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Narrative histories: journeys of discovery

A narrative history is a journey of discovery that keeps memories alive. Narratives of those who lived in and influenced a particular time reveal the social, political and educational landscape. Memories of those who contributed to education in Victoria in the past century are quickly fading and their part may be forgotten as the reality of their ageing looms. It is important therefore to document the contribution of those who shaped our education system and to record their stories.

Interviews with various people and members of organisations illuminate the significance of their work and their legacies to education. Narratives shared by those who remember add voice to archival records. This paper addresses narrative journeys of discovery and explores how personal accounts, interviews and examination of relevant archival sources keep their histories alive. Memories of this immediate post generation of educators bring reality to their contributions and enhance our educational knowledge.

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Time passes and we easily forget. During our lifetime the histories of the moment are so much a part of the day-to-day that often we underestimate their value. We easily forget the historic relevance of just 'the-other-day'. In view of the ease with which we forget our recent past, in this paper I look at ways to explore educational history through narratives of people who served in the Victorian education system. I consider the accessibility of such people who served just 'the other day' and to information relevant to their careers. I bear in mind the significance of personal accounts to give light to the changing social and political era and processes involved in identifying appropriate supporting records held in various archives that trace the histories of yesterday's educators and their legacies to education. Often it is in years to come that we recognise their worth and the input of those who for a while took centre stage. Who were they, you may ask? Where are they now?

To respond to these questions I reflect on my current research project of writing a biographical history of a senior administrator of education in Victoria. The biography touches on his early life in the post WW1 years but focuses on his forty-five years service to education and the various roles he played from 1939-84. The process of writing this biography is complex as it involves exploring the life of a living person, whose life story embraces the lives of others of similar ilk. This leads to intricate networks of others who supported the biographical subject's innovations and some who opposed his notion of change. There is value in him being able to justify his actions and decisions he made but at the same time care must be taken to present a clear picture and to consider alternate perspectives.

The subject of my biography is now an educational octogenarian whose service to education in Victoria culminated in his leadership and senior administrative positions (1979-1984). Because of his ideas and length of time he had to implement them he is probably Victoria's most significant education leader since the Frank Tate era. His service as a teacher, educator, researcher, visionary leader and administrator embraced the war years, the post war period of rapid social change, economic development and population growth, and the ensuing years. As a result of his policy papers, his contribution to education was far reaching and drove the direction of education in Victoria.

I conceptualise this paper in terms of narrative, an approach used in the data collection. The term *narrative* is exchangeable with *story* that depicts process of the collaboration between the *'story-*

giver' and 'research-taker' (Goodson, 2003). Despite this being a research project I think in terms of story rather than research. As receiver, rather than 'research-taker' I think of myself as 'story-taker' by mutual consent. Goodson warns about tilting the balance in the relationship and for me the word 'story' infers greater affinity between story sharers, or the narrator and me. While ethically I present myself as a researcher I am cautious to develop a sense of mutuality with the intent to empower the story-giver. Narratives thus shared have resulted in lengthy accounts of memories re-lived or in lively anecdotes that give a snapshot into a particular scene. Short snappy phrases, intonation, gesture and merely just a few words add valuable insight and meaning. Each is a *narrative fragment* that adds to the story. Whether the narratives are oral or written, lengthy accounts, phrases or fragments, they form *narrative threads* that piece together as the stories unfold.

The background

After the Second World War, education in Victoria underwent decades of extraordinary change. Educators of this era lived through a time of amazing social transformation. Its momentum was surely unforseen and the possibilities held unimagined. As the decade unfolded, post war Melbourne's population grew and spread, initiating pressures to develop widespread suburban infrastructure. Wartime and post war marriages prompted a burgeoning birth rate and together with an increased level of immigration the population swelled. These events triggered urgency to establish schools to educate this new generation of children. Unprecedented educational development in planning and constructing of schools occurred, which required an urgent expansion of numbers of teachers in training and a need to establish colleges to train new teachers. In response to the increased demand for schooling, active expansion became part of the educational scene throughout the 1950s, 60s and 70s. These years of enormous change are identifiable by the period of reconstruction, the expansion of services and increased social freedoms. Preceded by cultural change in Australia in the 1960s, there was a trend to society being 'more participative, more permissive', influenced by the persuasive pressure of advertising, increased public comment from radio and TV (Connell, 1993 p. 660).

While educational administrators coped with enormous pressures imposed by ongoing and increasing demands they attempted to democratise educational services. Simultaneously there was opportunity for innovative leadership he faced pressure from union groups and parent organizations. They urged further reform, by decreasing class sizes increasing specialist support, improving conditions and demanded a voice in decision-making. Though the groups had different approaches to solving problems and means to achieve their goal it appears at the heart was the

common quest to optimise children's educational potential. However the gulf between administration/inspectorate and teacher education *'was probably deeper than I had reckoned' (Personal communication).*

The narrative landscape

Deciphering the educational changes that took place during this period is like painting a landscape that depicts the background of the era. An artist's careful brushstrokes reveal the scene, the aura and the atmosphere. In the same way, people's stories are snapshots frozen in time that reveal the history of the moment. Narrative histories describe events that occurred and bring new dimensions to those who view them today. Rather than focus on the event itself each narrative holds meaning for those who listen, as it did for those who lived the experience (Chase, 2005). By recalling memories of times gone by, tellers of stories can share with others the histories of schooling and teaching with inspector's visits, overflowing classrooms, the first day influx and how they established new schools. Ways of sharing might be through formal or informal interaction in the course of interview or conversation. It may involve listening to recounts, reading personal memoirs and letters or documents.

Each narrative plays a key part in writing the biography. As we notice our landscape changes with the time of day, the social, political and educational landscape was evolving over the years. Against this background I depict the life of the educator whose story I write: the depression and his education; the war years and his early teaching; the post war period of reconstruction; expanding educational infrastructure; teacher training; administration and new directions for education. Each day is a journey of discovery as I develop knowledge of the education system, the politics and philosophies involved and learn more about the key personnel who served. Politics of the past show the system as it was and demonstrate the urgency for new infrastructure and opportunity for innovation.

> *Well, my father - adults, parents didn't really know much about secondary education. I'm talking here about the early thirties and he didn't understand about a secondary school ... in the end of '53, this is the big advance in teacher education; the demand for teachers was quite huge. The baby boomers had been hard at work and they had been producing ... the baby boomers is the result of the Ex-servicemen's activity (Personal communication),*

In my position as a biographical historian I have become witness to others' educational knowledge, and try to imagine their innate attitudes and the realities they saw (Goodson, 2003). In doing this I

am aware of the feminine[1] perspective I bring. I am guided by Chase (2005) who suggests not merely thinking of these histories in terms of collating and sequencing information; instead to consider the people involved as social actors. My feminine lens helps me identify their human traits rather than consider them as objects or educational artifacts. This gives rise to an interesting phenomenon, as the majority of people are male, which is not surprising as a male hierarchy administered the Victorian Education Department. Entering the administrative hub one saw '*the five, six big boys had their own offices but the secretaries were all together outside … all the secretaries were out in the big open plan area' (Personal communication).*

My acknowledgement of being female highlights the juxtaposition of my own gender in relation to the predominance of male narrators. Male/female duality could pose questions of voice and interpretation, raise issues of whose truths are portrayed and whether they are factual, fictional or reconstructions (Denzin, 1997b; Errante, 2000). In response I claim open-mindedness, awareness of power relations in the research relationships and my intent that the narratives 'speak for themselves'. My aim is to hear personal stories as others describe the social, political and educational landscape they knew and I feel that my feminine lens takes me beyond the surface to sense others' sensitivities in my attempt to understand their emotions, views and attitudes.

The narrative process

The narrative process is a shared experience whether orally, textually or conversationally shared as short specific description, extended storyline or recount of an entire lifetime. Ideally story-giver and story-taker collaboratively share the 'historic situation', 'social structure' and 'moment of experience' (Denzin, 1997a p. 39) and ultimately reach mutual understanding. Collaboration is fundamental, according to Goodson (2003), as stories 'cannot be all give and no take' (p 45) and the need to maintain a balanced relationship.

Narratives of bygone days awaken perceptions and thoughts so that the receiver experiences what the other has known. It is as though in the narrative shared in story form, the receiver can live within the pages of another's life. For the story-giver, each word evokes a memory, crafted into a cameo or vignette that brings a new dimension to the whole. Cameos, vignettes and narrative fragments of a life correspond to Janesick's (2000) notion of a crystal with its multiple planes. Richardson (2000) thinks in terms of 'multidimensionality' among pieces that fit together. Each

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[1] Feminine is selected rather than Feminist. It identifies the author by gender rather than epistemological stance.

plane has unique value that offers a glimpse into the narrator's social world and ongoing process of self-definition (Goodson, 2003) within their world at the time.

The Bahktinian notion of identity presents itself in 'the intimate connection between the project of language and the project of selfhood' (Munro, 1998 p. 6 cited in Goodson, 2003). The narrator simultaneously depicts who they were in each particular situation and moment of time. The one time parent activist who became a politician presents multiple faces as do the teachers' college lecturer who turned teachers' college principal and young secondary teacher, once union activist who took on administrative roles. Their notion of identity and professionalism is coloured by their stance on their perception of selfhood which shifts as they recall their career stages and define themselves situationally (Kostogriz & Peeler, 2004) through position, achievement and fellow travellers. Whatever their role,

> 'The knowledge we had defined the people we were … the forms of knowledge which teachers have are substantially implicated in the kind of people teachers are and believe themselves to be' (Goodson, 2003 p. 4).

The affinities in relationships with others are part of the process of self-definition (Gee, 2001). They are mutable, and as the Bahktin implies, one defines self in relation to others. The nature of the relationship can affect the degree of mutuality, the ability to share common experiences and even attain a sense of belonging (Alfred, 2001). Affinities in the narrative process potentially influence what is shared, particularly when strangers meet as their interactions can be unpredictable (Denzin, 1997a). Softening the experience by minimising possible tensions can establish common ground and create ambience for sharing stories. The scene thus set is facilitated by open-ended or 'watershed questions' (Casey, 1993) that trigger a stream of memory in 'a moment of flow' (Errante, 2000 p. 19) as the following example suggests.

> *Tell me about the first time you met him? I'd like to hear that.*

> *I think it must have been about the middle of the 1950s and he was the organizer of an in service training course at Melbourne Teacher's College. The Department used to organize these every couple of years. You'd had two or three different subjects in the in-service course. At that stage he was in Survey and Planning. There were teachers from Geography, Commerce and I think Arts: there were about 200 teachers in all … (Personal communication)*

My narrative journey

This narrative journey is personal. The journey is slow. Step by step, piece-by-piece it holds interest and challenge. Stories, whether shared formally or informally, orally, textually or in visual form,

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are the building blocks. My journey commenced just over a year ago after prolonged negotiations as my diary entries show.

April 28th 2006
I was faxed a copy of his 'doings' over his professional lifetime. Strangely, he phoned me later in the evening to ask whether I had received the fax and could not understand my excitement. I took these events as a licence to go ahead and felt there was an underlying meaning.

July 23rd 2006
He phoned last week (Wed 12th) and I suspected he was 'fishing' about my work and interest in pursuing the idea of writing the biography. He was keen to read my thesis so this week I sent it to him. He wanted to see how I write. On Thursday he phoned to say it had arrived, he like my writing and references and would like me to do it. I could hardly believe my ears!

Though authorised to proceed I am aware that narrating the life of a living person needs caution! I have found it to be a complex constant balancing act. There is need for tact, respect (Berg, 1995), neutrality and determination to be non-judgemental (Densombe, 1998). The duality of the relationship through situation and story can seesaw and easily become tilted and skewed as it sways to and fro. The sense of stability resumes when mutuality and harmony are again attained. As the author of another's life I constantly walk a fine line and step warily as if 'walking on egg shells' (Selleck, 2006). The relationship and levels of affinity, as Gee (2001) describes, determine the degree of closeness that influence what is shared or withheld (Clifford, 1986). Similarly, what is shared is situationally affected (Kostogriz & Peeler, 2004). Taking a walk, sharing a meal, at home or with others, brings different perspectives and new stories to light; the public, the private, those told often, not previously shared or seemingly too insignificant to matter. Attaining degrees of intimacy in the personal, interpersonal and public domains is like peeling the onion to get at the core. This brings into question the ethical responsibilities involved in telling stories of others. What should be told and what withheld?

Making links
Initially, the biographical subject was my primary link to others who had shared experience throughout his career and could bring knowledge from alternative standpoints. Frequently, each has in turn led to another and yet another link. Tracing and making connections has required me to adapt and meld to each relationship, in some it is easier than others.

Narrating the story of another's life is complex, convoluted and often confusing. The trajectory is long and progress between beginning and end may appear steady but vision is easily obscured. It's a long row to hoe. Neither story-giver nor taker should consider the activity or relationship lightly;

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the narrative journey is one of commitment, persistence and being prepared 'for the long haul' (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996).

Mostly we meet in private homes but sometimes in office settings. Ideally encounters are conversational yet there are always degrees of reserve. Conversations can be alive with new information or result in staid, predictable replies. Following each conversation I try to 'keep the door open', retaining access for further questions. Emails and phone calls prompt quick responses to follow-up questions or clarification of information. Borrowing books, items from personal collections and other memorabilia are useful means of follow-up. Among the materials I have collected are a complete set of 'In-house' publications, not available in public libraries, photographs and a collection of personal folios written by an education columnist.

Library and archival clues

Though the biographic subject has been a prominent educator in Victoria whose public face remains well known, it is necessary to sift through various sources of evidence to compile a complete career profile. The volumes on library shelves hold clues in their texts, references lists and indexes. Many appear to have superficial value but careful scrutiny brings new glimmers of light. Classic educational texts, lesser known volumes and unpublished theses are each a valuable source and may describe events in general or bring focus to specific events. They reveal what another has found from their own archival searching for their particular cause. Evidence of days-gone-by illuminate another facet of the educational scene; albeit in texts with apparent alter focus or seemingly minimal clues. Selleck's (1982) account of Tate's career in the early 1900s gives glimpses into his subject's social, political and educational world that also inform this study. Tate's role as Director and his conviction to establish a secondary system of government schooling are among his legacies to benefit to the biographical subject as a student at school and educational leader. Selleck's work informs how changes took place over the years and from its description of the Director's role and the Westminster system. One can see from this how the role and system changed in later years and administration of education entered the political realm when politicians accused the Victorian Education Department of being 'fragmented, confused, under vigorous criticism, and vulnerable to any determined attack' (Connell, 1993 p. 653). Another view saw that the new Education Amendment Act (1981) that replaced the 1929 Act acknowledged the presence of the Director-General but removed his administrative powers '*vested firmly in the Minister … political head appears not only on stage but backstage as well*' (Shears, 1985).

'Vision and Realisation' (Blake, 1973) gives insight into the Victorian scene and its historic foundations and in this way also informs the study. Similarly, Connell's (1993) work 'Reshaping Australian Education 1960-1985' is comprehensive, readily accessible and recent. Its outline of the educational scene, Australia-wide and State-by-State, the evolution of change and tendrils of Federal Government intervention establishes the educational climate relative to the subject's career development. Elaborations of latter day stories are shared in 'Perspectives on Educational Change' (Frazer *et al.*, 1985) where educators and others interested in the changing educational scene of the early 1980s present their views. Multiple prisms of a single event rouse controversy about the truth. Perhaps as one author suggests, to respect the confidentiality of others the truth may never be known (p. 314). Where it seems the truth is undefined, archival searching in the cause of this biographical investigation may bring new light.

Searching archival records has been described as a detective's role, often hindered by fragility of microfilm and the viewers that blur (Johnson, 1992). Initially I was overwhelmed by the thought of searching the archives in the Public Record Office and the State Library. The process of tracing detail appeared prolonged but this summation was incorrect and time has developed familiarity with these and numerous other institutions and their knowledgeable librarians. The ABC, the Herald and the Age hold vital clues. The State Library has incomplete resources and the Australian Education Union library holds the only set of Ministerial policy papers of 1984. It is exciting to locate new materials in libraries large and small, public institutions and private collections that may have been stacked away under a desk. The biographical subject's private collection is unique, as his policy documents are not found elsewhere. Sadly, among the libraries are the 'haves' and 'have-nots' and their records of yesterday are incomplete.

Despite knowing the whereabouts of drawer stacked upon drawer of the daily news stored as microfilm, carefully prepared newspaper files on individuals who held the public eye and carefully archived boxes in specialist collections the search must continue. The detective's role is ongoing and like an archaeologist I must excavate and continue to dig and sift through newspapers of the day Australia-wide, Hansard files, parliamentary proceedings, reports, policy changes and related debates.

Time has developed familiarity among the archival and library records I am scouring. Continually I follow tendrils that lead to new sources of knowledge and meet interested people along the way. Networks develop and again, one leads to another and when the end seems blind there is someone to show a new direction.

The journey ends

"The narrative journey, for what you might ask?' 'To keep memories alive,' I reply. Times are changing and memories of those who contributed to today's education system are not readily accessed or records easily found. Their commitment to education must not be taken lightly and their legacy to today's system not overlooked. As their contributions to education in the past are legacies of the system today. We are the benefactors of what they imagined, created and accomplished. Their contributions must not be overlooked or filed away in archival boxes. The impact of this narrative journey and historic research will keep memories alive and bring recognition to our former educators and the part they played. Now is the time to hear the stories they have to tell, to delve into their personal records, talk with them, laugh with them, stir their memories and hear their stories, before it is too late.

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