Room for Fear: Using Our Own Personal Stories in Teacher Education

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Abstract

In this paper, we explore how stories can serve as a pedagogical strategy in pre-service teacher education. Sharing concerns for students facing the complexities of today’s classrooms evoked memories of moments from our own early years as teachers. Making sense of our fears many years later, led to the recognition that our students are facing similar situations. Through the exploration of our stories we demonstrate how we have gained insights into teaching and begun to make meaning from our experiences. Key to these stories is a sense of beliefs being disrupted by a fear of teaching.

Leading up to the installation of his work entitled Room of Fears at Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery, Michael Fernandes (2006), a Halifax-based conceptual artist, placed cards at strategic spots (e.g., cafeteria check-outs) around campus inviting community members to complete the following sentence: “I am afraid of ....” He was to include the replies in his art installation. The walls of the gallery were painted flat black with blue horizontal chalk lines from ceiling to floor and the artist had written in chalk everyone’s fears—one after the other all around the room. Entering the installation space, one was likely to be struck by the fact that the work alluded to classroom blackboards.

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from a time before ‘smart’ technology. One of the sentiments expressed in this iteration of Room of Fears was the line: “I am afraid of my professors.” Teacher educators in particular may have been struck by this expression. We certainly were. Despite our efforts at setting education students at ease in our classrooms, are we still complicit in a pedagogy of fear? Do we keep silent about our own fears at a cost to our students? How can reflection upon the stories of our own fears help education students come to grips with theirs? In this paper, we explore how our stories of own fears as teachers have informed and shaped our current research and teaching practices as teacher educators.

Barone (2000) encourages qualitative inquirers to engage in critical storytelling; that is, storytelling that “adopts an openly political stance” (p. 192) in that it attends to “the connections between an individual life and a debilitating sociopolitical milieu” (p. 196). Further, they might “compose stories that promote inquiry into how schools, as currently constituted, discourage intimacy—stories that explore the connections between the pain of isolation, its attendant injustices, and the school as sociopolitical institution” (Barone, p. 192).

His desk and chair must be in the exact spot as yesterday with his work open and ready for him to begin.

However, just as we start working, Mrs. Strum returns to “her” classroom and is now rather nosily sorting and straightening different stacks of paper on her desk. With this change in routine, Johnny has started repeating the word “tick”.

“Tick... tick...”

The English term “fear” comes down to us in almost the same form it took in Old English. The concept has changed little throughout its history. Today’s meaning of fear as an emotion characterized by apprehension and uneasy expectation can be traced back to the Old Saxon fāron meaning “lying in wait” (OED). In the process of facing fear, the centuries between our hunter-gatherer predecessors and us continue to grow.

To what extent does teacher preparation take student teachers’ fears into account? Teacher educators are well aware of the apprehension of pre-service teachers. In foundations of education courses in particular, where readings and discussions hinge on the ideals, aims, and ethical grounds of education, professors grow accustomed to student resistance. A student teacher fears that when she stands before a class her authority will be challenged. She wants definitive instruction in what to do. The fact that, in teaching, as in life, there are no fool-proof recipes is not reassuring. Teacher educators are teachers too; we live through our own performance anxieties. Can we “come clean” with students teachers about our own fears without compromising our authority?

Palmer (1998) distinguishes pathological fear from healthy fear; the former makes people impervious, the latter makes them porous. In the initial stages of a teacher’s education, pathological fear must certainly be accounted for and met with interventions that support the novice in the personal work of opening up and moving beyond disconnection. On the other hand, healthy fear, says Palmer,
“enhances education, and we must find ways to encourage it” (p. 39). It is healthy fear and how we continue to learn from it that is our focus here; the fear we continue to confront and recount as teachers.

“Tick...tick...tick...tick....” Johnny's pace is increasing as Mrs. Strum continues to hastily sort and stack papers on her desk.

“Johnny, can you tell me what’s wrong?” I ask.

“Tick...tick...tick.... There’s a bomb inside of my head.... Tick...tick...tick....”, he continued.

“Mrs. Strum, do you think you could leave the room, while I talk to Johnny?” I ask.

She responds tersely, “I have to get these papers marked. I have two days to get all my grades submitted and I need to sort these exam papers. When I’m finished, I’ll take a pile to the staff room and mark them there.”

She continues to sort the exam papers.

The teacher in Canada today is no longer an undisputed authority, nor should she be. She can hardly claim to be teaching children to be critical without opening up her own words and actions to students’ questions. Overall (1998) points out that the use of personal experiences in the classroom can enhance democratic practices by “breaking down the mystique that makes the instructor seem less fallible than those whom she teaches” (p. 180). One of the things a student-teacher has to come to terms with is that she does not and cannot know everything and that this does not mean the demise of all discipline and respect in her classroom. In fact, what she soon realizes is that her students respect her all the more for being honest about her own fallibility.

The teacher’s claims to authority within her subject area should also be opened up to inquiry. As McPeck (1990) argues, it is best to foreground disciplinary epistemologies and examine them as part of curricular objectives. The idea that facts are sacrosanct and somehow fixed and unchanging is one of the most difficult notions to unsettle because teachers are given to believe this throughout their own schooling. A pre-service teacher can complete an entire undergraduate degree learning the theories and practices in her chosen major with little, if any, focus on the claims to knowledge upon which this discipline rests. It is little wonder, then, that teacher educators encounter resistance as they encourage pre-service teachers to take a critical stance to the subjects they teach and to encourage this critical attitude among their own students. Is it fair to leave unchallenged the misconception that knowledge is the accumulation of what Whitehead (1929/1967) called “inert ideas” or “ideas that are merely received into the mind without being utilized, or tested, or thrown into fresh combinations” (p. 1)?

In addition to unquestioned assumptions about the grounds of a teacher’s authority, a pre-service teacher may also labour under the assumption that his
“favourite teacher” is the ideal upon which to fashion his practice. One problem with this assumption is that one person’s ideal teacher can be another’s worst nightmare. The view from the audience is partial; sitting in the front row gives you no idea how the drama is unfolding for those at the back. Judgments are coloured by expectations and intentions. It is worthwhile for student teachers to try to account for this desire to imitate a favourite teacher. One might ask: “What does it mean if I plan to imitate what I liked in my teacher? Was it because she liked me that I liked her? Is this good enough reason to make her my model for practice?” In teacher education, as we strip away students’ certainties, more fears accumulate.

A course taken towards the Bachelor of Education degree in the foundations of education may be a pre-service teacher’s first introduction to scepticism regarding knowledge. The questions: “What do you know you know?” and “How do you know it?” provoke more unease. They can seem facile until one tries to answer them and discovers the epistemological problem of how to ground knowledge. The task of the professor is to balance an introduction to scepticism in such a way as to prevent a slide into cynicism, absolute relativism, or both. The Socratic insight “all I know is that I know nothing” offers little comfort to a novice whose subject-area knowledge plays a large part in her developing identity as a teacher. Sensitivity and tact are vital capacities in attaining a balanced introduction to scepticism; they help the teacher educator avoid the pitfall. Hare (2001) warns that “teaching is not preaching” (p. 248).

“Tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick…” Johnny’s pace increases.

I feel my body become tense as I try to de-escalate his tension. Suddenly, Johnny gets out of his chair, runs to Miss Strum’s desk and, with his arm outstretched, drags it along the top of the desk. Aided by the slight breeze coming through the opened window, the mountains of sorted paperwork fly throughout the room.

Mrs. Strum starts screaming and screaming. Johnny is now holding a student desk protectively above his head. I push the button for the hall monitors. As they arrive, Mrs. Strum rushes from the room.

Johnny is restrained and transported to the Superintendent’s office.

To what extent are beginning teachers’ fears taken into account as teacher educators articulate aims and theories, determine students’ needs, design programs, and arrange support services? If fears are lying in wait, what might be the result of sharing with our students the stories of our own fears? Freire (1970) stressed that when our experiences are critically examined and theorized it can be an important source of knowledge about the teaching and learning process. Critical reflection on personal experiences can create spaces for teachers to re-imagine and revision their own teaching practices and professional identities (Ritchie & Wilson, 2000). This revisiting of our stories also helps us to historicize and contextualize our lived experiences (Freire & Macedo, 1987). As we name our stories and engage in discussions about them, we can gain a deeper understanding of the interconnections between the personal and the social
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(Overall, 1998). Overall cautions, however, against using stories to overgeneralize or to allow one person to speak for an entire group. Our stories help students see how experiences and knowledge are informed by the political and social aspects of the larger society. They provide an opportunity to explore the larger context within which schools are situated, rather than always viewing teaching situations as issues of methodology. Though teaching has many technical aspects, we need to take care lest they dominate. Barone (2000) warns how easily this can happen: “Memories linger of a workplace, the features of which (including the content-centered and skills-driven curriculum) diminish my access to the life stories—the heartbeats—of my students, and theirs to mine” (p. 192).

Berthoff (1987) states that the worth of an idea is the difference it will make and the same may be true for stories used in teaching. Stories have the potential to expose the multiple layered and often conflicting nature of teaching. Teaching becomes real when situated within the daily realities of teaching and relations of power in schools. Education becomes a “form of cultural politics” (Giroux, 1987, p. 10). Teacher change can be fostered and supported “when teachers gain a critical perspective on how their identities have been constructed by/in the culture and how cultural narratives of teaching have shaped their personal and professional subjectivities” (Ritchie & Wilson, 2000, p. 180). What knowledge is valued in schools and for whom? What gets funded and what doesn’t? How do overcrowded schools and limited resources affect classroom teaching? How does this impact on teachers’ fears, anxieties, plans and dreams? What strategies are important for survival and resistance?

I am now alone in the classroom, surrounded by a sea of exam papers. I am shaken and sad. I know Johnny won’t be allowed back to the school. He’s just had his 15th birthday so the police will be involved in this incident. For Johnny, months and months of struggling for hard-earned improvement have been brought to an abrupt end.

To make the seemingly abstract concept of fear a tangible entity upon which we can reflect, we must make it come alive. To recall fear from the murky depths of the psyche, we must give it a voice, we must contextualize it within an experience; tell a story in which fear is the theme. Bruner (1991) says that for a story or narrative to be worth telling it must be about how an “implicit canonical script has been breached” (p. 11). Fear and the silence surrounding it have become the accepted “canonical script” for teachers and the breach is the retelling of the story reflexively, acknowledging that fear and silence are part of our pedagogy.

I wonder... what just happened?
Was I afraid of Mrs. Strum?
Why didn’t I demand that she respect our space and time?
Would it have made a difference?

The stories that we tell help us to uncover and sculpt the experiences that frame our lives. Clandinin (2007) states: “These lived and told stories and the talk about the stories are one of the ways that we fill our world with meaning and
enlist one another’s assistance in building lives and communities” (p. 35). By
telling a story we are connecting others to experiences that have influenced us as
individuals and as teachers.

According to Pavis and Shantz (1998), Aristotle wrote that the essence of
any story is the *fabula*, or the plot of the story, and he claimed that the fabula
must encompass a combination of events connected by relationships of
temporality and causality. However, as we seek to uncover the fabula of a story,
we, the story teller and the listener, render our own points of view on the reality
we wish to represent, retell, and hear (Pavis & Shantz). For example, as authors
of our own life stories, we have the discretion to change the characters, the plot
or the fabula, and the outcomes to accommodate a particular situation or
experience. Crites (1978) suggests that all experience is “imaginative
constructions” (p. 126) and that different depictions of an experience can co-
exist. Thus, one moment in time has the potential to spin off into multiple story
lines. The question then becomes: “What story do we tell?”

As teacher educators, as we contemplate—“what story do we tell?”—we
must consider the impetus behind the re-telling of a particular story. This would
require us to reflect upon which details of the story we include, embellish,
downplay or simply exclude. Olson and Craig (2005) acknowledge that the many
stories that construct our past experiences create numerous intertwining story
lines that make up our lived experience, meaning that a story might be told
differently tomorrow as opposed to how it was re-told or heard today.

Writing on Inuit mythology, Bonnefoy says that “connection counts more
than explanation” (as cited in Manguel, 2007, p.75). We know the value of
connection in our daily lives as we tell and listen to stories about work, or birth,
or death. Narrative researchers know this and celebrate it as they collect and craft
one story upon another, which allows for the narrative inquirer to interact with
the research on an intimate level, locating her own experience in the retelling of
This partnership between researcher and participant is subjective and temporal. It
is subjective in the sense that the meaning that the inquirer extrapolates from the
participants’ story is rooted in the present social and historical context in which
the story is being told and in which the researcher lives. Yet, it is temporal
because meanings change over time due to the fluidity of the larger context in
which we live (Clandinin & Connelly; Josselson, Lieblich, & McAdams). Manguel says that

> [f]or a Westerner, it is difficult to leave aside the cumulative notion of
time and accept that what is imagined and told as happening takes place
in a constant moment that is, all at once, present, past and future. For
the Inuit, it is the story, not time, that travels. (p. 79)

When it comes to the visceral feeling of fear, it seems that time does not
exist. This an adult can understand because, having grown to adulthood, she
knows what it is to be afraid. The Inuit insight holds true; it is the story that
travels, the story transcends a linear concept of time.
Johnnie’s fear and my fear exist in a constant moment with the fears of my students. As we teach teachers to teach—a claim indigenous peoples find absurd—our own paradigmatic stories move the fear of teaching into an amenable space. Past anxieties, present realities, and future hopes travel together.

Will my story scare my students? Perhaps … but I am still here … teaching. My story carries the possibility for change and survival, not because it ends happily ever after, but precisely because it doesn’t.

Palmer (1998) suggests that

[i]f we were to turn some of our externalized reformist energies toward exorcising the inner demons of fear, we would take a vital step toward the renewal of teaching and learning. … By understanding our fear, we could overcome the structures of disconnection with the power of self-knowledge. (p. 37)

Every teacher has her paradigmatic horror story of embarrassment, ineptitude, rage, omission, frustration—and the unspoken, pervasive emotion in each account is fear: fear of failure; fear of discovery; fear of self, or others; and, fear of teaching. The teacher’s story of fear was, is, and will continue to be. Times change, curricula come, go, return in new clothes; but, as Manguel (2007) suggests:

[t]he language of poetry and stories … which acknowledges the impossibility of naming accurately and definitively, groups us under a common and fluid humanity, while granting us, at the same time, self-revelatory identities. (pp. 25-26)

Dewey (1944) reminds us that “all thinking involves a risk. Certainty cannot be guaranteed in advance. The invasion of the unknown is of the nature of an adventure; we cannot be sure in advance” (p. 148). To look back on a less-than-stellar performance in the classroom reveals a self the teacher may wish to forget; yet to develop as a professional, she must accept this inevitability. “Reflection is the acceptance of such responsibility” (Dewey, p. 146). By recounting the moments when fear surfaced, the teacher breaches the silence and joins the process of developing as a responsible professional.

In The Truth about Stories, King (2003) ends each chapter in the same way by admonishing the reader not to pretend she has not heard his story and not had the chance to learn from it:

Take it. It’s yours. Do with it what you will. Tell it to your children. Turn it into a play. Forget it. But don’t say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story.

You’ve heard it now. (p. 151)
A story sticks while the generalizations drawn from it can be turned to other uses. With each retelling, a story provokes new insight, which shows how important it is to tell and tell again. Details shine and fade as the teller and his relationship with his listeners and their context create new emphases.

*Connection counts more than explanation; by making room for fear in the constant moment of my story I acknowledge our condition as teachers.*

In Manguel’s (2007) words:

The other, through whose presence we become aware of our own being, is transformed by us into our enemy at the cost of our life, since whatever we do to him we do to ourselves. (pp. 35-36)

In our teacher education classrooms, it is worth making room for fear; we ignore it at a terrible cost. In reference to Fernandes’ *Room of Fears*, Wark and Dykhuis (2006) suggest that although, through open acknowledgement, fears may not be dispelled, “they are transformed – both from intangible, nuanced emotions into sensorial and textual representation, and from isolated, private experiences into a collective and public expression” (p. 15).

Slowly and methodically, stories bring us together in our common humanity as teachers with hopes for our students’ futures and with fears that deserve to be transformed.

“Tick . . . . . tick . . . . tick . . . tick . . . .”

**Acknowledgments**

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Canadian Association of Teacher Education (CATE) at Canadian Society for the Study of Education (CSSE) Annual Conference, May 2008 in Vancouver, BC.

**References**


