

USING NARRATIVE INQUIRY TO INFORM AND GUIDE OUR (RE) INTERPRETATIONS OF LIVED EXPERIENCE

CARMEN SHIELDS *Nipissing University*

ABSTRACT. In this paper, I share stories that provide sites of inquiry for the (re)interpretation of my own educative experience. Crossing time, I (re)visit and (re)construct seminal events in my life using knowledge gleaned in the intervening years to come to see how these life stories inform and guide me in the present. I use my own stories to enhance my understanding of the direction I am taking in my life since they are what I know, and I offer them here as an example of how narrative inquiry can provide a theoretical and practical framework for (re)interpreting our lived experience.

**RECHERCHE NARRATIVE COMME OUTIL DE DOCUMENTATION ET D'ORIENTATION
DE NOTRE (RÉ)INTERPRÉTATION D'EXPÉRIENCES VÉCUES**

RÉSUMÉ. Dans ce document, je raconte des récits qui sont sources d'interrogation pour l'(la ré)interprétation de ma propre expérience de l'enseignement. Je (re)visite et (re)construit les événements fondamentaux de ma vie en faisant appel aux connaissances glanées au fil des ans pour en arriver à voir comment ces récits me renseignent et m'orientent aujourd'hui. Je relate ma propre expérience pour mieux comprendre la direction que je donne à ma vie puisque c'est ce que je connais, et je la cite ici pour montrer comment une recherche narrative peut constituer une structure théorique et pratique pour interpréter ou réinterpréter notre vécu.

INTRODUCTION

It is only recently, in the past decade and in middle age, that I have understood the profound significance attached to considering all of life's experiences as grounds for building a personal framework that is whole and sustaining. These years have afforded me the wisdom and time to reconsider the nature of lived experience as a grounding force in my life choices and directions. I have also begun the process of basing my own inquiring into my beliefs about learning and living using a narrative structure, employing the age old art of telling stories as a means of sharing perspectives and formulating arguments to explain my own position and viewpoints.

Storying is, in the words of Clandinin and Connelly (1994), a process of moving simultaneously in four directions: inward (inside self), outward (toward community), backward (in time), and forward (also in time). What one does in telling something to another is to engage in sharing a story, an event or situation that moves in each of these directions. There is also another important aspect of sharing stories that inform and connect us across time and place, and that involves reconstructing stories from the past in the light of present knowledge. It is not enough to retell the same story in the same way across time if that story is to be used to connect with new meaning and inform us in the present. Rather, a story remembered must be revisited and reconstructed using our own life experience across the intervening years. It is then that we can make use of specific stories to inform and guide us, to connect us to the core of ourselves which we may have sensed tacitly from the very beginning, but left behind as we went out into the world where knowledge often seems to be connected more to 'expert texts' than to our own human experience.

In this article, I share some of my own stories of using narrative inquiry as a means of (re)interpreting and (re)connecting my understanding of my own shifts in consciousness as I have (re)considered my life experience across time and place. I do this storying purposefully, because I believe that we each must find the seeds of, and establish the grounds for, our actions and beliefs in something solid that we can share with others and live by ourselves in a principled and accountable way, in the 'practice' of our lives. In considering why we know what we know, I do not believe we can leave our pasts behind us. I would even say that in thinking we do, we move toward negating the essence of ourselves or rendering ourselves disembodied in the roles we choose to enact. To me, we are then left living the metaphor of 'life as performance,' with only a received script to live by.

ACQUIRED THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Perhaps it goes without saying that we are born into a story already in progress, but the implications for each of us is profound in terms of examining the roots of our beliefs about the world, and the way our thinking and actions are enacted in our lives. Setting out to develop our own vision for living, I think we have behind us the social construction attached to the place and language of our origins. We therefore see through a lens established before we know we are looking, and we carry the epistemological stance of our families and the culture we know into our lives as a basis for living. Essentially, we begin life with an acquired theory or perspective, one we only come to consider critically as we reach a stage in life where we begin to emerge as the selves we are, separate yet connected to others in the world. Annie Dillard (1987), writing about her childhood says,

“I woke in bits, like all children, piecemeal over the years. I discovered myself and the world, and forgot them, and discovered them again. I woke at intervals until... I was more often awake [to myself] than not” (p. 282). This awakening to self as independent being takes us back and forth, outside ourselves to the stories we were born into, and inside ourselves to that person we are becoming. This pattern of awakening replicates the storytelling process itself, as it provides us with the template for coming to know across time as we continue to (re)awaken to ourselves, no matter what our age. All too often though, in our rush from one stage to another, it seems that we forget the gift that this inward, outward, backward, forward emerging pattern can provide if we pay attention to it. Without that movement, reflexively taken, I believe we are unable to really use our own experience as a means of (re)interpreting present circumstance in our lives.

PERSONALIZING THIS VIEW

My own story began as a person immersed in what I think of now as the best and the worst of the 1950's. My early experience was rooted in a solid and unchanging white, middle-class neighbourhood, a two-parent family, four living grandparents, a given way to relate and behave in every situation. I also attended a well-established school for girls where I remained for fourteen years. All the lessons I absorbed and lived that were part and parcel of this lifestyle were tempered by other, more difficult lessons though. For example, I learned about long-term illness and the determination of recovery from contracting polio as a six year old. I learned about the perils of difference in a society of sameness because when I was ten, my sister was born severely autistic. She did not look or behave as everyone else did which set our family apart in our neighborhood. Fearing negative comments about her that might hurt my mother or me, I seldom brought anyone home after school. I learned from the adults who surrounded me that public denial of emotions and feelings, and silence around difficult topics, was expected and polite. I learned to place myself last and others first. I learned the art of protecting others who were less able to speak than I. And I learned about non-relating relationships. From here, in the present, as I look back across the years, this is what I see.

STORIES FROM THOSE LIFE EXPERIENCES

In previous writing, I have detailed excerpts of some of the experiences noted above. I include two of these stories here as a means of providing examples of the power of coming to know in new ways from stories lived in the past. Both of these stories were written in 1996: the first focuses on my experience with polio and inquires into how I might have used tacit knowledge gained in that illness and recovery in later years. In the second

story, I explore connections between my determination to see possibilities for my sister and my work over the years in special education.

Storying myself

As in any life, some incidents or specific times stand out as momentous. For me, one of those was in the late winter of 1954, when, as a six year old, I contracted the polio virus. My memory holds bits and pieces of the initial stages of that experience: feverish and ill at school, pins and needles on the left side of my body, our housekeeper telling me I would have to go to the hospital. Once in hospital, I was quarantined with three playmates – we had shared gum from each others' mouths and ingested a virus with life-long effects. My left side was paralyzed. My left arm was placed in a sling and pinned back to the sheet; my feet were pressed firmly at ninety degrees against a board at the bottom of the bed. There I spent many weeks watching the other children who were all more mobile than I was myself. Later came months of physical therapy and rest at home. As I look back, my memory fixes on the convalescing child I was, struggling to walk, to move limbs in the therapy pool, to get out of the arm brace that kept me captive for many months. During that time, I believe now that I developed the will to fight back, to push boundaries for myself to whatever degree was possible. Perhaps, as Castaneda (1987) describes, this is the place in time where I began to 'ground my internal dialogue' in the perception of myself as persistent, stubborn, and, above all, able. My flight from remaining a polio 'victim' seems to me to have resulted in the wish to work against any force that entraps or ensnares. Indeed, my life's work appears to be enmeshed in a desire to liberate myself and others from situations that limit possibilities. Has all this been a move to replicate my own sense of power over my physiological destiny? (Shields, 1996)

Storying my sister

In 1960, I learned that some situations seem to be orchestrated by a power so strong that even the best efforts at fighting back are not enough. At two, my sister, who had been slow to sit up, and did not yet walk or talk, was pronounced mentally handicapped by our family physician. I remember stubbornly trying to show our parents that possibilities still existed, telling them falsely that my sister had sat up in her bed, and later, helping her learn to stand and walk. When I tried to press her to try by herself, her tactic was to withdraw to her bed and rock by the hour. She seldom spoke the few words she knew, and she never cried. It is only recently that I have come to see that threads of my sister's childhood have woven a strong and lasting pattern across the years of my life. There I have found the seeds of my work in special education, which I now know has been ongoing in one capacity or another since I was twelve years old. I see that my sister is far from the only one I have tried, often by acts of sheer will, to make 'better.' In this stance and language, I see multiple lessons from my upbringing with its many interpretations of love both spoken and unspoken. (Shields, 1996)

I know that my epistemological foundations are comprised of all the secret and sacred stories (Crites, 1971) of those early years with all the emotions and feelings of turmoil that I still feel when I revisit stories and events from my own long ago. It is from there that I began the twists and turns of my

own educative journey, working to determine on what grounds I should rest my actions and make my choices.

Looking back on these reconstructed stories now, seven years after I wrote them, I find an even more profound sense of continuity from those early experiences because I see the powerful, and perhaps even unavoidable, thread of being the provider of support for others continuing on in my work with my graduate students as I teach and supervise their work. For me, the stories I wrote then have become, in the words of Crites (1971), sacred stories, because “men’s [sic] sense of self and world is created through them. [They] form men’s living image of themselves and their world...and celebrate the powers on which their existence depends” (p. 295). He claims further that “these stories are like dwelling places. People live in them” (p. 295). I believe that is what I do. Clandinin and Connelly (1995), name our stories “secret, sacred and cover stories,” which I believe extends the notion of stories as dwelling places. I think of many of my formative stories like the two above, in this way. My sister, for example, was a secret story until my doctoral studies, my inside self a sacred story of thoughts and ideas unspoken. In contrast, my outside story was often lived as a cover story as I disguised painful aspects of life at home from others.

EXTENDING AN ACQUIRED VIEW

Stories of schooling

Spending all of my growing up years in a school for girls with religious overtones and a Christian ethic presented a very powerful vision that enhanced the grounding I received at home and extended it outward toward the world. The rules were clear and discipline was expected. Teachers had the opportunity to know students well, and for me, security and personal interest in me meant a very great deal. I was a good student in the courses that interested me, and a poor one in those that did not. Over the years, I have come to see that I was a person then who hid the upset of home behind a disguise of behaviours that pushed the limits personally and scholastically. I think that under a cover of strength, I was a person in need of much support. During my middle school years, I found one teacher who I felt I could approach with my inside questions, questions that I know now were of an epistemological nature. She took me seriously; she shared and discussed and gave her time for an adolescent engaged in a first awakening to her self. One specific story that I clearly remember provides a link between the girl at home and the girl at school who was becoming.

Speaking and not speaking

At my school, we began each day with prayers, and we had formal scripture classes as part of our studies until high school. These classes were focused on

acquainting us with the formative stories of the Christian view. I never spoke about my sister to anyone; I followed my parent's example in this stance, assuming that was what was expected. Meanwhile, I had many questions about my place in the universe: why did I recover from polio when others I knew did not? Why was my sister handicapped and I was not? Did a purpose exist for me that I would come to know? My scripture teacher became the one I could voice these questions to. She formed a small group of three of us and met with us for two years, listening and sharing with us, and easing the burdens I carried. She became my safe place and also a place of challenge to find my own particular path using the strength that she said God had given me.

Years later, at the age of twenty-seven, as I completed a degree in Religious Studies, I realized that I was also completing the cycle of searching for answers to the same questions within the same acquired framework that I had explored with my teacher all those years ago. I found that although I had shifted from silence to becoming a procedural knower (Belenky et al., 1997) in my years at the university, my educative journey was still tied to my past; I had grown older and had moved far from home to build my life in a new place, but I had brought my old story with me. It took me many years following this realization however, to understand that my search for answers had remained an outward one alone. The feeling of complete emptiness that I experienced following those three years of academic study of Christian philosophy and hermeneutic exploration was largely based in that disembodied sense of knowing that comes from studying the perspectives of others without making the meta-cognitive leap inward as part of the inquiry process. I remember as I stepped away from the comfort and safety of those years, asking myself what I had lost and naming it, faith. I saw that I had absorbed the lesson too often still perpetuated by us in the modern university: that knowledge is an accumulation of arguments and perspectives of others, and that the job of the student is to acquire as many of these as possible in order to place herself within the position of important others. The forgotten step is the connection to why we might think as we do based on our own tacit knowledge, which we seem to learn to discount in our race to present arguments that appeal to us but that are owned by others.

GATHERING LIFE EXPERIENCE TO BECOME MYSELF: SLOW BEGINNINGS

I took my emptiness and my new found ability to formulate and defend specific positions taken by experts (that I thought of as knowledge) to studies in education, where, over the five following years I completed a B. Ed and an M. Ed in special education. Along the way, I taught children who were deaf, blind and cognitively handicapped. Engaging in my studies, I learned the 'how to' of teaching; I took steps toward amassing that expert knowledge and I embraced a mechanistic worldview that I absorbed as part of becoming the efficient professional that I wanted to be. Essentially, I gave up my old questions of 'why me?' 'what is my calling?' for 'how do I

go about that?" In re-focusing my questions, I extended my pattern of seeking the "how" from knowledge experts learned in my first degree, and I left myself behind. I learned to operate like a well-oiled machine, the ultimate positivist metaphor. I lived this metaphor as I engaged in my profession of special education, and raised my children. I felt I had found answers to the questions about my place in the world through the structure of a positivist epistemology, and a way to contribute to the world through my professional life. My faith had found a home.

During those years, as a resource teacher and consultant, I employed standardized tests of ability and achievement to assess and place children who did not fit the norm of regular classroom life. Over a period of ten years and under the guise of progress, I worked to bring change as I saw it to teachers and supervisors for the betterment of students. It took me that long to begin to see that in dispensing my certain knowledge, I was losing the original purpose of my work – I was getting lost behind my own unquestioned, positivist cover story. One experience from that time speaks to my vision of myself then with clarity.

Organizer and chairperson

As chairperson of an annual provincial reading conference, I was able to invite a speaker I admired to give the keynote address. He agreed to come on the condition that he try inviting the audience to step personally into his talk rather than address them lecture-style. There were four hundred teachers in the audience when he set the stage with questions designed to initiate us into viewing our own practice as teachers, and to begin to tell ourselves our own stories of teaching and learning. The reaction was mixed: as he spoke, and in the silence of our own reflections, one third of the teachers took his invitation to leave the room if they were uncomfortable. Another third wrote on their evaluations that they were intrigued and excited by the message delivered that day. The other third, myself included, sat in some bewilderment, unsure of the task and the message that accompanied it.

It was not until I moved my family across the country for my doctoral work a number of years later, that I began to be able to name the discomfort and disconnection that I felt that day. I had my roles and structures to live by; I was mother and daughter, teacher and wife, but who was I, just me myself? I remember my thesis advisor telling me that becoming educated meant stepping out of my established roles and reacquainting myself with myself – what did I think? I found I did not know.

TAKING CHARGE OF MY OWN EDUCATIVE EXPERIENCE: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

Writing about a dramatic shift in his own worldview, Egon Guba (1991) likened himself to Paul on the road to Damascus, experiencing a profound

change in the understanding of his life direction. My own metamorphosis was not sudden, but was rather a much more gradual emergence from one self to another, separate yet of the same origins. I find for me that change is most often comprised of small ah-ha! moments that culminate in a new way of seeing. Slowly, new vision percolates that lights my path and offers new direction. When I embarked on doctoral study, I engaged in a journey of (re)connection with myself through (re)visiting and (re)constructing stories from my past that cross time and situation and speak to who I am becoming in the present. I found that so many stories comprise that journey. For example, it was then that I connected the girl I was living with my sister to the teacher of special education that I was for so many years, for the first time, and I spoke the story aloud to student colleagues, which was a profound sharing from within for me. I wrote how it felt to be paralyzed on one side as a child with polio for the first time, and connected my experience to the children I had taught who could not keep up for their own reasons. My heart and soul joined my head gradually, as such (re)connections through story emerged and I came to see in a more complete way.

Paulo Friere (1973) makes a distinction that has been seminal in my changing understanding that adopting a role or many roles is not a substitute for living life connected to myself. He distinguishes between dialogue and anti-dialogue, and defines them in the following way:

Dialogue is a relation of empathy between [those] engaged in a joint search. [It is] loving, humble, hopeful, trusting, critical... it is nourished by love, humility, hope, faith, and trust... Only dialogue truly communicates... Anti-dialogue is loveless, arrogant, hopeless, mistrustful, acritical... lacking love, it ... cannot create a critical attitude. Anti-dialogue does not communicate but rather issues communiqués. (p.46)

I opened my eyes to a different way of being with my self and others as I read this passage in years past. I could see my disconnection from my own life stories. I had never viewed my own stories critically, and so had missed the meaning they held for me in the present. I found myself in the midst of a life of 'issuing communiqués,' and realized that I could not change the way I related to others without first relating to myself. I saw the separation and distance I had created from my past, and how that separation had limited my understanding of the world.

When I chose to write my doctoral dissertation using narrative, I believe I opened the door to intertwining my 'why, what and how' life questions through an exploration of my own lived experience, both personal and professional. The process was revealed as the educative journey that it has always been. I gave up my machine metaphor as I (re)connected with myself across time and situation, and I gave up my search for that expert knowledge outside myself that engaged me for so many years. Instead, I have taken a path that leads toward supporting myself in a journey to become my own authority,

using as curriculum all of my life's experiences to provide the very fertile ground for me to come to know in my own unique way.

Today I bring my evolving narrative understanding to all the relationships in my life. I am a more personal mother and companion, willing to share my formerly secret and sacred stories (Crites, 1971) with those I love. I also am able to bring my own stories to graduate students as part of our class sharing as I attempt to open doors for them to bring their life experience to bear on the subject matter we are focusing on. In a piece that Bill Pinar wrote entitled "Working From Within" (1991), he says of his own teaching,

I have knowledge of my discipline, some knowledge of my students, and self-knowledge that I am willing to share... I come ready to respond, not only as a student and teacher of my discipline, but as a person... I must be willing to disclose my thoughts and feelings... if I am to hope that the discipline that is significant for me will also be significant for [them]. (p. 9)

This quotation describes the way I have worked with graduate students over the past number of years, and also the way I choose to live in the relationships in my life. In Parker Palmer's (2000) words, I "let my life speak" where in years gone by I let expert knowledge I had amassed but had not made my own, speak. I continue to journey on, relating what I learn to my own experience from the past, (re)interpreting as I go. Sometimes I fall off the path I have come to know so well. I still forget. But I know to use that backward, forward, inward and outward pattern of story and its subsequent awakening to regain my footing as I strive to inform my own future direction guided by my own educative experience.

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CARMEN SHIELDS is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at Nipissing University, teaching in the area of curriculum studies in graduate education. Her research work is in the area of narrative inquiry and phenomenology. Research interests include topics in gender and feminist studies, personal story and links to curriculum development. She is currently in the third year of a SSHRC program of research studying aspects of faculty belonging in faculties of education across the country.

CARMEN SHIELDS est professeure agrégée à la faculté d'éducation de l'Université Nipissing où elle enseigne dans le secteur des études de programmes en enseignement du deuxième cycle universitaire. Son travail de recherche est axé sur la recherche narrative et la phénoménologie. Ses intérêts portent sur les études féministes et de genre, les récits personnels et les liens avec l'élaboration de programmes. Elle en est maintenant à sa troisième année d'un programme de recherche du CRSH portant sur les aspects de l'appartenance à une faculté dans les facultés d'enseignement d'un bout à l'autre du Canada.