

## **A Sting in the Tale: Use of Anecdote as a Research Tool**

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### **Abstract**

*Narrative, teacher stories and critical incidents have been used for a number of years as research tools to access memories and reflections on experiences as learners and teachers. Anecdote, a specific form of story writing, is another 'tool' in this genre of narrative writing which can be used to spotlight, magnify and explore events and their meaning in teachers' lives.*

*This paper describes research in progress in the use of anecdote as a means of accessing and using the reflective process by beginning, up-grading and post-graduate students in the Faculty of Education at the University of Tasmania.*

*But why the use of anecdote? This form of narrative is used in preference to writing stories or critical incidents because of the very specific 'grammar' ie key features, their brevity, immediacy and personal perspective, and the requirement of the punch line: the sting in the tale.*

### **Introduction**

Narrative, teacher stories, and critical incidents have been used for a number of years as research tools to access memories and reflections on experiences as learners and teachers (Beattie & Conle 1996, Brookfield 1995; Clandinin 1992; Jalongo & Isenberg 1995; Ritchie & Wilson 2000; Stake 1995; Tripp 1993; van Manen 1999). Anecdote, a specific form of story writing, is another 'tool' in this genre of narrative writing which can be used to spotlight, magnify and explore events and their meaning in teachers' lives. This paper describes research in progress, the writing and discussion processes used with a group of beginning,

up-grading and post-graduate education students to develop and refine their approach to the reflective process.

## Rationale

For the last five years when working with beginning, upgrading and experienced teachers I have used the framework of critical incident, in particular that described by Brookfield (1995) and Tripp (1993) as a means to develop and guide the reflective process. Their program included compiling a critical incident file over a period of six months and the concept and applications of the reflective process to teaching and learning to be teachers.

However, to define reflection was and is in some ways like asking how long is a piece of string. The definitions of reflection, its application within learning, teaching and even teacher education abound with little consensus (Calderhead 1989; Grimmett, Erickson, MacKinnon and Riecken 1990, 1997; Munby & Russell 1993; Phelan, 1997; Tom 1985). There appears to be in these definitions an underlying assumption that all teachers should use logical, rational, step-by-step analyses of their own teaching and the contexts in which the teaching occurs (Korthagen 1993). However, the 'surface' sense of similarity in meaning are deceptive, as reflection has very different connotations and purposes to different people, be they learner, teacher, teacher educator or researcher.

In order to 'begin at the beginning' we used a commonsense starting point for 'reflection', of 'looking back on an experience, trying to understand what happened and why' To explore this somewhat basic definition a whimsical, but no less serious 'tale' was used to identify a number of the key features of reflection, both 'in' and 'on' action.

*One day Pooh and Piglet (Milne 1965) were in the forest following the track of a strange visitor. Soon another set joined the single set of tracks. The two animals became frightened as the tracks began to multiply: first one set, then two, then four!*

Trapped in their own 'actions' Pooh and Piglet were unable to understand what was happening, why these 'things' were happening and more importantly how they could stop or change them.

It was only when Christopher Robin, sitting in a tree observing their behaviour, intervened "Silly old Bear. What are you doing?" (Milne 1965, p. 37), that Pooh could understand and act upon his experience. Brookfield (1995) suggests that through reflection and its linkage to theory, we, as teachers, gain a language to name our practice and a way to break the circle of familiarity so that unlike Pooh and Piglet we do not fruitlessly continue to 'hunt' ourselves!

The initial commonsense definition could now be expanded to include and value the exploration of one's perceptions and understandings of a specific experience; the ability to climb Dewey's (1933, p. 14) metaphorical tree and regard the experience in a critical manner and lastly to change behaviour based on that critical reflection. By looking at our experiences, our 'stories', we began to find our 'voice', the 'sound' of our beliefs about what we do as teachers when we interact with learners and our peers.

Thus the definition of reflection could now be the process whereby we respond to experience, explore our learning and teaching practices, when we begin to reframe our understandings of why we do what we do so that we may better understand the reasons for change to our practice (Brookfield 1995 & 1990; Boud, Keogh & Walker 1985; Tripp 1993; van Manen 1991; Wilson & WingJan 1993). The use of critical incident and in particular the construction of a critical incident file was the means to achieve these ends.

So why should beginning teachers bother with and be bothered by reflection? If Novices and Advanced Beginners make decisions based on a context-free rule base, does reflection have a purpose or value? Given the pressures of the 'press' of the first few years of teaching, does reflection have a place in learning to become a teacher? McIntyre (1993) and Calderhead (1989) have stated that beginning teachers are not particularly reflective about their practice, let alone the cultural and social underpinnings to those decisions. Their focus is on delivering, not asking questions about how it is 'going'! Each halting step is a consequence of deliberate planning by Novices. The building of a repertoire of alternative teaching approaches is the top priority if they are to survive. There is a high level of ego-involvement at this time and thus a reluctance to be self-critical just when one's confidence is under threat. One might deduce that reflection would appear to become possible only when teachers can draw upon an extensive repertoire of past experiences built up over time and when they have the confidence, and analytical and linguistic skills to talk about their teaching (Calderhead 1989; McIntyre 1993). Yet it is at this very early stage of one's career that this 'habit of mind', the ability to critically reflect needs to become an integral component of becoming a proficient or even expert teacher.

The in-service and postgraduate teachers had both the benefit and hindrance of experience. They were able to draw on their experience to illuminate current problems and had the ability and confidence to reframe their understandings (Russell and Munby 1991). These frames built over years of experience can run ahead of experience by defining and guiding. For example, the way we conceptualise a problem affects what is noticed; which features are recorded and valued; the solution developed, the level of cognitive and affective investment expended to achieve the pre-specified outcomes (Barnes 1992; Boud and Walker 1991). Examples would be how to ask open and closed questions; beliefs about classroom management strategies, curriculum organisation and modes of delivery and just what do teachers do in classrooms. However, over-dependence on unquestioned fluent, well-learned practices based on assumptions no longer valid in the current context can result in 'blinkers' and even 'mummification' of those previously valuable expert teaching skills. The use of reflection and reframing can assist these teachers to question those 'stable states', to re-assess those assumptions and even add new teaching skills to their repertoire. The development of a new frame does not mean an end to puzzles and problems. One needs to continue the scrutiny and reflective judgement of one's own practices in order to move to even more elaborated views of practice: "...new actions and new frames for practice go hand in hand" (Russell & Munby 1991, p. 185).

Therefore, for all the learners reflection was, and is, a means of sustaining their professional health and competence (Day 1999); a means to clear the tangle of espoused theory and actions and create space for coherence and cohesiveness (Carson, 1995), a time when we can "... construct and reconstruct our understandings of ourselves as teachers, our students as learners and the classroom as a setting for learning" (Beattie & Conle, 1996, p. 312).

For some the process of using critical incident file was successful and they were able to step back and look at their own belief systems which had guided or affected their decisions, actions or responses. However, the majority (Novice and Competent and even Proficient) remained at the descriptive level: "*What I did*". The challenge was how to encourage more to take the steps to asking "*What did this mean?; How did I come to be like this? and How might I do things differently?*"(Smyth 1987).

What was needed was an opportunity and means to assist the learners to comprehend what had happened; to appreciate and accept that their view is always partial (in both senses of the word), and that through dialogue with their peers they could perceive, understand and capture both the complexity and 'accuracy' of the incident. The writing and re-writing of an

anecdote and the benefit of discussion with one's peers on the 'meaning' of their tale provided the opportunity and means.

## Process

Before summarising this process it seems appropriate to begin with one of the student's 'polished' anecdotes.

*It is a single room school with a fireplace separating the two sections. The primary and infant. There are twenty students. My brother, my cousins and our neighbours. I am in grade three with Rodney and we are doing Drill with our number facts. It is an orange striped booklet and I hate it. I can get as far as  $9+3$  and then I am confused. My brain can't get past it. I only ever get  $5/10$ , or maybe  $6/10$  for mental arithmetic. Everyone knows I can't do any better. I never ask for help because we are never asked if we need it. Suddenly Rodney and I are asked to go to the blackboard. We stand anxiously waiting for our teacher. She says we have done so well that she is going to show us some grade 4 arithmetic. I panic. I can't do grade 3 arithmetic! Rodney catches on very quickly and goes back to our desk. I stare at the numbers and my mind is full of a redness that grows. The whole school knows I can't work it out. My brother, my cousins and our neighbours. The redness grows. The teacher's voice gets louder but farther away. I lose focus on the numbers on the blackboard. The redness explodes and I call the teacher 'an old bugger'. My legs sting with the thwack of the ruler. I'm outside on the verandah. I cry ... not for the sting, not for the fact that the whole school knows I can't do arithmetic, not because of my anger, but ... what do I tell mum?*

There were three key steps to the process: the development of the skills to write an anecdote; the discussion with one's peers of the meaning of the tale and its re-writing with a coda which linked the research literature to the theoretical, conceptual and value issues raised in the anecdote.

The first step was how to write an anecdote. The students were provided with a detailed article (van Manen 1999) on how to write an anecdote ie the key features and a number of examples which exemplified those features. The features of an anecdote are as follows:

1. it is a very short and simple story
2. it usually relates one incident
3. it begins close to the central idea
4. includes important concrete detail
5. it often contains several quotes
6. it closes quickly after the climax
7. it requires punctum for the punch line

(van Manen 1999,  
p.20)

Prior to the first class the students were required to write a draft anecdote which was to be shared with the group. The second stage, the in-class work, involved the sharing, polishing and clarifying of the intention of the writer and the meaning of the tale, in a supportive and yet critically reflective manner. The last stage was the final editing and publishing of their

'tales' and a critical reflection on the issues raised by the anecdote in terms of published research as a coda to their tale.

Students all came with drafts hidden in folders. To ease the pressure and to model the process an anecdote from my teaching career was used as a starter. We explored the issues raised - the actions and reactions of the participants and theirs as observers, what 'lessons' were being taught and learnt, why some events stick in our memories; what I learnt from the event and how it has since affected my practice; what was in the event which has caused me to retell and share and finally what values or beliefs, my philosophy of teaching and learning, were being tested. We then broke into groups of six to share our anecdotes and to clarify understandings. The students then re-wrote (many times) their anecdotes for final submission.

## Results and Discussion

Why does this form of narrative appear to produce such clear, powerful and often poignant reflections in comparison to those previously observed through compilation of a critical incident file or collections of narratives?

Firstly, the fairly strict guidelines of the genre of anecdote force the writer to focus, to distill the essence of the event. There is no room for extra information to cloud, obscure or even conceal the meaning.

Secondly, the writing and multiple re-writings reinforces this distilling of the essence of the tale. Many were pruned by half to two thirds of extraneous detail, other events and embedded stories, ambiguities, confusions and the general detritus of draft writings. In words and sentences are 'our preunderstandings and distortions (Gitlin and Goldstein 1987, p.106) and these needed to be spotlighted. The writing and analysis of the anecdote provided a vehicle for what Shor described as an 'illumination of reality' (1986, p 422), an organising concept to develop critical thinking and critical reflection (Brookfield 1993, Jalongo and Isenberg 1995, van Manen 1999). This re-writing process provided a framework to analyse, frame and re-frame the events and responses. The sharing, re-writing and editing processes enabled and encouraged the learners to move through the technical, contextual and confrontational levels of reflection to uncover and clarify their understandings of the events described in the anecdote.

Thirdly, the use of concrete details and quotes provides the opportunity for personal response and immediacy for both writer and reader. The tales gain a presence, a present reality where we become a part of that experience, albeit vicariously.

Lastly, the discussion with peers and the process of horizontal evaluation with peers (Gitlin and Goldstein 1987) provided space for the teacher to step away from the event, to verbalise to others and themselves what was essential about the tale. Reflection through private journaling can lead to a one-way conversation with one-self. Through discussion with others a 'conversation' (Yinger 1990) was generated in spoken and written form which provided a vehicle for the writer and listener/reader to critically reflect on their own and other tales, a means to unlock beliefs, perceptions and experiences, a direction to focus their reflection and lastly a strategy to encourage teachers to move beyond the technical to the contextual and especially confrontational levels of reflection.

The topics of the anecdotes were varied, written from the perspectives of themselves as learners, as teachers and observers of other teachers. Nearly all had comments on the moral implications of teaching and learning as learners and practitioners. The themes addressed justice and more often injustice in a classroom; how a sense of self was

supported or undermined; the discrepancies between what was said and what was done; the role of one's values and beliefs being challenged or supported and how a single event can make a difference. There was the opportunity to ask themselves 'why is this still important to me now' (van Manen 1999). Common throughout was the sense that "...students experience instructional relations as personal relations. It matters to them how they matter to their teachers" (van Manen 1999, p23).

One example of the issues raised in one draft anecdote included how the rules for democratic discussion may in themselves become intimidating; the role of trust in a teaching and learning situation; how we have assumptions how people will behave; the appropriacy of the role of the teacher as a social reconstructionist and lastly cultural imperialism and educational colonialism. The event had occurred many years ago but still was strong in the teacher's memory. Through discussion and rewriting the central issue became focussed.

*...The comment had embarrassed me as it pointed a finger at my background which is inherently part of me. It was also hurtful because music lessons with my Jamaican children had been one of my most rewarding teaching experiences. The comment had tarnished memories of something very special. I began to wonder, "Was I a benign racist?"*

*I remained quiet for the rest of the night.*

## **Conclusion and Future Directions**

This paper has reported on research in progress on the use of anecdote as a means to illuminate, magnify and explore events and their meaning in teachers' lives. The process of writing, discussion and re-writing produced a series of anecdotes which have since been published and circulated to class participants who gave permission for their stories to be shared.

The writing and re-writing process with discussion does appear to produce a qualitative difference in the content, expression and reflective levels of the tales and especially the codas. However, this preliminary research needs to be verified by comparing narratives gained through interview and through a writing process without the peer discussion component.

Verification is also needed at the fourth level of reflection ie action. Has the process of writing the anecdote affected teaching practice, assisted teachers to clarify their philosophy of teaching and learning or influenced their pedagogy. Has the writing of the coda (and the research associated with this) influenced practice?

A third area for further research would be to verify if there is a 'measurable' change in levels of reflection between draft and final copy and what are the indicators? Are the writers conscious of this change?

Teachers' stories have been dismissed as mere anecdotes. This paper has provided a brief glimpse into a few teachers' lives and how these glimpses can be focussed to bring their meaning into sharp relief through the discipline of writing and discussing an anecdote.

To conclude it seems appropriate to share an anecdote from my own teaching experience (an event that still chills my teaching soul). It is one with a sting in the tale.

*"Good morning Mary. Welcome back"*

*It was 10 am on Monday morning and I had two hours of communication studies with the secretarial students. Mary had left a few weeks earlier to take up an office position, but it had not worked out well and she had been sacked. Today she had come back to class to continue her studies. I was concerned as she was not a strong student and I knew how much courage it had taken for her to return to college.*

*"Got the sack did ya?" was the taunt from class bully. Mary stood silent, head hung, tears threatening to spill.*

*"That's enough Ellen. If you had any sense of what it takes to get a job and keep it you would keep your mouth shut" was my very sharp response.*

*The class was stunned at my uncharacteristic outburst. Ellen sat rigid taken aback at the venom in my voice. Mary quietly moved to her regular seat. There was that silence you could cut.*

*"Right after that display, we'll move onto to today's lesson: Conflict resolution."*

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