Lost dogs and forgotten towns: Reclaiming the narrative self through research

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Abstract

This paper examines the place of narrative within the contemporary academy through a pedagogical and epistemological stance informed by critical theories of teaching and learning. Drawing on my own experience as a teacher-educator and beginning researcher, the author calls for a re-examination of the way narrative knowledge is conceptualized as part of a broader re-organization of formal knowledge producing institutions in the digital age. Rather than being seen as secondary or incidental to the pursuit of "hard core" empirical knowledge, the author argues that narrative practice should be placed at the center of research that emphasizes democratic values and the pursuit of social justice. Creating communities where narratives can be shared and critiqued is a central aspect of this integrative project in an era of increasing corporate and authoritarian influence within the university.

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I have a rather bright friend who likes to refer to the academy as "the monastery". At first I didn't quite know how to take his comments, but eventually I began to see his point, and, in fact, I later learned that others have made a similar argument (Boone, 2003; Cantor & Schomberg, 2003; Hubbell & Homer, 2002; Ritchie, 2002). It is not hard to see why since the institution is populated with so many recluses who equate devotion to silent mediation and late night scribing with a sort of elusive preternatural virtue. In this world, knowledge is thought to be found in solitary retreats far from the maddening crowd, so to speak. To extend the metaphor, there are also cardinal sins and unassailable hierarchies. The first cardinal sin is to question the premise that the best knowledge is to be found in the monastery through discipline and personal meditation. Of course, there are many types of monks. We have, for example, those who devote themselves to the scientific orders. For these people, truth seeking is largely a matter of devotion to a method. Paul Thomas (2004), here draws a fictional allusion to illustrate the complex way in which scientific knowledge is often deployed for authoritarian ends:

> It was written in the 1950s, and its fiction, I admit. But within the world created by Kurt Vonnegut (1980) in Player Piano, eerie parallels exist with the modern political wrestling match we call American public education. One exchange captures ideas important to us here: The main character, Paul, questions another character, Lasher, about the harsh treatment of manager and engineers compared to the apparent ignoring of the scientists; Lasher points out that scientists only give society knowledge so they cannot be held accountable for the way we apply that knowledge. As with much of Vonnegut's work, in the world of Piano Player, a great deal of scientific knowledge is being applied in the worst possible ways.

In Vonnegut's world, most workers have been replaced by machines, the worth of every human determined by IQ tests that label each person for life, the data stored in a centralized personnel system that regulates what people can and cannot do for their jobs. Tests scores are graphed, and everything revolves around economic efficiency. If machines save money over human workers, then machines it is! (p. 1)

Thomas (2004) here emphasizes the need for aims talk in relation to our knowledge producing institutions. As Thomas points out in his book, the problem is not simply numbers, it is how they are used, all too often to silence people, to restrict their freedom to talk and limit sharing knowledge with others. In this regard it is important to remember that critical approaches to teaching and learning are not anti-scientific. Rather, critical approaches are against ways of teaching and learning that isolate and alienate people under the guise of dispassionate neutrality. In a world of increasing technological complexity, critical pedagogy insists that what we need is a conscious effort to create spaces where people can reclaim knowledge and to have learning experiences that traverse the limited and facile boundaries of traditional disciplinary spheres. This is a world that requires imagination and critical thinking to bring scientific knowledge and the arts together in discussions about such fundamental questions as the nature of the good life, the purpose of democratic society, and the place of critical knowledge workers in the public sphere.

But it is not simply misguided scientists who take refuge in the role of the expert. Many of us perhaps remember a literature professor who alienated or belittled students, who force fed them knowledge even when they threatened to gag on the version of reality that they were being compelled to consume. At the heart of the matter, is a sort of hubris that itself verges on ignorance, a stance that portrays the teaching of knowledge as doing something *to* rather than *with* someone. Climbing the ladder of success becomes a substitute for genuine engagement with people in the search for social justice and for finding ways to express those voices that have been pushed to the margins. Research grants become simply another feather in the scholar's cap reducing him or her to becoming part of a vast monolithic machinery that standardizes learning experiences, often at the expense of curiosity and wonder (Doyle and Hoben, 2011).

Just as the printing press threatened the powerful position of the medieval scribes, today's digital technologies cause us to question whether we, in fact, need so many monasteries, or even whether we should be listening to monks with medieval mindsets. Just as early printers paid close attention to lists of books banned by religious or state authorities in order to determine the most profitable volumes to print, so too today we have a proliferation of technologies that are difficult to regulate and that put an enormous amount of information in the hands of the masses (Powers, 2010). This dirty word, "the masses" in fact is what much of the trepidation over standards is all about (Singh, 1980). Elitists dislike masses and even more than that, they dislike ways of thinking and talking that allow the masses to undermine the positions of the powerful, or even worse, that allow the masses to become empowered themselves (Singh, 1980).

I remember having a conversation with a law-school friend who used to work in the restaurant industry to make ends meet. One day we were sitting at a professional seminar when she looked at me and said: "You know it's funny, I have the exact same views and opinions I had when I

was a waitress but now because I am a lawyer, they suddenly are supposed to matter more?" The irony of her statement was very much apparent to me because I too felt the same way. For various reasons, we had both sought the stamp of approval of an elite social institution. This is how, perhaps, complicity is born. As Michael Apple (2000) has argued, "one of the most interesting historical dynamics has been the extension—gradually but still graphically—of the direct or indirect State authority over the field of symbolic control" (p. 63). As Apple (2000) emphasizes, "these institutions of course have often been sites of intense conflict over whose symbols should be transmitted and over whose principles should organize this transmission" (p. 63). Education, research and scholarly writing all evince this deep rooted conflict and constitute a particularly important part of the field of symbolic control. Very often we encounter gatekeepers in these fields since the strategic stakes in these fields are high. Thus, although scholarly institutions and research bodies purport to be neutral arbiters of knowledge, neither can escape the ideological, class and personal interests that make such cultural spaces so intensely political. This is also why it is important to contextualize the act of research and to use stories as the basis for a broader dialogue about the aims of universities and research institutions.

First Steps as a Researcher: Lost Dogs and Lawyers
Yet, if we are to be realistic I think it is necessary to acknowledge that because we are social beings, we need the recognition and mobility afforded by dominant institutions. Gramsci himself reminded us of as much when he spoke of the shifting nature of hegemony and the need to strive for change from the margins. Margins themselves, are sites that are at once very vulnerable but that provide access to borders, gateways and the foundations of unstable hierarchies.   For the same reason, those things that are transgressive or illegitimate often hold their own hidden virtues. In a scholarly world obsessed with intellectual pedigree, illegitimacy is also an opportunity to pursue countervailing values and to seek our friendships and alliances outside of conventional norms. Illegitimacy foregrounds new forms of parentage and causes us to question the whole range of ways of seeing that foster a great deal of waste and pain in our world.

"Ours is a perishable age", writes Julia Cameron (1998), "writing is old fashioned but it helps us to survive and connect in a modern world" (p. 93). I often start off my course on teaching and learning by telling my class that I want them to learn how to do two things: i) tell a story and ii) make an argument. Of course, in modern western society, narratives are not valued very highly as authoritative knowledge forms. From the dominant perspective, narratives are a curiosity, a refuge from the lifeless data and smug inscrutability of empirical data—a form of entertainment almost. To become knowledge narratives require strict formalized procedures such as those provided in a court of law whereby stories become "evidence". Or they may provide the basis of an expert's account, in the case of an anthropologist's fieldwork, for example. In a knowledge universe dominated by conventional empiricism, to compare teaching and story telling, or to seriously suggest that narratives themselves should be taken seriously as a form of genuine knowledge is often denigrated as mere romantic fantasy.

But is this necessarily so? Kieran Egan (1996) has argued that the arts, rather than the sciences should be seen as the true basics of education. Egan (1996) rightly points out that not only do we "begin as story tellers" but that stories allow us to engage in a form of empathetic inquiry whereby we can overstep the bounds of our physical and temporal selves and to enter the

personhood of another breathing, thinking human being. No other form of knowledge, and no other form of human technology is able to mimic the nature of human episodic consciousness in the same way. Stories combine the phenomenological complexity of human emotions, thoughts, ideas—and, yes, data—in a way that no other nounmenal form does. Stories in this sense are the stepping-stones upon which knowledge seekers journey closer together in their search for authentic engagement and community building. Because of their importance in everyday life, being able to tell stories and to test them by critical thinking are important educational skills. Stories are the ways in which we write ourselves into existence. In this way one could say human beings are made up of stories just as atoms make up physical matter. Because we are signifying and temporal creatures just as much as we are "rational", stories are indispensable to our daily lives.

While Cameron (1998) takes care to emphasize the importance of interpersonal connection provided by writing even to the point of suggesting that it is a tool for survival, these are rarely words we hear within the research context. Indeed, my own personal research narrative is one of happenstance and ambivalence. In the second year of my doctoral program I received a three year fellowship to study teacher perceptions of free speech. This was a topic that I had gained an interest in during a well-publicized incident where two teachers from our province were disciplined for making frank comments about the state of professional development during a teacher workshop on stress. I was shocked by the heavy-handed treatment of the teachers and by the relative silence of the legal community on the issue. Even if the school board was within its legal right to discipline the teachers why did they feel the need to do so? What message was this sending to students who doubtlessly knew that those same teachers who taught them civics classes felt like they could not speak freely in public about the topic which ostensibly meant a great deal to them, namely public education?

Finding it initially very difficult to recruit subjects, perhaps because of the sensitive nature of the subject, I eventually did speak to nearly two-dozen teachers about the subject. While I felt that the research was valuable as it gave a voice to some who felt a degree of trepidation about speaking in public, the fact that I was doing research in such a small province meant that confidentiality concerns forced me to leave many details out of my research report. I also wondered why more people were not interested in this topic and how this research fit into my career plans as a whole. Meanwhile, real life continued on its course: we had two children and since my wife was self-employed I spent a fair amount of time caring for newborns. I also became interested in other writing projects. Research seemed to be a lonely experience that was disconnected from everyday experience. I enjoyed teaching and writing more, and slowly began to wonder why these other forms of academic activity seemed to be valued increasingly less within the contemporary university.

I talk, therefore, I do not exist alone. To me it was incredible that teachers felt so censored since to me talking and arguing was synonymous with what good teaching was all about. My parents and many of my relatives and their friends were teachers in rural areas of the province. I remembered many late night arguments between teachers about history or Newfoundland society at warm, glowing cabins as a child. Teachers talked about ideas, they joked, they argued and they sometimes drank. Most of all they talked, talked, talked. To keep a teacher from talking was like clipping a carrier pigeon's wings, it was an affront against nature of some sort; one that harmed

not only the pigeon but also the countless people who waited on those undelivered messages—messages of loss, of gain, or sorrow, of hope—but messages all the same, and ones that helped to better orientate people to the world in which they lived, in which we all lived. They were people, I now realize, who were passionate about ideas and who wanted in some way to understand their little narratives in relation to the stories about history and literature and science and art that they told daily in schools—ones that they were mandated to tell because they were part of the official curriculum. In those impromptu conversations I saw an authenticity and a connectedness that is often missing from university teaching and research. They humanized these big stories about the abstract or the "universal" by relating them to the particular in a way that formal institutions of learning often fail to do:

> When I hear stories like this—and almost every school has
> its stories of inspired and devoted adults who reach out in ways
> that change people's lives—it occurs to me that we educators
> and social scientists have not yet found a way to capture what
> we hear and see. When we try to synthesize what has inspired
> us, to generalize from these individualized stories and draw
> them into a theory or a technique, the images don't survive,
> like certain wildflowers that won't bloom if you try to transplant
> them.
>
> We boil the stories down into their essences but their power slips
> away. (Fried, 2001, p. 15)

Research and much of academic work, seems to me to be a part of this process of trying to distil things into their essences even though living things don't readily distil into anything resembling their solid, breathing selves. While some seem to take this as an inevitable corollary of doing research, I like to believe that more empathetic, critical and attentive forms of inquiry exist. Just as a particular discipline can create a language to discuss problems and concepts that are unique to its own demands, so too can we try to create forms of research and ways of writing about research that are more attentive to particularity, difference and place. Like writing itself, research is a practice that forces us to take upon the stance of an inhabited self, it implies a subject that engages in the epistemological activity that has created the product we see before us when in actuality the lines between object and self, activity and cognition are much more interconnected that we have been led to believe.

I write, therefore, I exist. Since I left rural Newfoundland and taken on sort of a hybrid identity, this has been the unspoken, sometimes unconscious proposition that drives me into a compulsive obsession with writing and the written world. Having grown up in a place where people seemed to live on the margins of the larger world, I saw writing as a way of claiming a voice that mattered. Understanding a hierarchy of writing, of publishers and of writers themselves was far removed from my consciousness. I wanted to write in a way similar to that of a child who wants to play, it is just a way of being in the world that gives satisfaction and meaning to the moments and places in which we live. I had no such understanding of research, a practice as foreign as some abandoned orphan in a Dicken's novel or some fictional sailor who has washed up on a far

off beach. The idea that I would need to appropriate the knowledge or stories of others in order to be able to say something did not really occur to me. Sadly, it does occur to me now.

Why do we need to take on the status position of "expert" in order to have a meaningful conversation about teaching or education? Is it to distance our selves from the teachers at whom so much research is directed and that is used to control them and diminish their experience and insight? How much of the teacher's voice actually comes across in our research or in our scholarly forums? In part these questions point us to the growing need to have a serious discussion about the place of teachers in educational research and the growing divide between professional researchers and "ordinary" teachers. Even more than that it requires us to think about what educational problems are most worthy of our attention as we strive to find some degree of pragmatic consensus in an era of deepening ideological divides (Hoben & Tite, 2008).

Indeed, before I started to study education, I did not write much about myself, my family history or the place I was from. One of the things I liked about teaching and writing itself was the importance of place, and of the way teachers often related their knowledge to each other through stories. The best stories for me were ones that seemed to draw the storyteller and his or her audience into a new shared experience. A good story was also one that changed the listener's perception of the world somehow, that even made the world seem enchanted or even haunted by the past in some way. In this vein, I remember a story my father told me while we were visiting the area on the Burin Peninsula where he grew up. It was a story that I wrote as a poem in a course on narrative and education that I myself would later teach:

What was lost

> My father took me
> back through the tiny towns
> where, in his mind,
> he played out
> all the memories of
> his childhood days:
> Lamaline, Rushoon,
> Point a Gaul, Mortier—
> their names
> like worn pebbles
> on my rough north
> shore tongue.
>
> I remember
> just after Garnish
> when our car swept along
> a grand arc of rocky beach;
> the waist high grass
> swaying wildly in the August wind
> that drove in

for miles across
the churning cove.

'This', he said,
pointing to a sunlit meadow
just off the winding road,
'was where Uncle Esau
left his blind dog. She
wandered around for days
trying to catch his scent.
We could hear
Her whining, getting weaker
And weaker;
Until later
we buried her
In a small pit we dug
There by that brook.
The old man drowned years later
fell through the ice
crossing the barasway".

For a while,
We could hear only the
Low growl of the car's motor
And the hard moan of
The biting wind;
Then suddenly,
I knew:
Somehow it was his dog;
He had claimed
And then abandoned her;
So now he was circling back,
Hoping to find some lost trace
Of the way home,
Searching for the elusive hint
Of those timeless days.

I was trying to write a poem about memory and attachment. While we often think of research as being related to memory, it is not central to it, in the same way it is with narrative. Narratives encapsulate memories. Likewise, because someone tells them, they also often speak to the storyteller's attachment to another person, a time or a place. Conversely, in research, attachment is often something we hope that can be cured by the proper application of method. But, of course, there is nothing natural or inevitable about this search for epistemological distance. In fact, this reification of distance and formality is also a recurrent theme within teaching lore— who, for instance, has not heard the old adage about not smiling before Christmas? The nature of research is entirely open to negotiation and change.

At one time, Alberto Manguel (2008) reminds us, silent reading was uncommon and virtually unknown. Reading aloud was the near universal norm in part because texts were expensive and they often had to be shared. Reading aloud in this social setting made sense: in an era in which illiteracy was widespread, those who could read were in short supply and so it was useful for some "learned" person to read and provide commentary on a text. Silent reading in a sense, opened up a whole new mental and cultural space, one which was related to the social changes wrought by the printing press, much in the same way perhaps as the internet has already begun to change human thinking in ways that we have not even begun to apprehend. For all these reasons a university based on a model of epistemic scarcity whereby knowledge is created and disseminated by a few privileged authorities in highly centralized institutions does not really accord with the new social realities, nor perhaps with the way human consciousness is evolving in the fluid, fast paced and distributed networks of the future.

Sometimes when I teach aspiring teachers, there is the feeling that they believe I possess some secret equation that will make teaching easy once they have internalized it. Their understanding of teaching is formal and technical rather than dialogical and personal. They seem to think there is some secret function that will ensure appropriate outputs once the right conditions exist. This is the temptation, of course, once we have advanced in some realm of social life, to pretend as though we have arrived at a position of enviable certainty, that we do in fact hold a certain skill with the divining rod that allows us time and time again to find water where countless others have failed. It is another manifestation, I suppose, of the desire to feel needed, or perhaps, if we want a more cynical take on it, of the ability of animals to hide the weakness of illness from other predators or those who would challenge their pack status. This is the temptation that we must continually resist if we are to remain civilized and especially if we aspire to be caring humane teachers and researchers who pursue equality and social justice.

I do not believe that this means that the university cannot survive, nor that it will become irrelevant. I do believe, however, that contrary to orthodox belief, the university's most important function lies within its ability to teach critical thinking as well as to serve as a unique connective node for like-minded knowledge workers in the emerging age. Students in the new digital world will need to know how to focus and apply knowledge just as they will need to know how to contextualize it within the particular narrative of their own lives and the interconnected lives of those people who live within their particular culture (Powers, 2010). For all these reasons the university must evolve from a centralized into a distributed network form or it risks becoming simply the hapless tool of authoritarian corporate interests or modern digital bureaucracies.

Freire (2000) reminded us that you cannot expect education to be empowering if you create classrooms that treat students like objects who sit passively waiting to be filled with knowledge. Research, like learning, is an activity that requires critical engagement with the world around us. Both are also activities that are meaningless without a critical and attentive audience. It is for this reason that critical writers like Joe Kincheloe (2012) have long emphasized the need to see students and teachers as knowledge workers and researchers who can create as well as consume new knowledge. The act of knowledge creation, cannot in a democracy reside solely in the hands of judgmental, experts who serve an instrumental and corporatized state apparatus.

Where does this leave us? I am a firm believer in that it is important to be actively critical of those things that mean the most to us. I think that research is vitally important. But I am also wary of two diametrically opposed tendencies that are prevalent within educational discourse today. To return to Thomas (2004), these are a radical postmodern scepticism towards anything scientific and a narrow empiricism that ignores the insights of the conventional humanities and the demands of democratic society:

> Since the rise of Taylorism in the business world at the turn of the century, education has been driven by a belief in empirical data, the belief that we can objectively generate meaningful numbers from standardized tests to assess both individual students and entire educational systems—from individual schools to school districts to state-by-state comparisons to the public school system as a whole. Within the last few decades, the academic and scientific communities have simultaneously developed a sceptical if not somewhat cynical postmodern attitude that such objectivity is a delusion, or at least misleading and oversimplified: Gould (1996) expresses his embracing passion as a scientist and offers a postmodern view of objectivity: "Objectivity must be operationally defined as fair treatment of data, not absence of preference,"(p. 36) or any absence of humanity I would add.

> The result has been that educators function under a Jekyll and Hyde personality, both gathering and displaying huge amounts of empirical data on educational performance while often discounting much of that data as biased or only relatively true; we often explain that the findings are far too complicated for mere politicians, journalists, and parents to understand while we bash journalists for displaying that data in overly simplistic formats, thus misleading that unaware public and fuelling political agendas. In short, the majority of Americans still accept the objective truth of empirical data while the intellectual elite harbour a cynicism toward objectivity—though they continue to produce large amounts of experimental and quasi-experimental studies that still carry the greatest weight in the world of research (and has recently received the stamp of approval from the federal government?) (pp. 49, 50)

Thomas (2004) calls for a "new honesty in education",(p. 50) a project that is very much akin to that envisioned by this issue of the *Morning Watch*: the search for new critical positions that take a hard look at some of the institutional and socio-cultural conditions that often restrict teachers and researchers in what questions they can ask and how those questions can perhaps be reframed. I recognise that there is nothing new in such a call for reform, what is new is the present here and now and the place from which we begin our own engagement with the tensions and inequalities inherent in research. This requires stepping outside the safe and closed spaces of the traditional monastery. It requires examining those false emblems of authenticity and to consider our own complicity when we consider the larger questions of fairness, openness and social justice and how they are often absent from the contemporary academy. It means pushing outwards in the

messy, smelly dirty world, hoping to find a lost talent in the muddy street, or better yet, the ungrudging compassion of an old forgotten friend. Can we conceptualize a form of educational research that is like an earnest conversation between old estranged friends? I believe so. Even a lost dog can find his way home, if he has a guiding hand.

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