Being and becoming a researcher: Interrupted journeys

I left a road well travelled in primary schools to become a teacher educator. This journey began after a minor detour where I stopped by the roadside to investigate teachers’ perceptions of drama and discovered I enjoyed the change of scenery and the experience of becoming a researcher. This was what Rorty (1992, p.107) describes as a ‘transformative’ event, an encounter that re-arranged ‘priorities and purposes’ It changed my understanding of who I am and what I want to do with my life. I continued my journey at University, enjoying teaching pre-service teachers while preparing for a longer adventure, a PhD. Inspired by Kvale’s (1996, p. 4) view of the researcher as traveller, this paper describes and discusses my journey in the context of the busy life of an educator and administrator. While the journey is interrupted and the traveller often becomes distracted from the central task, there are also events that sustain and inspire me to continue.

Introduction

Keep going towards the horizon. Sit down and have a rest every now and again. But keep on going. Just keep on with it. Keep on going as far as you can. That's how you get there. (Leunig, 1996, p. 57)

This paper seeks to articulate in narrative form, not only what might interrupt an academic on their journey towards being and becoming an early career researcher but also what might sustain them enough to just keep going. This is by no means an epic tale; it simply seeks to articulate the reality of a research journey. Leunig’s words of encouragement presented above were helpful to me as an early career researcher, struggling to deal with an interrupted journey and searching for the essence of what might sustain me enough to just keep moving on.

Interrupted journeys

The surgeon frowned when I asked if I could delay the carpal tunnel operation until the end of semester. ‘Sorry,’ he replied, ‘there’s too much nerve damage to wait any longer. I’ll see you next Friday at St Vincent’s Hospital.’ I pondered how I would get through the final busy three weeks of semester as well as get my paper written for our Arts, Culture and Community Research Group symposium titled ‘Nurturing the research spirit: Narratives of being and becoming a researcher’. I didn’t want to let the group down. Besides, F1 papers are a ‘must’ in the new definition of being research active. This personal event had interrupted my research journey. Many early career researchers probably feel the strain of having an unexpected personal event place them in a dilemma. Often, early career researchers’ schedules are dictated by time
lines and deadlines; human frailty does not enter the picture. Make the deadline or you miss out.

I left my keyboard after a few minutes, the swollen fingers on my right hand were refusing to work properly and my head was still fuzzy from the strain of teaching and getting around in my heavily bandaged hand just days after the operation. This AARE paper was not going to happen. Then I received a phone call from a colleague in our research group to let me know that there had been a week’s extension granted. I had been given a few days grace to proceed on my interrupted journey. So here I am, telling you my story of being and becoming a researcher through interrupted journeys.

The choice to adopt the idea of research as a journey and the researcher as a traveller for this paper was inspired by Kvale (1996, pp.3-5) who described an interviewer ‘as a miner or as a traveller’. In my research, interviews were the central method used to collect the participants’ experiences of teaching. As I collected these stories of experience I was not seeking certainty. Instead it was the possibility of discovering new insights into the world of teachers’ work that lay at the core of my research. Kvale states that a researcher as a miner ‘digs nuggets of data or meanings out of a subject’s pure experiences’ and the value of what is uncovered is measured by its connection to ‘an objective, external, real world’. By contrast, the researcher as traveller takes on the role of an explorer, who examines ‘the landscape and enters into conversations with the people encountered’. Kvale goes on to say that the ‘miner metaphor brings interviews into the vicinity of human engineering; the traveller metaphor into the vicinity of the humanities and art.’

This view of the researcher as a traveller is therefore significant for those who work in the humanities or the arts. Chase (1995, p. 31) suggests that narrative approaches to research provide an opportunity for an empathic approach to research, one ‘that allows for discovery rather than to seek confirmation of hypotheses’ and it is an approach which ‘fosters more exhaustive quests for explanation rather than the illusion of finding a pre-existing truth’. As my research was about the teaching profession and more specifically, teaching in the arts, then adopting a view of research as a journey suited my purposes. This view of research also suggests that the researcher develops an intimate relationship with those whom they meet along the way. The new acquaintances become fellow researchers/travellers in the process; our relationship became one of co-researchers.

So how did I begin this journey of becoming a researcher? I entered my first classroom before I was twenty. There I stayed, as an educator of early childhood and primary students for the next thirty years. There was as slight interruption while I travelled overseas and later while I raised my two children. I loved my work as a teacher. It wasn’t until I decided to go back to post graduate study that a whole new world of learning and teaching opened up to me, and my journey into research began.

My first experience of becoming a researcher was when I took three months long service leave to investigate classroom teachers’ perceptions of educational drama. Spending time in conversation with my colleagues was an enlightening experience. I felt, for a moment at least, I had given my fellow teachers a voice. As Beattie (2000) states, narrative approaches provide ‘new possibilities and ways of hearing the details of professional ways of knowing’ (p.3). While Cortazzi (1996, p.5) argues that any
real changes in education will not be carried out until ‘teachers’ perceptions and experiences are taken into account’. He goes on to suggest that we need to know ‘how teachers themselves see their situation, what their experience is like, what they believe and how they think’. What sustained me on this part of the journey was the knowledge that I was providing a forum where teachers could speak about their experiences and what they had to say was of value. I had also been provided the opportunity to reflect on the classroom realities of those generous teachers.

This experience also meant I had the time to stop what I was doing and attend to my research; the journey became a central part of my life. I left the hustle and bustle of the classroom behind. I spent every day at home, in silence, immersed in the data and writing the thesis. It was as if the rest of the world disappeared and the stories I was working with became my only reality. Going for a walk was the only distraction I enjoyed because I could exercise my body and think about the work at the same time. I found household chores such as washing, cleaning and shopping for food boring and a waste of my time. It seemed what I really needed for this journey was both mental and physical space removed from everyday existence into the world of the research project. I remember that I had returned to teaching before the final draft of the thesis was finished and it took me months to finally get the editing done because my journey had been interrupted by the distractions of a professional life.

In many ways I felt enriched and rewarded by the process more than by the product; although I have to say, the personal challenge of thesis writing was at times soul destroying it could also be soul uplifting. As Kvale (1995, p.4) suggests, the experience of travelling with others on a research journey may not only provide new information, the traveller might also be changed. ‘The journey might instigate a process of reflection that leads the interviewer to new ways of self understanding’. It involved what Schon (1991, p.5) described as ‘the reflective turn’ where the researcher is ‘led to reflect on their own understandings of the subjects’ understandings and in the process of discovering another’s practice they are moved to ‘question their own’. All of these facets that emerge from the experience of becoming a researcher can provide enough sustenance for a researcher to just keep going.

My journey then took another major detour. I accepted a job as a lecturer within an Education Faculty. I became a teacher of pre-service teachers. The change to my professional life was remarkable. I was now teaching adults not children. There was a much higher level of academic rigour required in every aspect of my work. The unrelenting use of all forms of technology combined with the complicated tasks related to the administration of units was staggering. I loved my new job. This new destination suited me just fine.

It took me a year to really settle in, find my feet in the new landscape. I soon discovered that I was surrounded by colleagues who constantly talked about and discussed research over coffee, lunch - any time really. I realized that I was surrounded by fellow travellers, willing to share their experiences and offer support and advice to a novice researcher. It seemed to me that they had mapped the terrain pretty thoroughly and were willing to provide advice about the best ways to reach a destination unscathed. I had found another source of inspiration to embark on a new journey, I enrolled in a PhD.
This would prove to be a long journey. My interest had moved from how practising teachers’ perceived educational drama to documenting the experiences of a group of pre-service teachers when they used drama as a pedagogical tool in classrooms settings. As Denzin (1989, p.25) suggests, qualitative researchers ‘find their own worlds of experience are the proper subject matter of inquiry (unlike positivist who separate themselves from the worlds they study)’. I had developed an interest in pre-service teachers because teacher training was now at the centre of my work. My research would track a group of pre-service teachers as they moved from the campus to the classroom. I would document, through narrative inquiry, their experiences of teaching drama in early childhood and primary classrooms. In order to deeply explore the drama teaching experiences of the same cohort of pre-service teachers, a longitudinal study approach was adopted. With interviews as the primary source of data, the deep exploration of the teaching experiences of the ten participants came about as the stories were gathered over a three-year period. As I suggested earlier, this journey was to be a long one.

The research process began when the pre-service teachers were in their third year of a four-year education degree program and their participation continued until they completed their first year as graduate teachers. The study gave me time to wander ‘together with’ the participants as they told me stories of their lived world - their experiences of teaching drama in classrooms (Kvale 1996, p.4). This extended journey with the participants ensured that a large number of stories of teaching drama could be collected and that the settings for these narratives would change over time. Just as we are changed by our travels, I hoped to capture similar changes in this group of pre-service teachers as they made progress towards joining the teaching profession.

Everything moved along well. I made a start by conducting a pilot study to assess whether these approaches would draw out sufficient and appropriate data to ensure the research purpose could be achieved and the research question answered. Janesik (1998, p.45) describes this decision making approach as a ‘warm-up’. While I had conducted research previously, my interviews had been aimed at formulating teachers’ perceptions of educational drama. This new project, sought to gather narrative accounts of experiences. I felt such a trial was warranted. Polkinghorne (1997, p.12) in describing research as practice, suggests there needs to be ‘tacit strategic improvisations in the service of guiding purpose’ my pilot study therefore became a rehearsal of process. Using the journey metaphor, it was akin to taking short orienteering expeditions before setting out for a long hike.

During the pilot study I found that I could concentrate on particular issues, establish communication approaches and assess the appropriateness of the study’s form. (Janesick, 1998). I was able to assess the ease with which I could communicate my expectations to the participants, gather their journals, prepare the semi-structured interview schedule, conduct the interviews and finally document these experiences of teaching in a narrative form. I was able to focus on the success of my approaches with regard to what Janesick (1998, p.43) describes as ‘the meaning and perspectives of the participants’; an issue that was central to my research purpose. Perhaps this was akin to the process of familiarising yourself with the culture and language of the country.
you are about to visit on your travels. I began to feel more confident with the processes required for this qualitative study to be successful.

The pilot process also gave me the opportunity to develop confidence in conducting effective qualitative interviews. As Kvale (1996, p.147) explains, conducting several pilot interviews will increase the researcher’s ability to create ‘safe and stimulating interactions’. It was very important that my participants became co-researchers in this journey, so the pilot study assisted me in formulating the approaches required for a collaborative environment to thrive. Any journey is best shared with friends along the way and so this pilot project examined the processes that would best establish meaningful, collegial friendships. I sensed that for this research journey to be a success the quality of the relationships I formed with the participants was unequivocally linked to the quality of the data I would generate. It also seemed to me that the relationship I had with my fellow travellers would help to nourish me in my research endeavour.

Once the pilot study was completed I could begin my extended research journey in earnest. I found I could manage the extra workload involved in the pilot study during semester breaks; once the marking was complete and before the preparation for the next semester needed to be done. I found it easiest to take my annual leave, spend a couple of days taking a brief holiday and then I could return to the solitude of my home to focus, uninterrupted on the research task. At work I found my office was as distracting as a busy airport. The ping from the email, the ring of the phone, the knock on my door and the buzz of voices in the corridor all provided too many distractions for the level of concentration I required to get my work done. It seemed that in this part of my journey I preferred to travel alone with just my stories for company.

Again something happened to disrupt my travels. I was asked to take on the role of Program Director for the Bachelor of Education degree within the Faculty. In reality, this appointment meant becoming the principal of a school of close to 800 students. While my teaching load was reduced the myriad of administration tasks related to this position were both energy- and mind-sapping. For the first time in my professional career I felt myself facing a dilemma in time management. How could I maintain my commitment as an educator while at the same time properly fulfil my obligation to the successful directorship of the program? I noticed that the weekends became a time to catch up on my preparation for teaching. I was not prepared to compromise the standard of my teaching. During the week my priorities lay with the administration tasks related to the Program Director’s role. I suddenly discovered that whenever I thought about my research my heart started to race and I felt a rising sense of panic. The one day each week I had ‘set aside for research’ on my time table rarely eventuated. Anyway, I knew from my past experiences that I needed blocks of uninterrupted time to spend with my research, not snatched moments of time. I would forget about the research and wait for the break between semesters to grab my block of undisturbed time to continue my journey.

I’m currently still in this dual role; educator and administrator. The idea of being and becoming an emerging researcher makes me smirk a little because
the time I have to continue my research sometimes seems like secret moments. So what sustains me to believe this journey can be completed? There are two factors that nourish and support my belief that I will continue, just as other factors have sustained me in the past. The first one is the commitment I feel to the participants who travelled with me over the past four years and the second is the collegial support I receive from the Arts, Culture and Community Research Group.

Over the four year period I spent interviewing my participants I developed a close relationship with them both at a personal and professional level. Now that I have finished my interviews I often find myself thinking about them and wondering how they are travelling in their professional and personal lives. When I experienced this shared journey, I became inextricably linked to my companions long after that part of the journey had ended. This is best described by Clandinin and Connelly (2000, p. 20) who state that in the process of narrative inquiry ‘the inquirer enters this matrix in the midst and progresses in this spirit, concluding the inquiry still in the midst of living and telling, reliving and retelling, the stories of experiences that make up peoples’ lives’. Somehow I feel as if I’m still in that matrix. I want to know what has happened to my participants since we ended our wanderings together. Have their experiences as a novice teacher been positive and exciting? Have they been teaching drama? What experiences make up their lives today?

Sometimes I’m lucky enough to hear some news. Just last week I received an unexpected email from one of my participants that read:

Dear Julie
Hi! I hope that your research and writing is going well. I just thought that I would drop you a line to let you know of your part in a big event in my life. Well it goes like this - when I mentioned that you were going to interview me at the Burnie campus Alistair offered to drop me off and pick me up. I accepted this offer so when you had finished interviewing me he was waiting for me in the resource area. (This area holds sentimental value as it is where we met) Anyway he says ‘Lets pretend it was like old times and sit down there.’ So, I oblige and he pulls out a red rose with a ring on it and proposes!!!! So I’ll be married in 2 weeks’ time. He later confides that he wanted to propose in the place where we met but could not figure out how to get me to the N.W. centre- so your interview was just what he needed and came at just the right time!
Happy writing!
Jane

It is contact like this that nurtures my travelling instinct, provides me with the nourishment to continue my journey, despite the interruptions. One day the stories of these teachers will be told. I feel an obligation to the ten participants who gave so generously of their time and who so willingly shared their stories of teaching.

‘Continuity is possible because learning is a human endeavour. Change and continuity are brought together by human agency’. (Bateson 1994 in Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 7). In academic life, it is often the human agency of collegial support that will nurture the research spirit through troubled times. It is within our Arts, Culture and Community Research Group that tales of research adventures are told and shared. We respect each others work and knowledge and we are willing to support each other
in any way we can; reading each others’ work, sharing and discussing recent publications and most importantly - laughing together. All of these activities that seem on the surface to be simple acts of friendship actually have the power to foster a level of continuity that will sustain a traveller on their research journey.

**Conclusion**

After three days away from emails, phone calls and marking waiting for me in my office I can reflect on the fact that while the personal and the professional may interrupt my journey as a researcher, there are special aspects to my life that give me the courage and endurance to just keep going. One aspect is the empowering nature of the research act itself. Narrative research in education allows the teachers and students in our schools the opportunity to be given a voice, and for that voice to be heard. As an educational researcher, I am changed through the act of research. The new knowledge I uncover will lead, through reflection, to a deepening understanding of the world of teachers’ work. The special participants who share my journey with me also provide the inspiration to just keep going. And as I have been fortunate enough to create a band of fellow travellers with my colleagues, then I know that they will sustain my endeavours through thoughtful encouragement, advice and support.

My right hand feels itchy – now that’s a good sign!
References:


