

2010

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Recommended Citation

Katzmarek, JoAnne (2010) "Weaving a Song of Self," *The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning*: Vol. 16 , Article 10.

<https://doi.org/10.7290/jaepl16v4s5>

Available at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl/vol16/iss1/10>

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Cover Page Footnote

JoAnne Katzmarek is Associate Professor of Reading/ Language Arts in the School of Education at the University of Wisconsin, Stevens Point. Prior to her university teaching, she taught middle school and high school English in Wisconsin schools. She completed her doctoral studies at the University of Wisconsin Madison.

Weaving a Song of Self

JoAnne Katzmarek* ·

Discovering What We Know

What I enjoyed most during my many years of teaching high school English was listening to the stories students told as they made astonishing connections of their lives to the literature being discussed. Anne Bradstreet's poem "Upon the Burning of Our House" will always remind me of Jeremy (pseudonym), a 16 year-old farm boy from southern Wisconsin who, over the same weekend as the poem was assigned to be read, lost his home and possessions in a devastating January house fire. During that next week in our 4th hour American literature class, Bradstreet's images were seared into all our brains and hearts as he told of the frantic actions and overwhelming feelings his own fire had produced. In particular he identified with Bradstreet's litany of things lost. "Here stood that trunk, and there that chest," as well as the sacred everyday activities that would no longer happen there: "Under the roof no guest shall sit,/ Nor at thy table eat a bit" (44).

Jeremy told us how he and his family, as they tried to make sense of the fire, always ended up "listing" what was lost: family pictures, baseball gloves, winter clothes, even kitchen appliances. And for them, too, the vanished gatherings: family Christmas dinners or summer evenings on the porch listening to the sounds of a farm. Their litany helped them, like Bradstreet, to forge a shape for an event whose meaning was otherwise too enormous to grasp.

Joan Didion wrote that stories fill in the space between what happened and what it means to the individual. Jeremy's talking about his family's ordeal helped him to understand that event in new ways. Giving students the opportunity to understand more deeply their own experiences can help us, subsequently, to connect the students to our learning goals. For Jeremy, for me, and undoubtedly for many of the adolescents in that American literature class, Bradstreet's loss will be more understood because of Jeremy's story.

I suspect stories might have been the only entry point for some adolescents into Emily Dickinson's metaphysical landscape, as well. Her ambiguous images and precipitous questions sometimes beguiled them into probing for connections. For example, "I'm Nobody, Who Are You? Are You Nobody Too?" occasionally invited passionate accounts about rude treatments from disloyal friends, painful yet irresistible bouts of peer pressure, even fake admiration from the glittery groups. The adolescents didn't accept as wholeheartedly as Dickinson that it would be "dreary to be somebody" (133), but the idea riddled them enough to want to know more about the eccentric poet and what she might have meant. Sometimes the stories helped them to view their own experiences with a different and maybe wider lens, as when the lanky basketball player (seated in the front

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row—I remember that, too) bravely admitted that he had fewer friends after an ankle injury benched him for the remainder of the varsity season than he had when he was the starting center. How could he have known that his story helped many of us understand the satire the poet might have meant when she wrote “To tell your name the livelong day to an admiring bog”?

Many classrooms—many stories. The students’ stories were our lifelines to the poets and novelists. Even I shared stories, though carefully, because I wanted their stories, so authentic and connected, to be the true transitions to the poems.

William Cullen Bryant’s “To a Waterfowl” drew the most complaints from students about its difficulty and, they argued, its absurdity and irrelevance. I pointed them to the 7th stanza where Bryant claims he has learned a lesson from watching and empathizing with the waterfowl. “Deeply has sunk the lesson thou hast given,/ And shall not soon depart” (354).

Rather than having them attempt to understand what that lesson could have been for Bryant, I asked them to consider what we in the Midwest in the late 20th century might learn from watching and thinking about a waterfowl. Predictably, this invitation was followed by silence and suspicious stares. So I offered my canoeing story.

My husband and I are canoeing in the evening on a small rustic lake, our eight-year-old son seated on the floor of the canoe between us. I am in the front in a white, hooded sweatshirt, the full August moon illuminating me like a headlight. We paddle silently to the far side of the lake, a dark bay densely fringed with dogwood and willow shrubs and lined intermittently with tall pines. Earlier in the day, we had seen an adult Great Blue Heron feeding her chick along the shore. Now in the dark, we hear a heron, probably perched high in a pine where they typically nest, squawking harshly. Nervous, I want to turn around the canoe. My husband and son, joyous at the scary sound, cheer instead to go farther into the darkness of the bay. Reluctantly I paddle us forward. In a moment, my son yells, “Mom, look up!” Above me I can see the wings of the Great Blue Heron and, in the middle of its terrible span, its fierce golden beak, long and arrow-sharp. I freeze.

My husband yells, “Use your paddle!”

“On the bird?” I ask. The students invariably laugh at this part of my story.

“Yes. Scare him off,” he yells. “I’ll turn us around.”

We head out of the bay, and I paddle fiercely—certainly as fiercely as Natty Bumpo paddling away from his pursuers in *The Deerslayer* (another typical American literature selection), to get back to our cabin on the other shore. My students enjoy this story. In particular, they savor the vision of their English teacher swinging a paddle wildly at a menacing bird who is defending her chick.

“But what did you learn?” they ask. And I pause.

“The experience teaches me some important things mothers will do for their children.” My story is simple. It is not deeply philosophical, but it does give me a chance to share my human experience and values with them at the same time we explore meanings of poetry and literature. Because I have told my story, they are freed to tell their own stories. For this poem, their stories often include hunting adventures. Is their story very different from the lesson Bryant learned “midst falling dew, while glow the heavens with the last steps of the day”? Well, what did he learn? Let’s talk about that. Their stories and mine are facile transitions to what the poet himself might have learned.

Lee Shulman claims that stories are a way for us to get at the learning that's already inside us: "Learning is a dual process in which initially the inside beliefs and understandings must come out, and then can something outside get in" (12). Then we can make connections to larger themes and patterns. In other words, stories can help students discover their own meaning as they prepare for subsequent learning.

It must be recognized, too, as Herbert Kohl reminds us in his essay, "Wicked Boys," that stories and the thoughts they provoke can be a vehicle to the development of an intellectual community in the classroom and perhaps, even more than that, stories can be the manifestations of such a community. Thus, as the students share these stories to clarify points in the literature, they are simultaneously creating a more literate environment as they encounter deeper meanings of it.

Connecting Lives through Stories

Fast forward to the 21st century, and I am now a teacher educator. I respect and value the energy and enthusiasm that nearly all of these teachers bring to their professional development. I elicit their feedback at the end of each course to learn more about their view of the strengths of the course they take with me, as well as suggestions to improve it. I am struck, every semester, by the claims that they got clearer images and framed more authentic questions about teaching and learning after hearing "the professor's stories of her own teaching and the stories from the other teachers." Some even say "I wish we could hear more stories about how these strategies actually work in classrooms." Stories. They learned from the stories, and they wanted more stories. What stories did I tell? What stories did they tell? I can't always remember because often the stories weren't planned parts of the class. It is natural and comfortable for me to use them to illustrate consequences of teaching a certain way or making certain decisions. And of course, my stories invite their own stories, much like when my high school juniors and I worked together to explore murky or baffling poems. Clearly stories have an impact on the disciplinary learning of a teacher, too.

I was asked a year ago to teach a course for in-service teachers that I had not taught before: "Teacher Self-Knowledge." The course would be taught completely online, so the curriculum as well as the venue would both be new to me. Until this time, I had managed only segments of courses as online interactions, usually as discussion forums, for example, about a controversial research report, or as a cyber place to provide feedback to classmates' projects. But in all those courses we had several earlier face-to-face sessions to accomplish the work of relationship building—so crucial to an energetic learning environment—before we moved to the online sessions. This course would be challenging to me in particular because we would go directly to online sessions with no face-to-face relationship building.

The questions that had originally inspired me to teach this course were: How could teachers learn more about their teaching personality, their teaching identity? How could we begin the discussions that would lead to this understanding? Stories. Stories could be the portal for these teachers to enter, comfortably and confidently, a new landscape of self discovery and their teaching identity. Additionally, as Kohl suggested, stories could nurture as well as express the intellectual community I hoped would evolve even in an online context. And in the spirit of yet one other American poet, Walt Whitman, these

stories could yield the details, the essentials of their teacher selves: “And of these one and all I weave the song of myself” (860).

In the course description, I invited teachers to explore ways that they could learn more about their teacher self-identities as a way to enhance their professional development and to support their well being. During the course, they read accounts and explanations offered by philosophers and researchers about the connections between teacher self-knowledge and teaching improvement, and they wrote their own versions of their evolving teacher self-identity. They examined artifacts of culture and art in order to understand more deeply the possible ways in which teacher self-identity forms and sustains itself. They created their own expressions of what teaching means for them. As they learned more about themselves, these explorations and expressions built their skills in reflective teacher practice.

I composed the course in five sessions or movements: Teacher Stories, The Work of a Teacher, Teachers in Art and Culture, Learning from Other Teachers, and Reflective Teacher Practice. Each session was constructed using four learning interactions: reading/ writing/ viewing, reflective writing, creating a project, expressing ideas, and sharing ideas. The order of these activities sometimes varied with the sessions. Following is an analysis of the opening activity of the first session. Keep in mind that this session also served as a way for teachers to introduce themselves to each other and to begin the relationship building that is unique but necessary in online environments.

In Session 1, “Teacher Stories,” teachers first read a teacher memoir or a novel written about a teacher. I suggested titles for this platform activity:

- Hilton, James. *Goodbye Mr. Chips*. New York, Grosset & Dunlop, 1934
- Spark, Muriel. *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. New York: Perennial Classics, 1999
- Dickens, Charles. *Hard Times*. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1974
- Jones, Lloyd. *Mr. Pip*. New York: Dial Press, 2007
- Conroy, Pat. *The Water is Wide*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1972
- Bennett, Alan. *The History Boys*. New York: Faber & Faber, 2006

The list also included these nonfiction titles:

- Ashton Warner, Sylvia. *Teacher*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1963
- Gruwell, Erin. *Freedom Writers Diary: How a Teacher and 150 Teens Used Writing to Change Themselves and the World Around Them*. New York: Doubleday, 1999
- Albom, Mitch. *Tuesdays with Morrie*. New York: Doubleday, 1997
- Edmundson, Mark. *Teacher: The One Who Made the Difference*. New York, Random House, 2002
- Kidder, Tracy. *Among School Children*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1989
- McCourt, Frank. *Teacher Man*. New York: Scribner, 2005
- Tompkins, Jane. *A Life in School: What the Teacher Learned*. Reading, MA: Addison Wesley Publishing Co., 1996

I strove for a balance of traditional and contemporary, novels, plays, memoirs, both contemplative and practical. They also had the option of finding a “teacher story” not on my list; no one did that. Only one novel was selected for reporting, *Goodbye Mr.*

Chips, and this by a teacher from the U.K. who was pursuing a graduate degree at our university with the tentative plan of returning to his boarding school in UK in pursuit of the headmaster's position. The other selected choices were all non-fiction; several chose *Tuesdays with Morrie*, one chose *Teacher Man*, and another chose *Among School Children*.

After reading the text, they posted a response writing in the discussion area of the online course. I provided simple guidelines for this response writing in the course syllabus: a summary of the book, lessons/ insights about teaching that they learned from reading the book, and connections of the ideas in the book to their own teaching. In the last section, I asked them to be sure to include details about their own teaching story—for example, how they decided to become a teacher and their feelings about being a teacher.

The discussion area for this posting is an asynchronous discussion format, but I assigned a deadline for the writing to be posted, and immediately following that deadline, a “window” of time for them to respond to each others' summary and connections. Some online instructors provide rubrics or checklists for these online discussions, but I did not—although I did monitor the discussions and also participated in them in order to model and coach deeper thinking or additional questioning. By Session 5, my involvement was really not needed as much as in Session 1. The guidelines in the syllabus, which I intentionally kept simple, said only that each teacher is expected “to respond to all of the other teachers' initial postings and that the discussion should explore as much as possible the ways that writings by and about teachers add to our view/ perspectives of what it is to be a teacher.” The first discussion included an average of ten discussion turns per teacher, an especially lively beginning, since I had not established a standard for frequency of responses. I was pleased with the ease with which most of the teachers were able to introduce themselves to the others through the context of the teacher literature they chose. Two examples in particular, were stunning and elicited much conversation among the teachers.

Paula¹ reported on *Teacher Man* by Frank McCourt. She summarized the book and pointed out what she admired most about his memoir: his doggedness during 30 plus years of inner city school teaching. “I wish I could have read this book before I set foot in my own 2nd grade classroom in inner city New Orleans.” In her sharing, Paula began by explaining that like McCourt, her teaching experiences in pre-Katrina New Orleans, many painful, led her to believe that “perseverance counts more than education or pedagogy” towards successful teaching. She goes on:

While I did not have such wild expectations [as McCourt], I do admit to feeling that I could save the world, one impoverished child at a time. I wasn't prepared to face a classroom of eight-year olds who didn't want to be saved, especially by this cracker (excuse the racial term) of a teacher who talked funny.

She further clarified her language by saying that her northern white rural teacher presence mostly agitated her southern black urban students in ways she had not anticipated and only after much initial discomfort and intensely hard work, had she found ways to ease cultural transitions for both herself and the students.

One of the other teachers in the online discussion pointed out that it seemed that Paula and McCourt were both dealing with the challenges of being an “immigrant

1. All names of teachers are pseudonyms, to protect privacy.

teacher,” an observation that led to subsequent discussion for other teachers and at least one recommendation for the group for further reading on these issues, that being *Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children* by Gloria Ladson Billings. One other teacher applauded her: “There is no replacement for life experience and you are wiser because of what you went through and will be able to help others.”

This isolated strand of online discussion suggests the power of the “outside story” (McCourt’s) to provide a substantive launch for a teacher’s own story as introductory online “talk.” And the resulting discussion did a nice job of blending McCourt’s and Paula’s stories into the broader concerns of teaching and learning and here, in particular, the role of teacher-identity and its impact on learning.

And what broader concerns are evident? I am reminded immediately of Lynn Bloom’s account of her own struggles essentially of “subverting the success stories” that are often told to teachers. Her own painful summer school experiences at “Prestige University,” where she seemed to get everything wrong, finds a strong match in Paula’s admission of unpreparedness to teach her second graders in New Orleans. Both of them clearly indicate that teachers’ professional growth is not always about the teaching we did well. We can be well advised to look at our “failures” as well for useful teacher knowledge.

Toby Fulwiler elaborates on this conflict between the ideal and the real, between Bloom’s “academic master plot” (and Paula’s “ideal” of saving poor, urban second graders) and the stories of failure:

To feel good about myself as a teacher, I need to feel knowledgeable, imaginative, resourceful, and relevant. And I need to believe in and celebrate (narrate) my classroom successes as much as to affirm my own identity as to affirm and enlighten others. At the same time. . . I need to be accurate, truthful, insightful, and vulnerable. I need to share with my audience things that don’t always make me look good. (93)

The ordinary, the mundane, perhaps even the “dark side” of experiences nurture growth and self knowledge. In later reflective writing, Paula mentioned the value she gained from sharing this story and reading the responses of her colleagues.

Another teacher in the course had read *Goodbye Mr. Chips* and used the traditional English boarding school experiences in Hilton’s novel as a way to tell of his own experiences teaching and serving as assistant headmaster in a U.K. boarding school, owning up to his doubts about whether he actually wanted to focus his professional goals on becoming the headmaster of his school as he had once thought. Tom had included in his summary of the novel many, family-centered sorts of responsibilities performed by Mr. Chips as headmaster.

Another teacher said to Tom: “The part where Chips was forced to announce the death of the students’ fathers (during the war) really got me thinking, how does one learn how to do this? Are you taught in classes about it?” Tom replied to her that her question made him realize that preparation for a headmaster’s work should include learning about emotional intelligence, a subject area completely overlooked thus far in his professional development. These comments led to rich contributions from the others about important texts about emotional intelligence, as well as testimonials from some

that they, too, could have used more information and knowledge about emotional intelligence in their work with particular students and families in U.S. public schools.

Tom was asked many questions about his work at the boarding school; the U.S. teachers were very curious about the UK boarding school type of education. One of his responsibilities as assistant headmaster was filling in for absent teachers, an experience, he claimed, that made him a better teacher:

The lesson plans are generally in subjects out of your special area, and you are required to follow the lesson plans. I have often found that these are some of the best lessons I have taught because they require you to think in different ways as well as use techniques that are out of your comfort zone.

This observation generated a flurry of comments on the needs for leaders in U.S. schools to “ratchet up” the quality of substitute teaching, as students could not afford to lose these opportunities to continue learning. Currently in the teachers’ schools, substitute performed poorly either because they weren’t left substantive plans to follow, or in some cases, they did not have the pedagogical skills to follow the plans that were left. Several admired just the basic requirement to follow the lesson plan and that Tom did so.

These are just two examples of how reading about and sharing teachers’ experiences provide a fertile context from which to begin to analyze our own teaching life and identity and simultaneously create a welcome and safe venue, i.e., Kohl’s notion of intellectual community, in which to share with other teachers our insights as well as our doubts. This introductory activity accomplished much: exposure to trade texts about teaching, relationship building for the teachers in the online class as they become acquainted with the unique backgrounds and experiences of their teacher-colleagues, and a beginning critical analysis of important aspects of pedagogy. The online responses to these stories and to other stories helped us make the transition as well to the topics and issues yet to be explored in the other sessions. For example, when Tom told about his experiences in the boarding school and his need to pay attention to broader emotional and family issues of his students, I was able to connect his observation to a major theme of one of the texts for the class, *The Courage to Teach* by Parker Palmer. In that text, Palmer explores multiple aspects of the emotional and spiritual health of teachers. Essentially, Tom’s experience helped me to scaffold for future learning in the class.

Stories as Ontological Events

Graves explores the importance of stories in his book about teacher stories, *How to Catch a Shark and Other Stories about Teaching and Learning*. “Every story is an ontological event; it connects me with the universe,” he claims (3). In other words, stories help us to understand our being, our teacher selves. And at the same time, the stories help us to connect with the rest of the world. Similarly, my goal in using teacher stories to launch the course, “Teacher Self-Knowledge,” was so that stories would help the teachers to connect to each other and begin relationship building—surely the biggest challenge of an online environment—as they explored and expressed their own connection to a published teacher story.

Kohl writes about storytelling itself in, "A Plea for Radical Children's Literature." He tells about listening to his grandfather tell stories of the days in New York City when he worked with the unions for workers' rights. His grandfather's stories and the vision they conjured up of a decent and just future affected him deeply.

I think what I got from that evening and many others like it listening to my grandfather was a sense of the power of stories to build comradeship and dedication to social struggle. I learned the importance of imagining good things in hard times, of keeping hope alive and never believing that 'reality' was fixed once and for all. Over the years I have learned to tell stories too, and I've come to realize how important it is for young people to hear talks of justice, to learn of the sorrows and joys of trying to make a better world. (64)

Kohl's hopeful tone reminds me of the optimism and support the teachers in my class gave to each other as they responded to the stories and their own struggles.

And what about these shared teacher stories themselves? What is the value of such stories in the process of this course, which is also intended to build pedagogical knowledge? Jerome Bruner identifies narrative mode along with the paradigmatic or logico-scientific mode as the two dominant ways of knowing. "Narrative mode leads to good stories . . . and deals in human or human like intention and action and the vicissitudes and consequence that mark their course" (98). In short, stories can sustain as well as deliver the essential parts of teaching knowledge. Sharing and telling stories provide ways for us to begin the important critical understanding of our own actions and values as ways to build teacher knowledge.

William Schubert extends this concept in his important work on teacher lore:

Teacher lore includes stories about and by teachers. It portrays and interprets ways in which teachers deliberate and reflect and it portrays teachers in action. Teacher lore refers to knowledge, ideas, insights, feelings, and understandings of teachers as they reveal their guiding beliefs, share approaches, relate consequences of their teaching, offer aspects of their philosophy of teaching and provide recommendations for educational policy makers Teacher lore for me includes both what I have gained from other teachers for my own teaching and what I can offer other teachers from my experience. (9)

By asking the teachers to write about published teacher stories and by encouraging them to share each other's personal stories, I invited them to develop just the kind of teacher lore Schubert describes. This beginning activity also contributed to the teaching knowledge of the participants.

Miller, in her work on teacher spaces, also confirms that teachers must converse with each other as a way of creating and revising teacher knowledge. She further notes, "We shared our evolving knowledge not through sets of goals and objectives or measurable means or standardized checklists of our behaviors, but rather through the stories that we told to one another" (13). This dynamic echoes Kohl's idea, mentioned earlier, that stories can be a vehicle to an intellectual community at the same time they can be manifestations of such a community. Additionally, integrating a narrative mode in our work as teachers can "penetrate cultural barriers, discover the power of the self and integrity

of the other, and deepen understanding of respective histories and possibilities” (Witherall and Noddings 4).

Teacher stories, ours and others, will inspire us to ask important questions about our teaching and guide us to seek deeper understandings of our practice, our sense of self, and our next steps in professional development. Paula gained important insight about the hard work of teaching students whose culture was very different from her own, and Tom clarified gaps in his own preparation for being a headmaster. These are not simple understandings. Paula, Tom, and the other teachers in the class benefited from their own reading and writing about their experiences, as well as having the supportive, critical responses and discussion from their online colleagues.

Fulwiler reminds us of the complexity yielded by the act of writing, insights he gained after he had written reflectively about his own teaching experiences: we cannot tell what we know unless we take time to share it over several tellings, and even then, we need others in turn to help us untangle what is true, certain, and uncompromised. Whether we are in each other’s immediate presence or online, reading, writing, conversing, storytelling, all are ways of learning more about ourselves and finding possible answers to the questions Whitman might ask. Who are we? What kind of teachers are we? How can we weave a song of self?



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