Storytelling and Professional Learning

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Abstract

This paper begins by reflecting on the role that story-telling plays in our lives, drawing on a range of theoretical resources to affirm the value of story-telling as ‘the central function or instance of the human mind’ (to borrow the words of Fredric Jameson, 1981, p.13). The paper then moves on to ask why story-telling is not given the prominence it deserves in school education, and then considers ways in which classrooms might be reconceptualized as story-telling sites, in which teachers and their pupils come together to share their experiences by exchanging stories.

The main focus of the paper, however, is on the heuristic value of story-telling as a form of professional learning and practitioner inquiry. This will include reflecting on the importance of autobiographical writing as a vehicle through which educators can develop a reflexive practice that is sensitive to the values and beliefs of the young people they teach. I will also be looking at how teachers can learn by writing stories about their day-to-day professional practice, drawing on my long-time collaboration with Douglas McClenaghan, an English teacher who works in a state school in Melbourne (Doecke and McClenaghan, 2011). To conclude the paper I will also consider the role that storytelling has played in a major project in which I have been engaged, namely the development of the Standards for Teachers of English Language and Literacy in Australia (STELLA), focusing on the teacher narratives published on the STELLA website (stella.org.au).

A key aim of the paper is to show how teacher educators working in tertiary institutions and school teachers can develop collaborative research partnerships by focusing on the stories that teachers tell about their work.

INTRODUCTION

‘The narratives of the world are numberless.’

Roland Barthes, ‘Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives, in *Image, Music, Text*, Essays selected and translated by Stephen Heath, New York: Hill and Wang, 1977/1978, p. 79.

‘… the all-informing process of narrative, which I take to be … the central function or instance of the human mind.’

Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1981, p.13.

‘Stories break the surface of our discourse not as great edifices but as spontaneously constructed coherences – cheap as dirt, common currency, a popular possession.’

Harold Rosen, *Stories and Meaning*, Kettering, Northamptonshire: NATE, nd., p.25.

Is it possible to imagine how we would get by from day to day without telling stories? What would a life without stories be like? You arrive home with the day’s events behind you, and your first impulse is to tell others how your day has been. Perhaps it is to share a moment of insight: the antics of a bunch of teenagers, who boarded the train with you, all engaged in excited talk and buoyed up byeach other's company. What must it be like being a teenager these days? Or maybe you want to vent about an injustice that you feel has been done to you. Why would my boss think that I was responsible for submitting that report? Since when has that been part of my job? I've got a good mind to tell him where to get off!

We might also consider the way that stories multiply. You are sitting on atrain, picking up snippets of conversation, story fragments that strangely conjure up in your mind people you do not know and places you've never seen. A young womanis speaking loudly into a mobile phone, quarrelling with her mum, giving excuses as to why she hasn't visited her for a long time, saying that whenever she visits her she criticizes her, that dad just blobs out in front of theTV and doesn't have any time for her. Such conversations are peppered with 'she said' and 'he said', typically followed by direct speech, the words of peoplewho are at yet another remove from you.

Where, indeed, might we locate the flesh and blood people and the physical presence of things in all this talk about what has happened, what might have been, what might happen and what is likely happen? It seems that rather than securely anchoring us in the present, the stories we tell one another are partly or wholly imaginary, driven by other impulses than simply to give an honest account of actual events. And with each retelling of a story, we get better at it;it somehow becomes more dramatic, the characters more vivid, the speech more pithy, the irony more palpable. That's what makes a 'good' story.

Then there are the big stories that everyone shares. At the moment in Australia there has been talk in the media about the government needing to tell a narrative that might give the right spin to the decisions it has made. This is in order to show the electorate that all the policy decisions that it has taken have been part of an overall plan, that it has beenbehaving strategically and not just reacting to events. This kind of behavior on the part of our political leaders is obviously not a recent phenomenon – history provides us with many compelling moments when governments have generated stories in order to vindicate decisions or to seek legitimacy. And this is not simply a matter of governments foisting their self-justifying stories on a susceptible public. Such stories are often actively taken up by people, becoming the stuff of their everyday conversations, and eventually – as James Wertsch puts it –the voices of 'collective remembering', as people recallmajor historical events that have shaped their lives (Wertsch, 2002; cf. Parr and Doecke, 2012).My own childhood memories feature such voices of collective remembering. I still have in my possession, for example, my composition book from primary school, in which I dutifully wrote on topics that were set for us each week by my Grade 4 teacher. The book comprises a variety of stories, some relating personal moments in my life, such as my sister's wedding, but others retailing the history we learnt, including the adventures of the early pioneers as they cleared the land. I knew the Kings and Queens of England off by heart. My childhood was, in short, shaped by what Benedict Anderson has called 'Empire nationalism', a metanarrative about the benign role of the Mother Country in governing its Empire. My teachers retold this story without any hint of the stories and lives that it did not embrace.

Paradoxically, this recognition of howpublic events have shaped our lives merges witha sense of the way stories touch us at a more intimate level, such as the fairy tales and children's books that linger in our memories. The vignettes that comprise Walter Benjamin's *Berlin Childhood around 1900*provide a wonderful example of how to gain a perspective on your life by recalling moments fromyour childhood (see Doecke and Pereira, 2012). As well as the large public events that figured in his life as a child growing up in Wilhelminian Germany, such as the battles carved into the stone of theVictory column in Berlin, Benjamin relates otherstories, including fairy tales that were inextricably bound up with his relationships with others:his memory of the way his mother sat at the window, doing her sewing, is linked to his knowledge of Sleeping Beauty's fate, except that his mother wears a thimble to protect herself from the needle that she uses. He recalls the hiding places of his childhood, the cavernous wardrobes into which he would crawl, the world under the table where adults sat eating. He also recalls how words meant far more to him than the things they named – the covered market that he visited with his mother was transformed from the Markt-Halle into the Mark-

Thalle, a sign of the way the people and produce at the market were registered on his sensibility, as he wanderedthrough the hall, alive to the world around him. Far from simply being a place forbuying and selling, the market hallcomprises sights and sounds and smells and colors,as the market women gesticulate and talk with one another (Benjamin, 2002, p.361). This world has not yet receded into the dull ordinariness of adult life, as somethingthat exists apart from human emotion and action, which operates according to its own laws. His apprehension of the world is inextricably bound up with the social relationships into which he was born. The world might more properly be understood as a product of those relationships, of Benjamin's subjectivity and the subjectivities of those who share this world with him.

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By reflecting on the way stories form the fabric of our lives, we can begin to appreciate the insights that stories might yield into our situation as educators. This is not a trivial thing to say, for any attempt to affirm the heuristic value of storytelling inevitably comes into conflict with the 'scientific' methods that are now habitually employed to represent what happens inclassrooms. From a 'scientific' standpoint, the stories that teachers tell about their work aretypically dismissed as subjective, as 'anecdotal' rather than 'evidence based and data driven' (DE&T, 2005, p.15).The state of Victoria, for example, has recently been a site for what the government has called a 'Performance and Development Culture', where teachers have been expected to engage in 'effective' professional learning that focuses on student 'outcomes' as demonstrated by standardised testing (DE&T, 2005).

Phonics instruction,the explicit teaching of grammar, formulaic writing produced according to the 'rules' of a circumscribed set of 'genres' - such routines are increasingly coming to dominate Australian schools, systematically repressing the value of people sharing their experiences through storytelling. These practices are being adoptedin response to pressures by governments to improve the literacy outcomes of students as measured by standardised tests. They generate the 'data' that underpinclaims about the effectiveness (or otherwise) of particular approaches towards teaching and learning. The fetish of 'data' is effectively transforming the way we think about teaching and learning within classroom settings. Everything is directed towards achieving pre-conceived outcomes, rather than allowing teachers to seizethose unanticipated momentswith their students when they can throw themselves into imagination and play.

As a counterpoint to the privileging of narrow understandingsof 'evidence' and 'data' that presently holds sway (as reflected in the proliferation of so-called standards-based reforms that have been implemented in countries like the US, England and Australia), we might usefullyreconceptualise classrooms in the form of stories, as sites where people come together to share their experiences by telling stories and imagining possibilities that take them beyond the here and now(cf. Rosen, nd; Doecke and Parr, 2008). This standpoint is congruent with all that I have said thus far about the role that stories play in our lives, providing a basis on which to create links between what happens in school and everyday life, and thus potentially overcoming the alienation that young people experience when confronted by the drilling and skilling of more formal schooling.

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You can perhaps sense that I am not simply advocating the value of story-telling as yet another methodology to add to the range of methodologies on offer when it comes to conducting research in classrooms. Rather thanan alternative methodology, storytelling impliesa certain standpoint vis-à-vis the world that enables us to be more fully responsive to what is happening around us. Indeed, this might more properly be conceived as a standpoint *within* the world rather than *vis-à-vis* it, since the latter implies a world thatcan be posited as an objective realm that remainsexternal to us, as in traditional understandings of so-called 'scientific' knowledge. Such a 'scientific' stance cannot be a valid starting point for inquiring into the social relationships and activities through which we make our own history by renewing our lives each day.

Here I am again echoing Walter Benjamin, this time drawing on an essay that he wrote after Hitler's rise to power, in which he triesto capture the way writers might contribute to the struggle against fascism. A socially critical stance, according to Benjamin, cannot be located outside the social conditions that are the focus of critique. The paradox, as Marx observes in his 'Theses on Feuerbach',is that people who take a socially critical stance are the product of the very society they wish to change (Marx, 1969). This is not to say that we are therefore doomed to remain trapped within existing social conditions. It is to recognize that any project for social reform can only arise out of a complex dialectic between our consciousness and our social being, between our vision of what we wish to achieve (what we think 'ought' to be) and the social relationships in which we find ourselves, including the values and aspirations of people who may not share our ideals (what 'is').

Any genuine program for social reform is an educational program, not just in the populist sense of slogans and propaganda that might prompt people to take political action, but because itmeans trying to understand the conditions of our lives, and engaging in politics with an enhanced awareness of the possibilities available to us. This is what I understand writers like Karl Marx,Rosa Luxemburg, Georg Lukacs, Antonio Gramsci and Walter Benjamin to mean when they write about people becoming conscious of the social relationships and structures that shape their lives, as they engage in their work and other activities from day to day. This educational program is directed towards enabling people to developasustained commitment to reflecting on the conditions that have created them, and which they themselveshave created through their everyday activities, in an effort to play their parts as social and historical actors in a fully knowing way.

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We may seem to have travelled a long way from the claims with which I began about the role of storytelling in our lives. My first point, however, about how stories might be used to inquire into our professional practice as educators concerns the way autobiographical writing allows us to gain insight into our education as educators. Thekind of inquirythat I am advocating here is perhaps nowhere better captured than by Gramsci's reflections in *The Prison Notebooks* on the need to reflexively engage with the conditions of our own makingas human beings. He writes:

> The starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is 'knowing thyself' as a product of the historical process to date which has posited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory. The first thing to do is to make such an inventory.
> (Gramsci, 1973/1986, p.324)

This injunction is not only something that those of us who believe in the heuristic value of autobiographical writing might take to heart. The reflexivity that Gramsci is advocating here is a condition for all inquiry, whether or not it takes the form of an autobiographical narrative. Edward Said quotes this passage from *The Prison Notebooks*in order to explain his 'personal investment' in writing *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, giving a brief account of his life as a child growing up in Palestine. It would be difficult to imagine a more scholarly tome than Said's study of Orientalism, in which through a careful analysis of archival texts he is able to show how European writers constructed a version of the Orient that justified colonial oppression. Yet despite the sophisticated scholarly apparatus on display in this book, it is important for Said to foreground a 'personal dimension', not in order to expose his 'bias' but to make the standpoint from which it is written explicit. And this is ultimately more than a 'personal' standpoint, as it might be narrowly understood: it is a standpoint arising out of a significant socio-cultural moment – a 'cultural reality' relating to 'the personal involvement in having been constituted as “an Oriental”’ (Said, 1978/1991,p.26), which also explains the epistemological position from which the book is written, and underlines the knowledge claims that Said makes.

This is simply one example of a scholar who understands knowledge production as crucially bound up with a sense of who ‘we’ are - or, indeed,who ‘I’ am - conceptualizing writing and scholarship as always in some way bound up with questions of identity and belonging. Rather than being incidental or merely peripheral to inquiry, an autobiographical impulse exists behind all research. All research is conducted from an ideological standpoint deriving from an author’s education and upbringing, as they areshaped bylarger social and historical relationships. This is so, even when those relationships cannot be easily identified. To engage in autobiographical writing at certain stages in your life – to conduct an ‘inventory’, as Gramsci puts it – is an important way of identifying and critically engaging with those conditions, and of developing an awareness ofthe partial or interested nature of your standpointas a social and historical actor.

It is noteworthy, however, that when quoting Gramsci’s statement about the importance of an ‘inventory’, Said takes exception to the fact that the original English translation had omitted the concluding sentence – ‘The first thing to do is to make an inventory’ – an omission that was subsequently corrected in later editions (see Said, ibid.). An ‘inventory’ is not something that is simply available to you. Autobiographical writing that gives rise toa ‘consciousness of what one really is’ (Gramsci, p.324) is itself a form of knowledge production that attempts to move beyond the immediacy of one’shabitual practices and beliefs, or what Gramsci calls the ‘common sense’ of one’s everyday life (Gramsci, p.330). This means developing a reflexive awareness of the language that we speak, the clichés and jargon that we use from day-to-day, (cf. Parr and Doecke, 2012, p.158; Doecke and Parr, 2011). It means continually turning words around, alert to what they conceal as much as what theyreveal about our lives, including the stories that we habitually tell ourselves about ourselves and anyone else who cares to listen. It’s not enough to simply relate the events of your life as you recall them, or – more problematically - according to how you wish to see yourself at the present moment. Adolf Hitler begins *Mein Kampf* with an autobiographical account of his boyhood resistance to his father’s wishes, and yet far from critically examining the conditions of his own making, the effect is to convey an impression of his initially wayward spirit prior to responding to the call of destiny. Everything is directed towards justifying his worldview. To arrive at a ‘consciousness of what one really is’ is a continuing project in which you place your world view under scrutiny. An ‘inventory’ can never be a definitive statement about what you ‘are’, buta taking-stock, a provisional report of where you are on your journey.

One of the best exponents of the kind of autobiographical inquiry that I am envisaging here is FriggaHaug. Her practice of ‘memory work’ (*Errinerungsarbeit*)shows the value of reconstructing moments from your past and interrogating those moments through a close reading that exposes words or phrases that have allowed you to gloss over key dimensions of your experience. Or it might be a matter of focusing on words that evoke people and scenes from your past, opening up further layers of memory and experience as part of your continuing inquiry into the conditions of your own making. Haugseeks answers to questions about the nature of teaching and learning by interrogating her own experiences - experiences thatmight be named as examples of ‘teaching’ and ‘learning’ - and thereby approaches an ever more refined understanding of the way those experienceswere mediated by the social relationships in which they occurred (Haug, 2003, p.41; Haug, 2001). But I can also point to equally compelling writing by students who have worked with me, including students from Indonesia and China who have sought to reconstruct their histories as learners of English, thereby grappling with the larger social and historical contexts that have shaped their lives (give references). My own work has also involved a series of moments when I have stopped to review my life, to ‘engage with a continuing conversation with voices from my past’ in an effort to better understand my standpoint as an intellectual worker and educator (Doecke, 2004, p.17; see also Doecke, 2006; Doecke and McClenaghan, 2011).

Figure 1. Excerpts from autobiographical narratives

Ilir-ilirtandurewussemilir
Takijoroyo-royotaksengguhtemantenanyar
Cahangonpeneknoblimbingkuwi
Lunyu-lunyupeneknokanggonyebododotiro
Dodotirokumitirbedahingpinggir
Domonojlumatonokanggosebomengko sore
Munpungpadangrembulane
Mumpungjembarkalangane
Sung surakosurakhore
("Ilir-Ilir", children's Islamic Javanese song)

O wind, the rice field produces their fruit
The beautiful green of the rice field is like a new married couple
O shepherd climb the star fruit tree
Climb it though it is slippery
To wash your cloth
Which is wrecked
Fix and sew it
For this evening celebration
When the moon is full and the field is wide
Let's cheer and hurray
(English version of "Ilir-ilir")

Before I go to bed, Bapak (Javanese name for a father) sings this song as a lullaby for my two brothers and me who sleep in the same bed. I can still feel the warm notes of this song whispering in my ears. This song has had a great impact on my life. It was believed to have been composed by SunanGiri (Saint Giri) in the 16th century. He was one of the first Islamic preachers in Java known as the *Walisongo*(Nine Saints). These *Walisongo*had turned Java towards a form of Islam that was shaped by Javanese culture, which had long ago been influenced by Hinduism and Buddhism. SunanGiri's father was a Persian and his mother was a Javanese princess of Blambangan or East Java…

DewiCandraningrumSoekirno, Phases of awareness: Why I became an English teacher, *English Teaching: Practice and Critique,* May, 2004, Volume 3, Number 1, pp. 59-70

I grew up in a remote village in Soloregion where the life was very simple without any electricity and cars. The beautiful memories of peasant life where together with my friends I helped to cast out the sparrows in the rice field, played "kasti" (a cricket-like game), went fishing in a brook, or went to "langgar" (small mosque) when the dusk came, have remained in my heart. The thing that made me feel really contented was that I got some privileges as "putrane Pak Guru" (the son of Mister Teacher) – in fact, my mother was also a teacher – since teacher was an honourable profession besides "lurah" (the village chief) and "modin" (Islamic preacher). Sofrom early in my life, my identity cannot be separated from my parents" profession as teachers.

YohanesNugrohoWidiyanto, The making of a multicultural English teacher from early in my life, *English Teaching: Practice and Critique*, May, 2005, Number 4, Volume 1, pp. 106-117

China is a vast country where a great diversity of dialects coexists alongside the national language, Mandarin. This is the rich linguistic world into which I was born. Although Chinese has only one unified written form, the variety of spoken languages or dialects is striking. A dialect might sound like a foreign language to people from another place and they might not understand a word of it. Besides pronunciation, the choice of words in dialects might also be different. For example, when a Wuhanese says "*haizi*", meaning "s*hoes"*, a Beijinger interprets it as "*children*", because though they are of the same pronunciation, the meanings are different. Because my parents came from different villages of different regions, they spoke different dialects. My grandparents were common villagers, and so they could not speak Mandarin. Therefore as young as I was, as their grandchild I had to speak the dialects of my maternal and paternal grandparents, as well as the dialect of the city in which my mother worked and Beijing dialect, that is, Mandarin. Later our whole family moved to Wuhan City, and I had to pick up the dialect Wuhanese, too. I had to speak different dialects according to whom I met and what situation it was. I felt I was an operator on a switchboard and I was a prolific language learner.

Fang Fang, My experience of learning languages and teaching English in China – A narrative inquiry, *English Teaching: Practice and Critique,* September 2006, Volume 5, Number 2, pp.117-129.

As a child of Chilean migrants, I have always felt a strong affinity with the displaced and vulnerable. It would be as difficult to change this as it would be to change my place of birth for this is my inheritance. By this I mean the physics of who I am – woman, non-white, Chilean born; the social and economic conditions that I was born into – Catholic and working class; and the politics that I have adopted – a commitment to social and political reform. The way that these social forces have intersected over the years has shaped my personal and professional identity. However, none has played as significant a role in determining who I am and my sense of self and community as language.

It is language that has allowed me to be the multiple things that I am, just as much as it has been language that inhibited and constrained my parents from being all that they could be…

Bella Illesca, Speaking as 'Other', in B. Doecke, D. Homer and H. Nixon (eds), *English Teachers at Work: Narratives, Counter-Narratives and Arguments*, Kent Town, SA; Wakefield Press, 2003, pp.7-13.

Murray Bridge High in the 1960s was endless rows of portables and asphalt, with weekly assemblies where our Headmaster told us to aim for the stars – the school motto was '*sic itur ad astra*' – and not to smoke in the toilets. When we started high school, we were tested and yarded into classes ranging from 1A to 1G. Those who got into A stream held vague notions of going to teachers' college or university; those who landed in 1G had other prospects. Collectively, we somehow made sense of it. Every morning boys and girls were bused in from nearby farming communities like Jervois and Pompoota and Mypolonga, while the kids from Tailem Bend rowdily lugged their bags on the long march from the railway station to school. For years the railway town of Tailem Bend had been promised a high school of its own, but successive governments had done nothing about it. So the Tailem Bend kids were forced to get up early every day to catch a slow train to Murray Bridge.

> Our teachers were likewise creatures of this world, and it would be easy to rattle off any number of horror stories about them. Yet by and large they supported our fumbling attempts to imagine our lives differently, even as they administered a fairly nasty system of branding and culling, and I remember several of them fondly, especially my English teachers…
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> BrentonDoecke, Teacher Quality: Beyond the Rhetoric, in B. Doecke, M. Howie and W. Sawyer (eds) *Only Connect: English teaching, schooling and community*, Kent Town, SA; Wakefield Press, 2006, pp.195-208.

Why is it important for educators to engage in autobiographical reflection? Your answer to this question hinges on your view of the standards-based reforms that are currently transforming our policy landscape. If you accept that so-called 'effective' teaching and learning can be demonstrated by the achievement of pre-conceived outcomes, such as the results of standardized literacy testing, you are unlikely to see the writing of an 'inventory' as very important. Admittedly, standards-based reforms have been accompanied by a lot of rhetoric about the teacher as the crucial determinant of a student's learning (cf. Doecke, 2006), but this hardly embraces a teacher's values and beliefs as they have been shaped by his or her life experiences. The recently released professional standards developed by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL), for example, constructs an account of teachers' work around the familiar categories of 'Professional knowledge', 'Professional practice' and 'Professional engagement'. But while the last category might conceivably touch on the question of a teacher's views and values, it is, in fact, narrowly focused on professional learning that will bring about improved practice as measured by preconceived outcomes of a narrowly cognitive kind.It is also noteworthy that the world beyond the school is primarily invoked in the form of mandates with which teachers must comply or external authorities to which they are accountable for achieving those outcomes, not as a place of cultural and social diversity. While the 'diverse linguistic, cultural, religious and socioeconomic backgrounds' of students are acknowledged elsewhere in these standards, the emphasis falls overwhelmingly on enabling students to achieve learning outcomes that are non-negotiable, in relation to which 'diversity' figures as an obstacle or barrier to be surmounted, rather than a condition for the rich cultural exchanges and storytellingthat otherwise might occur in schools.

Writing an inventory presupposes a far more complex form of professional engagement than that constructed by such standards, one that actually raises questions about the way such structures are beginning to mediate teaching and learning. Standards of the kind that I have just mentioned typically reduce educators to mapping their practice against a set of performance indicators, a practice that diminishes any sense of the ideological investment that educators make in their work(indeed, the word 'ideology' has no place in the world of standards-based reforms, which are supposedly directed towards achieving learning outcomes that are beyond contention, as with the claims that are made about the PISA results).An inventory in the form of an autobiography is quite a different text. Rather than supposing that teaching and learning lend themselves to being described in universal terms, it posits classrooms as culturally specific sites, where educators need to be constantly mindful of whose culture is being privileged and how it connects with local cultures and the meaning-making practices that characterize them. It supposes that every classroom comprises social relationships to which both teachers and pupils bring their autobiographies, that is, a world of values and beliefs that they may or may not hold in common with others in the room. Given the teacher's role in facilitating the meaning-making practices that occur in classrooms, it is crucial that teachers exercise this role knowingly, monitoring the way their values and beliefs shape their perceptions of what is happening. Writing an autobiography is one way of achieving the reflexivity necessary to negotiate the transactions that occur in classrooms in a culturally sensitive way.

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You can probably sense that the way that I am conceptualizing the role of storytelling in professional learning rests on an alternative vision of how social relationships are actually enacted in classrooms, and of the kinds of communication that occur within them. For me, Douglas Barnes's evocation in *From Communication to Curriculum*of the exchanges that occur in classroom settings provides a powerful counterpoint to the way in which classrooms are currently being constructed by standards-based reforms. Rather than seeing 'curriculum' as something that teachers deliver, as with the current obsession with specifying learning outcomes in advance of instruction, Barnes sees curriculum as a form of communication. I shall quote my favourite passage from his work in full:

> When people talk about 'the school curriculum' they often mean 'what teachers plan in advance for their pupils to learn'. But a curriculum made only of teachers' intentions would be an insubstantial thing from which nobody would learn much. To become meaningful a curriculum has to be enacted by pupils as well as teachers, all of whom have their private lives outside school. By 'enact' I mean come together in a meaningful communication – talk, write, read books, collaborate, become angry withone another, learn what to say and do, and how to interpret what others say and do. A curriculum as soon as it becomes more than intentions is embodied in the communicative life of an institution, the talk and gestures by which pupils and teachers exchange meanings even when they quarrel or cannot agree. In this sense curriculum is a form of communication.

(Barnes, 1975/1992, p.14.)

I often treat this passage as describing an ideal situation, in contrast to the forms of communication that occur in classrooms that are organized around such things as drilling and skilling for standardized testing or other practices that construct pupils as empty vessels to be filled with the knowledge specified in a formal curriculum. But Barnes' point is that such practices also constitute a form of communication, except that the interlocutors perform significantly different roles from that which they might perform when a teacher is responsive to the 'private lives' (as Barnes expresses it) that their pupils bring into classrooms from 'outside school'. And even in a classroom that is characterized by very rigid forms of control, such as when a teacher does all the talking, reducing his or her pupils to listening, absorbing and occasionally regurgitating the information transmitted to them, other patterns of behavior and communication can be observed, whether it is in the form of surreptitious talk by the pupils or day-dreaming and other forms of inattention. The teacher's intentions, in short, are no guarantee that the pupils will actually engage in the lesson in the way that he or she has envisaged.

Yet this difference between intention and enactment need not be seen as a failure on the part of a teacher. Barnes's distinction suggests that a curriculum is always more complex and multifaceted than any plans that a teacher may have made in advance. While this difference can take the form of a 'hidden curriculum', when teachers and their pupils enact certain forms of social regulation, regardless of what a teacher may think he or she is doing, it can also provide a justification for a pedagogy that is directed towards facilitating rich and multifaceted forms of meaning-making –meaning-making that is rich by virtue of the fact that it exceeds what a teacher may have planned in advance.

As Douglas McClenaghan and I have written elsewhere (Doecke and McClenaghan, 2011, p.26), the distinction between the intended curriculum and the enacted curriculum also opens up a space where storytelling becomes a vital means by which teachers are able to critically reflect on their practice, exploring the exchanges that occur within classroom settings in an effort to grasp the meaning of what is going on. Again, this kind of stance – which might be described as an ethnographic of anthropological one – contrasts with the way educators are positioned as technicians or functionaries by standards-based reforms, where people do not ask about the meaning of what is going on, because the meaning has already been decided in advance.

I would now like to consider why story-writing provides teachers with a means to reflect critically on their day-to-day practice, offering a more differentiated sense of the kinds of reflection that stories embody. I shall be drawing on writing that I have done with Douglas McClenaghan, a secondary English teacher in Melbourne with whom I have collaborated over the past few decades in an ongoing inquiry into aspects of English curriculum and pedagogy. To some extent what follows is a précis of an argumentthat we developed in *Confronting Practice: Classroom Investigations into Language and Learning*, a book that we recently coauthored (see Doecke and McClenaghan, 2011, pp.22-40). During the period of my collaboration with Douglas, he has written many narratives that inquire into dimensions of his professional practice as a teacher of English. These have been published in a variety of places. For the book, we republished a selection of those narratives, using them as prompts to reflect on the value of storytelling as a means of inquiring into the complexities of teaching and learning.

Figure 2.Excerpts from Classroom Narratives by Douglas McClenaghan.

Jungle Warfare: The First Strike

I am sitting with my year 9 English class in the Textiles room (great place for teaching English!) period five on a Friday afternoon. We have managed to shoehorn a TV and VCR in between some tables and have re-arranged the room so that everyone can see. Three boys are about to play us a video of their ‘crime story’. The class have been writing crime stories for most of the term and today is the day for submitting them. All of the other students have submitted written pieces but these three boys decided to make a video. David, who does little but talk to his mates and wander around the room - his parents despair of him; James, who is clever, wants to do well, and will work at home, but mainly socialises in class; and Georgi, who is irritatingly garrulous and inattentive, bugs other students about what they're doing, and consistently only partially completes tasks. The boys had filmed their video on weekends, while their class time was used to ‘plan’ and ‘script’ (their words, not mine) the piece and to reminisce about the previous weekend’s filming adventures…

Excerpt from Douglas McClenaghan and BrentonDoecke (2005), Popular Culture: A Resource for Writing in Secondary School, in Rijlaarsdam, G., van den Bergh, H., Couzijn, M. (eds) *Effective Learning and Teaching of Writing: A Handbook of Writing in Education*, Second Edition, New York: Kluwer Academic Publishers, pp.121-130.

The Bottle Poem

We know we are teaching well when we are surprised by our students’ insights, when what they accomplish exceeds our expectations or even challenges our preconceptions about how an exercise should be done or a text might be read.

Sue decided to write about alcoholism, producing a text which is instantly recognisable as a poem. She is a Year 9 student, and it is impossible not to be impressed by the way she has constructed a persona through her carefully chosen words, conveying a sense of the menace which alcohol poses to its victim who is implied in the poem by her use of the second person. Because the ‘you’ of the poem conflates the anonymous addict with the reader it becomes all the more confronting and disturbing. The poem creates a contrast between the all mockingly triumphant force of alcohol and the implied – silenced and powerless – victim…

Excerpt from BrentonDoecke and Douglas McClenaghan (2005), Engaging in Valued Activities: Popular Culture in the English Classroom, in Doecke, B and Parr, G. (eds) *Writing=Learning*, Kent Town: Wakefield Press, pp.247-260.

Norman Bates, Karaoke and Abba

For this story, you need to imagine four Year 11 girls out the front of the class singing about Norman Bates to the tune of Abba's 'Mamma Mia'. They have written the song as part of their response to *Psycho*, and they have decided to perform it, accompanied by a karaoke tape. They have tapped into Hitchcock's black humour and word-play and are attempting the same with their own words.

By choosing to perform their song rather than just hand in the lyrics, they have accomplished something far more pleasurable, for performers and audience alike. When the karaoke version of 'Mamma Mia' finally tinkers towards its end, the audience bursts into applause. Throughout their performance the girls have been half-embarrassed, and it was evident that as a foursome they were propping each other up as they sang the verses, but now they are obviously gratified by the way their work has been received. Like all good oral work, their presentation has grown out of and reinforces the class's sense of community and shared experience, and their presentation has been a social occasion as well as a moment for learning…

Adapted from Douglas McClenaghan (2001), Norman Bates, Abba, and Annoying Neighbours, *STELLA:English in Australia*, 129-130 December 2000-Februrary 2001 *&Literacy Learning: The Middle Years*, 9.1, Februrary, 2001, pp.87-88 see alsoBrentonDoecke and Douglas McClenaghan (2005), Engaging in Valued Activities: Popular Culture in the English Classroom, in Doecke, B and Parr, G. (eds) *Writing=Learning*, Kent Town: Wakefield Press, pp.247-260.

What is the heuristic value of the stories that teachers tell about their work? What kind of truth claims do such stories make? I'd like to conclude this essay by making three points:

1. As teachers negotiate the social relationships that comprise any classroom, they aretypically sensitive to the individual personalities of the young people with whom they are interacting, gaining an ever more refined sense of their needs and aspirations. But in Australia and in other countries that have implemented standards-based reforms, this kind of recognition of the other who is standing before me is becoming increasingly compromised by a relentlessemphasis on the importance of measuring young people's performance against the performance of young people everywhere. Rather than identifying the needs of individual children through dialogue and other interactions that allow insight into what a child might potentially be capable of achieving, standardized tests compel teachers to classify children according to what such tests deem they should know and be able to doat certain stages of their development. Whenever a young girl does a standardized test, it is though all young people of the same age from around the country are sitting in the room with her. Her identity as a member of a particular community counts for nothing in comparison withher performance in relation toan anonymous mass.Standards-based based reforms embody a logic of sameness. When teachers tell stories about their professional practice, they resist this generalizing mentality. The very details of their stories – concrete detail about the way the desks were organized in the room, the mood of the kids as they walked into class after lunch, the personality of an individual child–challenge the capacity of generalizations to capture everything that happens in classrooms.

2. Storytelling always has a provisional character, reflecting a much more lively spirit of inquiry than that of 'measurement experts' when they judge the performance of young people on standardized tests. The judgments of 'measurement experts' are always about what young people have done, not what they are potentially capable of achieving (cf. Doecke, 2000). Everything needs to match the types of learning that standards-based reforms map out in advance, as when young people's intelligence and creativity are interpreted through the lens of pre-existing learning continua.

Douglas McClenaghan's pedagogy stands in stark contrast to this attempt to contain the potential of young people within the world as adults see it. For Douglas,it is a matter of nurturing a capacity to be'surprised by our students' insights, when what they accomplish exceeds our expectations or even challenges our preconceptions about how an exercise should be done or a text might be read' (Doecke and McClenaghan, 2011, p.27). This is also a good way of describing thepotential ofpractitioner inquiry to open up dimensions of experience and education beyond the world of standards-based reforms. The storythatDouglas then narrates concerns a poem created by one of his students, which she presented in the form of a papiermachedisplay. According to Douglas, this artifact both demonstrated how young people draw on a range of semiotic resources in order to make meaning, rather than simply words, as well asparadoxically raising questions about the claims made by advocates of multiliteracies about the radically innovative nature of such practices (what, after all, could be more traditional than a papiermachemodel?). I won't retell this story here, except to point to the way it shows how Douglas learnt from what his student had created, critically reviewing his stance as a teacher of English who might have been inclined to value the words of the poem and to treat the visual display as simply decorative. The text his student produced opened up levels of meaning-making that he had not anticipated, but the point is that he needed to be receptive to what she had accomplished, and not allow his judgment of the quality of her work to be overly shaped by his preconceptions about how the task should have been done.

It is noteworthy, however, that this story has provoked discrepant responses on the part of educators who have engaged with it. Again, these responses are detailed in *Confronting Practice*, and I won't go over this ground again here. To engage in storytelling is to treat classrooms as interpretive sites, where the same events might be viewed differently, depending on the interpretive lens that a person brings to it (including the interpretive lens of so-called 'measurement experts'). Telling a story, however, is no guarantee that you can control how readers interpret what you say, and the story itself can prompt a variety of responses, depending on the values and beliefs that readers bring to it. The challenge for readers is to become reflexively aware of the values and beliefs that might be shaping their judgment of the scenes and incidents described – something that Douglas and I have experienced repeatedly when we have work-shopped such stories.

The provisional character of storytelling relates not only to the way a storyteller can make his or her own views and values an object of scrutiny by reflecting on the differences between what he or she intended and what was actually accomplished, but to the activity of readers who engage with the story and who thereby become conscious of their own views and values, especially when they enter into dialogue with readers who might be interpreting the story in significantly different ways. This is not to doubt the trustworthiness of the story: a reader might acknowledge a writer's preparedness to put his or her own practice on display, whether or not the significance that the author ascribes to the events depicted seems right. Readers involved in workshops that Douglas and I have facilitated typically wish to gain a stronger sense of the specific nature of the school community in which he is working. For them, context is everything when it comes to making a judgment about the teaching and learning represented in a story, and deciding whether that story might provide a meaningful perspective on the school community in which they work. Needless to say, this acknowledgement of the importance of context again contrasts with the logic of sameness of standards-based reforms. The latter presupposes (to borrow from Bahktin [Bahktin, 1993, p.37]) that 'the truth of a situation is… that which is repeatable and constant in it . The aim of a storyteller, however, is 'to relate a given lived-experience to me as the one who is actively experiencing it' (ibid., p.36) – a 'truth' to which readers respond by likewise acknowledging its specific character and attempting to understand it on its own terms.

3. I should perhaps emphasize that none of these forms of reflection are exclusive to written narratives. Teachers can engage in worthwhile reflection by talking to one another, by constructing knowledge through conversation (cf. Doecke et al., 2000). Such conversation typically involves mention of particular pupils and situations, sometimes speculation about how something might have been done differently, and an interweaving of anecdotes on the part of all the participants in the exchange. Talk of this kind can also weave in general reflections, sometimes through mention of the expectations embodied in mandated learning outcomes (when the focus might be on whether a particular example of students' work matches a specified outcome), or perhaps through reaching conclusions about the significance of an incident that has been the topic of conversation.

Written narratives obviously prompt us to think about the larger significance of the situations and events at their heart.Douglas's introductory comment to the storythat we have just considered, about the 'surprise' hesometimes experiences when students present him with their work, is a generalization that he has arrived at on the basis of many examples of the kind of teaching that he goes on to describe. By focusing on the labor invested when people try to capture their experiences in writing, I am highlighting the complexity of the work that all storytelling involves, whether it takes an oral or a written form.

Storytelling by teachers is not something that should be dismissed as merely 'personal'or 'anecdotal', as has occurred with the implementation of standards-based reforms and their circumscribed notion of 'evidence'. A story typically involves a play between the rich particularity of specific scenes and incidents and a provisional judgment about what it has all meant. It is also significant that Douglas's narratives are told from the standpoint of someone who is an actor within the situation that is being described, who therefore has an insiders' view, in contradistinction to the judgments that might be made by an outsider. Teachers' stories can embody a far more subtle intellectual engagement in the complexities of professional practice than accounts constructed from the standpoint of an outsider who reads the phenomena of everyday classroom against pre-existingconcepts, reducing those phenomena to merely illustrating those preconceptions rather than being sensitive to the way situations of practice can contradict our existing understandings, prompting us to review our values and beliefsand to question what we think we 'know' (cf. Smith, 2005). Privileging the standpoint of the outside observer, who can supposedly take a bird's eye view of all that is going on, as opposed to the thoughts and feelings of those who are actively engaged in the situation that is the focus of the inquiry, is yet another sign of the way so-called 'scientific' methods do violence when it comes to representing the way teachers and their pupils actively renew their lives each day.

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Douglas Barnes' evocation of the classroom as a site where communication occurs reminds us that classrooms are not always what they seem, and that the social relationships enacted within them are mediated by larger contexts that are not immediately accessible to us. Storytelling is a vital means of grappling with that complexity.It is not the only vehicle for this struggle – the enormity of the social and economic changes that are currently occurring around the world (which we name with words like 'globalisation' , 'corporate culture' and indeed 'standards-based reforms') cannot be captured simply through narrative, but should prompt intellectual and imaginative work of various kinds. Nevertheless, the characteristic features of storytelling – its situatedness and specifity, its reflexivityand provisionality, its focus on lived experience - show that it is an indispensable means for remaining fully responsive to what is happening around us.

My basic point, as I reach the conclusion of this essay, is that schools and classrooms are social worlds that are characterized by the same kinds of 'narrative exchanges' (Reid, 1994) that enrich our everyday lives as we engage in the relationships and situations that we encounter in the larger society. In countries like Australia, the United States and England, such storytelling has been marginalized. It is time to restore storytelling to its central role in education, and to the way that teachers and researchers think about education.

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