

Fragmenting Narratives: The Ethics of Narrating Difference

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Introduction

Continuing a conversation¹ we began at the *Provoking Curriculum* conference in Vancouver in 2003 (Lund, Panayotidis, Phelan, Smits, & Towers, 2003), we endeavour to think through what we sometimes experience as fragmenting narratives that shape our teaching, research, and everyday practices in our university. We focus particularly on the ethics of narrating difference and consider how it manifests itself in our educational work and how it affects our relationship to the *Other*. Through a series of individual narrations, we attempt to unsettle and develop notions of the transformative potentials of narrative in our teaching and research.

Hans:

The accounts that follow attempt to struggle with what Judith Butler (2004) has recently termed “precarious life.” Butler’s evocation of precariousness has layers of meaning, but principally refers to two major issues: 1) the precariousness of critical actions in the face of fear and repression manifest in the world since 9/11; and 2) the very precariousness of critical thought itself, and the veracity of representation in our struggles to acknowledge the Other.

In the discussion that follows, I am concerned with precariousness as it pertains to our work as teacher educators. That is, how is it possible to

stand for and defend a strong sense of practice, when the narratives that might nourish practice are themselves held, at best, as irrelevant and, at worst, in disrepute? When I speak of “teacher education” practice in this context, I am referring to the multiple ways our work as teacher educators is layered in the contemporary university, as exemplified in the narratives that follow, illustrating struggles around the ethics of research, practices of representation, responding to the demands of cultural and other forms of diversity, and attempting to constitute practice as a form of practical judgement or wisdom.

In the ensuing narratives we attempt to foreground the importance of the relationship between narrative and practice. The work of Paul Ricoeur is helpful in exploring this relationship. In Ricoeur’s study, *Oneself as Another* (1992), he links the idea of a “narrative unity of life,” which refers to the idea of a life project such as that of a vocation or a profession, with the achievement of living such a profession in terms of *phronesis*, which may be loosely translated as practical wisdom or practical judgement (Dunne, 1993). In the context of professional practices such as teaching, *phronesis* refers to living and acting ethically, to act well in terms of some sense of an overall good (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 175). It is important to emphasize that this “good” is understood as something inherent in, or internal to practice, and not as a set of rules for practice, nor simply a composite of all the discrete activities we undertake in our everyday work. However, we know from experience that practice, in the sense of an overarching orientation to the good, cannot be so abstractly defined. From the perspective of practice as *phronesis*, its meaning and understanding cannot be encapsulated in rules, procedures and processes, as important as these might be. In other words, practice in the sense of *phronesis* is very differently understood and experienced than practice in a technical sense. For example, my own practice as a teacher and an administrator in a teacher education faculty cannot be fully understood only in terms of the lists of things and disparate actions that fill my day, nor even fully by numerical ratings I might receive as evaluation of my practice.

Yet, in everyday life, while we can speak of practice in term of *phronesis*, aspects of practice are often not *phronetic*. Here I am referring to practice as a whole, as a constellation of diverse actions but oriented by intentionality and responsibility. While teaching in the larger sense can be considered in terms of *phronesis* (Dunne, 1993), there are nonetheless—and necessarily so—practical activities that are technical and instrumental. Such activities can be conceived as part of the “unity” of practice, but may still be experienced as fragmentary. A common example is that as teachers or instructors we must submit grades and follow certain procedures required for all courses. While the act of assessment requires good judgement, the

procedures for assigning and recording grades are technical in nature. They must still be done well, but completing assessment of students does not define good teaching in totality.

Thus, practically speaking, as Ricoeur suggests, we customarily experience our daily responsibilities in fragmentary, instrumental ways. But then to experience our work in less fragmentary ways, what is required is that diverse, sometimes isolated activities be gathered together in some fashion. The critical issue here is one of ethics—that is, understanding practice in terms of its ethical intentions. In other words, fragmentary activities in themselves cannot sustain an ethical intent and life, but require the mimetic function of a sustainable narrative to more generously hold both intention, and acknowledgement of the “Other.” This is indeed a difficulty, what Martha Nussbaum (1986) calls the “fragility of goodness,” as circumstances, events, and contingency always disturb stable spaces for goodness to be achieved in our work. Yet, as she notes, the exercise of practical wisdom cannot be retreated from in a contingent world; “the person of practical wisdom inhabits the human world and does not attempt to rise above it” (p. 314).

The challenge for those of us who work in institutions like the contemporary university—specifically in our case in teacher education—is a very complex one, then, particularly if we think of practice in terms of phronesis, or practical wisdom. Increasingly there is a sense in which our practices are experienced as fragmentary, difficult to “gather together.” Furthermore, some “unifying narratives” are themselves fragmentary, and narratives offered for the purpose of unifying practices are not able to sustain ethical intent.

The context in which each of us reflects on aspects of our practice is specifically the institution, practice and curriculum of teacher education, and we ask what allows it to be experienced in other than fragmentary ways. In posing this question I want to acknowledge, first of all, that the anxieties about experiencing life in fragmentary ways are not new. Even in the shorter historical term (the last two centuries, for example) the notion of fragmentation, even if not called that, is a dominant theme in social theory and commentary. For the great social theorists of the late 19th century and early 20th century (e.g., Marx, Tonnies, Durkheim, & Weber) a primary concern was a social-psychological one, namely, the question of how ethical and responsible forms of life could be sustained in the face of fragmenting traditional societies, and the within the demands of the rapidly developing bureaucratic, industrial and scientifically oriented institutions. But while not a new theme, what seems necessary to ask is how fragmentation is understood within the very recent acceleration of globally dominant market-oriented forms of life and practice, something we all know has impacted the

university and schools in some striking ways (Smith, 2000). It is within that context I want to think further about our work as teacher educators, and the challenges of fragmenting narratives that each of the following narratives raises in the context of specific responsibilities and interests.

As Slavoj Žižek (2005) recently notes, a critical impact of neo-liberalism—that is, the pervasive encroachment of capitalist economic forms in all spheres of life—has been to further dismantle ties of obligation and identity. Reflecting on the example of the professions, he writes,

The modern notion of the profession implies that I experience myself as an individual who is not directly “born into” his social role. What I will become depends on the interplay between contingent social circumstances and my free choice... In the specific social conditions of commodity exchange and the global market economy, “abstraction” becomes a direct feature of actual social life... The concrete existence of universality is, therefore, the individual without a proper place in the social edifice. (pp. 129-130)

Another way of putting this challenge is to attend to what I refer to above as the social-psychological problem, the way the location of our experiences and how we understand can, or ought to be, understood as situated within certain historical, cultural and social frames. The issue is, on the one hand, the question of what both Habermas (2003) and Ricoeur (1992) refer to as “successfully being oneself” and what that means in our own current context and how that frames adequately more global questions of what constitutes the “good life.” The question in some sense is eternal, but as Habermas argues, it is also new, and implies a different inquiry, or at least a newly sustained and urgent inquiry into our lives—into an “ontology” of the present as Jameson (2002, p. 214) terms it. Facing the challenges of the new scientific and information technology, Habermas (2003) emphasizes that,

Rather, today the original philosophical question concerning the “good life” in all its anthropological generality appears to have taken on a new life. The new technologies make a public discourse on the right understanding of cultural forms of life in general an urgent matter. (p. 15)

Habermas’ challenge is particularly in response to the biomedical technologies, or what Donna Haraway (2000) has called “technoscience,” wherein human life and the human body have themselves become fragmentary sites of capitalist (re)production. Reading authors like these, I thought of Karl Marx’s work in the 19th century when he raised important questions about the process of *commodification* and its impact on social and cultural life. Marx’s analyses of work in capitalist societies are arguably relevant to us today, and especially to those of us who work in the university. Here I am not thinking so much of the economic argument, for example, of the increasing corporate intrusion into the university, but rather Marx’s analysis of alienation. Alienation, in Marxist terms, is directly related to his

analysis of the commodification of labour that was, in his time, increasingly fragmented from the notions of work and action. Under capitalism, work and human action become manageable parts—manageable in the sense of directing such labour for instrumental ends. The notion of alienation is not simply that one becomes divorced from the products of one’s work, but that the ability to respond more fully as a “successful person”—the ability to act ethically, to address and formulate actions in terms of the “good life”—becomes severely compromised as work and sense of efficacy as a person seems increasingly fragmented.

While the conditions in late capitalism are obviously very different, especially in the developed world (Jameson, 2002), there are conditions such as those addressed by Habermas that debilitate possibilities for selfhood and attaining the good life. And, I would argue, this has been exacerbated in our era of neo-liberal hegemony. We are experiencing this in some immediate ways in the university (Delbanco, 2005) and particularly within areas such as curriculum and teacher education. In terms of teacher education within the university, such developments are especially felt because historically, our work was marked not only by research (at least not in an instrumental sense), but also by responsibility and by practice (Boyer, 1990); I am referring here to both the practice of being a teacher educator / curriculum scholar and to the responsibility to good practice and, more globally, the responsibility for education of the young in societies (Arendt, 1993).

As Arendt (1958) has written, that responsibility speaks to a kind of authority that is embedded in practice, and that, in its form *as action* is integrally ethical in intent. It is also what distinguishes a “professional” faculty and its mandate from more traditional “disciplinary” faculties in the university. However, faculties of education are increasingly under pressure to conform to the norms of such faculties, especially those in the sciences. What seems to be especially valorized are not necessarily the traditional science faculties, but the applied sciences such as engineering, technology, biomedics, certain branches of medicine—“technoscience” in Donna Haraway’s terms—where there is large funding available for research, and the expectation for substantial commercial returns (Delbanco, 2005).

Specifically within teacher education, the space for developing critical practices and for practicing forms of scholarship that may be more broadly defined is constrained by the emphasis on the one hand by such “market” forces and the break between the individual and ties of obligation (Berliner, 2005), and also through increasing regulation of the “curriculum” of both schools and the universities, such that “we education professors are losing—have lost?—control of the curriculum we teach” (Pinar, 2004, xi-xii).

The context presented only in outline above and the difficulties suggested for practice, especially practice understood as embodying

a commitment and orientation to ethical work, form the basis for the discussions and narratives that follow. As practitioners in teacher education, our practices are challenged in fundamental ways in the diverse spheres of our work. In the accounts below my colleagues take up the kinds of issues of vulnerability and precariousness that Butler (2003) suggests are now our lot in a world where the foundations for forms of representation, address, and action have become destabilized. The narratives that follow provoke fundamental questions about fragmentation, and how we begin to take responsibility within conditions of fragmentation.

The ensuing narratives ask questions of how our own work in storytelling may be done in truthful ways, with regard for difference, and in the interests of social justice. More specifically, the accounts that follow pose the following questions:

How might we live truthfully with others in our practices and institutions? How do the stories surface differences between myself and others? How do such differences affect my relationship with the Other? What is, or ought to be, the researcher's ethical obligation in narrating difference in teaching practice? And what is at issue when the research itself focuses on the nature of difference? But where do we go from here in our work on "difference" with pre-service teachers? Where shall we turn our attention to find a way to learn from the fracturing discourses that often characterize our work? How can we help them see the complexity of historical narratives of schooling and the way they situate difference? How does the past live in our present practice, theories, and research? And lastly, why might all this matter? Once these questions have been asked, how can we best honour our responsibility to act in ethical ways as teacher educators and as researchers?

Each of these questions is posed within the conditions of fragmentation raised above, but with an orientation to the question of how one might construe practice, not as technique but as practical wisdom; that is, they are posed in relation to our responsibilities, not necessarily as outcomes to be achieved. One of the commonalities in all the accounts is the tension between the demands of working in an institution and practice that values certain things over others and, at the same time, with the demand that we attend to the question of difference, and what constitutes good practice in teaching and research in relation to difference.

Lisa: The Ethics of "Telling Tales Out of School" *How might we live truthfully with others in our practices and institutions?*

Over the last several years I have become overtly conscious of the way in which I narrate my/self and the Other into the very construction of two of

my regularly scheduled graduate courses that deal with visuality and space. The stories I tell seem to hearken back to my own intended and unintended learning in school, and are offered up in the first class as a way to position my interests and desires relative to those of the course under deliberation. Partly I want to make my epistemological choices with regard to the readings, arguments, and concepts readily transparent. But I also strive to fracture the ubiquitous graduate narrative of course intents, the litany of descriptions and requirements, and to show that this course is to some extent bourn both from lived experience of being-in-the-world as well as from a knowledge of larger social structures and systems—what Himani Bannerji (1995) calls a “situated critique.” Accordingly, I stake the first claim of the course: that there is no such thing as objectivity, impartiality, or disinterest. Rather, each of us is positioned in an intricate matrix of relations and our interpretations are inextricably tied to ideologically determined subjectivities.

Narratives are always for somebody and provide “future social imaginaries” for us and the Other in our midst. In this case, my actions are designed to provoke students, early on, to unsettle the complacent and the comfortable—for the harsher terrain of the unfamiliar. I wish to have them begin to see the necessary relationships amongst narrative, difference, and ethics. I want to make visible the invisible conditions under which knowledge is produced and point out how epistemological issues are always part of moral deliberation, and how ethical issues are implicated in all analyses of knowledge (Code, 1991). It is no small thing for me to tell these stories, for as Thomas King (2003) reminds us, “once a story is told, it cannot be called back. Once told, it is loose in the world” (p.10). One of the stories—and there are a number of variations—goes like this:

My family came to Canada (Toronto more precisely) when I was 8 years old and my brother was 7. Without any previous knowledge of the language, we were both put back a year and placed in what was then called the “New Canadians” class. There were approximately 8 or 9 children in that class who hailed from all parts of the globe—we were united by our marginalization, our silences, and oftentimes, our fears. Without the rudiments of the English language, I learned to “read” Canadian schooling, society, and culture through the spaces in which I walked, the artifacts, symbols, and images on my school’s walls.

I was very good at this, in part because I had already spent the majority of my childhood looking and interpreting. As a child, no doubt like many other Greek children, I spent an exorbitant amount of time gazing upon the narrative imagery depicted on the walls of a Greek Orthodox Church. Avid churchgoers, my mother and grandmother attended—with us in tow—every Sunday service, every high and low religious holiday, every observance of a Saint’s birth, death, and miraculous deeds. As the liturgy is chanted, to this day in archaic Byzantine language, most of what is said is completely incomprehensible to a child, so my gaze would wander over the visual

imagery around me. I was grateful when the inevitable boredom set in that gazing around you was not frowned upon, but rather, subtly encouraged as a powerful form of curriculum.

This early skill at visual interpretation would come in very handy in my contemplation and understanding of the meanings of school, teacher, and education. In our first couple of weeks at William Burgess School, my brother and I found ourselves outside the principal's office. Looking up at the wall immediately opposite the office, I was drawn to a photograph portrait of a well-dressed lady with a crown and lots of jewellery. After a time, I asked my brother, "Who is that lady up there?" My brother, always happy to oblige with an answer—right, wrong, or nebulous—looked at me confidently and assuredly pronounced: "Oh! That's the principal's wife. He likes to keep up that picture of her so he can think about her during the day, when he's at school." Of course the woman in the photograph was Queen Elizabeth, but in that moment and in an imaginative act my brother had tried, as King (2003) phrases it, "to set the world straight" (p. 60).

Of late these stories have become troubling for me as I seek to understand not *why* I narrate these stories but *how* I narrate them. I want to reflect on how these stories are shaped—altered, transformed, and embellished—relative to my student audience and what effects they serve to construct in their learning and in my pedagogy, and in my own shaping as a woman, teacher and researcher. I want to fracture my own narrative practices in the classroom, as a way to make sense of how the educational experiences we relate serve to construct and mediate difference, and to question why they call forth our care and our ethical consideration. More broadly, I consider the "educational stories" we all tell in our classrooms and wonder provocatively: Does the educational story make the educator?

My inquiry into the nature of these narrative tales is prompted by my desire to live ethically in the classroom with my students and to problematize the strict hierarchical relations that so often exist in university classrooms. I want to situate myself "as part of the whole," not in opposition to my students. And while I understand the complexity of power and differential interests, and all that is called forth in each of our interactions in the classroom, I endeavour to live and learn alongside my students, charting our oftentimes difficult and chaotic allegiances and understandings in the world. Ultimately, as Rita Irwin (2003) has noted, "cultivating an appreciative way of knowing is an act of cultivating an aesthetic way of knowing, an aesthetic that values awareness, perceptual acuity, attunement, wonderment, novelty, and emergence" (p. 63).

As a result of these intents, certain tensions are created that are difficult to resolve. Having said that, the contextual conditions of each classroom mediate how well these aspirations and understandings are realized and negotiated within that particular given place/time. These stories

constitute the warp and weft of my cross-cultural experience of school life in an unfamiliar space/country. In some ways I never tire of telling these stories but I also know that I am driven by these stories. I have often asked myself: What sort of dichotomies do I set in place? How do I smooth the fragmented narrative and emotional distress of my schooling experience through humour? Katharine Smithrim (2003) has eloquently discussed the importance of being emotional in the classroom as a way in which students and instructor can forge “an experience of engagement” (p. 60). Furthermore, how do I impose a narrative arc of “success” and “progress”? How do I come to ennoble the immigrant child who was able to *subvert* the structures, policies, and practices of Canadian schooling—constructing in the process what cultural theorists would call centre-margins relations. Do my immigrant narratives construct me as the subject—“speak me into existence” as Judith Butler might say? Who am I without these stories?

How do the stories surface differences between myself and others? How do such differences affect my relationship with the Other?

Jo: The Ethics of Narrating Difference in Teaching Practice

As I began to think about the theme of difference in general and these questions in particular, I was drawn to an ethical dilemma facing me in my research practice. One of my current research projects focuses on the relationship between the way teachers hold their mathematical knowledge and the nature of their mathematical practices in the classroom—in other words, on their *knowing in action*.² As the research has progressed I have found myself struggling with the ethics of “telling the story” of the teachers’ work, of describing teachers’ practices in ways that respect the realities and contingencies of classroom and school life and that honour each teacher’s contribution to my research while provoking, for the teacher and the research community, dissonance between accepted and alternative teaching practices. This struggle is a constant presence for me as I immerse myself in the many hours of data I have collected in my own and others’ classrooms and as I begin to tease out ideas, patterns, and themes and wrestle with the discordance between what I and other teachers *say* we believe and what we actually *enact* in our classroom practices.

In struggling with this dilemma I have been drawn to Aristotle’s notion of *phronesis* or practical wisdom. *Phronesis* is fundamentally about living and acting ethically, though in daily life many of our practices are not *phronetic*. “*Phronesis* requires an interaction between the general and the concrete; it requires consideration, judgment, and choice. More than anything else, *phronesis* requires *experience* [italics in original]” (Flyvberg, 2001, p.57), but it is precisely my experience as a teacher that is causing me

to read my data as both a teacher and a researcher. Negotiating the distance (Picard, 2002) between these two roles is indeed the work of the teacher-researcher.

I want to offer here one example of the deep difficulty inherent in attempting to negotiate the distance between teacher and researcher. On occasion—actually more often than just occasionally—I come across an article describing a teacher’s practice in less than favourable ways. Here are just a few excerpts from one such example that draws on a study of two teachers’ work with elementary students in mathematics. The author juxtaposes Ms. Carter’s and Ms. Andrew’s teaching of fractions like this:

Unlike Ms. Carter, Ms. Andrew did not ask her students to justify why they chose a particular partitioning strategy. Instead, Ms. Andrew often asked questions that required a show of hands or yes-no responses.... Ms. Andrew wanted to engage her students in the activity and to see if they understood, but the questions she asked yielded general responses without revealing specific information about the students’ thinking. (Kazemi, 1998, p. 412)

Both teachers wanted their students to learn from their mistakes, but Ms. Andrew often supplied the conceptual thinking for her students. In Ms. Carter’s class, inadequate solutions served as entry points for further mathematical discussion. (Kazemi, 1998, p. 413)

Neither the students nor Ms. Carter belittled, penalized, or discredited anyone who made a mistake. The atmosphere of mutual respect between the students and Ms. Carter allowed the class to think about and build conceptual understandings eagerly. Ms. Andrew treated errors differently. (Kazemi, 1998, p. 413)

When I read such an account of less-than-adequate teaching, especially when it is juxtaposed as it was in this article by a description of “good” teaching by another teacher, I am compelled to pause and wonder what the “Ms. Andrews” of this world must think when they read these descriptions. Does the account come as a surprise? If not the account, what about the comparison and the surrounding analysis?

Such moments of discomfort give me pause for thought, and yet there is something in the power of example, as Aristotle knew well. The teachers who invite me into their classrooms understand that they will be, one way or another, re-constituted into “examples,” and all of them, having been either my erstwhile students or party to instances of my work in professional development over the years, know that I use videotaped examples *from my own teaching* as teaching tools, often specifically choosing instances of my own less-than-stellar teaching as a means to open up discussion of what I now view as inadequate practice. Each teacher with whom I conduct research has given me permission to use excerpts from the videotapes of their teaching in my ongoing teacher education work, and some have been

present on occasions where their teaching has been shown to others in such forums. It is a different matter, however, for me to hold out examples from my own teaching as being in need of improvement than to do the same with another teacher's practices. I tend to be much more brutal with my own examples.

Nevertheless, I continue to struggle with the researcher's ethical charge to "do no harm." While we may be instructed by the differences of which we are informed concerning Ms. Carter's and Ms. Andrew's teaching practices, and therefore we may assume that a general "good" is being done, I wonder what Ms. Andrew has learned from her experience as part of this research and whether she feels "good" about her portrayal? I console myself by thinking that perhaps Ms. Andrew was the one pushing for change in her own classroom (though no hint of this is given in the article), or that perhaps she was secure enough in her practice to be unconcerned by an outsider's view, although this is at once comforting and troublesome. Perhaps Ms. Andrew recognises, as Derrida reminds us, that the Other can never be "captured" through social categories or designative names (Butler, 2004). But I am troubled still by the recognition that how we choose to frame the Other speaks volumes about us, and I recognise the power of my narratives to transform others and myself. Indeed, the irony is not lost on me that in exposing this dilemma of research practice by bringing under scrutiny another researcher's writing, I am engaging in the very practice I am seeking to disrupt. Nevertheless, I am curious about the decisions this author made in choosing examples from the data and in juxtaposing two teachers' practices in this way, and this provokes me to wonder: What gives me the authority to act through my research—in propose ideas and make judgements under cover of a word processor—in ways that would make me uncomfortable if I were to speak the ideas aloud before an audience, especially if that audience included the teacher who is anonymously portrayed in the writing?

Indeed, this is a dilemma I with which I am struggling in the research project I mentioned earlier, as I work with a colleague to understand and write about the growth of mathematical understanding in one particular teacher's classroom. As we have analysed the classroom data, we have started to recognise that the particular theoretical lens we are bringing is surfacing questions for us about the teacher's practice and these questions have started to coalesce into a critique. The lens we have brought is that of complexity theory, which has prompted us to analyse the classroom discourse from the perspective of the collective. Through the complexity theory lens, aspects of the teacher's practice have emerged as problematic. However, this critique is simply meaningless when one focuses on the data without the theoretical lens of complexity theory and without the

perspective of the collective. It was only when our attention turned away from the fragmentary and the individual and towards the collective processes at play in the classroom that we began to critique the teaching we observed more vigorously. This leaves for me the dilemma of how to broach such critiques with the teacher, whose work I respect and whose trust has been placed in me. How shall I talk to her about the differences between her practice and practices suggested by emerging theories in mathematics education?

What is, or ought to be, the researcher's ethical obligation in narrating difference in teaching practice? And what is at issue when the research itself focuses on the nature of difference?

Darren: The Ethics of Narrating Difference in Antiracism Research

To conduct social justice research and activism in Canada means to disrupt the narrative flow of a fragile national identity that springs from a comfortable tale of collaboration and consensus. For this identity is founded on a sweeping and magnificent lie, like a colourful blanket thrown over the broken bodies of the silenced victims of its effects. Its captivating narrative is woven from the carefully selected textbook images, pre-packaged curricula, and intricately coded public discourse of a nation. Bringing up racism means pointing out the flaws and seams in the weave.

Stuart Hall (1992) explains how the concept of racism serves to create and reinforce the barriers that divide people:

Racism, of course, operates by constructing impassable symbolic boundaries between racially constituted categories, and its typically binary system of representation constantly marks and attempts to fix and naturalize the difference between belongingness and otherness. (p. 255)

Even to mention racism by name, or to acknowledge its existence in every community, structure, and institution, is to fracture the smooth image of a cohesive, multicultural society.

Current research on challenging racism is complicated by the pervasive but erroneous notion that Canada has always stood for harmony and acceptance. John Boyko (1995) notes our national tendency toward whitewashing our racist past: "Canadians are often guilty of ignoring or warping our past while sanctimoniously feeling somewhat removed from, and superior to, countries struggling with racial problems and harbouring histories marked by slavery or racial violence" (p. 15). Even reported activities of contemporary racist hate groups in Canada are typically downplayed or avoided in schools and universities (Kinsella, 2001). My personal experiences with racist hate mail, telephone threats, and lawsuits

launched by extremists have revealed to me a sense of the depth and dangers of this lethal undercurrent of hate. Admittedly, the very topic of *difference*—arguably the currency of antiracism work—is itself a concept that attracts a great deal of heated academic debate and drawing of lines. Where the lines drawn are racial, the discourse can boil over. Hall (1992) notes that difference is “a slippery, and therefore, contested concept,” clarifying that “there is the ‘difference’ which makes a radical and unbridgeable separation: and there is a ‘difference’ which is positional, conditional and conjunctural, closer to Derrida’s notion of *différance*” [italics in original]. What is needed, he argues, is a “decoupling” of ethnicity and difference—too often defined by white nationalism—from the violence of the state (p. 257). He was writing about the situation in the United Kingdom but his words ring just as true in the Canadian setting.

My recent research with students and teachers undertaking the thorny work of tackling racism in school settings³ (Lund, 2003a, 2003b) has drawn a sharper focus on the strength of mainstream Canada’s propensity for denial, and the barriers this can present to those undertaking social justice initiatives. Tackling some of the destructive responses to difference—such as white privilege, patriarchy, homophobia, classism, sexism, racism, and oppression—in their various forms in schools and the community means fracturing the thin veneer of social harmony. But I am coming to see that this fracturing is an inevitable, and perhaps even desirable, first step on the journey toward a more equitable society.

An additional source of discord in educational research emerges from the various identities within which we conduct our work. Dei, Karumanchery and Karumanchery-Luik (2004) assert that our national and cultural identities are not fixed but intersect within a shifting terrain of meanings and negotiations. In spite of this fluidity, some national images seem cemented; for example, “because Western cultures are most commonly equated with whiteness, in these contexts, racialized bodies are formed and negotiated as inherently unequal and certainly less desirable than their white counterparts” (p. 142). Antiracism research requires confronting these and other discomfiting inequities.

Whether antiracism activism takes place in faculty hiring meetings, lectures, staff rooms, or school hallways, this work has the effect of interrupting the shared fictional narrative of a nation purportedly built on harmonious cooperation between different peoples. Countering the denial of our racist historical past and the inequities of our present through social justice activism is an effort to strip away the whitewash—so to speak—revealing a new problematic narrative for Canada that many find troubling. As Roxanna Ng (2003) notes, “undoing inequality and achieving equity in education is a risky and uncomfortable act because we need to

disrupt the way things are ‘normally’ done. This involves a serious (and frequently threatening) effort to interrogate our privilege as well as our powerlessness” (p. 216). Articulating this new, discordant narrative into teacher education and educational research has an unsettling effect on many participants. This backlash to particular antiracism initiatives in teacher education has been documented recently in a study of the negative reactions of white Canadian pre-service teachers to a classic article on white privilege (Solomon, Portelli, Daniel, & Campbell, 2005).

In my own efforts to insert contentious topics into teacher education, I find myself using self-effacing humour and an awkward form of “guilty white male confessional” to mask my own discomfort. I have heard myself lapsing into a sort of “redemptive” narrative, a version of my own life story that highlights my being raised in a working class neighbourhood with a racist father. Most often, when I first raise the issue of white privilege among mainstream education students, the response is anger or, at the very least, emotional defensiveness and denial. I have come to believe that these are promising signs that the necessary fracturing has begun.

But where do we go from here in our work on “difference” with pre-service teachers? Where shall we turn our attention to find a way to learn from the fracturing discourses that often characterize our work?

Lisa:

Significantly, it is my historical research practice that has allowed me to question the stories I relate in class and to wonder: How might my musings on these educational stories inform my research practice in due time? And how might it enhance my attunement to difference and to ethical considerations in historical interpretation and analysis?

As a historian I am always conscious of the narratives I encounter in my research and particularly how I choose to interpret them. I understand that “the past as history will be necessarily configured, troped, emplotted, read, mythologized and ideologized in ways to suit ourselves” (Jenkins, 1991, p. 3). I am ever vigilant of how narratives are constituted as forms of argumentation that intertwine past/present and self/other. “Narrative and argumentation are dialectically related,” notes David Kaplan (2001), and “each is part of a whole and needs the other to be complete” (n.p.).

Historians interpret the same phenomenon differently through discourses that are always on the move always de-composed and re-composed, always positioned and positioning, and which thus need constant self-examination as discourses by those who use them. Since they construct their understandings laterally—that is, moving from one set of sources after another—they effectively do comparative work. They

do not move down into deeper and deeper knowledge. At the root is the perpetual quest for the truth and the assertion that “evidence is in the record.” After Jenkins, I prefer Edward Carr’s explanation that “the trace becomes evidence when it is used to support an argument (interpretation) prior to which, although it exists, it remains just an unused piece of stuff from the past” (as cited in Jenkins, 1991, p. 49).

Accordingly, I employ “unused pieces of stuff from the past” at the beginning of each course by fracturing narratives and confounding our notion of difference, reminding my students, and myself, that the world / the past comes to us always already as stories. We cannot get out of these stories (narratives) to check if they correspond to the real / world / past because these “already constructed narratives constitute reality” (Jenkins, 1991, p. 9). I encourage them to think critically about how they try to know the past and why this might matter? As David Lowenthal (1999) has insightfully elucidated “whether it is celebrated or rejected, attended to or ignored, the past is omnipresent” (p. xv). This is crucial in determining the possibilities of what “history” is and can be—it is history’s “claim to knowledge” rather than belief or assertion that makes it the discourse it is.

Drawing on feminist conceptions of difference as a political act, one that has fundamental implications for how individuals (self and other) and societies can live, develop, and transform themselves—I seek to vindicate difference as a powerful factor of dissymmetry that rejects dualisms and recasts difference, narrative and ethics symbiotically in the classroom and in research. There is no justice in the world without accepting and understanding the richness and power differences inherent in the world. As Sandra Harding (1998) has noted, it is a question of reinventing oneself as Other. While my students grasp the particularities of my own alienated and marginal school experience, I need to keep questioning.

How can we help them see the complexity of historical narratives of schooling and the way they situate difference? How does the past live in our present practice, theories, and research? And lastly, why might all this matter?

Darren:

Teaching is a conservative profession; the workforce is comprised mainly of white people, and most of us liked our schools, thrived within their visible and invisible hierarchies, and so we unconsciously strive to recreate and protect them in our own practice. The resistance of Canadian educators to antiracism initiatives has been well documented (Fleras, 1996; Solomon & Levine-Rasky, 1994). From their national study of over 1000 teachers, Solomon and Levine-Rasky (1994) concluded, not surprisingly, that Canadian educators consistently seek to avoid contentious issues around

difference, and specifically that “denial and reluctance to name the problem of racism and thus the need for an antiracist pedagogy remains a most tenacious obstacle” (p. 12). It is significant that a decade later, their recent research confirms that “anti-racism pedagogy has been slow in achieving the objective of equalizing opportunities for racial and ethnic minorities because of educators’ ambivalence, contradictory responses, or outright antagonism to its concept, policy and practice” (Solomon & Levine-Rasky, 2003, p. 9). Facing the hatred and discrimination is uncomfortable, but can open the way to a more critical examination of the mistakes of the past, and more importantly, how they can be stopped from repeating themselves.

Since European settlers began arriving here, systematic discrimination has been practiced against individuals and groups based on racist ideologies and ethnocentric views about the primacy of British cultural norms, beginning with the colonization of First Nations peoples. Official government policies, formulated and implemented with popular public support, served to entrench, among other examples, racial segregation in schools, forced assimilation of First Nations Canadians, racialized immigration restrictions, anti-Semitism, the mistreatment of Chinese immigrant railway workers, and the displacement and internment of Japanese-Canadians (Boyko, 1995; Henry, Tator, Mattis, & Rees, 1995; Ward, 1992). Exposing and studying this past is an important first step for all Canadians, and Jennifer Tupper’s (2002) work on racialized representation in contemporary social studies textbooks offers an important exemplar to point the way.

I am learning to find strength in unstable narratives, comfort in the awkward recognition of differences, and hope in the fracturing of smooth surfaces. Daniel Yon’s (2000) poignant observation about the young people who were the focus of his study offers promise in the fluidity of their multiple identities. He warns: “The desire to know cultures, races, and identities as stable objects detracts from the possibility of engaging with the multiple identifications and affiliations which we have seen are central to the ways that identities, race, and culture are made and lived by youth” (p. 132). Conducting antiracism research means to choose to interrupt a false story, to ask uncomfortable questions about power and privilege, to open up new negotiations about identity and difference. This means walking a rocky terrain that offers scant refuge and demands continuous effort just to move forward.

Once these questions have been asked, how can we best honour our responsibility to act in ethical ways as teacher educators and as researchers?

Jo:

As a researcher in a professional faculty I have an obligation not only to describe and account for various teaching practices, but also to challenge accepted practices and to make judgements—to stand for something. In this sense, one acts *phronetically*, in Aristotle’s sense of the word, when one considers one’s relationship to society when one acts. Society here includes not only individual teachers who might be embarrassed by accounts of their practice but also other teachers seeking to improve their practices, parents seeking alternatives to deadening school systems, and indeed the children who might find themselves in “Ms. Andrew’s” class. By contrast, “Foucault... talks about ethics in relation to ‘an aesthetic of existence,’ that is, the relationship you have to *yourself* [italics in original] when you act (Flyvberg, 2001, p. 55). Such an ethic compels me to confront the differences I perceive between myself as a teacher (and researcher) and the Other as teacher, including those other teachers in whose classrooms I do my research. I am compelled to reconsider whether those differences I perceive are as “real” as I think they are. Maturana (1988) suggests that “we accept or [do] not accept... responsibility for our actions... according to whether we are aware or not of our constitutive participation in the bringing forth of the reality that we live at each instant” (p. 73). Such a position suggests that we are always and already implicated in the “reality” we are witnessing when we observe teaching, and that we are in part responsible for occasioning the very practice we are documenting, critiquing, and from which might like to think we are—philosophically, theoretically and perhaps ethically—setting ourselves apart.

As we act, then, we must honour and remain alive to the practice of criticism (Butler, 2004) but maintain sensitivity in our encounters with the Other. After all, as Derrida again insists, the Other is “one to whom an incalculable responsibility is owed... [and therefore] one to whom a certain response is owed (Butler, 2004, p. 32). And here I am back where I began: What ought to be the nature of my response to the teaching practices I research?

Sustaining ethical practice in research on teaching remains a delicate affair. Choosing how to act is messier, more contingent, and more context-specific than many research methodology texts would have us believe. Borrowing from Maturana and Varela (1992) I suggest that sustaining ethical practice in narrating difference is *dependent on*, though not *determined by*, the nature of our relationship to the Other.

And so a question persists: How ought we, in our research practices, to do justice to a life?

Hans:

The preceding narratives are intended to illustrate and interpret the question of fragmentation, and especially what would allow or disallow an ethics of narrating difference. Here, as mentioned at the outset, the work of the hermeneutic philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1992) may be helpful, and his exploration of the relationship between “the self and the ethical aim.” What is valuable in his discussion is that the ethical aim, as it were, cannot simply be reduced to individual wants and desires and interests, but must indeed rest in something *other*. It is within his formulation of ethical intention as “aiming at the good life with and for others in just institutions” that I wish to frame the narratives of my colleagues. And I want to argue that Ricoeur, while not giving us an immediate solution to fragmentation, perhaps points to alternative ways of construing narratives that bring us back to some sense of ethical purpose and unity, as I noted earlier may be integral to the work of teacher education and curriculum. I reiterate below the questions around how we can be “successful” persons within the desire to achieve a good life, or to strive for the good through our practices within the context of teacher education and research.

“Aiming at the good life” (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 171)

Nel Noddings (2003) has asked recently why it has become so unfashionable, or even prohibitive to talk about the “aims of education.” I would take her question to parallel Ricoeur’s discussion about the good life as ethical intent, which constitutes the aim of our responsibilities as teachers and researchers. There are two points in this: first, that the “good” is never totally achievable and therefore cannot be held by narrow and finite definitions of outcomes; and secondly, Ricoeur restates Aristotle’s notion that basis for the good life lies in *praxis*. But *praxis* has a different meaning than merely *technique*.

For example, when we talk about standards of excellence, whether they are in our research approaches, our construction of narratives about our lives, or how we take up the issue of difference, such standards cannot be reduced to instructional outcomes or procedures, although they are often presented this way. While those procedures, steps and techniques certainly have their place—they are fragments, in this sense, of narratives and practices—they cannot replace practice nor *praxis* in a more constitutive sense (i.e., What does it mean to be a teacher? What does it mean to be a researcher?). Hence, standards of excellence require the kind of gathering up that requires both a sense of the good life and, more critically, shared understandings and dialogue. When a person acts ethically in this sense, it is not just on the basis of individual choice, or on that part of our work

that is demanded through narrow outcomes, but more broadly through what Ricoeur argues is an interpretive relationship with the Other, with multiple narratives—texts of action—of how we conduct ourselves in the world, then, provide possibilities as well for the self and for understanding the other.

“*With and for others...*” Ricoeur (1992, p. 180)

Ricoeur raises the question of what makes it possible to engage in ethical action, what makes us capable of ethics. In a fragmented context, ethics may only be reduced to one’s instrumental relationships to things and others. Even the Other (or understanding the Other, others’ narratives, or others’ differences) is seen as a problem to be solved. In construing our educational and research work in such forms we may fall into a kind of narrow self-realization, and certainly, a narrower sense of what it means to be a *self* as teacher or researcher. Knowledge then becomes something different, something less attached, than knowledge oriented to understanding.

Ricoeur raises the important idea that to be a self is, in some ways, impossible without what he calls the “mediating” role of the Other—that it is the Other who mediates the possibilities “between capacities and realization.” He writes about the relationship as one of *solicitude*, a relationship open to the suffering of others, with suffering here not necessarily referring to physical or emotional pain, but to the degree of capacity for action, for taking up the world more fully, for better understanding. He writes,

For from the suffering other there comes a giving that is no longer drawn from the power of acting and existing but precisely from weakness itself. This is perhaps the supreme test of solicitude, when unequal power finds compensation in an authentic reciprocity in exchange, which in the hour of agony, finds refuge in the shared whisper of voices or the feeble embrace of clasped hands. (1992, p. 191)

What Ricoeur is raising here is what summons us to responsibility, a question Judith Butler (2003) re-emphasizes in her book, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, where she reminds us of the precariousness of all representations or attempts at representation. It is a reminder that we find ethical intent, or the “good life,” not in lofty academic plans, or good lessons, or outcomes, or neat ethical proposals for research, but in a form of narrative that finds its fragile roots in our need for friends and for the well-being of both others and ourselves.

“*In Just Institutions ...*” Ricoeur (1992, p. 194)

Ricoeur defines institution as “the structure of living together as this belongs to a historical community” (p. 194). It is a structure not reducible

to interpersonal relationships, or our immediate everyday practices, yet integral to them. It provides what he terms an *ethos*—from which ethics takes its name—something that gives common rule, and common constraints. Ricoeur’s discussion of just institutions is important for thinking about fragmentation in this way: he raises the critical questions about understanding in the first instance, *plurality*—that is, the idea that the other cannot be reduced to the same—and yet at the same time, the ability to hold what he terms “*action in concert*” (p. 196).

Returning to the points I raised earlier about Marx’s notion of alienation, one can see that part of the problem is that first of all, difference is easily erased when work is determined and recognized solely in terms of quantifiable (and hence also interchangeable) elements. If, for instance, our preparation of student teachers is only for the purposes of meeting narrowly defined and discrete “standards” of teaching, then what may effectively be erased is the question of who a person is and what he or she can bring to work; and practice defined in such standards cannot hold “excellence” since excellence requires a strong and shared narrative of action and one that offers possibility for self-understanding and becoming.

Additionally, in fragmented forms, teaching as work cannot only be individually conceived, but indeed requires “action in concert.” In a situation of fragmentation, it becomes all too easy to consider the Other as a thing. Ricoeur makes the interesting point that institutions can only thrive on some basis of equality, by which he means that we must treat every person as an “each.” Equality here refers to where solicitude lives, as a deep regard and responsibility for the Other as other, and not as a product of a process of practices unencumbered by a broader sense of intention and purpose.

Hence, to return to our theme of narrative differences in fragmentary contexts, in taking up our responsibilities as an effort that aims for *phronesis*, we cannot assume the stability of guiding master narratives, or even secure or hospitable institutions. But the struggle to frame our questions and practices as orienting to addressing differences and respects do require more than simply carrying out our work in the assumption that we have achieved good practice. As Alexander (1997) suggests in his reading of Gadamer’s view, when we risk the self to express goodwill to—or *solicitude* for—the Other, we may begin to create more hospitable conditions for our practice.

Notes

1. A modified version of this paper was presented as a series of narrations at “Provoking Curriculum: To Promote a New Era of Canadian Curriculum Questioning,” a symposium of the Canadian Association of Curriculum

Studies, University of Victoria, Victoria, BC (Lund, Panayotidis, Phelan, Smits, & Towers, 2003). The authors have tried to capture the polyvocal quality of the presentation by maintaining their individual voices. A series of visual images was projected as a backdrop to the original presentation, a few of which are included here to elicit further insights into the meanings conveyed and evoked by our writing. These selected images are used with the kind permission of the artists. Click [HERE](#) to access the images.

2. This research is supported by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (# 410-2001-0500)
3. This research has been supported by grants from the Killam Trusts and SSHRC.

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