham, NC since 2003.
She has been a bartender, a substitute teacher and a certified flagger for construction. She has two grown children.
# APPENDIX B

## Methods Table (March 3-April 2, 2008)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Site Visit</th>
<th>Basic Needs</th>
<th>Contextual communication</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jim Allerdice Atlanta</td>
<td>7 A.M.-1:30 P.M. Radar scope control room Meeting room</td>
<td>No food. No breaks. Water bottles available at meeting.</td>
<td>Interview at Allerdice’s home. 3 in-depth phone calls after site visit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large TRACON</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meria Carstarphen</td>
<td>8 A.M.-5 P.M. SPPS District Offices Como High School</td>
<td>Lunch alone in SPPS cafeteria. Carstarphen ate strawberries during afternoon meeting.</td>
<td>Interview in Carstarphen’s office. Several email exchanges with Meria and staff. One in-depth phone call.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saint Paul Public Schools</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosanne Haggerty Common</td>
<td>10:30 A.M.-8 P.M. Prince George Hotel (Common Ground Hqtrs) Yale School of Architecture</td>
<td>Lunch catered for noon meeting with new staff. Dinner together at Asian noodles restaurant.</td>
<td>Interview, end of site visit in Haggerty’s car. Several email exchanges. One phone call. Two written logs of how time was spent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ground</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debra Westenskow Duke</td>
<td>8 P.M.-12 midnight Robertson Bus en route between UNC and Duke.</td>
<td>Snacks on bus.</td>
<td>Interview after shift. Several conversations by email, in person and phone.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transit</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
On March 21, 1965, more than 3,000 civil rights advocates set out on a 54-mile march from Selma, Alabama, to Montgomery, the state capital, to demand voting rights for black citizens. Today that long walk toward equality is commemorated as the United States’ newest national historic trail.

The photograph was taken by Carstarphen for National Geographic.
APPENDIX D

The Site Visits

In this appendix, I provide descriptions of my site visits to establish the context for interpretation of data.

Jim Allerdice
Staff Specialist and Air Traffic Controller
Atlanta Hartsfield International Airport
Atlanta, GA

“I just move the blips around so they don’t hit each other and then I go home.”
Russell Bell (Billy Bob Thornton) in Pushing Tin

I spent weeks fantasizing about my ascent into the Hartsfield International Airport Tower. Instead, I found myself in a tank-like brick fortress called the Large TRACON, a radar facility, tucked back from an industrial road in Peachtree City, GA. Jim Allerdice, an Air Traffic Controller (ATC) and Staff Specialist, did not toil
in a tower but worked alongside 80 other people in a building with a dual redundant power system, a battery bank, and a chiller room about twenty-minutes from the airport. Only Armageddon would get in the way of their busyness.

_Pushing Tin,_ a movie about the New York TRACON, gave me a leg up on the culture I would enter that day. The jousting, the tough love, the intensity, and the dueling wits of the Air Traffic Controllers appeared to be alive and well in Atlanta. Albert Ensell, a fit fifty-one year old staff specialist, who looked like a cross between Steve Martin and Phil Hartman, met me at the door with a strong handshake saying “Hi, I am Jim Allerdice.” I knew a good comeback was in order but it was only 7:02 A.M.m.

While the administrative facilities were unremarkable, the operations room was nothing short of eye popping. Imagine being sucked into a _Star Wars_ film or a _Star Trek_ segment. Surrounded by darkness but brightened by the designs of more than thirty radar scopes, controllers ringed the room, each in a conversation with a different pilot, as they monitored traffic at Hartsfield. Barely thirty seconds in, Allerdice plugged in a phone at an empty station and let me listen to some real-time communication.

The operations room was an oval 10,000 square foot facility with 25 radar scopes along the walls for arrival and departure and another five or so for overall monitoring. The controllers at the TRACON were in the “ears” of the pilots. They were responsible for all departing aircraft up to ten thousand feet and all arriving
aircraft from 10,000 feet until they landed on the airport runway. At the center of
the operations room were terminals for the lead controllers and the engineers
who maintained the equipment. There was a plate of ham biscuits near a screen
saver of Mayberry RFD. Besides Aunt Bea, I only saw one other woman in the
operations room.

Compassion was not expressed in the operations room in a way that most
would understand. When a senior controller, wearing a bright red button down
shirt and tie, entered the room, everyone clapped. Allerdice told me this controller
had been out of work for six months due to a heart condition. The cheering
yielded promptly to jabs about the controller’s absence.

Allerdice was in charge of the naming and route development which he
developed on a piece of software called Targets. There were sixteen departure
routes into Atlanta and four arrival routes. Each route followed “fixes” with names
like “snuffy, ramblin’, thrasher, braves and peanut”. One fix, “riggz,” was named
recently for a retired controller. In addition to the air traffic controllers on deck, I
met two retired controllers who had returned as training consultants. One of the
consultants told me how glad he was to “get weekends and holidays” but he
missed “talking with real airplanes.” These consultants were responsible for
educating a class of twenty-five controllers who would begin to replace the recent
and significant loss of controllers who were either fifty-six years old (the
mandatory retirement age) or had performed twenty-five years of service.
In a two-hour meeting with colleagues about Atlanta’s Class B airspace, controllers and administrators slogged through bureaucratic actions through humorous barbs. One colleague was addressed by his pet middle name “dumb ass” when he was asked to give an update about his current projects. Secretaries were described by the staff as people “who kept them on a leash.” Allerdice added an “e” to the end of everyone’s first name when he wanted to underscore a point like “Mikey,” At one point, he said “I disagree with you but that’s OK because I’m right and you are wrong.”
Rosanne Haggerty
President
Common Ground
New York, New York

“We are solving homelessness through innovative programs that transform people, buildings, and communities.”
Common Ground Mission Statement

The restored Prince George Hotel, in the lower east side of Manhattan, was one of the most recent facilities developed by Common Ground, the organization founded by Rosanne Haggerty who is one of this study’s research participants. The lobby had been restored to its majestic glory. The only glaring
difference now was the presence of security guards who greeted you as you entered the building.

The guard sent me up to the penthouse. Instead of a big bed, Jacuzzi and chilled wine waiting, this penthouse contained a labyrinth of staff cubicles and a big conference room. In the hallway was a beautiful collage of black and white photographs of some of the 416 tenants who lived on the floors below the Common Ground headquarters. At every turn were write-on wipe-off boards with lists of things to do, motivational posters and computer terminals.

I arrived at 10:30 A.M. Haggerty worked in a tucked away office behind her assistant. Haggerty offered me some tea and said “if you don’t feel I’m being rude, I’m just going to make my calls.” I sat next to Rosanne’s desk for the better part of the morning as she made a battery of phone calls.

Haggerty took me to a cubicle occupied by Becky Kanis, a West Point graduate and former Fort Bragg soldier, where I learned more about Becky’s work at Common Ground as the coordinator of national outreach initiatives. In addition to work in Manhattan and the boroughs, Common Ground traveled to several other cities to engage in actions to help homeless people gain permanent housing. Kanis and Haggerty discussed a recent coup in New Orleans where Common Ground staff worked with local activists to find housing for over 100 people who had lived under the Claiborne Bridge since Hurricane Katrina struck.

When Haggerty launched Common Ground nearly twenty years ago, her focus was on Times Square and the renovation of one hotel. Since then, she
has extended her boundaries of concern to all homeless people potentially all over the world. This means, it was her responsibility to care as much for the homeless people under the Claiborne Bridge in New Orleans as it was for the folks in Manhattan.

Haggerty’s sense of urgency was palpable because she deemed certain practices unacceptable. Recently, Common Ground was a catalyst for overhauling how outreach was done in Manhattan and the boroughs. As a result, the acceptable timeframe for intervention had shrunk:

Some of these poor souls have been living on the streets for forty years but since the new contracts, people say ‘What the hell is going on we’ve got these many people living on the streets.’

Expanding the boundaries of her concern, while tightening the timeframe of intervention was, in large part, what made Haggerty’s work life, at times, unwieldy. She referenced activists in London as initial inspiration in Common Ground’s approach. One week after our site visit, she traveled to Australia to work with an Australian Premier and other officials on their approach to homelessness.

At noon, we met in the conference room with a large table full of new Common Ground staff. She told the story of Common Ground, how it fights homelessness through the creation of innovative housing and support services. She described the initial restoration of the Time Square Hotel, with 735 units and how an eager staff person convinced Ben and Jerry’s to put a store in their
building. At that moment, a veteran staffer piped up “If you wanted to find
Haggerty, she was scooping ice cream.”

From their first moments on the job, the new employees heard Haggerty’s
vision.

New York was spending seven million toward homelessness but no one
was getting housed. Now, any time someone dies on the streets, we
reconstruct their lives. It is not ok to leave people on the street. Blankets
and a left over sandwich are not ok.

There were a lot of nods of approval. Haggerty finished her comments and gave
me the nod to leave.

Haggerty gave me a highlights tour of the building which included a gorgeous
ballroom and gallery that had been restored by a youth job training program.

Then, we were on our way to New Haven, CT for a 3 P.M. meeting with a Yale
School of Architecture class. The students in the class, in conjunction with
Common Ground, planned to design and build a house for a woman war veteran
and her family.

At 2:56 P.M., we circled New Haven and Haggerty was nervous. We were
going to be late and she could not get in touch with the Yale faculty member. We
walked into a packed basement classroom twenty minutes late. Two minutes
later, Haggerty was at the lectern giving another rendition of the Common
Ground story and reasons why this particular partnership mattered. New Haven
officials chimed in. Haggerty and I went out for noodles afterwards and she
dropped me off at the train station.
Haggerty confessed later in correspondence that, after we said good bye, she drove immediately to a mall in search of a Franklin Covey store. She discovered the store was no longer there. “No time planner located,” she said. “My schedule is still out of control.”

Meria Carstarphen
Superintendent
Saint Paul Public Schools
St. Paul, MN

“Welcome to a World of Opportunities”
Saint Paul Public Schools Theme Statement
At 8 A.M, Judy, Meria’s secretary, and Meria were swapping colorful folders back and forth. “How far did you get?” Judy asked. “I will get my work done,” Meria said. “Don’t you worry.” Decisions about future meetings, responses to letters and when Meria would pick up her dry cleaning were all dealt with in rapid-fire succession.

At 8:30 A.M., Carstarphen and I went down to the large public meeting room for the Joint Property Tax Advisory Council (JPTAC), a group of city, county and school officials who met monthly. She was proud to say she hadn’t missed a meeting and she made a point to say she suffered through them all. This particular meeting, she had her staff develop a spreadsheet of services that each entity provided for children in St. Paul. Her staff member recommended that the members meet in like groups and put sticky notes next to their priorities. Members of the JPTAC spent the rest of the meeting discussing why this recommendation was not appropriate. They agreed to return to the same question in May. Carstarphen and I got in the elevator and, with a tone of disgust, she told me they never got anything done. We returned to her office and a big piece of red velvet cake left as a present for Carstarphen.

When Carstarphen became superintendent, she made a commitment to spend time in the schools, not just for photo opportunities but to teach in the classrooms. That morning, she taught a photography class in a high school. “What does the superintendent do?” she asked the students. No one responded.

Carstarphen showed the class of high school students slides from a story about her hometown, Selma, Alabama. The slide show was a catalyst for a history lesson about the civil rights movement and current conditions. While the students’ eyes glazed over during her history lesson, they perked up as she described how she strapped herself to the hood of a car to take a particular photograph.

That afternoon, Carstarphen’s focus was on Homecroft, an elementary school that the district planned to “repurpose” into a building for an alternative learning center and special services. The phrase “crosswalk,” which conflated completion of an assignment with the striped path of pedestrian protection, was code for finishing briskly. In meetings, Carstarphen and her staff bonded over frequent references to “crosswalking” and work load.

Some of the neighbors were disgruntled by the proposed changes to Homecroft. Carstarphen sat with some of her chief staff to review some of the latest letters critiquing the plan. With a pink highlighter and a ballpoint pen, she made notations for individualized responses. At 5 pm, Carstarphen’s special assistant Jeremiah took me to the airport.
"The more I can get done in a day, the better I am. I handle life much better if I am busy. I work best under pressure."

Halfway through my visit with Debra Westenskow, a bus driver for Duke University Transit, I realized I was officially dizzy from a bus route that goes back and forth and forth and back on the half hour between the Duke University and the UNC-CH campus. Every hour, Westenskow made one loop that took her along the wooded roads surrounding Duke University, along a highway that connected Durham and Chapel Hill and up a hill to the UNC-CH campus. The hill was her favorite part, she said. Then, she reversed directions.
During her 4 P.M. to midnight shift, she departed promptly on the half hour from each campus. Each half hour included anywhere between one and 10 minutes of time at rest on a particular campus when Westenskow greeted people as they got on the bus, ate a few pretzels or got off the bus for a smoke and a stretch. While the routine was always the same, the content inside each loop was different. Finesse was her guide during periods of traffic when she had to switch lanes frequently and pick up the pace. Historically, her record between the two campuses was fifteen minutes. “I caught all of the green lights,” she said.

Last fall, Westenskow was promoted to become a bus dispatcher for Duke Transit. While she received a hefty pay increase and a 9-5 schedule, she missed her time out on the road and being among people. “My last years of working I do not want to do it sitting behind a desk. I want to do what I enjoy. The money is good but there is nothing like having a job that you want to go to,” she said.
References


*Communication Quarterly, 50*(3), 251-268.


