Self-study dilemmas and delights of professional learning: A narrative perspective

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ABSTRACT: The following essay explores aspects of my professional identity as a teacher of English, presenting a focus on "the reflexive project of the self" (Goodson, 1998). I argue for the way rich professional learning can occur by keying into a discourse that values penetrating reflection on classroom practice, teacher identity, self and professional knowledge, particularly in the wake of current professional challenges about professional learning. This paper aims to foreground a space that was, for a time, difficult and invested with uncertainty. Yet, the opportunity to experience a textually rich moment of professional growth arose from dilemmas and "chaos" (Parr, 2004, p. 41) as I grappled with a socio-cultural context different from what I had previously known. The other key focus of the following essay concerns the way my new context, teaching in an all-girls, Jewish independent school in Melbourne, prompted me to reconsider the nature of schools as interpretive communities. As a teacher of literature my aim is to open up texts to a diverse range of readings, enabling my students to explore the complexities of language and meaning. This approach to the teaching of reading is not one promoted by statewide examinations which tend to reduce texts to the one (examinable) meaning. Nor is the idea of promoting a multiplicity of interpretations necessarily associated with religious orthodoxy. I show how I was able to use the cultural and religious understandings of my students to open up alternative readings of literary texts in a way that is congruent with post-structuralist understandings of language and meaning.

KEYWORDS: Self-study, uncertainty, Emily Dickinson, literary theory, professional identity, professional knowledge, pedagogy of discomfort.

INTRODUCTION

> What remains of a story after it is finished? Another story.
> Elie Wiesal

Goodson argues that one way to face new challenges about teacher roles and professional identities is to reflect about teaching experiences. He bases this stance on the importance of storying the self, that is, to use autobiography about classroom experiences in teacher education, contending that stories about professional lives is "an important step in viewing and understanding the self as an emergent and changing social identity 'project' " (1998, p. 5)

Those who are seeking prescriptive rules about education by preferring to use the lens of instrumental reason (Gane, 2002) may not be satisfied with this insistence on both the "vicissitudes of experience" and on an "historical, embodied specificity" (quoted in Boler, 1999, pp. 196-7) socially constructed and shaped. In contrast, educational research of this nature "enters a more general discourse that includes different and

often conflicting views" (Mishler, 1990, p. 429). This struggle, nonetheless, arising from what Boler (1999) calls "a pedagogy of discomfort" (p. 176) is more to do with questioning the familiar (Feldman, 2001) to lead to a greater sense of connection and move towards "a fuller sense of meaning and in the end a greater sense of 'comfort'" (Boler, 1999, p. 197).

Accordingly, an argument is developed that a post-structural view of professional knowledge can provide additional important work still to be done on "more contextual and intertextual studies of the process of professional identity…especially the life history genre" (Goodson, 1998). This story of my journey from South Africa to Australia charts not only geographical dislocation but also indicates how I was prompted to interrogate my practice as a teacher of English. My professional knowledge then was not something that I could simply transport with me and keep intact. Rather, my new cultural framework forced me to confront key aspects of my professional identity, professional understandings about pedagogy and beliefs as an English teacher.

Yet, I am increasingly aware that this narrative cannot capture the complexities or the multifaceted nature of human experience. It is an endeavour to create some kind of coherency to represent the changing frames of knowledge and subjectivities that I experienced as I moved from one country to another. It is also a focus on how an examination of practice through self-study, such as the one I describe later in this paper, provides the opportunity to present professional lives in narrative, grounded in particular settings. It is ultimately an opportunity for educators to raise significant questions about learning and teaching in relation to teacher histories, bias, experiences, traditions and personal preferences. In this sense then we might understand better the paradoxical relationship between the dilemmas and delights of professional learning.

SELF STUDY

I shall devote the first section of my article to the value of "self-study" as powerful reflective practice (Mooney, 1957; Graham, 1989; Cole & Knowles, 1995; Loughran & Northfield, 1996; Brodie, 1997; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Boler, 1999; Boler & Zembylas, 2003) for professional learning. From this perspective, reflective practice demands an inner critical exploration of self and practice as ongoing and rigorous so that knowledge itself provides a site for resistance (Boler, 1999). In other words, and as Boler (1999) argues, our responsibility as educators is to force us to deal with what she calls, "a pedagogy of discomfort as critical inquiry" and turn the gaze "equally upon our own historical moment and upon ourselves" (p. 176). She continues that the goal is:

> …to embrace ambiguity and question the techniques for understanding and improving one's self in relation to that which is considered true, permitted and desirable (p. 176).

I find Boler particularly useful to argue a case for the dilemmas of professional learning, enabling "more ambiguous and less rigid, identities and relations to the world" (Boler & Zembylas, 2003, p. 121) to be created. To develop professional learning that effectively invites discomforting practice through contradictions is not

an easy task. But it is a crucial one, and according to Boler, consistent with Dewey and Greene, challenging educators to engage in creative reflective practice out of which understandings can be given status as knowledge. Or as Mishler (1990) recognises, this occurs when "the results of a study come to be viewed as sufficiently trustworthy for other investigators to rely upon in their own work" (p. 429). Ultimately (Boler, 1999), the goal is to continually question our "own aims, ideas and assumptions" (p. 179). She continues that such a discomforting pedagogy invites educators to acknowledge "profound interconnections with others" (1999, p. 187), in addition to inhabiting both a more ambiguous sense of self and a space that is often paradoxical.

A little less ardent but similar in perspective, Bulloch, & Pinnegar (2001, pp. 13-21) use the term "self-study" as a possibility to link the study of self to the study of practice, as well as the scrutiny of self-in-relation-to-other. As Marion Fine and Lois Weis observe (quoted in Berger & Quinney, 2005):

> It is now acknowledged that we, as critical ethnographers, have a responsibility to talk about our own identities, why we interrogate as we do, what we choose not to report, on whom we train our scholarly gaze, who is protected and *not* protected as we do our work (p. 7).

It is worth noting, therefore, that critical sociology in these postmodern times theorises ontology of self and being that notes an interrelationship of self, society and knowledge (Berger & Quinney, 2005). This way of perceiving self is, by definition, read against the grain of contemporary modernist thought. Western societies value individualism and individual freedom that paradoxically give rise to a view of ourselves as separate and unique individuals. In contrast with this latter view, teacher identity, therefore, cannot be abstracted from particular contexts or from the politics and world of schools and schooling. More to the point, therefore, is that "self-study" is a response to the uncertainties of knowing our world as a way to gain creative understandings about our professional lives as educators that are fragmented and in flux.

The point to be made is that meaning is not only subjectively understood. If it were, it would remain uncritical and fall into mere solipsism. Rather, it provides a site to open up a space of "discomfort" for profound reflexivity as understandings of professional lives develop, grow and change in language and meaning through and with others. Unfortunately teacher identity and professional knowledge are often defined by powerful and absolutist detached educational imperatives (Locke 2001). It is these constructions and others arising from subjective, social and particular professional experiences that need to be brought to the surface through penetrating and often discomforting personal and mutual reflection.

Acknowledging that self-study perceives knowing as an interrelated experience between self and others, makes an argument that knowledge of practice occurs when the known can first engage the knower personally. A sociology of epistemology for the 21st century contends strongly that any form of inquiry starts with the knower (Seidman, 1998, p. 325; Belenky, 1997; Beatty, 2003; Boler, 1999) and it is right to view the "I," the knowing subject, as someone who is always spatially, temporally and socially located. Here then, we have a perspective of knowledge and knowing that

finds the starting point from "subjective knowing" (Belenky, 1997, p. 82) requiring an active analysis of personal experience with the world which leads to a more demanding and deepened "contextual knowing" (Beatty, 2002, p. 12). Perceiving ways of knowing as a progression, it is possible to imagine a body of research knowledge that moves from the personal to more elaborated modes of knowing and then back again in a spiralling-loop like movement (see Beatty, 2002 for a more detailed discussion). A significant dimension of self-study then is to scrutinise how these vital critical, contextual and connected forms of knowledge might pave the way for a deepened knowledge about teaching philosophies.

Although I have tried to demonstrate that teachers must also develop learning in these, subjective, personal, contextual and connected ways (Belenky, 1997), it is not suggested that every teacher must adopt a formal position of "study" or research. Rather than being told what goals, objectives and policy should direct their work and knowledge (Locke, 2001, p. 5), what is being foregrounded here is that educators need to find ways to reveal insights, interrogate relationships, contradictions and uncover the limitations and strengths of traditions about teaching and learning.

As my teaching self (incorporating teacher knowledge of curriculum and practice) was challenged in another context of teaching and learning, I used autobiography to offer an account of professional knowledge and practice that was grounded in personal history, discourse and subjectivity (Mishler, 1990, p. 419). Its power as a form of self-narrative provided a retrospective view that enabled me to discern a significant "pattern in experience" (Bulloch, & Pinnegar, 2001) that captures the struggle to learn more about teaching and learning, and to confront "the complexity of this task" (p. 16). The implications for understanding professional identity and practice have been profound for me, as professional and personal dilemmas were (and continue to be) fought out in the complex sites of classrooms and schools. It is here where forces, as Bakhtin (1981) suggests, compete and collude in "centrifugal and centripetal" ways (quoted in Doecke, Homer & Nixon, 2003, p. 3).

In my continuing efforts to understand my professional practice in a new school and a new country, I see how my autobiography simultaneously provided a perspective on and was in turned shaped by my teaching experiences – both past and present. The fact that I came from another educational setting meant that I was able to see my new situation as "other," with a stranger's eyes. This also, however, enabled me to critically review my existing pedagogy as it had been formed by my previous experiences in South Africa. For me, the focus of my research became my "self" as it was shaped by these contrasting educational settings, sensitising me to the complex interpretive frames that obtained in my new classroom.

Yet, at the same time, working within a particular culture and traditions of thought created the processes of being inserted into a chain of meaning. It was inevitable that I worked within these meanings, interacting with my students as sharers of knowledge and making important cultural and personal connections to their world and to mine. These subjective and inter-subjective practices revealed ways in which a changing curriculum and context can impact on professional knowledge landscapes in complicated ways. For example, Beavis (1997) points out the profound effect a new set of traditions "into the web of discourses making up the world of the Literature teacher," had on a group of teachers' understanding of their roles and professional

status (p. 302). What can be learnt from Beavis' study is the inevitability of professional landscapes changing and developing as both curriculum and practice evolve in dynamic and inevitable ways to meet the needs of a rapidly changing world. Thus, it is crucial now more than ever "for English teachers to trace the tensions within their own teaching and to re-examine the knowledge and values that shape their professional practice" (Doecke, Homer & Nixon, 2003, p. 3).

Self-study is one way teaching communities can think seriously about what and why certain practices are adopted in the classroom and not others – a useful post-structuralist insight that raises, in addition, further and useful interest about the dynamic text-context interaction. Below reflects only a sample of some questions that might be raised for further investigation.

- So what if traditions that inform professional knowledge landscapes are interrogated?
- So what if the relationship between reading and culture becomes an essential component of practice and curriculum?
- So what if teachers came to expect diversity rather than conformity in their classrooms?
- So what if both teachers and students are encouraged to deal with the partiality of their own knowledge?
- So what if common sense assumptions about practice and professional identity are sought out, disclosed and discussed?

The reader is "invited into the research process by asking that interpretations be checked… and that the "so what" questions are vigorously pressed" to move "the research conversation in teacher education forward" (Bulloch, & Pinnegar, 2001, p. 20). This vision offers the potential for the creation of knowledge to be sufficiently worthy to take its place in this burgeoning area of teacher education research. Bulloch and Pinnegar argue a case for self-study (2001, p. 13) as valuable educational research, highlighting the centrality of the researcher. They also make it clear that interpretations should not only reveal insights, but relationships, contradictions and limits of the views presented within particular contexts and history, and that these understandings must be rigorously interrogated.

The assumption that behind all professionals sit larger contexts and traditions can, in many ways, fuel educational debate and open up discussion about these complexities. One particular point to be made is that practitioners cannot walk away from particular traditions, just as they cannot walk away from a professional enactment of them, but must strive to establish professional practice in an environment that involves constant negotiation and dialogue, a multiplicity of voices. Indeed, to always talk to like-minded people can only provide limitations to a vibrant understanding of teacher roles, supporting the value of scrutiny of "self" in relation to other. A significant aspect of self-study, therefore, provides the opportunity for professionals to listen to others, talk to others, even with those with whom they may radically disagree (Hargreaves, 1996).

Representing different points of views through self-study can enable teachers to find their voices in the contexts in which they find themselves (Hargreaves, 1996). To understand others and to make visible moments of experience, practitioners can

collaboratively wrestle with the complexities of education and schooling. This approach to rethinking teacher roles and classrooms is a powerful way to provide an angle of vision that sees beyond the teller, the "I", as more far-reaching issues of version, bias and context are brought to the surface and interrogated.

Recognising story as a valuable form of knowledge, communities of practice can develop to support and strengthen teachers' voices by "recognising the diverse chords that comprise them, and thereby accord them all a place in a wider dialogue about educational transformation" (Hargreaves, 1996, p. 15). Thus, self-study offers the possibility for educators to explore personal and professional findings or discern a certain moment and make connections to "the larger frame of shared experience" (Bulloch & Pinnegar, 2001, p. 16).

I want now to turn to an epistemological dilemma which precipitated a complex process of professional reorientation, during which I struggled to make connections between what I had valued and known as a teacher before and what I was expected to accomplish and know as a teacher in a religious, Jewish, all-girls, private school in a new country. Although, as I have already gestured, the culturally specific nature of the school community in which I was working initially created "a site of ongoing struggle and tension" (Parr, 2004, p. 36), it provided a frame for reviewing my professional knowledge and practice as a teacher of English.

CHANGING CONTEXTS: CHANGING PRACTICE

> I stand outside a new classroom in a new country – feeling nervous, somewhat out of place and unsure of myself. I open the door and try to appear professional and knowledgeable. I fail; I dread every day because I can't control these new classes. I'm not connecting. I feel alienated, confused. As a teacher who has taught for 25 years, I feel dislocated from my subject, from myself and estranged from my profession (April, 1998).

Although the students attending this Orthodox Jewish girls' school in a Melbourne suburb come from a mixture of immigrant South African, Israeli and Russian backgrounds, as well as students whose parents were born in Australia, the school is grounded in shared histories and traditions. The level and extent of religiosity vary, yet the ethos of the school values a strong commitment to Jewish religious tradition, underscored by a strong academic record. The school provides a comprehensive curriculum of Jewish and Secular Studies, valuing both equally.

In contrast, the particular mixed-gender, state school where I had been teaching in South Africa in the 1980s for a number of years was made up, on one hand, of seventeen-year-old, six-foot boys who were more interested in winning their rugby matches. The girls, in the same way, also tended to use their energies for sport, such as hockey and netball. The emphasis was more on sporting prowess than academic achievement. My challenge, nonetheless, was to make Shakespeare and poetry relevant to these students, as these kinds of texts were significant components of the English course in South Africa. The teacher was generally accepted as the authority or the "knowledgeable critic" (Reid, 1984). I did not question this kind of teaching role, largely because I had not yet come to understand what Popkewitz calls, "the politics of schooling and the construction of the teacher" (1998).

In Australia, I had to learn how to adjust to new teaching experiences working with fifteen to seventeen-year-old girls, who were juggling their family responsibilities with academic school demands. The new curriculum was divided into two distinct English subjects – Literature and English Expression – and I had to familiarise myself with a different set of assessment criteria and course content. Thus, the traditions of my previous classrooms and my professional life were very different to those that obtained in this new classroom and school. As a result of immigration from one context to another, I was spurred on to reflect about how easily I had accepted certain previous classroom practices and knowledge as "natural."

My teaching life in this new context was complicated further by working in an environment whose cultural boundaries were unclear to me. I needed to learn about what kinds of texts were considered acceptable in a very religious, but high achieving academic school in terms of language and the issues explored in them. In South Africa, by way of contrast, the Education Department prescribed texts for the senior levels and there was no choice.

Other marked differences were timetabling and matters of control; the school day in my particular school in South Africa was shorter and discipline was more rigid. For these reasons, among others, I found classroom interactions very confronting in this new context as my position and role were being challenged daily. I was not yet familiar with the overall English Curriculum in Victoria and, in addition, found it difficult to come to terms with the differences in classroom management, the design and structure of the school's English Course outline, academic expectations and administrative issues.

In addition, I had not yet come to understand the powerful dialectical nature of the text-context relationship. All I could perceive was that it was different to the state school in which I had taught in South Africa. Two years later in 1997, when I began to story my experiences as a teacher-researcher, I was able to bring to consciousness the complicated processes of textuality, beginning to see these different discourses against the backdrop of what I had known before. As the years went by in my new school, I began to perceive how the traditions and value system influenced the way my students saw the world as a particular interpretive community (Fish, 1980), although I had not really explored these particular cultural frames in my teaching in any significant way.

It would be illuminating now, I believe, to relate a classroom experience that allowed me to explore the nature of intertextuality (MacLachlan & Reid, 1994) as a valuable way to open up interpretive practices in the classroom. This particular moment for me illustrates how traditions of thought available to my students provided an extremely powerful tool with which to examine one particular text, making visible the relationship between text, context and reading practices.

INTERPLAY BETWEEN CONTEXT, INTERPRETATION AND CULTURE

At the beginning of 1999, I introduced the poetry of Emily Dickinson to my Year Twelve class – the final year at school. I had chosen this author because most of the others on the prescribed Year Twelve list, I knew, would not sit comfortably with the ethos and value system of the school, making the final choice fairly limited. I also decided on Emily Dickinson because of a personal preference.

Although I knew the students had, in the past, very little experience with poetry, I was not overly concerned because they were generally interactive and aimed for high results. Indeed, the preferred teaching and learning practice at this school is usually one that invites discussion to encourage students to develop their own readings. I felt, though, that I still needed initially to open up the text to these students because I was a little concerned that handing interpretations over for such complex texts might result in unsophisticated or simple readings from some students. I wanted to keep class discussion interactive and "liberate" students to value their own interpretations. Yet, I was concerned about endorsing a "wrong" reading against what I knew would be the preferred analysis for the final English Examination. I was thrust into, what Beavis has called, "the paradox of framing" (Beavis, 1997).

Still, I was not necessarily despairing of enabling them to construct their own readings, but I was clearly more concerned about modelling a "literary" interpretation with the expectation that they could emulate the model I was providing them. I felt it was important that I "accessed" the text for them in the quickest way possible because of the demands of the Matriculation Examination (Victorian Certificate of Education: Board of Studies, 2000). I believed that they would then take ownership of the text and explore meanings in an interactive and inter-subjective way.

Nevertheless, I was disappointed, having to admit that my students were not particularly responsive – fairly unusual for them. Although I knew teaching poetry would be challenging, I was disturbed that the students were being driven into "the gallery" (Reid, 1984) and I was concerned that the students had become passive and unconfident learners. They assumed I would tell them what the poems mean so they could simply regurgitate my ideas – similar to the teaching style that I had adopted years ago in South Africa. It was not a comfortable feeling for me. The poetry became nothing more than an elaborate text that remained inaccessible to my students.

Although well grounded in experience and understandings of my context by this time, I seemed to have "hindered learning" for most of my students (Barnes, 1976, p. 128). As this was my first attempt at teaching poetry at this level at this school with so much at stake, I did not know what other kinds of reading practices or pedagogy I could adopt that would open up the text to the students. In frustration, I wrote in my journal:

> What is happening here? Is their reluctance simply inexperience? What traditions inform the interpretations and meaning I am making about Dickinson's poetry? Are the students reluctant to engage with the poetry because "poetic" practices have not been sufficiently practised/learned in earlier levels? Is reading poetry largely skill-based? (Journal Entry, April, 2000).

These are still important questions that I ask each time my students and I face the challenges of reading confronting and demanding texts. Quite by chance, however, I spoke to one of the parents about the difficulties I was experiencing in teaching Dickinson's poetry. He pointed out the resemblances between certain aspects of Jewish mystical thought and some of the interpretations I was making about her poetry. I wondered in what ways I might use these similarities as framing cues and work with them intertextually (MacLachlan & Reid, 1994) in my Year 12 English classroom.

Although I had not yet consciously drawn on these particular traditions of thought in any significant way, I knew, having taught at this religious school for a number of years by this stage, that it values a certain Jewish philosophy taught to the students. Pursuing the possibility of drawing from these ideas in some way to open up Dickinson's poetry, I asked Abby, one of the Year Twelve students to write out a simple explanation of what they learn in these lessons. This is what she wrote for me; I refer to it as "The Chabad Narrative" for the purposes of this study.

In my earlier lessons, before the conversation with this parent, I had spoken about "an epiphany," "a sublime experience" and "transcending consciousness, – themes common in much of Dickinson's poetry – with very little success. Within a new cultural frame of reference, however, we drew from this narrative familiar to most of the students to open meaning in the poetry. For example, in one of her poems, Dickinson speaks of "a certain slant of light" that we could compare to the Chabad "spark". As Enid, one of my Year Twelve students succinctly put it, referring to these mystical ideas: "I have been brought up with this stuff my whole life."

Recalling my earlier frustration, I was reminded of Barnes's affirmation that "It is all too possible for a teacher to be so intent on his (sic) own interpretation that it never comes into significant relationship to those of his pupils." He continues further that the pupil's ability to "re-interpret knowledge for him/her self is crucial to learning" (1976, p. 23). I was determined to put those words into practice and so several poetry lessons began with a brief explanation of certain Jewish philosophical concepts from the more informed and religious students. Abby, for example, explained that Dickinson's description of a sunset and sunrise ("How the old mountain drips with Sunset"; "I'll tell you how the Sun rose –"; "The Crickets sang") can be linked with an important concept from the Chabad Narrative that "the most physical thing becomes the most spiritual thing". Looking at one of the poems ("I'll tell you how the Sun rose –") she clarifies further:

> If you look at the image of, "A Ribbon at a time," and then the "news, like Squirrels, ran" – it can be compared to seeing the potential of celebrating and sharing in this beauty as a way to see our job is to bring in more light by remembering the G-dly sparks within us all and within the world. If we are open to the natural beauty and cycle of nature, we can connect with the world in this way. We can see beyond them to the potential of the goodness in the world, like the "Bobolinks" who rejoice in song, we can rejoice in good deeds. That's like first be receptive to the knowing, the "Sun", or the light and dawn and then contemplating within, perhaps the line 'Then I said softly to myself,' can suggest this quietness of thought to lead you to the doing, the "climbing," the action that can lead to more understanding, the "Binah", you get from knowing something. It seems like it's all tied up and linked.

Chabad is a Chasidic Philosophy which explores the actions of man stemming from the processes in his mind, through to his speech and finally into action. It is made up of three aspects:

Chochmah: Knowledge
Binah: Understanding
Da'at: Wisdom

Chochmah: The word stems from the Hebrew words "Koach Mah" which mean the potential of the WHAT. Chochmah is the initial spark or idea that comes to a person's brain. This spark lasts only seconds. Like when solving a problem a person might find a spark where he believes that the problem is solved, yet he does not know what the solution is. It is the lightning bolt that hits him with the solution, even though he does not yet know what it is. This is normally characterised by thought and the mind.

Binah: This word stems form the Hebrew word "LeHavin" or "Livnot" which mean to understand or to build. This process takes longer than Chochmah and comes willingly through voluntary thought. It is when one sits and contemplates on the problem and solution and explores all paths and ideas. It is a time of mind expansion and exploration, a time to contemplate and stimulate the mind with thinking and thought processes. This is normally characterised by intense thinking or by speech, talking or writing.

Da'at: The true understanding of a concept, problem or solution is evident when the person can finally apply those thoughts and ideas to other seemingly non-related scenarios. The person is able to analyse and interpret and ultimately DO according to what he has learnt. This is characterized by explanation or action.

These concepts are important because they take non-tangible matter and bring them down to thought, speech and action. This means that the concept is "dressed" in people's thoughts, their speech and the things they do.

In addition, we can take physical objects, which seemingly have little or no holiness in them and elevate the holy, G-dly life force within them to make them holy. For example, by taking parchment that is leather (seemingly VERY unholy and VERY physical) and using it to make a Sefer Torah we are able to elevate the G-dly spark and the most physical thing becomes one of the most spiritual things in Judaism.

The Chabad Narrative (my title)

The students seemed to find significant links between Dickinson's concerns with daily cycles in nature described in many of the poems with ideas with which they were grappling with in their Jewish studies. Libby, looking at another poem ("An awful Tempest mashed the air –") puts it this way:

Well, it seems to me that images of light and darkness pervade Dickinson's poetry. "A Black" and then "morning lit" from the poem "An awful Tempest…" and then the idea of "Heavenly Hurt" from the poem "There's a certain Slant of light –". Do you think it means the difficulty is to find the light? But I really found the last stanza in "The Crickets sang" impossible to understand, but when we look at the image of "Night," I see it as meaning that sometimes our thoughts and even our loss

> of faith sometimes is like part of the struggle, you know like the darkness. What I mean is that we need these uncertainties or night to see the light, enjoy the sun, hear the crickets so that we can realise our potential to do good things. Like Abby says, celebrate the sunrise. Is this like the Chabad concept that light stems from darkness is a pure and stronger light and then we have to work really hard because we live in a world of concealment? Yea, and then maybe we will fall back into doubt again.

Nina, a student with a more secular and non-religious background disagreed with such symbolic readings of the poetry and argued differently. Referring to the poem, "The Crickets sang", she maintained that:

> I think you are trying too hard to connect these poems to religious ideas. This poem is about the sunrise and the sunset. If you look at the images of "a Neighbour," and "A Wisdom, without Face", it is maybe personification about how night is important for rest and all that. Well, I s'pose you can see the "Wisdom" as G-d. I mean that is okay but I think sometimes Dickinson is just like describing nature and things. Like the storm description on page 4, "An awful Tempest mashed the air -", I mean the whole poem is just a description about a storm and then the calm that follows. Well that is what I think anyway.

Janie had this to say:

> I think Dickinson's poetry is just that. It's about finding beauty in poetry, I mean a way to see the beauty of the world and also the horrible things. My sister, who does Literature at Uni says that Dickinson was crazy about writing poetry, like she was in love with poetry and all her poems are about writing poetry.

Thus, it was not unusual for many of the students to offer various and multiple interpretations in spite of being part of an interpretive community (Fish, 1980). In other words, familiar cultural and religious patterns were used intertextually (MacLachlan & Reid, 1994) and yet, they instigated disagreement, illustrated by the way Nina and Janie contested certain ideas arising from the Chabad discourse. Drawing from the varied cultural, personal backgrounds and experiences that impinged on their understandings about the world and their lives, many of the students began to make sense of the poetry as they grappled with ideas. What becomes evident is that the students entered into vibrant conversation about the poetry, opening it up to further scrutiny and healthy discussion.

The point to be made is that the Chabad Narrative enabled these particular students to access the text, giving them the opportunity to focus on and interpret one, rather than another set of textual details. The complex layering of framing elements (MachLachlan & Reid, 1994) must necessarily involve conflicting voices and contrasting viewpoints, as students enter into an active dialogue with their world, language and the text.

These examples of student responses provide a glimpse into the way in which the students became active, interested and collaborative learners, constructing knowledge together and linking the world of the text to their own lives by identifying interpretive significances for themselves. They were entering into the world of the "Workshop" (Reid, 1984) as they interacted with one another in a generative, competing and yet productive way (Kyratzis & Green, 1997).

As my students began to move from "the gallery" in the earlier lessons – tidy, orderly and controlled – into "the workshop" (Reid, 1894) – noisy, creative contested and shared – they drew textually from some of the ideas arising from Jewish philosophy taught at the school and their own lives and contexts. Watching my classroom change in this way, I felt a greater sense of professional satisfaction that arose out of the initial dilemmas that I had experienced earlier. In contrast to the restraints that a religious school might impose on which texts to choose and which interpretive frames to construct when making meaning in class, the Chabad Narrative indicates something quite different.

It signals a complex layering of framing cues that came into significant relationship with the world of many of the students, opening up a space for disagreement, agreement and alternative viewpoints, rather than as a conservative influence that constrained them. What this article aims to emphasise is that students are particular readers who bring into the classroom a range of meanings, backgrounds, complicated further by the discourses, curriculum and values systems of specific schools.

Learning more about the religious traditions of my school, I began to see my classroom as a very complex, interactive discursive site that opened up meanings rather than hindered them. Yet, my autobiographical snippet does not suggest any possibility of completely overcoming discrepancies and dilemmas in the classroom. Instead, I have charted a journey of change as I sought to know better my own learning situation through its "dramatic, thematic and emotional significance" Burroway, 1987, p. 13, cited in Bulloch & Pinnegar, 2001, p.16).

Although this is an isolated episode, it is important because it raises questions about the ways in which contexts, curriculum and schools produce a certain kind of learning and social subject. It is also important because it signals that a particular school community and its students play significant roles in the kind of interpretive and discursive frames that determine what is knowledge and what meanings are made as a result. In other words, by appropriating schools and classrooms as discursive spaces, certain ideological frames that would otherwise be internalised as "natural" have been made more explicit.

Still, these complexities still preoccupy me, and I make no claim to offer to try and offer a comprehensive set of neat and orderly answers. What I do sometimes think about is how I might have varied teaching and learning in my earlier South African context – knowing what I know now about the complex relationship between text and context. What is more significant, however, is that I have presented this particular classroom experience to show how I initially had to move through a complex experience of dislocation and as a result, hold up to scrutiny common-sense assumptions about practice and professional identity.

Reflecting on the relationship between self and "other socio-cultural factors" has enabled me to transform human experience into meaning, opening up valuable insights about teaching and learning. As a result of moving from one school environment to another, the context-specific nature of knowledge and value systems I came across enabled me to denaturalise both my setting and professional identity.

In terms of pedagogy, I was able to open up reading and writing practices within particular interpretive frames relevant to these students learning poetry in a certain classroom. My experience with Dickinson's text and the Chabad narrative illustrates a dynamic interplay between text and context, inviting inquiry into learning more about professional and practical knowledge.

CONCLUSION

Although there has already been the obvious interest in the social context of learning (Muspratt, Luke & Freebody, 1997) and it is hardly revolutionary thinking at present, this paper does something quite different. It argues for self-study as a way to develop increased understanding of the dynamic interaction between text and interpreter and text and context (Reid, 1994, p. 9). It argues for the necessity to open up an intellectual and emotional space that focuses on reflexivity as one way to counter an "erosion of professionalism" (Locke, 2001, 2004). Instead of "teachers losing ownership of their professionalism" these kinds of personal/professional experiences can create shared understandings about the "creative disorder in the professional context in which teaching and leaning happens" (Parr, 2004, pp. 21, 41).

Perhaps then, generative inquiry into teaching and learning might encourage more confident reflexive professionals to engage in provocative conversations about curriculum, policy and teacher knowledge. Indeed, the use of self-study in the form of autobiography is designed "to provoke, challenge, and illuminate rather than confirm and settle" (Bulloch & Pinnegar, 2001, p. 20). It is here that reference to post-structuralism as a theoretical perspective in this essay is notably significant. It is precisely because in postmodern terms, "there is no authoritative standpoint from which to know the world" (Seidman, 1998, p. 324) that understandings arising from self-study and story can help us understand something better and know something more about what we do not know.

Just as this paper is not suggesting a dualism between truth and narrative, it is also not abrogating a responsibility to argue that knowledge arising from narrative and contextual inquiry is reliable and trustworthy (Mishler, 1990). Having taught in a state school in South Africa, then later as an immigrant in a private Jewish school in a new country, I have been able to compare and contrast traditions and ideologies. My classroom practice in South Africa was enacted in other ways to what I do now in Melbourne, Australia. I have been able to stand back and tell a story constituted by a life history that positions me differently from the histories of most of my colleagues. I was prompted to think more critically about my teaching as I sought to understand better the social and cultural structures of my new school and the way they impacted on my classroom and professional knowledge landscape.

It needs, therefore, to be strongly restated within the contention of this paper that reflective study about self, others and context matter very much. And what is very useful is that communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) can develop critical knowledge (Foucault, 1970, 1972) to help define what is not yet known about teaching and learning and what might still be learnt as teachers and professionals.

Acknowledging the socially constructed nature of investigating experiences in classrooms and schooling as valuable knowledge, educators and researchers can pursue a "shared enterprise," (Wenger, 1998, p. 45) by using self-study as a basis for further research. Although this dimension of narrative inquiry is still fairly uncharted territory, as a method of research, it is gaining new interest as a powerful way to reveal the tissue of contexts and teaching experiences that shape professional knowledge landscapes, even as teachers contribute to shaping them.

Thus, this paper invites educators to bring their worlds, their contexts, biases, knowledge, experiences and stories to bear upon this particular account, because "There is never a single story that can be told" (Berger & Quinney, 2005, p. 9). Raising professional tensions and issues that might resonate with other teachers has been a central focus of this essay. Or as Berger and Quinney point out, "…we trust readers to bring their own interpretive and emotional sensibilities to bear on the tale being told" (2005, p. 9).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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