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A Process of Becoming: In Favour of a Reflexive Narrative Approach

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As both researcher and practitioner, or in service educator, I often resist situating myself within one discrete tradition. For this reason, I turn to narrative as an approach to understanding. I believe employing narrative allows me to draw from a cross-section of scholarly work including reflexive inquiry, critical analysis, and autoethnography. Often qualified as a method or a tool of inquiry, the narrative approach is rarely examined for its epistemological underpinnings. Thus, "A Process of Becoming" refers to both the promotion of a methodological approach to knowing in social science and to the medium through which practitioners can become better acquainted with themselves. Key Words: Research, Narrative, Reflexivity, and Critical Analysis

Introduction

I am sitting on the lawn in front of my alma mater. The sun is warm, and I cannot resist closing my eyes. The faint smell of freshly cut grass is floating on the breeze and my mind catches a current and drifts off with it. I hear the growling of a push mower in the distance and the hum of the traffic passing on the highway. I recline a bit and feel the softness of the lawn under my fingers. I wonder why I never took time to simply be in this place when I was a student here completing my Arts Degree. It seems impossible that I graduated more than 12 years ago. The girl who left here was running blindly into a professional degree to ready her for a career she didn't even know she resisted. Another woman sits here today wondering whether she is better or worse for the realization. Certainly the idealism she clutched as her life preserver has been casualty to my growth and maturity. Although I still possess an often blind determination, I do believe that my inner weavings are of a more pragmatic fibre. It leaves me oddly contemplative today to find myself at the site of my first conscious and independent attempt to build my own understanding of the world. Here today as scholar and speaker, I recognize that I left more than a decade ago defined by my newly framed degree and my unrealistic expectations of the next leg of my academic journey. I anticipated preparedness from my Bachelor of Education; in reality, I encountered toxicity of such magnitude that it nearly destroyed me. Despite four years of teaching in the public system, my professional degree left me feeling devalued, misplaced, unsupported, and bereft of hope. The incongruence between the espoused theories in the hallowed halls of academia were so far removed from the practical reality of the system that I was desperate to make sense of the experience. My questions were met with mocking superiority and assurances that the system was no place to attempt change or spout ideals. By the completion of my education degree, I was a shell of my former self. Diagnosed with generalized anxiety and panic disorder, as well as clinical burnout, I quit teaching and ran for my life. After

three and a half years, one and a half spent in recovery and two more years spent seeking alternative types of employment, I returned to the system only to prove to myself that I could survive. I recall acutely the day I went back. The hollow click of my heels in the corridor. The air pregnant with apathy. The smell, a blend of sweat socks and cleaning solution, unchanged. The class composition-- the clown, the cynic, the insolent, and the apathetic-- was also familiar. The curriculum was a carbon copy, not only of my days there as teacher, but as student. The bells rang on cue. People came and went as in a well-scripted film. What was different was me. I approached the class with my trepidation and fear cloaked in the certainty of survival felt by a skydiver who knows that the parachute will open.

Upon the completion of my commitment, I walked out of the school victorious and I never looked back. I have since made my career creating employee learning and development programs to help all those for whom the school system was not, or is not, a good fit. A passionate educator at essence, I found a way to contribute that was meaningful to both learners and me. The choice I made as practitioner inspired the researcher in me to examine the effect schooling experiences have on the development of praxis.

Understanding praxis as the enactment of my theoretical beliefs about teaching, and situating it in my own narrative about schooling experiences as they relate to praxis development, my goal is to promote reflexive narrative as an approach which creates space for others to engage in critical thought that may result in wakefulness to alternative approaches to knowing ourselves as practitioners. Bloom (1998) refers to the reflexive component of this interpretive approach as emphasizing "an individual's experiences as a journey of becoming" (p. 65). The regressive movement, or ebb, she says, is reflective; "it takes one back on a journey of exploration among objects, people, places, and events which make up the grounds of one's being" (Bloom, p. 162). It follows that each time I move forward again, I take with me an altered or deepened self-knowledge gained from my reflections on prior experiences.

In this ebb and flow of attempted meaning-making, the researcher in me is interested in how my experiences as practitioner inform praxis. I believe, as do Webster and Mertova (2007), that the narrative tradition is "well suited to addressing the complexities and subtleties of the human experience in teaching and learning" (p. 1). Grumet (1981) beautifully articulates some compelling reasons to engage in this type of research. She writes convincingly about the roles of our stories in making visible our attitudes, choices, and values. I share her position that narrative has the power to illuminate for me how my personal history shapes who I become as an educator. Grumet's (1976) earlier work says that narrative contributes in two specific ways. First, through reflective processes, I can allow my mind to wander and weave rich tapestries of memory. Because teaching and teacher development are rooted in the personal, reflexive inquiry involves the study of how the personal influences the professional. Cole and Knowles (2000) identify this as "the autobiographical nature of teaching" (p. 9). This autobiographical component, says Behar (1996), does not require a full scope life history; rather, it calls for a "keen understanding of what aspects of the self are the most important filters" (p. 13) through which I perceive the world. The second contribution of the narrative tradition, according to Grumet, is its analytical component; through careful and critical consideration of my memories, I can, she claims, reveal the influences not

only of the incidents recalled but assumptions and biases that might otherwise have remained hidden from me. Webster and Mertova interpret this as the reordering of my educational experiences with the aim of promoting an understanding of how they inform praxis. For this reason, narrative cannot be regarded as separate from real life; rather they must be understood as the revisiting of life experiences that are considered influential by the author. Richardson (2000) supports Webster and Mertova's reading that form and content are inseparable. She pushes one step beyond this position, though, and says that "writing is not just the delivery and dissemination of our findings; it is also a way of knowing – a method of discovery and analysis" (p. 499). Narrative, viewed through this lens, is more than a tool to collect or disseminate information; it is the methodology as the researcher, through narrative, uncovers the data. It is with this understanding that I frame my methodology as reflexive narrative.

Within this intersection of narrative and reflexivity, who is the self who writes? Ellsworth (1997) cautions me that there are some complexities in the consideration of self, the author. In her opinion, the third person in every conversation seemingly dual in nature is the unconscious. This entity, she suggests, is always participating indirectly thereby influencing not only what is communicated but what is understood. From her perspective, even if we strive to come to reason with self, our learning is only temporal because the self with whom we begin is never there upon return; it is "the inherent, irreducible difference between consciousness and itself" (Ellsworth, p. 60). Citing Felman, Ellsworth refers to this space as the asymmetry between "the self departed from and the self returned to" (p. 65) as we reflect on our experiences. As such, I not only struggle with negotiating understanding with others, but also the temporality of my own knowing. Palmer (1993) names a different trialogue with regard to consciousness – that of "the teachers, the students, and the subject itself" (p. 98). He suggests that, because of the nature of consciousness, entering into this discourse with other makes our own speech become clearer. His primary concern, though, is in learning to teach from an undivided self; that is, to teach from a position that honours the multidimensional nature of our experiences that come together in the nature of our being (Palmer, 1998). It is his position, and I agree, that we cannot help but teach from who we are; likewise, students learn from the unique perspectives accorded by their individual experiences. In my reading of Palmer, to deny either of these positions is to commit violence against self in our attempt to learn. "Good teaching" he says, "cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher . . . good teachers join self, subject, and students in the fabric of life because they teach from an integral and undivided self" (Palmer, p. 67). He says this essence of teaching is what the ancient cultures referred to as "heart – the place where intellect, and emotion, and spirit, and will converge in the human self" (Palmer, p. 68).

Cole and Knowles (1994) also support this approach to knowing. They posit that, by beginning with an exploration of self, the researcher is better able to investigate the phenomena. Succinctly stated, narrative subsumes both the process and the results. It is my belief that the coupling of narrative and reflexive inquiry well positions practitioners to explicate the nuances of schooling experiences as they inform praxis.

With all the intricacies of this situated consideration of experience as it contributes to praxis, I am called upon to explicate how I, as a social researcher, frame my attempt at understanding my work as a practitioner. Perhaps my challenge is to

employ reflexive narrative in such a way that honours both my telling and another's hearing of the story. It is through this engagement of intertextual dialogue that I come to new understandings of myself, my experiences, and my attempt to disseminate my conclusions. For this reason reflexive narrative is, at once, substantial in scope and intrinsically personal. It seems to me to be like the waves cresting in the ocean. Seen by one set of eyes, it is at best a vast unit that can shimmer or rage on a whim. Another set of eyes, though, sees not a capricious unit but the sum of so many facets – the shimmer or chop is a mere façade covering the life within. Engagingly written and properly read, its revelations are infinite.

Although postmodernist traditions hold that writing is always partial and contextual with the self omnipresent, narrative as methodology positions this as an advantage. Acknowledgment of the self, as articulated by Richardson (2000), fronts situational partiality and frees us from the constraints that otherwise impede the telling and retelling of our stories. In elevating the primacy of experience, reflexive narrative provides a unique framework for me to critically deconstruct that experience. The intersection of reflexive narrative and critical analysis demands at least three things. First, the reflexive tradition calls upon me to revisit moments from my past that may have informed praxis development. Second, the narrative component tasks me with recording the incidents through the cognisant and mediated use of language. Third, critical analysis challenges me to unpack what I have gathered through reflexive narrative and account for the incidents I have recalled and the language I have chosen in their retelling. The agenda of critical research, in its most primitive form, is an effort to deconstruct knowledge to reveal its underpinnings of power, privilege, and utility. Critical research, not to be confused with Critical Theory, according to The Sage Dictionary of Social Research Methods (Jupp, 2006), is a "generic term usually applied to any research that challenges those conventional knowledge bases and methodologies - whether quantitative or qualitative - that make claims of scientific objectivity" (p. 51). Through critical research, scholars endeavour to expose their own biases and demand an examination of the research that attempts to move beyond its own situational partiality. I understand this as a divergence from narrative and reflexive methods in which the contextual privilege is often exalted.

Within this framework, how do I uncover the role of reflexive understanding, temporal as it is, while highlighting the role of power and privilege inherent in the story? Harvey (1990) insists that whatever data are collected or shared must not be taken at face value, but interpreted within their socio-cultural context. Anderson, as quoted by Doyle (2007), pushes this position farther and insists that this type of research must be "sensitive to the dialectical relationships between socio-structural constraints on human actors and the relative autonomy of human agency (p. 4)."

Autoethnography provides some valuable insights here as well. According to Ellis and Bochner (2000), autoethnography allows for a dual focus. First, it may encourage an outward viewscape of the personal experience; that is the social and cultural aspects of lived experience. Second, it may encourage an inward look at the vulnerable self that may resist the cultural sphere surrounding it. Authors of these studies, say Ellis and Bochner, "use their own experiences in the culture reflexively to bend back on self and look more deeply at self-other interactions" (p. 740). Further, Ellis and Bochner (2000) argue that situating research within this framework allows the researcher to "use 'self' to learn

about other" (p. 741). My hope is that, by engaging in the critical discourse within autoethnography, I will become better acquainted with myself as both practitioner and researcher. Furthermore, as articulated by Ellis and Bochner (2000), "by exploring a particular life, I hope to understand a way of life" (p. 737). Thus, this approach is not only self-exploratory and reflexive, it potentially advances the understanding of other researchers by encouraging practitioners to be responsible to this introspective growth. To quote Foucault (1984), this illuminated modernity is not strictly to "liberate man [sic] in his own being; it compels him to face the task of producing himself" (p. 42). I guess, then, the goal in this process of becoming is not only to make sense of reflexive narrative as an approach but to position critical analysis as a tool that can help substantively ground it. I hope that advocating a new methodological approach that partners reflexivity, narrative, and critical analysis, will answer some of the current criticism from the scientific fields levelled at the singular approaches for lacking substantive grounding or rigorous analysis.

Graham (1995) supports such an intersection of reflexive narrative and critical analysis when he claims that education is simultaneously "a narrative and a political enterprise" (p. 209). As such I believe that, by drawing from these three approaches, I am better able to increase both the depth and breadth of my understanding and be more accountable for privileges that might have be otherwise left unexamined.

I am shaken from my stream of consciousness by the change in the light and the coolness in the air which reminds me that I have lain in the grass and thought about thinking far longer than I intended. I rise, shake the cobwebs from my limbs and, and make my way to my truck. As I pull out of my parking space and turn onto the highway toward home, I catch a reflection of my alma mater in my rear view mirror and smile as recollections of my journey continue to float through my mind.

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