

The Journey Between There and Here: Stories of a Faculty Writing Group

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Abstract

Reflecting, sharing, and producing knowledge about the process of writing and collaboration in a writing group is the focus of this qualitative project, in which we explore a complex weaving of knowledge, subjectivity, and representation. In this group are eight women faculty, all of whom are individually working on writing projects in their own areas of expertise. Using a method of *writing as inquiry*, each person was asked to keep a reflective journal; an autoethnographic account of their experiences of writing during a three-month period. The group met weekly and each individual shared their reflections

and writing experiences. In this project, our intention is to decentre notions of the alienated, isolated academic by writing and constructing knowledge as a collective. Using the metaphor of *here* and *there*, we ask how can a relational culture grow out of writing? How can competitive, hidden barriers be broken down and replaced by open, encouraging spaces?

Keywords: research stories, post-structuralist writing, writing groups, faculty writing, collaborative writing, writing process, academic writing, writing narratives

Résumé

Cette recherche qualitative porte essentiellement sur le processus d'écriture et la collaboration dans un groupe d'écriture, notamment sur le maillage complexe entre savoir, subjectivité et représentation. Le groupe réunit huit femmes universitaires, chacune menant à bien un projet d'écriture dans son champ de compétence. Ayant recours à une méthode d'écriture exploratoire, chaque membre du groupe a tenu un journal, sorte de compte rendu autoethographique de ses expériences d'écriture, au cours d'une période de trois mois. Le groupe s'est réuni une fois par semaine afin que chacune puisse partager ses réflexions et ses expériences quant à l'écriture. Dans ce projet, notre intention est de décentrer la notion de l'universitaire isolé en écrivant et en construisant un savoir en tant que groupe. En utilisant la métaphore de l'ici et là, nous nous demandons comment une culture relationnelle peut surgir de l'écriture? Comment des barrières cachées, engendrées par la compétitivité, peuvent-elles être abattues et remplacées par des espaces ouverts et stimulants?

Mots-clés : récits de recherche, écriture poststructuraliste, groupes d'écriture, écriture chez des universitaires, écriture en collaboration, processus d'écriture, écrits universitaires, récits sur l'écriture

Introduction

The metaphor of *there* and *here* emerged from two contextual occurrences. First, a large group of new faculty were hired into the Faculty of Education at Memorial University over four years. Second, for many years the faculty was a teacher's college. Over the past 15 years, it gradually transitioned into a research-based faculty, however, as the only one in the province, its ethos is still rooted in teaching practice and educating pre-service teachers, and most positions required significant teaching experience in schools. Many new hires moved from the K–12 schooling system and, although experienced educators, they were less experienced as researchers. The consequence was a group of new faculty inexperienced in research productivity and pressured to produce publications and acquire research grants. To address the perceived lack of research expertise, a grants facilitation officer was hired whose primary role was to support faculty in publishing peer-reviewed research articles and to assist with research grant applications. The grants facilitation officer, who is one of the authors, decided in addition to working with faculty individually, a group environment might provide further support in the form of a community of practice where knowledge could be exchanged, shared, and combined (Ens, Boyd, Matczuk, & Nickerson, 2011). A faculty writing group was formed. Although initially sporadic and ineffective, the group grew into a successful and productive community of practice. We have published collaboratively (see Badenhorst et al., 2012, 2013, 2016; McLeod et al., 2015; Penney et al., forthcoming), and individually we have been more productive because of the group. In these publications, we identified that this was more than just a writing group, yet it is difficult to articulate what “more” means. Our exchanges sometimes defy language because of the complexity of the interactions. The purpose of this article is to document, in an experimental way, how we attempted to explore this complexity and to find a method to express what the group has meant to us. We found a post-modern approach (Lather, 2013) allowed us the freedom to explore our “relational entanglements” (p. 639). Through adventurous writing—enjoyable, embodied, truthful quests (Badley, 2015)—this article explores the experience of group members in the early days as we transitioned from previous professional contexts into current academic ones. We used autoethnography (Chang, 2008; Ellis, 2004; Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Chang, 2010) and writing as inquiry as our methodology (Richardson, 2000a; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2008; Speedy, 2005, 2013; St. Pierre, 2007), and stories of self (Arnold, 2011) as the data.

To frame the stories of self we used a metaphor “from *there* to *here*.” In sum, writing was the methodology, the data, and the analytical mechanism for exploring how we negotiated our transitions from *there* to *here* in our group.

The Writing Group

In September 2009, the new faculty joined to form a writing group. Membership was informal and the group gathered weekly during the fall and winter semesters. A facilitator who provided ongoing information on writing and publishing led the group. Faculty joined in on an ad hoc basis and membership grew and dwindled as time and workloads dictated. Some consistently attended while others attended sporadically. In September 2010, the facilitator proposed a project for the group to get a more committed membership and to ensure its sustainability. An invitation went out to all faculty members, and seven women, all relatively new and untenured, joined. Members came from diverse backgrounds within education including psychology, counselling, special education, arts, English as a second language, and social studies. Three members came from predominantly quantitative backgrounds and the rest were qualitative researchers.

The project entailed members committing to a writing project of their choice for three months. At the beginning each person wrote a reflection piece stating why she was committed to the project, her writing goals, and why this three-month project was important to her. Members also set up a schedule for regular writing. During this period, each member was required to keep an ongoing reflective journal and attend a weekly meeting. The purpose of the reflective journal was to develop writing as inquiry as a method for understanding themselves as academics, researchers, writers, and selves. The facilitator provided information sessions on writing goals, schedules, characteristics of writing productivity, and writing as a method of inquiry.

Data Collection

During the week, each member would work on her individual research project and writing goals. At the weekly meeting, she would tell the group what she felt she had achieved or what problems she was facing. The written journal reflections were collected and filed

at the end of the meeting and the recording of discussions enabled the group to conduct a joint research project on writing, the writing group, and writing as inquiry (see Badenhorst et al., 2013). As time went on, members were asked to reflect on particular topics as they arose and these written reflections were also included as data. The entire project was framed by a postmodern approach, setting the data collection against a background of flexibility, ambiguity, uncertainty, and an unfolding process of qualitative research. The idea was not for the group to be regulated or to regulate themselves but to set up the architecture for an *unfolding* and *emerging* to happen. What unfolded and what emerged, we left open to the process. We set up the structure then waited to see what happened. Also, we allowed ourselves to be open to non-linear, non-traditional forms of representing our “data” and the freedom to develop heuristics as and when we chose to understand what we were experiencing (see McLeod et al., 2015). It did not take long to realize the process we initiated was richly textured and deeply layered.

Cecile: As facilitator of the writing group with a primary interest in writing, I looked for emerging themes as my traditional qualitative research training had schooled me. However, each time we met different things were happening and I increasingly found it impossible to extract the threads of meaning with regard to the writing group. How to unpack what this collaboration means? There were too many layers, dissecting lines, faults and moving parts. There were parts I couldn't see because they were hidden and parts I could not yet reach because my thinking hadn't conceptualized that far. Although we had set a timeline for collecting data and established what data to collect, it was difficult to draw lines and boundaries. How do you exclude the conversations in the corridor that spark a line of thinking, the development of trust during socialising, and the myriad daily fleeting exchanges?

One day, I'd been feeling homesick and came across an account of homesickness. In the article, Alsop (2002) talks about the divide between home and away. It made me think about there and here. There is a familiar safe haven. Here is unfamiliar, amorphous, unstructured and we are new, vulnerable outsiders. Could our writing group be the bridge between here and there? There, wherever it is, we know our mother tongue while at the university the language is different and difficult. There we know the practices, we can “read” people, here we

feel isolated, alienated and anxious. There we talk with confidence, here we are unsure, and we need translators. There we belong, here we are under surveillance and in deficit. Is the writing group a way of negotiating our heres and theres no matter what they are? Is the writing group and our collaboration a journey between we and they? Is our group about learning to belong? I asked everyone to write a narrative about their there and here.

Through the *there* and *here* stories that follow, a notion of the academic emerges that celebrates academia not as an isolating, disconnected place but as a nurturing, organic relationship that navigates instability and uncertainty.

Writing Practices

The critical discourse defining academia often results in writing practices leading to alienation, isolation, and anxiety. This applies particularly to new faculty trying to write productively while simultaneously having to negotiate the tenure demands of teaching, research, and service. Writing collaboratively and writing groups are sometimes proposed as the answer to the challenges of writing and publishing in academia (Gilligan, Cretchley, George, McDonald, & Rankin, 2003; Grant, 2006; Lee & Boud, 2003; Moore, 2003; Murray, Thow, Moore, & Murphy, 2008). There is a growing literature on the value of writing groups for graduates and faculty in providing models and developing writing self-efficacy (Aitchison, 2009; McGrail, Richard, & Jones, 2006; Speedy et al., 2010). Our writing group proved as valuable as the literature suggests but rather than identify the significance of the group through outputs and productivity, we wanted to explore the value of the interactions experienced and how that helped our individual writing processes, our sense of self, and our group processes. Many members found the transition from previous work contexts to academia fraught with insecurities and anxiety. We found the group interactions helped us find individual strength and although we were shaped by the discourses we were in, we became intentional subjects and actors who could shape our own subject positions.

Cecile: I knew from the time I took my first course at university I wanted one day to work there. I loved the research but when I started teaching I realized I was a

teacher first. I spent ten years in a busy faculty position and thoroughly enjoyed it. Then we made the momentous decision to relocate from South Africa to Newfoundland. My husband took up a faculty position but I struggled to fit in because my experience was tailored towards the context I had worked in, and the expertise I had developed there did not seem to fit here. I took on a job as grants facilitator in the Faculty of Education. On the fringes of faculty life, not teaching and not researching, I felt I had lost my identity and my sense of self. Even with the writing group, I felt as if I was on the outside, a facilitator. But somehow after the first year, our relationships began to solidify and I began to feel that I was part of the group—enough to suggest this project. I started to become more like myself. The here and there metaphor resonates with me because it describes my experiences in two different academic contexts. There I was a productive academic writer and so an authentic teacher and mentor of writers. Here I was not writing but only supporting others in their writing without authenticity as a writer myself.

Academic identity is the focus of this story but it suggests that identities are tangled, the personal and the professional are sometimes not easy to separate.

Methodology

In this article we privilege stories of self (Arnold, 2011). We argue for the need to reclaim the inevitability of the personal in academic lives. Scholarship is intimately tied to personal experience and although many researchers “have been trained to guard against subjectivity (self-driven perspectives) and to separate self from research activities” (Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Chang, 2010, p. 2), such separation is impossible. Stories of self allow us to notice elements in our researcher lives that shape our identities, practices, and experiences. Despite being new to us, narratives of self have a long history in qualitative research (Pinnegar & Danes, 2007). Here, we engage in what Arnold (2011) calls “the subjective academic narrative” (p. 1).

We also draw on evocative autoethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2006; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, Richardson, 2011; Denzin, 2006). Evocative autoethnographies are personal texts where writers tell stories of their experiences (Richardson, 2000c). This type of autoethnography uses language in less traditional academic ways. The purpose

of language is to evoke a response in the reader and to connect on an emotional level. As Pelias (2004) suggests, such scholarship:

...has language doing its hardest work, finding its most telling voice, and revealing its deepest secrets. It is literature that makes its writer and readers take notice not just of its points but also of its aesthetic presentation. Often it relies on the figurative and rests on form. It avoids cliché, the familiar. It depends on the creative and finds force in the imaginative. (p. 12)

The writing often includes hidden private lives and vulnerable emotional experiences. The language and style may focus on the relational and connective nature of individual “selves.” The purpose of evocative language is to position the reader as a participant in a dialogue rather than as a passive reader (Pace, 2012).

In autoethnography, the researcher is both the “subject” and the “object” of research. As the “subject,” the autoethnographer is the one who performs the investigation along with the “object” or the one being investigated. While the “self” is often perceived of as individual, autoethnography locates the individual among others—others of similarity, difference, opposition, and connection (Ngunjiri et al., 2010). It links the self with others, the self with the social, and the self with the context, and reveals a socio-cultural understanding of selves (Starr, 2010). Autoethnographers invite the instability of “knowing” and challenge the idea that they are researchers situated outside of their own life processes (herising, 2005). These texts are inevitably fused with vulnerability: “The stories we write put us into conversation with ourselves as well as our readers. In conversation with ourselves, we expose our vulnerabilities, conflicts, choices and values. We take measure of our uncertainties, our mixed emotions, and the multiple layers of our experience” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 748). Autoethnographies often do not show the struggles taking place in the writing itself and the decisions one makes about what to reveal and to hide (Chatham Carpenter, 2010; Ngunjiri et al., 2010). Yet it is this epistemology of vulnerability that is this research genre’s potency because it resonates with readers who feel that same vulnerability (see Richardson, 2013). Rather than drawing conclusions, the authenticity of the text is in its resonance with the reader (Pace, 2012). Our work could also be labeled as collaborative autoethnography, where “researchers work in community to collect their autobiographical materials and to analyze and interpret their data collectively to gain a meaningful understanding of sociocultural phenomena reflected in their

autobiographical data” (Chang et al., 2013, p. 24). We found collecting stories of the self and collaboratively engaging in autoethnography a richly rewarding experience despite the discomforts of vulnerability, which is no small issue if one is untenured.

Dorothy: Perhaps “from there to here” is mostly about moving from a place of burn-out to a place of balanced living. In finishing my M.Ed. I was convinced I could write and now having finished my Ph.D. I am in a place where I feel I cannot write. I sit spinning my wheels for hours at a time trying to write a paragraph. What happened? Am I lost in my writing? I feel my writing is strongest when I am able to write with vulnerability but in academia I sense that to be successful, to do my job well, I must write with certitude. There is much to be learned through questioning. Academic writing encourages raising questions, but it seems questions are only allowed if they arise from some great insight. I want to arrive at a place where my academic writing is accepted for the insights born out of the process of doing research, not only the end result. In arriving here will I discover balance in my life overall?

In this story, Dorothy shifts the gaze to the transitory, ambivalent nature of academic writing and how much of us is invested in our practice. We need to connect to ourselves, sometimes to be vulnerable, to feel authentic as writers.

Writing Groups and the Writing Process

The literature on academic writing and productivity falls into three broad, but analogous, camps. The first focuses on behaviour. This group argues that academic writers who struggle have not developed the behaviour allowing them to write productively. They get distracted, become too busy, avoid writing, or do not have the structures enabling them to write (McGrail et al., 2006; Murray et al., 2008). The second camp turns the spotlight on the discourse of academia and the identity of the writer. These studies explore the quirky and often mystifying nature of journal publishing, the lack of confidence of new writers, the need for a scholarly identity, and the mentoring that ought to take place (Lee & Boud, 2003; McGrail et al., 2006). The third camp takes a more postmodern approach, looking less at the structure and the outcome of the group and more at the process of dialogue

between participants and texts (Speedy et al., 2010; Winter & Bradley, 2007). These articles are concerned with representing the collaboration in an authentic manner rather than the efficiency or effectiveness of the group (Gale, Speedy, & Wyatt, 2010; Paulus, Woodside, & Ziegler, 2010; Wyatt, Gale, Gannon, & Davies, 2010).

We are interested in all of the above. What happens in a collective, a group of women who assemble with loose ties and what seems like constantly moving goals? Like St. Pierre (2007), we want to know how “women construct their subjectivities within the limits and possibilities of the discourses and cultural practices available to them” (p. 258). That is, how do we negotiate space and strength for ourselves in this discourse? How can these constrained subjectivities decentre notions of the alienated, isolated academic and be employed to nurture a collaborative, relational space?

Sharon: In 1989, I left Newfoundland so that my husband could study at the graduate level. I always thought it was temporary move—eventually I would return to Newfoundland. But it wasn't that easy to get back to a place I always referred to as “home.”

By 2008 I had established myself in a career as a school psychologist in Ontario. I felt competent. One of the reasons for leaving was to have the opportunity to return home. When I was living on the mainland, I always felt I didn't belong and somehow I gave up a part of who I am. I had to learn to slow down my speech and to pronounce words differently and in the process lost much of my Newfoundland accent. However, giving up my position and moving into an academic environment in Newfoundland has not been an easy transition. I am a novice again and feel out of my element. I constantly struggle with my decision. Is this right for me? Do I belong?

When I first returned, I seriously questioned my decision because I realized that I didn't actually fit in here either. Nothing was the same. I no longer felt competent. I actually missed many things from the mainland. I find I have adjusted somewhat to the place of here. I am happy living in Newfoundland and I miss the mainland less and less. However, I still haven't come to terms with my career move from expert to novice.

Sharon's story centres on belonging—a theme that surfaced regularly in our discussions. Notions of (in)competence, beginning again, and learning to fit in characterize her (our) transition.

Writing as Inquiry

Using writing as a method of inquiry, Richardson (2000a) foregrounds how researchers construct knowledge about the world and themselves through writing. Writing is not the end point of research; it is the way we come to *know* our research (Richardson, 2000c; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2007; Speedy, 2005). The substrate of this perspective is an ontological stance of multiple realities and constantly negotiated selves. Language is not assumed to be transparent and to mirror a single reality. Instead, language helps to create reality/realities. Writing is used to make sense, to theorize and to produce knowledge (St. Pierre, 2007).

In research, the “data” we collect, transcribe, and analyze reflects a particular research agenda, and a deliberate construction of that research picture (Law, Ruppert, & Savage, 2011). By developing “findings,” we collate the bits and pieces into coherent text. The practice of conceptualizing knowledge as “findings” reflects a coded subtext of “science” where such bits are carved into chunks that are “summarizable, cumulative, and citable” (Richardson, 1995, p. 190). By making choices of what to include, what to exclude and how to piece it all together, we craft narratives and we write lives (Richardson, 1990, p. 10). We need methods, but they carry with them “baggage which can be heavy, even burdensome” (Law et al., 2011, p. 3). In qualitative research, writers often face dilemmas that will not be compartmentalized and will not go away (St. Pierre, 2007). The “data” and “findings” often cannot be partitioned off into tidy jigsaw pieces. Drawing on these ideas, we wanted to experiment by contesting “standard arrangements for knowing” (Law et al., 2011, p. 13) and to explore our “data” differently. To do this, we blurred the lines between data collection and research findings. We used writing as inquiry to both generate and analyze data. As a method of *data collection*, researchers write from the beginning of the research process, they document the formal parts and the behind the scenes parts (St. Pierre, 2007). In doing so, the writing *becomes* the data. Writing is also a method of *data analysis*, where “writing forces us to textualize the rigorous confusion

of our thinking” (p. 1). Data collection and analysis are not separate but happen simultaneously, and as such, writing is a constant process of integrating thinking, subjectivities, and representation (Gale & Wyatt, 2007). The narratives in this article illustrate the rich complexity of each writer’s experience. Reducing them to keywords and themes would certainly diminish their impact.

Xuemei: From there to here—the forever inbetweeness. I think about my life and career in China and Canada. There was home, the place where my dreams of coming here started. Now I am here but I constantly think of there. I dream about people, events, places in my earlier life. Implicit psychological implications are attached to such dreams—nostalgia of my childhood, thoughts about parents and friends. Why did I come here, then? When I was there I was always curious about life here. I wanted to experience it myself instead of learning it from second-hand sources. Now after living here for so many years, I realize I am still living a life in-between here and there. I work here, but themes of my work are constantly related to people who came from there. I buy groceries from the stores here, but I cook everything in the Chinese way. I speak English here outside of home but at home I speak a mix of two languages with my son. I celebrate all holidays, western and eastern, only partially because I’m living in the space between the cultures.

Career-wise, why have I chosen to work here, having to write in a language I never have full confidence in; whereas there I could write in both languages? The challenge of living in the middle space attracted me here, but I also desire there where I feel completely confident and comfortable about the language and cultural practices, where I feel I belong in a deeper sense.

Xuemei’s story illustrates the deeply felt contradictions of being an immigrant academic, “living in the middle space,” wanting to be there but wanting to belong here.

The Worded World

The postmodern critique of what counts as “truth” and how that “truth” is represented opened the door on what research can signify. There have been many attempts at

alternative forms of representation, to write more compellingly, and to communicate more effectively (Colyar, 2009; Gale & Wyatt, 2006; Gale & Wyatt, 2007; Holbrook, 2010). Even when we write research, we write the narrative of that experience. In essence, we're telling a story and wording a world into being (Richardson, 2000a). Then we re-word it through revisions and drafts until we are satisfied. But this “worded world” never accurately, precisely, completely captures the studied world” (Richardson, 2000a, p. 923). In narrative, too, the writer’s voice speaks for others and the writer still has authority and privilege. One way to decentre this authority is to tell “collective stories” that cross the boundaries between the individual and a group, and between the private and public. Our collective story emanates from a group of women with a particular emerging, developing, disappearing, reconstituting identity. We write as situated, positioned authors with a collective story to tell. In this way, the world we create, the one we “word” into being, is “both true and partial” (Richardson, 1990, p. 28).

Sarah: What does there entail? There's in my life seem to centre around a theme of familiarity, competence, security and safety. When I move into a new space, I immediately set out to make it mine, with representations of who I am at present. I create this sense of “home” and I crave the comfort and peace that comes with it. Until about five years ago I had gained a sense of “homeness” with my work. It was challenging but comfortable, I felt competent and I knew what opportunities within that area I could pursue. My relationship, although new, offered the same solace. It was shortly after this period I embarked on the journey towards the here I am in now. In that short time span we moved across the continent where I worked in a universal health care system for the first time, bought a house, made the leap from health to academia, had our first child and am now expecting our second. These events, all exciting, also brought many new and uncertain experiences my way.

At present, I am struggling with what I find to be a multitude of heres, which often bring about self doubt, confusion, excitement, eagerness, joy and challenges. What I find the most difficult is how to make meaning of the process, how to find “home” in this phase of my life’s journey. The heres outweigh the theres and I find myself on a new path—charting new territory as if I were a child again. Motherhood, pursuing an academic career, living far away from my

family of origin, and creating a life in Newfoundland all feel equally important. My present task is not how to master all of these or reach a goal which will bring me a sense of “home” within each area but to try to accept, embrace, even relish the notion that the process of being in these new life phases and journeys is my “home.” Along with the joy and splendour, I need to find friendship in uncertainty and ambivalence rather than defending against their existence.

Sarah’s story centres on finding a “home” amidst a range of new *heres*. Her story (a collective story) speaks of looking at her world with new eyes as a way of uniting all the disparate ambivalent parts.

Choices

Writing as inquiry means discovery and learning through writing, and choosing meaning-bits from the morass of chaos of life and research. It means writing a way into a story, even if that story is never finished. It is a methodology of finding out about oneself and one’s research passion (Richardson, 2000a). Writing as inquiry also means documenting through writing the day-to-day activities, impressions of events, informal conversations, observations, and reflections of the writing process, as well as writing about the subject under review (St. Pierre, 1997). This documentation is always grounded in a holistic context, so the writings may include observations not traditionally included in the academic sphere, such as dreams, emotions, “the novel just read, a neighbour’s comment” (St. Pierre, 2007, para. 10). This is not merely a selection of a method, but an epistemological choice. As Richardson (1990) argues, “We choose how we write, and the choices we make do make a difference to ourselves, to social science, and to the people we write about” (p. 9). Writing is both a theoretical and practical way of unpacking our epistemological positions, for questioning taken-for-granted assumptions, for connecting with others, and for nurturing ourselves (Richardson, 2000b).

Jackie: Am I here when I sit at my desk in my office at Memorial University or am I there? If we should “live in the here and now” then my here is at home with my family. Figuring out what’s here and what’s there reflects one of my current struggles—who I want to be—mother vs. academic and whether it is possible to

successfully be both at the same time. At this point I don't feel that I am successful here or there. If I had no children I could spend late nights at work and devote my thoughts and energy towards my career, but would I be happy? If I wasn't struggling to get an academic career off the ground, I could pick up my daughter from school each day and enjoy my time with her without thoughts of what academic activities I should be doing. While I love spending time with my child I wonder if I'd be able to return to a dull 9–5 job in order to ensure that my time with her would be devoid of work-related distractions.

I'm not sure as a female academic you can ever resolve the struggle between being here but wanting to be there. Maybe when your children are grown and no longer need you, you can achieve the freedom to focus on your career. In the meantime, our writing group helps me get through this stage in my life. I think our being mothers who are pursuing an academic career is the perfect support group for me! We share a common understanding and experience and this shared knowledge allows me to openly express how difficult it is to balance family and career.

Jackie's story reflected another group story: The tension between wanting to work and wanting to be at home. While apparently simultaneously possible, this tug inevitably seemed to result in either/or. Sharing a common understanding of what this meant *here* became significant for many in the group.

Metaphors and Writing

“Metaphor,” Richardson (2000a, p. 926) argues, “is the backbone of social science writing.” If we locate metaphors only as a characteristic of language, we undermine how metaphors affect meaning and also act on us. Through metaphor we experience; we move within the metaphor as it, in turn, shapes us. Faced with an overwhelming sense of complexity and inability to extricate threads of meaning and developing patterns of understanding of what was happening in the writing group, we found the metaphor of “there” and “here” offered us a way through. It gave us a common language and a universal experience even though our experiences were different. The metaphor bundled us into a collective, but also carried our different perspectives comfortably.

Rhonda: *I worked as a Guidance Counsellor for over 20 years. About 12 years into that role, I decided I wanted to learn more, so I pursued my doctorate. This was a life-changing experience as my husband and I moved to different universities for a year. When we returned home, life changed again. Over the next few years we had three children and my husband lost both parents. I continued to work full time and finally finished my dissertation within two months of the birth of my third child. I returned to my position in the school system and loved my work but felt a nagging sensation I wasn't making use of my degree and my efforts were a waste. A position came open at the university and I was encouraged to apply for it. Much thought went into this—I wasn't sure. But I felt I needed to challenge myself so I applied for the position. This was a big move! I wasn't convinced the university was for me, but I felt like I didn't belong in the school system anymore either. How do I go about finding my new place of belonging?*

My transition to the university involved trying to get a “handle” on each aspect of the job bit by bit. Research was very challenging for me. It has taken some time but I'm beginning to feel I might be able to do this as well. My family have a big piece of my heart. From the start my husband has been a constant support, always encouraging and sometimes pushing me along. My children are my life. Some days it is all consuming but they are worth it. Little hands wrapped around my neck and cuddles are just a few of the many reminders. Initially I truly struggled to maintain a balance and keep them a priority while still trying to meet the demands of my job. Being a wife, and mother along with the many other roles that co-exist in my life and becoming an academic is a tough balancing act I work on every day. This is here. This is where I am right now.

Rhonda's story again shows the criss-crossing intersections of previous professional life, new academic identity, and the multiple demands that here entails, but it also hints at the excitement of being here.

Themes and Truths

The stories presented here are nested against a background of a larger project of formally collected “data.” We have published the “themes” that appeared in the data (Badenhorst

et al., 2013). Issues that arose included (1) the difficulties of being new faculty, the new systems, the inability to read the “politics” of the faculty, the lack of confidence related to this newness; (2) the pressure of tenure, the need to form research agendas and publish quickly, the need to do any research even if it was not in the researcher’s area of interest for tenure purposes; (3) the difficulty of balancing teaching, research, and service, as well as the need to weigh multiple demands; (4) the lack of time to write, think, conceptualize; (5) the difficulty of switching from writing a doctoral thesis to writing for publication; (6) the challenge of balancing family and career goals, of feeling fragmented and stretched taut with the wants of others and ourselves (see Penney et al., forthcoming); and (7) the need to overcome the isolation and alienation of an individualistic competitive academic path and the reassurance that the experiences of others in the group were familiar and therefore not abnormal. These themes provide a truth but that truth is only partial because it does not capture the fluidity of meanings and positions.

Not everyone in the group felt the same about each issue, and for each issue there would be a continuum of positions and responses from positive to negative. Members’ positions on these continuums changed, too, depending on what was happening in their lives as a whole. What was clear was the writing group was providing a mechanism of support and that support was different for everyone. With the variety of identities, histories, subjectivities, differences, similarities, before-contexts, now-contexts, experiences, confidence, positive, and negative emotions, how do these themes make sense of what was happening in the group? The metaphor helped us begin to articulate what was going on and provided us with a language to discuss the experience in traditional and non-traditional research terms.

Heather: What’s “here”? And “there,” what’s that? Perhaps there is the place where I existed before engaging in a doctoral program. The career options I had seemed to shrink as I aged. I was frustrated at not being able to focus for very long because there were quick decisions to be made on constantly changing issues, and I couldn’t do things in an in-depth manner.

Now that I’m here I feel more unified. I can find time and rewards for focusing, I sit and ponder, rework, refashion, etc. And despite the long hours involved, there’s some recognition associated with what I produce. Academic production moves carefully. I can be recognized as an expert on the topics I’ve

researched; it's understood I've put more time into considering it than others. Thus it seems here is the place where I'm finally enabled to think through notions of my choice.

Heather's story, we placed last, because it acknowledges what many of us feel: that *here* is where we want to be. We just want it to be a *here* that is more suited to our subjectivities: that reflects all of us, not just the academic.

Connections

It was only in the process of writing this article that we discovered what we wanted to say. We each came from different directions and diverse angles. The written world in our heads was unique to each member. The metaphor, however, moved us from positions where our feet were firmly planted in a paradigm or perspective into a space with less defined edges and more room to breathe. In breathing, we realized how connected we have become and are still becoming.

The writing group is one of the best things that has happened in my new academic career (Xuemei). Through the writing group, I was able to open my mind to the possibility of having an academic career again (Cecile). By giving voice to my thoughts and feelings in this group setting I am developing a sense that maybe everything will work out (Jackie). The writing group has been extremely helpful as a support system. Having my colleagues talk about the same struggles has helped me realize that I'm not alone (Sharon). As I struggled and continue to struggle to find my identity this group has been a wonderful support. As new academics we experience many of the same issues and the group is a place to feel safe to share and to feel supported as we try to move forward in this new realm (Rhonda). As we became vulnerable with each other, we gained insight into who we were as individuals but also as a community responsible to each other (Dorothy). The writing group has helped construct a crucial bridge from there to here (Heather). It has helped me to embrace the process, which at present I strive to accept as my here, my home (Sarah).

Possible Routes

What has the metaphor of *here* and *there* allowed us to articulate? Although we tell individual stories, those stories are a collective, an assemblage, because through writing as inquiry, and reflecting, sharing, and interacting in the group, our voices merge in relation to one another. We stand as individuals, aware of the instability of our writing and the unfinished nature of our stories. Yet we also recognize being together means we reflect off each other, and shared writing, deliberate or not, is a key component of this process. What we have learned is that collaboration, when we move from our certainties and fixed positions, is an enriching experience.

We each have a range of “*heres*” and “*theres*” and they have to do with our different selves, our various roles, and our subjective positions in our work context. That we are all women seeking some form of “truth” is not a coincidence. That the journey for many is filled with contradiction and struggle is not chance. We could take each story as “data” and draw out themes but these themes will be lacking in authenticity because our stories are always only partial. They are never fixed:

The story of a life is less than the actual life, because the story told is selective, partial, contextually constructed and because the life is not yet over. But the story of a life is also more than the life, the contours and meanings allegorically extending to others, others seeing themselves, knowing themselves. (Richardson, 2000b, p. 158)

If each person in the group wrote another “there” and “here” story, they would be as true as the ones shown here. The metaphor allows us to hold *all* those partial stories, some written, some not yet written but all accepted by the group. It allows us to make connections “between the fragments” (Speedy, 2013, p. 34). The metaphor also gives us the mechanism to accommodate diverse positions, conditions, issues, and demands, which we can experience in a visceral sense because we have told our stories and been acknowledged. We have been witnessed. What happens in the writing group and what the metaphor articulates is knowledge construction on the rational level along with a whole range of interconnections that happen on the perceptive, intuitive level. What we chat about can be as important as the solid “facts” we construct. This is why we often cannot explain the group dynamics in rational terms. Our collaboration extends beyond

the group meetings and is relational in ways hard to articulate. We value that we do not have to articulate it to each other. The practice of writing this article has given us a deep connection.

The metaphor also opens up the relational aspects of writing: trust, communication, identity, notions of time, and reflexivity. The stories presented here are not always specifically about writing but all the stories are *relevant* to writing in academic contexts. In the group discussions, through writing reflections and sharing our writing, we are building relationships of trust and developing a community of support. We devote time to each other, we critique each other's foundations of knowledge, and we reflect on trust, communication, and time. We participate and observe as others make mistakes, experience pain, and lose hope. While grappling to make sense of what is happening to others, so we learn and grow. Through reflection and interaction, we begin to build identities as writers, researchers, scholars, colleagues, and friends. We borrow and share concepts, sentences, and words. Our identities and experiences are not unidirectional; they may be contradictory and conflicting. We sometimes get irritated and impatient, but what the metaphor reflects is the ability of the group to hold our diverse needs and multiple standpoints with respect for individual stories.

The *there* and *here* stories have also shown us that we are not disinterested and neutral writers. We may choose to write like that when discourse demands dictate. But we problematize the distortion and the invisibility of "women's intuitive rationality" (Lather, 1992, p. 92), a rationality based on subjectivity. The possibilities of post-structuralism have opened up writing and research to ways of knowing that are no longer gender bound. Our search for meaning is value-based. Our epistemology *is* one of vulnerability. Our collective *there* and *here* story reveals that collaboration is about vulnerability and the ability to build relationships from that foundation. Connections are forged overtly through constructing writing, reflecting, and telling stories, but also implicitly through perception, intuition, smiles, and a softening of the eyes as we regard each other. There is no linear way to describe the complexity and the multilayered dynamics except to say we are emerging as individuals and as a group, and as we *emerge*, so we *become*. As we become, we begin again to renew, to question, and to refuse remaining the same.

A Collective Relational Culture

What does our experience mean for other writers and writing groups? We found by focusing on relationships, exploring selves and others with honesty and vulnerability, and moving from our usual fixed positions to embrace possibility, that productivity took care of itself. We worked to establish a non-competitive, nurturing environment, and it was only through undertaking projects like this one, where we had to move beyond our comfort zones, take risks, and trust one another, that we were able to achieve that safety collectively. In the process, we practised writing and learned about each other and ourselves. Glancing behind us, we see our writing group served as a strong yet flexible bridge from *there* to *here*. It has been the space and place to negotiate who we are and where we want to go, as individuals and together.

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