Self-Narrative and Pedagogy

Stories of Experience within Teaching and Learning

Mike Hayler and Jess Moriarty (Eds.)
Self-Narrative and Pedagogy
STUDIES IN PROFESSIONAL LIFE AND WORK
Volume 12

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Scope
The series will commission books in the broad area of professional life and work. This is a burgeoning area of study now in educational research with more and more books coming out on teachers’ lives and work, on nurses’ life and work, and on the whole interface between professional knowledge and professional lives.

The focus on life and work has been growing rapidly in the last two decades. There are a number of rationales for this. Firstly, there is a methodological impulse: many new studies are adopting a life history approach. The life history tradition aims to understand the interface between people’s life and work and to explore the historical context and the socio-political circumstances in which people’s professional life and work is located. The growth in life history studies demands a series of books which allow people to explore this methodological focus within the context of professional settings.

The second rationale for growth in this area is a huge range of restructuring initiatives taking place throughout the world. There is in fact a world movement to restructure education and health. In most forms this takes the introduction of more targets, tests and tables and increasing accountability and performativity regimes. These initiatives have been introduced at governmental level – in most cases without detailed consultation with the teaching and nursing workforces. As a result there is growing evidence of a clash between people’s professional life and work missions and the restructuring initiatives which aim to transform these missions. One way of exploring this increasingly acute clash of values is through studies of professional life and work. Hence the European Commission, for instance, have begun to commission quite large studies of professional life and work focussing on teachers and nurses. One of these projects – the Professional Knowledge Network project has studied teachers’ and nurses’ life and work in seven countries. There will be a range of books coming out from this project and it is intended to commission the main books on nurses and on teachers for this series.

The series will begin with a number of works which aim to define and delineate the field of professional life and work. One of the first books ‘Investigating the Teacher’s Life and Work’ by Ivor Goodson will attempt to bring together the methodological and substantive approaches in one book. This is something of a ‘how to do’ book in that it looks at how such studies can be undertaken as well as what kind of generic findings might be anticipated.

Future books in the series might expect to look at either the methodological approach of studying professional life and work or provide substantive findings from research projects which aim to investigate professional life and work particularly in education and health settings.
Self-Narrative and Pedagogy

Stories of Experience within Teaching and Learning

Edited by

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In memory of Kevin Fossey
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MIKE HAYLER

1. THIRTY TWO WAYS TO TELL A STORY OF TEACHING

Self-Narrative and Pedagogy

BREAKING THE UNION

I couldn’t get them out of my head for weeks, those words.

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold. (W. B. Yeats, The Second Coming)

I knew the words of old somehow and I had recently heard the actor, Liam Neeson reading them on the BBC television programme called ‘W. B. Yeats: A fanatic heart.’ The sound and the meaning of the words distracted me like a flickering shadow at the window as I tried to get on with writing this chapter. I needed to look past the words and shut out the feeling of dissonant unease, follow my plan and write about how my life experiences had made me the thoughtful and creative teacher I have become. But the page stayed blank. I didn’t feel very thoughtful or creative. I felt increasingly uncertain, uneasy and flat on my feet. Not for the first time, it felt as though things were falling apart. The news was full of war of one kind or another. Whole societies being torn apart. People on the move making perilous journeys over deserts and seas, too often ending in tragedy. The wars kept spilling out into what had seemed like safe places like Paris, Brussels and Istanbul. Feeling helpless to help, we all carried on with our lives. What else could we do?

The long lead up to the referendum on Britain’s membership of the European Union trundled on endlessly in the background of the spring and early summer, dominating the television and newspapers or popping up in conversations. People seemed to be saying things that had been unacceptable just a few weeks before. Shouting about immigrants and sovereignty. In June the Labour MP for Batley and Spen, Jo Cox was shot and stabbed to death outside her constituency surgery and then suddenly, well it felt like suddenly, we seemed to be on our way ‘Out of Europe.’ Union broken; things falling apart.

When we went on strike for two days I was shaken and confused when several friends who are union members crossed the line and went to work, seeming to say one thing and do another without any noticeable difficulty.

‘You are over-reacting’ said my wife and best friend, ‘Don’t take it so personally, people have to make up their own minds.’

It did feel personal; like I didn’t really know them at all anymore. As though I never really had known them. They seemed like strangers, getting on with their day, breaking the union for one reason or another. When some students arrived at...
the gate for their very last day at the university, I gave them a leaflet and told them I was sorry not to be joining them today; that it was a national ballot and that the issues we were fighting for really mattered for the future of higher education. They were friendly and supportive as they continued to their lecture; looking back full of goodwill and calling ‘Thanks for everything Mike.’ I am almost sure that they meant it. I waved and looked away. It felt like a strange place and a strange moment to say goodbye and good luck. Good luck.

My son rang: ‘We’re on a break.’
‘What sort of break?’
‘I’ve moved out.’

I managed not to say ‘what about the children?’ which was the first thing my Mum had said to me when my marriage came apart in 1993. But I kept thinking ‘what about the children?’ They had all seemed so happy from the outside. The chapter seemed far off, in the distance somewhere. It would have to wait until I had sorted things out – in my head at least.

Kevin died. He was my first head teacher when I started teaching. We had been friends ever since. Twenty years later we were teaching together at the university and I was still learning from him. He had always encouraged me and he had this uncanny knack of always bringing out the best in other people. We used to walk and talk together, sometimes with family and friends. At his funeral, I told them all that I had once read a story to my class of eight and nine year olds about a King who was kind and wise and strong and that one of the children had said that Kevin was the king of our school. I called him King Kevin for a while after that and he said ‘oh yeah, do you think I’d be doing this if I was royalty?’ And now I think and say out loud: ‘yes I do actually: you would have always been a teacher and you could never have stopped yourself from caring, and leading and helping people. Kind and wise and strong. We all walked with you in one way or another and you brought out the best in all of us:

I was more than somewhat lost
But I thought that I might stand up straight
And find my stride
That I might have a song to sing
When I went walking with a king.

I had scribbled the little rhyme into a notebook a couple years or so before when Kevin had told me that he was terminally ill. The centre cannot hold. I went up to the old school where I had worked with Kevin decades before, but neither of us was there. It felt like autumn on the field behind the playground and the children and staff looked puzzled through the fence. I had to get on.

Back at work, I tried to put all of this to one side. I needed to reach past these events and situations to make the links between the events of my life, my beliefs and my precious pedagogy. To ‘improve upon the blank page,’ as Nicandro Parra put it in 1968 (p. 113). I thought about that quote and found the poem that it came from:
THIRTY TWO WAYS TO TELL A STORY OF TEACHING

Young Poets
Write as you will
In whatever style you like.
Too much blood has run under the bridge
To go on believing that one road is right.
In poetry everything is permitted.
With only this condition of course;
You have to improve upon the blank page.

That reminded me of autoethnography:

... an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal and the cultural. (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739)

I tried to improve upon the blank page and reflect upon how things seemed to be shifting and changing in different ways at such a pace that summer. Things were being shaken and broken in my world, and in the world ‘out there’: locally, nationally and internationally. New uncertainties were pushing me towards new perspectives in making connections between the personal and the cultural and, of course, this is what I needed to write about. As the crime writer Jim Thompson put it: ‘There are thirty two ways to write a story, and I’ve used everyone but there is only one plot – things are not as they seem’ (Polito, 1997, p. xi).

THE STORIES WE TELL

I have come to see this sort of self-narrative writing as ‘research’ as well as a kind of problem solving ‘therapy’ of self-nurturing and care that is crucial to me as a teacher. This book shares stories of experience from teachers that demonstrate the self-nurturing character of reflective writing while telling the tale of education in our changing times. A reviewer had once taken exception to a story from childhood that I had included in an article about education, writing that he or she was tempted to say ‘get over it’ as they read my piece. I knew what they meant; self-narrative can read as self-pity or solipsistic self-indulgence, but they had missed the point. I was ‘over’ the particular incident in that sense and now attempting to ‘embrace vulnerability with purpose’ (Adams, Holman-Jones, & Ellis, 2015, p. 40), by drawing upon it for illumination and understanding of the wider issues that it was part of. One of the fundamental elements of autoethnographic research is the recognition of how self-narrative is constructed, changed and developed in relation to grand, group and individual narratives. Hayano (1979) used the term ‘autoethnography’ to refer to the work of ‘insider’ anthropologists, researching their ‘own people’ (p.101) arguing that in a post- colonial era ethnographers needed to study their own social worlds and sub-cultures. ‘Autoethnography’ has evolved, developed and widened to include an inspiring and sometimes bewildering variety of narrative approaches, methods and techniques. One of the central aspects of this work is that the narrative places the self within a social
context where the researcher performs the roles of both participant and researcher, stepping ‘in and out’ of the story as much as this can be reflexively achieved. In this respect autoethnography becomes, as Reed-Danahay puts it, ‘both method and text’ (1997, p. 6). Memory can provide the lens for an examination and reframing of understanding of the self and the cultural, past, present and imagined future. I have also learnt that memories are themselves contractions that can shift and change in relevance and meaning in what Goodson describes as ‘the genealogy of context’ (1992, p. 240).

In drawing these chapters together, Jess Moriarty and I argue that the stories demonstrate that reflection and reflexivity in relation to personal memory is a key element of being a teacher. Pedagogy is the synthesis of knowledge, belief and action (Rouse, 2008) where teachers’ knowledge of subject meets their theory of learning through discourse in practice (Alexander, 2008). Teachers need to examine and reflect upon what they ‘know,’ ‘believe’ and ‘do’ in considering the way they work. Memories of experience are a key resource in this process as we reflect upon them from new perspectives. But the meaning and relevance that we find in memory must be regarded as temporal and contingent not fixed and permanent as we consider them within different contexts. In my own experience for example; as I came to see myself as a teacher, I came to understand my experiences of education in a new way. I came to understand those experiences in another way again as I became a researcher of education and could see them in the context of the history and policy of education. Writing of one sort or another has been the central tool for me in the reflective analytic process throughout my career.

While I avoided or struggled with the chapter as the summer turned to autumn and then to winter, I was reminded that while fissures and ruptures in the fragile union between memory and identity can be disconcerting, autoethnography does have the potential to de-construct the researcher and the writer as subject in order to, as Jackson and Mazzei (2008) put it, ‘confront the limits of a reliance on experience and narrative voice’ (p. 300). As Jess Moriarty highlights in Chapter 3 (this volume), Richardson (1997, 2000) led the way in arguing for writing as a ‘creative analytic practice’ that invokes evocative analytic thinking entailed within the construction of text. With Denzin (2006) and with Ellis and Bochner (2000, 2006), Richardson demonstrates that the analytic process takes place primarily within the planning and construction of a narrative. Therefore the crafting of the story is a process of analysis and the story itself represents that analysis at a particular point in time. This kind of reflexive autobiographical narrative writing is especially suitable for those involved in teaching as it entails the key element of reflexivity that asks questions about how we learn and why we do things the way that we do. To understand and develop one’s own pedagogy involves exploring where it came from and how we have arrived at the point where we are.

Each of the authors in this book, who work in various phases of education, demonstrate the various ways in which reflection on and analysis of life experience informs and contributes to the ethos, method and content of their teaching. In telling their stories they also tell stories of the culture and process of education. The individual stories of experience need to be culturally located to avoid de-
contextualisation and individualisation in this analysis. The aim, as Goodson (2013) argues, is to ‘provide a story of individual action within a theory of context’ (p.31). This offers the opportunity to consider the narratives as examples of how individuals and groups respond in different ways to institutional and national policies on education. In these chapters, the authors offer illumination from a number of perspectives, of how practitioners of education make meaning of their lives and work in our changing times.

In Chapter 2, Sean McEvoy returns to his own family roots and his own time as a pupil at school to trace some of the influences that have shaped his passion and his pedagogy as a teacher of English literature in secondary and further education: what excited him as a learner in his early teens has never left him, while his understanding of how people learn and the role of teachers in the process has continued to develop. Remaining optimistic about education, Sean argues that future generations may well look back at our current educational policy and strategies of change with incredulity and contempt.

Susan Diab takes an experimental approach through Chapter 3 by exploring her pedagogy by revisiting a number of youthful ‘projects’ which she undertook as a child that were kept safe by her late mother. Wandering around the ‘museum of Susan’ yields some unexpected perspectives on her younger self that adds new understanding of herself as a teacher and lecturer.

Resistance to the de-humanising effect of neoliberalism in higher education sits at the heart of Alec Grant’s Chapter 4. Alec uses his autoethnographic experience and writing skills to vent his rage at the system but also to show how he has taught through collaborative writing and publishing with students, former students and colleagues. The piece examines the dilemmas and contradictions of teaching in the area of healthcare and the ‘ersatz form of academic work’ encouraged by the neoliberal agenda while at the same describing and demonstrating the teaching and learning within the ‘welcome oasis’ of co-inquiry and writing together.

Kathleen Pithouse-Morgan opens Chapter 5 by introducing her ‘writer-teacher self’ in the context of her own education of ‘privilege’ in apartheid-era South Africa. The chapter offers an evocative and analytic insider account of Kathleen’s qualitative, poetic narrative inquiry into her professional learning about teaching writing in a changing culture, and draws attention to poetic professional learning as a generative practice that others might use in unravelling narrative tensions in their own stories of experience.

Julie Everton uses her storytelling and playwriting skills in Chapter 6 to create a number of ‘acts’ from school to university with her own story at centre stage, almost ‘accidently’ becoming a university lecturer via a community creative writing group that she joined and then ended up running. Her faith in creativity as the key ingredient of education survives in the era of student fees and an increasingly competitive environment in higher education.

Holly Taylor shows in Chapter 7 how her development as an undergraduate student drew her towards primary teaching as a profession despite her earlier efforts to avoid following her father into the classroom. Studying education as a subject encouraged her to reframe her own experience and to be persuaded that she
could thrive and contribute to the learning of others in the early years of schooling. She draws upon the skills of reflection and narrative analysis in negotiating the uncertainties of her profession and her ‘new’ identity as a mother.

John Catron has come to understand himself a little more in writing Chapter 8. Still wondering ‘how the hell’ he became a teacher, John identifies the same inclusive values driving him now as an independent educational consultant that took him from supply teaching in Australia to directing education at a local authority in the north of England.

Relatively new to the profession, Kristian Galea offers multiple reflections, through a number of voices in order to reflect on the fractured and splintered perceptions of his own journey into teaching in Chapter 9. The creative montage of experiences will have immediate relevance for those who teach or wish to teach.

In chapter 10, Jess Moriarty shows how a range of inspiring teachers, including her mother helped her to move on from her conviction that she hated the idea of being a teacher. Her autoethnographic exposition draws upon poetry and storytelling to share stories of events and eras that have impacted on her teaching at university. Jess’s chapter demonstrates how autoethnography can provide the space, conditions and opportunity for autobiographical memory to act as a site of narrative construction.

WHERE DID WE GET TO?

It took me a long time to decide that I might be a teacher after all, and I am still not sure. I would have rejected the idea out of hand in my teens and twenties, along with anyone who knew me at that time. This had as much to do with self-confidence and low self-esteem as it did with my own ambivalence towards schools. I just didn’t see myself that way. But I became a primary school teacher in 1991 at the age of 31, taught children in a number of settings until 2004 and adults of all ages at university since then. I had a story that I wanted to tell. I told a version of it in my doctoral thesis and later in a book (Hayler, 2011). Reading it again, in preparing this chapter it seemed like a sort of hero narrative (Campbell, 1972). It is about someone overcoming a number of difficulties, struggling against the odds to become a teacher and make a contribution as a teacher-educator. I did not skate neatly over the difficulties, challenges and changes along the way but sought and found explanation to the mystery of me becoming a teacher through a story of my own struggle, resilience and eventual transformation: wild boy, troubled youth, expelled from school, factory worker, labourer, father, evening classes, degree, teacher, teacher-educator/researcher/writer. It worked for me, my doctoral examiners and at least some readers of the book who have been in touch over the years to say that aspects of my story resonate with them. But returning to the story with a view to bringing it up to date made me see it clearly as a moment in my own development. The events of the summer of 2016 had brought new emphasis, and new things to mind, changing the hue and character of aspects of the story in my reading of the narrative.
As his life turned upside down, I was reminded that my eldest son had taken me with him on his very first day at school in September, 1989 and showed me how things had changed since I was a boy. I did not have to leave him in the playground and he really was clearly going to be much happier at school than I had been. A door opened for me as well as for him that day. This memory took on new relevance for me as I looked on rather helplessly as his relationship with his partner disintegrated. I was also reminded in parting from Kevin in that summer of 2016 that meeting and working with him had made all the difference for me when I was new to teaching in 1991. He was a local working class boy made good who was very much his own man by then. As a student and then a teacher in his school I came to believe that I could be a good primary school teacher without pretending to be someone else. After his funeral a colleague had reminded me that she had been a student at the school after me, when Kevin had left, and that I and the team had offered her a similar welcome and the opportunity to grow and learn. I had learnt something from Kevin about giving people space and time to learn. Her words reminded me that we are inspired and also moved to evolve and change as teachers by sharing stories of success and challenge in our work, and that we are not alone when things go just as we hope in the classroom - or when they go completely wrong.

Through autoethnographic writing I came to recognise that I ‘became a good teacher’ in those years (Hayler, 2011 p. 107). At least that’s what all the appraisals and inspectors said. I certainly continued learning and became more confident as I developed my knowledge about how children learn. I still believe that evaluating, reflecting upon and developing one’s own approach are the key skills for a teacher, although I have never completely escaped a feeling that somebody could arrive in my class, ask me what I am doing there and tell me to leave. While the skills of critical reflection continue to help me to shape and change my practice they have also fed my insecurity about the whole process of teaching and learning and my place within it. This is largely about me and my own experiences of school: as well as being excluded from secondary school I also failed in a number of ways as a learner. There are large gaps in my knowledge and skills. Also, while teaching within a few miles of where I was born and grew up sometimes gives me a sense of progress and triumph over the past, it also serves as an occasional reminder of that feeling of failure and some of the pain of my childhood and youth as it did when I taught in school. In the early days this fed into my mixed feelings about schools and the education system. Hargreaves argues that the growth of a competitive knowledge economy across the world diverted schools and teachers from ‘ambitious missions of compassion and community’ towards the ‘tunnel vision of test scores, achievement targets and league tables of accountability’ (2003 p. xvii). The preparations for the school inspections that I have been involved with dominated school activities for months and drove management and some staff to, and sometimes beyond, the point of breakdown.

As this collection demonstrates, teachers of all kinds have individually and collectively found ways of negotiating their way through what sometimes seems like a blizzard of change. In their study of becoming a teacher, Bullough and
Knowles contend that: ‘Individuals are never passive receptors of social norms or presented content; they always remake them in some fashion’ (1991, p. 138).

Lacey’s (1977) concept of a ‘sociology of the possible’ as a lens through which the collective and individual ‘strategic compliance’ of teachers can be understood implies a ‘purposive, guiding, autonomous, element within individual and group behaviour’ (p. 67), where policy meets pedagogy within the classroom:

The individual actor, who is at the intersection of ‘biography’ and the ‘social situation,’ has some freedom to manipulate and change the situation while at the same time being constrained to adjust to it. (Lacey, 1977 p. 95)

I have felt the constraint grow and the freedom shrink during my career as a classroom teacher and as a teacher educator. Generally I have and do, enjoy the work. I have felt that it mattered, and it still matters, sometimes too much. In school I tried to be fair and kind and gentle. I tried to encourage independence in the children but increasingly there was something about the system that both controlled me and put me in a position of control over the children. It was more than making decisions and organising the teaching. Sometimes it felt as though the teachers were planning and trying to control what the children thought as well as what they did. I felt a tension and a contradiction that I still feel between the possibilities of facilitating learning in open ways and the teacher’s or tutor’s role and responsibilities of controlling learning in narrow ways with defined outcomes. I think that in struggling with, rather than ignoring this contradictory tension, those who teach are forced to be creative in their pedagogy.

In the 1990s I turned to my own education as a teacher for some answers, initially through an MA, studying language and literacy, child development and gender in a social context. This added to my questions. I could see the ways in which pressure and stress as well as values are passed down the line from politicians to children and the part that teachers and lecturers play in that process. I was able to research, examine and write about this but I never managed to change it within my own situation as a primary school teacher. I affected a rather individual approach to strategic compliance, arguing against regimentation and formulaic curriculum content and teaching strategies while in practice I pretty much followed the manual and measured myself as a teacher in a similar way to everyone else.

In the year 2000 I moved on to working as a teacher and advisor with children who were at the margins of the mainstream system. This gave me further opportunity to reflect upon what happens to some children and their families in schools. Teachers often saw me as the person who would ‘deal’ with the children with emotional and behavioural difficulties. They listened to advice and adapted their work and classrooms to support children but once a child had been referred to our service or become part of our school it was clear that there had been a shift in responsibility and there was often no way back into the mainstream. So I found myself at the edge of the system again. Working with children who did not fit in, trying to find ways forward through the maze of the education system not only for children and their parents, but also for me as a teacher. It was rewarding, if often
stressful work. I taught a small group of excluded children in the pupil referral unit in the morning and then went out to different schools in town to support children who were at risk of exclusion. As few of the young people that we supported were able to access and enjoy mainstream school in the ‘normal’ way and there was a certain amount of expectation and dependency from both children and the teachers we worked with, I began to wonder again if, with the best will in the world, I was really part of the problem. It was an uncomfortable thought at the time, but it drove me towards further reflection and eventual change. Telling our tales and hearing about others’ experiences can offer the opportunity that teachers need to be reflective learners and to value such moments of reflection and change.

The political and educational landscape has shifted considerably in recent years and there is no doubt that state education and the profession of teaching is under a kind of siege with a shortfall in recruitment and large numbers of teachers planning to leave the profession (NUT, 2016; Lightfoot, 2016). Yet many people still become teachers because they want to contribute to making the world a better place (Priyadharshini & Robinson-Pant, 2003; Kelchtermans, 2005; Troman & Raggl, 2008; Marsh, 2015). Many of the teachers and students of teaching that I work with now continue to resist the standardised curriculum scripts and reach beyond the technical tasks of teaching in forming and building communities of learning. The danger is that the regressive discourse of accountability changes the way that we all think about our lives and work and that teachers come to internalise and accept the situation ‘as it is.’ This is not a new concern in education. Lacey characterised this sort of ‘internalised adjustment’ as a social strategy in which the teacher believes or comes to believe that ‘the constraints are for the best’: he or she is ‘really good,’ whereas ‘strategic compliance’ involves a strategy in which he or she is ‘merely seen to be good’ (Lacey, 1977, p. 72). Related and more recent constructs of subjectivity may also be sites of resistance, or ‘refusal.’ Ball (2015) considers three modalities of truth: the truths ‘told about us,’ ‘the truths we tell about ourselves’ and ‘the truths we tell to others’ (p. 2). If as Foucault (1981) argued, the construction of the ‘subject’ is a central aspect of governance and control, it is also where we may begin to think about ourselves differently in refusing the ‘script’ of neoliberal education:

The starting point for a politics of refusal is the site of subjectivity. It is a struggle over and against what it is we have become, what it is we do not want to be. (p. 15)

I took on some part-time initial teacher-education work at the university in 2004. It felt strange and exciting to be back in the same rooms that I had worked in as an undergraduate and where I did my own teacher training. I felt very positive and authentic and knew what I wanted to do for a job at last. When I started a full-time job in the school of education at the university it felt like coming home. And so it was. But coming home is often a mixed experience. Like many teacher educators, such as Jan, who I interviewed in 2007, I found that the problems and pressures that I had felt in schools were pursuing me into university:
Lots of the changes that happened in schools in the 80s and 90s seemed to filter through into teacher education ... I found myself teaching the teachers to teach the literacy hour which I ran away from. (‘Jan’ in Hayler, 2011, p. 72)

Academic freedom seems far away for someone who is teaching a method and a philosophy that they profoundly disagree with. In the past there had been more flexibility. As Sean McEvoy demonstrates in his story (Chapter 2, this volume), there have always been things that teachers and teacher educators thought they did too much or too little of. Things they thought were questionable or had doubts about. The difference with the legislation of the last thirty years is that it has legally required teachers and lecturers to follow methods that they often disagree with. This is the case in university schools of education where teacher educators are required to train students for a system and method they often profess to oppose and which goes against their readings of educational research. Research and writing about education has given me a personal and professional understanding and allowed me to work within and develop my professional knowledge and practice in teacher education. Using methods of self-study and sharing experiences with others has been a way of examining my self within a subculture and aspects of that subculture and the wider culture within my self. The perspective provided by the process offers me a way forward in my work that connects past experience and present mind with future plans and action. As a writer I remain in the middle of the story. The story continues to change and to develop as I and the profession of teacher education continue to change and develop.

TEACHING ROUND THE CORNERS

While I have come to understand and agree with Schon’s (1971) point that all real change and learning involves feelings of ‘being at sea, of being lost, of confronting more information than you can handle’ (p. 12), and the day job still undoes me from time to time, I have found some sea legs while sailing on the ocean of education. It was my experience of trying to negotiate the tension between narrative autoethnography and the requirements of a doctoral thesis success that helped me to develop my work as a teacher in a different way. The tension is a typical example of the issues that arise between traditional frameworks of assessment and approaches which foreground narrative inquiry, analysis and modes of assessment (Hayler, 2011). I learnt a lot from this process and given that the undergraduate students I work with face a similar challenge in balancing comparable requirements, I used this framework in designing the ‘Reframing Identity’ module as part of an undergraduate Education course in 2012. The aim of the module is to support and encourage students to explore their understanding of education and to develop critical engagement with their past experience, current knowledge, and ideas for the future. I encourage the students to draw upon their studies, placement experiences and reading from earlier in the course. The module hinges around the written assignment in which students critically reflect upon their own learning experiences in order to analyse and evaluate the educational
principles and values that underpin their understanding of education. In the first sessions we focus on the nature of memory, and writing as a method of inquiry (Richardson, 2000). Discussion centres upon ‘creative analytic practice’ and the crafting of story as a process of analysis. The students further reflect upon their own view of education and how this has been informed by their own experience through a writing task following each session, beginning to serially assemble a draft of the assignment.

Later in the module we consider the way memory is used in autobiography by looking at life-history and narrative approaches. Students consider the process of constructing their own stories of education. As part of the process I share some of my own experiences of education. Working in small groups the students prepare and share poster presentations on their understanding of the terms ‘identity,’ ‘culture’ or ‘narrative.’ Each week we return to the serial assignment and discuss how they are approaching their writing, what they are learning as they write, and what they will do next. Towards the end of the sessions we begin to work in smaller groups and consider ways of making sense of stories of experience. I introduce them to the progressive/regressive approach (Sartre, 1963; Denzin, 2001) as a way of considering their data. The concept of the individual, defined as a praxis that both produces and is produced by social structures (Sartre, 1982) forms the basis of the progressive/regressive method as it combines psychological and sociological explanations of human action. Here narrative is located in a particular historical situation. Sartre (1963) structured an analysis that first looks forward from a particular point towards a conclusion of sorts as well as back to the historical, cultural and biographical conditions that moved the narrator. This situates the memory and interpretation of actions in time and space, illuminating the uniqueness of the individual while revealing commonalities of the sub-culture. In practice the students consider and develop their own texts assembled over six weeks and follow this process based on the progressive/regressive approach. While this simplifies and reduces the progressive/regressive model to a somewhat mechanistic level, the results have been sometimes astounding with students writing autoethnographic assignments that bring new understanding of their own experience to bear on new understanding about the development and nature of education in England. Encouraged by an environment that places reflexivity at the centre of a critical narrative pedagogy, from the middle of their stories, the students come to know and narrate something about themselves, and by narrating the subjective experience, they come to share something about the way that education works. I always learn from them. Through the process of teaching and in reading their stories of education I am brought back to my own learning and development as a teacher and as a writer; the union abides. In the genealogy of context the other unions now seem bruised and tested, transformed and changed, rather than broken as I saw them in the summer of 2016. We learn to live in new ways.

As you will see in reading their accounts, the authors of this volume have responded with skill and insight to the space and the framework provided in contributing a collection of engaging and insightful narratives. As the editors of this collection, Jess Moriarty and I have identified very strongly with the
experiences and insights shared by the authors as we worked with them in the development of this book. We invite you to follow their personal and professional journeys of becoming and being teachers, and perhaps to reflect upon your own journey of education and how you might tell that story.

NOTE

1 BBC Four, 3rd April 2016.

REFERENCES

THIRTY TWO WAYS TO TELL A STORY OF TEACHING


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2. NO CRAFT MORE PRIVILEGED

My education began, of course, at home with my parents. My mother, June Huyton, who left school at 14, never expressed any regrets about stopping lessons so young. But my father, Michael McEvoy, felt differently. Born in Cork in 1926, Dad was one of the generations of Irish people who suffered from the cultural-nationalist policies of the De Valera governments. Despite the fact that the overwhelming majority of the population spoke no Irish at all (let alone as a first language), and despite a shortage of qualified teachers, from 1924 children in the Free State (and later the Republic) had to learn most of their lessons in Irish (see Foster, 1989, p. 518; Garvin, 2004, pp. 47–49). My father, who lived in a single room in an inner-city tenement with his parents and four siblings was always an English speaker and came to feel cheated out of a proper schooling. Yet he worked hard at his Irish, and in 1939 he passed with distinction a Post Office scholarship examination by writing an essay in Irish on the seasons. The prize was the offer of a further two years of education paid for by the state, and subsequently a white-collar job working in communications when he left school. But there was no question of my dad taking up the offer: he had to go out to work. The whole family scraped an existence on a British Army pension. My grandfather Sidney had been buried alive at Ypres in 1917 after a German shell burst in front of his trench. When he was dug out by his comrades he was completely deaf, and from the age of 19 he never worked again.

My dad came over to England in the bitterly cold winter of 1947–8, abandoning his horse-drawn milk wagon for the factories of Birmingham, and eventually settling in Feltham, West London, having married my mother in 1955. Mum was from Hounslow. Dad was determined that his children would not miss out on their education. I could read when I started school because my brother Steve, who is two years my senior, would come home with his books from St Lawrence’s Roman Catholic Primary School (where I would soon follow) and teach me what he had done in school that day. Dad also bought a subscription to a magazine called Knowledge (‘The colour magazine which grows into an encyclopaedia. Every Monday, 2/-’). Published by Purnell from 1961, it sold 400,000 copies. Each edition contained a dozen articles covering science, history, geography, literature and art. I still have a copy of one edition. The target audience looks to be upper secondary, but in an age when the majority of people left school at 15 and the idea of the working-class autodidact was not completely dead the readership must have included many adults. It was the colour illustrations that absorbed me long before I could read the articles. I still have vivid recollections of some of them: of Aeneas about to kill Turnus at the end of Book 12 of Virgil’s Aeneid, for example, a...
passage I was to teach many times forty years later. Flicking through the magazines in their binders again and again did show me how exciting learning about the world would be, and gave me a familiarity with the names of scientists, painters and political figures which has never left me.

My Mum used to take us to Feltham Children’s Library every week after primary school. It was located in a bright, airy modernist building, and the ascent to the books was up a concrete staircase without risers, giving an exciting glimpse to the floor below the higher you climbed. When I was at junior school I read everything I could find there about ancient Egypt, and even tried to teach myself how to read hieroglyphics. I had no interest in fiction, and apart from the Jennings books about prep-school life I read no novels beyond what I had to at school until an interest in the Napoleonic Wars prompted me to read C S Forester’s Hornblower adventures when I was fifteen. I must have read a good deal of history, and sometimes in older editions. I had a big book of Greek and Roman myths from the school library when I was nine or ten which must have been written in that cod-Elizabethan style fashionable with Edwardian writers because I remember being puzzled by an account of Theseus in the labyrinth ‘hiding his sword in his bosom.’

There weren’t many books at home that we owned. Mum would borrow romances from the library, and Dad would occasionally get out books on horse racing, local history or on Elizabeth Taylor. But I did find an old, unread copy of Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* which Mum had been given at school before the war. I enjoyed reading it when I was ten or eleven, so I think I must have been a reasonably accomplished reader at that point, though I did not realise it.

My primary school was very much a matter of sitting in rows and doing as we were told. In the very first year, because I could already read, I was allowed to sit with books on my own, which I enjoyed, although it tended to make me a little isolated from the others. I was never picked on or treated unkindly, even so. I recall little about my days at St Lawrence’s beyond playing Prince Charming in Cinderella aged about six (but I think my interest in the theatre sprang more from attending Mass, which I can just about remember being said in Latin). I was also an altar boy, and even did readings at Mass occasionally. We were streamed in the top two years to prepare us for the Eleven Plus examinations for Grammar School. My main memory of that class is that we had ‘English composition’ on a Monday afternoon. No title or stimulus was set. We had to sit in silence for an hour and a half until the muse sat on our shoulder and we started to write. My friend John Webb, whose dad ran the local cobbler’s, would sometimes write nothing at all and leave school in tears.

A CLASSICAL GRAMMAR SCHOOL EDUCATION

Four boys in my year passed the Eleven Plus in 1970 and went on to Gunnersbury Catholic Grammar School for Boys, which was then located in Ealing, nine miles away by train and tube. I was very much looking forward to what I felt would be more demanding and interesting work. And it was. There was a good deal of rote learning, especially in English, French and Latin, but there was also much to
stimulate. This was the early 1970s, and our Liverpudlian History teacher, Joe Quirke, taught us the rudiments of Marx’s theory of history in the second and third years. Since the school was about 40% Irish and about 40% Polish heritage he also taught us Irish and Polish history (when what was left of the Polish air force escaped in 1939 it had been based at nearby Northolt, and there was a substantial Polish Catholic community near the school). In English we did a Shakespeare play every year and in the third year (age thirteen to fourteen) we read Keats and Conrad (which I found hard, not having much experience of fiction). We were writing proper, 800-word essays from the age of twelve. But to start with at least Gunnersbury was quite a brutal environment. Given that the school recruited each year what were supposed to the 72 brightest Catholic boys in the state sector in an arc from Kilburn round to Richmond, there was really no need to treat us as if we were dangerous semi-ferals who had to be shouted at and threatened with violence to make us want to learn. And of course some of the boys took their cue from the teachers and were bullies. I was picked on in the first year by two rather unpleasant characters, but the school did deal with it very well when Dad complained. No doubt they were threatened with ‘the whack,’ and the bullying stopped. A scandal of the Grammar School system was the number of children that its culture turned off learning completely. Half a dozen of my year didn’t make it to O Level, and left as soon as their sixteenth birthday arrived in the fifth year. The school went comprehensive at the end of my second year, doubled in size and moved to a new site in Brentford. New staff came in and the atmosphere changed greatly for the better.

I can’t remember why I was so keen to be involved with school plays, but when I was first allowed to help with props in the 1972 production of Rolfe’s Hadrian VII (a very Catholic choice) it was in retrospect an important moment. The following year we were taken to see a production of Romeo and Juliet at the Shaw Theatre on the Euston Road which moved and entranced me. I’d first come across Shakespeare in 1970 when Mum was clearing out her parents’ house after my grandfather’s death. She had a thing for Laurence Olivier when younger, and having seen his 1947 film of Hamlet bought a 78 rpm record of the soliloquies. She put it on her old gramophone and explained to me why Hamlet was ‘so upset’ in his speech beginning ‘O that this too, too solid flesh …’ Not long after the Romeo and Juliet I picked up a copy of Macbeth Steve had brought home (he had passed the Eleven Plus but had decided to go to new comprehensive school at the end of our road instead). I surprised myself at reading it so swiftly on my own. But I wanted to be in a play myself. I got my chance when the new Head of English, John Crook, put on his second Shakespeare production, Henry IV Part One, in 1975. I was the Earl of Westmoreland that year, when I also took my O Levels. The following year I played Bonario in Ben Jonson’s Volpone, then Cinna the poet in Julius Caesar in the upper sixth. These were in many ways the most valuable experiences of my secondary education. Apart from the obvious gains anyone gets from being in a play – learning how to work in a team, discipline and self-confidence – there was also the striving to produce a genuine theatrical experience, to produce some art. I think, for school plays, these were good productions. John
Crook was, and still remains, a very talented amateur director. For me, to be immersed in the language and dramatic structure of these plays gave me an understanding of theatre and of early modern drama that no classroom experience could ever provide. I was amazed by how perfectly *Volpone* worked as a theatrical machine, and by just how funny it was. It has never left me, either. I have taught the play many times; I directed a college production of it in 1989; I wrote a substantial part of my 2003 doctorate on it and also a major chapter in a book on Jonson which came out in 2008 (McEnvoy, 2008). In the latter two projects I finally tried to work out why *Volpone* has those qualities which inspired me so much in 1976.

John Crook taught me English in the fifth year and in the sixth form, and for me he was that English teacher who makes a difference to someone’s life so familiar in narratives like this one. The qualities which made him a great teacher have little to do with innovative classroom methods, careful lesson planning or careful tracking of student progress. He was just expert at conveying his own belief that the ways in which Shakespeare, Donne, Austen, Jonson, Blake, Chaucer and D. H. Lawrence used language to shape and depict the world was something exciting, insightful and beautiful (he didn’t convince me in the case of D. H. Lawrence). He also convinced us of the importance of writing with clarity, energy and a lack of pretension (which took a little doing in my case). There were some dull, repetitive lessons in other subjects and some lively and quirky teaching too, but English was the most inspiring and eye-opening to the world around me. Yet when the time came to choose a university course I chose Classics. I was the last person in my school to take A Level Latin, taught in a manner unchanged since the 1930s by Kenneth Jenner, who was in his final year before retirement. We covered the set texts (Virgil, Catullus, Ovid, Livy) in about half the time each week and the rest was devoted to elementary Greek and to his recollections of being in an armoured division in the Italian campaign of 1943-5. I was encouraged to attend ancient Greek summer schools where I read Homer and met private schoolgirls. I had found Latin to be my worst subject lower down the school and I had to work hardest at it; but by the upper sixth I could read Virgil and Catullus as poetry. I thought at university I could write about Latin poetry just as I had been doing about English. I was wrong about that, but I did somehow work out correctly that I hadn’t read enough to be ready for English at Oxford, where John Crook encouraged me to apply. So I sat the fourth-term Classics entrance paper for Christ’s College Cambridge in November 1976. I had some patronizing and demoralizing ‘extra-tuition’ from the Headmaster, Monsignor Chapman, a man who looked back with fondness on his time at the English College in Rome when Mussolini ruled Italy. He didn’t take to my long hair or to my view of the world. When I was offered an ‘Exhibition’ place just before Christmas the Monsignor deigned to sidle up to me, grabbed me by the arm and announced that ‘I see the devil looks after his own.’
CLASS AND CAMBRIDGE

In my first term at Cambridge I did not do enough work, such were the temptations of so much else to do: plays, debating at the union society, student journalism, third-eleven college football, the college bars and pubs in the evening. By Christmas I was ill with some infection which required very strong antibiotics to take down a dangerous temperature. After Christmas I learnt to marshal my time and energy with more success, and began to please my supervisors more often. The way a Cambridge college works still strikes me as a highly effective system of education. The fellows are autonomous teachers whose authority is based on subject expertise and who share in the governance of the whole institution with a minimum of hierarchy. The supervision system, where the student has to defend an essay with a teacher for an hour, sometimes alone, depends on the teacher asking the right questions to elicit and to develop the student’s understanding. Individual thought is welcomed and precision of expression, in discussion but also on paper, is at a premium. The supervision doesn’t start with a predetermined ‘learning outcome,’ but is an exploration of ideas, and when needed, a correction of shoddy thinking or shallow reading. The best teachers I had at Cambridge: David Sedley, Michael Crawford, Edward Craig, Jimmy Altham, and my eventual Director of Studies at New Hall, Jenny Teichman, were models of what this kind of teaching can achieve. I recognise now the influence of these years on what I still think teaching should be.

At the end of the first year I realised that Classics had not been the best choice for me after all. The pressure was on to bring my Greek up to scratch. One Sunday afternoon I had to learn the chief parts of a long list of irregular verbs and I realised that this was not how I wanted to be spending my time. The study of classical literature had turned out to be philological and historical analysis, not literary exploration. It was also the summer of 1978, perhaps the high-point of social agitation before Thatcher, and I wanted to study something more socially engaged and of the moment. I had enjoyed Plato most of all the work I had done in Classics, and so I changed to Philosophy. I did consider English, but it was still clear that I had not read enough. I was on a full grant, and the London Borough of Hounslow was happy to pay for an extra year, so I started the first year of the Philosophy Tripos that autumn. I was particularly interested in ethics and political philosophy, and I had to work hard at logic and metaphysics; well, quite hard. I deliberately used to do nine to five, Monday to Friday, with Wednesday afternoons off for football. Now I look back on it, the adoption of a worker’s schedule was symptomatic. Most of my university friends came from working-class backgrounds, and the city’s pubs and betting shops were an untypically Cambridge part of my time there. In the last two years I lived in a college flat near the station. I was still involved in college politics (I was JCR – college student union – Secretary for a year), but also went to Cambridge City Labour Party ward meetings and went to watch Cambridge United play on many Saturdays. Working-class boys (and there were still nine male undergraduates to every female undergraduate at this time) were a small, if distinct minority at Cambridge but many of us were
confident in that identity at that moment in history. The 1970s were perhaps the high point of British working-class cultural identity in the twentieth century as living standards rose and record numbers went into higher education (Todd, 2014, p. 278). Not everyone coped; at least two of my friends were clearly alienated and disturbed by the cultural clash they experienced. I used to wear my college scarf tied up in the contemporary style of a football fan in the throat of my black leather bomber jacket, not wound around my neck Brideshead-style. One Saturday night in Trinity Street a group of northern away fans who had been at United that afternoon pointed at me, and one called out ‘traitor.’ I was never made to feel unwelcome by any of my teachers, even if the condescension of certain students offended. In May 1978 I could not understand how Michael Crawford could schedule an ancient history supervision which clashed with the beginning of Liverpool playing in the European Cup Final. He was amused and tolerant, and let me leave in time for kick-off, my only punishment being denied the traditional glass of sherry with which all supervisions after lunch began in those days.

LEARNING A CRAFT

In my final year I knew I wanted to carry on with something involving study. It was becoming clear to me that I wasn’t going to get a first. I had a place at King’s College London to do an MPhil on the philosophy of war, but the funding required that first. I had a funded place at York for an MA in ‘Toleration Studies,’ despite articulating intolerant ideas about liberalism at the interview. And I also had a place on the English PGCE (Postgraduate Certificate in Education) at King’s College London: what I had been excited by at Gunnersbury had never left me. Being an English teacher seemed a worthy vocation socially and politically, but it also had the thrill of a life in literature. My reading and theatre-going had never stopped and I felt comfortable now to be coming back to books. I got a good 2.1, turned York down, and found a flat with my girlfriend Germaine in South London in the summer of 1981, from where we could see the smoke rising from the 10th July Brixton riot, and where I listened to the Botham Ashes series on the radio.

Much of the King’s PGCE consisted in genuine academic studies in education not related to learning how to teach. I wrote essays on the philosophy of education, on the disturbances in French universities during les événements of 1968 and on the history of English in schools. We had four days out in London schools on teaching practice, and on Fridays when we were in college in the afternoon, often having lunched well, we had our ‘English Methods’ seminar. This was where we discussed what English teaching consisted of. Most of the work we were doing was in mixed-ability classrooms in London comprehensives, and there was an emphasis on well-resourced group work which would ensure proper differentiation, develop social interaction and enhance oral skills. Such an approach requires a great deal of planning and requires a teacher who can keep lots of plates spinning in the air at the same time. During the 1970s there had been, relatively speaking, the funding to make this kind of teaching work: class sizes, teacher workload and the presence of in-class support could be favourable. I am not sure I ever really managed to
achieve this as a secondary English teacher, either because of the huge amount of preparation required or because I grew impatient with the slowness of progress in this kind of learning, partly due to its dependence on successful group dynamics and unsupervised student engagement. But this was my fault, not the fault of the method. At the time we felt that it was the discussion we had straight afterwards on Fridays in the White Lion in Covent Garden, where we shared tales of our adventures in inner London classrooms that provided more insight into what it was like to be starting out as a teacher. In terms of running a classroom and developing the right sort of relationships with pupils, Michael Marland’s (1975) book *The Craft of the Classroom* just explained simply and invaluably how to do it; it’s another influence that has stayed with me.

My first teaching practice was at a mixed grammar school in a south-eastern suburb. For my first lesson on my own – I think on one of Orwell’s essays, which I still teach – I wrote out some detailed notes of some kind on the blackboard well before the pupils arrived, only to discover that I was in the wrong classroom. When I arrived in the right place, rather than spend the first part of the lesson writing on the blackboard with my back to the pupils I apologetically improvised some kind of discussion. Not an auspicious start, but the pupils at this school were generally not disposed to regard student teachers as prey to be devoured. I was encouraged to do interminable spelling tests with the younger pupils which I soon realised made very little difference to their ability to spell the same words in their written work. I got a great deal of support from two English teachers not generally in tune with the school’s ethos, who offered all sorts of practical advice. I remembered them being particularly disgusted that a pupil of Asian heritage had objected to being called a ‘Paki’ by another student, and had been told by the Head that this was just the kind of thing she would have to get used to. At any rate I asked King’s if I could go to a proper comprehensive for my second teaching practice, which was more the kind of school I wanted to work in. In January 1982 I started at John Roan School, on top of the hill in Greenwich. During the run-up to the Falklands War that spring we could see helicopters lifting huge nets of artillery ammunition from the Woolwich Royal Arsenal and setting off downriver to load them onto ships at Tilbury.

At that time John Roan was a three-site comprehensive. I taught some A Level English – or rather lectured and anecdotalised ineffectually on *The Waste Land* – some O Level Literature, some lower school Classical Civilisation on Aeneas’s adventures, and some low-ability groups, also in the lower school. The school was much more mixed in terms of class and ethnicity than my previous teaching practice, and I worked with both disturbed and disruptive pupils and some highly motivated middle-class children with plenty of cultural capital. What would surprise anyone who has trained to be a teacher in the last twenty years is how much autonomy I was granted and how little oversight I was under. It meant that a young teacher had to shoulder a great deal of responsibility, but also acquired the confidence to learn through trial and error (and constructive advice) the practices, routines and attitudes required to teach well, without constant, critical observation and without having to deliver material handed down from high, either from within or beyond the school. One of the worst things to have happened in English state
schools between 1982 and 2017 is the emergence of the now common dogma that an individual teacher cannot be trusted to work as an individual but must be told what to teach and be observed frequently to ensure that she or he is doing it in the prescribed manner. These were the early days of the series of neo-liberal governments in Britain after 1979. These were also the days before the National Curriculum (which was introduced in 1988). Driven by the ideological assumption that the structure of private business was the platonic form to be emulated universally, in many schools it seems that teachers were expected to be operatives carrying out the instructions of their ‘managers.’ A uniform ‘entitlement of provision’ for all pupils was the ideological term used to justify what in fact was state centralism. A transformation in the status and professionalism of teachers would occur over the course of my career.

In my second teaching practice and in my first year of teaching I made plenty of mistakes. For example, my own experience at Gunnersbury made me default to shouting at pupils when they were misbehaving. Apart from any other consideration, I soon realised that in many cases I was dealing with young people whose experience of full-scale shouting matches, at home or elsewhere, was far more developed than mine, and they were just tactically more adept than me in a confrontation of this nature. A quiet word from my first boss, Mary Jenkins, asked me to think about what I was doing and I realised that defusing the situation in order to fight on ground of my own choosing – employing blandishment, rhetoric and reasoning backed by institutional sanction – was the way forward. Of course if I had proved myself unable to control a class I would not have been tolerated. My first job was to fill the vacancy created when my predecessor was unable to do just that. The pupils also told me that they could smell the vodka in the flask of orange juice he sipped from in lessons. But at John Roan, and at the comprehensive I taught at from 1983–7, I had considerable latitude in what I taught and how I taught it. In my first job I was shown the stock cupboard and given the freedom of it. There were four common assessments which the pupils took in each of the first three years, on poetry, prose, drama and creative writing, but otherwise I devised my own lessons. After my probationary year I think I was only observed once a year as part of my annual appraisal. The quality of provision was in no way inferior to what is taught today; texts later taught at GCSE such as Of Mice and Men were taught in the third year (age 13–14). Pupils learned more in fact because they were assessed less. For their final exams we didn’t choose the easiest texts to ensure the highest results for the sake of league tables. My first O Level Literature group in 1985, at an ordinary Sussex comprehensive, studied in detail Wuthering Heights, The Merchant of Venice and contemporary poetry.

It had been my intention to stay in London and work for the Inner London Education Authority, the body which organised education in twelve London boroughs until it was abolished in 1990. New teachers applied centrally to the authority, rather than to any particular school. When I was asked by one of the advisers at interview why an inner-city education authority should employ a Cambridge Philosophy graduate however, I could give no effective answer. I could see exactly what he meant and I can now see what kind of answer might have
satisfied him, but he was probably right to see that with my grammar school and university background that I lacked the necessary experience and understanding of the lives of working-class children in inner-city London, and, more to the point, I hadn’t thought about what I would need to do to address that. I didn’t get the job. I decided to leave London. My relationship with Germaine, who was studying at Goldsmiths, was ending, and the political situation in the city post-Falklands and post-riots was bleak. Not having an English degree, I found that several schools I applied to outside London were not interested, particularly if they had a sixth form. I soon realised how questionable an assumption that was. Considering that I had vainly spent much of my PGCE year trying to plug what I thought was a worrying gap in my subject knowledge of the eighteenth century by reading Johnson, Fielding and Sterne, once appointed I could clearly see that having a post-A Level qualification in English had little relevance to the teaching of *Stig of the Dump* or *Of Mice and Men*. Having turned down a job at a Siberianly-remote and bleak school in Cumbria I accepted a job at Downlands School in Hassocks, an 11–16 comprehensive eight miles north of Brighton.

Living in Brighton was the attraction, and in September 1982 I was returning every afternoon to a bedsit in Kemptown, utterly exhausted. I had no idea how much energy the job would require, nor any understanding how long lesson planning and marking would take an inexperienced teacher. It was of course also tough moving to a town where I knew nobody at all. But Downlands was, and still is, a well-run and friendly school. My colleagues – especially the two most senior English staff, Mary Jenkins and Ken Howarth – were generous, encouraging and supportive. I made friends both in school and in the local Labour Party. I met my wife Nicky in 1983 when she joined the staff to teach Geography. In the classroom I carried on with the mixed-ability group-work kind of approach I had been taught at King’s but I was increasingly aware that both the quality and quantity of what the pupils learnt was improved by having short, focused and properly prepared collaborative tasks co-ordinated by lively, fast-paced and good-humoured teacher exposition (a weakness in my early career was in fact to let classroom comedy undermine good discipline). I soon realised the importance of frequent written tasks with well-focused feedback, and recognised the value of praise and the need to respect the individual dignity and worth of the pupil no matter what the situation. At least, this is what I learnt and strove to stick to. What I actually taught was at times a bit too abstract and puzzled some students: examining qualities of leadership in characters in a second-year class reader, for example, rather than looking at the more conventional aspects of literary study or at more accessible issues in the text.

All lower school English classes at Downlands had a period a week in the Drama Studio, and CSE and O Level Drama were taught in the final two years. On teaching practice I had realised that being in plays at school and university was actually no preparation at all for teaching educational drama and began reading and trying out the work of Gavin Bolton and Dorothy Heathcote. I thought I was catching up with my colleagues, but discovered that this was new and exciting work. I discovered that a sense of active learning of the material and method for
the teacher can produce a common sense of engagement and purpose and energy. By the end of my time at Downlands I was teaching the exam drama, both CSE and O Level (the former very hard work, but they were a warm-hearted if fractious bunch). There was a school play every year. I appeared as a stand-in Malvolio in *Twelfth Night* in 1985, and in the following year directed my first school play, a rather inept *Macbeth* in 1986 which tended to lose quite a lot of its audience in the interval, and then a much more successful pot-boiler comedy called *A Tomb with a View* by Norman Robbins the following year.

By the spring of 1987 Nicky and I had bought a small terraced house on Albion Hill in Brighton (we married in 1989). I was initially sceptical when she suggested I apply for a job at Varndean Sixth Form College in Brighton. But I was interviewed, my face seemed to fit, and the new Head of English, David Smith, wanted someone to develop drama in the college. I was to work at Varndean for the next thirty years. The college only had about 400 students aged 16–18, all taking A Levels or retaking O Levels, but a great expansion of post-16 education was about to take place, and David Smith was keen to expand what was offered beyond A Level Literature. New subjects were becoming available. Shortly the college would offer A Level English Language and Literature, then English Language, Media Studies, Film Studies and Theatre Studies. I taught the new GCSE Drama and A Level Theatre Studies. Once again I had to do a considerable amount of study to equip myself to teach the new course, but in a few years I was teaching more Drama and Theatre than English and we had also appointed a specialist Drama teacher, Gill Lamden. I also now began to direct a series of college productions: mostly Shakespeare and early modern plays (the first was Sheridan’s *St Patrick’s Day* in 1987 and the last *Othello* in 1998). Gill also directed shows, and when we were joined by a theatrical Economics teacher and ex-Headmaster, Gerald Sexton, there was a busy programme of two or three extra-curricular plays every year. Some of our students went on to professional careers in the theatre, but for most the experience was I am sure a highly valuable personal and creative educational experience, achieving something real as a community and as artists without formal assessment and ultimately, on stage, without teacher supervision. Working on these plays was I think the high point of my teaching career.

In May 1989 David Smith was promoted to Vice Principal and I was appointed Head of English in his place. To start with there were only five teachers in the Department, but as the college expanded and as the remit of the job increased, by 2006 I was managing seventeen teachers and technicians and also responsible for Music and Dance. To start with my focus was teaching A Level Literature. I had little idea of what would have been studied on an English degree at most universities in the 1980s and assumed that it was important that I would need to familiarise myself with Literary Theory, which was in fact in contrast to the more traditional forms of literature teaching in universities at the time. The late 1980s and early 1990s were in fact a very progressive time in English examination courses. GCSE courses were available where all the assessment was by coursework, and the much-loved AEB 660 Literature syllabus offered fifty per cent
coursework, a long coursework essay, and the chance for students to study up to thirteen books, many freely chosen by the teacher. All kinds of texts and approaches were possible, but I tended to focus on what might be seen as Marxist and feminist ways of reading, with a bit of psychoanalysis, as far as the courses and the level of work allowed. I think there were a couple of cases where bright students I taught did not achieve A grades because their answers were unfamiliar to the examiners – or at least that is what seemed to emerge when we asked for the papers to be remarked – and I think sometimes I neglected encouraging detailed textual knowledge in favour of a broad critical overview, but I got better at that, and the students did well. I took a part-time MA in Literature myself at Sussex University in 1994-6, and in 1997 I spent four weeks as an Education Fellow at Keble College, Oxford. Here I wrote the first third of my first book, *Shakespeare: the Basics* (McEvoy, 2012). I had already written a couple of articles for teachers and students, but I was motivated to write a book for students which offered an accessible introduction to contemporary ideas about Shakespeare. Too much criticism at the time was written in a manner to make it difficult to read, I think often unnecessarily. At Keble I received excellent advice and support on how to get the book published from one of the English fellows at the time, Nigel Smith. It is now in its third edition and has been translated into Korean and Spanish.

A Level was about to change, however. The New Labour government in 1997 dodged genuine reform aimed at broadening the sixth-form curriculum beyond the traditional three subjects. Their ‘Curriculum 2000’ introduced a fourth subject in the first year, with all subjects to be assessed at the newly designed AS Level in the third term. The changes for Literature teaching were more profound. All subject syllabuses were now known as ‘specifications’ (as if they were some kind of industrial or commercial standard) and now all assessment was tied to very specific ‘assessment objectives’ with fixed percentages of the marks attached to specific objectives. The desire to make students study the contexts in which texts are read and produced and to be aware of critical views (two of the new assessment objectives) was laudable, but by ascribing a certain number of marks to these things as discrete qualities of the work (as if they can be separated simply from a student’s overall understanding and critical response) was part of a process where assessment came to drive teaching and all student writing, and where the subject came to be not unfairly parodied by my colleague Chris Savage as ‘Assessment Objective Studies (English Literature).’ Essays were no longer written so much as examination answers framed solely to hit the assessment objectives. The same numbers-driven managerialism was taking over all aspects of education. I can recall my feelings when the Vice Principal showed me the data table to which all my department’s work would be reduced, relating percentage figures for student retention, passes and high grades to government ‘benchmarks’ centrally decreed. I remember once seeing a very similar chart on the inside of a stock room door of shoe shop showing the sales people’s targets. A subject, department or teacher
would from here onwards be judged on this data. No disputing was possible, despite the common experience we all had of teaching exactly the same course, with the same lessons, to classes of very similar ability in consecutive years only to get very different results. Students are people and people differ. One student in a class of twenty just getting a C rather than a B grade produces a 10% swing in the high grades data by which a teacher is judged. No matter. Only the data mattered. I wrote an article under a pseudonym in 2009 for the Times Educational Supplement attacking managerialism but noting the slogan of the McKinsey Corporation of management consultants: ‘Everything can be measured. Whatever can be measured can be managed’ (Golding, 2009). Digitalisation was part of the process, but a new authoritarianism had arrived, and an age of anxiety. Teachers knuckled under. No teacher-produced book offering ideas on teaching A Level Literature appeared between 1989 and 2013; we did as we were told (Brown & Gifford, 1989; Atherton, Green, & Snapper, 2013). Apart from anything else the workload became increasingly onerous. In 1987 at Varndean College a full-time teacher without remission periods for responsibilities would expect to have 20 hours of contact time and an average class size of twelve. By 2012 this had grown to 25.5 hours and an average size of seventeen. One-day strikes became an increasingly common occurrence.

‘FRESH WOODS AND PATURES NEW’

By the early years of the new century I was teaching as much A Level Classical Civilisation as English Literature, a subject much less distorted by assessment. I had introduced the subject as an AS Level in 1997 when the college, now with 1300 students, had been looking to expand its provision still further, and it became popular. I enjoyed teaching it on my own – no meetings, no ‘managing.’ I stopped teaching Theatre Studies at about the same time; we had appointed another specialist drama teacher, Lisa Peck, who did the job very much better than me, and with my other responsibilities, including managing some warring and troubled colleagues, I no longer had the time to produce plays. I was also considering moving into teaching in higher education. Between 1999 and 2003 I completed a PhD at Royal Holloway with Kiernan Ryan as my supervisor. I had admired Kiernan’s work on Shakespeare before I applied and was delighted to have him as my supervisor. He constantly communicated the need for integrity and precision in all academic writing and was an inspiring teacher. My topic was theatrical representation in Ben Jonson’s comedies. I had learnt so much about how an early modern play worked in my directing years, and knew The Alchemist and Volpone so well that I could complete the part-time doctorate – with Arts and Humanities Research Council funding – in four years. An education fellowship at New Hall, Cambridge in 2002 helped me to get it finished. I even unsuccessfully applied for a job at South Bank University which had nearly as many contact hours as at Varndean. But in August 2003 our daughter Julia was born and I did not want to take a job which would not allow me to take her to school in the morning, for example. I had done a bit of first-year undergraduate teaching at University of
Sussex in 2001–3, teaching ‘Historical Approaches to Shakespeare’ and Literary Theory seminars. But I had found these rather unsatisfactory; the courses didn’t seem to be designed with an understanding of what students only a few months out of A Levels need and could do. I had quite a lot to do to get the students to a place where many could begin to access the material; teaching theory without reference to particular texts to exemplify how a theoretical approach might be employed was not useful. The courses didn’t seem to enthuse the students, especially when taught in seminar groups of thirty in a windowless basement. I had a much more positive experience when I was asked to do some work on the Shakespeare MA at Royal Holloway. The course was well-designed and fully resourced, and despite a wide ability range (from international students with shaky English to students with high firsts heading for a doctorate) there was great value and pleasure in exploring the texts and films outside any straitjacket of assessment. From 2011, I was back in Cambridge. A couple of ex-students have gone on to become English fellows. Leo Mellor at Murray Edwards (as New Hall has become) employs me as a kind of supply teacher at odd times. I taught a series of classes on tragedy in 2014–15 just a few yards from where I was myself supervised in 1978–81, classes which, with his encouragement, have now become the basis of another book for Routledge (McEvoy, 2017).

By 2008 I had also escaped from the surrounding gloom of English education. A new Principal had decided to introduce the International Baccalaureate. I had already made it plain that I no longer wanted to manage the large English faculty, even if it meant a pay cut. I was asked to apply for the job of IB Co-ordinator, which I did. After a couple of years I managed to identify the kind of students who could cope with and enjoy this demanding course, and worked to recruit students with a curiosity about the world around them who wanted to continue to develop their learning across the wide range of subjects, not through the narrow choice of three A Levels (the IB requires the study of six subjects plus a range of other study and activities). By 2014 fifty students a year were on the course and our results were as good as those of the local private schools. I didn’t manage the curriculum, but coordinated the whole complex process, involving students (present, past and prospective), teachers, parents, the college management and the IB Organisation. By this stage I was only teaching IB Literature, which was a great liberation. Only six of the thirteen texts studied at Higher Level have to be assessed, and in three out of four parts of the course the students have a choice on what they are assessed on, and in two parts they devise their own assessment. Learning drives assessment, and not the other way round. The coursework is oral work. There is huge latitude in what is taught, with texts in translation an integral part of the course. IB students are encouraged to question everything and to think creatively; every student also studies another language, a science and a humanity. Its ethos stands as a reproach to what sixth-form education in England has become. I feel fortunate to have been able to make my escape when I did.

In 2017 I am planning to leave the college, take my pension, write more, and continue my own education in many fields, new and old. I would like to do some university teaching when I can. I have felt privileged to work with such wonderful
literature and theatre for so long with enthusiastic young people, and I have loved my work. I am proud of what my students have gone on to achieve, and not just those who have become academics, directors, actors and writers, and, in a few cases, friends.

I am aware that the conclusion of this account of my career might sound like the familiar grumble about everything going to the dogs these days. In fact I am optimistic about the future of. The time will come when teachers will look back on what was done to education in England in the bad days of neoliberalism with a mixture of incredulity and contempt. But not yet.

NOTES

1 ‘There is no craft more privileged. To awaken in another human being powers, dreams beyond one's own: to induce in others a love for that which one loves; to make of one’s inward present their future: this is a threefold adventure like no other …. It is a satisfaction beyond compare to be the servant, the courier of the essential – knowing perfectly well how few can be creators of the first rank. Even at a humble level – that of the schoolmaster – to teach, to teach well, is to be an accomplice to transcendent possibility … A society, such as that of unbridled profit, which does not honour its teachers, is flawed’ (Steiner, 2003, pp. 183–184).

2 In the 1970 and 1980s university fees were paid by central government, and there was a means-tested ‘Maintenance Grant’ paid by the local authority for living expenses. In 1980 only 68,000 people were awarded first degrees in the UK. By 2011 the figure was 350,000 (source: www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/SN04252.pdf).

3 The Certificate in Secondary Education (CSE) was introduced in the 1960s to provide a qualification for students staying on until sixteen outside the top 20% of the ability range who took O Level. A Grade One CSE was regarded as equivalent to a C grade pass at GCE O Level. ‘General Certificate of Education, Ordinary Level’ had been introduced in 1951 and was merged with CSE to produce the GCSE qualification which was first examined in 1988.

4 Particularly influential were Towards a Theory of Drama in Education (Bolton, 1979) and Collected Writings on Education and Drama (Heathcote, 1984).

5 In particular, Kiernan Ryan, Shakespeare (1989; third edition 2002).

REFERENCES


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3. PROJECT TIME-TRAVEL

Reflections on Learning by Revisiting Childhood School Projects

INTRODUCTION

I stood at the foot of the mountain. It looked steep but as it was the first time I had climbed, I was quite confident. On the top of the mountain, from down here, I could just see Dinas Bran castle (our target).

Well, I started on my climb, the first lap was easy just a level piece of ground. The sun was hot and we were dying for a drink. Walking on, the path was rougher. It was very steep now. And the stones kept slipping under my shoes.

By now Mr Vinton and most of the boys had reached the top but I was only halfway. Then we had to start coming down again. Unfortunately, I did not see the ruins, but I’d had good fun. (school project: ‘A Journey To Conway 1975’)

Taking far too long to sort through papers left in my old bedroom in my Mum’s house last summer, following her death, I was drawn into reading passages and looking at drawings made in some of my old school projects. It felt as if there might be an answer there, somewhere, to questions I had yet to formulate. The opportunity to write a chapter considering how changes, transitions and transformations have informed the teacher I am now came at just this juncture. I am an artist with a first degree in Modern Languages (1982–86) and a second in Fine Art – Sculpture (1992–95). 2016 marked my thirtieth year as a teacher in Higher Education, a personal jubilee giving me the chance to step back, take stock and reflect on a career that has a peculiar but no less fond, character of its own.

There are so many routes I might have taken to consider how my own experiences of learning have influenced the teacher I am now. The main change I focus on here is growing itself, passing through childhood. I’ve deliberately left the ‘up’ out in ‘growing up’ because that signals an adult perspective and when looking back through these projects I was cast back into my childhood self without any need to see that condition as just a stage on the way to being older. ‘London Folder by Susan Diab,’ ‘A School Trip to Conway 1975,’ ‘Unusual Musical Instruments,’ ‘Creation: A Comparison of Darwin’s Theory of Evolution with the Book of Genesis,’ ‘Woman and Her Fight For Freedom,’ ‘Aufenthalt in München, Sommer 1981’ are the projects I revisit in the process of writing this. Sifting through the
contents of my old bedroom, ‘The Museum of Susan,’ pretty much untouched since I left it over thirty years ago, retrieving the project books and, since then, reviewing them and reflecting upon how I worked as a child, remembering how I felt when I was putting them together, has offered a consoling validation. I have realized that much of what I am now I already was then.

By way of example: an image of a trilobite carefully drawn in pencil and labelled: ‘Trilobite, The First Life Form.’ On the facing page, an explanation:

About two and a half billion years ago, scientists think life began. It is not known how or where life started. It is very hard to imagine that out of the miles of water that covered our planet, life arose. Out of nowhere, maybe, small molecules joined together to form living organisms. The scientists know about what was living by the fossils they find under layers of age-old rocks. (school project: ‘The Creation’)

I know that what I feel for the trilobite is love. I love everything about it and that love began with the doing of that drawing. The shape of its body, segments joined together inbetween which I have carefully shaded in darker pencil to give them some dimensionality. I didn’t understand it, I don’t understand it now, but I love its shapes and that was enough to have created a life-long romance. I am become, as Alec suggests in his feedback, trilowoman, a Baradian entanglement. Three lobes: so appropriate for a project about projects, concerning past, present and future. This present reflection navigates around and through the notion of the ‘project’ – up for question in its protective comfort-blanket of parentheses – because this offers a container that is deliberately provisional, tentative. Here, I am aiming to reflect on the nature of the ‘project’ in order to understand better the complex interplay of relationships between image, text, childhood, time, research and learning. Projects, by definition, inhabit different temporalities: they look back through processes of research, they take on a form and a purpose in the present and they look to the future. Experiencing a period of major transformation in my self whilst writing this chapter, life events, happening with a recognizable shape in the moment are given a voice and acknowledged as they continue to affect myself as artist-author-researcher throughout the editing process. Life’s contents are never sufficiently tidied up to allow for a clean overview and events intervene, so feeling ‘unready’ is a part of this process. As such, the chapter itself is a ‘project,’ though, naturally, edited, retains diversions and asides intervening and and when they must. The chapter and its contents will remain up for grabs even once time and print have cast their essaying into some form of posterity.

Michael Taussig’s ruminations about keeping notebooks as an anthropologist have helped me to recognize in my childhood projects the transformative act of making visual (drawing) and of combining image and text as a way of making sense of research into a topic. Looking back over my own juvenile works has given me insights into how I teach, by bringing together my younger artist self with whom I am now, an older artist-teacher self, negotiating and encouraging the youthful creativity of my students. The writing of this chapter allows me to look back through my youthful projects with a view to understanding how what I did
then and how I felt about it inform and direct how I teach and (continue to) learn now.

To draw is to apply pen to paper. But to draw is also to pull on some thread, pulling it out of its knotted tangle or skein, and we also speak of drawing water from a well. There is another meaning too, as when we say “I was drawn to him.” ... Drawing is thus a depicting, a hauling, an unraveling, and being impelled toward something or somebody. I will be doing this twice over, first in my drawing and then, in what I have to say about it, drawing on my drawing. (Taussig, p. xii)

Life has thrown events at me over the past year which have threatened to stop me writing altogether but which have also given me the gifts of particular levels of openness that shockingly breath-taking difficulty tends to bestow. I am in a period of things breaking down; every time I try to write, it all just breaks down. During the past year I have been struggling to negotiate debilitating symptoms of menopause, my beloved husband has been diagnosed with Parkinson’s and in May 2016 my Mum died after a decade of suffering a long, slow deterioration with Alzheimer’s disease. Consequently, my sense of time has been altered: nothing is as it seemed before and all is up for re-invention. If I become conscious of how little I know I am struck dumb so all I have left is to venture out in the direction of trying to speak ... I give you three sections: Part One The Project, offering ruminations on the nature of projects in order to set the context, Part Two The Museum of Grief, writing my way through grief for both past and anticipated events and Part Three, Duplicating Spirits, where readings of the school projects themselves bring to light inherent insights into what it is to learn, their relevance to teaching, hopefully, implicit.

These thoughts are for my students as much as they are for me. The neoliberal mood of the present would set us against our students as they advance on us in ever increasing numbers with their growing anxieties, needs and real-life concerns, like unstoppable armies intent on wrecking any vestiges of a research career and grading us for our efforts as they go. I reject this perverse encouragement to resent them even as we are supposed to be delivering them with an excellent ‘experience’ and put myself in their shoes on a daily basis, because they are me and I am them and we are all learning together.

* * *

Thinking-while-dancing on Saturday night; feeling wild and free. Somewhere amidst all the movement I imagine a kind of writing liberated from self-consciousness and purposeful function. A writing with no interest whatsoever in addressing some academic rubric, a dance fighting at every step and twitch to rebuff the suggestion that it be ‘for’ or ‘concerned with’ any kind of viewer.

When I know what that kind of writing is like, I will write it. For now, it’s only sensed, not yet visible or utterable. Pre-linguistic maybe or some kind of ‘chora’ but even to categorise it in that way is to subject it to institutionalised terminology.3
It was, is and will be wild and free. W&F.

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Interlude / ‘between playing,’ Andalucia June 2016

In the night there struck up a great wind that set the shutters rattling and hauled us out of our deep sleep to see that everything was all right. The bushes and trees beyond the mesh of the mosquito guards were swaying wildly and the wind started to howl in that way it does when it swirls around a building, and which sounds so alarming in the middle of the night. The wind ripped me from an absorbing dream where fire was threatening destruction and soon the rain came too and when we staggered outside, naked, to fetch in cushions and parasol to stop them being blown away, I smelt the wet earth giving up its soul. “Earth, wind, air and fire”, I thought, “all four elements in one night.”

The next morning, the ground still wet, we took ourselves up the track to the awkward bend where the road gives out to one side. Along the track butterflies and tiny, exquisite, pink flowers, as well as a Morning Glory, gave up their faces and wings to us to admire. Underneath a small tree seemingly growing out of a rock, fallen juvenile pomegranates, unharvested and blackened by the sun, hardened into dark brown leathery nuggets begged to be picked up. As we walked by the ruin I stopped to imagine sitting there looking out across the valley at the view and sketching, the ruin’s walls of red baked-clay bricks, crumbling, held together only by snakes’ lairs and spiders’ eggs. I said out loud “I’d like to sit here and sketch” but even as I said it I knew I never would.

PART ONE: THE PROJECT

Some years back I was working in a small team and referred to what we were making as a ‘project’ when one of my collaborators disapproved of the term saying they thought it was “a bit schooley”. Thinking about that now, it seems a most suitable term. Was it not at school that I did my most passionate, most thoroughly researched, best thought-through projects? The ‘project’ has been theorized as an endeavour and applied as a concept to the grandest of schemes, from the Bechers’ photographic archival documentation of industrial buildings to Habermas’s analysis of the unfinished project of modernity.†

My method of writing and research is a ‘bricolage’ practice where the writing happens as and when it can, in the cracks amongst the various tasks of a teacher’s working life (for example, Kinehelo, 2016). I am imagining having time to write this chapter, reflecting on possible connections between looking back through the projects and sorting through Mum’s possessions. I begin thinking that maybe this fearful anticipation of not having enough time to write is part of the work, being overtaken as I am by the hugeness of the very thought of the task of clearing Mum’s house. I begin to see connections in my mind between the act of dealing
with her things and the writing and drawing of the projects. I am thinking about the task and the activity of making a project: having an idea, researching it, collecting material, selecting which material to use, which images to make to ‘go with’ it and then, finally, how to organize it all and lay it out to make a book. The idea for a project looks to the future and its production; once written, its editing goes back to the past. Each then meets the other on its return trip: each is both and both is each. In their discussion of the temporality of the project, Gratton and Sheringham offer the following insights into the contradictions inhering in the very provisional nature of what it is to be a project:

the term ‘project’ may be used to describe a completed undertaking. But to apply the term in this retrospective way, … is necessarily to recognize the trace within the final product of the now past future and past present dimensions of the project. … A ‘result’ is above all a project when the process of accumulation can be seen constantly to jeopardise, even as it calls for, the moment of culmination. (2005, Introduction, p. 18)

So, its end may be threatened but a project can extend back through time and simultaneously launch into the future.

To ‘project’ means ‘to throw things forward.’ I once saw a woman projectile vomit on a bus. She gets on, sits quite near the back on one of the raised seats and then, a few moments later just as the bus drives off very suddenly there is this horrendous noise of guts wrenching and a completely horizontal, orange, fluid jet shoots from the back of the bus to the front, catching several other passengers along the way. I am in awe of this event and it doesn’t sicken me now to think of it, rather the striking thing about it was the strict horizontality of its path, as if she had marked out in advance with a spirit level a perfect 180° line through the air to then use as a guide in her retch.

I think of light projections I have made from a source onto objects on a wall. To project in this sense is to move forward through space, from one plane or point of light, to another. So, when, as a child, I made my ‘projects,’ did I know that I was extending them into the future, to this point, now to be written about at a future date? Where at the time, did I think they were going? Where could I have envisaged them ending up? I was familiar with the idea that people collected things but had I really thought at all about objects being kept for posterity and then used as artefacts from which to understand something about the past? The young self talks to the older self constantly. Youth is always looking ahead: “what do you want to be when you grow up?” never “who are you now?”. Fulfillment lies in the future, not in the present. Each project we make is a step towards another state where we will have become someone. Perhaps to be alive is to be engaged in that forward movement?

A project, you see, goes forwards and I would just keep coming up against this dead end. A dead end doesn’t carry you on. You need something to keep you going. The outlook must bear some spark of hope or …

Or what?
Or the reader doesn’t read on.
And if the reader doesn’t want to, or can’t read on, then the project is doomed.

Tuesday 28 June 2016 (5 days after the UK EU referendum): a project may be embarked upon in the direction of hope, betterment, improvement. As far as the notion and reality of ‘Europe’ is concerned, has it not been seen, since its inception, as a project, as the ‘European project’? An endeavour that signifies an ongoing attempt made by different countries within an agreed union to live and work together? I have been a member and beneficiary of that ‘project’ for most of my life and to see it scuppered as a result of an ill-thought through referendum after 43 years feels heart-breaking. The UK’s participation in this European ‘project’ destroyed by a right-wing press in league with privileged élites intent on covering up the real reasons for people’s hardship (an austerity programme) whilst blaming any deficiencies in the economy on the presence of the EU and on ‘immigrants.’ The ‘European project’ is a project of hope, going in the direction of greater co-operation and collaboration and now the UK is intent on leaving it at a historical moment where extremely urgent issues such as climate change require more of a hands-on, joint approach than ever.

PART TWO: THE MUSEUM OF GRIEF

Frozen in time, until now the days of reckoning, of clearing out and sifting through.
Frozen in time, until now the days of reckoning, of clearing out and sifting through.
(deliberate repetition to denote inevitable return)

My Mum died. She died in May of this year, 2016, that is only four months ago. I am shocked that it is only four months since she died because it feels like much, much longer. This is partly because in that time I have been expected to do such a lot arising from her death. Clearing up after a parent’s death is a job of work.

My Mum died. She died in May of this year, that is only four months ago. In that time I have been travelling backwards and forwards between her house, the house I mainly grew up in, tidying, cleaning, sorting, bagging up, taking to the tip, putting away, squabbling over, the many items of stuff that accumulated in her house over a lifetime. We’ve put the house on the market, the house I grew up in. We’ve let the estate agents in, men in suits, with their cameras, who’ve taken photos. They have put their photos onto a website for strangers to see in case they want to buy this house, the house I grew up in. We’ve been advised to put away ‘personal effects’ to stop them getting nicked by potential buyers so that they can imagine their own personal effects in their place.

Wednesday 7 September 2016: struggling with two beasts, grief for Mum and menopause. Still having hot flushes and now the summer doesn’t seem to want to die and its warmth continues and the sun is shining through my blinds and making me overheat every ten minutes or so. I long for the cool, dark grey of Autumn proper. Grief is treating me meanly. It sneaks up on me and catches me unawares so that I forget that it is grief which is affecting me and instead spend half of the
energy I could be devoting to releasing some of the feelings, trying to work out why I feel so bad. Such profound heaviness: going up the stairs I am dragging ten sacks of coal after me and mostly I just want to lie down on the floor where I am, curl up and cry. A lack of concentration, difficulty focussing and applying myself to anything really, loss of confidence and self-belief, increased feelings of vulnerability.

Many of those symptoms are the same as menopause but this throws in its weird fluctuations in temperature as well, with accompanying moments of despair. Hardly anything is written or known about menopause. If only I’d asked Mum about it while I had the chance…

Mum the Muse.
Mum the teacher of reading and writing.
Mum the literacy ‘expert.’

What happens is this: I wind down towards a point of authenticity, a place of feeling. I am walking down towards a lakeside jetty. The water is dark and threatening. I am drawn to wade in tentatively but I resist and as I do so I start to feel what it would be like to be in that water: physical pain, emotional wreck, an end-point, a death-within-life.

Not going there – yet. I’ve read Joan Didion dealing with the aftermath of her husband’s sudden death (Didion, 2012). A revelation, her ability to describe just enough detail to point to intensity of feeling together with her reminders that memory itself is unreliable: “not only have I always had trouble distinguishing between what happened and what merely might have happened, but I remain unconvinced that the distinction, for my purposes, matters” (Didion, 1968).

Lying on my desk is Carolyn Ellis’s ‘Final Negotiations,’ also about the loss of a husband, but I don’t have the heart to read that one yet.

Screaming from the pit of my stomach, an intensity so sharp, this heated knife cuts through the air as through a million planes of thin sheet-ice. I tried to let my body go the way it wanted to go naturally, to let it change and bend and shift and enact a life alteration but in doing so it dragged me down with it.

The mentality of aesthetic modernity begins to take shape clearly with Baudelaire and with his theory of art … This mentality is characterized by a set of attitudes which developed around a transformed consciousness of time. It is this consciousness that expresses itself in the spatial metaphor of the avant-garde – that is, an avant-garde that explores hitherto unknown territory, exposes itself to the risk of sudden and shocking encounters, conquers an as yet undetermined future, and must therefore find a path for itself in previously uncharted domains. But this forward orientation, this anticipation of an indefinite and contingent future, the cult of the New which accompanies it, all this actually signifies the glorification of a contemporariness that repeatedly gives birth to new and subjectively defined pasts. … The new value, which is now accorded to the ephemeral, the momentary and the transitory, and the concomitant celebration of dynamism, expresses precisely
the yearning for a lasting and immaculate present. (D’Entrèves, & Benhabib 1997)

Yearning for a lasting and immaculate present – a refrain which echoes …

I was reading Taussig just now discussing a Mexican writer’s relationship to his photograph of his late Mother (Taussig, 2011, p. 69). It reminds me of Barthes’s description of searching through photographs of his recently deceased Mother looking for one which does her justice, as we say in English, one where he sees the Mother he can recognise. Taussig writes of the dog-eared photograph of the Mother having a hole where her heart was – it must have been a large photograph – where a finger could fit through.

I am wondering about the connections between marveling at notebooks and projects and reflecting on Dead Mothers. On ‘One’s Dead Mother’ or ODM, for short. An acronym as anæsthetic, dulling the pain.

My Mum died only four months ago.
She died, she did.

I am writing to try to find out what I think and how I feel right now, how I’ve felt in the past four months, since she died. I’ve been waiting until I ‘felt better’ to write but of course I’m not about to feel better in the near future and I need to meet this dead-line. I have to meet this dead-line. I want to take part, to claim for myself the right to continue to participate even though I am devastated. Participation in devastation. Some years ago I was enrolled on a course at a university when my Grandmother died a couple of days before an essay was due in. The university regulations stated that I could have ‘a week’s extension to dead-line in the case of family bereavement.’ I could see that a week on from receiving the news of her death I would not be feeling any more able to write the essay on the subject of cyberspace. So I decided not to delay but go ahead and write through the grief. I passed the assignment but the tutors were unable to grade my essay; my writing sat somewhere outside their marking criteria… The piece of writing was acknowledged to be ‘strange.’

Turn to face the strange.

Writing as an exploratory process. Joan Didion says that she writes in order to find out what she thinks and that’s the same for me. Writing helps me to untangle the feelings as well. Maybe it’s about sorting out the feelings from the thoughts, to see what the difference is between them?

PART THREE: DUPLICATING SPIRITS

The first page of my school project about our trip to Wales, typed, produced on a Banda machine or spirit duplicator, holds this promise written by my form teacher, Mr Vinton:

You may not think so now, but in many years’ time you will enjoy reading this book and showing it to your friends. So use it well and make it as interesting as you can. You will treasure this book for many years to come.
There follow pages of typed text with words left out; a foundation for us to complete with the palimpsest of our own discoveries. As I leaf through, a memory of a photograph from this trip comes to mind. Two of my friends at the time, Siobhan and Tracey, both ‘Bay City Rollers’ fans posing and pouting and waving their tartan scarves above their heads as if they are at a concert miming along to the songs. I was not a fan of the ‘Rollers’ and I recall that as I shot the photo I felt a sharp pang where my part in their shared experience ought to have been. Siobhan went on to organize all the girls in our class to bully me as punishment for my academic achievements at school. It was not on for girls to do well academically and Siobhan, my former best friend was chief of policing this code. Eventually none of the girls in the class would speak to me and I was cast alone and adrift on the mercy of the boys who were seemingly unaware of my Pariah status and demonstrated acceptance, kindness even towards me, letting me sit at their table. Paul W told me one day “when you grow up you could be a barmaid”, which I took as a huge compliment.

London Folder

A green cord binds the folder together but now only through one of the two punched holes. It drapes, or rather hangs, next to the folder like a strange, shriveled umbilical chord.

I notice in myself a kind of condescension towards my younger self yet also great levels of affection. I sense how much pride I must have taken in putting together this booklet, how it must have looked, when new, completed and handed in. I can summon that pride back up and think and feel myself into the younger me who was probably around 8 years old when I wrote this fairly straightforward account of the history and uses of the Tower of London. Below it a nice drawing of a crow goes with the last sentence: “There is a legend that if the ravens get killed or if they leave the tower, an evil will befall the whole of London.” A teacher has written ‘Good’ in red ink at the bottom of the page and her long tick reaches up through the last two lines of my text.

The Creation

Another project, is a comparison of the story of the Creation in the Bible with Darwin’s Theory of Evolution. The finished project gave me a sense that I was clever and this is the key to why this is such a significant piece of work, to me then and also to the adult person I am today. I know that there have been times in my life when I have held back from showing cleverness. Patriarchal society requires the female intellect to shrink somewhat to accommodate the space that is left for it. Looking at the project now, as it lies on my desk reminds me of a time in my life before I learnt to hold back. The project demonstrates a level of enjoyment of research and of discovery - difficult to find the right vocabulary here – it testifies to a delight in my own generation of ideas and an ambition of reach in calling on the
Book of Genesis and Darwin’s writings as material to be analysed and ruminated upon.

I designed the cover inventively: a disk of images with a window cut into it which you can turn to show each day of the creation story. I still love it, it’s so ingenious and it was my own idea. The images were drawn and coloured-in using my water soluble Caran D’Ache pencils. You could stick the point of the pencil in your mouth, transfer a blob of spittal to the page and paint with it by moving the tip of the pencil around. The colours are vibrant and the drawings confident. The cover is built to last, protected in sticky-backed plastic; I was making this project for posterity, that much is clear. And so neatly done. It’s beautifully clean, with headings underlined, twice. The handwriting is big and confident and joined-up in parts. There is barely a blotch in the transcription of the First Book of Moses and the margin of every page bears a teacher’s approving tick in pencil.

At this point I am moved to skip to the teacher’s overall comment at the end of the project. 96% for the work and: “Excellent. Brilliantly presented and clearly you understand it. Commended.” Looking at it now I don’t really understand why I didn’t get 100%. I mean, what was wrong with it after all? Nada. It’s beautiful. I now realize, looking through it and feeling so pleased with it, with myself, that this represents some sort of pinnacle of achievement in my life. Gosh, at aged, what? Age 12? What does that mean? What can I do with that? Through this revisiting of ‘The Creation’ (the project) I am enacting a kind of re-creation of my younger self. I am taking my current self to visit my younger self, writing becomes a means of time-travel that allows me to have conversations I have not previously dreamt of.

Leafing through a French project I notice how many illustrations I made to demonstrate language use. Homework to show an understanding of prepositions is an excuse to draw a range of objects upon, underneath and next to others. I get tremors of pleasure revisiting these drawings because I can recall how much I enjoyed doing them and how satisfied I was with their completion. I am rather astonished to see a picture I drew of a Monsieur Albert, boulanger, and a range of French patisserie each labelled with its specialist French name: ‘bagnat,’ ‘pain au levain,’ ‘couronne tresée,’ ‘natte ordinaire.’ I am touched by my middle-class naiveté, my lack of understanding that it was precisely this careful attention to detail and my broad cultural knowledge gained from growing up in a house full of books against an impressive range of mixed European, West Asian and English influences, the characteristics of being me, which would bring me the most opprobrium and punishment from my more working-class ‘chums’: Next to a drawing of a sad looking rabbit with one drooping ear against an acid yellow background: ‘Ce lapin a besoin d’un ami,’ this rabbit needs a friend.

I am good. I am good. I am so good. I am so so good. So, I am good. Good so I am. I am good. I am so good. Good good good good good good good good good good …

Don’t look back.
I studied Ancient Greek for two years at secondary school, some real treasures here: pages of Greek I can’t read now, written in beautifully formed script, the letters like pictograms, holding so much meaning, my fountain pen tracing the shapes as lovingly as the making of any drawing. A comic strip of Orpheus and Eurydice in the Underworld, with coloured illustrations showing the stages of their story, underneath, a summary in case the pictures hadn’t conveyed the narrative adequately: ‘Orpheus, a famous singer, lost his wife, she was killed by a snake bite on her ankle. He played his lyre and lulled the creatures of the Underworld. He asked Pluto and Persephone for his wife back. They gave her back to him on the condition that he didn’t look back at her. But, Orpheus looked back to make sure she was still there and Eurydice drifted back to the Underworld.’ ‘Back,’ ‘back,’ ‘back,’ over and over …

There is a feeling there, it is with me right now. Present. What is it? How can it be described? It’s in the space between my body as it is now and my being as it was then. There is a time-space which is being bridged and it’s awkward, this bridging because I’m not just flicking through the projects in order to be mildly amused by my childhood self, in that patronising way that is so usual when attempting to consider anything related to extreme youth. I’m trying to go straight from the feelings these old pages with their yellowish-brown sellotaped traces evoke in me to putting down words, words which might be meaningful to an understanding of teaching and learning. That is a tall order.9

*Woman and Her Fight for Freedom*

Capital letters cut out of card and stuck onto the cover of a green ring binder underneath more sticky-back plastic. Inside the cover I have written out a poem, unreferenced: ‘The New Women: They dress like men/They talk like men/They live like men/They don’t like men.’

A timeline of significant dates in the history of women’s suffrage, then over the page written on the back in biro:

Tomorrow I’ve
  got an ‘O’ level.
Tomorrow I end
  history. The next day I take
  German no.2 and then je
  suis fini!

A kind of poem, a note written in class to a friend while the teacher is speaking and you’re supposed to be silent.

Leafing through, leafing through.

Approaching overwhelming tiredness I could just close my eyes and be off … All those hours and hours of study emanating from the pages. All the anxiety, the fear of not doing well. There was a kind of self-imposed tyranny there, over myself. A
holding of myself within a kind of strait-jacket of discipline. There I felt secure and safe from the danger of doing less than well. What was that danger, what shape did it have?

A fear of the withdrawal of love. 

Now, in the present, I know there was no actual threat. I used the need for the perpetuation of love to motivate me to work so hard. So hard that my knees would ache from lack of movement after hours sat at my bedroom desk. This was not a childhood, it was a kind of prison. I interpreted the messages incorrectly. There is a hint of tragedy there. Or is it here? What was I trying to prove? What am I trying to prove now? To prove, to rise, like warm dough? I was active all along but just waiting … for another day.

(IN)CONCLUSION: ENDINGS

What have I learnt about how I teach now from these travels through time back to my school projects? That there is much to be gained from allowing for the provisionality of projects: an openness that lets life (and death) in, that allows room to breathe and that does not assume that everything is moving forwards, always onwards but that time and directions change and alter. That decisions made when very young can be reviewed from an adult perspective and understood anew and changed. That the editing process never ends. That affections and attachments forged in youth can endure like fossils to last beyond the ends of time …

Recently, there has been an end-of-the-world feeling in the air, occasioned by the savagery of war, numerous atrocities, home-grown killings and murders, an increase in hate crimes, Donald Trump as US President(!). On a personal level, too, events have me thinking about – and feeling – a sense of endings. A youthful project looks to the future. A mid- to late- life reflection or review of such projects must struggle against a lived – felt? – sense of ends being real. End. Times. If we consider this idea of ‘end times’ in relation to ‘The Project’ then … where does this take us? If a ‘project’ is dedicated to the future, then, even considering the possibility of ‘end times’ is a negation of that, a cancelling out of the project. But a project also has an end, a completion point. I am not so focused as an adult as I was as a child. I was more concentrated then. I would finish things. I ‘see’ things. Artists do. I take a bit from here, add a bit from there and spend a while arranging them, either as physical material in the real world to make a picture, or in my mind. What I see, frequently, is the end of everything.

My fine art students submit for assessment a set of documentation of their work so that they may learn how to present a collection of ‘texts’ and images that ‘represents’ their work in its stead. The brief clearly states that this should be an ‘edited’ set of documentation yet always some of the students understand this brief better than others. Sometimes they submit documentation that tends towards the encyclopedic; they put all their notebooks, scrawled seminar notes and photocopied chunks of articles together in some kind of container and then give it all back to me. In some instances at least some of the text will have been highlighted by them.
but this is not always the case and sometimes, what is given back to me are the
very passages I drew their attention to in the seminar.

For an assignment to be a forward-looking ‘project’ for it to re-new, it must
have had selective, and organizing principles applied to it. Students must lay their
hands on their material, make it their own through processes of reading,
understanding, the raising of further questions, an attempt at analysis and the
application of critical thought. However, sometimes re-productions come back,
whereas what I have wanted is that processes of review inform and structure the
editorial decisions they make about what to include and what to leave out.

For much of his working life my Dad was a trade delegate for British furniture.
At the time one of our most popular exports was reproduction antique furniture that
is, newly manufactured but made to look old, like a family heirloom. These
particular British exports were increasingly popular abroad. Who knows just how
many Japanese board rooms or upmarket dining chambers are graced with an
English oak table which is actually only thirty years old but looks two hundred and
thirty? What’s missing in this reproduction, it seems to me, is a new interpretation,
and, in my view, without that the project is moribund or bound towards death,
deathward-bound.

All that teaching. All taught. All taut.

Air loom,
When the air weighs down
Suffocating

* * *

I sit in the wind with the waves at my feet and the breeze blows my hair about my
face. I dissolve into the air and think myself into the water. I am fluid, I bend like a
reed. I am free of tautness, constriction and fear, free of the control of others.

NOTES

1 The school projects are a collection of folders I made as a schoolgirl on a range of topics as
indicated in the text, which I have kept into adulthood.
2 I am indebted to the insights given by Alec Grant into ideas of entanglement between the human and
other material worlds, in this case Bronwyn Davies’ article about ‘Ethics and the new materialism,’
in particular what she calls the ‘co-implication of humans with non-human matter’ (2016, p. 2)
3 Andrew Sparkes’s essay ‘Autoethnography at the Will of the Body: Reflections on a Failure to
Produce on Time’ about the time needed for a ‘yet-to-be-told story’ to find its way to words is a
central reference for my chapter in having encouraged me to write despite and through grief to a
meet a deadline.
4 See in particular Taussig, chapter 4.
5 In the 1980s and early 1990s I concerned myself heavily with research into ‘l’écriture féminine’
as part of investigations into the work of the German poet Karoline von Günderrode (1780–1806).
From these readings I retained an interest in the notion of pre-linguistic (and hence pre-
phallogocentric) feminine language but grew disillusioned with this and related theories once I had understood their essentialising nature.

Gratton in ‘The Art of the Project’ defines characteristics of the project as: attenuation in all its forms, delegation and collaboration, open-endedness, documentarism, and ‘contraintes’ or restrictions, protocols, parameters, rules of engagement’ (p. 130).

I believed I could tell the story when it should be ready so that I could then craft it in written form as a chapter for this volume. In so doing, I forgot the ‘will of the body’ in the process which would not be rushed to reveal itself in symbolic form and on demand at a pre-specified point in time (Sparkes, 2013, p. 209).

I write entirely to find out what I’m thinking, what I’m looking at, what I see and what it means (Didion in Popova, 2012).

Sparkes points out the time needed for somatic experience to reach verbalisation e.g. his question: What are the consequences for the autoethnographic author of denying or by-passing these carnal ways of knowing? (2013, p. 210).

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4. TOILETS ARE THE PROPER PLACE FOR ‘OUTPUTS’!

A Tale of Knowledge Production and Publishing with Students in Higher Education

PART ONE: THE PRESENTATION

Delegate: ‘Hi Alec. I’m going to be at your presentation later. I want to find out more about co-publishing. I’ve never done this before, but it looks like it’s something we’re going to be expected to do more and more.’

Alec: ‘Yes, I guess so. Students are increasingly coming to be seen as co-producers of knowledge rather than just passive recipients of it. Good thing too! I’m going to be talking about this, and its highs and lows.’

Nurturing Co-Construction

It’s mid-July, 2016 and I’m presenting my work at the University of Brighton’s annual Teaching and Learning Conference. Its title this year is ‘Nurturing Co-Construction,’ and the 30 or so delegates at my session are mostly University of Brighton academics, some of whom I know very well as they work in my school.

I start my presentation in a light-hearted way by disclosing that I’m in my last 10 months before retirement and old-age pension, so it’s a privilege to be able to reflect on what I think has been one of the most gratifying areas of my 20-plus years as an academic in higher education. I disclose that I’ve recently been passed over for a professorial appointment, which might not have been the case had I been more of a ‘big bucks’ research grant enthusiast. They laugh when I say that the kind of ‘grant attraction’ that interests me the most is the one where the students I work with are attracted to researching and writing with Alec Grant, who is likewise attracted to doing this with them.

A surge of pleasure rushes through me as I tell them that for over a decade I’ve regularly co-published with current and former undergraduate and postgraduate students. This has amounted to 9 articles in international peer-reviewed journals, 9 in national equivalents, 4 books with students and ex-students as co-editors, with 1 currently in press, and 4 book chapters.

In the hour or so before my conference slot, I rehearsed what I hoped would be a hubris-busting statement: ‘I’m very proud about the “impact” our work has made, in what for me is the best sense of the term. When I first heard my publications described as “outputs” by a professor in my school whose role was to increase our

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Research Excellence Framework (REF) scores, I had the immediate thought that toilets are the proper place for outputs!’ This raises a few giggles among delegates when I say it, and I wait for the laughter to die down before mustering the necessary gravitas to go on to tell them ‘I’m talking about impact in the sense of our writing being helpful for people and the development of useful knowledge.’

I say that I can back this assertion up with my Google Scholar Citations, ResearchGate data, from feedback sent to me by the publishing houses who’ve hosted our books, and by constituent groups and individuals. Direct feedback from those groups and individuals about our work testifies to the ways in which it has comforted and helpfully troubled and provoked people. According to their accounts, some of them have also made subsequent positive changes to their lives and how they story their identities, experiences and beliefs as a consequence.

I also recognize the helpful and useful impact our published work has made in the shape of new research and writing collaborations, and research and practice developments across autoethnography, cognitive behavioural therapy and practice, mental health practice more generally, and organizational and curriculum development. I tell delegates that the autoethnographic work I’ve been involved in with Drs Nigel Short and Lydia Turner (Grant et al., 2015; Short et al., 2007, 2008, 2013; Turner et al., in press) has contributed to the popularity of this methodology in the social and human sciences and nursing. Indeed, 2016 saw major changes made to the editorial policy and practices of the leading international journal, *Nurse Education Today* as a direct result of our writing (Grant, 2016; Short & Grant, 2016).

Delegates hear that I’ve known Nigel and Lydia for over 20 years, originally as undergraduate and postgraduate students and now as friends and esteemed scholarly colleagues. Our book, *Contemporary British Autoethnography* (Short et al., 2013), has this year (2016) resulted in a transatlantic collaboration in producing and editing the first text addressing international perspectives on autoethnographic research and practice (Turner et al., in press).

I go on to describe how, again in consequence of our work, 2016 marked the start of interest and use of autoethnography as a new methodology in Norwegian health and social care research. This developed from the initial interest shown by Trude Klevan, a Norwegian PhD student, and her supervisor, Professor Bengt Karlsson. Trude and Bengt, whom I’ve also now co-published with (Klevan et al., in press), came across my single- and co-authored autoethnographic and related work in 2015, recognizing its relevance for Trude’s own scholarship and research. Since then, and following their fortnight spent with myself, Lydia, Nigel and our autoethnography colleagues at the University of Brighton in Spring, 2016, Trude and Bengt have started an autoethnography interest group in their home university in Norway.

I then turn to the fact that for many years I was the course leader for the University of Brighton’s MSc in Cognitive Psychotherapy. I say that in this context I’m also proud that my published work with students and ex-students turned colleagues on the organisational mediation of cognitive behavioural practice has influenced the curricula of UK universities teaching this approach. This includes
the University of Oxford’s Advanced Diploma in Cognitive Psychotherapy, which started using the principles described and discussed in our first co-edited book (Grant et al., 2004) soon after its publication.

Organisational mediation, in the form of the negative impact of local custom and practice rules of work settings, often undermined the knowledge transfer between my cognitive psychotherapy MSc curricula and my students’ clinical practice. So, with students and ex-students who were directly affected by this problem, I built on my original idea of formulating work settings according to the cognitive behavioural principles normally used to help clients in therapy understand and more effectively tackle their difficulties. This included conceptualising work settings in terms of their socially constructed and tacitly held core beliefs, and related procedural rules and thinking errors, all of which contributed to the problematic relational, behavioural and emotional consequences experienced by the students I have taught (Grant & Mills, 2000; Grant et al., 2004, 2006; Poole & Grant, 2005).

I tell delegates that I have written confirmation from my publishing editor at SAGE that our cognitive Behavioural books (Grant et al., 2004, 2008, 2010) have consistently kept their place in the top 20 of SAGE best sellers in recent years, and that ‘Assessment and Case Formulation in Cognitive Behavioural Therapy’ (Grant et al., 2008) is a standard in courses in different universities in the UK and beyond. I end this part of my presentation by informing delegates that the cognitive behavioural literature review and theoretical development articles, co-written with Sirous Mobini, an experimental psychologist postgraduate student on the Masters in Cognitive Psychotherapy degree I led, have also prompted international developments in cognitive behavioural therapy research and practice (Mobini & Grant, 2007; Mobini et al., 2006, 2007).

Benefits

_Alec: ‘I’ve got this idea, based on what we’ve been talking about... I think we could shape it up into something publishable. Are you up for that?’_

_Student: ‘God... I’ve never done this before... I don’t know if I can.’_

At this stage in my presentation, I’m aware that I’m probably the oldest person in the room and I want to give the younger delegates something hopeful and tangible to take away for their own futures. I begin by describing what I see as the main general benefit of co-writing and publishing with students and ex-students turned colleagues. I tell them that I think this is best described as a mutuality of transformational learning and development. In a few people I’ve worked with in this way, this has exceeded the duration of their degree programmes. I understand the development of long-standing writing and inquiry partnerships as a form of extended qualitative inquiry based on ‘Friendship as Method’ (Tillmann-Healy, 2003). As mentioned earlier, in my work with Lydia Turner and Nigel Short this has resulted in a recently secured transatlantic collaboration with Tony Adams, one of the major figures in autoethnography in the USA, and a collaboration with our
new, neophyte autoethnographic scholar friends in Norway. I palpably feel how we are all helping each other to be the best we can possibly be, academically and in some respects morally.

In terms of more specific benefits, I say that engaging with and writing about knowledge-to-practice dilemmas and contradictions, and then feeding this back into curriculum development, is what critical pedagogy is all about for me. Following Eisner (1994), this constitutes merging the null with the explicit curriculum (Grant & Radcliffe, 2015). I describe the differences between explicit, implicit and null curricula. In Eisner’s terms, the explicit curriculum refers to the publicly advertised programme of study, or formal curriculum. The implicit curriculum includes the values and expectations associated with but not described in the formal curriculum. The null curriculum in contrast refers to the often important knowledge that’s been left out of the explicit curriculum, either by accident or ideological design (Grant & Radcliffe, 2015).

Picking up on my points made earlier, I move on to elaborate on my co-writing about what I see as a fourth curriculum, which I believe is often neglected in vocational degrees. The insidious ‘way things are done around here’ curriculum is the one that students and graduates are gradually socialised into in their practice settings by their more established work colleagues. This fourth curriculum constitutes negative organisational mediation of the explicit academic curriculum. It functions to trivialise, undermine or sabotage students’ good and creative practice intentions, aspirations and idealism. I stress again that the specifics of such knowledge-to-practice dilemmas and contradictions (between what should and but actually does happen) drives much of my co-inquiry with students.

The dilemmas and contradictions I’ve written about with students have often focused on the insensitive and disgraceful ways that qualified healthcare staff actually treat people in their care. For example, individuals with the ‘Borderline Personality Disorder’ label and who self-harm are often managed in dehumanizing, inhumane and unintelligent ways in healthcare in the UK and beyond (Eastwick & Grant, 2004, 2005, 2008). In co-written work with Zo Eastwick, who was a postgraduate student and mental health specialist nurse in this area, we described and discussed this problem, identifying the curriculum and practice changes that we believed must logically address it.

At a more general level, the international mental health survivor movement testifies to the ways in which institutional psychiatry can often add extra layers of misery to human suffering. This includes ‘narrative violence’ – the serious damage rendered to the coherence and integrity of individuals’ biographical understandings of their life histories and identities as a result of their time spent as mental health patients (Grant et al., 2015).

In this context, in its current state of guilt by association and complicity with institutional psychiatry, I led on an article with Steve Smith, a mental health nursing undergraduate student, about why and how international mental health nursing curricula urgently needs to change (Smith & Grant, 2016). Our argument was that this is because, although portrayed as benign and benevolent, the medicalizing of human problems of living inevitably leads to the ‘othering’ of
some people – marking them out as not just different, but as dysfunctional and unacceptable as humans in many ways.

This professional and corporate construction of misery-as-illness profits both the psychopharmaceutical (BigPharma) industries and the so called ‘psy disciplines,’ including mental health nursing. In mainstream institutional psychiatric practice, these disciplines, dominated by biomedical psychiatry, are implicated in a complicit relationship with BigPharma. This creates a problem for those recovering from periods of extreme psychological distress because the recovery concept is always in danger of being colonised by nurses and other mental health workers.

In well intentioned ways, which they are usually not critically consciously aware of because they are so much a part of it, these workers manage to camouflage their inscription within institutional psychiatry. They do this by conceptually glazing ‘recovery’ with a sugar coating of humanistic and collaborative terms, while their bottom-line practices and assumptions both reveal and reinforce this inscription (Klevan, 2016; Klevan et al., in press). All of this directly disadvantages those who embrace ‘recovery’ from extreme psychological distress in existential and other non-biomedical ways (Smith & Grant, 2016).

In the last couple of years, I have introduced the concept of ‘hybridity/hybrid identity’ to my writing with some students and ex-students turned colleagues who, like me, regard themselves as survivors of the institutional mental health system and related cultural oppression. My aim has been to exploit this concept to undermine ‘othering’ representational practices in mental health qualitative inquiry. I originally borrowed the hybrid concept from post-colonial scholarship to identify myself and my co-writers as culturally mixed – neither exclusively mental health scholars nor mental health survivors, but scholar-survivors.

A related aim is to challenge the cultural hegemony of what I see as ‘one side of the fence’ scholarship, within which it is assumed to be acceptable to write either as a mental health academic or professional, or as a mental health survivor, but not break tacitly held cultural rules by producing work which speaks from both identity positions simultaneously. So, in a refusal of such exclusively single identity representational practice, Nigel Short and I have recently written about recovery from extreme psychological distress from our standpoints as ex-mental health professionals-academics-survivors, in the context of both narrative (Grant et al., 2015) and poetic (Short & Grant, 2016) inquiry. I have also employed hybrid writing with Jaime Naish and Amy Barlow, undergraduate mental health nursing students, to explore LGBTIU concerns (Grant et al., 2016) and the use of trapeze in recovery (Barlow & Grant, in press).

Challenges

Alec: You’ve been telling me for weeks now that you’re nearly finished your chapter for the book. I’m really starting to feel that you’ve been bullshitting me. Am I right?
Ex-student: Okay, I’m really sorry Alec. I hoped I could get something together but haven’t. And to tell you the truth, my heart’s not in it. I didn’t know how to say this to you. I didn’t want to let you down...

I bring my presentation to an end by talking about some of the challenges I’ve experienced in sustaining motivation for co-publishing among students, in terms of facilitating the development of their necessary scholarly, intellectual, writing and representational skills. I think that many students are often seduced by the real and imagined kudos of writing, editing or contributing to a book. However, reality kicks in when they begin to realise the hard graft involved. Some may then want to back out, but will find this difficult to do in ways that don’t result in a loss of face.

At the very worst I’ve had to sack an ex-student co-writer, illustrated in the brief dialogue above from 2004. More minor issues include moving ex-/student writers to a point where they can accept that the consistent and appropriate use of apostrophes is not a trivial and issue that I’m unreasonably and pedantically obsessed about; that it’s just as important for them to provide complete and accurate references to match citations as it is to stick to a good dental hygiene regime; that adherence to the rules of grammar and syntax isn’t simply an irritating obstacle to their creativity; and that if they want to be good at writing they have to practice practise practise it as a craft, and learn from and through such practice, not just assume that, like riding a bicycle, they can do it any time they want because they mastered the how-to basics as pre-pubescent. Taking students to task over these more or less dramatic issues has been painful and somewhat risky for us. Unless handled reasonably and more or less effectively, the consequence might easily have been long term damage to self-esteem and relationships.

I think this aspect of co-writing has been as much an apprenticeship in project-, people- and self-management for me as it has been for students who’ve engaged with me in the process. Clearly, in spite of ideological rhetoric to the contrary, under- and post-graduate education does not comprehensively equip students with the resources, skills, knowledge, experience or level of practice essential in writing for publication. Because of this, in hard but ultimately rewarding work, I’ve found myself having to adopt a composite persona, composed of shifting permutations of teacher, mentor, role model, boss, bully and affiliative nurturer elements.

In terms of being a teacher-mentor-role model, I have always exposed the people I co-write with to the ways in which I set about writing, involving them in the process from an early stage. Depending on the nature of the project and the relative experience of my co-writers, I sometimes have to make it more or less explicitly clear that I’m the boss in the process. And I set the bar high. This does mean that I have to come down hard on ex-/student co-writers from time to time, but I try to do this in a caring and containing way that helps them develop as scholars.

I haven’t always managed this as successfully as I would have liked, and I’ve had to work on my level of sensitivity along the way. My natural propensity is to be direct and blunt with these co-writers (and others in my life and work), and I seem to have been born with a tact gene deficit. Moreover, with my ex-
psychotherapist head on, I realise that there’s been a certain amount of acting out on both sides from time to time. This has included regression to sulky infantilism on the part of students, and morphing into incredible hulk-angry parent on mine. And then there’s the sibling rivalry that has occurred when co-writing with a few ex-students on the same book project, who all note the extent of my editing of their chapters and make intra-group comparisons. At worst, I’ve experience rejection of, and rebellion against, me as a (sometimes parent) writing project leader figure. Thankfully, this doesn’t seem to last for long most of the time, and acknowledgement of and working through them has usually healed such alliance ruptures.

In Conclusion...

My presentation is generally well received, resulting in polite, mutually respectful discussion at the very end, but little more than this. I finish off by saying that, at best, I have witnessed rapid psychological growth among student and ex-student turned colleague collaborators, in a trajectory that moves through scholarly pubescence and adolescence to maturity, which is extremely gratifying for me. Although I have played only a very small part in their writing and publishing achievements, as they have of course in mine, I’m proud of the fact that Nigel Short and Lydia Turner are now lead editors of their own books (Short et al., 2013; Turner et al., in press), with me as third author, whose role – as far as I’m concerned – is to help co-steer the editorial process with them.

PART 2: BEYOND THE PRESENTATION AND EMERGING IMPLICATIONS

The Invitation

Dr Jess Moriarty contacted me in the summer of 2016, around the time I was preparing my presentation for the Teaching and Learning conference, to ask if I would consider writing a chapter in this present volume. This contributed to a happy synchrony of events for me in several ways. From the time of being one of her two doctoral supervisors a few years back, I have been very proud of Jess as a rapidly developing young academic, of my own contribution to this development, and of the fact that her first major publication was her doctoral thesis (Moriarty, 2014). I therefore jumped at the chance as her invitation allowed me to further our scholarly co-inquiry, develop and consolidate my presentation as an extended text, and, as I will now go on to discuss, consider some of its emerging implications from a critically reflexive position.

Troubling the Neoliberal Agenda

The fact that it’s politically expedient in our new public management universities to position students as active producers rather than passive recipients of knowledge impacts little on me. I’ve done co-inquiry with students for years, independent of a
higher educational policy and a teaching and learning environment that has increasingly come to resemble a production line. In the knowledge factory, scholarly and research work re-branded as ‘outputs’ seems to lose much of its intrinsic value as it disappears into an ether of auditing and meta-auditing. To further abuse metaphors, co-inquiry for me has thus functioned as a kind of welcome oasis in this philistine and vulgarising desert of neoliberalised higher education (Grant, 2014).

I have felt increasingly professionally isolated over the last two decades, witnessing many of my ‘academic’ colleagues morphing into civil servants, in terms of how they work and the apparent focus and limits of their work. This often looks to me like a dogged, but less than happy engagement with implementing national and/or local policy initiatives. At classroom and writing levels, this translates in turn into a kind of ersatz form of academic work, which is often dry and educationally-technocratic and normative in support of dominant cultural agendas. I believe that such a state of affairs squeezes the life and soul out of higher education, excising much of its passion and obscuring the hope and possibility of students and academics around engaging in critical co-inquiry, the aims of which should be to change the world for the better.

All of that said, the irony of the fact that I’ve cited the use of neoliberal self-audit tools to gauge and argue the impact of my work in part 1 of this chapter doesn’t escape me. Doing so marks me as yet another academic who’s flattered and seduced by the culture he simultaneously berates. It’s also true that much of my co-writing, especially that which was published in international peer-reviewed journals, was accepted in the REF audit in my institution. Like many others, I am caught up in the neoliberal game I despise, while trying to conserve and act on my idea about what co-writing and publishing in higher education should be about in the broader context of the universal purpose of education.

Co-Inquiry as Critical Consciousness

Noam Chomsky has often remarked that the positive world-changing purpose of education is to disturb, in the sense of challenging thoughtless complacency and stuck-in-the-box, paradigm-entrapped thinking. In this regard, I believe that engaging in critical co-inquiry requires the concomitant development of critical consciousness, a topic largely absent from the dialogue in my own higher education institution and many others I have visited over the years. Freire (1970/1996) described such critical consciousness as ‘conscientization,’ and a decade earlier Mills (1959/2000) termed it the ‘sociological imagination.’ In contemporary parlance, this translates as ‘critical reflexivity,’ which demands that academics and students constantly strive to become increasingly aware of how their identities are co-shaped both with culture and the historical moments they find themselves in. I hope I have inculcated this in some measure in all the people who have co-written with me.
Whose Story Is It?

In this endeavour, although paid by the university, I like to think I am more frequently to be found in the nurturing environment of what Rolfe (2013) described as ‘the paraversity.’ In metaphorical terms, the paraversity can usefully be conceptualised as loosely co-ordinated patches of creative and unruly ‘ideas gardens’ (Grant and Radcliffe, 2015). Ideas gardens, ablaze with rapidly spreading multi-coloured, constantly hybridizing blooms, are concealed in the larger parks of universities, where grass is kept neatly trimmed and a restricted quota of uniformly coloured flowers constantly monitored to make sure they conform in height, width and spread.

My paraversity work has functioned as the welcome opportunity cost of my own dogged refusal to prostitute myself, and my time and effort, in chasing research grants for academic promotion, when the chances of being successful in this endeavor are usually slim, and the resultant research work often normatively-rather than critically-determined. To borrow from Schon (1987), what’s at stake for me is the issue of reflexive professional ethics, in my need to engage with research and scholarship on the basis of professional artistry rather than technical rationality. As Trude Klevan remarked to me recently, this signals an ethical obligation to do research properly rather than trying to stay one step ahead in thinking about the next grant application.

My time spent in ideas gardens may seem to some however as rather self-indulgent and, in terms of the co-inquiry and co-publishing I have described in this chapter, may provoke questions around what I thought I was doing and what I hoped to and did actually gain from it? The moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre (1985) argues that a human life ultimately emerges as a unified meta-narrative embedded in a plurality of other narratives. I’m aware that the first part of this chapter could be un-problematically read off either as a reasonable and worthy achievement biography, or as me writing myself into a dominant metanarrative of sustained, benevolent, scholarly virtue. A more cynical reading however might be that all my co-inquirer students and ex-students turned colleagues have been represented as bit-part players in the Great Alec Grant Show. However, they are just as likely to have placed themselves centre-stage in their own stories as developing academics and people, with me playing a supporting role. All of these readings will do for me, as I can think of much worse tales to be caught up in!

Although it might be acknowledged as a piece of narrative social academic history, with plural rather than single meanings, I think part 1 of this chapter can still be reasonably read off as a straightforward witness account of the benefits and challenges of co-inquiry and co-publishing with students and ex-students. In this regard, it is an account of work done in the context of environments which constantly throw up obstacles to its fulfilment. The fact of privileging policy and research grant-chasing imperatives over student and academic co-inquiry gives the lie to current policy and organisational rhetoric about students as co-producers of knowledge.
GRANT

**Kindness versus Reptilian Survival**

I think that in the face of these institutional and organisational contradictions, my co-writing successes are in large part down to the fact that, by disposition, I am generally a kind, generous and big-hearted man, an assertion which may appear immodest, but which I believe will be attested to by most of the people who know me. However, to what extent does this mark me out as a kind of evolved and friendly, but misplaced, dinosaur living outside of its eco-system? It seems to me that university life these days is perhaps based more on reptilian survival than on kindness (Phillips & Taylor, 2010) practised in broader contexts of passionate and productive human-relating.

Reptilian survival is, I believed, well-illustrated in and represented by the most boring and dry kind of academic ‘outputs’ that tend to function as the basic nourishment of the REF monster. Moriarty (2013, 2014) has incisively described these as exemplars of ‘Halal’ writing – work that exists and thrives even though the blood has been drained from it. Moriarty’s metaphor might well be extended to ‘zombie-halal,’ in the sense that such work is often deadening and deadly to read, reflecting creativity-murdering environments.

**The Biographical Self as Convenient Fiction**

The first part of this chapter might certainly read as though it’s been written by a passionate, blood-saturated scholar, whose work and identity reflects this and has developed coherently through time. But does passionate co-inquiry and writing presume or necessarily require a coherent self or selves behind it as an endeavour? The coherent, single, non-contradictory, biographical self only makes sense in liberal-humanist terms. However it functions as a dominant convenient fiction posing as an essential, foundational and timeless truth, for the public and for vocational professionals and academics alike. It seems especially valued by people in the latter two groups who have an investment in the presumed authenticity and straightforward believability of ‘lived experience’ (Grant, 2014, in press).

With my critical mental health scholar hat on, I know that this fiction is thus essential for the continued survival of psychotherapy and counselling clinics, and related training and writing. It also serves an important corporate function in higher education. I don't think the new public management university copes very well with the idea of fragmented, contingent and contradictory academic selves, beyond occasionally discussing this in the abstract as a scholarly topic area, as though its proper place must always be outside of the university-as-business arena. This is a strange and troubling organisational double standard, as the concept of identity (sometimes referred to as subjectivity) as a constantly contingent and shifting phenomenon across time-space is supported in social cognition, postmodern, poststructural, eastern religious and philosophical, and literary scholarship.

Along with several of my co-writers, I have no trouble with the idea of myself as contradictory, fragmented and unfinished, with no real and fixed core to my identity. This means that who ‘I’ am in any situation really depends on who I’m
Toilets are the proper place for ‘Outputs’!

talking to or with, in regard to both real and imagined audiences,’ including myself as audience. That said, I’m just as guilty as other writers, indeed most human beings, in being more or less unconsciously driven by the psychological phenomenon of social desirability bias in my constant ex post facto attempts to achieve narrative coherence in my work and life.

This point equally applies to those I write into my stories, including in this chapter, and throws up interesting representational ethical issues if the presentation of self and others is accepted as an inevitable work of fiction. Life-as-narrative allows for no bottom line of fact or transcendent ‘really true’ single story, or for essential and coherent flesh and blood people behind such a story. As a case in point, in part 1 of this chapter I discuss how I used the ‘hybridity’ concept in my co-writing with students and ex-students turned colleagues. It is a fact that, as far as I’m aware, I was the first person to use the ‘hybridity’ term in published mental health nursing qualitative inquiry. However, from a liberal-humanist perspective my work and part 1 of this chapter could be read off as presuming too much. It might be argued from this perspective that I have colonised, or perhaps more specifically counter-colonised, my co-writers’ identities and representational practices by situating them and our co-produced work into this conceptual area? If, on the other hand, my co-writers’ identities are just as much a product of representational fiction as my own in everything I write, then the extent to which I am ethically compromising real, flesh and blood people might be argued as less of an issue.

I’ll conclude my chapter by leaving you, dear reader, to ponder on or ignore all of these heady issues, perhaps follow up some of the references below, and maybe go on to engage in some co-writing with willing students (or if you are a student, with willing academics). While you’re doing any or all of these things, I’ll hopefully be happily and purposefully retired. There is one thing I can assure you about, though, before saying goodbye. This is that, to paraphrase the late Kurt Vonnegut (1969), everything I’ve asserted and described in part 1 of this chapter is more or less true and more or less happened!

Acknowledgements

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TOILETS ARE THE PROPER PLACE FOR ‘OUTPUTS’!


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Understanding and mystery are central to the writing project. [The] writer unravels a mystery, discovering and then understanding what was previously hidden and unclear. (Denzin, 1994, p. 505)

PRELUDE: INTRODUCING MY WRITER-TEACHER SELF

Conle (2000) explained how a writer’s personal history can provide a context for making meaning of personal and professional experience:

We are burdened with a past for which we are accountable – even though it is not all of our own making – and with a future that is both unpredictable as well as foreshadowed by preconceived images of it …. Constraints of the past and foreshadowed futures at each point of the writing suggest particular horizons within which it can proceed. (p. 192)

A burden that I carry from my past and for which I feel accountable is the educational privilege that characterised my school experience as a White, middle-class, high-achiever in apartheid South Africa. While it might seem disingenuous to describe educational privilege as a burden, in looking back over my professional life as a teacher and university educator, I can see how my initial choice to become a teacher and my subsequent pedagogic choices and undertakings have been influenced by my emotional distress at having been privileged, primarily because of my racial classification, at the expense of other children.

The apartheid policy of separate education that was in place during my schooling (1979–1990) meant that South African schoolchildren were kept apart by boundaries created by the National Party government’s system of racial grouping (Kallaway, 2002). White schools received a disproportionately greater amount of government funding and had superior facilities and resources, while African, Coloured and Indian schools were purposefully disadvantaged in innumerable ways (Christie, 1991). In practice, this policy ensured that an unyielding hierarchy of racialised educational privilege constrained all children’s school lives.

During my early primary school years at a White government school, I was not aware of my separation from other South African children due to restrictive categories of race. My social life took place within the confines of an urban English-speaking White middle-class suburb. I did not know any children of other races and so did not feel our separation.
In my later primary school years, I did become a little more informed about the discriminatory practices of apartheid. Because contemporary South African history and politics were not part of the prescribed school curriculum, my knowledge came from unofficial sources, such as my older brother. I must have also caught glimpses of poorly resourced rural African schools while on long road trips with my parents. What I am sure I did not see were the urban African, Coloured and Indian schools as these were situated in racially demarcated areas into which I never went. I do not think that I realised then that these schools lacked the libraries, sports fields and swimming pools that were common to the urban White schools with which I was familiar.

At the end of grade 7, I was expected to continue on to the local White government high school. But, I wanted to join my best friend at an independent girls’ school. My father had died when I was in grade 6 and my mother could not afford private school fees on a nurse’s salary; nevertheless, I was able to go to the school of my choice through an academic scholarship.

At that time in South Africa (1986), independent White schools could admit a limited number of children from other race groups (Dolby, 2001). I remember feeling a kind of relief (and, I have to confess, a sense of moral superiority) in being able to make a choice to go to a so-called multiracial school. However, in reality almost everyone in my secondary school was White and, looking back, I can see how this still seemed to be viewed as the norm in terms of the dominant culture of the school. Thus, although my awareness of racialised educational privilege in South Africa did increase somewhat during my high school years, my understanding of its actual impact on other people’s lives was still restricted by a mostly White environment.

I went on to study at university in 1991. As an undergraduate, I met some students who had attended schools that were very different from my own. Through my interactions with these students, I started to understand a little more about the discrepancies between my schooling and theirs. I also discovered more about the educational deprivation of the majority of South African children through my experiences as a volunteer tutor for secondary school learners from nearby African schools who came to the university campus for extra lessons on Saturday mornings. I enjoyed my time as a tutor because it gave me a sense of purpose. But I also often felt discouraged by the limited intervention that I could make. Although I had not planned to become a teacher when I left school, I now decided to study for a postgraduate teaching qualification, with a sense that I wanted to redeem my ill-gotten educational privilege by using it in a productive way that would have some benefit for others as well as for me.

When I returned to university after several years of teaching and started writing a personal history narrative as part of my Master’s thesis (Pithouse, 2003), I gained some more insight into my troubled relationship with the “mis-educative” (Dewey, 1938/1963, p. 25) system of privilege that enclosed apartheid schooling in a shroud of disconnectedness and discrimination. I began to recognise my school experiences in the work of scholars such as Connell (1993, p. 15), who argued that “education that privileges one child over another is giving the privileged child a
corrupted education, even as it gives him or her a social or economic advantage.” I concluded my Master’s thesis with a commitment to further exploration of what I had learnt from my own experience during my Master’s research about the educative value of teachers reconstructing and making meaning from their personal histories.

After completing my Master’s, I started teaching postgraduate teacher education classes on a part-time basis at the South African university where I had enrolled for doctoral studies. Because of my learning from my Master’s research, I consciously made space in all the courses I taught to offer students opportunities and means to make sense of their professional learning as teachers by discussing and writing their personal histories, which Samaras, Hicks, and Berger (2004) described as “powerful ways of promoting teachers’ professional growth towards the end of self-knowing and professional identity” (p. 927). Teaching and learning through composing and sharing personal history narratives became a focus of my doctoral research (Pithouse, 2007) and I have continued with this practice throughout my career as a teacher educator.

Currently I am employed full-time to teach postgraduate classes and supervise students’ research in the academic specialisation of Teacher Development Studies. My teaching and supervision are located in the area of professional learning, with a focus on professionals initiating and directing their own learning to enhance their continuing growth (Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras, 2015). My students are practising teachers with diverse educational backgrounds, teaching various subjects in schools and higher education institutions. The majority of these students would have been classified as African, Indian or Coloured during the apartheid era. Those who are about my age (in their 40s) or older would have been educated in racially segregated schools during apartheid and many of the younger students would have attended schools that still bore scars from the bitter experiences of apartheid education.

An unexpected consequence of using personal history narrative writing as a teaching practice has been that my own professional learning has been shaken up, deepened and extended as I have not only listened to my students’ stories of lived experience, but also helped them to write these stories, which are in many ways so very different from mine. I see this shift in my learning reflected in Richards’ (2016) argument for bringing personal narratives into higher education in South Africa:

It is useful for witnessing, exploring issues of social justice and social change, for knowing what it is like. It could also help us to understand our identities in a more nuanced way and to break down borders and boundaries. It may also promote healing. (p. 171)

As I have written about elsewhere (Pithouse, 2007, 2011; Pithouse-Morgan, 2016), many of my students’ stories of lived experiences during and after apartheid have been emotionally distressing, both for them and for me. I have come to see how my emotional distress is integrally linked to my own felt burden of racialised privilege. In coming to know more about what it was/is like to not be a White, middle-class,
high achieving learner in South Africa, I have experienced painful, sometimes paralysing, feelings of guilt at my corrupted privilege and at my exemption from the hurtful memories carried by so many of my students (Pithouse-Morgan, 2016). And yet, I have also increasingly become aware that witnessing the writing of my students’ personal history narratives is healing for me in the sense that it is repairing a wound in my humanness caused by being born into and growing up in an almost exclusively White world, a world of privilege that was made possible by harm done to others categorised as non-White. Also, from a different perspective, healing has often been highlighted by my students in relation to the cathartic and restorative impact of coming to self-knowing through personal narrative writing (DeSalvo, 2000; Nash & Viray, 2014). As one of my Master’s students wrote:

Self-study enabled me to re-examine my past and present personal and professional experiences. I had a chance to learn from my personal history and there was also a healing process that took place within me. Engaging in self-study gave me a chance to consider how and why I respond the way I do to certain situations that I face as a teacher. (Magubane, 2014, p. vi)

SETTING THE SCENE FOR THIS CHAPTER

A little more than a decade ago, I published an article titled: “This gave us a chance to feel like we are authors”: A chapter in my story of learning to teach writing (Pithouse, 2004). The article was based on my Master’s research, which was a narrative inquiry into a story writing project that I had designed and carried out in my capacity as a grade 7 English teacher (Pithouse, 2003). In the article, I reflected on what I saw as the generally mis-educative practices of writing pedagogy during my own schooling years in apartheid South Africa and during my pre-service teacher education, where “the emphasis was on matching a finished piece of writing to a set mark category, rather than on intervening positively in the actual writing process” (Pithouse, 2004, p. 15). I went on to describe how my thinking about the pedagogy of writing had evolved over time:

Through reflection on my teaching experiences, interaction with like-minded colleagues, and reference to others’ stories of teaching writing … I came to believe that writing could be a more expansive, fruitful experience for the learners. (p. 15)

This book chapter, written after my second decade of teaching (as a university-based teacher educator), serves as a kind of sequel to the 2004 article, which was written at the end of my first decade of teaching (as a schoolteacher). The catalyst for writing this chapter was the recent construction of a teaching portfolio in which I was required to elucidate my educational approach and teaching methods as a university educator. Working on the teaching portfolio made me aware that my professional learning about teaching writing seemed to have developed in some significant ways since the 2004 article; this awareness gave me the desire to revisit and inquire further into my learning about the pedagogy of writing. I had an
BEGINNING TO UNRAVEL A NARRATIVE TENSION

intuitive feeling that there could be something important for me to discover through such an inquiry.

This chapter offers an insider account of a qualitative, narrative inquiry into my professional learning about teaching writing. My understanding of professional learning is aligned to Webster-Wright’s (2009) conceptualisation of authentic professional learning as “as embedded and constructed in the experience [emphasis added] of being a professional in practice” (pp. 724–725). Hence, my aim was to write a candid, self-reflexive story of experience that would take into consideration how my own history, environment and viewpoints could have influenced the educational representations and explanations offered.

I begin the chapter by explaining my initial choices about the narrative features or literary elements for my inquiry. Next, I describe how I retraced my professional learning about the teaching of writing over a 20 year period. I go on to clarify my preference for poetry as a creative mode to unravel a narrative tension in my lived experience of learning to teach writing. To follow, I illustrate how I composed a descriptive portrayal of this lived experience in the shape of two found poems in a renga format, which provided material for a further, interpretive portrayal comprising a sequence of three tanka poems and finally, a free verse poem, which encapsulated my discovery. To end, I consider how mindfulness of what I have started to unravel through poetic narrative inquiry might enrich my future teaching and learning. I also draw attention to poetic professional learning as a generative practice that others might use in unravelling narrative tensions in their own stories of experience.

GETTING STARTED ON A NARRATIVE INQUIRY INTO MY PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Narrative inquiry is a qualitative research methodology that is used to understand human experiences as expressed and interpreted through stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) described narrative inquiry as “a dynamic process of living and telling stories, and reliving and retelling stories” (p. xiv), which is intended to awaken “possibilities for reliving, for new directions and new ways of doing things” (p. 189).

To begin with, I felt quite unsure about how to embark on an inquiry into 20 years of lived experience of professional learning about the pedagogy of writing. I was aware that composing and interpreting a story of lived experience through a narrative inquiry lens would require me to pay close attention to the narrative features or literary elements – such as characters, settings, and storylines – that influence and are influenced by stories of lived experience (Barone, 2008; Coulter & Smith, 2009). Questions that I asked myself included: Who will be the characters in this story? Whose voices will be heard? Which professional settings should I focus on? What will the storyline be?

With these questions in mind, I decided to delimit the inquiry by drawing from three instances where I had already stepped back from my teaching practice to document and reflect on my writing pedagogy. These were my Master’s research
(Pithouse, 2003), my doctoral research (Pithouse, 2007) – which was an inquiry into my professional learning as a novice teacher educator – and my recent teaching portfolio (unpublished, 2016). As field texts (or data sources) for the narrative inquiry, I chose the 2004 article, my doctoral thesis and my teaching portfolio. I was to be the protagonist in the story and the other characters would be my former grade 7 learners (participants in the Master’s research), my former postgraduate students (participants in the doctoral research), and my former and current postgraduate students (contributors to the teaching portfolio). These characters had added their voices to the three field texts through journal writing (learners and students), anonymous written student evaluations (former and current students) and audio-recorded discussions (former and current students). The settings were to be the well-resourced girls’ school where I taught from 1998 to 2002 and the research intensive university where I have been teaching on a part-time basis since 2003 and, subsequently, a full-time basis since 2010. While it was clear that the focus of the narrative inquiry was to be on my professional learning through teaching writing as a schoolteacher and as a university-based teacher educator, the storyline was yet to emerge.

In preparation for my Master’s and doctoral research, I had followed the ethical clearance procedures required by my university. I have also since obtained ethical clearance to conduct ongoing research into my own university-based teaching as part of several different research projects. In line with the undertakings that I made in order to obtain ethical clearance for my research, the field texts that I have drawn from in writing this chapter were created with the consent of all involved (including the parents of the learners who participated in my Master’s research).

**RETRACING MY PROFESSIONAL LEARNING ABOUT THE TEACHING OF WRITING**

As an opening move in the narrative inquiry, I retraced my professional learning about the teaching of writing as expressed in the three field texts that I had selected. I created a summary from each text to highlight my most significant learning.

*Table 1. A summary of my professional learning about the teaching of writing from my Master’s research (as articulated in Pithouse, 2004)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Summary</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Daily journal writing by the learners and by me encouraged reflection on our lived experiences of doing and teaching writing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A writing workshop atmosphere allowed for more freedom of movement in the classroom and promoted sharing and listening.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In teaching writing, I played the vital part of paying close attention to, and responding to, the individual writing process of each learner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learners felt that their interests, concerns and desires were being acknowledged because they could choose to write about topics that were personally meaningful to them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The creative possibilities of this story writing project made me more aware that</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
genuinely creative learning experiences were not an integral part of the learners’ school lives.

Because the learners were guided through a writing process and were helped to focus on each aspect of story writing at a time in the process when it was most meaningful, they felt more in control of and satisfied with their own writing.

The learners’ realisation that they really could be authors was cemented by the knowledge that their short stories would be published in a book and placed in the school library alongside the work of professional authors.

Table 2. A summary of my professional learning about the teaching of writing from my doctoral research (as articulated in Pithouse, 2007)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Taking a writing process approach and asking for multiple drafts of written assignments from students created opportunities for them to develop, practise, share, and revise their own writing process strategies.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Talking about writing in class was not sufficient. Giving guidelines and having whole class discussions did not necessarily aid all students in developing their own writing process strategies, particularly in relation to complex tasks such as making links between their own understandings and other authors’ ideas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practicable, hands-on writing activities done in class assisted students in becoming more aware of themselves as writers and in developing their own writing process strategies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My detailed, constructive written comments and questions contributed to students’ learning about writing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrating the teaching of writing into all the classes I taught contributed to students’ learning about writing as a process and themselves as writers.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. A summary of my professional learning about the teaching of writing from my teaching portfolio (as articulated in Pithouse-Morgan, 2016, unpublished)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Engaging students in pre-writing activities using arts-based and participatory modes – for example, collage-making, concept-mapping, drawing, or working with objects – can heighten interest in and stimulate ideas for writing.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asking students to begin by writing informally about their own experiences and observations can allow them to express themselves more authentically and alleviate fear of not being academic enough.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commenting on initial drafts of students’ writing without giving marks can encourage them to write more freely and lessen fear of failure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comprehensive written comments that acknowledge students’ efforts and accomplishments in writing can enhance their self-confidence as writers and help to cultivate an atmosphere of support and mutual trust.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giving detailed written comments that pose questions and offer advice can help students to see for themselves how they might extend and deepen their writing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-depth class discussions on written feedback on drafts can help students to understand what they have done well and what they need to pay attention to in future writing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asking students to compose self-reviews of written feedback can enable them to identify what they have done well and what needs more attention. This can also help students to apply their learning from one writing assignment or activity to the next.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working with students to support them in editing their own writing can help them to develop agency and independence as writers.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Creating summaries of my professional learning made me more mindful of how my approach to teaching writing had developed over the years through dialogue between my pedagogic practice and my increasing consciousness of how South African education under apartheid was generally characterised by a “strong behaviourist and non-inquiry ethos” (Henning & Van Rensburg, 2002, p. 85). Although I have critiqued a perceived lack of attention given to the teaching of writing during my own schooling (Pithouse, 2004; 2005), over the years I have become increasingly conscious of just how privileged my school experiences of learning to write were in comparison to the experiences of most of the students that I teach at my university.

Through discussions with students that I have worked with as a teacher educator, I have become more and more aware of how, in many apartheid-era schools, particularly those designated as African schools, the teaching of writing often took the form of reproduction of model essays and the teaching of reading as harvesting of information to be memorised and regurgitated (as illustrated in Madondo, 2014 and Ndaleni, 2013). I have also become increasingly alert to how, despite significant post-apartheid curriculum policy shifts, behaviourist and non-inquiry approaches persist in many South African schools and higher education institutions (Andrews & Osman, 2015; Bharuthram, 2012). Mindful of this, I have progressively embedded inquiry-oriented pedagogy throughout my teaching and supervision by using arts-based and participatory modes, which heighten engagement and deep thinking, dialogue and sharing, enjoyment, taking action, and emotional growth (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2013, pp. 85–87). Anonymous written student evaluations of my university teaching over recent years (2012–2016) have highlighted these “different methods of teaching”: “The way she conducts the lectures is an excellent example of how we should teach in our classroom. She always has a variety of ways of teaching [that] makes us interested!” Students whose research I supervise have also remarked in their supervision evaluations on my “multi-pronged approach in dealing with topics, e.g. arts-based, journal writings, drawings, collage, group discussions and memory-work as methodologies.”

Summarising my professional learning about the teaching of writing also showed me how I have increasingly aimed to facilitate students’ inventive and personally meaningful engagement with the challenge and adventure of writing through developing context-specific writing activities (Ivanič, 1998). I scaffold class assignments and research supervision tasks to encourage the growth of “authorial presence” (Ivanič, 1998, p. 26). Students begin by writing informally about their own experiences and observations and then deepen and extend this free writing in dialogue with relevant literature. Starting with free writing about matters that are personally significant to students enhances their confidence and enjoyment (Elbow, 2000; Ivanič, 1998). I take a process approach to writing by giving detailed, iterative written and oral feedback on plans and multiple drafts of assignments and chapters (Vardi, 2011). This formative feedback is regularly discussed in classes and supervision sessions. Student evaluations have drawn attention to the benefits of this approach:
What I enjoyed most about this module, was that in all our written tasks, we learnt to plan first, write a rough draft where positive feedback was always given. This gave me an energy to always strive more and give it all my attention.

She would always provide me with constructive feedback on my work. She would sit me down and explain the comments and suggestions about my work after she has supervised my chapters. Thereafter she will offer suitable guidelines and strategies to assist in correcting my work.

EXPLORING MY PROFESSIONAL LEARNING THROUGH POETRY

The word “professional” has roots in the Latin *profiteri*, meaning “declare openly” (profession, n.d.). In thinking about professional in this way, it can signify that professional learning (as a teacher or any other kind of professional) should involve going public with our learning as work in progress (Pithouse-Morgan, 2016). Producing the summaries (Tables 1–3) helped me to see more clearly what I had made public so far with respect to my professional learning about the teaching of writing. I felt quite comfortable with what I had openly declared in the 2004 article, my 2007 doctoral thesis, and my 2016 teaching portfolio. I had no sense of tension with any of what I had revealed. But, just as a novel requires unresolved tension to hold a reader’s interest in the storyline, so too a narrative inquiry requires tension to propel the inquiry (Conle, 2000). Clandinin and Connelly (1994) advised that a narrative interpretation of lived experience should be “simultaneously focused in four directions: inward and outward, backward and forward” (p. 417). In retracing my learning as articulated in the three field texts, I became aware that I needed to keep moving – inward and outward, backward and forward – to unravel a narrative tension.

Conle (2000) highlighted an intimate connection between tension and emotion in narrative inquiry, pointing out that narrative tension is often experienced as “emotional discomfort” (p. 197). More than two decades ago, Richardson (1993) drew attention to how “social science writing conventions (e.g. prose, passive voice, omniscient narrator) conceal” the emotionality of research (p. 706). Richardson demonstrated how creative writing modes, such as drama and poetry, could “violate [the] unwritten emotional rules” (p. 706) of conventional research writing practices, with the aim of making visible and palpable the often disregarded, and yet vital, emotional dimensions of research. Narrative inquiry, with its close alignment to the literary arts, calls for forms of written language that are more creative than the “standard style of … technical, boring and impersonal scientific writing” (Sand-Jensen, 2007, p. 723) that is often found in research texts. As Charon, Hermann, and Devlin (2016) pointed out, “to call writing ‘creative’ means not that it is fiction or fantasy but that it unleashes the curiosity and imagination of the writer” (p. 345).

Increasingly, poetry is being used by narrative inquirers and other qualitative researchers as a medium for imaginative and intriguing research writing (Clandinin...
In addition, poetry is progressively being understood as a mode of professional learning that can not only enhance self-insight but also invite others to participate in the subjective lived experience of an individual’s learning process (Pithouse-Morgan, 2016). For me then, poetry offered a creative mode to begin to unravel a narrative tension in my lived experience of learning to teach writing.

A narrative research text often begins with a descriptive portrayal of the phenomenon being studied (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994). In this portrayal, the researcher draws on the field texts in an attempt to recreate the texture and complexity of the phenomenon. The descriptive portrayal provides a basis for later interpretation. It is frequently in the creation of this portrayal that a narrative tension begins to become apparent (Conle, 2000).

Having decided to use poetry as a mode of narrative inquiry, I embarked on composing a descriptive portrayal in the form of found poems. Found poems are crafted through finding words and phrases in field texts (or data sources) and rearranging these words and phrases into poetic form (Butler-Kisber, 2005). In composing found poems, my purpose was move inward and outward, backward and forward through my three field texts to begin to unravel a tension in my professional learning about the teaching of writing.

I chose a renga format for the found poems. The renga is a traditional form of linked-verse Japanese poetry typically created by two or more poets as a way of communicating with each other (Poets.org, 2004a). The first stanza of a renga, with three lines in a 5/7/5 syllable count, is typically composed by one poet and the subsequent stanza, with two lines in a 7/7 syllable count, is typically composed by a second poet in response to the first stanza. The third stanza repeats the structure of the first and the fourth repeats the second, alternating in this pattern until the two poets have concluded their poetic conversation. I saw potential for the renga to serve as a kind of double voice poem that could bring my voice into dialogue with the voices of my learners and students. Here, I was inspired by the work of Johri (2015), who composed double voice poetry to study her teaching of writing.

I began by re-reading the three field texts, looking for my learners’ and students’ voices and my voice. As I read, I copied and pasted lines from the field texts into two new composite texts. One composite text (five pages long) was made up of quotations from my learners and students (which had originally been drawn from journal entries, student evaluations and audio recorded discussions). The other composite text (four pages long) was made up of extracts from what I had written in the field texts from my own perspective as a teacher of writing (which had originally been drawn from journal entries and audio recorded discussions). In keeping with the conventions of found poetry, I only added words or phrases from the field texts to the composite texts; no other sources were used (Butler-Kisber, 2005). The lines were pasted in the order in which I came across them in the field texts, with no separation between lines taken from the three different texts. In this way, excerpts from diverse field texts merged into two dense composite texts (as illustrated in Figures 1 and 2).
When I look back at all my work, I feel really proud of myself, proud that I can actually sit down and write a good story. It makes me feel special. Although I often get irritated with having to write in steps, I see the importance of it now. I now see that all the books in the library take a lot of work and I respect the authors. I have learnt how to write properly and I could easily write my own stories at home. This gave us a chance to feel like we are authors. I have never before been able to write a story with someone and put it in a book that anyone else can read. The fact That we dealt With language and writing Filled me with happiness I learned That writing is A thoughtful process And I am now More creative When writing One of the things I liked most About this module Was being introduced To the writing process. I’d never before had the chance to do any academic writing about myself. The fact that the style of writing was different from the academic writing I was used to made this piece of writing a challenge. I’d been used to using the third person and distancing myself from the story, but this time I had to be in it.

Figure 1. A brief section of the composite text made of quotations from learners and students

Mr O. and I spent about an hour today in the library going through a draft of his essay. I felt it was a useful session for both of us. Mr O. had obviously done a lot of reading and had included a great deal of information on HIV/AIDS in his draft. But, he hadn’t incorporated any examples of his lived experience or expressed his personal-professional-academic interest and aspirations. I tried to encourage him to develop his own voice and to link his reading with his experience—both personal and professional. I also explained that I would be interested in reading about his particular concerns, insights, and suggestions as the principal of a rural school. He appeared pleased and quite surprised that that was what was required. Mr O. seemed more confident and enthusiastic about the essay after our session. I had thought that the essay guidelines I’d given and the discussions we’d had in class would have made it clear that I was expecting the students to focus their writing around their individual personal-professional-academic interests in our area of study and to use their lived experience.

Figure 2. A brief section of the composite text made of what I had written in the field texts from my own perspective as a teacher of writing

In composing the initial renga poem (Figure 3), I began by reading and re-reading the composite text of learners’ and students’ voices to extract lines that evoked feelings of emotionally discomfoting tension in me. I then looked for possible responses to these lines in the composite text of my voice. Unlike in a traditional renga, I composed all the stanzas myself. I imagined a conversation between the other characters in the narrative inquiry and me, drawing on my learners’ and students’ voices for the initial stanza and then responding in my voice in the subsequent stanza, and so on. The composition of each stanza and of the renga as a whole was a slow, backward and forward process of selecting and
shedding, positioning and repositioning words and phrases to create a poetic dialogue between my voice and the voices of my learners and students. I crafted the renga over several months, in-between the other activities of my daily work as a teacher educator. In the end, I created a renga that began and ended with learners’ and students’ voices, rather than my voice. This meant that the dialogue was left unfinished, without a final response in my voice. I think that this was because I still felt hesitant about how to understand the tension that was beginning to unravel through the poem.

In the renga, the learners’ and students’ voices are portrayed on the left hand side of the poem and my voice is on the right hand side, in italics – for differentiation rather than emphasis. Of course, because I was selecting which words and phrases from the field texts to include in the renga, the voices of my

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**Figure 3. Renga 1: “I Feel So Confused”**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I Feel so Confused</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I set out feeling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>That my story will not be</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interesting to tell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I just quote and quote</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filling space with formal words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distancing my self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I pour my heart out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All these ideas come jumbling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Just mix together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel so confused</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About what things to put in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And what to leave out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It takes a long time!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I get irritated with</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More revising…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m still new in this</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think what you say is right</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is not easy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

Start with what matters to you
Be true to your own concerns

Use your own words to explain
Make links with your own story

Respond freely, without fear
Take the risk of making mistakes

It is time for you to feel
Your own way, to find your voice

My comments are suggestions
You can accept or reject
BEGINNING TO UNRAVEL A NARRATIVE TENSION

learners and students were mediated through my composition of the poem, revealing more about me than about the other characters in the narrative inquiry. Yet, it is helpful to keep in mind that such mediation by the author of a research text is not confined to creative forms of research writing. Richardson (2003) emphasised that “when we read or hear poetry, we are continually nudged into recognising that the text has been constructed. But all texts are constructed – prose ones, too” (p. 515).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I Feel Really Proud</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I just want to say</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comments matter more than marks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback really helped</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It gave me the boost</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To be faithful to my self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To always strive more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I didn’t worry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About getting it correct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On the first attempt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I learned that writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can be thoughtful, creative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And informative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My story has changed!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think it’s better this way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More interesting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel really proud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>That I can actually write</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To express my self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I see my role: a sincere, Appreciative reader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I play the part of building Confidence and enjoyment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear curbs enthusiasm Writing is an adventure!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am still feeling my way, It demands close attention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The growth of your authorship Encourages my teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vital, passionate writing! Think further and explore more...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4. Renga 2: “I Feel Really Proud”
While choosing lines from the composite text of learners’ and students’ voices for the first renga, I noticed other lines that evoked feelings of pleasure and fulfilment in me. I decided to create a second renga (Figure 4) using these lines, which seemed to add another, emotionally significant dimension to my inquiry. This second renga began with learners’ and students’ voices and ended with my voice. I think this was because I felt more at ease with what was being expressed in this poem and so I felt more able to give a closing response than with the first renga.

The two rengas formed an initial descriptive portrayal that provided material for a further, interpretive poetic portrayal (Clandinin & Connelly 2000). Drawing on Langer and Furman (2004), Faulkner (2007) explained interpretive poetry as follows: “interpretive poetry includes the researcher’s subjective responses for a fusing of perspectives, researcher, and participant” (p. 219). For my interpretive poetry, I chose another traditional Japanese poetic format – the tanka. The tanka format is a poetic form that is increasingly being used in qualitative research to unravel personally and socially challenging experiences (Breckenridge, 2016; Furman & Dill, 2015). When used for this purpose, the tanka is “concerned primarily with the working out of human emotion and conveying an authentic, personal voice” (Breckenridge, 2016, p. 4). I used a version of the tanka that has five lines, with a 5/7/5/7/7 syllable count in the lines (Poets.org, 2004b). In working with the two rengas to distil and “convey with emotional impact ideas or patterns present” (Furman & Dill, 2015, p. 46), I composed a sequence of three, connected tanka poems (Figure 5). In creating the tankas, I was guided by the traditional progression of the tanka, which follows a path from observing an image in the first two lines to expressing a personal response in the two closing lines, with the third line denoting the beginning of that movement from observation to response (Poets.org, 2004b). Unlike with the rengas, in fashioning these tankas I did not intend to make a strong distinction between my voice and the voices of my learners and students.

Through reading and re-reading the tanka sequence, I came to a point where I felt that I was zooming in on an emotionally significant tension that was not fully present in what I had made public so far concerning my professional learning about the teaching of writing. I played with the words in the tankas and ultimately created a free verse poem, titled “A Story of Words and Hearts” (Figure 6), which did not fall within any particular poetic convention.

From my perspective, the free verse poem, “A Story of Words and Hearts,” encapsulates not only a tension in my professional learning about teaching writing – which I could describe as “the matter of hearts” or “matters of the heart” or “the heart of the matter” – but also the extemporary poetic narrative inquiry process through which I began to unravel this tension.
BEGINNING TO UNRAVEL A NARRATIVE TENSION

**So, I Find Y/Our Heart**

I set out my heart
To find you can reject it

Your words matter so
Take time to feel your own way
To my story with your heart

Vital authorship
A passionate adventure

My story has changed!
Your writing demands my growth
Building my creative self

I set out to build
Your authorship my own way

So, I find y/our heart

Y/our vital, passionate heart
Demands creative self-growth

*Figure 5. Tanka sequence: “So, I Find Y/Our Heart”*

**A Story of Words and Hearts**

Hearts matter
So

Your words
Changed

My story

*Figure 6. Free verse poem: “A Story of Words and Hearts”*
In creating the poem, I came to see more clearly that a critical tension at the heart of my professional learning about teaching writing has to do with the emotional and relational dimensions of the process of teaching writing. In the past I had explored the emotionality of the content of my students’ writing in terms of their emotional responses to their own and each other’s personal narrative writing (Pithouse, 2007, 2011), as well as my emotional responses to students’ personal narrative writing (Pithouse, Khau, Masinga, & Van de Ruit, 2012; Pithouse-Morgan & Van Laren, 2015; Pithouse-Morgan, 2016). But, what I had not paid the same attention to was the emotionality of the teacher-student relationship in the writing process. Creating “A Story of Words and Hearts” helped me to discover something central to my project of the inquiry-oriented teaching of writing, which I think could be expressed like this: the teaching of writing requires emotional exchanges between student and teacher.

In looking for some examples to help me to elucidate and illustrate what I mean by “emotional exchange,” I went back to writing done by some of my postgraduate supervision students. While I am sure that there are many instances in my teaching of writing where I miss students’ cues and pass over opportunities to respond to their emotional needs, interests and realisations, I found two particular examples that seemed to me to show how I was able to act in a way that was generative. Here, I am thinking about Erikson’s (1963) conception of generativity, which comprises “creativity and a calling to contribute to the well-being of others, particularly younger people” (Pithouse-Morgan & Van Laren, 2012, p. 417). (While many of my students are not younger than me in terms of age, they could be viewed as younger in terms of experience of academic writing.)

One instance that I found of an emotional exchange is in a book chapter written by one of my doctoral students, Thelma Rosenberg (2016). In the chapter, Thelma reflected on how our supervisory conversations, as well as her conversations with other people, contributed to her cultivation of self-understanding through personal history narrative and autoethnographic writing. In re-reading Thelma’s chapter, I noticed the use of the word “heart” in her transcription of one of our audio recorded supervisory conversations:

Thelma: That’s the thing I want to talk to you about this morning—is that I worry about if I’m not going to get distracted in the study. I’m going to go on this trajectory of my family and how I grew up and all that and I’m going to stay a long time there and I’m not going to get to my learning. And this is about my learning, you know.

Kathleen: But your learning, does your learning only happen in school?

Thelma: [laughing] No, it doesn’t.

Kathleen: So, I wouldn’t worry about that. For the time being, go, go where you need to go.

Thelma: My heart needs to go there.
BEGINNING TO UNRAVEL A NARRATIVE TENSION

Kathleen: Go where your heart needs to go.
Thelma: My heart needs to go there before my head can follow, I feel, like, you know.
Kathleen: And I think you’re right.
Thelma: Ja, I think my heart just has to go a little bit down there first, you know, and spend some time, you know, and then I think, I think I’ll launch, you know, but I think I sort of have to …
Kathleen: I think you have launched [Thelma laughs]. You’ve started and it’s a good start. (Rosenberg, 2016, pp. 36–37)

In this extract from Thelma’s chapter, I see an emotional exchange in the sense that she was looking to me for reassurance and encouragement to go where her heart needed to go in her writing. As Thelma recounted in the chapter, the direction of her doctoral research shifted over time as what she had initially felt to be a distraction became central to her study.

I found another illustration of what could be seen as a generative emotional exchange in a Master’s thesis written by Ntokozo Mkhize (2016). This example comes from an audio recorded conversation that Ntokozo transcribed and included in her thesis to show how her learning through creating a collage representation of her written personal history narrative was enhanced by dialogue with her fellow students and me. In this instance, we were discussing her lived experience as an African girl struggling to fit in at a well-resourced formerly White primary school in the early post-apartheid period when schools previously reserved for White children were beginning to admit children of all race groups. I see my role here in terms of prompting an emotional realisation on Ntokozo’s part:

Dr Kathleen: So, let’s look at Ntokozo’s collage. … With the primary school, it’s interesting that it had the resources but you didn’t feel at home.
Ntokozo: Yes, the primary school had resources.
Dr Kathleen: And in the high school that had fewer resources, you felt more confident.
Ntokozo: And only when I was doing my collage and when I was presenting to you, I realised that I actually gained more in high school compared to primary school. Even though there were so many things that I could take part in at primary school, but I feel that it didn’t aid me at all.
Dr Kathleen: I think that is a very important realisation. So what do you think stopped you from taking part in or advantage of those activities in primary school?
Ntokozo: I think I was always afraid; I was worried that I was not doing the right thing anyway. I felt like it was pointless for me to try. I remember when we had to read in front of the class everyone would actually wait for you to make a mistake, to pronounce a word wrong or to omit a word. That discouraged me and at the same time I did not get support; I didn’t have a teacher who was supportive. (Mkhize, 2016, pp. 58–59)

Thelma and Ntokozo’s transcripts of our supervisory conversations are two examples that I feel capture how I can make a constructive contribution to a significant emotional exchange that can enhance students’ learning through writing. However, what my students have not written about, perhaps out of respect for me, are emotional exchanges that were not so generative or where I felt anxious and unsure about how to respond in a generative way. I found some examples of this in my own doctoral thesis (Pithouse, 2007). The one that I have included here was written in the form of a lived experience description (Van Manen, 1990) that I titled “She Felt Tempted Just to Pretend That She Had Not Heard.” This description, written in the third person, was developed from an audio recording of a session of a Master’s course that I taught on Health, Sexuality, and HIV/AIDS in Education and from my reflective journal writing about this session.

She Felt Tempted Just to Pretend That She Had Not Heard

After Ms N. finished reading her story about how her husband had raped her, she went on to explain that this experience had been a sort of catalyst in her life. She told the group that she had left her husband after this and that she had never seen him again. There was silence for a while and then people started to voice their support for her actions. But then Mr S. responded in a way that sounded quite antagonistic and angry. He was critical of Ms N.’s decision to leave and not look back. “What about him?” he demanded. “Didn’t you think about him; didn’t you care what happened to him?”

Again, there was silence in the room. Kathleen, who was feeling quite emotional and drained after listening to Ms N.’s story, felt tempted just to pretend that she had not heard Mr S.’s questions. She felt unsure about how to acknowledge the issue that Mr S. was raising, while still showing support for Ms N. After some hesitation, she decided to try to move the conversation away from a focus on Ms N.’s particular experience and to give Mr S. an opportunity to reposition his questions in relation to a more general discussion about society’s responses to perpetrators of sexual violence. This tactic seemed to work and he rephrased his questions to ask, “Is it enough just to shut them out or push them away?” “Isn’t there some responsibility on society’s part to engage with them?” In the ensuing group talk, Kathleen tried to attend to Mr S.’s earlier criticism of Ms N.’s actions in a non-specific way by explaining that, in her view, the rehabilitation of perpetrators of sexual violence was a task for society and not the duty of individual victims.
The session went on without any noticeable friction, but Kathleen continued to feel very anxious about how this discussion of personal experience might easily have developed into a hurtful and divisive situation. (Pithouse, 2007, p. 115)

In looking at the examples of my emotional exchanges with Thelma, Ntokozo and Ms N. and Mr S., I can see how my teaching of writing is made possible through emotional exchanges with other human beings. Through poetic dialogue with the voices of students and learners, my story of professional learning about teaching writing has changed. I have been pushed to look for and pay more attention to instances of how this teaching is made possible through and given its most immediate value by the quality of the human emotions and relationships that arise during processes of teaching and learning. Now that I have begun to unravel this tension I cannot tangle it up again and put it aside. This leaves me with the question of how following the thread of “A Story of Words and Hearts” (Figure 6) will influence my future teaching practice and my understandings of my teacher self.

Over the years, I have read a good deal about the teaching of writing (e.g. Elbow, 2000; Ivanič, 1998) and I have read a lot about the emotionality of teaching and learning and of teacher-student relationships (e.g. Day & Lee, 2011; Palmer, 1998). I have tried to learn from this reading to enrich my teaching philosophy and practice. A challenge for me now is to explore how I might dialogue afresh with these diverse scholarly conversations in my efforts to move forward with “the matter of hearts” or “matters of the heart” or “the heart of the matter” in teaching writing, while taking into account the distinctive educational histories and environments that influence my teaching and my students’ learning, including the deep-rooted patterns of educational privilege and disadvantage that live on in post-apartheid South Africa.

I think that, for me, a core tension around the teaching of writing involving emotional exchanges between student and teacher is centred on my awareness that when there is an emotional exchange, there is emotional vulnerability and a concomitant emotional responsibility, as illustrated in the three examples presented in this section of the chapter. The summary of my professional learning story about teaching writing over the past 20 years (Tables 1–3) did point to some consciousness of emotional vulnerability and emotional responsibility, through phrases such “sharing and listening,” “paying close attention to, and responding to,” “their interests, concerns and desires were being acknowledged,” “constructive written comments,” “acknowledge students’ efforts and accomplishments,” and “an atmosphere of support and mutual trust,” but after having been through this recent poetic narrative inquiry process, I am mindful that I have to give much more explicit attention to the teaching of writing as involving emotional exchanges between student and teacher.
In arguing for the value of evocative representational forms in educational research, Eisner (1997) stressed that “how one writes shapes what one says” (p. 4) and that “the selection of a form of representation, whether by mindless habit or by reflective choice, affects what we see” (p. 7). Unquestionably, the choice to explore my professional learning through a poetic narrative inquiry process shaped what I was able to perceive and express. It will also affect readers’ responses to this chapter. The poetic forms of the renga and tanka helped me to “see something familiar in new ways … that [were] surprising [and to] learn something about [myself] and the human condition” (Faulkner, 2016, p. 230). Similar to the way in which I scaffold writing activities for my students to encourage the growth of authorial presence, working within and sometimes also playing with the poetic conventions of the renga and the tanka encouraged the growth of my poetic presence, to the point where I felt able to step out from those conventions to create a free verse poem, which was a significant move towards unravelling a narrative tension. I am aware that I have much to learn about the craft of poetry and that my poems would fall into the category of research texts rather than poetic texts with inherent literary merit (Faulkner, 2007). Nonetheless, I do see poetic professional learning as artistic experience, in the Deweyan (1934) sense of “the clarified and intensified development” of aspects of everyday life, made possible by working “with some physical material, the body or something outside the body, with or without the use of intervening tools, and with a view to production of something visible, audible, or tangible” (pp. 46–47).

In writing this chapter, I intended to explicate and illustrate my narrative poetic inquiry process in the form of an accessible, credible, and dynamic research text that others might use to generate ideas, approaches, or questions for their own professional learning inquiries (Mishler, 1990). I was influenced by Faulkner’s (2016) argument for the demonstration of vigour as a criterion for quality in qualitative research, particularly arts-based research. I am drawn to the idea of vigour, which carries connotations of strength through energy, liveliness, and flourishing (vigour, n.d.), as a generative alternative to the more conventional criterion of rigour, which can connote strength through stiffness, rigidity, or numbness (rigour, n.d.).

Of course, despite my intention to be vigorous, frank and self-reflexive in my writing, and to also look beyond myself to consider what my inquiry might offer for others, it was inevitable that my account would entail some self-censorship and be limited by my own vantage points and my capacity for written expression. Even so, I have tried not to present an stiff, idealised version of my research journey, but rather to share “the ambiguities and satisfactions of trying to discover what is unknown” (Walford, 1991, p. 5). I offer my story as an invitation to poetic professional learning.
BEGINNING TO UNRAVEL A NARRATIVE TENSION

A Poetic Invitation

Take time
To feel
Your own way
To find
Your own story
With your heart

Figure 7. Free verse poem: “A Poetic Invitation”

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to Lesley Smith of George Mason University, USA, for introducing me to renga poetry.

I would like to acknowledge all the learners and students whose words and hearts have changed my story.

I am appreciative of the insightful feedback from Mike Hayler and Jessica Moriarty that helped me to strengthen this chapter.

NOTES

1 In the apartheid era (1948–1994), the Nationalist government used the racial classifications of African, Coloured, Indian, and White to stratify South African society. “African” referred to people who were understood to be indigenous to Africa, “Indian” referred to people who were understood to have ancestral heritage from India, “Coloured” referred to people who were understood to be of “mixed race,” and “White” referred to people who were understood to have ancestral heritage from Europe. These racial categories are still used in post-apartheid South Africa for policy and data collection purposes. When I refer to these categories in this chapter, I am aware that they are socio-political constructions. However, I am also aware that they continue to have a significant influence on the lives of people in post-apartheid South Africa. And I am aware that these categories play a significant part in processes of identity construction in South Africa. Although the terms “Coloured” and “White” are not generally capitalised, I capitalise them in this chapter to show that I am referring specifically to constructions of race that are a legacy of the apartheid era.

2 In South Africa, students at tertiary institutions are generally referred to as “students,” while students at primary or secondary schools are referred to as “learners.”

REFERENCES


PITHOUSE-MORGAN


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INTRODUCTION

The playwright Samuel Beckett writes that ‘The author is the worm at the core of the apple’ (Waters, 2010, p.1). The writer works in an instinctive, detailed way, from a private core towards the light of public showing. The playwright Steven Jeffries, in his playwriting masterclass, suggests that playwrights need a bird’s eye view, an overview of structure and narrative without which a piece of work can founder. There is a place for both the worm and the bird in writing and in teaching.

The screenwriting students that I work with, writing imaginatively, need an understanding of structure before they can work more instinctively with dialogue and with visual image to create a final draft. In the classes I teach, I aim to help the students excavate their own unique experiences and themes to inform and inspire their writing.

This chapter tells a story of my experiences in and out of formal education, in an attempt to explore the ways in which creativity has informed and inspired my teaching. Like all professional writing, it is shaped by a deadline, a word count, and an intended audience.

FAMILY STORIES, READING AND WRITING

My Grandfather, who used to joke that he was educated at Borstal, was a captivating and funny storyteller (‘Did I tell you about the time we played motorbike football?’). At Sunday lunches he was often the centre of attention.

Many family stories are recycled and retold by different family members.

I was one of five children. Mum dressed all four girls alike, and each of us struggled to find our own niche. Jane’s niche was ballet, a way to get close to Mum, who loved ballet; Kate’s love was sport, impressing Dad. Lucy, who was much younger, found music and was encouraged by mum, who considered herself tone deaf. My passion became reading and writing, a way to get close to both parents.

Four sisters in flowered dresses, ducklings following mother duck, waddle into Hagley Village Library, Lucy still in her pram, Kate running up and down the book aisles. There is a smell of dust, old books, polished wood. Jane chooses a
book on Margot Fonteyn, I head for the children’s books, and cross-legged on the floor I take my favourite: the beautifully illustrated ‘Pookie the Rabbit with Wings’ by Ivy Wallace (1945). Pookie is born with wings and this makes him different from the other rabbits. He has many cold lonely days before he finally finds the love he has always been looking for. It is a story in which I see myself. At the counter, I stretch up to hand it to the librarian, with her long hair and big glasses. She stamps the date in red.

At home, I am on Mum’s lap, reading the book with her, snuggling into her warmness, her cushiony bosom.

Later, on the kitchen floor, with felt pens and wallpaper in a long strip, we write, in big bold letters, WELCOME HOME DADDY! All four girls colour the letters in and Mum sellotapes it to the hall wall.

Dad is arriving home from Sri Lanka, where he has been in the finals of the World Billiards Championship.

Dad, born in Worcestershire in 1937, remembers seeing Coventry burn from his bedroom window as a young boy in the war. He was a grammar school boy from a Tory working class family. He was forced to be in the cadets at Worcester Grammar school, which he loathed for its authoritarianism and scratchy uniforms. He failed Maths O Level and retook it seven times in order to get to University, the first of his extended family. He thus avoided National Service. His mother, whose baby daughter died of septicemia from breast feeding, suffered a mental breakdown and underwent electroconvulsive therapy (ECT).

My grandfather’s inability to handle this led to great marital tensions, and Dad was often asked to be the intermediary when they refused to communicate with each other. His anger and passion was channeled into snooker and school. He played snooker at the local YMCA to avoid going home to such a hostile environment. He was the under 16 England snooker Champion, and went to Cardiff University to study English Literature in 1958–61. After what he calls the ‘misery’ of teaching Liberal Studies to car mechanics at Technical College, whilst writing sports columns under pseudonyms for the Birmingham Mail, he took the plunge and became a self-employed sports journalist and professional billiards player. This was a gesture of self-determination which took him away from home for months at a time, but gave him a sense of purpose and vocation. At seventy-nine, he still works as a sports journalist. When I was a child, he was on television, as a snooker commentator, talking to the nation, though inaccessible as a Dad. As an adolescent, I remember him behind a newspaper or a novel, or behind the door of the billiards room above the garage.
WORMS, BIRDS AND RABBITS

Mum, who was born in Birmingham on the day that the Second World War broke out in 1939, attended a Rudolf Steiner boarding school. Mum’s education faltered when her mother died suddenly around three months before Mum was due to take her A Levels, which she failed. She re-took one at Birmingham Technical College where my Dad was retaking Maths. So it was through failure at school exams that they met and fell in love, fifty years ago, which goes to show that passing exams is not the only measure of success! She became a capable, kind and practical mother of five children. A legion of other women helped her: Auntie Eva, and Edith with her false eye, Mrs. Parker with her sharp hand, Nana with an eye on the dust. Our family was, until the birth of my brother, one full of girls and women. There was always a lot of competition for attention, all the girls wanting to be acknowledged by Mum.

I am in a snake of six year olds, being counted off into the hall for lunch. I am anxious, unbearably so. I need my mum. I step out of the queue, and open the door. I walk across the playground, waiting for a shout from a patrolling pink lady. I sink down the path, through the lichgate and out. No one sees me. I look back for a moment, then, unsure what to do, walk all the way up School Lane. I need to be home with Mum. At the top, I cross the busy dual carriageway and walk past the war memorial. Finally at the bottom of the close, so near to home, I sit on a neighbour’s wall and wet myself as I have run away and know I have done something quite wrong. The neighbour phones Mum and she collects me. Later, in the headmistress’s office, I lie instinctively to both her and to Mum, saying that a lady in a flowered long dress, driving an orange mini had offered me a lift home and I had gone with her. The process works: from that point on, Mum collects me at lunchtime, cooks spaghetti hoops for lunch, and then takes me back to school.

The adventure, of breaking a taboo by running away from school, and then making up a story of what happened, led me to achieve my aim of having lunch at home. I have come to see writing itself is an adventure, as a breaking of taboos, as storytelling with a purpose.

As a September baby in a small village school in the West Midlands, I was the first girl to complete the Peter and Jane reading scheme and had early encouragement for both reading and writing. My first poem, ‘Happiness Is’ was read out in the school assembly. In Middle School, my poem about a Spanish Bullfight (my grandfather took me to one) led to compliments in the Headmaster’s office: (“Well done Daffodil!”). A rhyming poem that I called From my window, was published on the Children’s Page of The County Express newspaper and I was awarded with a ‘fine pen’ – a navy biro with the paper’s logo on the side. My aunt typed my poems and put them in a binder.

I loved the privacy of writing in my bedroom, an escape from the downstairs noise of four quarrelling siblings. There was magic in my story writing: girls got to
swim across rivers and befriend lonely dragons, bad people got sucked down plug holes. The magic of story, written in privacy, is still vital to my writing. At the same time, reading aloud, captivating my audience was also vital and affirming. This same experience is part of my teaching, planning lectures and seminars, the privacy of thought, imagination and research, giving way to the lecture theatre where, if I am lucky, something transformative and thrilling happens. When it works out well, I feel that I have captured the imaginations of the students with the narrative of the lecture. I have entertained them as well as informed them.

“QUIET, LITTLES!” At six foot three inches tall, Dad is a dragon, coming out from his lair, standing in the doorway of the lounge. We are playing a game which involves me as witch, my sisters as fairies, screaming. This strange Dad bellowing, terrifies me. Later, contrite, he suggests a treat.

I follow him, up the musty back stairs above the Greengrocers on Birmingham’s Hagley Road. Shelves full of his magazine ‘Snooker Scene,’ his secretary at her typewriter, a smell of leather, un-hoovered carpet. A professional journalist’s office.

“You can sit at my desk if you want to write there.”

I swing round in the chair. Take out my story, “The Lonely Dragon” which I am writing for a competition at the library. I place the paper and pens on his blotting paper desk top. I begin. Two writers together. A girl leaves the comfort of her family in an attempt to reach the dragon, in his lair. Despite her fears, she understands that his fierceness masks his loneliness.

HIGH SCHOOL

Haybridge High School, a village comprehensive, was brand new in 1978. There were only four hundred students in total. I once interviewed the headmaster, Mr. Hobson for the school magazine. His hero was Enoch Powell. Hagley, part of Bromsgrove, voted Conservative in big numbers in 1979. (Its current MP is Brexit campaigner Sajid Javid.) Thatcher came to power when I was fourteen.

Citing a knee injury, I avoided PE for the whole of secondary school. Unconfident about my adolescent body, I was beside myself with anxiety about the expected humiliations of competitive sport, and forced communal nakedness in the showers. I took refuge in the library; overweight, frizzy haired, studious, a school librarian. I devoured the books there: Dostoevsky, Virginia Woolf, Stephen King, Neville Shute – anything that had a good narrative. Other people’s imagination, expressed through literature, fed my own. My extrovert younger sister Kate, who was a sporty, curly permed blonde, was my nemesis. She was in the county tennis and netball teams, dated boys in my class. Physically, I felt I never had a chance
against her. I focused on getting attention by excelling at exams instead and became a Grade A student.

Performing in school plays allowed me to become someone other than the swatty girl. I successfully auditioned for the part of Mrs. Bumble in Oliver; learned the script, and got to sit on the lap of the desirable Robert Hamblett’s Mr. Bumble, singing “I shall scream!” There was a set, music, audience. The thrill of this captivated me and inspired me. The immediacy of stage performance, the visceral response of the audience.

UNIVERSITY – ESSAYS AND ANXIETY

My grandfather, who lived with us in his last months, died of cancer while I was taking my A Level exams. I arrived at Leicester University to begin my degree in English Literature in 1984, grieving. This was the time of miners’ strikes, IRA bombing campaigns in England, agitprop theatre, women’s self-defense. University was free, a luxury hard to imagine now in our world of the neoliberal university as corporation.

I did what I knew I could excel at, read widely, loved the lectures, joined the Literary Society, became a student rep, and an expert essay writer. Medieval Literature, Milton, Middlemarch, William Morris, Dickens, DH Lawrence, Literary Theory, James Joyce. Feminist and Marxist literary theory opened my mind intellectually, but my creativity went totally underground into private diary entries, rhyming couplets about my excruciating social phobias, panicking about the attention of boys. I suffered with anxiety and loneliness.

From my diary in 1984:

*Came home on the bus, and felt totally fed up. Lots of work yet no work, the ever oppressive cloud of extra reading hovering. Lost a book. Dare I say the dreaded word, depressed (ugh!) Everything too vague to be able to sort out. Jonathan threw stones at my window and asked me for dinner. I can’t bear the claustrophobia. He came on his own tonight, and it was all so painful, embarrassing, straining. Keep the conversation going, don’t touch on awkward subjects, entertain, and don’t get too deep, be natural. The thought of having to sit there at the meal makes my heart beat and my stomach churn.*

Just before finals, I cracked up, unable to stop crying. My focus on work had a high price. I excelled academically rather than making connections and relationships or real intimacies. I hung on and came out with a first class degree without pausing for breath. I arrived in Brighton on 30th September 1987. I lodged in an attic room of a family house in Hove, knowing no one except my fellow MA students. Things began to unravel again. In a new town, at a new university, on a new course where half the people had first class degrees, I ran out of steam. When my first love relationship ended badly, the
disciplined inner world in which certain aspects of life were repressed in order to succeed academically fell apart. At 3am on 16th October, 1987, the sound of the wind and tiles hurtling from the roof was deafening. I stood, with the family, watching trees uprooted down the street, falling on cars. Reflecting on the fragmentation of that time, and the failure of my rational mind, led to this poem in which a short prose has been re-ordered alphabetically:

**Hurricane.**

Attic room  
Beach huts smash. Blatchington Road a war zone  
Burn Clothes. Black.  
Chanctonbury Ring  
Curtainless candlelight  
Frank’s Wild Years.  
Falling, falling, falling.  
Guitar  
Innocent when you dream, when you dream,  
Memories, nightmares.  
Scaffolding smashed  
Scary sex  
Silk underwear  
Tumbling  
University full of static.

Emotionally and academically exhausted, my life no longer fit for purpose, I went to visit Dad (the lonely dragon) in the empty auditorium of Reading Hexagon Theatre, where he was reporting on a snooker tournament. He listened. He told me that he had been helped by psychoanalysis for ten years, since suffering from depression relating to his childhood and after a spinal injury at the height of his snooker career. He suggested that I could use some money left to me by my Grandfather to have some therapy myself.

The experience of being in therapy was a challenging, liberating journey of self-discovery for me. I reconnected with my desire to write, and in many ways the therapy impacted on the way that I thought about – and how I began – to teach writing. Susie Orbach recently worked with improvising actors in a radio series called ‘In Therapy,’ an attempt to show what goes on between the therapist and the ‘analysed’ in psychoanalysis:

In therapy, you don’t just learn a new language to add to your repertoire, you relinquish unhelpful parts of your mother tongue and weave them together with the knowledge of a new grammar. (Orbach, 2016, p. 101)
This was it – abandoning unhelpful bits of a story in order to re-edit and revise so that a new, more empowered story could emerge. It was a different kind of learning; a collaboration between me and the psychotherapist. He offered a bird’s eye perspective on the seemingly unconnected bits and pieces, the jigsaw of my memories, experience and dreams. Together we pieced together a story of my life. Underlying themes emerged and I realised that I could change my story.

**HOW DID PSYCHOTHERAPY HELP ME TO BECOME A PLAYWRIGHT, AND TO TEACH AND HELP WRITERS TO WRITE THEIR OWN STORIES?**

Therapy involves being able to see the different parts of the self with empathy and I could draw on these, for characters and stories as I discovered the complexities of my own psyche, and the complexities of others in my life. I gained an understanding of the subtle subtexts and backstories that motivate behavior.

Therapy is a collaborative venture. Trust is developed and metaphors are co-created to bring meaning and poetry to the inner life. An increased ability to create healthy boundaries around one’s self. Screenwriting and playwriting are also fundamentally collaborative, requiring poetry, empathy, trust and boundaries, as actors bringing new dimensions to the material, as do set designers, directors, and lighting designers.

Therapy requires courage and resilience. It is at times a painful process. A writer needs courage to express themselves with others. They also need resilience to carry on. Creative failures are inevitable for a writer and resilience helps a person avoid taking this personally. In fact, failures can be instructive of new ways to approach pieces of writing, new questions to ask of the work.

The sociologist and writer Brené Brown puts it like this: “I know I’m ready to give feedback when I’m ready to sit beside you rather than across from you, I’m willing to put the problem in front of us rather than between us or sliding it towards you” (Brown, 2012, p. 204).

**WORKING WITH WRITERS**

I completed my MA in 1988. My MA thesis on Working Class Women’s Autobiography involved reading Carolyn Steedman’s *Landscape for a Good woman* (1986) as a case study. Steedman’s book details the relationship she has with her mother. Her mission is to particularise with detail and historical specificity of the landscape of her mother’s life, and then to theorise a way of telling life stories of people who are marginalised or exiled from the mainstream, like her mother. I was interested in the way certain stories are easily told and others are not. In a broader, cultural sense who gets to be centre-stage?

Dave Morley and Ken Worpole’s book *The Republic of Letters: Working class writing and community publishing* (2010) radicalised me. The authors suggested a way in which the writing and telling of certain stories, links with social and
political change, working class writers in charge of their own publishing. As a young writer I found this book empowering. I saw how, in mainstream publishing, some types of writing are considered to have greater literary worth, and that this consideration was political; working class stories, and stories by women were often dismissed as having little literary value. The socialist approach of the community publishing movement appealed to my belief that a range of silenced voices deserve to be heard.

I bought an Amstrad computer to write my dissertation. The internet did not touch my life until many years later. It has transformed the experience of writing. There is software for formatting work, online learning and writing communities and many ways to get work out into the world. Students are way ahead of me in this respect. Technology has moved on since I was a student handwriting my essays. Undergraduate students working with me on a ‘script to screen’ module make films of their own fiction screenplays and upload them to YouTube or Vimeo; my journalism students work with local community radio stations to broadcast their writing. I often feel very behind the times with what is available to learners.

In 1989 I became involved with local community publishers, Queenspark Books. I was looking for a writing group. The facilitator was leaving and she asked me if I would consider taking over from her. I met the group and with their agreement, I became the new facilitator. I was twenty three and enthusiastic to learn about creative writing. I reused and recycled exercises from Arvon courses, books on writing and through the annual weekends of the Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers I learned from, and was encouraged by, workshops with Jimmy McGovern, Winsome Pinnock, Sarah Kane, and Michele Roberts. The idea of recycling, experimenting with and refining exercises continued to be part of my repertoire as a teacher. Through Queenspark, I became part of a community of women writers, a world of women with powerful stories to tell. Our backgrounds were very different, yet we were connected.

I am
A hamster, a tiger,
A comfortable old armchair which needs re-covering
A candelabra
An unopened chest full of precious stones
A fur coat, nothing underneath
A purple negligee
Black Doc Martens
A worn pair of my mother’s pyjamas

Initially, I wrote alongside the other group members. I didn’t want to place myself in a position of authority. But I came to realise that this led to a lack of clear
boundaries, and I had to change my approach. In 1989 I attended an eight week Workers’ Educational Association (WEA) adult teacher training course. The course provided me with a bird’s eye perspective, clarifying my role and the role of students in our different responsibilities for learning. I became able to facilitate a safe space for writers, and to offer guidelines for group feedback. I learned to structure sessions and programs of work, and I kept my own writing and need for feedback and sharing, separate from the group. I also asked students to think about how they learned from each other.

In the late 1980s, the Department for Health and Social Security came up with a scheme called Enterprise Allowance which was aimed at reducing the unemployment rate by supporting people on state benefits to set up their own businesses. With a business plan as a freelance writer, forty pounds a week was mine. I lived in a housing co-operative with cheap rent and began to write journalistic features and reviews for local and London listings magazines. I made a short film with other women. I was just out of Sussex University, with pink hair and plenty of attitude. We made a feminist film about witches and food called *High Tea* and I learned how to film and edit. I interviewed the Brighton and Hove Albion Football team, and the piece that I wrote led to writing a monologue on women and football on Radio 4’s ‘First Person’ strand. I continued to teach creative writing evening classes at Brighton City College as well as at Queenspark Books. I made money from freelance indexing for a Hove-based educational publisher. It was a time of great creativity and growing confidence.

I developed a portfolio career, combining one or two commissions for theatre, radio and television, working in youth theatre, teaching evening classes at Brighton City College. Later I worked with Lighthouse Film and Video in Brighton, teaching scriptwriting alongside my writer-in-residence work in schools and in community settings. Writing careers are often like this. Goodson describes these flexible, specialist careers:

> Now a worker may only be employed for specific tasks – say, writing an article. … The work is put out to workers who are not part of the core employing unit. These conditions of constant flexibility and disruptive change mean a seismic shift in the way people experience and indeed manage their lives. (Goodson, 2013, p. 22)

In 1991, riding the wave of my work in film and the journalism, I attended a workshop at the Gardner Arts Centre at Sussex University which was run by the Royal Court Young Writers’ Festival. An established female playwright, Charlotte Keatley, encouraged us to see that the most valuable thing was having something to say, to take risks, to be bold. I plunged in and wrote a play I called *Pig in a Poke* which was a semi-autobiographical, surreally comic, coming of age story about a repressed studious teenager who wants to find out about sex – to be like her friend Ruby: carefree, and sexually confident. Then, she finds a wounded, fantasy pig
EVERTON

which she rescues from the fridge. This pig, who sings a piggy version of Shirley Bassey’s *Big Spender* (“The minute you brought in the joint, I could see you were a cook of distinction, a real Pig Spender”) is larger than life, carnivalesque. I had a lot of fun bringing the character of the pig to life, and writing the dialogue.

(Part of scene one …)

ANGELA Sometimes I feel so afraid when I talk to Ruby, and I don’t know why. It’s as if there was something I wanted to say and I can’t speak it.

MRS CLEAVER Ruby has gone downhill Angela. She had a lot going for her once. Very polite. But do you know, I popped down ASDA for the puddings and I saw her with red hair in the carpark with John Robinson. A very rough sort. I don’t know what they were laughing at but she wasn’t going to look my way however long I waited by the car. All those boys who left school with just a handful of GCSE’s. I never think red hair suits. You know me Angela, I’m very broadminded, but she’s letting herself down. If she could only see herself!

ANGELA (wistfully) Ruby’s always been a bit like that mum.

MRS CLEAVER Come on, don’t be a sausage. She’s not our sort. It all works out for the best, look at me. Now go and get yourself out of that uniform. Why don’t you wear that tartan skirt I bought you? And clean out the rabbit. That cage is absolutely filthy. And a clean out is very therapeutic.

Later in scene 2, Angela finds and rescues a pig from the fridge; an all singing, all dancing pig:

PIG Ooh but it was chilly in that fridge. As cold as a butcher’s bollocks. What I wouldn’t do for a pair of stretch nylons with a wide gusset.

ANGELA Perhaps I should fetch mum?

PIG You saved my bacon back there Angela, stitched me up a treat. I knew you would, there’s something about you, something in the way you move.

ANGELA I have to work!

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WORMS, BIRDS AND RABBITS

PIG  I think we need to change your outfit though. It’s no frock for a woman in the bloom of her youth. Come on, give us a twirl, and don’t be shy.

ANGELA  Where have you come from? Tell me, please, before Mum comes down.

PIG  I get around a bit. Let’s just say, I’m a friend of Ruby’s. And I’m here to give you the time of your life.

The play won the competition and I was catapulted into a new, professional world. It was unforgettably empowering to see and hear actors say my dialogue on stage at the Royal Court Theatre in front of audiences and critics. Being bold and adventurous, and having a go with nothing to lose, had great results for me. I am still addicted risk-taking through a desire to try new things with the hope of a bit of magic, in my own teaching. Mostly it pays off, though flying by the seat of my pants is not what works best for me. Structure is needed. The success of my first play was followed by failures as I struggled with ideas and lost confidence in how to structure a script. Nothing worked. Ideas did not come to fruition.

In 2003 I trained to teach the UK Film Council’s foundation in screenwriting course which gave me a huge file of extracts, screenplays and teaching materials. I also undertook script editor training, through a European Union-funded scheme. These two training courses are the core of my current teaching, at undergraduate and postgraduate level, giving a sound basis from which students can experiment and develop. Seminars combine mini lectures, film clips and analysis, and practical writing exercises, towards complete short films and pitches for features. The short piece gives students the tools for longer work – how to tell a story visually, create dramatic characters, write effective film dialogue and work with genre.

RETURN TO ACADEMIA

In 2009 I began to teach at the University of Brighton. I took the Post Graduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, with the Centre for Learning and Teaching at Brighton. The course involved being part of an action learning group, reflecting on my own teaching, writing up peer observation sessions in which I observed two of my colleagues teaching. This has been invaluable for me as a reflective teacher, giving me, for example, and ideas about ways to get students to work together collectively, and observing other lecturers’ teaching styles. Having been away from academia for fifteen years, I was challenged, as are my students, by the rigours of the academic essay writing process. Writing the essays for the course involved both the bird’s eye view, reading and researching, referencing and learning about submission technicalities,
and the worm, typing, deleting, and revising my evolving thoughts about how my experience linked to the wider research.

In 2017, as a Senior Lecturer, there is a rhythm to my work, a mix of admin, lesson or lecture planning, classroom engagement, tutorials, marking, departmental meetings, research articles, and chapters such as this one. As a module leader for several modules on various aspects of drama and writing, I plan obsessively to help with nerves during the first teaching weeks, as I meet with new students. They too are nervous about the course and what challenges it might bring. After a couple of weeks, trust and rapport is established and we all relax. Writing should be fun as well as hard work! Stories remain at the heart of my life. I teach students to write fiction scripts and journalism and ask them to think about audience and purpose, but more broadly I think critically about the available narratives of what education is for, for whom, and how one might succeed. Creative writing courses are thriving at the University of Brighton, with new undergraduate and postgraduate courses. Creative approaches to learning and assessment proliferate across the humanities.

Creativity is about creating something out of nothing. So is teaching. With imagination anything is possible: Pookie, the rabbit with wings, can fly; pigs can sing; lonely dragons can be reached; birds and worms might live happily ever after.

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7. REFRAMING IDENTITY

Exploring My Pedagogy through Memories of the Past

INTRODUCTION

This chapter extends and develops a number of themes that arose in the final paper that I wrote as part of my undergraduate education degree in 2012. In writing my final assignment I had the opportunity to delve deeply into personal memories and explore my own educational journey. I reflected upon the links between these experiences and my thinking processes at different stages in my life and developed a refined understanding of my ideas and beliefs about learning and education. I explored these within changing educational and political contexts and considered how my future practice may be impacted.

I adopt a similar narrative life history approach within this chapter in extending the discussion to consider my experience of becoming and being a teacher. Here I make use of my existing work as a focus for reflection and merge new thoughts and ideas with some of my original writing to explore the impact that my experiences have had on my current pedagogy as a teacher within a Reception age classroom in the South of England. A strong theme that emerges throughout this chapter is the way in which I negotiate the challenges and potential pitfalls of the educational and political landscape in addressing the reality of being a full-time teacher. A central element of my story at the time of writing is the recent and most wonderful experience of becoming a mum for the first time. Now everything looks different once again.

EARLY LEARNING: NOW AND THEN

I have very fond memories of primary school. I can still see the face of my very first teacher vividly in my mind: dark, curled hair, unavoidable pearl earrings and a warm embrace. I loved Mrs Pike and despite allegedly being fiercely independent from the word go, I needed hugs and caring words and even a nap sometimes. I looked forward to school. I was enthusiastic about the day ahead and above all I was happy. The positive way that I felt resonated far beyond learning to read, write or recognise numbers. My growing knowledge and understanding of child development and Early Years Education now helps me to identify Mrs Pike’s practice as child-centred, as she was concerned in developing the whole child (Dalberg et al., 2007) and this is something that is hugely important to me in my classroom. My experience has taught me that more often than not children thrive in
their learning if their social and emotional needs are understood. At the beginning of every year I spend considerable time getting to know each child in my class which goes far beyond revising names and reading preschool notes. I make time to talk to and observe each child to find out their interests and particular characteristics so that I can differentiate my practice and respond to individual needs as much as possible. It is really important that the children and I get to know each other in this way not only so that they feel comfortable and happy in school but so that they develop the confidence to ask questions, share news or come to me when they are in need of comfort and reassurance. I learn more about each child as the year continues and not only do I enjoy seeing their personalities emerge and their approach to learning about the world evolve, but this process makes me a better teacher as I can respond to the children more naturally, provide experiences I know will engage them or crack jokes that will make them laugh; and what is a classroom without humour? It is a real privilege to build relationships with children in this way, one which is ever more apparent to me now, being a Mummy to my own developing little person; one that I think anyone would be lucky to get to know on such a level.

My Mum still writes to Mrs Pike and although she tells me she dreaded leaving me at just 4 years old, she could not have wished for a more nurturing teacher to put her mind at ease. I have always been confident that I understand the anxiety many parents feel during the first term of their child’s school journey. I am sure that working closely with families as a nanny has aided this. Despite the expected trials and tribulations, my relationships with parents have always been professional and positive. As a parent now myself I have already experienced the emotions of parting with my baby daughter for an hour or so when leaving her with a family member. Leaving her for a full day at preschool or school currently seems completely out of the question. I imagine as I return to teaching I will have a different level of understanding to bring to my practice. The nurturing environment I create will be even more important, the affectionate embrace I offer a child in need will be even more significant and the reassuring smiles and words to parents will be given with genuine empathy.

I was around the same age when I had my first experience of secondary school as I used to go into the local school to collect my dad who taught maths there. As I weaved my way through the huge mesmerizing corridors to the smoke filled staff room I only came up to the knees of the children passing by. I wasn’t scared. I remember being exhilarated at the thought of one day being that big, and feeling excited about the possibilities that ‘big school’ could bring. As it happened, when I got there, it was not the place I dreamt it would be as the warm environment of primary school seemed to have all but ebbed away. Although I was in some ways one of the ‘cool’ gang I was always somewhat side-lined. I often dreaded going into school as when I was not the brunt of the joke I was ignored by the group. However I was no angel myself. On the odd occasion when another group member committed a ‘faux pas’ I would relish the opportunity to trade positions from bullied to bully. Despite clearly needing time to explore our social and emotional needs it felt as if they were left at the classroom door. I did not particularly enjoy
the learning that went on inside the classroom but I did not question it. When I was in the mood I would sit on the high science stools secretly eating crisps while listening intently to my teacher and copying beautiful work into my book. At other times I would muck about with a friend or zone out altogether. Perhaps what my friends and I needed were more learning experiences that were concerned with encouraging collaboration, or listening and respecting one another. Of course it is likely the teachers tried to support us in this way; maybe we were not receptive or open to such discussions or maybe we weren’t old enough to understand the importance of this. Either way this is something that has become central within my own classroom as beginning to talk about these issues sooner rather than later can only have a positive impact.

The Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum gives considerable emphasis to Personal, Social and Emotional Development (PSED) (Early Education, 2012) and this, interlinked with Communication and Language are, at least within my school, seen as the back bone of early learning. As a team of colleagues we spend considerable time planning for this across all learning contexts which includes discussions about how our own interactions with children can support their development as they learn through play. We often use stories or role play to help children understand and talk about a particular concept. For example we recently planned a series of lessons around the Oliver Jeffers book *How to Catch a Star* (2015) which tells the story of a boy who wishes to catch his very own star. When a giant broken star arrived in the classroom with a note asking if the children could care for it they were only too quick to oblige. It was amazing to see them show their understanding of friendship and kindness through role play and there was plenty to reflect on at the end of the day which only enriched the learning that took place. Building children’s confidence, especially when school is so new, is a big part of personal, social and emotional development and is central to my practice. One way that this is done is through questioning strategies. I have my own memories of the superiority I felt over those that did not understand when I answered a question correctly but I also remember the overwhelming sense of humiliation when I became one of those pupils; scolded by my teacher for giving such a ludicrous response. This is not always easy to avoid as a teacher. I have seen children in my class look as if they want the ground to swallow them up when I have forgotten myself for a moment, become frustrated and let them know that their answer is not up to scratch. What I try to create is an environment where all answers are valid and that having a go is every bit as important as giving a comprehensive answer. Of course there is a balance to be forged somewhere between ensuring that children feel safe to take a risk and share their ideas and also feel valued for making links through their learning in making useful contributions to class discussions.

It may be easier to keep PSED central to practice within a Reception classroom as unfortunately PSHE (the PSED equivalent for Key Stage 1 and 2) does not take centre stage in the National Curriculum. Whilst government recommendations indicate expectations that the area should be taught in schools, it is not given the status of statutory subjects like Mathematics, English or Computing (Department
for Education, 2013). Additionally we are working within an educational context that puts teachers under a huge amount of pressure to deliver a complex and content-heavy curriculum and systems of accountability that judge schools efficiency through standardised testing. It is not that other areas of the curriculum are not important, but rather that there seems to be an unfair balance in the value of learning facts, understanding difficult terminology, and following rules, that stands above children’s social, emotional and creative learning. Even in a school such as mine, where the learning philosophy very much emphasises the Personal, Social and Emotional aspect of learning, inspiring teachers that know what is important for children are under a huge amount of pressure as they battle to give enough time in planning for this.

I am considering now that this was likely a similar story when I was at Secondary School. It was the mid to late 1990s and the emergent neoliberal principles introduced during the Thatcher era continued to dominate (Gillard, 2011). The 1990s saw the establishment of The Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) (The House of Commons Education and Skills Committee, 2007), unprecedented testing of academic ability through Standard Attainment Testing (SATS) (The Guardian, 2004), and the introduction of school league tables (Baker, 2007). These were all, arguably, initiatives that were part of the Conservative government’s agenda to sustain market values and competition at the heart of the education system (Hursh, 2005). It is probable that the dominant focus for my school became improving academic performance to meet national standards and ensuring inspection criteria were fulfilled to a high level. Yet I can barely remember sitting my SATS or my GCSEs for that matter. I just have a vivid memory of casually memorising dates and events under the stairwell before my History exam. I didn’t even think about it at the time but today this depiction of education is a far cry from what I would call an effective system and, unfortunately, despite hardworking creative teachers across the phases, it does not feel like the overall picture of education has changed.

THEORY INTO ACTION

I left school with reasonable GCSEs but with an overwhelming sense that I was not cut out for A Levels and was certainly not academic enough for University. It was not until well into my adulthood that I decided to give Higher Education a try. My three years of undergraduate study gave me a whole new perspective as I began to see both learning and education, and later myself, in a different way. I became inspired as I experienced learning as an exciting process of growth and change. I was given the autonomy to work independently, make decisions and learn from my mistakes. Some experiences were particularly significant because they helped me to further understand my own education, informed my emerging educational philosophy, having direct impact on my career aspirations and an influence on my teacher pedagogy today. The significant shift in the way that I viewed teaching itself happened while I was studying in higher education. I previously often loudly asserted that I never wished to go into teaching because I saw it as involving
tedious prescriptive practice which did not stimulate or engage children in learning; a view which is explored in relation to my experiences of secondary education throughout this chapter. As you will see from the discussion below I learnt to love learning and later during my Post-Graduate Certificate in Education I saw that teaching could be creative, exciting and fun. This is something I have really tried to hold on to in my practice.

Now I am lucky enough to work within a hugely creative Early Years team that understand learning, know their children and think ‘outside of the box.’ Within our planning we are always asking how can we make this exciting and relevant, and what will capture the children’s imagination? How can we make this fun? We try to use the children’s interests as a starting point for teaching and often start a lesson or string of inputs with a stunning start or prop to inspire awe and wonder. Quality storybooks and texts that link with the learning area are important too as the narrative creates context for the children within which to understand a concept. Furthermore stories can be brought to life with props and language and are, for me, just the perfect teaching tool. An example of this kind of work springs to mind: we planned a problem solving week around the book Each Peach Pear Plum (Ahlberg & Ahlberg, 1999) and for one input a colleague dressed as Little Bow Peep ran through my classroom in search of her sheep. Needless to say the children could not wait to go on the hunt for the missing sheep, record their findings and report back to Little Bow Peep as to how many they had found.

During the course at university I pondered at length and in depth upon the big philosophical questions about reality and knowledge (Blaikie, 2007). As a result I became less concerned with trying to find the right or the wrong answer. Through my engagement with my research modules I not only discovered a passion for learning about theoretical frameworks I also found clarity for my thinking within social constructionism (Crotty, 1998). These ideas were reaffirmed as I discovered the complex concept of ‘instrumental rationality’ which refers to the critique against the application of scientific and standardised thinking to human phenomena (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1971). My thinking has been further refined through engagement with specific ideas within educational theory, which led me to question the models of learning that underpinned my past educational experiences. Dewey (1999) argued that schools are traditionally only concerned with transmitting preselected corpuses of information into the minds of pupils whereby the product of learning holds authority over the complex and important processes of learning.

From what I can remember the majority of lessons at secondary school seemed focused on learning and remembering specific information. I did find some topics engaging and there is certainly a space for learning facts as they can be interesting. I enjoyed learning about ecosystems, landscapes and tectonic plates in Geography; wars, kings, queens and ancient Egypt in History, and indeed I’m still a keen reader of historical novels. But what was missing was learning to love learning; I was engaging in the process but had no idea about the value of metacognition. I think in part this is where I developed a rather polarised view of learning in believing that there would always be a right and a wrong. Meizrow (1990) talks of learning
becoming ‘transformative’ when the process is engaged with critically and I really believe this is what happened for me during my degree study. I am sure my teachers across primary and secondary school encouraged this in age-appropriate ways but I expect that I was not ready to see learning in this way or to understand the thought processes involved for it was challenging enough as a mature student. I recall many a time becoming frustrated with lecturers’ vague responses when all I was looking for was a clear, unambiguous answer. I now know that they were encouraging my autonomy as a learner and trusting that I would find my own path, and as such discover a richer learning experience. So while I realise that young children may not be developmentally ready for some of these complex ideas, I feel it is important to support children to develop a positive attitude to learning and to begin to see the value in the process itself. Of course we still enjoy celebrating the outcomes of learning, for example a piece of writing or finished artwork, but I try to ensure that the children’s approaches and attitudes to learning are equally valued.

Lipman (1991) talks of a classroom becoming a learning community if more time is given to discussion, reflection, thinking and collaboration. I certainly try to incorporate these processes within my practice both within the lessons I teach and the interactions I have with children every day. This is about involving the children in a dialogue about learning on a level that they can engage with and understand. To do this I ensure that I am attentive to their interests, their strengths and weaknesses and talk with them individually and as a class about their growing ideas, knowledge and understanding. As a team we try to incorporate past learning within lessons so that each input progresses or consolidates what has come before; starting a lesson with a visual prompt is a simple way of supporting children to reflect on what they have already learnt. It is important to me that children begin to understand that learning is a lifelong process, so I am open with them about my enjoyment and frustrations; they need to see that adults can and do make mistakes. This supports them to keep trying when things are tough and start to view any inaccuracies as a stepping stone to new learning.

I wrote earlier in the chapter about the importance of questioning strategies for confidence building and the same applies here as through questioning you can encourage critical thinking skills even in the youngest of children. Even asking something as simple as ‘what do you think?’ requires the child to call upon their own ideas and knowledge and reach their own conclusions. I recall a particular time when children were engaging in a maths activity that required them to sort 100 objects. In asking ‘how can we sort these?’ the children had to come up with their own ideas as opposed to following the instruction of the teacher. It was wonderful to see them investigate their own ideas; ideas that I would not necessarily have thought of myself. As the activity progressed all that it took were small prompts like ‘can we find any other ways?’ to inspire the children to find out more and build on their learning. It is important to note that because every child is different, some children will need the support of more structured questioning and in knowing my children very well I am able to do this appropriately. We also try to plan specific lessons that will encourage children to utilise these kinds of thought
processes. For example we recently created a ‘Problem Solving Toolkit’ with the children so that they could begin to engage with what this term, which is often banded about in classrooms, really involves. Each thought process used within problem solving, for example sharing ideas, thinking of lots of ways, keeping on trying, and risk taking, were represented through child-centred pictures. Once this had been explained and discussed as a class the children were observed using these skills during their play and were able to identify problem solving skills within their peer’s learning.

As a practitioner I understand and appreciate the role of play within the learning process. Despite often being seen as a vague and unhelpful pedagogical concept (Broadhead, 2006; Howard & McInnes, 2010) experience tells me that children are natural explorers, and that they learn about their world through play. If I wasn’t sure of this already, watching my daughter and her baby friends make sense of their worlds through playful investigation, even from the youngest age has convinced me of the fact. With the potential of play for learning and development so vast I cannot fathom why so often it is set in opposition to ‘proper learning.’ For me this is not about dismissing other learning contexts, for whole class, teacher-led inputs are important and small group directed tasks a necessity, however I encourage children to view them all as opportunities for learning. In my experience a great deal of time, expertise and knowledge goes into creating a play-focused curriculum within which children thrive. Achieving this is multifaceted and at the core of what we do is balance. Each week we think very carefully about how the resources and activities that are offered in the environment will enhance the learning theme. We also respond to children’s interests day to day and within in the moment. These strategies are balanced with a flexibility that allows the children the freedom to take their play in whichever direction they choose. I can remember one particular instance when I set out number cards and a collection of ornaments and provided an example of matching groups of objects to numerals. However a group of children decided the ornaments would be much better ‘sold’ in their role play shop! As the children built their ideas they independently practised and applied learned skills from all areas of the Early Years curriculum and encouraged others to join their play. When children self-initiate in this way my role is of course paramount and knowing how and when to intervene is vital so as to scaffold and progress learning without stifling creativity. The level of independence each child can cope with can vary greatly and knowing how to support each child appropriately comes back to knowing my children really well – a theme that has emerged as important throughout my writing.

Returning to my university study, engaging with Critical Theory (Gibson, 1986; Popkewitz & Fendler, 1999) and Poststructuralism (Agger, 1991) was particularly resonant as it led me to further question firmly-established ideas within Early Years education. Whilst evidence-based theory which proposes age to be a distinguishing feature within cognitive capabilities (Piaget, 1964) is certainly useful, the supportive texts of Cannella (2005) and Burman, (2008) led me to question some of my own long-held assumptions and to critically reflect upon my practices and beliefs relating to child development. Unfortunately the school
system is awash with processes that call upon teachers to generalise children’s abilities, ideas and to some extent personalities, which certainly creates some challenges. While evidence (Burman, 2008; Cannella, 2005; Pollard, 2008; Robinson & Jones-Diaz, 2006) and experience tells me that children do not develop in a linear fashion and that no one character should be valued above another, I find myself making assessments as if this were so. I thoroughly enjoy planning creative lessons that deliver the curriculum content but also question the relevance of the content for some children and wonder if there could be more flexibility within the knowledge and skills that need to be mastered to become a ‘successful’ child.

Postman (1993), much like Adorno and Horkheimer (1971), suggests that it is somewhat unusual to assign a technology in order to evaluate human action. What is more peculiar he argues is that so many of us see it as proper that a quantitative figure can represent the success of a person. Whilst I believe monitoring children’s capabilities and progress is central to my job as a teacher, there are certainly times I feel saddened that there seems to be no choice but to reduce children’s wide and varied ideas, or even their emotional development, to a numerical score. Although these contractions between philosophy and practice are of course extremely hard to negotiate with the realities of teaching including increasing class sizes, high expectations, bureaucracy and such, there is a certain amount to be said for set curriculum and assessment processes for teachers to follow; it makes it easier to manage for one. I do wonder sometimes whether there is a more effective way to challenge the status quo of the ideology of assessment that has been created but I also think it would be easy to let these inner dialogues take over. With this in mind I try to find a way to make the best of the context within in which I work and firstly this means letting go of a certain amount of responsibility. If things have to be done a particular way then I turn my attention to the way I approach these processes. I see assessment then as a means for improving my teaching and progressing learning and ensure that I use formative assessment strategies productively to learn about each child’s developing understanding and needs. Where summative assessments are necessary I try to gather as much insight as I can through observations and more relaxed one to one activities; of course box ticking sometimes becomes necessary but again I try to think about the child’s emotional well-being within that. I am aware that this may be easier to achieve in Early Years as tests and assessments become more formal as children progress through the school.

In my first year at university we explored the work of De Bono’s ‘six thinking hats’ approach (2000). Stepping into an alternative perspective, often one that conflicted with my own, meant that not only did I begin to understand the rationale behind these different points of view, but also started to look at my own perspectives through a critical lens. I increasingly took time to listen to other people’s perspectives without necessarily giving up my own; a rarity for me at any level before university! I developed an understanding of the diverse ways that others may see the world, thus becoming more reasoned and understanding myself. These ideas continued to develop during my placement experience at Brighton
Peace and Environment Centre (Bpec). I was inspired by Global Education which supports pupils in the exploration of the connections and relationships between people both locally and globally (Global Dimension, 2012). This approach is underpinned by a critical stance on education whereby individuals are encouraged to critically engage with matters of inequality, and think more widely about the views of others within political, cultural, and societal contexts (Department for International Development, 2011). As I started to examine my own assumptions about others I found clarity with Brookfield’s (2005) perspective on critical reflective practice. Brookfield argues that through critical thinking individuals increasingly learn to respect and understand one another as they develop an appreciation of the role that individual life experiences play within specific views and ideas.

As a teacher and now as a mum, I meet so many different people and children and it is extremely easy to judge people based on what you see or what you think you know. If I am honest I have done this many times but through my university experiences and engagement with theory I feel I have another voice; my own devil’s advocate. I ask myself about the experiences, culture and life behind the person in front of me and think about what could be driving their decisions and behaviours. I am sure that my liberal perspective has developed whilst living in Brighton and Hove for the past 6 years. I have surrounded myself with like-minded people, and practiced yoga and meditation. This keeps me grounded and more able to maintain perspective when needed. This open-minded perspective can also be seen within my pedagogy in many different ways. For example it is easy as a teacher to jump to the conclusion that a child is plain ‘naughty’ but to me this is extremely unhelpful. I am not suggesting that I have never been frustrated by a disruptive child but it is important to me to think about why the child may be displaying certain behaviours, to talk to them, listen to them, and try different approaches to include them in the learning. These kind of mindful practices are also encouraged within the children in my class. Of course I have to ensure my views are not delivered in a way that would upset any parents as ultimately it is their choice as to how to raise their children, but I think it is important that children learn to listen to and respect one another and to understand that every type of person should be equally valued. Sometimes this is done through responding to children’s queries or comments with a question and letting them take the dialogue on in their play. I have heard some moments of magic where children have discussed in child speak the comprehensive realities of gay marriage and transgender issues, and begin to work out their own beliefs and ideas.

BRINGING IT ALL BACK HOME

Despite the challenges raised in this chapter, when exploring my pedagogy on paper, my narrative begins to sounds rather idealistic. In reality my practice cannot look this way for every moment of every day. As I am sure every teacher and every parent knows, sometimes you are tired, short of time, or have distractions from outside of school; sometimes I just need to take time for myself and that may mean
a less than creative lesson is delivered. It is only through a constant process of reflection that I feel I am able to be the teacher I want to be – most of the time!

Criticality and reflection (Schön, 1983; Bolton, 2005) were a substantial part of both my degree and my education as a teacher, and through engagement with these ideas I realised that I could deepen my understanding of my own learning and of myself through reflecting on what had been. This has been reaffirmed as I have developed as a teacher, and also as a new mum. I don’t think I could be the parent I am and will be, or the teacher that I am and will be without engaging in reflection.

One particular experience comes to mind. I had a lot going on in my personal life when a lesson observation was due; I put all my energy into preparation and spent a huge amount of time meticulously planning to ensure that I covered all elements of an outstanding lesson. It was only once the lesson was complete that I realised I had completely forgotten to bring my personality and any flexibility to my lesson. Yes, I had a comprehensive plan, but I didn’t add the awe and wonder or fun as I normally did. Reflective thought processes also support me to be more responsive to children in the moment; thinking on my feet. I can see when I have made a wrong choice or acted in a particular way, and I can decide on ways to change if necessary. Reflection also gives me the ability to look back and celebrate my success and notice when something really worked. This is the way reflective practice works for improving teaching and learning and I am not sure that you can be a successful teacher without it. For me it has become intertwined with every day practice and is at the centre of professional development.

Writing this chapter itself has been a powerful process of reflection and throughout I have gone through some distinct professional and personal changes. Whilst carrying my daughter I was sure I would waltz back into school the same teacher that I was when I left. However once Olive arrived I realised that being a mummy changes you in so many ways that I never thought were possible. The emotions I felt, and still do, are so powerful and the way this little human being has put my life into perspective is quite wonderful and unexpected. It was early on in my maternity leave when I began to put my pedagogy onto paper and as I wrote I began to feel that I was writing about the past; about the teacher that I used to be and the practice that used to be mine. All I wanted was to be with my daughter and the thought of teaching again was all too much; I was really saddened as I found myself beginning to resent the career I had once loved. However as time went on I continued to write. I met with Mike Hayler, our editor and one of my old tutors, a number of times at the University and while I was there I bumped into a number of my past lecturers. A sense of nostalgia washed over me. I felt a glimpse of my interest in academia return and I remembered that this was part of my identity before I became a mum.

As my return to work fast approached I increasingly felt as if I was being pulled in two directions and after careful consideration I made the decision that I was not ready to commit to being a full time teacher again. Olive needed me and I needed her. I am guessing there is a time in most teachers’ careers where they feel it becomes too all-encompassing and they seek a better balance with other important things in their life. Of course I was still writing during this crossroads in my life.
and I found that doing so helped me see that while I recognised the difficulties of the profession and I knew I had to make changes, I had not given up; it was still part of me. Having Olive made me realise that perhaps being the teacher I once was would no longer be sustainable. Ultimately she became my number one priority and if I wanted to still be creative, passionate and dedicated in my career then I had to make changes. I was informed that returning to my school on a temporary part-time contract was not possible so with a heavy heart I resigned. However my motivation and drive soon returned. As I explored other avenues of work, created a new CV, covering letters, and applied and interviewed for posts, I felt my energy and passion for teaching come back; I could even see myself back in the classroom full-time in the future. I am now excited about taking my creative pedagogy into new schools and gaining experience through supply work and I am enjoying tutoring two boys in higher year groups than I have previously taught. It is stimulating (and in parts frustrating) to explore their curriculum, and to plan engaging and creative sessions for them. Moreover it was warming to see them respond to me and to hear how their confidence is growing.

As is clear from this chapter the particular school where I started my career had an ethos that matched my own and an educational philosophy that I really admired. I remember clearly the connection I felt when I read about the post, visited the school and spent my interview day there. I have been able to develop my pedagogy within a setting that, despite challenges and external pressure, bases quality teaching on a sound understanding of how children learn best. I knew my EYFS leader valued learning through play and would be thrilled to see the children from my class independently exploring their environment, lying on the floor making with fat felt markers or exploring ice and mud on the field. Whilst I’ll warmly return to cover days here and there, my life has undergone some serious change and, at this time in my life, full time teaching at this school is no longer right for me. I am also realising that there is a whole host of experiences out there for me to learn from and different settings with different priorities that may allow other parts of my practice to flourish. The school I am leaving behind has a huge amount to do with my pedagogy today but so has, as explored in this chapter, my many experiences before that. Just as I encourage the children I teach to see learning as a lifelong journey, I know my practice will continually evolve. There are always challenges and my next may well be working out my practice within the boundaries of a new school, one that provides fantastic opportunities and provides me with the balance between work and family that I am longing for but one that has fewer similarities with my own educational philosophy. I am certain there is always space; I am the teacher in the classroom and I am the person behind that teacher wherever my career takes me, so I’ll always seek ways to be true to my beliefs – at least most of the time!

Olive has given me new perspective and I will be a better teacher because of her. I have more patience, I am more efficient, I have a genuine empathy with parents and I feel less stress about the little things. I could go on. As a five year old I was hopeful and full of excitement as I contemplated my future in education. I am glad to say that my passion for teaching has been refreshed and I am eager and
excited to continue providing supportive, creative, and inspiring learning experiences for children just beginning their journey. Now I am beginning a new chapter with an altered identity. I am Olive’s mummy and I am a teacher.

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REFRAMING IDENTITY


**Holly Taylor**  
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8. HOW THE HELL DID I END UP TEACHING?

INTRODUCTION

My decision, after much prevarication, to go into teaching, seems so long ago now that I’m almost tempted to begin with, ‘Once upon a time ….’ Until that moment, I had looked somewhat askance at a career in education and had my sights set on economics, mainly because I had read *The Affluent Society* by J. K. Galbraith in 6th form (or, more correctly, during my Higher School Certificate … more of that later) and the simple idealism and yearning for fairness that permeated the book, helped shape my nascent political views and gave them some direction and purpose.

The year was 1975. I had just completed one year of an arts degree majoring in Economics at Macquarie University in Sydney. My parents and I had migrated to Australia five years earlier and I had completed my secondary education (via their post-16 route: the HSC). Economics, at that time, seemed to be the appropriate vehicle for a left-of-centre idealist, caught up in the heady optimism of the Whitlam government; with Keynesian approaches dominating the financial discourse and concepts of shared prosperity through tax and spend policies becoming mainstream, orthodox and even viewed in some quarters as a little cautious. Jim Cairns, the then Labor (sic) treasurer was, at that time, famously quoted suggesting that governments could simply print money to fund their way out of economic difficulties. For the next thirty years, a different economic ‘wisdom’ prevailed and hardened into the neo-liberal orthodoxy in economics to the extent that any aspiring economics academic would be hounded out of western university faculties (Mirowski, 2014, p. 293) was probably for the best that I did not take up a career in economics and opted instead for education. My views would have been a major hindrance to career advancement, whereas education offered the prospect of being able to work in accordance with my views. That does sound a little too pompous, even for me, but it’s the best wording I can come up with to define the set of values I continue to hold and which have provided a sort of conscience against which I tend to measure myself. In fact, I’ve probably taken too many career risks based on this values set which have caused me problems during my career and, hopefully, this reflective writing exercise will help me to articulate and understand that process with greater clarity and perception.

Meanwhile, back in 1975, that new economic model was poised to break the Keynes consensus. Nixon famously asserted in 1971: ‘we’re all Keynesian’s now’ prior to exploding that same (Friedman, 1965) and the Australian Labor Party lasted only two years before it was ousted in a quasi-coup (Horne, 1983) that not only ushered in Friedman economics dominated by the right wing, supply-side
Chicago school but also a debilitating sense of impotence for the centre left of politics that remained in place for a generation. That’s when I decided to try education for a career.

In writing these first few paragraphs, I seem to have charted a thought-through, decision-making process for my entry into the education profession, with objectivity and calmness. To be honest, this was not the case and the trends shaping politics and economics that influenced me at that time are only brought into relief through the passage of time and reflection. However unarticulated the rationale was at the time, I believe that these were the prevailing drivers of the decision I made to quit the economics course at Macquarie and to join the education faculty. I had passed all my courses until that time (Economics, reasonably well; Accountancy, reasonably badly) but the passion had been slowly sucked from my studies. The courses were dry, they seemed to have no relevance to the excitement of Galbraith and even less connection to the political ideals that fired me up. Education, on the other hand, offered passionate idealism and I could also translate my love of reading books into a paid career!

What I didn’t realise at the time, and which has come only too sharply into focus recently, was the extent to which the revolution in economics in the mid-1970s would incrementally but overwhelmingly suffuse and distort education as a profession, to the point whereby a production line model of educational delivery would become the dominant metaphor for perceived success. In this brave new world of education in the UK, there is now no such thing as ‘context’ (echoing the old Thatcherite lie that ‘there is no such thing as society’ … as I write this passage, Oliver Letwin, the Conservative cabinet minister is in the news for blaming the 1985 London riots on ‘bad, moral character’ (*The Independent*, 30th December 2015). Not police tactics; not slums; not entrenched, institutional racism; not poverty; not unemployment and certainly not a combination of these factors!)

So it is now in education. A child born into hunger, poverty, emotional distress, lack of opportunity and neglect is expected to make the same progress as a child born into affluence; who has the support, guidance, money and opportunities that advantage confers. The abolition of context from educational accountability means that the educational progress of any child is simply and exclusively attributable to the moral fibre of the individual child. Therefore, in this distorted view of the world, context is irrelevant. And, therefore, we do not need Scandinavian models of social pedagogy and community funding; we do not need the professional autonomy and positive regard of teachers in South East Asia. We simply need to instil backbone, character and the will to win.

All of this is not to suggest that there weren’t other influences on my decision to start teaching and, subsequently, to stick with it. In the following sections, I will reflect on my (somewhat nomadic) early years and on my social and cultural background along with the links between my politic views and a career path that, in retrospect, seems more haphazard and coincidental than I had realized at the time. However, the main point from this crucial decision is that I have always been driven by a strong sense of injustice and political awareness and this has ensured that a certain restless desire; a political itch, has permeated my career – both
hindering it and, on occasions, advancing it – and, even at this late stage, that dynamic remains oxymoronic in its effect – makes me restless and somewhat driven; fires me into contemplating projects that may remain beyond my capacity but always ensuring that I remain grudgingly engaged in a search for a system better than we currently have.

It’s never easy to discern exactly how much impact a person’s early years can bring to bear on crucial life choices further down the path. However, in my case, the uniqueness of my early experiences, particularly between the ages of five and ten, have left an indelible imprint that, in retrospect, has subtly shaped my values and outlook.

I am the only offspring of a mother from a staunchly Methodist family, who was raised in debilitating poverty in the north east of England. She earned a place at a local grammar school but, at fourteen, she was obliged to leave and take up employment to support the family, as her father was, at that point, chronically ill with emphysema. She remained, nonetheless, quite adventurous in her outlook and, when she met and married my father (ten years her senior) at twenty-one, she injected her wanderlust into the marriage, encouraging and supporting my father to take up job offers overseas whenever the opportunity arose.

By this time, my father, the fourth child of a mining superintendent from East Cleveland, had served in the navy during the war and sailed around the world. Politically, there were differences between them but these rarely surfaced and were never the source of any tension. My mother considered herself as quite left wing, without ever really being politically conscious. She had a natural empathy for the underdog but this was the extent of her political consciousness. Conversely, my father came from a one nation Tory tradition. He was a believer in the benefits of empire and the essential decency of the British way of life. By the mid-1990s, both would be united as firm supporters of the Blair administration, reluctant to concede to any critique of that ‘nice man’; their sense of fairness and social justice embodied by the New Labour government. They were very comfortable with New Labour’s quiet drive to combine aspiration and a degree of poverty relief whilst disguising, or even denying, a need for any challenge to the social order. They remained politically deferential rather than disrespectful in their view of the world.

The blend of romantic idealism and real world experience in their relationship seemed to cement the marriage and, within four years of my birth, the family embarked on the first work driven journey abroad; this first time to India. As a foundry methods engineer, my father’s skills and experience of manufacturing railway rolling stock was in great demand as India sought to establish its transport network in the early 1960s. Not only did this mean immersing ourselves in a wide range of social and cultural experiences beyond our ken at that time, educationally, it meant moving from a council-run primary school in north east England to a private school for English boys in Calcutta via a Mother Teresa inspired Catholic primary school. Such a barrage of class-based experiences inevitably sparked internal reflections and prompted dialogue and discussion within the family, as we tried to, at first, assimilate these new surroundings and influences and, eventually, to make sense of them. As a young child of five on arrival in Calcutta, I can vividly
remember many of the sights and sounds that prompted family discussion; from
beggars and abject poverty, to Hindu festivals and even a visit to a local orphanage
as my parents explored the possibility of adopting a young Anglo-Indian boy.

Somewhat surprisingly, despite my eclectic range of school experiences (and
this was set to continue in future years), by the time I had confirmed my
professional views on education, I was (and still am) a firm adherent of
comprehensive, non-religious education. Even at an early stage of development, it
was possible to discern latent snobbery and discrimination at the schools I attended
in India, which were in stark contrast to the sense of acceptance and inclusion (I
probably rationalized this as ‘being happy’ at my council-run school in the north
east of England). I have stark memories of being rejected at the Catholic school in
Calcutta and, as a result, being beaten up in the playground and this prompted my
parents to send me to a small, fee paying, English-only school for boys in the city.
To their credit, my parents had tried to place me at the Catholic school because its
intake was broad, included Indian boys and seemed to offer a more egalitarian
ethos but they were quick to respond to my dilemma. At Mrs Johnstone’s School
for English Boys, I quickly made friends and found a measure of acceptance but it
was probably the first time that I experienced a sense of my own class background.
I recognized that my council-life upbringing was different in many ways from the
upbringing of the other boys at the school and, even now looking back, I’m not
sure what led me to that awareness.

So, my early life experiences ranged across a wide variety of social contexts and
provided an insight into education in a wide variety of settings that engendered a
dawning awareness of class consciousness that later began to influence how I
thought about education and indeed what constitutes a good school in the context
of a good society. The subtle semiotics of privilege within a private school system
became entangled with the inclusive ethic of a comprehensive ideal from a state
school and they were overlaid with the theoretically spiritual culture of a faith-
based school that was undercut by the actual physical brutality of the institution
that belied its stated aims. Quite a cocktail of experiences that remained with me as
we sailed on the return journey to the UK two years later. To experience such a
variety of cultures, patterns, life-styles and philosophies in such a short time and to
return to the same inclusive but now somewhat mundane community in the north
east must have been restricting for all concerned and, sure enough, it wasn’t too
long before the family embarked on another overseas jaunt; this time to Australia.

THE SEARCH FOR A POST

Back in 1978 in Sydney when I qualified from Macquarie University with my
equivalent PGCE and concurrent Bachelor of Arts degree, there was a teacher
shortage in New South Wales. Unfortunately, by the time my qualifications came
through, that teacher shortage had become a teacher glut, because the State
Government’s answer to the chronic need for teachers throughout the state, was to
import 4000 Canadian teachers en masse.
This seemed like a good long term solution to a frequently recurring problem within the NSW Education Department at the time. Unfortunately, it left people like me with no prospect of permanent employment. However, in 1979 after briefly flirting with house painting in apartments around Sydney Harbour, which provided wonderful views but little in the way of income, I managed to secure myself some interim part time employment in the education department in New South Wales and that resulted in me getting employment at a wide range of schools mainly in the Sydney area. Supply teaching paid the bills, but it wasn’t that regular and it wasn’t that secure. But what it did do was provide me with a degree of resilience and adaptability. I hadn’t completed at the time, what we could call now an NQT year, I was simply thrust into teaching in a wide range of schools; some in economically deprived areas in the far west of Sydney, an area where most of the poverty and deprivation exists to this day. And not only did I teach English, to secure work I had to teach all range of subjects areas well out of my comfort zone, including maths and science at one stage. So, in a way, it was a good grounding, because it provided me with some skills of flexibility. I had to adapt to different situations; I had to fit in; I had to cope with pupils who, perhaps, were less than well behaved, without having the kind of strategic support that might be offered to teachers now. And when you cut your teeth in situations like that, you learn lessons that you don’t forget. So, a wide range of schools, a wide range of experiences and learning to survive, were probably the hallmarks of my first couple of years in the teaching profession.

I was restless and relatively ambitious as well at the time and having come out of university qualified, I was a bit frustrated that I wasn’t able to secure a permanent post. We were not able to buy a house and I was married with a young child and, as a consequence, I became personally quite restless and this prompted us to take a family holiday up to Brisbane and offer my services to the State Department in Queensland. Much to my amazement, I was hired virtually immediately after a ten-minute discussion with the officials and I was given a posting in the northern suburbs.

Teaching in Brisbane was fascinating. It was my first permanent post and I thoroughly enjoyed the teaching community there and the pupils. What I didn’t appreciate was the political context in which teachers in Brisbane were having to operate. Reflecting on where we are now in this country politically, it wasn’t too different to be perfectly honest, but don’t forget this was in the Post-Whitlam era in Australia. My centre-left views about education had been burnished by the Labor government and my sights were set fairly high, about what education could and should be, so I found myself teaching my first permanent position in a state that had been dubbed the ‘Deep North’ as an echo of the Deep South in America and the Conservative views that prevailed there. It was a deeply conservative administration that had been in power for some time; the National Party, a conservative rural party, dominated every aspect of life including education and it was well known in teaching circles that unless you became a paid-up member of the National Party and demonstrated your conservative credentials then there was no point in you seeking promotion. That set me back a little but the teaching side of
it was very enjoyable and very satisfying and very illuminating, because they had moved ahead with teacher assessment and this hot, innovative idea was, ironically, being introduced by a deeply conservative government but based on the premise that it was cheaper than running exams.

Life in Brisbane, and teaching in particular, was dominated by this prevailing air of conservatism. A couple of anecdotes from teaching illustrate the point; one is the regular culling of books that had ‘risqué’ items in them that would be commonplace on the curriculum of any other school in any other country. And that made the atmosphere a little more cautious and threatening. The other insight that I think characterises my time in Brisbane, was a novel that was on the syllabus actually that was removed during my time there, but it was by an Australian Author called David Malouf and the book was called Johnno (1975) and the character Johnno was a lively, centre-left, outward looking, collaborative individual who believed in pushing the boundaries of life. Johnno described living and being brought up in Brisbane as, ‘shadow boxing in the suburbs of limbo.’

As I taught that novel, (I taught it a number of times there), that one phrase seemed to characterise my life in Brisbane, which was becoming, I felt, increasingly shallow, increasingly limited, frustrated by an inability to realise my ambitions in teaching and also I think at the time ignited yet again my desire to travel, to use my qualifications as a means of seeing more of the world and again more life experiences. Now the fact that I had at this stage, two young children and my wife who was in nursing didn’t seem to be a hindrance to me. Perhaps on reflection I should have thought more seriously about the impact on them and their future lives. But, nonetheless, I proposed the notion of moving on.

I should say that, although I’m a little bit critical of Queensland State Education at the time, it certainly isn’t like that now, but also I was really fortunate at the school I was sent to: they had the most innovative transition program that I have ever encountered. Secondary education in Brisbane at the time, began in what we would characterise as Year 8 and finished in Year 13, so pupils had an extra year in primary school before they made the transition to secondary. And at the school I was teaching at Springwood in Brisbane, they had a purpose built Year 8 transition centre. The theory was, and it proved extremely good in practice, to bring the Year 8’s into the school as a whole cohort and teach them via a primary model in the Year 8 centre and to have as a curriculum, a model based on primary education. So pupils would benefit from a dedicated Year 8 teacher, the teachers would teach them RE, English, History, Geography and PSHE and then for the other specialist subjects like Science, PE, etc. they would go to the other areas of the school to have those lessons to cover the more specialist curriculum area.

What it meant was that the Year 8 Transition Centre kept the essence of a good quality, consistent, coherent primary curriculum whilst furnishing the pupils with the skills necessary to go out into other subject areas and pick up expertise and to be more familiar with schools, so by the time they moved into Year 9 they had secured the basic skills that they needed for secondary curriculum, they had settled themselves socially and emotionally within the new school and now I don’t have data for this because we didn’t have data in those days, but the anecdotal feedback
that was available from the senior staff at Springwood including the Head Teacher was that it was a highly effective transition program that enabled consistency, continuity and progression and met the social and emotional needs of the pupils at the same time.

I can remember my first meeting with the Head on my first day when he said to me ‘John, you may not know about the problems of transition in education generally, but you don’t need to here because we’ve cracked it.’ Now ironically, decades later in Britain, certainly in England especially, we are still attempting to grapple with the dip of Year 6/Year 7 transition and successive governments have tried endless approaches to resolve the issue and it has remained stubbornly still unresolved. Back in Brisbane, in Springwood School in the early 1980’s, Max Sorwosky, the Principal of the School reckoned that he’d got it cracked and I think on reflection he probably had. Nonetheless, this experience served me extremely well in 2000 when I took up my post as a consultant with the National Strategies. One of the priority areas was Y6/Y7 transition and the experience I had gained teaching in the Queensland model was invaluable.

There was a personal issue that intervened at the time; my parents were living in South Africa and, in a way, this is where I get some of my wanderlust from, my Father had opened a new factory, a steel manufacturing foundry just north of Durban in South Africa and he’d been very successful. However, my mum contracted breast cancer and we learned about this just at the time when my two year contract in Brisbane was coming to an end and, therefore, the decision as to what to do with the next stage became bound up with mum’s illness and we decided, mainly through my prompting I must be honest, to take a break from teaching and to go to South Africa to stay with my mum and dad, to help with mum’s convalescence and also to have something of an adventure. I think I have to be frank and say that I looked upon this, although I had strongly anti-apartheid views, given where I come from politically, I felt that it would be an interesting and stimulating short period of time for the family that would be something we could look back on in future years and would stimulate discussions.

THE INTERREGNUM

The years 1983–1985 represented a break from teaching and, looking back, seemed to act to confirm the adage that ‘absence makes the heart grow fonder.’ With the prospect of ‘going bush’ a looming factor in Brisbane, and ill-health besetting my mother in South Africa, a temporary move overseas seemed a reasonable option to take. Although, seen from the position at the end of my career, it doesn’t seem particularly career-minded.

After a brief stay and, fired up by my antipathy to this system, we travelled to England to use my ‘qualifications passport’ to teach here and to join what I thought to be a progressive educational system. However, on application to the Department of Education (DfE), I was told that my Australian qualifications did not allow me to teach in this country. Needless to say, this was something of a blow to my assumption that teaching degree was a ‘passport’ to teach internationally. The issue
was the amount of time spent actually ‘practice teaching’ during my degree. As my experience was spread across the four years of my degree, rather than a continuous block as it is the case in a Post-Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE), the DfE deemed it inappropriate. To my delight, the director of my PGCE at Macquarie wrote to the DfE in an uncompromising tone and the ban on my teaching in the UK was lifted. This did take some time to resolve, though, and in the meantime, we returned to Australia as the prospect of work seemed to be more promising.

MY TIME AT NUNTHORPE – PRACTICE VS CAREER

Returning to the UK at this time, I was fortunate enough to be given a permanent contract at Nunthorpe Secondary School. The Headteacher at the time was a man called John Rowling. John Rowling was to have a profound impact on my career, not least at this time but also subsequent to that when my career took a slightly different path. However, I was also fortunate to join an English and Drama Department that was regarded as probably the premier department in the authority and had within it, people whose values I shared. As a consequence, pedagogy was high on the agenda, and there was a commitment to mixed ability teaching which occurred during my time there and the department was recognised, by all and sundry really, as the flagship department of the school. Not only did it operate on sound values and principles it drove standards in a pupil-centred manner. The department embodied the principles of progressive education.

So, I was very happy at that time and I spent 5 years there as an NQT because I had to serve my time as an NQT in this country. Also I was the head of drama and it was a formative time for me because it enabled me to establish a way of teaching and a way of operating with people in the education service that was consistent with the values that I had been espousing for most of my short career.

However, there were some tensions within my life at the time, one of those tensions was where the family should live. We ended up after 5 years returning for a brief period to Australia. However, on arriving back in Australia the same problems emerged; it was difficult to get on the career path to obtain permanent employment and we returned to Queensland, while my wife got a job I was unable to find any employment actually even supply work was pretty thin on the ground. And I spent 9 months, I suppose going backwards really, and I missed, very badly, the ethos, the drive, the excitement of teaching and the culture where I felt I was contributing and which reflected my own views and as a result of that, after just short of a year my family returned to the UK, and I was able to get employment at another good local school to re-establish myself in the education community. It’s probably worth reflecting at this time that the years I’d spent at Nunthorpe were really quite profound in my professional development. The Headteacher I mentioned John Rowling – later gained a knighthood for services to education. He came from a maths/science background and had a very different approach to teaching in that he didn’t really advocate progressive education but he was sufficiently astute to understand that he had a group of teachers who were passionate about their subjects, who worked together very effectively, who worked
tirelessly for the benefits of their pupils and who were producing results and on that basis he more or less let the English/Drama Department have a great deal of autonomy to develop and secure the kind of inclusive, progressive and also aspirational culture. It was probably the high point of my career. When I moved to other schools in the area, it was very apparent that their ethos was different. Some of them were less progressive, many of them were small ‘c’ conservative, many were dominated by the ethos that was antipathetic to the principles of English teaching that were being espoused at the time and I was extremely grateful to John Rowling for the ethos he created at Nunthorpe.

There was another tension in my career at this time between climbing the career ladder and developing myself as what I thought was and believed to be a very effective and skilful practitioner. Cohen and Mannion’s book *The Reflective Practitioner* (2000) was a major influence and I sought to hone practice through classroom based action research rather than seek career advancement. Consequently, I didn’t really see myself moving up the career ladder because I was so passionate about the subject I was teaching, to the extent that I joined various national committees on the teaching of English and Drama, I was writing and making contributions to periodicals and I also completed my Advanced Diploma and my Masters around this time as well.

It was this connection between the theory of education and practice and the action research that underpinned this that spurred me on at this time. In a way it lifted the banality of teaching; it can be a demanding and exhausting profession, particularly when the marking load is very heavy. The pressures it places on you as a professional can become over-whelming, but by infusing that with the excitement of theoretical background and of, as I saw it at the time, pushing the boundaries of progressive education, by using action research in the classroom and including pupils and other staff in that research. It provided me with a real drive, a real stimulus to continue and be productive in the profession and to continue my interest in high quality pedagogy.

**A CAREER PATH EMERGES**

In a sense I was a little bit reluctant to follow a traditional career path within education. My wish to pursue improvement of my own pedagogical approach dominated my perspective. I never really was ambitious to become a Headteacher.

Looking back that was perhaps slightly misguided. I now realise that Headteachers can influence the course of children’s lives and their staff and the local community more than I realised at the time, but, nonetheless, I recognise now that such was my passion and desire to improve progressive notions in teaching, that I perhaps didn’t take that career jump early enough and also I was reluctant to go down a particular traditional route. Perhaps there was also an echo of my upbringing in this reluctance. My parents were both very modest people who waited to be invited, rather than push themselves forward.
So although I had moved up to Head of Department level and I’d done that in two schools; one particularly challenging inner city school and I was fairly confident in my abilities, when the opportunity came to take up a role in the National Strategies as an English Literacy Consultant, I grabbed it eagerly.

It seemed to me that this really was an opportunity to pursue pedagogy and to influence other professionals and also to get more involved in the theory into practice notion of English teaching. It did involve a certain amount of backtracking, because to actually take the job I had to accept a salary that was considerably less than that which I was getting as a Senior Teacher in the Secondary sector, but I was prepared to make that sacrifice at the time, because of the reasons I’ve already elucidated.

On reflection this wasn’t quite the post that I had hoped it would be. The strategies became very prescriptive, very top-down and very circumscribed in terms of their teaching approaches. The concept of progressive education was inherent in some of the approaches being advocated and, therefore, there was a kind of niche in which I resided at the time. But I always felt a little bit on the outer of National Strategies, because it was an attempt to implicate a skills approach to teaching of English and although it purported to be evidence based it was quite selective at times in the evidence that it chose to accept and the evidence it chose to ignore and pointing that out to senior colleagues at that time was not an advisable was problematic. Free thinkers were generally not celebrated in the strategies. Therefore, there was, in my view, a lack of transparency and a lack of acknowledgement that consultants who were joining the strategy had anything to offer. We were very much beholden to those who were above us in the food chain and expected to deliver it according to their edicts.

However, it was a very stimulating time intellectually, because I had to navigate the difficulties of those kind of philosophical approaches to education and I thoroughly enjoyed the way in which I was able to operate with individual schools and pupils and staff to push the boundaries really of education. There was some action research, there was some in-class filming and some writing projects that I got involved in that were really interesting and really stimulating. Inevitably that also led to a need to move up; I was earning significantly less than I had been before and so when an opportunity came from the strategies to work in a different authority in York but in a leadership capacity; leading a team of consultants and that involved me in aspects of leadership development, team building and forging relationships with a new set of colleagues and schools, I eagerly grasped this opportunity as well. Michael Fullan’s work was influential at this time, particularly Leadership and Sustainability (2005) as he was promoting a reflective/autonomous professional model of educator. My new role allowed me to put into practice my understanding of leadership, my particular view of leadership as a collaborative enterprise, and I was able to create my own team; a very satisfying exercise. And to this day, that team has an identity. We still meet regularly as colleagues and indeed friends who shared a common endeavour and who faced some difficulties at times, who were sufficiently robust in their professional
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relationships which each other to produce solutions focussed outcomes to a whole range of problems that were evident in the system at the time.

A model of school intervention developed by my team was: the resident consultancy team. The resident consultancy team involved a dialogue with staff in schools: Headteacher, Senior teacher, classroom teachers about aspects of action research that we felt the school needed to move ahead with to develop its pedagogy and we would develop a contract around this and specification and we would go in and we would work with the school in a coaching capacity at all levels and for a time limited period it would be evaluated through feedback from participants and we did this in two or three schools in York and it had a profound impact because a) we were able to go in and work alongside the teachers without judgement and without any notion that they were being singled out in any way. It was a joint endeavour looking at open ended practice. We were trying to create an environment in which teachers could experiment with their own teaching practice and evaluate their own results. In a sense, we were trying to set up an action research ethos within schools that enabled staff to develop their own pedagogy, a kind of personalised CPD if you like, and we were fortunate as well at this time that a set of resources came out from the strategies which remain the best set of results for school improvement, in my view. It was called the Pedagogy Pack and was a much underutilised set of materials. If implemented effectively the pack would have rendered Ofsted obsolete and would have empowered the profession and given a notion of true autonomy to the teaching profession that it doesn’t have today despite the rhetoric that emanates from central government.

So, I was able to take my principles and build on them to develop an effective way of implementing improvement approaches consistent with my values, which was non-judgemental. The project had real impact on staff and on pupils as a secure and self-fulfilling way to improve schools that was relatively cost effective, when compare the inspection service and the associated costs of the other accountability mechanisms.

Partly as a result of this, I was able to move up the advisory ladder in York and eventually I became Principal Advisor and, as a result of that, an opportunity arose back in my home town of Middlesbrough, when the Deputy Director of Children’s Services post came about. Effectively, this was the Director of Education role. Middlesbrough was, and remains to this day, routed to the bottom of educational local authority league tables, so I was very aware of the challenges and the scale of the task, but at that time I felt that the strong relationships that I had with Senior Leaders, my experience of teaching in Middlesbrough and my values would enable me to fashion a model of working with schools that would help to make a difference. Certainly in the early days of my time in Middlesbrough this proved to be the case; we rapidly moved ahead with collaborative projects between schools (Fullan, 2005); we set up a strong partnership between primary and secondary special schools; we set about fashioning a vision of strategy that was consistent with government policy but which, nonetheless, was supportive and inclusive and also aspirational because everyone recognised, and still does, that our outcomes needs to be better in Middlesbrough. Myself and the Director of Children’s
Services at the time were firm in our belief that collaboration was the way to do it rather than stringent competition which we believed had held back Middlesbrough schools for some years. Another educational author articulated this concept, Dean Fink. His paper, ‘Trusting Our School’s’ set an ethical framework for developing a constructive and functioning ethos between schools and local authorities and John West Burnham’s, ‘Schools and Communities’ Network Curriculum Education, Sept 2010 was the text that underpinned our vision of area-wide improvement based on tolerance, respect social pedagogy. For a short while, the collaborative approach worked!

We made real progress in the early days. However, once the complexion of the Government had changed The Academy’s Act came in and Michael Gove introduced his reforms, it became apparent that the academy’s agenda and the internecine competition began to have negative effects that proved almost insurmountable in Middlesbrough schools, plus Ofsted began to take a particular interest in Local Authorities as opposed to simply being a school inspection service. I felt at the time that the kind of values and ethos I was attempting to build between schools in Middlesbrough would actually be antipathetic to the competitive notion that Ofsted espoused and being at the bottom of the leagues it was inevitable that Ofsted would have a dim view of Middlesbrough and would use its judgements to begin to try and manipulate the ethos that I was attempting to engender. I took the opportunity to leave join the group charitable trust, called PiXL, led by Sir John Rowling.

FREELANCING AND BEYOND

I began doing some freelance work for the PiXL Organisation (Partners in Excellence) some years ago. In a sense, I was moving out of my comfort zone into an area of challenge that was more data driven, but, nonetheless, it was interesting that the same principles emerged around leadership, around the quality of relationships, aspiration, inclusion and belief in every child and therefore I felt, and still feel, that PiXL as an organisation was perfectly consistent with the values that I espouse and indeed was making an increasing, significant difference to individual pupils and their schools.

And so as a consequence, I jumped ship and I became an ‘Independent consultant’ or, as it was called in PiXL, an ‘associate,’ and I began working in that capacity. I created a company, I paid Corporation Tax, I paid dividends and I adopted a whole range of seemingly antipathetic approaches, but, nonetheless, I’ve a firm belief that the values that I espoused are consistent with those that drove me in my initial phase of my career. PiXL is interesting in that it isn’t Ofsted, it is non-judgemental, it is a highly supportive organisation that doesn’t instruct schools to adopt any policy – it simply offers guidance. PiXL has grown now from 30 schools eight years ago to 1500, which is 50% of the 11–16 school community, so it is a stunning success and the results are there to be seen.
Also, I’d been fortunate enough to be commissioned by Fischer to deliver some of their literacy work and reading and writing and that has provided me with an outlet for that aspect of my professional demeanour. Now alongside that I’ve also, because I’ve written quite a lot during the course of my career as well, I have been writing various pieces, on school improvement that I’ve linked up with professionals overseas, I’ve been working with some Australian leaders in education on school improvement approaches and I’ve also had a link with a group called ISOS Partnership (Limited Liability Partnership, London) in the UK that are looking at new ways of structurally developing school improvement approaches beyond local authorities. In addition to this, I’m also doing writing on the teaching of Shakespeare. It’s these things that are kind of routed in my initial belief system in education and I’m almost compelled to keep doing these things, even though I’m not entirely sure there’s going to be a purposeful outcome to them. So the Shakespeare I will finish writing by the summer term, I’ve got a conference with a colleague of mine to see if we attract anyone to that conference and we’ll wait and see how that goes, but it’s by no means certain that that will enable me to pursue it in any career capacity.

Notions of pupil centred-ness, of collaboration, of inclusion, of teaching being based on a set of relationships that are reciprocal, that are respectful, a belief in every child and every teacher as having the potential to grow and to develop and to improve. These things have been fundamental and where I’ve been faced with choices in my career, where those principles couldn’t in fact be enhanced, I’ve shied away from them and I realise that quite startlingly now. The other aspect of this project that’s made me really reflect on this and learn about myself is that I’ve had a strong attachment to theory and to research, action research in particular. Working from my set of principles, articulating them in the context in which I’m working, whether that was the English and Drama Department at Nunthorpe or working in the Strategies or developing a team in York to do intervention in schools or working now in terms of PiXL and my freelance work. I’ve always had this notion that it’s important to link theory and practice; the two things go together in a way that I don’t necessarily think teachers appreciate and in fact I think that in some ways, Government has not wanted to go down this route.

They’ve generated the excitement, they’ve generated the interest levels, they’ve generated the engagement of pupils and staff in these projects and it’s the leadership and the ethos; the leadership to establish the ethos that I find even now exciting, illuminating, engaging and compulsive and I’m not sure I want to stop.

REFERENCES


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INTRODUCTION

Autoethnography offers alternative ways of telling stories and works to “hold self and culture together, albeit not in equilibrium or stasis” (Jones, 2008, p. 207). Autoethnography places an emphasis on writing as a “method of inquiry” (Richardson, 2000), resisting the conventions of traditional academic writing and legitimising personal freedom to explore creative and lived stories. The writing presented in this chapter will offer multiple reflections on my journey into teaching, using more than one voice in order to reflect the fracturing and splintering of my own personal experiences. This text serves to “move writers and readers, subjects and objects, tellers and listeners into dialogue, debate and change” (Jones, 2008, p. 206). This chapter aims to construct a patchwork montage of my experiences through a text, which is creative and theoretical, personal and analytical, and for it to have emotional relevance for those already in, or aspiring to be in, education. It is imperative that my writing allows the reader to make sense of their academic and personal worlds, offering an ‘enlightened reading’ (Kant, 2009) enabling them to extract meaning from my personal experiences. This is the path that led me to teaching. It won’t be like your journey but I hope it is of interest none-the-less.

In the Beginning

So, who can I actually talk to? My mother’s sick, my father’s emotionally unavailable and as for my brother? Well that’s another story. I refuse to talk to the doctor why would I? My mum told me to go the family GP… Ptsh as if that would work. She’d just judge me and think of me as another looney from the Galea family. No time for that. I’m a complex individual, that doesn’t mean I’m unwell. So what if I check the nutrients in everything that I eat, it’s just a phase... Right? I mean I won’t be able to go to a restaurant and ask the waiter, ‘Excuse me but could you check the saturated fat content in your vegetable spring rolls please? Cheers.’ But then again, I find the menus online and write down what I deem to be healthy into my phone so I’m prepared. Control. That’s a big thing to me, but my family wouldn’t know that. After all, my siblings frown upon me because I’m the youngest. The ‘golden child.’ The one who is at university. I bet I seem secure to them. To my dad, my mum – who tell their friends about me and how great I’m doing, so I nod, smile and agree. They sing
my praises. But do they ever ask how I’m feeling? Course not. I mean, I seem so secure. They seem to know who I am. That’s the scary part. They know me, but I don’t.

I am not a conventional, straightforward human being like everyone thinks I am, instead I am a messy, vulnerable man (who still feels very much like a kid) who would only be able to reflect during a self-narrative that analyses the “situatedness of the self with others in social contexts” (Spry, 2001, p. 710). My chapter will describe the struggles I faced before becoming a teacher, using autobiographical poetry and prose to capture the past. The creative pieces will consist of autobiographical fragments, personal narratives and a selection of poems in order to evoke the different voices that arise from each person involved. Writing an autoethnography can be disadvantageous, as some may question the validity of my writing in this way and challenge what it means about teaching or becoming a teacher. This is just one story though. But the process of constructing an autoethnography can help by “increasing the circumference of the visible” (Foucault, cited in Sparkes, 2007, p. 541) and my writing has provided me closure from past, painful experiences and enabled me to move past, move on, feel differently about the past.

Moving back home at the start of the third year of my degree course was not pleasant. I returned to my brother who suffers with bi-polar, my mother who battles with long-term depression and my father who is emotionally vacant. Mental illness has been with my family like a silent plague. But the act of writing about it has been ultimately healing. Autoethnographers use writing as a political and emotional act, as if we cannot express an emotional and personal connection with our work, then why are we bothering to do it at all? The resistance to traditional academic prose is undoubtedly one of the reasons I challenged myself to provide a text detailing a personal, emotional conflict as I agree with Ruth Behar who wrote in The Vulnerable Observer, “research that doesn’t break your heart just isn’t worth doing” (1996, p. 177). Behar’s philosophy inspired my writing as it aims to engage the heart and mind to produce a text that is potentially transformative for the writer and also the reader.

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Over the past twenty years, there has been emerging research that has opposed the traditional academic form, including genres such as: “auto-anthropology, autobiographical ethnography or sociology, personal or self-narrative research and writing, and perhaps most commonly, autoethnography” (Anderson, 2006, p. 373). The turn away from linear approaches to academic research has resulted in the shift towards what Geertz (1983) called a “blurred genre of writing” (Jones, 2008, p. 208), a heightened self-reflexivity and an increased focus on the emotional capabilities of the individual involved.

Heider (1975) first used the term ‘autoethnography’ to refer to studies by “indigenous anthropologists of their own culture” (Boyd, 2008, p. 215). Since then,
other theorists such as Reed-Danahay (1997) decided to take a more standard scholarly approach, defining autoethnography as a “form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context. It is both method and text” (Boyd, 2008, p. 215). The writings of Ellis and Bochner (Ellis, 1991, 1995, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Bochner & Ellis, 2001), Laurel Richardson (1994) and Norman Denzin (1989, 1997) have championed the teachings of autoethnography and used their own experiences to encourage students to work within this emerging genre. For Ellis and Bochner (2000), autoethnography is an autobiographical genre that “displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (Boyd, 2008, p. 215).

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world […] Qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. (Denzin & Lincoln in Davies, 2007, p. 10)

Denzin is referring to qualitative research as a framework that encourages the researcher to confront their position in the social world and to ultimately make meaning of their life in relation to their natural setting. Qualitative research is the foundation of autoethnography, which, Jones defines as, “multiple reflections” (Jones, 2008, p. 206). Jones’ position on autoethnography is one that I personally favour as it is difficult to make sense of the world and the people who have had an impact on your life through a linear perspective. Hence, multiple reflections are imperative in providing a kind of art that will take you “deeper inside yourself and ultimately out again” (Friedwald, 1996, p. 126). Friedwald’s view on writing as an art form coincides with autoethnography as throughout my text I am crafting my own experiences, attempting to expose the reader to the emotion behind the text. This satisfies my intentions to use storytelling to assist the reader and writer to “create, interpret, and change our social, cultural, political and personal lives” (Jones, 2008, p. 211). The words here express how I felt in the past, but now I would be able to tell you a different kind of story and becoming a teacher has helped with that.

Autoethnographic texts point out not only the necessity of narrative in our world but also the power of narrative to reveal and revise that world, even when we struggle for words, when we fail to find them, or when the unspeakable is invoked but not silent (Bochner, 2001; Denzin, 2000; Hartnett, 1999; Lockford, 2002; Neumann, 1996; Pelias, 2002; Richardson, 1997; in Jones, 2008, p. 211). Not only does autoethnography allow the author to project a future, which promotes a life free from pain but also promotes new ways to “think and rethink our positions and commitments, to push through resistance in search of hope” (Becker, 2000, p 523). But autoethnography is also partial, limited and problematic. Goodall (2000) argues that autoethnography is a “tricky genre of research as it often raises more questions than it answers” (Boyd, 2008, p. 216). Perhaps the greatest
methodological gain in using this methodology is that it provides the writer with the chance to achieve a greater sense of identity in the social world, providing the researcher an “added vantage point, enabling them to access a vast amount of data promoting self-understanding” (Anderson, 2006, p. 389).

8:30: My wake-up call is set for 7:23. I tend to set my alarm for odd times. Setting my alarm at this time allows me to snooze for seven minutes until the clock reaches 7:30, only when the hand reaches a round number will I rise from my slumber.

My mornings consist of porridge and Sky Sports News. However, today I decided to be adventurous and added a dollop of jam and a handful of granola nuggets to my morning fuel. I was the only one in the house at this time; my dad had left for work and my brother and mother were down at the gym. We had an agreement that they would both be back at 8:30 so I could then drive down to the leisure centre.

It annoyed me, those last few remaining oats that always seemed to resist being scraped away from to the side of the dish. I always finished my plate. After I finished chipping away at my mum’s ceramic bowl, I went to get ready for my morning workout. I allowed myself ten minutes to get ready; anything could happen, I could lose a shoe or even worse, misplace my towel. After I was dressed, I hobbled down the stairs, my calves still burned from yesterday’s run.

Leaving at 8:30 allowed me 15 minutes to drive to the gym to meet my friend for 8:45, even though it was normally 8:47. We trained together daily, and I hated being late as it would then mean that I’d have to catch up on the treadmill, then I felt like he was in control and I didn’t like that. I have to be in control at all times. Lately I have not been able to keep things together.

8:38. I was starting to get annoyed. Why were they taking so long? Did they not realise that now I would have to catch up on the treadmill? I would have to up the speed by at least double just so I can burn more calories in the long run. 8:42. I heard the car pull up outside but I also heard shouting; this was not a good sign.

My mum ushered me into the front room and explained, “Your brother isn’t moving out of the car, he thinks I’m dropping him up the common to walk the dog just tell him you’re in a rush?”

“We don’t fucking rush for you ya know, we take our time down there,” I nodded and tried to walk past him. “Where are you going? You’re dropping me up the common,” I grabbed the car key looked back at him and bluntly responded, “I’m already late.” He laughed at me. “Enjoy your cardio, a walk will do you good,” I snapped as I entered the car and locked the door. It was as if I knew what was coming.

“You fucking what?” He shoved my mum over and steamed towards the car. He went for the door. “Yeah you know to lock the door you pussy,” he screamed. It was now 8:50. People were looking out of their windows. “Wait till you get home,” he threatened as he trudged back into the house. My mum was picking herself up off the floor as he flung my bag; trainers and books out into the road, dragged my mum inside and slammed the door shut.

When creating an autoethnography, the author can “write about experiences while their feelings are still intense and then recall on an event when they are emotionally distant” (Ellis, 1999, p. 675). The latter is a useful and potentially powerful tool in developing cultural awareness through the writer’s creativity. The writer develops a platform to imagine and re-imagine past experiences and to develop an understanding of what and why things happened, inspiring change and enhancing the lives of those in question.

Dinner

It was around 5pm on a Sunday when my Dad screamed from the bottom of the stairs, “Dinner’s ready! Get to the table.” The call normally came from my Mum, as Dad usually spent his Sunday’s fishing by the lake; he never did catch anything. He always said that he needed to get away every week from the ‘mad house’ I called home; I don’t blame him. Anyway, everyone was round on a Sunday for once and as my father ordered us to our seats, extra chairs were brought down from the loft; it was as if my sister had lost her place in the household, she always made sure that my father was aware of this. It was like we were back at school and my father acted as the teacher with a seating plan of where we all must sit. It was as if he was attempting to cater to our problems. My brother sat the farthest away from my niece in case he experienced one of his uncontrollable mood swings, my father at the head of the table, he enjoyed being in control.

My Dad was silent as always, as he picked away at his food. Just then I remembered that no matter where he went, even if it was the nicest meal ever, he’d always leave food on his plate. I looked at him thinking, “You’ve got problems.” There was no productive conversation at the table. Nobody asked me how my day was, or how things were.

I started to add up the calories on my plate and what I had eaten thus far. Chicken 200, Yorkshire pudding 80, Vegetables nothing… this always made me happy. I continued to count: Parsnips 50, Potatoes … I start to panic as I had forgotten how many I had on my plate. My brother seemed to notice the distress on my face, “Are you okay bruv?” he asked, “Who me? Yeah I’m fine just full up.” I wasn’t really full up though, as I stretched out aiming to distract my brother away from my small anxiety attack. It was getting worse.

PERFORMANCE TEXTS

Performance texts have the power to move, entertain, educate and inspire the reader, just as the strength of dramatic pieces have inspired me to reflect during my darker days. Johnny Saldana is a figurehead for autoethnodrama, with his play Second Chair (2008) being an example of a text drawn primarily from the writer’s personal experiences. Saldana supports the teachings of Davis and Ellis (2008) on autoethnodrama as “the study of a culture of which one is a part, integrated with
one’s relational and inward experiences. The author incorporates the “I” into research and writing yet analyses him – or herself as if studying an “other” (Davis & Ellis, 2008, p. 284).

2AM

My mind wanders hopelessly.
I tend to think about
Something that happened
4 years ago, or something
That happened 1 hour ago,
My mind takes me to the future
And somewhere 10 years from now.
Bleak.
My mind is like a hurricane,
Wreckage.
It’s full of beautiful yet
Destructive.
Loss of breath joins
My wandering mind,
The storm is sucking me in.

As a tool, poetry enables me to portray the differing voices with the intention to contrast the explosive nature of mental illness. Throughout my poems, more than one character, story, voice or attitude surfaces all at once; and turns our attention to how bodies and voices situate in contexts – in “time, place and history” (Jones, 2008, p. 213).

In the past, I hated sharing information with people I did not know. This issue came up a lot at university, as at the beginning of the year most lecturers would start the sessions with, “Team up in groups of three and tell each other three interesting facts about yourself.” To be fair I did not mind writing down the facts, but it always felt like a pretentious exercise where everyone involved would write two home truths and then make up a lie just to sound cultured. I struggled to find anything interesting to say so I normally told the group, “I am half Maltese,” which usually resulted in the other group members nodding awkwardly as they globetrotted in their minds trying to locate the small island off the coast of Sicily. Secondly, I would say, “I’ve got a golden cocker spaniel called Jim,” which usually prompts the ‘awww’ amongst women. Finally, I would try to make up something that would make me sound like a fascinating human being, something like swimming with sharks or dolphins. In retrospect, I could have opened up about my struggles, but I did not want to scare them off on the first day.

Performance ethnography can take many forms, ranging from “recreating cultural performances for audiences invested and interested in understanding, preserving and or challenging particular identities and ways of life” (Conquergood, 1985, in Jones, 2008, p. 215). Thus, it is not only important to capture the reader
but to also leave them invested in the text. I hope my text implicates the reader but also incites them to participate, to act and to take risks. To be honest about who they are, the demons that hinder them and those that help.

**Reflection**

Full length will do.
In my house I can look at you,
I will stand for hours waiting for change.
Why are you still the same?
You are huge,
When did I get this fat?
I take off my t-shirt,
Pinch at my skin.
I stand to the side and suck in.
I can only look at you in my own home.
I avoid my reflection everywhere I go.
Back-alleys to avoid window reflection,
I need to hide, please, protection.
I can’t see you.
I can’t see me.

Poetry is a hallmark of autoethnographic performance and can enable the writer to travel through “*mines* (reflection), *poe* (creation) and *kine* (movement)” (Jones, 2008, p. 218). Poetry allows me to reflect upon experiences that were previously impossible to articulate. Writing poetry “requires the faith that language inked on a page can ‘do’ as well as ‘be’” (Stucky, 2001, in Jones 2008, p. 218) resulting in a potentially transformative experience for the reader and writer.

**Nutrition**

This looks nice,
Too bad I can’t buy it.
I flip the packet,
Energy [Kcal] TOO MUCH,
Protein [g] NEVER ENOUGH,
Carbohydrate [g] YOU’LL PUT ON WEIGHT,
Sugars [g] I’LL JUST TURN TO FAT!
Fat [g] HAHAHA I AM ABOVE 1.5!
Today is difficult,
There is nothing to eat.

For me, acceptance was difficult. Pretending that I was secure and free from mental illness was damaging, as being in denial helped me cope with the stigma and shame associated with having a psychiatric diagnosis. However through my writing I am aiming to display that being mentally ill should not be frowned upon, even
though it is usually perceived as being “culturally undesirable” (Goss & Gilbert, 2002, p. 235).

April 19th

“Hello, please take a seat.” Her office is pleasantly strange. Two leather seats facing each other, accompanied by colourful flowers and long vine plants scattered around the room. The room had an air of freedom to it; yet I knew this was where the most confined souls end up. There is hardly anything else, except a clipboard, which is in her hands. The floor is a shiny yellow hardwood and the ceiling is bland, ivory cream, the usual. I don’t know why I was expecting two 7ft long leather recliners with a sky-like painting on the ceiling and slow jazz playing in the background. I watch too many movies. I thought I’d feel calm once inside the doctor’s office, but I don’t. It must have been the wait for her to start with the questions. I didn’t know what she was going to fire at me.

She tells me to, “Relax” and to call her “Rachel,” She seemed nice enough, so I slouched back into the chair and attempted to unwind. “So ...” she said, “Why do you feel like you are here today, tell me from top to bottom what you think you are dealing with?” I leaned forward, covered my face with my hands as I attempted to digest the question. I started to awkwardly scratch at the callouses on my fingers. My palms started to sweat. “If I’m going to help you I need to know you right?”

She was right. I started to feel secure; not as secure as a bolted safe, but as secure as a bottle of water; knowing at any time my emotions could spill out. I kept telling myself I was here to change. I struggled to get the words out at first, just before I started she asked, “Is it okay if I take some notes?” I nodded. I was the protagonist of her story, but I wanted to change the plot. I wanted a happy-ending, so I unscrewed the lid and let it all spill out.

Well, erm ... If I’m honest, I don’t know what I am suffering with. That’s what scares me, as I know I have a problem but I just don’t know what it is. Food controls my life. When I’m not eating it, I’m thinking about it. Erm ... Whatever I eat I have to look at the amount of calories, carbohydrates and fat contained in the portion. If I don’t know what’s in it I physically can’t eat it. I don’t know why, but whatever I eat ... even if it’s a salad I feel guilty afterwards. I’ll go stand in the mirror, take my top off, and just look at my stomach. I end up hating myself. After I eat, my mood changes, I hate everyone. My family gets it the worst, which is why I shut myself away in my room. My mum always tells me to ‘treat myself once in a while,’ but I can’t, it’s not worth it. I mean, I haven’t eaten chocolate in four years and I don’t miss it ... well, erm, maybe a little.

I took a breather, as Rachel was clearly struggling to keep up. She was scribbling frantically on her A4 piece of paper. She was going to need sheet

Numbers as well, something about numbers. They consume me. Like, I have to wake up at a specific time every morning, weigh my porridge at a certain weight, reach the gym at an exact time. It drains me. Imagine, when I’m on the
treadmill I can’t get off it until I burn 800 calories, I don’t even know why 800, but I just like it because it seems excessive I guess. If I’m training with my friend he will never burn more than me, I’ll die on the treadmill before he burns more than me, I promise you. The gym kills me ... I try to go 7 days a week, no days off. Plus, after I eat a meal I have to do 100 press ups to burn off the food. Sometimes at work I will go to the stock room just to do the 100, I hate it. I wish I could stop but my mind won’t allow me to go to sleep until I do 100 press ups. I don’t even know why 100 either, it seems excessive, and I like excessive.

I stopped because I noticed Rachel kept tugging on her sweater every time she moved. It fascinated me because I used to do the exact same thing. I wanted to talk to her. I felt like I could help her. I wanted to tell her that I understood. After all, it was a problem of mine. I always thought my belly was showing. It’s funny how you notice someone else’s insecurities and relate to them without them even knowing. I didn’t mention it though. It would make her feel uncomfortable. Rachel made me feel comfortable so I decided not to confront her. I continued ...

Anyway, I guess I’m here because everyone at home has told me I’ve got a problem. I think I do, I’m way too anxious and never happy. But the real reason I came here is because I want to change. I want to break this curse before I’m old and damaged like my father, mother and brother. I want to be the one who actually does something about this. I’m willing to try anything, except any medication that will make me gain weight. I’m not into that. Well, I do – ...

Just then, Rachel stopped me, “Thank you for sharing, let’s move on.” As she scribbled some more notes on her third piece of A4, I started to pick again at my scabs obtained from today’s session of chest weights at the gym. But, strangely, I felt relieved, I took the first step and now I was in control. Only I can make myself better. Rachel stopped writing, looked up and before she could talk I smiled at her and stuttered ...

“I just like happy endings you see.”

WHY THIS ALL MATTERS

Teaching was never on my agenda. I fluttered between wanting to be a journalist and a writer for most of my teenage years. Writing always gave me a canvas to unload my ideas. It allowed me to (hopelessly) vent during my years of teenage angst.

Growing up my mother was a teaching assistant in a primary school and my Dad is a painter and decorator. Neither of them were academics, nor did they have a passion for study. Both of my siblings dropped out of school and I seemed to be the one left to carry the torch and break the cycle. I immersed myself in education and developed close bonds with the teachers who taught me. Bonds that developed me as a child and a student – conversations I was unable to have with my parents. This is not something I hold against them or resent them for; but the relationships were
just different. The relationships with teachers developed me on a deeper level. They chose to sit and listen, whereas with my family it always seemed like an imposition.

That said, when I applied to be a teaching assistant I had no expectations. I had just left university and I wanted to carve out my own path for myself. I left wanting to make a difference – my writing provided me with often new perspectives; that I can use my writing to facilitate change – that everything I do as a teacher must have a purpose. As Sartre once wrote: “Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself”, that is not to say that I was consumed in an existential crisis at this stage in my life, but I wanted to ensure that I was making some sort of positive impact – instilling hope in others, that they too have a voice and that people will listen to them. Working in a challenging, diverse secondary school in South East London was my pathway in.

I completed my first year as a teaching assistant and developed strong relationships with students. I saw myself in some of them and I made sure that I was not a teaching assistant who was there for the short haul. I was there for the kids. I promised two boys in particular that I would come back, and teach them one day as a qualified teacher. Fourteen months later, and I was standing in front of them as their year ten English teacher. There are an awful lot of children who are lost in the education system. Perceived as being a number on a spreadsheet or a skill on a success criteria. Education is so much more than that. It is a way for the student to develop relationships with others and gain confidence and a voice. It is about belief and engagement. Just as education and writing proved to be an escape for me, education can be an escape for the pupils.

Earlier I claimed that teaching was never a profession that seemed viable for me. This was mainly because I felt that I was too damaged to teach students. Why would they want to listen to a young man who had been bruised by his childhood? Why would they want to listen to a young man who had to go to therapy? How can a person who is worried about filling out the medical health form because of his past depression and an eating disorder evolve to become a committed teacher? Then I realised that we are all fighting our own battles and demons. I have managed to overcome the challenges through my writing and my life in education. Writing has provided me with a platform to challenge my anxieties. Ones that I still live with today, but through helping others I have managed to save myself and develop as a teacher I am proud of.

I remember being frightened of my relationship with my mental health as I thought it would hinder my professional development as a teacher. Then I realised that my job is to be as transparent as I can to inspire students to be their own role models. I am no longer afraid of my scars; I refuse to let the stigma and stereotypes dictate how I feel about myself. It is important that we educate the future about mental illness, especially in a time where pressure on our children is only increasing. We have moved away from the disgrace associated with mental illness. Do not continue to carry around the baggage of your mental illness and imprison yourself into a space of torment. Write down your feelings; speak to your peers; and remember that you are not alone. Tell yourself: “You are not an illness. You
have an individual story to tell. You have a name, a history, a personality. Staying yourself is part of the battle” (Seifter 2010, p. 38).

Your odyssey starts now.

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Kristian Galea
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JESS MORIARTY

10. SOARING AND TUMBLING

An Autoethnography from Higher Education

SUMMER

Beanbag before his nose fell off
penny sweets in a paper bag
the 3 Billy Goats Gruff
with all the voices
hot chocolate by the pool
at the Ivy Side Hotel
Yannis cocktail bar, ‘this is a tick’
Gandy asleep in the front seat of the Citreon
Butterscotch Angel Delight and Agadoo
‘I can see a great big spider,
creeping up on you’
4 inch heels and purple mohair
learning to tie laces
on Jim’s right shoe
drawing on the walls at 2am
Nana Liz’s cake with glace cherries
the smell of Simple soap
and a copy of Oink
my parent’s dancing
their Groovy Kind of Love
Enid Blyton books – the lot in one summer
watching dad play God
almost passing out
patent shoes I wasn’t allowed
the exploding soda stream
our first VHS
Knock Down Ginger on Mead Road,
Dartmoor in the rain, again
Dr and Mrs Cooper in cardies
she’d made
Golder’s Green Park
and banana lollies
a wasp sting and
my red dress with the flowers
MORIARTY

Father Christmas with black leather gloves
losing Matt at the Zoo
his face when we found him
my first day at school
and not feeling scared.

Writing is also a way of knowing – a method of discovery and analysis. By writing in different ways, we discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship to it. Form and content are inseparable. (Richardson, 1997, p. 923)

In *Fields of Play*, Laurel Richardson explores the inextricable way in which working in academia has affected her writing, how writing has affected her sense of self and how her sense of self has affected her role in academia, and so on and so on. It is a weave that is complicated and imperfect. It makes complete sense. In previous work (Moriarty, 2015) I have argued that a splintered and multi-layered text is suitable for reflecting lived experiences and that this style of writing responds directly to Kant’s notions of enlightenment (Kant, 2009). Writing in 1794, Kant suggested that an enlightened reading can take place when the text empowers the reader to evolve past a self-imposed immaturity and have confidence in their own understanding, appreciation and/or criticism without explicit guidance from another (in this case, the author). In this chapter, I present fragments of my lived experiences via a split text that uses poetry, memoir, prose and reflexive writing to explore how my autobiographical stories have impacted on my teaching practice. I hope that the process of uncovering and recovering stories will help me to better understand where some of my strategies for teaching are rooted and how they have evolved. I hope that this might have relevance for my colleagues working in education and people wondering what teaching is and can be like. As with all autoethnographic work, I cannot make any absolute claim on any absolute truth, nor would I wish to. As someone who has been through the education system in the UK, trained to be a teacher in higher education (HE) and is now a principal lecturer at the University of Brighton, I feel I have something personal and professional to say about teaching – who of us hasn’t? – and I hope this might trigger reflection, discussion and understanding on the part of the reader and help them to value their own experiences in terms of how they can enrich our teaching and also our individual and shared learning.

I HATE TEACHING

I never wanted to be a teacher. Never ever. Why bother? My mum was a teacher before she became a counsellor and she was brilliant. Even under a Thatcher administration, she managed to teach drama and English in a comprehensive school in Watford with an energy and a genuine joy that I’m not sure I’ve never had. Whilst the emergent neo-liberal agenda has undoubtedly intensified pressure on teachers to teach not how they wish but in accordance with a Conservative agenda driven by targets (Docherty, 2012) (rather than a desire to inspire and
motivate pupils), even back then – my mother worked hard. Part-time never really looked like part-time when she was directing school plays or marking work or planning theatre trips or teaching and still finding time to be a terrific mum. It looked busy and though she didn’t complain or rant or side line us or her pupils, there was always a sense that teaching (and parenting too maybe?) was demanding, exhausting, wonderful. When she was diagnosed with Meniere’s disease and lost most of her hearing, we moved from Edgeware to Brighton in the summer of 1986, where she quickly became part of the senior management team in a school for the deaf. While my brother and I sometimes waited for her in the drama studio, we would register how engaged and enthusiastic her pupils were. We would sit there, rolling our eyes and moaning, pretending that watching her do something she loved and do it so well was utter torture and that watching Neighbours or speaking to our friends on the single house phone – how did we cope?? – was many, many times more appealing. She worked incredibly hard because it mattered to her, because it was important and whilst we gave her a hard time and said that we’d rather have her at home as our domestic slave, we knew it was part of who she was and that we were luckier because of it.

Maybe it was in her blood the same way my father’s identity is tied up with being an actor? At 70, it still is who he is. He still gets nervous before auditions and feels the rush before walking onto stage, he still values the potential of theatre as a political lens, to put the world on a platform and challenge audiences to think and engage with, rather than just about the performance. But I didn’t want to be an actor either. I thought that you were born to be an actor and failed to understand that being good at anything takes blood, sweat and tears, a mantra I now try and work into every creative writing lesson. Teaching is as much a craft I now realise, as acting. Quite frankly, growing up I felt justified in blaming my parents and their hard work and success in their fields for my own malaise regarding what I would do and who I would be. I didn’t particularly want to help or inspire people, and I hadn’t been hit by the bolt of lightning that made you good enough to be an actor. I don’t think this was your typical rebellion against ones parents, rather I was humbled by what they had achieved and thought it inconceivable that I would do as well. Again, to their fault(!), they had also imbued me with the confidence and sense of possibility that meant I had ideas of what I could be. This unrelenting faith coupled with the infinite options worked with and against me like air currents, lifting me up and then buffeting me down and this has been a mechanism for gliding and crashing through life that has actually served me pretty well. Keep going and eventually you will stagger up into the atmosphere again. You know you might fall again but maybe you won’t? Or maybe next time you’ll rise that bit higher? Or the air stream will be faster, kinder, like nothing you’ve ever known. And of course, sometimes you will just want to get off. I’ve adapted this model a few times now to demonstrate to my students what the creative writing process can be like too. Recently a student compared their experience of my writing workshops to being pushed out of an aeroplane before you know you have the parachute on. A sort of alarming uncertainty followed by a more joyful and safer descent to
somewhere new. I think perhaps this sense of ‘what if I can?’ and all the terrifying and joyful implications that go with it has driven me and my teaching all along.

AUTOETHNOGRAPHIES

In other research (Moriarty, 2015) I have used an autoethnographic frame to detail my early experiences of teaching in higher education (HE) and of how being professionally undermined led to feelings of anxiety and of not being good enough as a teacher, researcher, partner, mother. When I joined HE in 2004, and certainly later when I experienced feelings of negativity and of being outside the academy, I would have found it useful for someone to tell me what it was like for them, so I could gain insight into a shared or different perspective and feel encouraged to share my own experiences with a view to having them validated or dispelled or just listened to. If I have learnt anything in the last twelve years, it is that the sharing of stories is the best way to understand how we feel and what we think. When done in isolation, our narratives can help us to reinforce negative or harmful beliefs, but the focus of this book and certainly this chapter, is to encourage the telling of stories from education with a view to developing self-understanding, mutual respect and empathy for teachers (or those training to become teachers), and that this process will be ultimately empowering and positive for the writers and readers of the research. Autoethnography “requires that we observe ourselves observing, that we interrogate what we think and believe” (Ellis, 2013 p. 10) in order to help us make sense of experience and offer insights into a particular culture or way of being (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2010). This process seeks to democratise academic writing and resist dominant and oppressive narratives that are synonymous with academic writing and academic life. Instead, this chapter seeks to trigger a process of self-study and storying the self that might help readers to resist reductive discourses that can trigger anxiety or feelings of inadequacy and instead value self-narratives and view them as a tool for reflection that may lead to a more enhanced sense of self. Autoethnography is a methodology that legitimises personal experiences and evocative writing in academic research and seeks to resist conventional academic discourse that is traditionally male, hierarchical, objective. Instead, autoethnographers are concerned with the production of necessarily vulnerable and creative texts that offer a personal insight into how life is (or was) for the writer, with the aspirational aims of fostering empathy, understanding and meaning making on the part of the reader. This process offers a potential method for resisting traditional academic writing (Grant, 2010) and it is through this process that we can then begin to re-imagine, recover and reinvent the world as we know/knew it (Denzin, 2003).

Autoethnographies often use tales of pain, suffering, hope and loss that seek to move audiences/readers on an emotional level but also encourage them to have an enlightened connection that is reflective and critical (Denzin 1997). The stories I present here move away from traditional autoethnographies, as many of the experiences that have enriched my teaching have been illuminating, uplifting, joyful. I can only hope that this doesn’t reduce their value. A problem with writing
autobiographically about trauma, is that we can become trapped in narratives of ourselves where we exist only as victims. In the past, the process of writing autoethnographic work where I detailed experiences with anxiety (Moriarty, 2015) was therapeutic and transformative and, for now, I don’t have such crippling feelings of self-doubt. I still identify the work in this chapter as autoethnographic but it seeks to develop empathy and a sense of what it has and can be like in teaching using a variety of writings that reflect a mix of emotions but with less emphasis on a traumatic past.

In autoethnography, the writer represents their lived experience and invites the audience/reader to interrogate that experience and take a moral stand on what is presented and what it might mean (Conquergood, 1985). The text offers an interpretative process of the social world or group under study without enforcing meaning on what is being researched. The combination of aesthetic practice and depictions of cultural experience can provoke audiences and readers to form critical social realizations that potentially resist dominant structures and also (and perhaps more usually) help them to consider themselves in relation to others (Alexander, 2005). Autoethnographic work can be harnessed in this way as a useful and powerful tool of developing cultural awareness and facilitating social change. Such work can illuminate cultural politics, develop understanding, inspire change and enhance the lives of those in and readers of the research (Alexander, 2005).

Creative writing plays an important role in self- and social-understanding and determination. That is why it is such a fantastic subject to teach to undergraduates and postgraduates. I try to encourage my students to write their stories and to use this process to make sense of themselves and their experiences over the course of time, and to use this as a strategy for identifying meanings and coping with changing circumstances. Such narratives are existential, in that they reflect our desire to grasp or seize the possibilities of meaning and to imbue life with imagination and creativity. To imagine and re-imagine the world and what it is and can be like and this can generate powerful meaning making and inspire rich creative work. An aspirational aim of this book and certainly this chapter would be to encourage readers to carry out their own writing and think about the individual pathways that took them into teaching. Try not to self-censor or judge. Just write and see what happens.

DISCOVERY

In this chapter, and in all of my writing, I am hoping to find something out. The purpose of this chapter is to uncover and recover stories in me that have impacted on my teaching and might help me better understand why and how I teach. I write for the same reasons I read: to develop understanding and acquire knowledge and, as with all writing, it is motivated in some way by the narcissistic belief that this might be of some interest to the reader. In Fields of Play, Richardson encourages the reader to experiment with form and to “write lives differently in shape and style and format in order to build a new communal understanding of what constitutes sociological “knowledge” …. An exemplary text comes to life and creates life”
(Richardson, 1997, p. 80). She identifies this strategy as offering an alternative way of being in academic writing that might engage wider readerships and more diverse audiences and discusses the complexities of intertwining our “academic interests, social concerns, emotional needs, and spiritual connectedness” (Richardson, 1997, p. 5) via research that is necessarily multi-layered and playful. So here it is. This is a little bit of me.

**Summer ’82**

We lived in a flat above Sketchley’s on Edgeware High Street. There was a Wimpy opposite but the smell of fast food was overpowered by dry cleaning fluid, a scent someone should bottle and sell. Just two floors up from the people and pace of North London, I remember sunlight. We must have had winters and it must have been cold quite often but I remember my childhood in terms of summers. Maybe, if we are lucky, most of us do? The kitchen door opened out onto the rooftops with a view over Edgeware that reminded Matt and me of the scene in Mary Poppins where the chimney sweeps high kick their way over the city’s skyline. Realistically, it was pretty grim. The neighbours had a dog in a cage that they fed leftovers too and my mum had to get up three flights of stairs with a double buggy and shopping in the days when you still went to the baker or butchers or greengrocers and online shopping wasn’t even an idea in someone’s head. She had gone back to work part-time and we used to have a minder who was called Maureen who was kind and firm and smoked all over us. In July 1982 I had said goodbye to Maureen and it must have actually been summer when this memory took place. Perhaps August because we hadn’t yet moved round the corner to a terrace house just off the high street, and I remember sitting at the kitchen table with the door open and the sun streaming through. Hitting the Formica and making everything gleam. My mum took out an HB pencil and a stack of dad’s old scripts from The Gentle Touch and wrote ‘Jessy’ at the top of the first page. ‘You’ll need to do this when you start school.’ So I sat there and copied it out, slowly. Getting used to the formality of the pencil and the definite direction I was meant to take. Wanting to please her with my first attempt, wanting to get it right. ‘That’s really good.’ She said approvingly. And I don’t remember anything else about that day. Just my name on that page and wanting the summer to end.

**MOVING ON**

Moving to Brighton was surprisingly tough. I had been lucky in Edgware which was happy school with a tiny but powerful Head Teacher called Miss McKie who had a Great Dane called Lucy who was almost bigger than her. There was a sense of grounded wisdom in Miss McKie but an irreverence too. I’m sure that under Thatcher, this balance of expertise and irony would have come in hand. They are traits most of us in education find useful, perhaps now more than ever. When Miss McKie emails me to tell me about her latest adventure – jungle trekking or sailing or writing – her alluring mix of knowledge and devil-may-care hasn’t diminished.
which can perhaps, at a time of proposed tests for 5 year olds, academies and university fees, offer some sort of hope to the rest of us.

The school was lively, noisy and learning was fun. For me anyway. I was lucky because I was supported at home with reading and craft and trips to the theatre and museums and this had imbued me with a love for learning and play. When we left London for Brighton, I went from being one of the most popular kids in my class to the bottom of the social heap. I was also, shockingly to me, quite far behind my new classmates in terms of handwriting – in Edgeware we were still using pencils and not joining up letters and concentrating on telling and sharing stories instead of presenting them neatly. At my old school, there was a real mix of cultures: Chinese, Sudanese, Jewish, Pakistani, Spanish, Jamaican, Italian, Indian – all blended together in a harmonious way. In the Brighton suburbs and even in the town centre (it is a city now), non-Anglo faces were rare to the point of unique. I found this unsettling. The cultural shift and an initial sense of failure meant that I felt outside, as if I somehow lacked the tools to be part of the friendship groups and community that this new environment offered. I also had a teacher I didn’t like. He would draw attention to individual mistakes and publicly humiliate pupils who struggled.

My handwriting and my addiction to chewing my pencil (which developed soon after I joined his class) became a class joke and I was bullied by one pupil in particular. In the autumn/winter term, I spent every playtime on my own and every evening begging my parents to let me move back to London and live with my grandmother. My mum was soaring at her new school and making a real difference to the pupils and how the school operated. My dad didn’t mind the commute from Brighton to London, it seemed many actors had made the pilgrimage to the coast and the train was almost as social as the theatre canteen or next door pub. They both loved living by the sea and my brother, who had always been poorly and friends with the most anarchic children he could find in London, was fitting in effortlessly with nice boys and girls. I just didn’t get it. But what I was developing was a tough outer layer and the ability to publicly self-deprecate and I was also working hard to catch up with my peers. By the spring term, I had made friends and was back to being in the top half of the class. I no longer felt the initial shame I’d encountered when we arrived, but I also had a sense of how quick and how far the fall can be and this has motivated me to continue to work hard and invest in people. Two of the people I met in that spring term are still my best friends now in fact. A year later and with a new teacher I did like, I was back in love with school and the South East but the transition and the problems that came with it are ghost scars even now.

With the exception of that early blip when I moved to Brighton, I have been lucky with the teachers I have had. I can remember all of them. Ms Booth who helped me identify myself as a feminist and allowed me to put on a musical with my lyrics depicting the start of World War I to the music of Joseph and his Technicolour Dreamcoat (think The Producers meets Grange Hill?), Mr Lloyd who championed inclusivity and encouraged my clichéd gothic horror entitled ‘Poor Jenny’ (think The Woman in Black meets Playskool), John who told me I’d never
get anywhere without more self-discipline in swim class (he was right but I’m still a bit half-in, half-out with that one), and all the others tasked with the challenge of igniting and illuminating a chatty and often over-bearing child and then worse, teenager, and receiving no thanks and meagre remunerations. Where was their incentive? What possible motivation could there be for working so hard, having so much responsibility and no obvious glory? I dismissed teaching as a career path at a very early age, it had to be something that was in you and it was missing in me. My comprehensive school was supportive and run by a former member of the British Weightlifting squad. He liked discipline and results and had a team of staff who cared less about discipline and more about making learning thought-provoking and alive. It was an impressive school and many of the incredible teachers I had then are still out in the world using their expertise and warm humour to bring out the best in other kids – I hope they know how lucky they are.

I went to a sixth form near the city centre that was more arts and humanities focused than the other local college. Again, I had amazing teachers. Perhaps Brighton attracts an unusually high calibre? I studied English Literature, Theatre Studies and Politics and party hard. Too hard. When my father collected me from hospital after I fell twenty feet behind a bar at a nightclub in town, and then accompanied me for a subsequent MRI, I think he wondered if I would make it to university and in what state if I did. Whilst my parents never piled on the pressure, they wanted me to do well, but I was always much harder on myself. I was in the top 10% at college, predicted all A grades, I was popular, I had wonderful friends, a great part time job scooping ice cream in what was then a trendy parlour with overtly sexual marketing (those who lived through the 1990s will know) but rather than enjoying it and feeling empowered, I maintained a desire to please people. I think that getting bullied by the teacher and a fellow pupil when I first moved to Brighton and desperately trying to fit in, instilled this in me and whilst I’ve got better, it’s still a thing. I have always liked to work hard and then play hard and probably like many teenagers, I pushed it too far but I didn’t learn my lesson either. When I was advised by my English teacher and director of the college play not to try for Oxbridge, I felt off the hook. That if no-one was expecting me to try for Oxford and Cambridge that I could just go where I wanted and see what happened. That I could stop pleasing everyone else and please myself. But actually this plan was flawed because I still didn’t know what that meant.

Whilst studying for an English degree at the University of East Anglia (UEA), and without parental guidance, I did just about everything to put off thinking about what next. And I couldn’t even blame Thatcher or the Tories. Blair had been elected during my first year at university and my flatmates and I had stayed up, almost as smug faced as Tony himself – we had never had it so good. I was a terrible undergraduate student. I did the reading, I turned up for lessons, asked questions and genuinely enjoyed the teaching and learning but I felt constantly over and underwhelmed by what might happen afterwards. Having gone straight through education with no year out or time to reflect appreciate the value of the
experience I was getting, I sort of missed the boat. Rather than just enjoying three more years of wonderful education, an education I didn’t have to pay for, I spent the whole time wondering ‘what now?’ instead of ‘what if?’ and every possibility came up short. Or rather I came up short because even if I had known what I wanted to do, I certainly wouldn’t have thought I was good enough to do it. I felt safe in class where you could find most of the answers in books and when that failed, ask the tutor or debate with your peers who were generally supportive and friendly and wanting to do good in the world. I applied for work experience at the BBC and also did some interning at various national and local papers, hoping that I would evolve as a journalist. But journalism felt tough. It felt lonely. And I was too soft, too cared for, to have a hunger for it. I still loved writing and was lucky enough to take creative writing modules at UEA but instead of using it to entertain my friends or get them performing as I had in the past, it became more reflexive. Probably because I was trying to make sense and figure out what next.

_The Learner_

Chewing gum grey bras hang off the radiator while you and I lie in sheets of skin and sweat. Too hot to touch, still too empty of longing to want to. We meet at points that were strangers just last night and now they share the same dismal morning air. I thought that student life would be about books and art, men with unkempt facial hair and ideas that promised to change the world from the safety of the pub. I find myself choosing between super noodles and solid, walking three miles to save money for white wine that makes me retch on every sip. I turn to see a face as lost and blurred as mine, needing answers to questions not found in textbooks: Can I face another 2 hour lecture? What am I doing here? Should I call my mum and ask for just one more loan?

I graduated feeling utterly useless. At least as part of the last cohort that didn’t have to pay fees I was debt free but I was miserable. I often wonder now what the impact of being in so much debt – and all because you wanted to think and learn and develop - and still being unsure of what next must be on the confidence of graduates. It seems like a hard punishment for daring to want to be more than you are.

I spent a year post-graduation managing a cinema and getting drunk, not always in that order, acutely aware that all the confidence and pleasure I had derived from my early studies was not just dwindling but collapsing. My parents, whilst supportive, were also despairing which is why I decided to do the MA in Creative Writing at the University of Sussex. When I enrolled I was living with someone
who had agreed to financially support me but we broke up in Fresher’s Week and I had to take a full time job at the University of Brighton to pay for the MA. I was helping to manage the shops and bars on campus but what that meant is that I was usually covering staff and doing jobs my boss was too busy to do. At the end of the MA I ran away to Asia with a boy who was five years younger than me and spent nine months not thinking about anything but temples and beaches and Thai rum. Whilst in Australia, my boss from the University of Brighton turned up in Sydney on a holiday and to persuade me to take my job back ASAP. As I was running out of money and although I wrote a regular blog about our adventures, my parents were still wondering what I was doing and maybe I was too. I was twenty five when I got back to the UK with nowhere to live, no dream job and a partner who wanted to keep traveling. And while I absolutely don’t blame him (not now anyway!), I knew that for me, it was time to settle.

WHEN THE HOLIDAY IS OVER

Once back at the University of Brighton, I realised that this is where I was meant to be. Brighton is a beautiful rainbow bubble and the majority of my friends and family had settled there. It felt like coming home but for good this time. I broke up with the toy boy so he could keep traveling (he still is) and so I could get a career. And by some weird osmosis, when I got back to the university I was put in touch with the Head of the School of Languages who asked me if I would give a session on how creative writing might be taught to undergraduates. Well why not? I put a twenty minute presentation together and included local writers I would bring in and how I would motivate the students to write. I thought they would use it to devise a job description but they decided I might be able to practise what I preached and gave me a module to teach – two hours a week - whilst I worked full time as a commercial services manager for the university and simultaneously completed the Post-graduate certificate in higher education. It was bonkers and absolutely like being pushed out of a plane with no parachute but I loved it. Watching the students take risks, be vulnerable, share their work, improve their sense of what good writing is and support their peers through that process was and is still the best thing about this job. It is easy to lose sight of this but inspiring and encouraging students to write and develop confidence with the things they have to say and what it means is an honour and a joy that I hope I never take for granted.

It is hard and it is getting harder. The pressure to do more for less is increasing and the shift in culture that sees universities view students as paying customers rather than learners has not, in my opinion, added value to their experience or ours. As I write this, Trump is being taken as a serious political threat in the States, Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson are encouraging the UK to get out of Europe and the revolution against all of this is struggling to spark. And I don’t have the answer to any of it. I often think that despite all the positives that education has to offer us as staff and also to our pupils and students, that my initial thoughts were right. Don’t be a teacher. Don’t get into education. It is too hard. You will not be valued – not by this government anyway. You will sometimes lose your mind. But I can’t
say that. I won’t. What I will say is if you care about learning and want to share that passion with the people who will look to you in class then strap the parachute on and jump out of the plane. It will let you fall and there will be moments of panic and ‘I can’t do this, I don’t want to’ but there will also be undeniable moments of pure joy when you watch your students become independent and empowered thinkers and that is when you will float. And then you’ll drop again, but hold onto those other moments? Thirteen years in teaching and I still don’t want to come down.

CONCLUSION

Similarly to Muncey (2005), the writing and telling of my story has provided clarity and been ultimately cathartic. The writing about and reflecting on my own experiences has been pleasurable but it has also reminded me to be angry, angry because the pressure on teachers to do more for less is damaging, it can suck the passion and joy we have for teaching and learning out of the role. But I see this book and the telling and sharing of stories as part of a strategy that seeks to engage readers in dialogues exploring experiences with teaching and to use those discussions to imagine and facilitate ways of being in education that maintain the joy and energy we have and need to have for our roles.

Tedlock (2000) argues that “women’s ethnographic and autobiographical intentions are often powered by the motive to convince readers of the author’s self-worth, to clarify and authenticate their self-images” (p. 468) and identifies this as a feminist issue. Perhaps there is a little bit of this in this chapter but as much as I want to convince the reader of my value, I also need to remind myself. Teaching takes blood, sweat and tears. It is a craft just like writing or acting. It is hard, it is exhilarating. It matters. Through all the stuck places I found myself in, I was pushed on and up by the teachers who understood this. I include my mother in that list. Because while being a teacher is not like being a parent – something else I know now – both roles need time, commitment and a genuine interest in those we support with their development.

The writing of this chapter has offered me the up close intimacy with my lived experiences and also the necessary detachment that is needed when seeking a viewpoint from which to examine ones lived experiences. This distance can provide a compelling space from which to review, reflect and revise. This process of meaning-making can offer powerful insight into one’s own identity and I would heartily recommend it to anyone in or getting in to education. My experience is that this process can offer us a method for authenticating self-image and recovering feelings of self-worth, allowing for a more expansive and liberated self that is able to critique and also resist the pressures we are under. The subsequent telling and sharing of those stories can help us to feel a deeper connection with colleagues and peers. I agree with Hunt that for some, ‘where the imagination sets to work on the raw material of the unconscious and turns it into art … engaging with their inner world has a strong self-developmental or therapeutic dimension’ (Hunt, 2000, p. 40). The process has been transformational, positive, liberating. Writing can help
us to legitimise and value our experiences, to reconnect with who we are and where we have been. Embrace the freefall that teaching and writing may excite you with and brace yourself for wherever you may land.

REFERENCES


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Kathleen Pithouse-Morgan is an associate professor in Teacher Development Studies at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Her academic work focuses on professionals initiating and directing their own learning to enhance their continuing growth, and implications thereof for education in the professions. Methodologically, her work has contributed to scholarship on professional learning through self-reflexive methodologies of self-study research, narrative inquiry and autoethnography. Kathleen is the current leader of the *Transformative Education/al Studies (TES) Project*, which supports self-study research across diverse South African universities. She is convenor of the Self-Reflexive Methodologies Special Interest Group of the South African Educational Research Association.

Holly Taylor is an Early Years specialist primary teacher and Mummy to 10 month-old Olive. Prior to teaching she worked with children for over 15 years as a nanny and holiday club leader. Through her honours degree in Education she developed a strong foundation in educational theory and research, developing an understanding of the important issues of culture, diversity, inclusion and equality; themes which were built upon during her Post Graduate Certificate in Education course the following year. Over the past three years she has developed her Early Years pedagogy as a Reception Class teacher in a school in the South East of England. Her practice is based upon a commitment to critical thinking, child development and holistic, development processes of learning. She is now focusing on balancing her career in teaching with being a parent.