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The Victorian Teacher Portfolio: Language of Possibility or Language of Control?

Abstract

In order to contextualise discussion of the use of portfolios for beginning teachers, we begin this paper by revisiting some important notions derived from narrative enquiry and research about teacher career entry. We draw on the work of Michael Connelly and Jean Clandinin (1995; 1996; 1998; 2000; 1988; 1998; 1999) from the United States, who use tropes such as ‘professional knowledge landscape’ and ‘storied lives’. We also refer to Les Tickle (1994; 1999; 2000) who has written extensively about induction of beginning teachers into the profession. Deborah Britzman (2003) contributes to our commentary on teacher identity and performance. Some current uses of the teacher portfolio are then discussed in relation to the regulation and assessment of entry to the profession in Victoria, Australia. In this context we characterise the Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT, 2004a) portfolio for beginning teachers as an example of ‘performativity’ (Lyotard, 1993, cited in Connor, 1997, p. 320) and, in our own terms, ‘narrative-poor’ enquiry which has appropriated the term ‘portfolio’ to the purposes of regulatory authority. In conclusion we suggest that this form of portfolio is blocking the potential for transformation of beginning teacher identity, in which early career professionals explore links between contemporary qualitative research, ‘writing’ in Richardson’s (2000) sense, and critical pedagogy.

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A starting point for appreciating the problematic nature of teacher professional portfolios is the tenuous, and under-theorised relationship between genres, which are derived from, or superficially associated with, narrative and those which contain substantive elements of narrative enquiry. We cannot, in the confines of this paper, elaborate on the gap between narrative-based approaches to education and theoretical perspectives from critical and cultural theory, as we have done elsewhere (Hay, White, Moss, Ferguson, & Dixon, 2003) but we will attempt to demonstrate how this gap manifests itself in practice. We begin by discussing those genres of narrative which lend themselves most readily to a relationship between narrative forms of enquiry and the articulation of teacher identity and proceed to the relationship between narrative and a genre of portfolio which emphasises not identity, but standards and competencies. We proceed from this to critique a specific genre of portfolio intended as a form of regulation of entry to the profession in Victoria, in which the links between personal and professional identity are almost completely obscured.

Narrative, in a variety of genres, is a common contemporary tool for the exploration of teacher identity. Biography and autobiography are the most obvious examples, since first person accounts of teachers' lives or the lives of teachers as recounted by others are clearly forms of discourse (in the narratological sense of narrative structures and patterns), which readily convey personal, professional experience and knowledge. To put this in the less technical sense adopted by a good deal of the contemporary literature on teachers' work and teacher preparation, teachers' lives are 'storied' and their experiences are shared for the purposes of self-expression, or as a means of breaking through an apparent wall of isolation and self-doubt into a space of shared professional identity.

These genres, while familiar and conventional forms of narrative, are not necessarily lacking in innovation and variety and may take the form of writing or even ‘storytelling' of the oral kind. A current variation on the autobiographical theme is ‘authentic conversation’ (Clark, 2001) in which teachers discuss their experiences in regular
informal meetings with colleagues or in which pre-service teachers exchange letters, formulating various questions in personal narratives.

Narrative is, moreover, being used in a variety of senses that move beyond biographical/autobiographical reportage, into 'critical reflection' and the more imagined, or fictive, aspects of storytelling. Connelly and Clandinin (1995; 1996; 1998; 2000; 1988; 1998; 1999) have written extensively about 'storying lives', 'stories to live by', and 'storied landscapes' while Schön (1983; 1987; 1991) talks about the 'reflective practitioner', as a person who is aware of personal practice, rather than just a practised or experienced professional. Implicit in these approaches is a view that narrative is a tool for shaping experience, not just for representing it.

More recently, Mason (2002) proposes a 'discipline of noticing' as an aspect of being professional which takes us beyond reflection into action. As he puts it ‘Reflection is a much used word, the meaning of which varies from “vaguely thinking back to or commenting on an incident” to detailed written records of as much as can be recalled of an event'. (p.15). The present writers are also exploring the idea of ‘noticing’ as a form of awareness which moves beginning teachers beyond the preoccupation with ‘classroom management’ to an appreciation of the complex cultures contained within and beyond the classroom (Moss et al., 2004). In general terms, narrative approaches to teachers’ work have not been preoccupied with the collection of data but with ‘data storying’ (Lather & Smithies, 1997). Connelly and Clandinin suggest:

Personal practical knowledge is in the teacher’s past experience, in the teacher’s present mind and body, and in the future plans and actions. Personal practical knowledge is found in the teacher’s practice. It is, for any teacher, a particular way of reconstructing the past and the intentions of the future to deal with the exigencies of a present situation (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995, p. 25).

The links with narrative, and genres from journal and chronicle to diary, letter or even life story are evident in this view of teacher knowledge - or self-knowledge. Craig (2003) argues that the entries teachers choose to include in their reflective narrative portfolio pieces are based on personal practical knowledge and school context (p. 4). She emphasises the importance of teaching context and draws on Clandinin and Connelly’s
(1995) metaphor of teacher professional knowledge ‘landscapes’. The essence of the trope appears to be the breadth and variety of view provided by landscape painting as opposed to other forms.

Connelly and Clandinin (1988) first used their term ‘personal practical knowledge’ which they defined as:

A term designed to capture the idea of experience in a way that allows us to talk about teachers as knowledgeable and knowing persons. Personal practical knowledge is in the teacher’s past experience, in the teacher’s present mind and body, and in the future plans and actions. Personal practical knowledge is found in the teacher’s practice. It is, for any teacher, a particular way of reconstructing the past and the intentions of the future to deal with the exigencies of a present action (p. 25).

Les Tickle (2000) reports on his own research with beginning teachers and the place of emotion in learning to teach. He explains that:

The initial focus of my research with new teachers in this respect was the recognition of the failure of the technicist and clinical views of teaching to acknowledge, let alone provide for, the development of the emotions associated with being a teacher. Here, I realized, there is a need to extend the substance and methods of professional development, to accommodate the person within the role of teaching. New teachers reveal the importance of the emotions, both in terms of their relationship to judgements, actions and events and in terms of how they handle that relationship through greater self-awareness (p. 91).

Tickle (2000) identifies the use of standards to measure beginning teachers as the most problematic current issue for them. He points to ‘a failure to comprehensively identify the nature of professional knowledge, of what new teachers should know and be able to do, or what kinds of persons they should be or be willing to become’ (p. 8-9). While he critiques both the rise of standards in the UK and elsewhere, he suggests that there is a twofold systemic problem of both agreeing on standards and settling for minimum standards in aspects of knowledge and classroom practice. And comments that ‘This portrayal is the symbolic formalization of learning and performance requirements derived from the hot political and social contexts in which teachers’ work is delineated and reduced to minimal descriptions (p. 35). Further, he caustically
remarks that with the advent of standards for teachers, ‘We are in danger of the portrayal of the teacher as the all-dancing, all-singing, all-knowing expert in subject content, instructional techniques and assessment methods’ (p. 36) and argues that in reality, ‘what teachers are engaged in is a process of learning, through multiple problem solving in complex situations’ (p. 37). He suggests that the ‘bases of personal growth, perspective, and identity…[should] sit alongside subject knowledge, instructional strategies and curriculum organization as worthy of attention’ (p. 89).

Similarly Britzman (2003) explains that ‘Learning to teach – like teaching itself – is always the process of becoming: a time of formation and transformation, of scrutiny into what one is doing, and who one can become (p. 31). The ‘private’ aspects of pedagogy Britzman describes as:

[C]oping with competing definitions of success and failure, and one’s own sense of vulnerability and credibility. Residing in the “heads” and “hearts” of teachers, and emerging from their personal and institutional biography, this “personal practical knowledge,” or knowledge made from the stuff of lived experience, is so intimately a part of teachers’ enactments that its appearance as skills becomes taken for granted (p. 28).

This year the Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT, 2004a) informed Victorian teachers that eight standards would be need to be demonstrated by teachers in their first year of teaching, beginning 2004. These teachers are expected to develop a portfolio to demonstrate that they meet these standards within the first two years of teaching (VIT, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c). If these standards are satisfactorily demonstrated to a school-based panel, these teachers move from provisional to full teacher registration. The standards are grouped into sections, such as ‘professional knowledge’ and ‘professional practice’ and the standards are then sub-divided into ‘pointers’, which indicate what teachers should demonstrate to prove that they have reached these standards (e.g. ‘Teachers know the content they teach’; ‘Teachers know their students’). A brief consideration of these standards and pointers suggests that they are a far cry from the kind of ‘knowledge’ articulated by people like Tickle (2000), Britzman (2003) and Connelly and Clandinin (1995; 1996; 1998; 2000; 1988; 1998; 1999).
We argue that these homogenised and seemingly neutral standards (VIT, 2004a), manage to reduce teaching, and ultimately teachers, to a conforming and compliant ‘managerialist’ (Sachs, 2001, 2003a, 2003b; forthcoming) workforce, rather than the notion of ‘professional’ suggested in all of the rhetoric preceding the establishment of the Victorian Institute of Teaching. What is ironic, of course, is that rather than representing teachers in Victoria, the professional organisation established to represent them, the Victorian Institute of Teaching, is actually complicit in implementing the controlling agenda of both state and federal governments in reducing teaching to bundles of skill and competence. Lyotard’s notion of ‘performativity’ seems to have a place in this discussion and his suspicion of ‘institutionalized knowledge and bureaucratized control of thought’ (Connor, 1997, p. 320) makes sense in this context. The draft version of the standards (VIT, 2003a) contained the following statement that was subsequently removed: ‘They are not a checklist of competencies for beginning teachers to master by the end of their first year’ (p. 1). We argue that while the portfolio process appears to be a contemporary and forward-looking approach, the content reflects a checklist of basic skills and strategies and a competency perspective. In parts of North America, and increasingly in Australia, the use of portfolios within the teaching profession has involved teachers in personal writing. However, we would argue that the genre employed is becoming an increasingly impoverished form of narrative that provides little room for complexity or identity development.

The Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT) beginning teachers’ portfolio, appears to mimic the bureaucratic, modernist genres associated with ‘performativity’, reflecting the performance management and assessment preoccupations of modern capitalism as currently seen in Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States (Schwandt, 2001) (p. 189). Lyotard was highly suspicious of ‘institutionalized knowledge and bureaucratized control of thought’ (Connor, 1997) and in the 1960s denounced ‘the inevitable subordination of both the ‘contents’ of culture and pedagogical relations to the sole operative categories of capital: production and consumption’ (Lyotard, 1993, p. 48 cited in Connor, 1997). Current Australian educational discourse relies heavily on terms like ‘quality’ ‘effectiveness’, ‘benchmarking’ and ‘best practice’ and the international preoccupation with ‘standards’ for teachers certainly seem to be consistent with this use of performativity.
It is difficult to resist the conclusion that the teacher portfolio to be used in Victoria, like others in use in the United States, is a very limited kind of ‘portfolio’ indeed. The term ‘portfolio’ appears to have been appropriated from another kind of performance area altogether – namely the performance arts – and the very use of the word tends to disguise a clear trend towards its antithesis - Lyotard’s ‘performativity’. Wolf (1994, p. 112) for example, moves, in the same sentence, from a definition of the portfolio as a ‘purposeful and selective collection of a person’s work and reflections’ to describing its use as ‘a highly regarded method of promoting and assessing student and teacher performance’ (our emphasis). Our purpose here is not to undermine the potential of portfolio approaches in education, but to point out a fundamental confusion between what is, ‘in its most basic sense a collection of information about a teacher’s practice’ (Wolf, 1994, p. 113), and the kind of portfolio which is currently being developed in Victoria as an instrument of measurement, assessment and promotion. The link between portfolio in the sense of literature and performance arts and this kind of instrument is largely metaphorical. The ‘portfolio’ has become a kind of pseudo-narrative in which the major concern is neither a teacher’s self-directed ‘collection’ or a more structured and authorial (narrative) use of events or highlights in a teacher’s life, (a form of interaction between the author/performer and audience) but an instrument of measurement conceived and structured by the critic. What is more, the ‘critic’ does not intervene after the act in order to provide an outsider judgement, but directly prescribes what is to be performed in the first place. Teachers, instead of being creators of a largely autobiographical genre, in which they themselves are ‘authors’, determining the way the ‘story’ is sequenced and the ‘plot’ arranged, are now to be largely passive objects of measurement. The teacher’s tale of a personal professional journey has become an exercise in map reading.

On the other hand, there is a way of linking teachers’ work, and narrative, in which writing (Hay et al., 2003; White, 2004) as opposed to recording, documenting and responding to prescribed categories of enquiry. Perhaps the clearest expression of this link is made by Richardson in her seminal work ‘Writing. A Method of Inquiry’:

Although we usually think about writing as a mode of `telling' about the social world, writing is not just a mopping-up activity at the end of a research project.
Writing is also a way of ‘knowing’ - a method of discovery and analysis (Richardson, 2000, p. 499).

The form of enquiry most readily associated with this view of ‘knowing’, as opposed to ‘writing-up' of experience or observation is, broadly speaking, a form of qualitative (ethnographic, auto-ethnographic) research. Some favoured genres identified by Richardson are ‘life histories, informants’ oral accounts, in-depth interviews, case studies, historical documents, and participant observation’ (1997, p. 26). What is required, in our view, in order to move the present VIT portfolio on from narrative-poor instrument of measurement to narrative-rich instrument of development and enquiry is not just a revitalised use of narrative but a revitalised notion of beginning teacher identity, in which the teacher becomes teacher-researcher in a form of critical pedagogy. The description of critical pedagogy which follows may indicate not only the type of experience a teacher might recount in a narrative-rich form of portfolio, but the nature of the relationship between teacher and student, which requires a much more subtle and personalised form of narrative enquiry than the check-list approach to teacher behaviour and competencies.

In place of centrally prescribed and culturally biased curricula that students simply receive, critical pedagogy regards the curriculum as a form of cultural politics in which participants, (rather than recipients of) curricula question the cultural and dominatory messages contained in curricula and replace then with a ‘language of possibility’ (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000, p. 34).

If one simply substitutes the idea of centrally prescribed regulation for teachers for the kind of centrally prescribed curricula for students mentioned in this paragraph, it is possible to see where a rich and authentic form of ‘assessment’ (Cumming & Maxwell, 1999) for teachers differs from the VIT use of portfolio.

This form of portfolio may well contain cumulative, chronologically arranged evidence of a teacher’s work, including lesson plans, student work samples and documentation such as professional development
attended. This, however, would be little more than a scrapbook if it did not contain some significant elements of reflection, or in ‘noticing’ (Mason, 2002; Moss et al., 2004). Reid and Frid (2001) differentiate between the ‘learning’ and the ‘show’ types of portfolio. The ‘show’ portfolio version being the sort developed specifically for use at job interviews. Nevertheless, they argue that ‘In the case of a portfolio used for a job interview, for instance, student teachers need to produce and compile a representation of themselves as the sort of teacher they imagine necessary for the particular situation of employment in the early twenty-first century’ (p. 3). It is still about identity. On the other hand, we would suggest that the VIT version of portfolio creates a third form of teacher portfolio, which has as its focus, assessment and appraisal of the teacher and is very far removed from exploration of identity. Dallmer (2004) has suggested that ‘Identity, for all teachers, is grounded in the daily work of learning and knowing’ and that ‘Teachers form their identity in the social context of schooling’ (p. 32).

It is the gap between the portfolio as educational tool in preservice courses and portfolio as instrument of measurement as seen in the Victorian Institute of Teaching model (VIT, 2004a) that is of particular concern to us here. The form of portfolio-based registration as proposed by the VIT appears to us to be very clearly couched in the language of control rather than the ‘language of possibility’.

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