

## Evocative Narrative as Educational Research

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**Abstract: After thirty years of teaching others how to teach, I enter a doctoral program to explore the question of how lived experience informs professional practice. Moving into the centre of my own doubts, I discover multiple selves, suffer death and rebirth, and ruminate on the nature of transformational learning.**

*Wait a minute. This is a research conference. They're looking for empirical studies, theory development, and theorizing from the literature. I don't see your work fitting any of those categories.* It is an "open" text, not terribly common in the adult education academy. It explores the messiness of what it means to become a teacher. It situates the writer and researcher as text. It invites readers to gather around the collegial camp fire to become co-researchers and co-writers.

*Slow down. Your study doesn't fit the customary categories and yet, it embraces all three?* It hovers at "the new frontier of qualitative research methodology" (Eisner, 1997). It consists, essentially, of a single case. It draws attention to the particularity of one man's reflection on his lived experience as it informs his professional practice. As such, it sets out to discover-not to explain; to describe not to predict.

*And why is that important?* Because we have such little "soft" data about teachers' professional development. Adult educators everywhere go about their work every day, making the best of what they have in order to teach adults. Most toil in relative isolation, unable to share their stories and benefit from each other's wisdom. Many function without formal training or certification, relying on a hodge-podge of training programs. Even college and university instructors work under very similar conditions. Much of their teaching expertise arises from lived experience, their private storehouse of "identity and integrity" (Palmer, 1998). Such inside information is rarely examined, articulated, or celebrated. It carries little or no weight when it comes to evaluation, promotion, and professional development. This study aims to give voice to the intra-personal aspect of becoming a teacher.

*Do we need this?* Yes, and about time! Most of the research on teacher development has been done in the K-12 milieu (e.g., Cole & Knowles, 2000). While adjacent fields of anthropology and sociology have long honoured personal experience, adult education research has been slow to acknowledge its legitimacy and importance.

*But isn't "learning from experience" the mantra of adult education practice?* Absolutely. Seventy-five years ago Eduard Lindeman wrote that the "resource of highest value ... is the

learner's experience ... it is [their] living textbook" (1926, pp. 9-10). Generations of trainers and educators have since been instructed to "tap the experience of the learners and involve them in analyzing their experience" (Knowles, 1975, p. 56). In that tradition, I thought it high time to scrutinize my own living textbook in ways never done before.

*To what purpose?* Three aims drove my investigation. I wanted to enhance my own understanding as part of my personal/professional growth; assist others in understanding the intrapersonal aspects of professional development; and reach out to my readers, inviting them to read their own stories between the lines and begin to interrogate their own practice.

*How did you proceed?* I set out to excavate the stories that hold my teacher persona. Resisting the public-private dichotomy, I recalled incidents from my childhood, schooling, and apprenticeship; I recollected stories about my father, being an immigrant, novice college instructor, seasoned trainer, self-published author, and eventual doctoral student. Zooming backwards and forwards between the personal and the professional, I used short stories, reminiscences, narrative poetry, photographs, collages, fictional dialogues, journal entries—an array of fragmented and layered text that reflects the messy reality of lived life.

*Please give an example.* One of the narrative threads originates in my childhood in Germany—post-war chaos, food rations, working class, mother dead, father damaged, leaving school at Grade 8, apprenticeship, and so on. The events surrounding my apprenticeship, for instance, began half-way through grade eight. I was living with a foster family at the time. One day I received a letter announcing my father's choice of vocation for me. It was normal for him to decide without consulting me, quite customary for a working-class father and consistent with our family tradition. Except for my paternal grandfather, who had owned a millinery store, the men on my father's side—as far back as 1623—have all been labourers, artisans, and craftsmen. My paternal grandfather had been a furniture maker; dad himself had apprenticed first as butcher, then as blacksmith. Having joined the army during the Depression, he worked his way up to sergeant-major and riding instructor. I remember him as being adamant about us "common folk" having to strive and better ourselves—and to take pride in our hard-earned achievements. He used to stand over me, slapping the back of his right hand into the palm of the left, for emphasis. You need to collect documents to prove that you're worthy, he'd say. (And here I am, five decades later, earning a doctorate, another piece of parchment.)

I was soon bundled off to a residential pre-apprenticeship school: thirty-odd lads, ranging in age from thirteen to twenty-one, making me the youngest at thirteen. Housed six to a room, we were indoctrinated into the workings of dining room, kitchen, housekeeping, and reception. One incident stands out; an "epiphany" as Norman Denzin calls such "interactional moments and experiences which leave a mark on people's lives" (1989, p. 70).

One Saturday morning, with most boys away for the weekend, I was called down to help the head chef prepare a directors' dinner. I remember the thrill of being asked to work alongside a real chef, not as one of a horde of novices. He showed me ways of cutting vegetables and taught me my first words of kitchen French: julienne and brunoise for precise cuts of vegetables; mirepoix to add to a stock; Espagnole, one of the mother sauces. Later he set me up in a cold room to make

ice-cream in a hand-cranked tub immersed in salty brine. His instructions always matter of fact, without the customary mention of my ineptness. I felt valued: his junior but a future member of the guild.

This incident needs to be viewed in the context of the apprenticeship that followed: three years of physical and emotional abuse, 10-hour workdays, poor food, little attention to the developmental needs of a teenage boy:

good for nothing  
stupid, lazy, half asleep  
why do I even bother  
    shovel coal  
    skin dead rabbits  
    scrub the cellar floor  
        I give you everything  
        (kicks, shouts, lewd talk)  
        so that  
        one day  
            you'll make a man like me.

"There are no chance memories," claims Alfred Adler, "out of the incalculable number of impressions which meet an individual, he chooses to remember only those which he feels, however darkly, to have a bearing on his situation" (in Nachmias, 1998, p. 79).

*Why did this day make such a lasting impression? What did you learn?* I learned that treating learners with respect may cause them to rise beyond their limits. And that people learn better—even under hardship and discomfort—when they are treated *as if* they are capable of learning. Let me give another example that illustrates the link between lived experience and professional practice. It goes back to when I was in grade seven; just a tiny event, lasting no longer than a few minutes. It involves a home room teacher, fighting to keep our class for another year, declaring, in tears, that "you are special ... I don't want to give you up." Remembering this incident helps explain my nurturing teaching perspective (Pratt, 1998) and preoccupation with inclusion and community-building. By being aware of this "transference" (Britzman & Pitt, 1996), my teaching practice continually resolves—and dissolves—past experiences of abusive apprentice masters and authoritative teachers.

*How'd you characterize your narrative journey?* Doing data collection and analysis alongside interpretation exposed me to self-doubt, pain, and confusion—but also rewarded me with moments of clarity and understanding. Again and again, I encountered the slipperiness of language and the subjectivity of interpretation. Making myself vulnerable meant opening a Pandora's box, as Ruth Behar puts it (1996), never knowing what would come flying out.

*Was your work as unstructured as it seems—or did you have a theoretical framework?* I used Florence Krall's five-fold model of "hermeneutic motion" (1988), consisting of venturing, remembering, comprehending, embodying, and restoring. It gave me structure (amidst

confusion) and disturbance (amidst complacency). I *ventured* by entering a disciplined writing regime and discovered questions and issues. I began to *remember* by standing at the centre of my experience, opening myself to possibilities, focussing on essence rather than details.

*Comprehending* involved reading and re-reading the emerging text, locating themes and propositions. At this stage, I invited voices from the literature to support and challenge my work. During a time of *embodying*, I noticed how the text began to modify and transform my view of myself and the world around me. *Restoring*, finally, called me to polish the fragmented text and to seek a new centre.

*Again, how does personal narrative serve as research?* Socrates tells Meno that "if we have courage and faint not in the search ... it would seem [that] research and learning are wholly recollection" (Rosen, 2000, p. 417). Courage indeed! Both in the doing and the defending, a personal narrative is not for the squeamish. There are academics (and practitioners looking for direction) who dismiss this kind of research as sentimental, solipsistic, and self-serving. But the narrative researcher makes a unique contribution to research and practice. Acting as an agent of self-discovery and self-creation, his work adds depth and texture to our understanding of the existential struggle to live life as teacher and person. Instead of seeking truth (as the scientific researcher might claim), he aims for "truthlike observations" (Bruner in Eisner, 1997, p. 264). He starts with his lived experience, builds personal knowledge, and opens conversations among author, text, and reader.

*I noticed a shift to the third person.* You're right. I'm still self-conscious about making claims in my own name.

*To conclude, what practical applications arise?* Taking the view that adult education is about "promoting learning for personal change" (Tennant, 2000, p. 87), personal narrative serves to disrupt and transform one's personal and world view (as the above first-to-third-person slip demonstrates). In personal and professional development settings, autobiographical writing offers interesting possibilities for self-exploration and meaning-making (e.g., Butler & Bentley, 1992; Karpiak, 2000).

### **Five months later**

"Midway this way of life we're bound upon, I wake to find myself in a dark wood, where the right road was wholly lost or gone" writes Dante in the *Inferno* (Luke, 1975, p. 107). What began with such hope for clarity, understanding, and meaning has thrown me into a new state of chaos. Patched together, my stories were to form an elegant quilt; instead they fall into another messy pattern. New doubts arise. What do these stories add up to? Hasn't my text already been written, already lived? With Thomas Merton I have a sense of dying. "The man who began this journal is dead" he writes five years after completing his autobiography (1953, p. 328). Instead of finding one Self-a unified, coherent, single Me-I discover many Selves: an aging man, budding poet, disenchanted teacher, solitary wanderer, spiritual seeker, freshly baked Ed.D. ... "fragmented, disjointed, contradictory" as Gary Rasberry found himself at a similar juncture (1995, p. 597).

So why do all this work? If you want to know who you are (and who wouldn't?), you have to excavate, construct, re-construct, and tell the story(ies) of your life. And in the process-and here's

the upside-you enter into individuation, that "inner process through which an individual moves from naïve consciousness and ego to reflection and identity" (Abbs, 1988, p. 21). Any rebirth requires dying, which can be painful and disorienting even in its symbolic form. Fortunately, no rite treats "initiatory death" as final, but always as "a transition to another mode of being, a trial indispensable to regeneration; that is, to the beginning of a new life" (Eliade, 1967, p. 224).

The concept of emotional and spiritual learning has entered the literature as "transformative" and "autobiographical" learning (e.g., Bridges, 1980; Dirkx, 2000; Nelson, 1997; Palmer, 1998). It points to learning where "an old way of seeing and doing is changed to a new way of seeing and doing" along with "grieving for the loss of the old" (Scott, 1997, p. 41). Such grieving is not restricted to narrative researchers, however; it grabs learners anywhere. Learning a second language, for example, involves a "loss of self," writes Ellen Foster (1997, p. 34): it touches a learner's personal background, personality, and identity. As I marvel at this quiet suffering of loss and rebirth, I wonder: *How can I be of help?*

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