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Narrating others' stories: Negotiating others' spaces

Eleanor Peeler
The University of Melbourne

Abstract
Researching teachers' stories requires one to negotiate access to another's personal and professional domains. To narrate the life of another, a balance must be maintained between the researcher's wants and the needs of the other, or the teacher whose story is sought. Such stories trace teachers' sociological, pedagogical and historical journeys of development and transformations in knowledge and professional practice (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). Spatial orientations of their professional journeys are enacted in various locations of their work environs, personal domains of home, family and other interests. They are significant too in the ensuing relationships between researcher and researched where ideally, a harmonious co-existence ensues. This paper explores how relationships, borne through affinities of shared experience, establish a basis of trust and respect that facilitate sharing of stories. It considers the fragile interplays of time of life and life experience, ethnicity, educational knowledge and position, personal commitments, gender and family that affect negotiations that may lead to positive outcomes, breakdown or confusion.

Introduction

This paper is a personal reflection on my recent doctoral study wherein I examined the processes involved of becoming a teacher among a group of immigrant women. I present the discussion by briefly describing the participants and the study and then focus on the ethics of negotiating access to the teachers and recounting their stories to others. Throughout the discussion I consider relationships between the teachers and myself as they shared personal stories that revealed some shocking truths about teaching environments in multicultural Victoria, I consider relationships in terms of Rogoff's (1998) notion of interpersonal space and my reading of Gee's (2001) conception of affinity identities in terms of the relationships that were played out in the study. In conclusion I reflect upon instances of breakdown during the research process that may caution others in their research design.

The study

The research participants were an atypical and diverse group: atypical in the sense they were overseas born and educated in countries where English was a foreign or minority language. The participants were nine immigrant women of diverse age, experience and cultural background. In this paper I refer to them as 'the teachers', 'immigrant teachers' or 'newcomers' and consider their different experiences in the process of becoming a teacher in various educational settings in Victoria, Australia. I also draw on some interview extracts throughout the paper so will briefly introduce the teachers whose voices I present.

Kim, who trained a teacher of Science, was a former colleague. She came to Australia as a refugee over twenty years ago. She had no English when she arrived so studies consistently to become a teacher in the Technical and Further Education (TAFE) sector where she taught English as A Second Language to immigrants, Mathematics component of the Certificate in General Education for Adults and all aspects of computer use to other teachers in the TAFE. She shares an affinity with her students and considers herself a role model for other skilled immigrants who come to Australia but lack English language ability. Nina, an experienced teacher of Mathematics, and I were strangers when we met. Like Kim, she spoke no English on arrival in Australia ten years ago. After a year of intensive English Nina enrolled in a Graduate Diploma of Education. She was teaching advanced Mathematics to international students whose background knowledge she understood.

Aya and Akiko had been in Australia less than five years. Both taught Japanese as a Language Other than English (LOTE). Aya had trained to become a teacher overseas but completed another teacher education course in Australia. She was in her second year teaching when we met. Akiko had no overseas teaching experience but her English skills were well developed. We had not met before the first interview and at that time she had had only a term teaching in a primary school. Sakura, also came from Japan and I had previously made her acquaintance . She had prior experience in their home country and recently completed a local teacher education course. Encounters with two other teachers are mentioned but these teachers are not identified.

My role was integral to the study so I became a participant too. Who am I you might ask?
In response to this question I hold the mirror to reflect my maturing Anglo-Celtic face. I am a teacher who has had good times and bad, memories I savour or prefer to forget. The intricate meld of past events shape who I am and lay the foundations of my philosophies of professional practice. My past determines my standpoint and continues to influence what I do and how. Yet this must be open to change with new technologies evolving to create new ways of knowing and doing and as global migrations become more commonplace. I am in the tide of the new present that sweeps away much of the past, yet I hold tight to memories of those times that helped craft the self that I am.

Memories of my own schooling, ongoing teacher education, parenthood and sending my own children and grandchildren to school have wisened me. My own stories lie filed in my mind but it was memories of others that I sought: the good and perhaps some rather forgotten. In the act of exploring and thence recounting other's stories I was cautioned to exercise prudence in the episodes I selected to present. I must listen to hear the voice of the other as her story unfolds; each word evokes a memory, crafted into cameos and vignettes that describe a new dimension. In Janesick's (2000) terms, this added another facet to the crystal, or according to Richardson (2000), presented 'multidimensionality'. As the stories unfolded our relationship became enmeshed and the images described flashed before my eyes.

In this narrative study I listened to the women's stories. They described the process of change, recounted adversities and told how they navigated access to a new educational environment. Although the research questions focused on the process of becoming a teacher, the ultimate aim was to understand how they negotiated transitions and were able to reconstruct their professional identity. I use the word reconstruct, as multiple forces had seemingly disqualified their prior experience, qualifications and perceptions of being professional (Kostogriz & Peeler, 2004), which had been documented in previous studies (Inglis & Philps, 1995; Santoro, Reid, & Kamler, 2001a).

My research design involved two conversational interviews and a focus group. The teachers chose the settings for the interviews, most of which took place in coffee shop venues, while we convened at the university for the focus group. Each teacher met with me on three occasions over a twelve-month period during which time I gained a sense of their lived experiences and the effects of these. My 'watershed' questions, as Casey (1993) informed, elicited lengthy responses that were narrative and poetic in nature. They were personal and told of heartache and disappointment, low points and highs, and how the teachers navigated new systems of knowledge. The narratives depicted a range of settings, relating to their school experiences in their country of origin as well as Australia. Structuring the thesis in this manner led me to better understanding of the teachers and their interactions with co-inhabitants of their workplace communities. During the data analysis stage I recognised the significance of my relationship with the teachers and that I too had a place in the study. The mutual and trusting bond we seemingly developed was in Gee's (2001) terms, affinity between ourselves.

Negotiating access
Relationships, or rather the affinities (Gee, 2001) that evolved were significant. While I sought to understand how the teachers navigated change, I also hoped to explore the impact of change on their self-perceptions. Commonalities we shared would be our teacher background while differences were

marked by our cultural tradition and knowledge. I had assumed the commonalities would be a suitable foundation for developing a positive relationship but was not fully aware of the possibility or consequence of break down. Generally our relationships reflected Gee's (2001) claim that affinities arise through shared social interactions that influence our self-perceptions. This is compatible with notions explored by Kostogriz (2004), who maintains that situational flows similarly shape our constructions of self. Here, the underlying meaning refers not only to those with whom we interact but the situations in which our interactions occur.

It is well theorized that we identify self in relation to other, thus perceptions of self fluctuate, mutate, transform and are subject to constant review, reformation and change (Dolby, 2000). In other words, it is situational as well. In our interactions our *Awareness of self* (Ivanic, 1998) presents to others the *kind of person one is* and in turn others identify us in a particular light (Gee, 2001). Our perceptions of self thus vary according to our roles in particular situations and respond to our identification with individuals, social groups, sets of values, interests and beliefs (Ivanic, 1998). Bearing in mind these characteristics, I consider the relationship between myself, as researcher, and the teachers who were the researched, On reflection of the research experience I question some aspects in relation to the ethics of accessing another person's life. My interpretation are informed by Rogoff's (1998) sociocultural outlook, which helps me to explore notions of spatiality in relationship in terms of personal, interpersonal and institutional or community planes.

If we consider ourselves on a personal plane, we recognise our individuality, unique life experiences and histories. Although as teachers, we may share commonalities, individually we are shaped by tradition, sociocultural knowledge and environments during historic progress of our lives. Our frames of reference are thus diverse (Goodson & Sikes, 2001), which may affect our relationships and the way others perceive us. Interpersonally we meet and interact on both personal and professional bases, and as we interact we negotiate our position in the relationship and identify ourselves relative to each other. We negotiate the relationships in terms of spatiality; however, our relationships have the capacity to change and mutate according to the situation and those present (Kostogriz, 2004), hence the perceptions we hold are situational too. On a communal plane we are participants in multiple communities of practice involved in the craft of teaching and discourses of schooling.

The intersections between interpersonal planes resemble borders between cultural understandings and are sites of immense tension (Kostogriz, 2002). They can also be points of suture (Hall, 1997) when a 'connective tissue', or space 'in between', represents common understanding (Bhabha, 1997). The overlap of planes creates a site of common ground or communal space in which one can manoeuvre within the bounds of self-knowledge while attempting to understand others' social norms (Crozet, Liddicoat, & LoBianco, 1999). Positive interactions affirm affinities while misunderstandings reflect apathy and indifference.

Communal planes such as the communities of schooling, described by Kostogriz and Peeler (2004) formed the basis of discussion. They saw '*Community* [as] a metaphor for representing the configuration of, and relations within, different sociocultural groups' (Italics added). Regarding the school as a community they shared 'a utopian vision … which would value diverse experiences of all teachers and see them as the resource rather than the liability … such a community is an ecological co-existence of differences' (p. 12). Ideally there would be mutuality in the interplay of teacher roles and relationships with 'symmetrical participation' and a 'stable cadre of teachers through such socialisation strategies as mentoring, ongoing support and sympathy' (p. 4).

Similarly reliant on mutual relationships was the stance I took in the study. The relationships I held with the teachers took me beyond the interpersonal plane to become a participant observer in their workplace. I am confident that situations shared were reliant upon the affinities that evolved and the apparent worth-while-ness the teachers saw in what I was doing. Unwittingly I realised that our interactions took place on the three planes I have discussed. Through our inter-personal interactions I became privy to a variety of workplaces, knowledge about colleagues and personal experiences. At the

time, I was aware that negotiating access to these personal and professional domains required discretion on my part. My ethical responsibility was to attain balance between my wants and the needs of the teachers. Despite this, there was some confusion and even uncertainty about what stories I sought. Nina's reflection is typical of other teachers' responses.

> I found I'm not very helpful
> this is not what Eleanor needs …
> it made me feel just a little bit guilty too (nervous laugh)
> this is not what she needs
> I'm not prepared well
> I'm not sure why this is happening
> but hopefully you will gain something out of all this (Nina).

Superficially the teachers' stories revealed instances of cross-cultural interactions and day-to-day events relevant to their shifts to a new educational culture. Embedded in these were sociological, pedagogical and historical records of their journeys of development and transformations in knowledge and professional practice (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). Episodes of their experiences in school communities in multicultural Melbourne at the dawn of the 21st Century have become historic records.

In hindsight I recognise the value of these and the mutual benefit us. Collectively we gained greater understanding of the complexities involved in the teachers' transformations and expectation they comply with what is done locally. The teachers' stories became a verbal record of their ongoing process of self-definition (Goodson, 1998) as they rethought their position in response to change. Potentially, problems they experienced would awaken others to their personal perspectives of the social realities (Janesick, 2000). A more confronting dimension was the potential to uncover conditions that the dominant social group would prefer to silence (LeCompte, 2000). Findings supported Santoro's (1999) study of ethnic minority teachers during their school practicum and her concerns about inequity, injustice and racist attitudes in schools. The study highlighted serious misunderstandings when interactions between teacher trainee, students and supervising teacher reached deadlock. The ramifications were negative for all and took a heavy toll on the trainee's sense of self.

Santoro's study (Santoro, 1999; Santoro, Reid, & Kamler, 2001b; Santoro *et al.*, 2001a) formed the basis for my, where the teachers recognised personal and professional benefits. They valued the experience, which gave them a chance to pause and reflect, to recall where they had come from, where they were now and where they were going. Responses by Aya and Nina express these views.

> we don't really spend time to stop
> and think about it
> we just have to keep going …
> and then we have to finish
> and then we have to start another year
> it's very good to think back about what I did (Aya).

> sometimes you're so busy, busy, busy
> you don't stop and think where are you,
> what are you doing,
> and this has made me stop and think …
> it gives you a sense of satisfaction
> that what you do and what you're going through
> difficulties and probably enjoyment
> it's the same things felt by other teachers too
> so you're in a way quite normal
> those experiences that you have is quite normal

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> it's not you, it's the circumstances you are in
> so if someone who is able to overcome them
> it will be a comfort too (Nina).

Personally, I gained insight into the teachers' journeys and the complexities involved. The stories created a new world of understanding, particularly during the analytic stage, when I crafted the oral performances of our conversations in the form of written text (Denzin, 1997). In this way,

> ordinary talk and speech, inscriptions of that speech in the form of transcriptions, written interpretations based on talk and its transcriptions, and performances of those texts … are always dialogical – the site at which the voice of the other, alongside the voices of the author, come alive and interact with one another (p. xiii).

Recording and reporting the stories I became aware that the individual interviews were dialogic and conversational and the teachers' texts formed rich poetic narratives. Influenced by Santoro *et al* (2001b) I changed conversations to narratives by deleting my own conversational turn. Using participants' own words I crafted raw data of interview transcripts to give them 'voice'. This 'ethno-poetic, self narrative' approach (Richardson, 2000) presented different 'multidimensionalities, and angles' like the image of a crystal (p. 934). As Richardson argued, 'writing up interviews as poems, honouring the speaker's pauses, repetitions, alliterations, narrative strategies, rhythms, and so on, may actually better represent the speaker than the practice of quoting prose snippets' (p. 933).

Tedlock (2000) views the process of crafting story fragments from interview texts as a continuum of time wherein minds run back and forth along its length. In this sense, I *narrativised* both individual and collective stories in a process that simultaneously *analysed* and *theorised* (Richardson, 2000). The teachers' stories revealed spatial orientations of their professional journeys enacted in their work environs and in personal domains of home, family and other interests. Our ensuing relationships were ideally a harmonious co-existence (Kostogriz & Peeler, 2004). The stories were borne through affinities of shared experience as women and teachers and established on a basis of trust and respect. Yet, on reflection I see that relationships were a fragile interplay of time of life and life experience, educational knowledge and personal commitment, gender and family. While our ethnicity, language background, educational experience and cultural knowledge differed in most instances there were positive outcomes.

Ethical issues
As a teacher researcher I became a guest in the intimacies of another's mind, and as Stake (2000) forewarns, should avoid embarrassment and intimidation or to expose confidentialities. My duty of care was to uphold a strict code of ethics to ensure personal and professional dignity. Reporting other teachers' stories requires the development of a positive relationship, is dependent on situational factors and the need to navigate the ethics of what it is possible to share. As I reflect on the ethics of the relationships that evolved I recall some with delight while more awkward moments I prefer to forget. For instance, I queried my interview technique and realised it could impinge on my ability to elicit the privileged information I sought (Densombe, 1998). I wrote the following comments in my diary at the time, '*some awkward spots … when I was uncertain how to lead on to a new question but it was generally good.*'

At times my desire to develop compatible relationships was taunted by the unpredictability of interactions with a group of women, most of whom were strangers when we met (Denzin, 1997), and as discussed above, most of the teachers were strangers. The implications of having worked collegially with two were another concern. This raised questions about how different relationships would affect our interactions. Goodson and Sikes (2001) liken such studies involving colleagues and other acquaintances to doing research 'in your own back yard' (p. 25). When one is privy to another's personal information they warn of 'unintended consequences' that might lead to imbalance of power. Foreseeing this likelihood, they alert other researchers to possible biases.

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Although I sought to develop a harmonious mutual relationship, there lay potential to unveil sensitive issues, such as marginality, tenure, workplace culture and racism (Casimir, Mattox, Hays, & Vasquez, 2000). Hence, there was always the fear of disturbing teachers' personal space. To reduce the risk, I tried to establish mutuality, minimise communication barriers and allay discomfort (Seiber, 1993). I recognised that the teachers were vulnerable and tried to protect them (Errante, 2000), show tact, avoid embarrassment and ensure they maintained 'face' (Berg, 1995).

Taking part in the study was overwhelming for one participant who opted out after taking part in the interviews and focus group. She and I had previously worked collegially, so as Goodson and Sikes (2001) explained I was researching a situation in my own back yard and my relationship was one of counsellor, confidant and friend. Although she openly shared her experiences with me, I was aware of difficulties, exacerbated by ongoing contractual positions teaching ESL and Mathematics to immigrant adults. She was always positioned on the borders and had never felt a sense of belonging. She confided her fervent desire to know the satisfaction associated with a permanent contract what it felt like to be a teacher in Australia. When contracts were renewed she got the 'leftovers' that no one else wanted. While she had been accepted to fill contractual positions for almost ten years, despite further study in a teacher education course she never attained a longer term or permanent position.

While in this case, the teacher imposed impenetrable boundaries and withdrew from the study I reflect that the interpersonal planes between her and me were perhaps out of alignment. Tension described by Kostogriz (2002) was paramount and possible misunderstanding led to lack of common ground. Despite my conciliatory role in the past now was devoid of hope to teach in either secondary or TAFE sectors. Loss of hope through continual marginalisation imposed constant 'barriers' that blocked access. Her situation resembles one reported in 'The Age' by Maganazik (1991) of discrimination against an immigrant teacher who found it impossible to continue teaching. The impact of negative attitudes towards her heavily accented English caused severe distress, loss of confidence and anxiety and as a result she was awarded compensation.

Personal reflections
Thinking on the positives and negatives in the research experience I am now cautioned by comments the teachers made concerning the process and our relationships. Some comments delighted while others revealed shadows of doubt. Nina expressed concern about telling her story, expressing her ideas and talking to a stranger, which were culturally unfamiliar.

> what I'm going to talk about
> I feel like I'm having an interview with a doctor …
>
> exposing your personal experiences …
> to talk to a complete stranger
> a total stranger about me, myself
> my teaching self' (Nina).

Entering others' spaces was fundamental to sharing their stories. The process involved in negotiation, which could take time. Having done so, even at the end of the project, there may be concerns as Akiko remarks. While it is possible to access others' personal spaces, intent may not always be clear.

> I feel as if we've developed a relationship
> and we communicate
> but we may be miscommunicating (Akiko)
>
> well I hope this is helpful to your project
> your research
> whatever (Kim).

> your topic is **changing culture, changing practice** …
> did I properly answer your questions? (Sakura).

As a researcher I continue to re-think my position and responsibilities. While I place emphasis on relationships I should also ascertain the other's understanding. Explanations should be ongoing in a longitudinal study to ensure the participants understand the research processes as well its progress.

Shared group membership offers a sense of mutuality but is merely a first step in a process of negotiation. Clarification of the purpose, expectations of commitment and relationship should be addressed. The negotiating process is a trajectory that extends from the initial meeting through the explanatory period and time of decision to participate or not. Negotiations may shuttle to and fro until an agreement is reached. The process involves my personal frame interacting with another as we establish a relationship. This involves the ethics of research, including commitments, a basis of trust and respect and relationships, which are borne through affinities of shared experience. In the process of sharing stories fragile interplays of time of life and life experience, ethnicity, educational knowledge and position, personal commitments, gender and family affect ongoing negotiations. The researcher who explores another's space must bear in mind possible tensions between interpersonal frames, be aware of others' needs and listen to their inner voice.

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