

FROM METHOD TO METHODOLOGY: NARRATIVE AS A WAY OF KNOWING FOR ADULT LEARNERS

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Abstract

Drawing from narrative theory, reflexive inquiry, and critical pedagogy, the intent of this article is to position narrative as perspective and process that, together, help construct theoretically new ways of conceptualizing and practising learning. My aim, then, is to present narrative as a methodology that brings together theory and practice in a space where readers might reflexively examine the experiences that inform their own educational perspectives. The centrality of lived experience is pervasive and recurring. Specific questions include: “What does a critically framed reflexive narrative methodology uniquely contribute to understanding teaching and learning?” and “How does remembering self in teaching and learning moments construct educational perspectives through narrative?”

Résumé

S'appuyant sur la théorie du récit, de l'enquête réflexive et la pédagogie critique, le but de cet article est de positionner le récit comme une perspective et un processus qui, ensemble, contribuent à la construction théorique de nouvelles façons de conceptualiser et de pratiquer l'apprentissage. Mon intention est donc de présenter le récit comme une méthodologie réunissant la théorie et la pratique dans un espace où les lecteurs peuvent examiner consciencieusement les expériences qui influencent leurs propres perspectives éducatives. La centralité de l'expérience vécue est omniprésente et récurrente. Des questions spécifiques incluent: «Comment une méthodologie de narration réflexive encadrée de façon critique peut contribuer de façon unique à la compréhension de l'enseignement et de l'apprentissage?» et «Comment le souvenir de soi-même lors de nos moments d'enseignements et d'apprentissages peut aider à construire des perspectives éducatives par le récit?»

My heart is in my throat as I climb the stairs to the classroom. It is six years since I was in school—six years since I quit. I hoped to have the courage to go back at some point, if for no other reason than to face my own demons, but, even now, I question my ability to survive. I feel the cold metal of the doorknob in my hand. I pause to remind myself to

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breathe. I raise my chin in false bravado and walk through the door. I am relieved to be alone in the classroom. I take it all in: large windows with lots of natural light; whiteboard on one wall; collection of mismatched tables and chairs. I see the room as I see myself—not without challenges, but having potential.

I drop my purse in the corner and begin hauling furniture around. When finished, I'm tired from the exertion but renewed by the result. I sit on the edge of the desk in the far corner by the window. As I put my feet on the chair and place my chin in my cupped hands, I look around and take my first real breath since I entered this space. I am teacher and I am back.

Continuously seeking to make teaching and learning relevant, I embrace narrative as a methodology that encourages meaning making in a personal way. Not simply a method, narrative is often seen as a collection of approaches that have in common a storied form. They are made narrative by their purposeful [re]presentation of events to evoke in the audience a particular response (Jupp, 2006). When partnered with reflexive inquiry and critical pedagogy, narrative provides the methodological framework necessary for me to theorize the process of doing reflexive narrative while uncovering a critical understanding of teaching and learning. Drawing from theoretical positions put forth in each of these traditions, my aim is to present narrative as a methodology that brings together theory and practice in a space where readers might reflexively examine the experiences that inform their own educational perspectives. Paradigmatically, narrative is within the domain of qualitative research, so my theoretical introduction begins there.

Perspectives

Qualitative Approach

Qualitative research is one of the major approaches to research in education. At its most elementary, its concern is achieving in-depth understanding of human behaviour and the reasons behind that behaviour. Because of its exploratory nature, it generally requires small, focused samples rather than larger, more random ones. Perhaps the most notable distinction between qualitative research and its counterparts is that it fronts its subjectivities and assumes the possibility of multiple interpretations, each one constructed from a unique vantage point (Catterall, 1998; Clandinin & Connelly, 1990, 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998a, 1998b; Goodall, 2008; Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994; Paul, 2005).

Although there are many divergent approaches under this qualitative research umbrella, Eisner (1998) identifies six common salient features: first, the context must be naturally occurring, not contrived or manipulated; second, the inquirer is considered an instrument of the study; third, because the methodology is concerned with understanding a human condition as experienced by the subject involved, qualitative research is highly interpretive; fourth, expressive language and voice are key to interpretation; fifth, because the inquiries must be contextually situated and interpreted, attention to particulars is crucial (this includes temporal and demographical factors); and sixth, deductive analysis

is disavowed in favour of inductive interpretation—so coherence, detailed insight, and instrumental utility must be clearly explicated.

Several scholars remind me that, because of the interpretive requirement of qualitative inquiry, researchers must be particularly attentive to naming their assumptions and subjectivities (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Harvey, 1990; Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994; McLaren & Kincheloe, 2002; Paul, 2005). By naming the lenses through which we view the world, we concede that all knowledge has both a knower and a context, and we are responsible for researching in a way that honours the subject, context, and researcher. It is through this relational engagement that we may come to new understandings of our experiences and ourselves.

In addition to being an approach, then, qualitative research is also a theoretical perspective. Drawing on the work of Polkinghorne (1988), Patton (2002) argues that the overarching power of qualitative information lies in its ability to tell a story. My goal, then, is to connect theories of qualitative research to those of narrative approaches and reflexive inquiry.

Narrative Theory

Informed by the work of several scholars (Behar, 1996; Boje, 2001; Czarniawska, 2004; Elliot, 2005; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Ellsworth, 1997, 2005; Gardner & Kelly, 2008; Goodall, 2008; Gough, 1997; MacEwan & Egan, 1995; Webster & Mertova, 2007; Wheatley, 2009), I assume that narrative inquiry adeptly explores the nuanced experiences of teachers and learners. Broadly, the power of narrative approaches is in their capacity to recount events that most deeply affect human understanding. They do this by illustrating how a particular life can be indicative of a shared experience or social reality. A review of recent narrative literature leads Webster and Mertova to explore four questions that frame the usefulness of narrative as a research approach.

The first question explores why researchers turn to narrative. Webster and Mertova (2007) draw on the work of MacEwan and Egan (1995) and determine that narrative is appealing because it provides a medium for people to record the history of human consciousness as well as the major changes that mark the development of thinking human beings. Further, because narrative may be employed to record human consciousness, it also provides accounts of individual consciousness. To make sense of the human condition, an understanding of human consciousness is essential.

Webster and Mertova's (2007) second question concerns the prominence of narrative in research. Here they cite Bruner (1986), who positioned narrative as the basis for understanding behaviour. Such an elemental foundation situates narrative as universally accessible to both researchers and participants as they, together, explicate human behaviour and motivation. They also draw on the work of Gough (1997), who claims that narrative is a way of examining any number of theoretical and practical problems in education. He maintains that stories, told and heard, reconceptualize the notion of practice in teacher education. Webster and Mertova also acknowledge the work of Shulman (1987), Elbaz (1991), and Fullan (2007), who use narrative to investigate teacher knowledge across various disciplines. They specifically cite Ball and Goodson (1985), who promote narrative

in autobiographical and life history writing, and Clandinin and Connelly (1990), who have done extensive work on teachers' stories as legitimate data. In addition to the people noted by Webster and Mertova, a myriad of scholars are employing narrative in research. Among some of the most influential are Grumet (1976, 1981), who writes convincingly about the role of narrative in making visible our attitudes, choices, and values; Cole and Knowles (2000), who make narrative central in life history scholarship; Knowles and Cole with Presswood (2008), who examine the role of narrative in understanding pre-service teacher development; Neilsen (1998), who uses narrative to research literacy and gender; and Richardson (2005), who positions narrative writing as a method of inquiry.

Having touched on both the utility and prevalence of narrative, Webster and Mertova (2007) explore the characteristics of narrative that make it an appropriate approach for educational research. They determine that the structure of the storied form gives narrative the aptitude for illuminating teaching and learning experiences. This structure involves not only recounting events in a storied form, but also framing those events in a way that reveals the underlying social and political implications. Although they do not list voice as a primary characteristic, I maintain that it is an integral consideration in narrative studies. I draw from Neilsen (1994), who says, "We are hearing the voices of reading and writing teachers who are claiming opportunities to 'read' their professional lives and 'write' their own classroom experiences and as a result claim authority for their professional growth" (p. 46).

Finally, Webster and Mertova (2007) ask if narrative uniquely explicates the human condition in research. Specifically, they conclude that narrative provides a framework for viewing human and cultural complexity. Using narrative, it is possible not only to look at human qualities, but also to consider humanness within a range of contexts, theories, and practices.

Although these four questions are helpful in considering the usefulness of a narrative framework, I find that they fail to explore some of the deeper, more epistemological questions. Richardson (2005) argues that writing is not just the dissemination of our findings, but also a way of coming to knowledge. Claims of how we know what we know clearly enter the epistemological arena and extend narrative from method to methodology. This reading is supported by Patton (2002), who maintains that methods are simply tools as opposed to methodologies, which have theoretical and epistemological considerations. Narrative, then, is the process of coming to knowledge as much as it is the knowledge itself or the dissemination of that knowledge. This process of coming to knowledge not only lays epistemological claims at the feet of narrative approaches, but also introduces questions about the temporality of knowing aptly explored through reflexive inquiry.

Reflexive Inquiry

Reflexive inquiry is helpful in framing narrative ways of knowing. It requires that I revisit those understandings I have come to narratively and continue to negotiate possible interpretations of them. Reflexivity also gives me the space to reconsider myself in continuous development because of my experiences. Bloom (1998) refers to 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” (p. 162). It follows that each time I move forward again, I take with me an altered or deepened self-knowledge gained from my considerations of prior experiences. It is this continuous critical renegotiation that transforms reflection into reflexivity.

In this ebb and flow of negotiated meaning, I am increasingly interested in how teaching and learning experiences inform educational perspectives. Knowles and Cole with Presswood (2008) state that for teachers to develop professionally, they need to understand “the formative as well as the continuing experiences and influences that have shaped and continue to shape their perspectives and practices” (p. 2).

Ellsworth (1997) cautions that there are some complexities in the reflexive consideration of self in relation to other. 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 also 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” (p. 60). Ellsworth refers to this space as the asymmetry between “the self departed from and the self returned to” as we reflect on our experiences (p. 65). As such, I must seek to make sense not only with the temporality of my own knowing, but also with multiple understandings negotiated in relation. Where the former is appropriately addressed through inward-focused reflexivity, the latter requires an outward-focused lens that informs a shared history, or collective criticality, between teachers and learners.

Critical Pedagogy

Abbott (2008) claims “narrative is an instrument of power” (p. 40). Tone, content, and medium are all used by the author to direct the audience, so, together or alone, these devices have the power to change the way an audience views the world. Such power, he claims, must not be left unchecked. Making central the importance of this accountability, I draw from critical research, particularly that of critical pedagogy. The intersection of reflexive narrative and critical pedagogy demands at least three things. First, the narrative tradition challenges me to write my way toward uncovering teaching and learning experiences that inform educational perspectives. Second, the reflexive tradition requires that I revisit those experiences and continuously renegotiate how they inform perspectives. Third, critical pedagogy insists that I examine what I have gathered through reflexive narrative for its underpinnings of power, privilege, and utility.

Drawing from the work of several scholars (Apple, 1990; Britzman, 1991; Brookes, 1992; Freire, 1976, 1981; Giroux, 1997; Greene, 1988, 1995; Kincheloe, 2008; Lather, 1991; Shor, 1992), I understand the agenda of critical pedagogy to be the collaborative pursuit of critical consciousness by teachers and learners. As defined by Shor, critical pedagogy examines

habits of thought, reading, writing, and speaking which go beneath surface meaning, first impressions, dominant myths, official pronouncements,

traditional clichés, received wisdom, and mere opinions, to understand the deep meaning, root causes, social context, ideology, and personal consequences of any action, event, object, process, organization, experience, text, subject matter, policy, mass media, or discourse. (p. 129)

As such, critical pedagogy requires that teachers and learners employ reflexive processes to illuminate connections between the political and personal, the global and local, and the economic and pedagogical (Dewey, 1938; Freire, 1976; Greene, 1995; hooks, 1994; Kincheloe, 2008; Shor, 1992; Willinsky, 1990).

Drawing on the work of Freire, Kincheloe (2008) lists several general concerns of critical pedagogy. I understand these to include the following: first, education is political and often reflects the interests of new modes of colonialism, and thus, critical pedagogy demands that we expose these practices and overcome them as part of critical praxis; second, teachers must be respected as professionals and encouraged as scholars and researchers; third, education should synergistically encourage emancipatory change and the cultivation of intellect; fourth, the pursuit of social justice and the alleviation of oppression should guide education; and fifth, all positions including critical pedagogy itself must be problematized and questioned.

Informed by a critical agenda, I understand reflexive narrative processes as uniquely able to help teachers and learners revisit schooling experiences with the aim of shedding light on their educational perspectives.

Process

I race down the stairs from the main level of the library. The air is thick with the smell of my own fear. I can't breathe. I try the doors, but they are secured by magnetic locks and a warning that forcing them open will trip the alarms. I'm mocked by the glass architecture as I can see the outside world but cannot re-join it. I hurry down another flight of stairs, my hand slipping along the cold metal railing. More doors—locked. I am in the basement overwhelmed by the once comforting smell of the stacks. Trapped.

I bolt upright in bed. It takes me a minute to regain my bearings. The air has the faint smell of asphalt characteristic of the city in spring humidity. I hear the clock ticking ... the rain dripping off the gutter suspended above my bedroom window. The red glow of my clock tells me that it's 4:06 a.m. I have another three hours before I need to be up for class, but I know my sleep is over. The kindest thing I can do for myself is shower off the residue of my recurring dream and don the robe of normalcy for the upcoming day.

My neck is stiff from tension. It doesn't come every night, this dream. I don't know why it visits at all. I replay it, trying to make sense of it, as I make my way to the bathroom. The coldness of the floor tile is a relief

somehow. The water starts and so begins the process of self-deception. I eventually shut off the tap, towel off, and get ready for the day. Dressed now, with my face applied and my hair tied back, I re-enter a world I cannot possibly understand with the singular aim of surviving.

I remember that April vividly for a couple of reasons. First, it marked the onset of the dreams that tried to save me from myself, and second, within six months I began a period about which I recall very little. By October, two months into my bachelor of education program, it was becoming increasingly difficult to rationalize away the dreams. They were coming with more regularity, more ferocity.

I don't know that I was able to make sense of my experience at the time. In fact, I'm certain that I understand my downward spiral quite differently now than I could have while I was enduring it. The desperation born of feeling trapped began to manifest itself in new dreams with the same theme. The anxiety piqued by those recurrences quickly became generalized. I recall feeling tired and unnerved most of the time. I ate little and slept even less. I began to show signs of serious fatigue. I eventually consented to see a physician on staff at the university. I refused to accept his sweeping assumptions about generalized anxiety, panic disorder, or clinical burnout. I declined to accept his recommendation to take sick leave. During the day, I struggled to function in the world in which I sentenced myself; I spent the nights torn between the worst kind of fear: not knowing which scared me more—waking up the next day, or not. I found new coping strategies. I stopped eating for fear of nausea and stopped sleeping for fear of awakening in those unnamed fits. The strategies were, admittedly, rife with problems, but they got me through another couple of months. By January, I collapsed.

I feel like I have stopped functioning. I can barely crawl across the floor and into the tub. I fumble with the taps until the water runs. Sometimes I am there only a few minutes ... often I lay there long after the water is cold. I stay until I can crawl back out of the tub and pull my body up in front of the vanity. There, I stare blankly at the stranger staring back at me. Sometimes her eyes show pity, or fear, or condemnation; most often, her eyes are empty.

Although I left the university in January, I did so only to a point. The panic attacks prevented me from attending classes, and my absolute depletion precluded me from challenging those systems that were wearing me down. Nonetheless, I couldn't quite sever the ties. Without them, I believed my future was over. I became fixated on securing the degree. I went to the university and spoke individually with each course professor. I explained that I was on leave but was committed to completing course work and finishing the degree. I emphatically maintained that some rest would allow me to return to the classroom and satisfy my final practicum requirements. Four professors reacted in very similar ways: with a blend of pity and smugness as they cautiously offered to be supportive in any way the faculty would permit. The fifth professor, though, did the most amazing thing: she asked how I was coping. It stopped me cold. When I cast my eyes downward, she asked me what I feared most. For the first time, I named it: that I was losing my mind in this breakdown. She seemed to grow taller and indomitable as she informed me that I was not having a breakdown, but rather a "break-up." Break-ups happen, she said, when we are

made of curves in a square world; in her opinion, if more people had them the world would be a more beautiful place. She'd had a break-up herself, she said, when she was about my age, and always counted herself lucky to be intelligent enough to recognize and challenge the insanity of the world at such a young age. Think of the inconvenience of having to do it in mid-life, or worse, never. I smiled. For the first time in months, I thought I might survive.

In those few minutes, she changed how I saw the world and my ability to affect change in it. She helped me name my experience. Brookes (1992) suggests that individuals cannot overcome sources of disintegration until they name those sources, thereby diminishing their potential to cause harm. She suggests that recalling and recording particular teaching and learning moments through narrative are integral to this process. Carter (1995) discusses this approach "as the framework that appears to organize teachers' personal understandings of their craft [and] well-remembered events as a bridge between personal understandings and the worlds of classrooms and educational knowledge" (p. 326). This process resonated with me, and, in the months I was on leave, I began to write reflexive narratives about teaching and learning experiences that informed my educational perspectives. Although I finished the degree, I no longer trusted myself to be healthy in formal systems of schooling. It was five years before I circled back.

My return to school started with a conversation. I often thought about the professor who, during my faltering health, recognized the deep underlying disengagement and helped me name it. Having never thanked her for her support, I decided to visit her. It was not a decision made lightly, though. I had not set foot on the campus since my nervous break-up five years earlier. I did not return for convocation, and the parchment sent in the mail was never mounted. Despite my determination never to spare the place a glance, my pulse still quickened every time I drove by. This particular day, I resolved to overcome my fear.

I slowed as I approached the fork in the road and guided my car into the left turning lane. Reminding myself to breathe, I signalled and pulled onto campus. I parked the car, locked up, and negotiated my way along a familiar path. I tried to focus on the fresh, crisp day, the beautiful autumn colours, and the New England feeling that the centre block always conjured. I managed to distract myself long enough to get to the door of the Education building. I gulped a breath of air as though I were a diver preparing for a deep plunge. I pushed through the door and, on trembling legs, climbed the stairs. The smells were the same—dank and stale, symbolic of my experience there. I reminded myself that I was not beholden to this place any longer and could come and go at whim. I made my way to her office and knocked tentatively.

When invited to come in, I found her at her desk, looking very much as I recalled: a comforting blend of academic and maternal. Her face lit with pleasure when she saw me and, as I greeted her, the hold of the past weakened. We chatted about the "dark ages" of the faculty and she updated me on the changes: new professors, thanks to some encouraged retirements; new dean specifically recruited to re-envision the faculty's future direction; new courses that encouraged critical pedagogy and intellectual development; and a new graduate program for leaders and

thinkers to write their way into professional growth. As she continued to discuss the renaissance of the program and its potential for faculty and students alike, she piqued my curiosity. When she suggested that I apply for graduate school, I realized that I could revisit old places and make them new by finding personal agency where previously there was none. Having given me much to think about, she bid me farewell with a challenge: "It's not enough to complain about perceived injustice or misrepresentation; we have to take ourselves seriously enough to reflect deeply on our experiences, generate ideas from them, and present greater possibilities." Before I made it back to my car, I had decided to apply for graduate school. Successful in my application, I began the master of education program the following September.

In the time between my application and program commencement, I began working with adult learners in a local processing plant. I recognized that I was leading the creation of a program very different from those of my experiences in formal schools. I was not, however, theorizing its creation or deconstructing my role in it. With the support of employee participants, I used my graduate research to determine ways to foster spaces for learners whose previous silencing within systems of schooling led them to disengage from learning. In partnering theoretical explication and practical application of my learning, my experience in the master of education program was fortifying, validating, and deeply meaningful. Newly inspired by this approach to learning, I was able to shift my focus from resisting problem-saturated systems of schooling to cutting paths for new ways to conceptualize teaching and learning.

Representation

Based heavily on Freirian philosophy (Freire, 1976, 1981), I imagined a program that synergistically encouraged emancipatory change and the cultivation of intellect. Driven to overcome repressive practices, the learners and I worked together to create a liberating program built on acts of cognition, not transferrals of information. Learner-centred generative approaches guided both pedagogy and practice.

I spent the first two weeks in my new job meeting individually with each potential learner. Each person approached me with trepidation, carrying a story of disengagement. I did what I had learned was best: I listened. I heard personal narratives stemming from places of anger, defeat, disappointment, self-reproach, and fear. When appropriate, I asked questions about dreams that had been silenced and goals that might be resurrected. I worked tirelessly to understand each learner and create spaces where we could learn together. Committed to trust and honesty, we did not always find the journey easy. It involved unlearning some tightly held assumptions and being open to seeing ourselves and our relationships with teaching and learning differently.

Although each learner had unique educational goals and motivations, we collectively sought restored confidence in ourselves and in our ability to succeed in the learning endeavour. We worked toward achieving this purpose in countless small ways. The first time our values were concretely enacted outside our group was about eight

weeks into the program. Some learners expressed uneasiness about the approaching end of school, as the learning centre was established as a 12-week pilot program. I encouraged those learners to write personal narratives to management in which they reflected on the importance of ongoing learning, its personal value, and its professional returns. At least three very important outcomes resulted from those narratives: first, employee-participants considered how learning informed both their personal and professional lives; second, they experienced the power of solidarity to effect change; and third, in being granted an eight-month extension of their program, they internalized a sense of agency reminiscent of Freire's consciousness raising and action.

The learning centre took on a life of its own and became a place of engagement and renewal. A bright room away from the hum of production, the centre had 12 personal computers, Internet and network connections, and a small but diverse library. The walls were alive with colourful learning charts, a world map, photography, and inspirational quotations. In the centre of the room were three large conference tables placed to form an "I." A reminder of why we learn and strategic in design, the "I" shape allowed learners individual space but was also conducive to discussion and interaction. Originally established to assist in the attainment of General Educational Development (GED) certificates, the centre soon became a space for anyone who wanted to learn. Courses eventually included adult basic education, secondary credits in English and mathematics, post-secondary refresher courses, and trades training. Computer courses, creative writing, and classes in personal and professional correspondence were also offered. Because learning was grounded in lived experience, relationality was key and a sense of solidarity developed. That solidarity allowed us to feel safe enough to examine assumptions about teaching and learning and reconceptualize what it meant to go to school.

I was pleased with the outcomes, but I wanted a deeper understanding of what we were creating. As I continued to theorize our experience, I uncovered the seminal work of Knowles (1970), wherein he named six principles of adult learning. I used his framework to gauge the success of our program.

First, *adults are autonomous and self-directed*. These adult learners had a wealth of life experience. To honour and engage them, I fostered a space where they were encouraged to express their views and direct their own learning. This practice took form as I met with each individual and we co-authored a learning plan based on his or her baseline and goals. The interim learning objectives and classroom schedule were developed to suit each person's requirements.

Second, *adults have life experiences and knowledge that must be honoured and incorporated into their learning*. Exalting the centrality of lived experience, we were consciously committed to connecting work, family, and community to the learners' studies.

Third, *adults are goal-oriented*. Every one of the learners re-entered the classroom with a particular goal in mind. We named those goals during our first meeting and collaboratively developed a plan that would move us toward successful completion.

Fourth, *adults are relevancy-oriented*. Each learner was taking time away from work and home to engage with learning, so it was essential that the studies have some

tangible benefits. As a result, the theories and concepts were often practised through real-life scenarios like banking, budgets, meeting minutes, or requests for proposals.

Fifth, *adults are practical*. The people with whom I was learning tended to focus on lessons that had the most potential to be useful and meaningful in their day-to-day experiences. Respectfully, we tried always to merge theory with its application. This merger not only gave value to learning, but also encouraged the learners to examine theory for relevance and even generate new theory from their practical experience.

Finally, *adult learners, in particular, need to be shown respect*. The wealth of lived experience and the daily demands of work, family, and community entitle adult learners to respect in the classroom. Through respect, we were able to establish a learning environment founded on the principles of equity and in the spirit of reciprocal learning.

Part of our commitment to learning with and through each other's experiences manifested itself in three participants volunteering to add their voices to my own for the purpose of researching reflexive narrative ways of examining how schooling experiences inform educational perspectives. Through narrative writing and conversation, the four participants, myself included, reflected on experiences we identified as critical events in our schooling. These reflections formed valuable field texts. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) define field texts as records "created, neither found nor discovered, by participants and researchers in order to represent aspects of field experience" (p. 92). They caution that, as the researcher, I must be aware of my biases when choosing to record and not record various aspects of the experience. The relationship between the researcher and the participant must also be consciously acknowledged (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 742).

I was both participant and researcher in this study. Although I was also the instructor of the learners' workplace literacy program, I did not provide evaluation or progress reports (academic or practical) to their employers. The participants were not beholden to me in any way and participated voluntarily. I made every attempt to make the participants fully aware of the purpose and design of this inquiry. They received the information in a letter of introduction and we discussed it together at our initial meeting. Each participant then completed a written informed consent. Participation was entirely voluntary and the learners were welcome to refuse to participate, withdraw at any time, or decline to share any part of their personal story. I committed to meeting any refusal with respect and without any negative consequences and to destroying the information gathered prior to the time of the withdrawal or refusal if their permission to use it was not granted. In an effort to check my hearing of their story with their sharing of it, I shared my field notes with each participant individually to allow them the opportunity to comment, clarify, or amend any information.

All participants expressed that the process of contributing to the research as well as the involvement with the learning centre itself helped them unlearn tightly held assumptions about teaching and learning. In letting go of notions that limit learning, we are able to engage differently.

I figured going back to school was going to be a waste of time. I don't get along well with the crap that comes with school—rules for their own sake, curriculum that has no bearing on my life, and goals that weren't my own. None of those things are problems here: the program

is different for each of us—it’s what we make it—and there’s only one rule—respect. Funny thing is, when I was in public school, I didn’t respect anyone—least of all myself. I was so busy being angry about the emptiness of it all, I just put up road blocks. That’s what’s so unique about this program—it helps us to get out of our own way. School should have been like this the first time. (24-year-old man)

The learning centre developed to represent opportunity and renewal, two qualities that I assume are essential to meaningful education. The opportunity and renewal were evident in both learner engagement and the company’s ongoing commitment to the program. During my four-year tenure at the centre, more than 200 learners successfully achieved their goals across more than 18 programs. Further, personnel managers reported improved morale, enhanced performance, and decreased absenteeism. The turnover in the learner population was 2% compared with 11% in the non-learner population. The low turnover rate among learners was particularly telling given that many identified as having “quitting tendencies.”

Having dropped out of school followed me through my life. It was the elephant in the room when I tried to help my children with homework. It was the blank space on résumés as I applied for work. It was the conversation-stopper when old friends and new acquaintances gathered to reminisce about school. I reacted to the lack differently at different times in my life. Sometimes I tried to make up for it by being really good at jobs. Other times, I almost convinced myself that I did the right thing—that I was too stupid to be educated. After all, I heard it everywhere. Dad—well, he was a good man but he took mean spells—he’d tell me that I was no good and that I’d never amount to anything. I’d go to school and get more of the same. It got to the point that I wondered if there was anywhere in the world I could go and feel good about myself.

One year, Grade 8, I had a teacher who made me feel good and strong and capable. When I left her room and returned to the way the rest of the teachers were leading their classrooms in that time, it was too cruel. I never experienced that type of caring in a learning environment again until I came to school at work. At first, I was afraid of who our teacher would be. The possibility of her being over-educated, unknowledgeable, and elitist terrified me. I knew right away, though, that I’d worried for nothing. I had come to a place where we were empowered to find our own strengths, our own light. We negotiated our own paths. Rather than struggling against something for success, the new way made it impossible to fail. I finally feel good about myself. My children always ask about school and that makes me certain that I was a success all along. I instilled in them support and pride in education. It just took me awhile to find it in myself. (51-year-old woman)

In the interest of creating a learning culture that was sustainable, I developed a graduated mentorship program. Comprising students who had met their learning objectives but wished to remain actively involved with the learning centre, the graduated

mentors engaged in at least three ways. First, they selected a subject area of study that was of particular interest to them and they worked as teaching assistants in the learning centre. They sometimes developed curricula and at other times helped learners with exam preparation. Most often, though, they continued to engage by working one on one with an employee-learner who required targeted tutoring in a given subject area. Second, the mentors met with me regularly as we planned together the type of supports most helpful in making learning relevant and engaging and then discussing teaching approaches that honoured those characteristics. Third, those mentors who were interested were supported in workplace education training certification. This certification program saw mentors exposed to new relationships with teaching and learning.

I was haunted by the sneers of those who repeatedly told me I would never amount to anything and, I guess, by my fear that they were right. I knew I needed to overcome my anxiety about returning to the classroom and, once I did, the insults and discouragement wouldn't mean much anymore. I summoned enough nerve to register for class but, after about three weeks went by, I still hadn't darkened the door to the classroom. The teacher finally left a message for me at home so I decided to bite the bullet and show up. If I looked like an idiot and had to quit, it wouldn't be the first time. I walked in the room, saw the teacher, and mentally put two strikes against her. She was obviously not from my side of the tracks, and she was not much more than a kid. I figured I was in for another know-it-all, never-listen, has-all-the-answers kind-of-brat. She invited me to sit down and asked me a few questions about myself and my job. I suppose I didn't tell her anything more than I had to. She put her pen down, sat back, and spoke with the plainness I used when I spoke to her. She said, "You seem to be here against your will, and I can only help people who want to help themselves. If that works for you, I'd be delighted to learn together." I wasn't sure if it was an invitation or a dismissal, but I had something to think about when I left. I don't know how she had me pegged so quickly—it was her putting the power in my hands that first meeting that convinced me to go back to school.

I worked through everything that she put in front of me. Before I knew it, I was holding a GED diploma in my hand. Eight months ago I couldn't imagine being in school, and now I can't imagine leaving. I signed up for university prep courses and six months later, I had completed credits in Grade 12 academic English and math, and refresher courses in history and biology. She talked to me about college or university, and I thought about it—I really did. I just figured that I was pretty long in the tooth to start all over again in another career so she suggested I study to become a workplace educator. That way, she said, I could continue learning but also work in the classroom as an assistant. I could not have imagined this path for myself because I didn't know my own potential. I guess that's what it all boils down to—having someone believe in you enough that it becomes contagious. (47-year-old man)

The learning centre was conceived to position education as emancipatory. In some cases, the learners were able to lay to rest long-held feelings of frustration, incompleteness, or even inadequacy. In other instances, they embraced learning as a second chance—a way to grow professionally and personally. Without exception, though, the goals and reasons were their own and the program was adapted to meet their needs.

From Method to Methodology

When partnered with reflexive inquiry and critical pedagogy, narrative provides the methodological framework necessary to theorize the process of doing reflexive narrative while uncovering a critical understanding of teaching and learning. The narrative tradition provides space for writing as inquiry while the reflexive tradition asks that we dynamically renegotiate how teaching and learning experiences inform our educational perspectives. A critical lens frames a way to untangle what we have come to know through reflexive narrative and the implications for power, privilege, and utility.

The real substance of narrative, then, is found in living, telling, and making sense of experience: "Narrative inquiry is the study of experience, and experience, as John Dewey taught, is a matter of people in relation contextually and temporally. Participants are in relation and we, as researchers, are in relation to participants" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 189). Narrative inquiry, as a methodological approach influenced by theories of reflexive inquiry and critical pedagogy, is the process of coming to knowledge as much as it is the knowledge itself or the dissemination of that knowledge. In moving beyond simple knowledge translation to a means of coming to or uncovering knowledge, it enters the epistemological arena and extends narrative from method to methodology.

Equally important to this theoretical perspective is narrative as process that fosters representations that are enactments of and testaments to the theory. That is to say that teaching and learning framed by the narrative perspective allow me to participate in the process of inquiry in concert with generating theory born of this process. As a reflexive process, narrative allows theorists and practitioners both to move between theory and practice as they continuously work to narrow the gap. This gap can be most readily bridged through creating accessible representations of theory enacted.

In presenting narrative as a methodology that brings together theory and practice in a space where readers might reflexively examine the experiences that inform their own educational perspectives, we are able to consider how the methodology uniquely contributes to understanding teaching and learning. Further, remembering self in teaching and learning moments constructs educational perspectives through narratives. Through careful and critical consideration of these memories, says Grumet (1976), I can reveal the influences not only of experiences recalled, but also of assumptions that might otherwise have remained hidden from me. In knowing self this way, we are able to know more fully our educational perspectives and their possibilities to mobilize change.

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