Abstract
Auto-ethnographic and narrative inquiry provides opportunities for teachers to reflect the personal with a curriculum dominated identity; a human kind of offering, with research as a living guide to revelation. The relative habitat of self in the context of teaching is a topic still under review, especially as it applies to the storying of self in a collective, professional life-world and the artefacts and icons of systems. I use auto-tales and biography combined with narrative inquiry as literary devices to explore teaching as a lived experience with a human map connected to others. Storying serves as an empathetic bridge to development and invites reflexive practice as we recollect our lives in the context of experience. I explore the medium of poly-vocal writing to evoke and discuss identity among the nature of teaching, calling on crucial literature as referent voices. I explore the medium of poly-vocal writing to evoke and discuss identity among the overt and covert nature of teaching, calling on crucial literature as referent voices.

Key words: Teaching, autobiography, inquiry, self, storying, poly-vocal, metaphor, ethnography, transformation, identity.

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1. Exposition

When we write we miss less – of ourselves and who we are and have become. Never before in my life have I been more aware of what I’ve done and how much my own sense of integrity means to me. My time of life now – yes – but mostly why I write and the confirmation of the writing moment. A comment a teacher made to me seems appropriate to begin:

*Teachers tend to reflect on what they do - not who they are. Writing my own story for your study has meant I could tell someone finally about what teaching has meant to me – now that I’m at the end of my life with this career... No-one has ever asked me to write my story before – I wanted to reflect on who I am as a teacher and how my life is also my work.*
I guess this has been my objective for the study – not what we do but who we are when we teach and how a life experience is also a teaching experience – to bring us into fullness with ourselves when we work.

2. The Study Guide

‘No one could any longer describe the forgotten prize, but it was rumoured that it was enormous and perhaps infinite.’ The Secret Miracle by Jorge Luis Borges. 2

There is always the shadow. And there is always the prospect that what we do rests in the temporal benevolence afforded to us when we remember who we are and might become. We are living in social worlds – the stories of us and the daily life-world which creates what we shall remember later and what others will remember us for. I have always wanted to write the story of my life and a life with teaching – as a teacher-writer exploring and discovering the multi-faceted landscapes of human nature - teaching others to become – what they will. Now I write, hoping that words will do the same.

I have experienced teaching as hope, tension, confusion, wisdom, excitement, empathy, failure, sickness, loss, miracle and magic, sameness and spontaneity, mask and imagination, friendship and alienation, achievement, judgement, habit, saviour and home, journey, conflict and the relegation of feelings to professional duty and others. I wanted to find a way that would place these experiences into some kind of resonant context – to share and discuss what my life with teaching has meant and what it might reveal for others, as a writer and interpreter. My personal life has also been filled with the parallel experiences that accompany change - roads I travelled, literally, as a young hitch-hiker and the choices I had and decisions I made, like everyone else.

Some roads lead us to struggle and some to a sense that there’s more to come. I wanted to find a medium to share these experiences and to honour the one creative force that has bound me to human endeavour – writing. I wanted to explore the mystery of a life as a communal dedication to something I’ve believed in and fought for, suffered and achieved. Story seemed the obvious choice. I have written the stories of other lives but not my own and not my life as I became – who I am and what I do today.

I discovered when I was a younger post-graduate student that I was engaging in ethnography and a kind of naïve phenomenology as grounded theory, except there was a great deal more I needed to know about research identity and paradigm. I was telling the stories of mature-aged people who decided to return to study and how this decision was impacting on them through the domains of Education, Psychology and Mythology. I was engaging in a kind of inquiry – a narrative and interpretive inquiry, as a biographer of experience. I documented their fear and anxiety, their trials with learning and aspirations, their achievements and, more importantly, the transformational aspects of learning and how and why learning brings meaning.
I was tracking and using reflective practice in the experiences of starting, staying with and finishing time with learning – why people persevere. I invited the students to keep journals and become the authors of their own experiences. We shared feelings, thoughts and discussed what our time together meant for us as recorders, learners and people engaged in the dynamic of meeting cognitive experiences with personal ideation. Sometimes we had the experience but missed the meaning, like the feeling of being the constant amateur – except we’re not. And sometimes I had the feeling I was manufacturing events caught in the constraints of time and constructed settings.

I asked the students to ‘watch themselves’ - to off-set what we were both experiencing as students and researchers of the self. We were illuminating our understandings about our positions in the teaching-learning environment. We couldn’t escape what was happening and realised we were characters and narrators in a collective story. There was still a good deal more I could have done on describing the felt sense of time and place and how this in turn shapes our views of experiencing. I had always been a writer since I was a boy, when I won a poetry prize, and then I became a reader and returned to writing when I felt I was old enough again to invite a partnership with self and subject. I am a visual artist too and part of that early study was based on how individual images are also collective narratives – in that the lines, shapes and subjects we were creating as art students had similar or same human contexts.

Our desire was to tell the human story as artists. In a way we were self realising, through a formalised life in Education, as teachers who knew the power inherent in the moment and mythology of experience for development. The curriculum was Art and we were ‘artists’ wanting artist-eyes, but there still remained the estranged relationship between the two worlds that should have been one. The lecturers were determined to make it rigorous and didn’t really see the nature of individual and collective meaning facing them, although the art works themselves denoted images of what concerned human beings. They too experienced the dichotomy of professional versus personal life-worlds.

The system, it seemed, still had a controlling power over time and experience, as accountability and policy agenda-making. So – as a teacher in a school and then a post-graduate student, I could see the missing bridge.

The purpose of the research now is to reflect on and interpret how a life story is also a teaching story. There were questions that seemed endless when I opened the can of worms to do with identity, revealing themselves in myriad ways during my exploration – and that is also the point of the research as a literary agent for transformative engagement – writer and reader: the teacher/teacher relationship – the ‘I’ and the other ‘I’. What is the whole of our experiences when we teach?

Who are we when we teach and how do our experiences reveal or contribute to the holistic identity of our teaching? How will the reader respond to the interpretation? This question has its own, unique identity located in the cognitive and feeling experiences of the literary reader. The first stage of the study was to write my autobiography to establish and find the common bond of the objective
and subjective, the other I, the yin-yang of researcher and writer, as a literary documentary – a long story with a life - easier said than done I discovered. I had to choose very carefully the excerpts from my own story I wanted to include as reference points or points of reading departure.

The auto-excerpts play several roles in the research frame: to provide a theoretical and creative stimulus for readers to write their own stories as a powerful method of reflective practice; to respond critically, as personal responders to the thesis as documented ‘evidence’ that holds the key to self research and future awareness and as reflexive praxis of both known and unknown truths; to hold open the door of experience that empowers others to respond to themselves as living portals of learning opportunities for learners; to witness how story imagines us, to act, in turn, on others in ways that promote teachers as the human gatekeepers of collective participation; to engage teachers in the process of collecting themselves, lest we forget, and finally to reflect on my own practice, the self as teacher and what teaching means to me, as a way of knowing the self and what one person can and might do – in the act of becoming a human being connected to a life as a servant-leader.

The whole tale is an unpublished ‘manuscript’ in itself, full of chapters and stories, in linear, documented experiences - the traditional ‘I’. The autobiography is titled: The Tale of an Unsuspecting Boy Who Grew to be a Likewise Man known throughout the study as The Tale (in italics):

3. An Early Experience of Who I Am (from The Tale)

I was six when I became a ten-pound migrant on the Southampton docks bound for Australia, after sailing in a belly from Ireland in the early fifties. My mother was a singer, who was also a refrigerator, who became a saucepan maker, and my dad was a Jazz drummer, who was also a volcano, who became a bicycle maker. We left the home I had known, as unsuspecting children to warm milk, crossing oceans on a metal ship to start again.

I was lost on a train, wondering what was happening. We were the longing and left-over refugees boarding a ship called the Fairsea; an Italian-owned passenger liner. The ship was a joy to see; beautiful to me, like some dream come true at last. Even though I was used to going from Liverpool to Dublin and back again, I wasn’t really prepared for the finality of this excursion - from land to floating iron. It was something I couldn’t take in at first. I caused a great deal of trouble going up and down the ramp, trying to grasp the reality and phenomena of the ship that was taking me to another land. ‘There’s enough blue sky to sow a sailor’s trousers...’ some woman said as I watched England move away. She was a middle-aged woman with a large hat, a nanny’s umbrella and a look of troubled curiosity.
Australia needed workers to fill its factories and build its skylines and so I guess my parents had enough sense to try it. The Sitmar Line had won the lucrative migrant contract - to bring people from the UK to Australia. It was a beautiful ship with a history of its own.

Beginnings are the first touch of the process and demand the first tentative steps of sounding experience and knowledge for the reader to come. The final chapter, the final part of the autobiography, I decided, should have a circular feeling, that we come around and go around and land somewhere that shouldn’t be so surprising, but often is when we consider the live and die of mortal growing and emerging. The study reflects this structure of life in-keeping with teaching as a living vocation. The meeting of autobiography and research is the study itself – the thesis, which has raised other questions and issues – to do with systems as well as the people who work in and with them.

The reality of systemic logic is that individuation and epistemological correctness often constructs how we reward ourselves with types of knowledge along the way, in the economics of achievement and acceptance. This tends to limit the roles teachers might play to singular, more functional context behaviour - the duality of living in two worlds of education – self among system. And systems can never really get it right. They are bound to the variations of either right or wrong – another duality of time and place. This may also cause doubt, to enter the contexts of living and working with others. And when doubt takes hold it flattens spontaneity and reduces the possible to the correctness desired of us. Uncertainty is a factor of contemporary life and it is a factor of teaching. Knowing things may be different to how the acceptance of knowing befriends a more contemplative life when we work.

Uncertainty is also an opportunity to include in research the kinds of meta and poly-vocal texts that make up a whole life and a life in the context of others. And so the profundity of the study lies in its evocative nature to raise not only the ideal, but also the philosophically based questions: If teachers were to see more of and within themselves; bigger images of themselves, away from the flattening familiarity of suburban feelings, would they take on the mantle of transformative roles – the potential of the possible? If teachers would read the stories of others, not just as social research but as evocative tales of the fictional real; would they begin to connect to a more personally and present form, as recipients of a life informed by wisdom and the artist at work; the shaman or sage; the heartfelt urban guerrilla or the revolutionary with a heart of gold or just the simple poet – seeing and believing in the nature of the profound word or the simple formula of simple uncomplicated truths?

And if this were to become a common knowledge about teachers, would the resonance of these acts inform a public view of teaching and raise the opinions of others about what we do – to a level akin to the kinds of kudos usually reserved for those whose lives are said to match their faith in something more profound than themselves? Would the normal acts of teaching be both felt and seen as acts that
transform others – into humans that serve the world as portals to harmony and spontaneous truths? Is this too idealistic in a world managed by temporal duty and the constraints of living a life at work, governed by an unseen minority in a well kept and embattled arena?

How do very personal forms of research benefit others who work and live in the same fields? The research questions here drive the philosophical and postmodernist face of the study and stand at the base of the work – as a researcher who sees study at a university to be a privilege that should be matched with a vision of something equally historical. Universities are after-all and in general, the last bastions of the greater good, delivering what we hope and wish might come true for human beings. And it’s not too much to ask individuals who study in them to follow some other truths that may also benefit a greater cause.

In an age of commercial and progressive melancholy we need the kinds of literature that presents teachers as a powerful and stable social influence, especially when change calls for mediation in an inconsistent world. The irony may be that consistency is not a reliable human trait. Teachers work in the landscape of irony – the nature of system and policy.

And if all this too idealistic – just the personal romantic views of the scholar; then consider the meaning of loss of the ideal self in the world of learning – that difference in the lives of others.

Notes

1 Research group tale PhD Curtin University 2012

Bibliography