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Knowledge
about
Teachers

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INTRODUCTION TO DEVELOPING PROFESSIONAL KNOWLEDGE ABOUT TEACHERS

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The book *Developing Professional Knowledge about Teachers* represents a significant step forward in our work with teachers. This book provides a vital link between work on teachers' voices, life-history and new patterns of analysis and pedagogy. The book fits into our growing understanding of the crisis of teacher education and of the representational crisis at the root of some of the problems.

The Representational Crisis

Educational study is again undergoing one of those recurrent swings of the pendulum for which the field is noted. But, as the contemporary world and global economies are transformed by rapid and accelerating change, such pendulum swings in scholarly paradigms seem to be alarmingly exacerbated.

Hence, we see a set of responses to a specific structural dilemma in which educational study has become enmeshed. But alongside this, the field is becoming engulfed (though more slowly than in many fields) by a crisis of scholarly representation. A specific structural dilemma now becomes allied with a wider representational crisis. Jameson (1984: viii) has summarized the latter crisis succinctly, as arising from the growing

challenge to "an essentially realistic epistemology, which conceives of representation as the production, for subjectivity, of an objectivity that lies outside it". Jameson wrote this in the foreword to Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*. For Lyotard, the old modes of representation no longer work. He calls for an incredulity towards these old canonical meta-narratives and says, "the grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification is used, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation." (Lyotard, 1984, p. 37)

Returning to the field of educational study, we see that in response to the distant, divorced and disengaged nature of aspects of educational study in universities, some scholars have responded by embracing the "practical", by celebrating the teacher as practitioner.

My intention here is to explore in details one of these movements aiming to focus on teachers' knowledge – particularly the genre which focuses on teachers' stories and narratives. This movement has arisen from the crises of structural displacement and of representation briefly outlined. Hence the reasons for this new genre are understandable, the motivations creditable. As we see, the representational crisis arises from the central dilemma of trying to capture the lived experience of scholars and of teachers within a text. The experience of other lives is, therefore, rendered textual by an author. At root, this is a perilously difficult act and Denzin has cogently inveighed against the very aspiration:

If the text becomes the agency that records and represents the voices of the other, then the other becomes a person who is spoken for. They do not talk, the text talks for them. It is the agency that interprets their words, thoughts, intentions, and meanings. So a doubling of agency occurs, for behind the text as agent-for-the-other, is the author of the text doing the interpreting. (Denzin, 1993, p. 17)

Denzin, then, is arguing that we have a classic case of academic colonization, or even cannibalization, "The other becomes an extension of the author's voice. The authority of their 'original' voice is now subsumed within the larger text and its double-agency." (1993, p. 17)

Given the scale of this representational crisis, one can quickly see how the sympathetic academic might wish to reduce interpretation, even collaboration, and return to the role

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of "scribe". At least in such passivity sits the aspiration to reduce colonization. In this moment of representational crisis, the doors open to the educational scholar as facilitator, as conduit for the teacher, to tell her/his story or narrative. The genuine voice of the oppressed subject, uncontaminated by active human collaboration; teachers talking about their practice, providing us with personal and practical insights into their expertise.

Here, maybe, is a sanctuary, an inner sanctum, beyond the representational crisis, beyond academic colonization. The nirvana of the narrative, the Valhalla of voice; it is an understandable and appealing project.

The Narrative Turn / The Turn to Narrative

So the turn to teachers' narratives and stories is, at one level, a thoroughly understandable response to the way in which teachers have tended to be represented in so much educational study. The teacher has been represented to serve our scholarly purposes.

Given this history and the goal displacement of educational study noted, it is therefore laudable that new narrative movements are concentrating on the teachers' presentation of themselves. This is a welcome antidote to so much misrepresentation and representation in past scholarship, and it opens up avenues of fruitful investigation and debate. The narrative movement provides then a catalyst for pursuing understandings of the teacher's life and work. In many ways, the movement reminds me of the point raised by Molly Andrews in her elegant study of elderly political activists. She summarizes the posture of those psychologists who have studied such activists:

When political psychology has been taken to analysing the behaviour of political activists it has tended to do so from a thoroughly external perspective That is to say, that rarely have their thought processes been described, much less analysed, from their own point of view. Yet it is at least possible that a very good way to learn about the psychology of political activists is to listen to what they have to say about their own lives. (Andrews, 1991, p. 20)

What Andrews said can be seen as analogous to a good deal of our scholarly representation of teachers where they are seen as interchangeable and essentially depersonalized. In 1981, I argued that many accounts presented teachers as timeless and interchangeable role incumbents. But that:

The pursuit of personal and biographical data might rapidly challenge the assumption of interchangeability. Likewise, by tracing the teachers' life as it evolved over time – throughout the teachers' career and through several generations – the assumption of timelessness might also be remedied. In understanding something so intensely personal teaching it is critical we know about the person the teacher is. Our paucity of knowledge in this area is a manifest indictment of the range of our sociological imagination. (Goodson, 1981, p. 69)

The argument for listening to teachers is, therefore, a substantial and long overdue one. Narratives, stories, journals, action research and phenomenology have all contributed to a growing movement to provide opportunities for teacher representations. In the case of stories and narratives, Kathy Carter has provided a valuable summary of this growing movement in the early years of its educational incarnation:

With increasing frequency over the past several years we, as members of a community of investigator-practitioners, have been telling stories about teaching and teacher education rather than simply reporting correlation coefficients or generating lists of findings. This trend has been upsetting to some who mourn the loss of quantitative precision and, they would argue, scientific rigour. For many of us, however, these stories capture, more than scores or mathematical formulae ever can, the richness and indeterminacy of our experiences as teachers and the complexity of our understandings of what teaching is and how others can be prepared to engage in this profession.

It is not altogether surprising, then, that this attraction to stories has evolved into an explicit attempt to use the literatures on "story" or "narrative" to define both the method and the object of inquiry in teaching and teacher education. Story has become, in other words, more than simply a rhetorical device for expressing sentiments about teachers or candidates for the teaching profession. It is now, rather, a central focus for conducting research in the field. (Carter, 1993, p. 5)

Story and History

The emphasis upon teachers' stories and narratives encouragingly signifies a new turn

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in presenting teachers. It is a turn that deserves to be taken very seriously, for we have to be sure that we are turning in the right direction. Like all new genres, stories and narratives are Janus-faced; they may move us forward into new insights or backwards into constrained consciousness – and sometimes simultaneously.

This uncertainty is well stated in Carter's summary of "The place of story in the study of teaching and teacher education":

Anyone with even a passing familiarity with the literatures on story soon realizes, however, that these are quite turbulent intellectual waters and quickly abandons the expectation of safe passage toward the resolution, once and for all, of the many puzzles and dilemmas we face in advancing our knowledge of teaching. Much needs to be learned about the nature of story and its value to our common enterprise, and about the wide range of purposes, approaches, and claims made by those who have adopted story as a central analytical framework. What does story capture and what does it leave out? How does this notion fit within the emerging sense of the nature of teaching and what it means to educate teachers? These and many other critical questions need to be faced if story is to become more than a loose metaphor for everything from a paradigm or world view to a technique for bringing home a point in a lecture on a Thursday afternoon. (Carter, 1993, p. 5)

But what is the nature of the turbulence in the intellectual waters surrounding stories, and will they serve to drown the new genre? The turbulence is multifaceted, but here I want to focus on the relationship between stories and the social context in which they are embedded. For stories exist in history – they are, in fact, deeply located in time and space. Stories work differently in different social contexts and historical times – they can be put to work in different ways. Stories then should not only be *narrated* but also *located*. This argues that we should move beyond the self-referential individual narration to a wider contextualized, collaborative mode. Again, Carter hints at both the enormous appeal and the underlying worry about narrative and story. At the moment, the appeal is substantial after long years of silencing, but the dangers are more shadowy. I believe that unless those dangers are confronted now, narrative and story may end up silencing, or at least marginalizing in new ways, the very people to whom it appears to give voice.

For many of us, these arguments about the personal, storied nature of teaching

and about voice, gender, and power in our professional lives ring very true. We can readily point to instances in which we have felt excluded by researchers' language or powerless in the face of administrative decrees and evaluation instruments presumably bolstered by scientific evidence. And we have experienced the indignities of gender bias and presumptions. We feel these issues deeply, and opening them to public scrutiny, especially through the literature in our field, is a cause for celebration.

At the same time, we must recognize that this line of argument creates a very serious crisis for our community. One can easily imagine that the analysis summarized here, if pushed ever so slightly forward, leads directly to a rejection of all generalizations about teaching as distortions of teachers' real stories and as complicity with the power elite, who would make teachers subservient. From this perspective, only the teacher owns her or his story and its meaning. As researchers and teacher educators, we can only serve by getting this message across to the larger society and, perhaps, by helping teachers to come to know their own stories. Seen in this light, much of the activity in which we engage as scholars in teaching becomes illegitimate if not actually harmful. (Carter, 1993, p. 8)

Carolyn Steedman, in her marvelous work, Landscape for a Good Woman, speaks of this danger. She says, "Once a story is told, it ceases to story: it becomes a piece of history, an interpretative device" (Steedman, 1986, p. 143). In this sense, a story "works" when its rationale is comprehended and its historical significance grasped. As Bristow (1991, p. 117) has argued, "The more skilled we become at understanding the history involved in these very broadly defined stories, the more able will we be to identify the ideological function of narratives – how they designate a place for us within their structure of telling." In reviewing Steedman's work and its power to understand patriarchy and the dignity of women's lives, Bristow talks about her unswerving attention to the ways in which life writing can bring its writers to the point of understanding how their lives have already been narrated – according to a pre-figurative script, Steedman never loses sight of how writers may develop skills to rewrite the life script in which they find themselves. (Bristow, 1991, p. 114)

This, I think, focuses acutely on the dangers of a belief that merely by allowing people to "narrate", we in any serious way give them voice and agency. The narration of a

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pre-figurative script is a celebration of an existing power relation. More often, and this is profoundly true for teachers, the question is how to "rewrite the life script". Narration, then, can work in many ways, but clearly it can work to give voice to a celebration of scripts of domination. Narration can both reinforce domination and rewrite domination. Stories and narratives are not an unquestioned good: it all depends. And above all, it depends on how they relate to history and to social context.

Again, Andrews' work on the lives of political activists captures the limitation of so much of the developmental psychologists' study of lives, and it is analogous to so much work on teacher parratives:

In Western capitalist democracies, where most of the work on development originates, many researchers tend to ignore the importance of the society-individual dialectic, choosing to focus instead on more particularized elements, be they personality idiosyncrasies, parental relationships, or cognitive structures, as if such aspects of the individual's make-up could be neatly compartmentalized, existing in a contextual vacuum. (Andrews, 1991, p. 13)

The version of "personal" that has been constructed and worked for in some Western countries is a particular version, an individualistic version, of being a person. It is unrecognizable to much of the rest of the world. But so many of the stories and narratives we have of teachers work unproblematically and without comment with this version of personal being and personal knowledge. Masking the limits of individualism, such accounts often present "isolation, estrangement, and loneliness... as autonomy, independence and self-reliance" (Andrews, 1991, p. 13). Andrews concludes that if we ignore social context, we deprive ourselves and our collaborators of meaning and understanding. She says:

It would seem apparent that the context in which human lives are lived is central to the core of meaning in those lives. Researchers should not, therefore, feel at liberty to discuss or analyse how individuals perceive meaning in their lives and in the world around them, while ignoring the content and context of that meaning. (Andrews, 1991, p. 13)

This, I believe, has been all too common a response among these educational researchers working with teachers' stories and narratives. Content has been embraced and celebrated; context has not been sufficiently developed. Cynthia Chambers has summarized this

posture and its dangers in reviewing Work on Teachers' Narratives:

These authors offer us the naive hope that if teachers learn "to tell and understand their *own* story" they will be returned to their rightful place at the centre of curriculum planning and reform. And yet, their method leaves each teacher a "blackbird singing in the dead of night"; isolated, and sadly ignorant of how his/her song is part of a much larger singing of the world. If everyone is singing their own song, who is listening? How can we hear the larger conversation of humankind in which our own history teacher is embedded and perhaps concealed? (Chambers 1991, p. 354)

Likewise, Salina Shrofel, in reviewing the same book, highlights the dangers:

Focus on the personal and on practice does not appear to lead practitioners or researchers/writers to analyse practice as theory, as social structure, or as a manifestation of political and economic systems. This limitation of vision implicit in the narrative approach serves as a constraint on curriculum reform. Teachers will, as did the teachers cited by Connelly and Clandinin, make changes in their own classroom curricula but will not perform the questioning and challenging of theory, structure, and ideology that will lead to radical and extensive curriculum reform.

It can be argued that the challenge of running a classroom fully occupies the teachers and that questions of theory, structure, and ideology don't affect the everyday lives (practical knowledge) of teachers and are relegated to "experts". However, there are many dangers in separating practice from these other questions. First, as Connelly and Clandinin point out, it ignores the dynamic relationship of theory and practice. Second, it ignores the fact that schools are intricately and inextricably part of the social fabric and of the political and economic system which dominates. Third, because curriculum reform is implemented in the classroom by teachers, separating teachers from these other aspects might negatively affect radical and widespread curriculum reform. To avoid these dangers, either the narrative method will have to be extended, or it will need to be supplemented with a process that encourages teachers to look beyond the personal. (Shrofel, 1991, pp. 64–65)

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In summary, should stories and narratives be a way of giving voice to a particular way of being, or should the genre serve as an introduction to alternative ways of being? Consciousness is constructed rather than autonomously produced; hence, giving voice to consciousness may give voice to the constructor at least as much as the speaker. If social context is left out, this will likely happen.

The truth is that many times a life storyteller will neglect the structural context of their lives, or interpret such contextual forces from a biased point of view. As Denzin (1989, p. 74) says, "Many times a person will act as if he or she made his or her own history when, in fact, he or she was forced to make the history he or she lived." He gives an example from his 1986 study of alcoholics: "You know I made the last four months by myself. I haven't used or drank. I'm really proud of myself. I did it." (Denzin, 1989, pp. 74–75) A friend, listening to this account commented:

You know you were under a court order all last year. You didn't do this on your own. You were forced to, whether you want to accept this fact or not. You also went to AA and NA. Listen Buster, you did what you did because you had help and because you were afraid and thought you had no other choice. Don't give me this, "I did it on my own" crap. (1989, pp. 74–75).

The speaker replies, "I know. I just don't like to admit it." Denzin concludes:

This listener invokes two structural forces, the state and AA, which accounted in part for this speaker's experience. To have secured only the speaker's account, without a knowledge of his biography and personal history, would have produced a biased interpretation of his situation. (1989, pp. 74–75)

The great virtue of stories is that they particularize and make concrete our experiences. This, however, should be the *starting point* in our social and educational study. Stories can so richly move us into the terrain of the social, into insights into the socially constructed nature of our experiences. Feminist sociology has often treated stories in this way. As Hilary Graham says, "Stories are pre-eminently ways of relating individuals and events to social contexts, ways of weaving personal experiences into their social fabric" (see Armstrong, 1987, p. 14). Again, Carolyn Steedman speaks of this two-step process. First the story particularizes details and historicizes – then at second stage, the "urgent need" to develop theories of context:

The fixed townscapes of Northampton and Leeds that Hoggart and Seabrook have described show endless streets of houses, where mothers who don't go out to work order the domestic day, where men are masters, and children, when they grow older, express gratitude for the harsh discipline meted out to them. The first task is to particularize this profoundly a-historical landscape (and so this book details a mother who was a working woman and a single parent, and a father who wasn't a patriarch). And once the landscape is detailed and historicized in this way, the urgent need becomes to find a way of theorizing the result of such difference and particularity, not in order to find a description that can be universally applied (the point is *not* to say that all working-class childhoods are the same, nor that experience of them produces unique psychic structures) but so that the people in exile, the inhabitants of the long streets, may start to use the auto-biographical "I", and tell the stories of their life. (Steedman, 1986, p. 16)

The story, then, provides a starting point for developing further understandings of the social construction of subjectivity. If the teachers' stories stay at the level of the personal and practical, we forego that opportunity. Speaking of the narrative method focusing on personal and practical teachers' knowledge, Willinsky writes: "I am concerned that a research process intended to recover the personal and experiential (aspects or not?) would pave over this construction site in its search for an overarching unity in the individual's narrative." (Willinsky, 1989, p. 259)

Personal and practical teachers' stories may, therefore, act not to further our understandings, but merely to celebrate the particular constructions of the "teacher" which have been wrought by political and social contestation. Teachers' stories can be stories of particular political victories and political settlements. Because of their limitation of focus, teachers' stories – as stories of the personal and practical – are likely to be limited in this manner.

A Story of Action within a Story of Context

This section comes from a phrase often used by Lawrence Stenhouse (1975), who was concerned in much of his work to introduce a historical dimension to our studies of schooling and curriculum. While himself a leading advocate of the teacher as researcher and pioneer of that method, he was worried about the proliferation of practical stories

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of action, individualized and isolated, unique and idiosyncratic, as our stories of action and our lives are. But as we have seen, lives and stories link with broader social scripts – they are not just individual productions, they are also social constructions. We must make sure that individual and practical stories do not reduce, seduce and reproduce particular teacher mentalities, and lead us away from broader patterns of understanding.

Let us try to situate the narrative moment in the historical moment – for the narrative movement itself could be located in a theory of context. In some ways the movement has analogies with the existential movement of the 1940s. Existentialists believed that only through our actions could we define ourselves. Our role, existentialists judged, was to invent ourselves as individuals, then, as in Sartre's (1961) trilogy Les Chemins de la Liberté, we would be "free", especially from the claims of society and the "others".

Existentialism existed at a particular historical moment following the massive trauma of the Second World War, and in France, where it developed most strongly, of the protracted German occupation. George Melly judges that existentialism grew out of this historical context.

My retrospective explanation is that it provided a way of exorcising the collective guilt of the occupation, to reduce the betrayals, the collaboration, the blind eye, the unjustified compromise, to an acceptable level. We know now that the official post-war picture of France under the Nazis was a deliberate whitewash and that almost everyone knew it, and suppressed the knowledge. Existentialism, by insisting on the complete isolation of the individual as free to act, but free to do nothing else, as culpable or heroic but *only* within those limits, helped absolve the notion of corporate and national ignominy. (Melly, 1993, p. 9)

Above all, then, an individualizing existentialism freed people from the battle of ideologies, freed them from the awfulness of political and military conflict. Individualized existentialism provided a breathing space away from power and politics.

But the end of the Second World War did not provide an end to politics, only a move from hot war to cold war. As we know, ideologies continued their contest in the most potentially deadly manner. During this period, narratives of personal life began to blossom. Brightman (see Sage, 1994) has developed a fascinating picture of how Mary McCarthy's personal narratives grew out of the witch-hunting period of Joe

McCarthy. Her narratives moved us from the "contagion of ideas" to the personal "material world". Mary McCarthy could "strip ideas of their abstract character and return them to the social world from whence they came" (quoted in Sage, 1994, p. 5). In Irving Howes's memorable phrase, as "ideology crumbled, personality bloomed" (Sage, 1994, p. 5).

And so with the end of ideology, the end of the cold war, we see the proliferate blooming of personality, not least in the movement towards personal narratives and stories. Once again, the personal narrative, the practical story, celebrates the end of the trauma of the cold war and the need for a human space away from politics, away from power. It is a thoroughly understandable nirvana, but it assumes that power and politics have somehow ended. It assumes, in that wishful phrase, "the end of history".

In educational bureaucracies, power continues to be hierarchically administered. I have often asked administrators and educational bureaucrats why they support personal and practical forms of knowledge for teachers in the form of narratives and stories. Their comments often echo those of the "true believers" in narrative method. But I always go on, after suitable pause and diversion to ask, "What do you do on your leadership courses?" There, it is always "politics as usual" management skills, quality assurance, micro-political strategies, personnel training. Personal and practical stories for some, cognitive maps of power for others. So while the use of stories and narratives can provide a useful breathing space away from power, it does not suspend the continuing administration of power; indeed, it could well make this so much easier. Especially as, over time, teachers' knowledge would become more and more personal and practical – different "mentalities". Wholly different understandings of power would emerge, as between, say, teachers and school managers, teachers and administrators, teachers and some educational scholars.

Teachers' individual and practical stories certainly provide a breathing space. However, at one and the same time, they reduce the oxygen of broader understandings. The breathing space comes to look awfully like a vacuum, where history and social construction are somehow suspended.

In this way, teachers become divorced from what might be called the "vernacular of power", the ways of talking and knowing which then become the prerogative of managers, administrators and academics. In this discourse, politics and micro-politics

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are the essence and currency of the interchange. Alongside this and in a sense facilitating this, a new "vernacular of the particular, the personal and the practical" arises, which is specific to teachers.

This form of apartheid could easily emerge if teachers' stories and narratives remain singular and specific, personal and practical, particular and apolitical. Hence, it is a matter of some urgency that we develop stories of action within theories of context – contextualizing stories, if you like – which act against the kinds of divorce of the discourses that are all too readily imaginable.

Carter had begun to worry about just such a problem in her work on *The Place of Story in the Study of Teaching and Teacher Education*:

And for those of us telling stories in our work, we will not serve the community well if we sanctify story-telling work and build an epistemology on it to the point that we simply substitute one paradigmatic domination for another without challenging domination itself. We must, then, become much more self-conscious than we have been in the past about the issues involved in narrative and story, such as interpretation, authenticity, normative value, and what our purposes are for telling stories in the first place. (Carter, 1993, p. 11)

Some of these worries about stories can be explored in scrutinizing the way in which powerful interest groups in society actually promote and employ storied material.

Looking at the ocean, at the bottom, representing long-term time, are deep currents which, although apparently quite stable, are moving all the time. Such long-term time covers major structural factors: worldviews, forms of the state, etc. The movement from pre-modern to modern, or modern to post-modern forms can be understood in terms of these broad epochal shifts (Bell, 1973; Denzin, 1991; Lyotard, 1984; Wright Mills, 1959). The effects of the emerging social, economic and political conditions of the post-modern era upon the organization and practices of schooling might be understood in these terms (e.g. Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991; Hargreaves, 1994).

Above this level are the swells and tides of particular cycles representing medium time. Such medium-term time has been conceived in boom-bust like spans of 50 years or so — although, with the compression of time and space in the post-modern

age, these cycles may themselves undergo compression (Giddens, 1991). It is within these medium-term cycles that one might explain the establishment of the current "grammar of schooling", for example, as classroom-based, graded and subject-specialized schooling in the latter years of the 19th and early years of the 20th centuries. As Tyack and Tobin (1994) admonish, unless reformers begin to talk the historical "grammar of schooling", their attempts to initiate educational change will be forever thwarted.

At the top of the ocean, representing the waves and froth, is short-term, every day time: the everyday events and human actions of ordinary daily life. Proponents of this view of history often celebrate its empirical specifics against the grander theoretical claims of epochal shifts between different historical periods (e.g. McCulloch, 1995). These theorizations of history should not be treated as competitive, though. Fine-grained empirical detail and broad-based theoretical sensibility are complementary forces in history and complementary resources for interpreting such history. Much of contemporary change positions itself here "at the top of the ocean" in the waves and froth: the legacy is therefore unlikely to be enduring.

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