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"What Was *That* All About?" Using Critical Personal Narrative For Inquiry And Critical Reflective Practice

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Abstract*:* I position Critical Personal Narrative (CPN) within the larger field of interpretive narrative inquiry, offer a framework for its use as a research tool, and conclude by suggesting ways CPN can be utilized by adult educators wanting to be critically reflective in their practice. I illustrate this with two stories of discourses at work.

The Conference Goer's Lament

"It was dreadful, all that navel-gazing, that's not real research, no validity!!" So lamented a positivist colleague a few years ago, as we deconstructed the conference we'd just come back from. He asked, "What *was* that conference all about?" It seemed to him that the presentations and papers seemed to fall into two broad camps: either they were about doing "real research" (which seemed to involve much work with ANOVA's, large data-sets and huge amounts of n's, and drawing conclusions supporting critical theorists' assertions about the dangers of some kinds of educational structures and activities in reifying social inequities), or they were about "sitting around telling stories," (which I claimed seemed to involve much intense work with small numbers of participants, and even the researcher, and where analysis of narratives of experiences in education seemed to support postmodern and poststructural claims that some kinds of educational structures and activities reified social inequities). Now, I'd say, him, "What was it about? Well, some of the conference presenters did, indeed, use narrative in their research; they're starting to construct what are in/appropriate 'interpretive research methods,' delineating the contours of a field of practice and body of knowledge—and who's allowed to play in that field. You've just witnessed the formation of a discourse." Back then, I think I likely said, "Well, there's more to it than that…" This paper provides a better riposte.

Siting CPN

Everyday, life stories me, and it stories my learners. When those stories are re-storied, purposively, I call them *Critical Personal Narratives.* I say to students, "Yes, you *can* take any kind of common experience, anything at all, from the everyday, *your* everyday, and write about it, and then read it, because, look, now you've created a text. Now, analyze it! Look for power, look for language, look for the way things 'just are,' because that's a discourse. Ask, how can you re-story 'what just happened' so others can see that discourse, and question it?" They look blank. You're looking blank: So, let me get academic. Let's make it a real/academic discursively/disciplinary sanctioned story, not just navel gazing.

Narrative Genres: Nowadays, one of the difficulties with designing and assessing qualitative research is that there is almost too much information available—in journals, texts, on-line—and way too many genres to choose from (Merriam, 2002). Novices and practitioners are easily daunted, and especially by narrative. "Narrative" is an umbrella term for different kinds of storying; it can refer to how research is framed methodologically, how data is analyzed, or how the research findings and conclusions are re-presented. So narrative may be concerned with *epistemology* (knowledge), with *ontology* (the nature of the world, and how people construct or become constructed in that world), and *rhetoric* (what's a good, dramatic, fair, and reliable way of presenting research texts, and our discussion of those texts). Or all three. Because I continue to expand the ways I can use narrative in my critical poststructural practice as a professor who professes to be a critical adult educator, I've sorted its genres into several groupings for my own

convenience. While understanding that many narratives are multi-dimensional, and could be classified in several ways, I see narratives as falling primarily into one of these broad categories:

- Narrative as **life-writing**, or biographical, where its author uses an individual's life—theirs or someone else's—to understand, or explain social phenomena or issues in educational practice and inquiry (Harper and "Mira," 2000; Renner, 2001; Tennant, 1998).
- Narrative as **critically ethnographic**, where narratives of groups and individuals intertwine to illustrate how they produce and are affected by (educational) culture(s) (Willis, 1997; Foley, 2002).
- Narrative as **autoethnographic,** where the narrator has placed themselves in a *social and cultural context* to better understand their practice/life as they live it (Reed-Danahay, 1997, 2002); frequently using *emotion* to connect with their audience in unexpected ways (Ellis and Bochner, 2002); where the narrator has relied upon their *insider or indigenous status* to offer deeper ways of understanding and accessing a culture (Atleo et al, 2003); and as emanating from "*contact zones*.... social spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, and in the models of community many of us rely on in teaching and theorizing that are under challenge today" (Pratt, 2002, p. 4).
- Narrative as **creative or arts-based**, when a poetic way of expression is used to either inquire into, or represent findings about, educational phenomena or issues (Piirto, 2002).
- **Critical narrative**, used to uncover the workings of oppressive or repressive power and/or the marginalization of learners, teachers or administrators (Brown, 2001).
- **P**ersonal narrative** as a method of writing and inquiry into issues or problems in an area of educational practice (Kennedy, 1990; Mannion, 2001), and/or innovative ways of representing the personal findings of such research (Shigezawa, 2001).
- **Critical personal narrative,** which combines the last two genres.

Defining Critical Personal Narrative

I distinguish CPN from other narrative genres because: It's *critical*, in that it works with issues of power and knowledge in practice. It's *personal* because it's about the author, often embarrassingly and deliberately so, even though its very intimate nature and the visceral reactions it elicits—especially from more traditionally oriented researchers—can be both a strength and a weakness. And it's *narrative* in that it consciously uses story form to be accessible to a wider audience, so there are characters, context and plot. It satisfies the human need for story, while enabling the teller to see their story as a text outside of themselves. CPN is, crucially, a *political* practice. The narrator stories experience for self-understanding (Chapman, 2003; Foucault, 1997), but also for public reading. CPN's deliberately/dialectically link theory to personal experience (Griffiths, 1995; Chapman and Sork, 2001; Author, 2003); their goal is to make a dialogic connection, to inspire or motivate, to stimulate the reader to self-awareness of similar issues or struggles, and perhaps, to praxis. CPN's "move between private histories and more public examinations," (Burdell and Swadener, 1999) without evading the complexity of theory and research. CPN authors allow themselves to become vulnerable; their narratives redefine the role of the leader/teacher/academic and what counts as knowledge, and trouble the theory/practice binary. Are they discourses of individualism and heroics? Critical theorists say "such writing can serve the chilling function of simply saying, 'but enough about you, let me tell you about me,'" which "winds up privileging the white, middle class, woman's or man's need for self display" (Apple, 1996, p.xiv). It is therefore crucially important to constantly monitor

who gets to speak, in, and about, the narrative. Critical Personal Narrators "located inside pragmatic, credential-oriented, and technology driven corporate university settings," see it creating dialogic spaces, because it "allows a field of possibilities to open before us, where we might see not only resistance but even educational and social change" (Burdell and Swadener, 1999, p.25).

Defining Critical Reflective Practice

So much has been written about how to become a "reflective practitioner" that the term has become emptied out of meaning, a catch phrase used to avoid some serious and hard thinking about what we do. It's in the area of reflective practice, too, that narrative has been most badly and superficially used. Teach a class, go home and write a page about it in your journal. Turn it into your practicum supervisor/peer evaluator. Put it in your teaching portfolio. Nice stories, gentle anecdotes, saying what you think they want to read about what you think they want you to say about your classes—this is not critical personal narrative, this is expediency. Let's start by defining critical: My definition differs from other critical perspectives. Peter McClaren (1994) characterizes critical pedagogy as a "disciplinary trajectory within education that has its roots in Marxian analyses of class," and claims critical educators "analyze and unsettle extant power configurations, to defamiliarize and make remarkable what is often passed off as the ordinary, the mundane, the routine, the banal." For Stephen Brookfield, ideology critique is central to a critically reflective practice, and involves "the attempt to unearth and challenge dominant ideology and the power relations this ideology justifies" (2000, p. 38). What we think are our own personal values, beliefs and self evident truths, and the justifications we hold for practicing the way we do, are ideologically sedimented; these ideologies manifest in language, social habits and critical forms. Feminist pedagogy, like critical pedagogy, comes in many shapes and sizes, including Marxist, liberal, radical, and "post"; what unites all its varieties, however, is the belief that oppression and inequity are inextricably linked to gender and sexuality—critical feminist pedagogy is often concerned with uncovering oppression in the classroom, through examination of "everyday" practices.

Poststructuralists also use critiques of the commonplace, as well as "important" things, to look and think differently about what we take for granted, but reject the notion that underlying power structures—whether economic, biologically essential, or hegemonic—can be "discovered" and resisted. Poststructuralists believe power circulates among all people in social relations, to create cultural and social practices and institutions—structures—and that all the people within them become both the objects of power/knowledge, and subject to it. A critical poststructural or Foucaultian educational project refers, then, to a "disciplined questioning of the ways in which power works through the discursive practices and performances of schooling… and a focus on knowledge as a social practice that constitutes the self in the world," (Popkewitz and Brennan, 1997, pp.4-5). Specifically, critical poststructuralists look at how language, discourses and power/knowledge structures work within education. Critical adult educators are also concerned with power in educational settings (Cervero and Associates, 2001), of course, perhaps because of a long history of engagement with social justice. But taking a poststructural perspective denies us the role of savior, of identifying injustice and oppression, because we see that teaching others to be "free" is also about freeing them from unequal relations of power in our classroom.

How does a poststructuralist work toward reflection on their practice? I find Foucault's suggestion for *askesis*, "a training of the self by oneself," (1997, p.208), useful in developing a critically reflective practice: *askesis* can include abstinences, memorizations, self-examinations, meditations, silence, and listening to others, and *self-writing*, which is about "nothing less than

the shaping of the self" (1997, p.210-211). My use, then, of CPN takes a poststructural narrative perspective, and I use my stories to examine how the paired words of *language/discourse, power/knowledge*, and *power/relation* can help us to "persistently critique a structure that one cannot not (wish to) inhabit" (Spivak, 1993, p. 284). For me, that structure is adult education. Two stories illustrate the way power, language, knowledge and discourse circulate in the academy to construct appropriate faculty.

Using CPN for Critically Reflective Practice: Institutional Discourses At Work

Changing the grade: In my second semester as an assistant professor, I was disappointed with the final paper one student—who had always been bright, engaged and produced excellent work throughout the semester—handed in, and I graded it rather harshly. The student complained, wanting a higher final grade, and so after a round of emails (which were copied to advisors, and senior faculty by the student, an interesting example of power relations at work, I thought, as the student, the one in the relation with unequal power, tried to pressure me, supposedly with more power, to make the change), I had the student meet with me. After a vigorous conversation with the student, who talked about their topic and showed me the research that had gone into it, I felt that I had undervalued the work. I filled in a grade change form (what's this, I said, I never had to fill in a form for this at my last place!), and sent it off to be administered by the College. It came back to me, with a personal note attached, saying that grades could not be changed unless computational error was involved, as faculty did not make mistakes in evaluating student work. I was deeply disturbed. Did this mean faculty were infallible, or at least constructed as such, by the institution? Was this a consequence of being in an institution where undergraduates were kept firmly in place? Was this also a manifestation of the power structures that seemed to require students to always address their instructors as Dr. So and So, rather than by name? I talked to many of my colleagues—none seemed to share my concern about the inability of an instructor to reevaluate student work, something I think a teacher may find themselves doing for many reasons. Finally, I discussed it with one of the "old timers." "Hah, yes," he said, "see, it's not about you or the student, it's because the graduate school won't allow changes—too many challenges in the past—so you're being told, nicely, to make it an issue of bad math, so we don't have to go up against the Grad School." I filled out the form, citing computational error, and the grade change went through. To me, this CPN reveals a great deal about my self as a teacher, about the relationship I have with students, about the way institutional forms and permissions are handled, about the dis-ease I feel in hierarchical pedagogic encounters, and about the institutions discursive practices—and its creation through them of appropriate students and faculty. In this story's telling, I feel like Spivak's (1988) brown woman, unable to speak—I can't speak because I'm in a double bind. On the one hand I cannot challenge a teaching practice with the student because I've been constructed as the expert, the infallible, and on the other hand, I am not able to discuss it with the institutional figures who disciplined me for not being disciplined enough with the students, where I clearly don't have the power to make choices of my own in how I teach and assess student work. I ended up feeling it's better to be a bad mathematician than a reflective teacher at this institution.

Making the grade: P and T: From the time we enter the academy as graduate students, claims Thomas (2004), we are forced to "labor through the agonizingly long series of trials to tenure." Having just been awarded tenure, Thomas begins to question this "single-minded focus on tenure as the pivotal moment in an academic career," and she now realizes that "it's not the tenure track that fills me with anxiety and fear that I'm a fraud; it's the academic track. Anxiety, it seems to me, is part and parcel of living the academic life." Some of us question this long

before we get to tenure. Pinnegar (1998) likens getting tenure to a ritual and magical process: those who have been awarded it, never talk about it, but those who are striving for it, talk of nothing else. It's pretty much the same in my institution as it was at Pinnegar's. All the junior faculty talk of what is needed to get P and T, and in an effort to make the process more transparent, the institution decreed the use of a new form to be filled in by faculty in their first year. Called the Statement of Mutual Expectations, it's anything but. The SME became the bete noir of the first agonizing year—like my peers, I struggled to write up in 1 or 2 pages what I expected to accomplish in the areas of teaching, research and service over the next few years. Many times the SME came back to me like an academic boomerang, it needed clarification, focus, the reworking of my goals… I don't hold the record for number of times rewritten (that stands at 8), but the iterative process played a major role in transforming me into the institutional professor of choice… I am sure many universities or colleges require something similar. The "Saga of the SME" is probably repeated in offices, over shared desks, at the water cooler, by the photocopier, in hushed voices and with varying amounts of trepidation, terror and turmoil across the academic landscape. Does writing what you're supposed to write mean compromising values, or is this an exercise in communicative power that is only that—an exercise? I recorded in my journal some of what I was feeling; this is an edited (for obvious reasons) abstract, but even so, it shows what I was trying to make of the experience, how this CPN is one that troubles me, and needs more reflection:

I'd like to see someone tackle the real stuff about tenure, and going from Assistant to Associate. That Statement of Mutual Expectations, rewriting it again and again and again until it says what the administration wants it to say, there's no mutuality to it at all, it's just a disciplining exercise. Then they put it somewhere in a dark place and it's not used again, until you have to rewrite it for them again at year 3. Maybe I won't mind then. I feel like I've had to reshape my very soul. And what will I really be judged on when it's time? Not my publications, nor my service, nor my teaching, but some kind of nebulous dollar figure for grants awarded… but while I am busy writing up grants (which in my field are nonexistent) then I don't have time to do my writing and my real research—the stuff I hide because 'they' don't like it or rate it. It means I have no life, no quality of life, live in fear of the next tactic of manipulation, and in the end, it's the boys who always win the prizes. What can we do to help women feel they can succeed here, and by doing the research and writing they're good at, not the research that imitates male successes?

I began this paper with a story about a conference and the creation of a new discursive strand within educational inquiry. I believe that telling stories, critically and personally, allows us to think and look "differently" at what we take for granted about our practices with learners, and our educational programs, institutions and structures. Using critical personal narrative, as **askesis**, or a critical reflective practice—creatively, biographically or ethnographically—often reveals how power and knowledge work in our educational contact zones. Language, as communicative power, does, indeed, supply the tools to dismantle educational structures and structure new power/knowledge formations, and to re-story them.

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