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The power of storytelling – how can we capture this as a reflective tool?

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Introduction

This paper draws on the theory of narrative as tool for reflective practice. It assumes there is a platonic ideal in each person's head to which they aspire as professionals. By narrating the story of their professional journey to themselves and to other professionals, the ability to reflect on the skills one has; the skills and attitudes one hopes to improve upon, and to test them with others in storying. Learning Stories, the narrative assessment tool developed at Waikato University, privileges the child's and parents' voices over others'. Storying assumes a prime part to be played by the narrator, but it also involves deep listening – listening at the peripheries, for underlying patterns and for the unspoken issues.

This paper is designed to bring together theory concerning narrative, and reflections on the decentred self. Theorists include Fairclough{Fairclough, 2001, 1989 #242; Fairclough, 2004 #271}, Foucault {Foucault, #380; Foucault, 1971 #357}and NZ writers McDrury & Alterio (McDrury, 2002 #464.

The personal as political

My early years were full of stories. Many of them were about my mother's childhood. I learned how they camped in huts on manuka mattresses and sheets, how she fell down a waterfall while camping, how their summers were full of memories of camping in the North Canterbury

bush. Open fields, turkeys, visiting relatives. I learned a lot about the role of women. My great aunts lived on a station, where they cooked for shearing gangs whom their father employed. Their days were full of cake baking, scone-making, baking mutton or poultry for gangs of 25-30 men. Their tools were a coal range and a large wooden table. The kitchen floor was compacted dirt, swept twice daily, and polished to keep it clean.

My grandmother was widowed early, as was her mother, so the idea of women under the command of their imperious father was strange to them, to my mother, and to me. But from the early stories I learned that there is both freedom, and responsibility -freedom to explore the stream, the paddocks, the bush, and the craggy rock outlets. If you pinched apples, the policeman growled you, and had a word to your mother. The responsibility to family, to those less fortunate than you was also a moral of the stories.

Storytellers have long been privileged in oral societies. We have strong memories of the things we were told as children.

What stories are we telling today?

Learning stories have given us tools to explore learning in the context of our bi-cultural curriculum{Carr, 2001 #465}. But have we unpacked the possibilities of storying, and what it can mean for the principles of empowerment, and relationships?

Perhaps a reflective tool that tells our own story as professionals can be an illustration of the power of the narrative. Stories can:

- Change from minute to minute. They are an active engagement between the teller and the listener. They may never be told in the same way, as both the teller and listener are engaged in a relationship that is fluid, consensual and interactive.

- They can engage the whole person. The emotions are captured, the possibility of goals, dreams, hopes, fears can be capture, expressed, faced and confronted.
- They can give openings for new identities, new possibilities. In a post-modern world, we can re-define our identity in myriads of ways- as a woman, a man, a professional, a parent, a member of a culture, an individual. No one story is 'the truth', but there are many truths.
- If we can learn by storying the powerful possibilities, we can use the tool of narrative for assessment to promote the child's voice more strongly. By finding our voice(s), we can see new possibilities. Our reflections on our journeys can lead to me goals, new insights, and new ways of assessing our dreams. From that we can model new assessment styles for families and children.

Digital Narratives

Narrative is seen by some theorists as deeply political. Norman Fairclough is interested in the practice of discussion, on the critical reflection of the artefacts of speech. He has analysed the illocutionary act of performing political functions, using speeches such as those of Prime Minister, Tony Blair, as examples. He uses the discursive theory of Michel Foucault to investigate the dominant discourse of Third Way politics. Texts and power are closely aligned. Power is created and transferred through discussion and conversation.

New Zealand health practitioners, Janice McDrury and Maxine Alterio have plotted a five-step approach, which is not unlike that used by Early Childhood practitioners (c.f. Carr). These five steps are: noticing; making sense; making meaning; working with meaning and finally, transformative learning. From hearing, responding and reflecting on the

narratives we hear, they believe, we can become more effective professionals. They set out a parallel process of learning: story finding; story telling; story expanding; story processing and the final stage of story reconstructing.

Digital narratives been used by a number of theorists. Helen Barrett is an exponent of digital narrative to capture diverse voices, and enable these to be heard by new audiences. The aim is to meld the technology of multi-media (visuals, oral, voice and artefact) to the traditional narrative-as-assessment-tool. Her model has parallels with the McDrury and Alterio model, as the techniques which capture attention, and engage the listener are those which use emotion and empathy. The purpose of story telling is that of ordering content, but using the emotions to excite, intrigue or upset.

The learning for other professionals comes through the processes of expansion, where the listener and narrator make shared meaning through the telling of events. Forgotten aspects as recalled, feelings clarified or revisited and past experiences linked to existing knowledge. By visiting the intense emotions, a shift is possible from surface learning to a deeper engagement.

An important aspect is to address the "why " questions that engage these emotions.

The 'Teacher's voice'

What does this mean for us and "why"?

When we 'talk as a teacher' we hold certain constructs in our head about what 'teachers do', 'teachers do', teachers say'. This construct drives and moulds our story. Some of our story will be about us as experts, some about us teaching quality, some about us being qualified.

Vivian G. Paley has written stories about the child/teacher dichotomy – “That was a time when kindergarten children were called the "little ones" by the other teachers who came by to watch them play…We now have reversed the order of events. It is generally believed that the earlier we begin to train a child in reading and writing skills, the better off everyone will be…[as teachers ask}What can we do to fix you?"{Vivian Gussin Paley, #468} Sylvia Ashton-Warner is one of the New Zealand writers who problematised dominant pedagogical practices and sought space for new insights. Her personal life and professional lives were not synchronic and synthetic, but drawing on experience of those who were seen as unfortunate, gave her passions those of us in mainstream life often miss out on.

Perhaps by playing the game about being “satisfactory teachers” we lose the important side of our lives. The official-speak discourse constructs as compliant pedagogs, who do not question the accepted wisdom of the dominant image of a teacher. This could be challenged by storying, by narrating our confusions, our imperfections, our misapprehensions.

Do we tell tales about our failures, our misapprehensions, the tensions between our and others’ expectations? Are our tales frivolous? Is there a negative side to the binary that we do not articulate, do not tell, will not even to think?

An early research by the second author was into constructs of women as they were seen my ‘writers of history’{Stuart, 1986 #466}. The research demonstrated the constructs that built what was seen as ‘woman’. Men saw women as good- wives, homemakers, mothers and midwives; or bad- witches or whores. Other women saw those of their gender more empathetically as complex beings who reached across barriers of race or class to assist their sisters. But the voices were louder and most

interesting when they wrote of their own lives. They were not ‘damned whores’ or ‘God’s police’. The binaries of good/bad were more complex.

Story processing and reconstructing

There is a possibility of deep learning through the processing of narrative. As we, the narrator and the listener shift our foci, we can work with meaning, and develop a range of perspectives of events. The regaining and affirming of personal knowledge is an important aspect. Narration, using images, artefacts and stories that are intensely personal, allow feelings to be acknowledged and valued. Digital narratives, as with traditional storytelling, allow a deeper understanding of relationships, including that between meaning and context.

The central issue to revisit our stories – those of us as professionals- with a more critical emphasis. Both tellers and listeners can interrogate and evaluate stories from many perspectives. There is never one “truth”. If dialogic reason is thoughtful and constructive it can lead to changed practice, to the combination of theory and practice to create praxis. Derrida suggests that binaries need to be explored {MacLure, 2006 #467}. That we fear frivolity.-it is the dark side, the abnormal side of the serious expertise. It illustrates the *différance* that contains an element of the inverse. Binaries have attached to them the oppositional. These resist the fact that structures resist closure. *Différance* calls into question any essence of being – there is no “Satisfactory Teacher Dimension”. In fact, the fact that we name something “satisfactory” immediately calls into question the concept of “unsatisfactory”. The relationship between the signifier and the signified is truly arbitrary. Traces of the oppositional are both attached and deferred and are inherent in language. This is the logo-centrism of Derrida . Words mobilise the play of language, and link the centrality of language to being. Within our concepts of teachers will be

the Aristolian and Socratic notions of both the teacher and the taught. The relationships are set out, constructed by the nouns and their representation. But the trace will also offer space for new meanings in the future. Teachers can negotiate, instruct, fulfil, engage, model, tell and direct. We can also debunk, question, enrol, enable, and deconstruct. If the child is "competent and confident" what is the role of the teacher?

If we are serious teachers we will seek the frivolous, re-tell our stories; unpack our expertise, debunk our constructions of qualified and quality teaching to re-seek new stories.

Such deconstruction will make evident our power/knowledge; our role in expecting 'right answers' from parents and children, and set out our position of influence to determine what makes a 'competent, confident child or parent'

It will also see our dispositions as constructed by time and place. Will we be experts in charge of technology or curricula if we are placed in concentration camps, mental health institutions, prisons, those places that Foucault noted that put us under constant surveillance?

Conclusion

If we are tellers of tales we must confront the power such constructions gives us.

- Do we tell tales that fit the DAP child?
- The 'naughty' child who problematises our 'control'?
- Does the 'teacher-talk' construct as us/them binary that needs to be confronted.
- Let's seek new scripts, write new tales, tell differing stories. Be frivolous in Derrida's meaning of the term.
- Let's tell complex stories, where the ending is unknown.