

“TUMBLING” THROUGH LIFE... AND EXPECTING A SAFE LANDING: A narrative journey of an educational researcher ®

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Abstract

This autobiographical and personal narrative is a representation of my journey as an experienced educational researcher, but one who has experienced a disrupted educational career path. My research development journey over almost four decades has been defined by seemingly inextricable phases, which I have identified as experience, proficiency, and reflection. The narrative inquiry approach used for this paper has revealed that my early career as an active elite gymnastics performer provided an important apprenticeship for my current role as an academic and researcher. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) argue that through narrative we can construct and reconstruct our personal and professional identities, and in the process begin to understand the significance of particular events.

The autonomous skill performance I demonstrated as an elite gymnastics competitor was enriched through my engagement in the phenomenon of “flow”. The flow phenomenon is a mental state in which a person is fully immersed in what they are doing, characterised by a feeling of energised focus, dedication, and feelings of success and engagement (Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). From the unique perspective of an elite competitor, I have sought to pass on my practical experience, and communicate my understanding of skilled performance to other aspiring talented individuals through coaching. In addition, I have provided qualitative evaluation of skilled performance of elite athletes through judging to the highest levels of elite sport.

In my current role as an academic in the field of education and human movement studies, I have brought together my expertise, experience, and knowledge into my doctoral studies and educational research. My understanding of how the human body functions as an integrated system has informed my holistic approach to research. McAdams (2001) argued that the content of a life story embodies a person’s identity and that both develop and change over time. In this paper, I reflect on my research journey through the process of narrative inquiry. My focus is the reconstruction of my practical experience and knowledge from my gymnastics career, as well as my experiences as an academic and researcher. Performing at an elite level, which requires one to intimately understand their strengths and limitations and to train consistently, has informed my academic approach. Education can also be viewed as an elite performance requiring the resilience, dedication, and commitment that I demonstrated as an elite gymnast. This paper demonstrates how my research journey continues to be informed by this early experience, allowing me to train my pre-service teachers to recognise and facilitate moments of “flow” and also execute numerous safe landings in their teaching career.

Introduction

To reconstruct my journey of becoming an educational researcher I need to reflect on my research interests and expertise. It is important to look back in order to understand the present and prepare for the future. Our present ambitions and abilities can often be traced to our childhood. Therefore, reflecting on, and identifying, the events in my past which have influenced who I am now, what I believe, and what I consider to be important is essential in the formation of one's personal, physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual life.

My research journey begins with the identification of specific research events. I use these events as a reflective tool that aims to tell the reader what activities I was engaged in, what I did to gain what I know and do, and how I came to be who I am now. This journey reveals how my abilities are connected to the type of research work I am doing now and how they will inform the research activities I hope to do in the future. The process of identifying the events, therefore, begins with remembering my earliest experiences of research.

Although I have unknowingly used narrative inquiry in the past, I have now become more aware of its value in researching and making meaning of life events. Specifically, I am now interested in accessing a more internal, private, reflective and contemplative way of expressing my research, a form of reflective inquiry. As Richardson (2000) notes, autobiographical writing provides an opportunity to gain insight into one's professional practice and explores how one constructs the world as it relates to one's practice as an educator.

My research development journey over almost four decades has been defined by seemingly inextricable phases. The phases which I have identified as experience, proficiency and reflection were informed by Clandinin and Connelly (1989) who similarly constructed the following elements in the lives of teachers, which are identified as the elements of narrative method: experience and time, personal knowledge, and reflection and deliberation. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) connect experience with narrative inquiry: "Experience is what we study, and we study it narratively because narrative thinking is a key form of experience and a key way of writing and thinking about it" (p. 18).

As a professional educator who has been and is currently engaged in research in the areas of sports sciences and education, I have utilised both quantitative and qualitative research designs and methodologies. For example, in my Masters and PhD theses, and in many reports and research articles which I have written, I have used quantitative and qualitative research designs where the problems prescribed the methods. Mills (1959) argues that "Every man [is] his own methodologist!" (p. 123) and, furthermore, that methods must not prescribe problems; rather, problems must prescribe methods (p. 72).

My purpose in this paper is to examine the process I have been engaged in as a way to present, theorise and examine my research journey using a narrative inquiry method. I recognize the relationship between my role as a researcher, my area of research specialization, and the possible social benefits that enrich my life. This was highlighted to me by recent interviews I conducted with elite coaches as part of gymnastics research I am currently engaged in. The conversation with these coaches

brought about memories from the past, rapid thoughts of gymnastics competitions, snippets of coaching incidences and judging experiences, all shot through my mind in split seconds.

As Mooney (1957) pointed out “research is a personal venture which, quite aside from its social benefits, is worth doing for its direct contribution to one’s own self-realization. It can be taken as a way of meeting life with the maximum of stops open to get out of experience its most poignant significance, its most full-throated song” (p. 155).

Experience

The importance of experience during my research journey cannot be underestimated. My college years in Vienna, Austria (1968-1970) were filled with full-time studies, gymnastics training and competitions. My understanding and knowledge of how the body works was instrumental in my desire to improve performances in both training and competitions, not only for myself, but also for the other gymnasts I coached. I believe this desire to understand the theoretical foundations of human movement encountered in my initial full-time studies in Vienna marked the beginning of my research journey.

This first phase of my research journey saw me complete a Diploma of Physical Education at the Austrian College of Physical Education (1969). I was also a member of the Austrian Men’s Gymnastics Team competing in the World Gymnastics Championships in Ljubljana, Yugoslavia (1970), whilst also competing regularly on the European Gymnastics Circuit. Serendipitously, and also as the result of alphabetical ordering, at the World Gymnastics Championships, the Austrian team stayed in the same hotel as the Australian gymnasts. I availed myself of the opportunity to speak with members of the Australian team who spoke very highly about Australia. This was a defining moment in my life. Travel had been on my mind for quite some time, so the conversation with these team members and my spirit of adventure prompted me to visit Sydney, Australia for a working holiday.

After arriving in Sydney (1971), I was offered a gymnastics coaching position at Sydney University. The coaching I undertook at the University of Sydney led to a position as a full-time Physical Education Instructor for the Sydney University Women's Sport Association and subsequently a position as a part-time Lecturer in the Bachelor of Physical Education program at the University of Sydney. In order to retain my currency in gymnastic events and coaching development I subscribed to both German and American gymnastics journals.

After a short period of time I became aware that these journals did not publish any reports about Australian gymnastics, so I decided to rectify this situation and began to contribute articles. Initially I submitted the Australian Gymnastics Federation competition results, and later, wrote coaching articles for the international journal, *The Olympic Gymnast* which was printed bilingually (English/ German) in Germany. For many years, I also contributed coaching articles for the *Australian Gymnastics Federation Journal*. These writing opportunities assisted me in improving my English language skills, and gave me the initial idea of enrolling in further studies. As an

Austrian by birth and an Australian by choice, my desire to pursue further studies was complicated by my adjustment to the social complexities of a different culture. Sparkes (2002) refers to this autoethnographical experience as relating the personal to the cultural domain.

During this time, I also lectured part-time in Education at the Castle Hill College of Advanced Education and the Australian College of Physical Education. Teaching in various educational organisations, I realised that I needed to upgrade my qualifications. I took advantage of the many learning opportunities I was given at Sydney University and other colleges. Teaching in physical education (mostly gymnastics) in higher education institutions and studying at the same time, was an exciting and challenging prospect for me. In hindsight, it was this search for constant challenge and achievement that also underpinned my gymnastics training and performances.

A diverse range of experiences, in addition to context, have allowed me to attain significant achievements through my elite gymnastics performances, coaching, and academic studies. These, in turn, have provided me with national and international recognition. I also believe that the expertise I gained through these commitments has motivated me to pursue authentic, meaningful, and relevant research in the human movement area, due to the fact that I was researching an area that I knew intimately.

In 1978, I continued my journey of upgrading my qualifications and my desire to engage in research, by completing a Postgraduate Diploma in Educational Studies (Human Movement Science) at the Sydney Teachers College of Advanced Education. This was followed, in 1983, with a Master of Education at the University of Sydney. My Masters' thesis project, "Specialised Schools for Sport and Gymnastics in Selected Eastern and Western Countries with the View of Implementation of 'Sports High Schools' in Australia" (1983) involved research into the identification, promotion, and implementation of extra-curricular special (talent) education programs in eastern European countries and western nations. My Masters' thesis was used by the authorities responsible for talent identification and promotion on a national and state level as a resource, although I did not receive any formal recognition for this. However, I felt that this academic achievement added to my established credibility as a researcher, and partly resulted in the successful securing of a lecturing position in 1983 at the Victoria University, Department of Human Movement, Recreation, and Performance.

On reflection, my teaching and research activities throughout my career have enabled me to work with a varied and diverse range of individuals. This process has provided me with the ability to work effectively as part of a collaborative team towards a common goal by further developing my interpersonal skills. In addition, my cultural dislocation has increased my empathy with people I have worked with during my research projects, both interstate and overseas. This was particularly evident during my four months Professional Experience Program Leave from Victoria University to work at the Cologne Sports University with an internationally renowned researcher. The research activities I was engaged in at this German University motivated me to pursue a doctorate based on a specialised area in gymnastics.

In 1997, I completed a Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Human Movement, Recreation and Performance at Victoria University of Technology. My PhD thesis entitled “Biomechanical Perspectives of Gymnastic Landings” involved a specific area of research that I was motivated to pursue due to previous landing injuries and subsequent knee operations. In gymnastics vernacular I told myself that I was going to “stick the landing” which refers to a perfect landing; the same grading I hoped would occur at the completion of my PhD.

Sparkes (1999) in his paper “Exploring Body Narratives” examines the body stories that athletes and PE teachers tell or write about themselves and which Polkinghorne (1995, as cited in Sparkes, 1999, p.21) describes as the “paradigmatic analysis of narratives”. This process is similar to a content analysis whereby the researcher seeks central themes of paradigmatic categories within the narrative told by a person, for example, a career-threatening or career-ending injury in sport.

The period between 1994 -1997 were my most productive years of research output, predominately based in the area of gymnastics. I produced several research journal articles, conference papers, and a co-authored book. I presented at local, national, and international conferences, produced audio-visual materials, resource manuals, teaching and coaching workbooks, and wrote successful grant applications at both Faculty and University level. These research activities satisfied my need to engage with people on both a personal and professional level, and also honed my skills in academic writing, research methodology, and evaluation.

There were moments of uplifting experiences both as an active sports person and as a researcher. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) describes these optimal moments as “flow experiences” where complete absorption in the task at hand is accompanied by a feeling that time itself is suspended. It was not only during my time as an elite competitor but also during the time of my early productive years as a researcher when I experienced the flow phenomenon.

In 1997, I moved from Melbourne to Brisbane due to family commitments. After arriving in Brisbane, I was offered various part-time and full-time positions for the Queensland gymnastics program and the Queensland Academy of Sport (QAS), Biomechanics Area due to my reputation in these areas. During this time, I successfully completed several research projects and produced five research reports for the Queensland Academy of Sport; organised and conducted teacher in-service workshops in Brisbane and regional Queensland; presented at the Elite Gymnastics Coaching Seminar at Chandler Stadium, the ACHPER (Queensland) conference and presented a guest lecture at Bond University (Institute for Health Sciences); and as a keen golfer developed the Golf Instruction-Practice-Feedback System (GIPFS).

I have worked at the Queensland University of Technology, within the Teaching and Learning Support Services (TALSS), in the section of Software, Multimedia, Internet, and Learning Environment (SMILE) as the Assistant Manager and Acting Manager. I was leading and managing multifunctional teams working on a variety of innovative, flexibly delivered, learner-centred educational programs and research projects. These teams included project managers, instructional designers, graphic designers, computer programmers and administrative staff. In many projects that I managed, I focused on identifying and analysing current and emerging educational research needs with the

view to enhancing students' learning. To this end I conducted problem-based learning workshops and learner-centered education programs.

I have briefly recounted some of the pivotal moments in my research journey. I am conscious of how the experiences I have had, which are affected by time and place, have shaped the type of research that I have undertaken. In addition, these experiences have transformed my perceptions of myself as a researcher and teacher educator. The challenges I have faced in my various roles have provided me with a variety of teaching experiences and increased levels of knowledge over time and in different places. I can now pass this knowledge on to current pre-service students in teacher education, as I continue to endeavour to make sense of the totality of this experience.

As Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) indicated, narrative research needs to be readable and engaging. The connection between autobiography and history must be apparent. Autobiography reveals to the reader a pattern in experience from a historical perspective, a person-centered history, and allows a reinterpretation of the lives and experience of both the writer and the reader. As in the reflective process in teaching, learning to teach requires knowledge of autobiographical reflection. I believe that my role as a researcher and an educator is about my individual passions and talents and how these have been informed by my life experiences.

Proficiency

The previous section focussed on the importance of experience in my research journey. I am now more conscious of how the proficiency I have gained on this journey has shaped me as a researcher and educator.

Direct experience and observation have been central to my learning. I have gained proficiency and knowledge on my research journey from my college years in Vienna, my training as an elite gymnast, my participation in national and international competitions; the 'defining moment' talking with Australian team members competing at the World Gymnastics Championships in Ljubljana, Yugoslavia (1970), who inspired me to travel to Australia; the study and coaching opportunities that were presented to me shortly upon my arrival in Australia; the journey to become fluent in the English language; the continual study I have undertaken (the lifelong learner syndrome); and the coaching of beginning right through to elite gymnasts in local gymnastic clubs, state centres in New South Wales and Victoria, and national centres such as the Australian Institute of Sport (AIS).

This wisdom, or advanced knowledge, has led me into new directions but also challenged me with other questions and provided solutions. As Polanyi (1974) indicated, we know more than we can tell; to make a difference, you need to help people by sharing your knowledge and learning from each other. The sharing of knowledge has always been part of my coaching and teaching, but has become more evident to me through the writing of this paper. As a member of a university research team I have been learning about the methodology of narrative inquiry which seeks to make use of the natural human inclination for storying experience by using story as a way of investigating experience and/or as a means of telling about people's experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, pp. 4-5).

Through this process the members of the team have shared their life stories and in the process made connections between their research areas.

Polanyi (1958, 1974) also argued that, when we acquire a skill, we acquire a corresponding understanding that defies articulation. In my case, narrative writing is a skill that I had to acquire and a process that I now understand so that I could value the individuality of my lived experience as a life “composed over time and full of richness and complexity,” rather than as data to be “taken apart by analytic categories” (Clandinin, 2006, p. 22). From this experience, I have now become more aware of the the act of storying, that human beings are able to make their own meaning of their experiences known to others. A teacher’s practice is to increase

self-awareness of their teaching in order to reflect on and improve how they convey

information and interact with their students. As a teacher educator I aim to provide pre-service teachers educators with understandings of their own practice as well as the theories they develop. In this role I also undertake research which can inform the specific area of health and physical education in order to provide my pre-service teachers with the most current and relevant information in this field.

The knowledge and wisdom of a good teacher will be revealed through their personal life history. According to a study of numerous educational autobiographies, a good teacher has two characteristics: being kind to students and having passion (Lianghua Liu, 2009). Among the array of teachers’ qualities, being kind to students, showing compassion and empathy at the same time, and being passionate are high on my priority list. The passion to succeed in my studies, the determination to successfully complete my PhD, and the passion I have shown in coaching athletes to reach their full potential, is paramount to my sense of self. The educational knowledge and wisdom of a good teacher is the result of a teacher’s long-term practice, reflections and passion about teaching. My teaching approach has changed over the years and I now acknowledge the view that ideal teaching should focus on virtue rather than efficiency and give consideration to effectiveness and responsibility (Liu Wanhai, 2008).

When I was enrolled in my Masters qualifying at Sydney University in 1981, I completed a second year in Philosophy, reading and learning about ancient philosophical ideals, from Plato to Socrates and Descartes, Leibniz’s philosophy of mind and, the principles of human knowledge, all of which have inspired me to do and to succeed. It is difficult to argue against the Socratic imperative of “Know thyself”, as for surely, we in education understand that our subjectivity is the only means we have to relate to others. The problem is that knowing thyself is not a corrective experience but instead one of the awareness of constructing experience (Britzman, 2006). The physical training regime I endured over several decades, the resilience, self-discipline, self-determination, strength of will and character, and the holistic approach taken to my body and mind, have all influenced my teaching and research activities. As a Health and Physical Education Lecturer at the University of Southern Queensland, I aim to instil the knowledge and wisdom that I have acquired, through my teaching and research, in the pre-service teachers I teach. In the process

they will also reach the level of proficiency required in their chosen career of teaching.

Reflection

In the previous section, I have reflected on the proficiency that I have gained and increased throughout my life. This was not only in relation to my role as an elite athlete but also honed during my research journey. On reflection, my desire to complete a PhD was initiated by a conversation with my then Head of Department at Victoria University (Melbourne), who after reading some journal articles I had written, challenged and prompted me by saying “Why don’t you do a PhD?” This was the impetus that led me to make a thoughtful and deliberate choice to begin my PhD research journey. My determination to succeed in completing the PhD was strong, which I now liken to a ‘dog with a bone.’ My research adrenalin juices were already flowing.

I am predominantly a kinaesthetic learner, a "hands-on learner" who is better able to concentrate and learn more easily when movement is involved. Bodily kinaesthetic learning style is one of eight types of learning styles defined in Howard Gardner's (1995) theory of Multiple Intelligences. This awareness of how I learn kinaesthetically has helped me to develop my motor and social skills, attain rhythm and has assisted in my cognitive and emotional growth. For example, the kinaesthetic awareness required during a gymnastic routine, followed by a “stuck landing” in a state of flow was important for my progressive and continuous physical learning, but also a catalyst in my cognitive and emotional growth. Smith et al. (2009) refer to the ‘bodily moment of touch’ and ‘bodily voice’ in their stories based on sports research and analysed them through a performative narrative analysis.

As an elite gymnastics performer it is essential to have proprioception and kinaesthetic awareness. Proprioception is often known as the sixth sense. It is the ability of one’s central nervous system to communicate and coordinate parts of one’s body with each other. Using the ability to express oneself aesthetically through movement is a cognitive skill that helps individuals to develop intellectually. Proprioception and kinaesthetic awareness are two of the topics which I currently teach at university level in the area of Health and Physical Education.

The family move from Melbourne to Brisbane resulted in a disrupted educational career path and subsequently prevented me from being able to have a continuous research career. I had to abandon my research career for a time as I engaged in other ways to make a living. I was not to know that it was this situation that would determine the destination in regard to my research activities. I describe this period as my transition phase, where I went from a safe and comfortable tenured position as lecturer and researcher to the unknown world of having to find the equivalent or better in the context of sessional work.

With this change of place came many different casual part-time teaching activities at schools, TAFE, and Universities. During this time, I started to develop my own business ventures that included consultancy work in both the government and private sector. However, I strongly believe that my disrupted educational career path has led to changes in my approach to teaching and research. Some of the changes that I

believe influenced my approach to teaching include flexibility, versatility and human compassion. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) argue that narrative allows us to construct and reconstruct our personal and professional identities, and in the process begin to understand the significance of particular events. On reflection, I realise that all of these experiences have been essential in forming the researcher I am today.

Conclusion

I conclude this journey by returning to the topic with which I began. On reflection, I can surmise now that my “tumbling through life... and expecting a safe landing” metaphor can be defined as being comprised of the following components: the run-up in tumbling as the “experience”; the take-off as “proficiency”, and the landing as “reflection and deliberation”. My narrative inquiry into my research journey has resulted in significant ways of linking elements of my personal and professional practice. These practical experiences and personal knowledge have allowed me to consider how my research has been impacted upon by my specialist area of expertise which in turn has informed my pedagogical practice.

Performing at an elite level requires one to intimately understand their strengths and limitations. Education can also be viewed as an elite performance requiring the physical and mental awareness, resilience, dedication, and commitment that I demonstrated in my sport.

In the journey I have documented, I have embraced various approaches to narrative reflection, to practice, to research, and to life. This process serves to communicate the notion of turning reflection into a larger narrative, which ultimately helps teachers and researchers alike to develop knowledge and professional practice (Nickerson-Crowe, 2005). The door to the world of further research is now open for me with the many directions and destinations that I can take. The narrative inquiry approach used for this paper has revealed that my early career as an active elite performer has provided me with an important apprenticeship for my current role as an academic and researcher.

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