

# Demanding Reflexivity: Lazy Ozzie and Other Stories

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## Introduction

I am a staff member in a University Department of Adult and Community Education, which espouses rather grandly, a radical approach to adult education theory, practice and research. I think of how two researchers in the Department recently articulated this approach. 'The goal of radical adult education' according to one is 'to transform unjust structures and systems in society through collective action for social change' (McGlynn, 2006, p. 36). Radical adult education, he says echoing Marx, 'is emancipatory because it is not sufficient to explain the world, it is also necessary to act to change it' (McGlynn, 2006, p. 37). The other researcher sees individual agency as an important aspect of critical and collective social action, particularly in addressing hegemonic discourses that both structure our subjectivities and identities and perpetuate inequalities (Kenny, 2006, pp. 22-24, 26-7).

I always feel inadequate in the face of these weighty pronouncements. But I increasingly suspect that I am not alone in feeling that personal and social change are much more complex matters than we ordinarily admit and that research adds another element of complexity, and that supervising research yet another. I think it is true and fair to say that supervising research in this field raises ethical issues of various kinds, not least in relation to the well being of the supervisee. It also raises issues of the kind of relationship that the supervisor sets up with the supervisee: tending as it often does to issues of the transformative learning of the researcher.

One of the orthodoxies of supervising research within the framework of a radical approach to adult education is that you 'demand' a reflexive approach. That is, you ask that the researcher adopt a paradigm of research that does not pretend scientific validity, one that recognises that the researcher's own assumptions, experiences and subjectivity constitute the major source of colour in the canvas he or she is painting. Reflexivity in research involves developing 'critical literacy' by not only exploring the external world but also turning the research gaze both on the medium of research and on the researcher him/herself (Davies et al., 2006, p. 88). Researchers therefore, as well as being concerned with doing research, are also concerned with their own story as researchers and with the story of the research.

But the layers are often complex and troubling. As Davies and colleagues recognise (2006) writing and researching reflexively is a fraught process. So reflexivity as a key aspect of research in adult education is both demanded (by the discipline) and demanding (of the researcher). This paper is a story about both of those processes and the complex dynamic that reflexivity sets up.

## The Elusive Self

'My own study has become part of my everyday life, and I wonder will my data collection ever cease', says St. Pierre (1997) and I know the feeling. Except, I would put it the other way around, my everyday life has become part of my study and the thread of what I want to say is as elusive as the self in Zagajewski's poem:

*It is small and no more visible than a cricket  
in August. It likes to dress up, to masquerade,  
as all dwarfs do. It lodges between  
granite blocks, between serviceable  
truths. It even fits under  
a bandage, under adhesive.*

(Zagajewski, 2004, p. 31)

At this point I am tired pursuing the thread, the heart of the matter, and it has slipped into the cracks and crevices of the numerous drafts I have done. The fact that the search is for something of little consequence to anyone save me, and takes place in the detritus of the mundane doesn't matter. This straightforward task of writing a paper has been, in a way, shattering, so bear with me as I try to put one foot in front of the other and tell you the story of writing a story.

I wrote *Lazy Ozzie* months ago. A short story written at one sitting after a tense day ruminating over a meeting with a research student. I kind of liked it, felt better for writing it and felt it captured some of the intimate flux of the meeting and its aftertaste. I felt I had done what Ellis and Bochner suggest that personal narratives can do:

*[they] create the effect of reality, showing characters embedded in the complexities of lived moments of struggle, resisting the intrusions of chaos, disconnection, fragmentation, marginalization, and incoherence, trying to preserve or restore the continuity and coherence of life's unity in the face of unexpected blows of fate that call one's meanings and values into question.*

(Ellis and Bochner, 2000, p. 744)

Even though I can't bear to read it anymore, and hate and detest it more with every draft of this paper that I write, *Lazy Ozzie* is part of the story and so I offer it here as a part of the story I want to tell.

## Lazy Ozzie<sup>3</sup>

*Unhinged with tiredness and strange to myself as a familiar word repeated, I wait for Janice. She arrives and we have a stern supervisory meeting. 'You are getting mixed up', I tell her. 'You can't do a thesis without having a clear sense of what it is you want to find out and how you want to find it out.' I speak with the authority of a supervisor of long standing. I know how to structure arguments and she just isn't doing the business.*

*But that's not all. A creeping voice asks me is it me. Am I making the mess? Do I understand research well enough?*

*'I just don't know if you are going to make the deadline at this rate. Have you thought of deferral as an option? Last year John just needed two extra weeks and he did really well, got his first.'*

*'You wouldn't be a perfectionist by any chance?' she asks. I answer quickly for fear of smarting and getting angry. 'It isn't about my perfectionism, this is about something being good enough.' I should know better, hang back a bit, quell the retaliatory impulse, let the question wash over me a bit.*

*I tell her that there are at least two selves at play: the practitioner self and the researcher self. We draw them on the page and all the other selves around them: the supervisor, the group, the course organisers... 'You need to be clear that you think differently when you are a group facilitator and when you are a researcher. You need to ask the questions that the researcher would ask.'*

*The session ends. Another session follows and ends in which I say many of the same things. I am drained going home and ruminate all the way, passing hedges and people in a blur of preoccupation.*

*At home Martha and Ellen want a story. I find one we have never read before about Lazy Ozzie. Lazy Ozzie is an owl that just wanted to be wise but didn't want to learn how to fly. I wake up a little. I want to be wise but have often very little evidence of it, am not really interested in the blarney learning that gains real wisdom. Janice has really gotten into me. Undermined me. But she doesn't want to fly either. She wants to be a researcher but doesn't want to learn the craft. I'm supposed to tell her what to do.*

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3 The Children's story referred to is Coleman, M. and Williamson, G. *Lazy Ozzie*, London, Little Tiger Press.

Ozzie's mom goes off one day. 'Now Ozzie when I come back I want you to be on the ground and then I will know you have flown.' My interest is piqued, though Martha and Ellen are not too interested. Ozzie has a great idea. He calls over the horse and convinces him to let him down on his back and to take him to the cow. He convinces her to take him to the pig. Martha is no longer sitting down. 'Want go ming' she says. The ming is the swing but that's not what she means, she actually wants the slide. I am as dislocated as an unfinished sentence. I put her on to the slide, seat her at the top and whee down she goes. 'Gain. Gain. Daddy.' I put her on to the slide, seat her at the top and whee down she goes. 'Gain. Gain. Daddy.' I put her up, place her at the top, talk to her about what I am doing and down she goes. I put her up, place her at the top, all the while intrigued with Ozzie. How will the story end? The parallels with Janice are so striking. She wants to fly but is finding ways of avoiding it. Am I the horse, I wonder, giving her a hand down?

I put Martha up on the slide, place her at the top and down she goes. I am bored. Pity she can't just do the whole lot herself. Climb up, place herself at the top, she should surely be able to do that bit. I tell her what to do which she doesn't do because she can't understand me. I wish we were finished with the ming. Bad parent. Enjoy playing with your child. I wonder what happened next with Ozzie.

'Would you like to play in the sand with Ellie, Martha?' It works, they play away, I know I'll pay for it later in mucky boots. In I go and stand excitedly reading Ozzie. He gets the pig to go to the sheepdog and from the sheepdog to the duck and then he is down. He has convinced them all to do something for him, to bring him always to the next lowest animal and eventually gets down. I prefer wisdom to flying, it's better fun.

But the mom comes back, in the story that is, Ozzie's story. Very good she says to him, you got down. But the narrator tells us (as if Ozzie couldn't hear or didn't know or couldn't figure it out for himself) that she has been watching all the time and knows that he can't really fly. 'Now' she says, 'fly back up again.'

Frustrated and dejected I check on the girls. Muck and sand but no-one crying. I am cross with the mom. How dare she? Could she not just let him be clever, the flying will come in its own time. I am no longer concerned with the parallels with the morning, they broke down long ago, just cross with a parent who sets up her child.

*'Dad. Will you wipe my bum?' 'Sure Ellen, but you were able to do that for yourself a year ago.' Frustrated and tired I give in to the day's chores and I cook, clean, pick up, put down, listen to the radio, my mind a numbness of essential trivia.*

*Later in the evening. Red wine and some space, I go back to Ozzie and read from the start, hoping to find something there, some key to the day's flux of feeling. I like Ozzie. I like anyone who wants to be wise, even if they can't fly. I read each page, slowly this time. I am shocked as I see the mom hidden on each page, I hadn't seen that earlier. She had watched him all the time, her controlling vigilance an affront to the chaos of my day. 'You set him up you bitch' I say out loud, 'You set out to catch him out. You just can't appreciate his creativity, his cleverness.' I am full of spite for a character in my child's book and am shocked at the feeling. Panopticon. The ever-present, not so benign parental gaze. I imagine Ozzie's shame and his fluster and I am contrite.*

*A sense of an ending, but an ending born of the need to end, the need for closure. The real ending is much more prosaic than that. Two weeks after the day in question I am outside with the girls again. Eighteen months old and Martha is climbing the climbing frame, rung by frightening rung and coming down the slide headfirst. Did I teach her or did she learn, I wonder? Was I right to set this up, will I now have to watch her, like Ozzie's Mom, every moment of her climbing life? I am terrified, but a secret part of me teacher, parent, father, supervisor, reader of texts, feels at ease again in the world.*

I wrote *Lazy Ozzie* without any thought that it had any significance over and above a storied response to a tense situation. I saw it as a short story, as a piece of creative writing that I had written for myself. It was in my doctoral studies that the trouble started. As part of my participation on a doctoral programme I encountered the post-positivist, reflexive genre of Auto-ethnography and I began to see my story as being something of an auto-ethnographic account of my work as a research supervisor. I learned about auto-ethnography as 'a method and a text' (Etherington, 2004, p. 140), an autobiographical genre of writing and research that incorporates aspects of one's own life experience when writing about others (Etherington, 2004, p. 139). I could see *Lazy Ozzie* as 'a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context' (Etherington, 2004, pp. 139-40).

I found it exciting to read Davies and Gannon make more ambitious, more radical claims for the genre of Auto-ethnography and of its value to my purpose of uncovering the subjective roots that reflexivity purports to expose. They claim that 'taking oneself and one's own ongoing experiences as the data' allows 'the richness, subtlety and complexity of the researcher's own embodied thinking and being in the world...[to] be told, brought to the surface of memory and language.' Auto-ethnography would allow me 'to make relevant those aspects of being that are suppressed by analytic strategies that draw a veil around emotions and bodies' (Davies and Gannon, 2006, p. 3).

I began to try to weave an argument about the emotional and relational dimensions of research supervision, using *Lazy Ozzie* as an auto-ethnographic illustration of a supervisor's own learning and development as a parallel to Janice's.

And so followed draft after draft of argument, poor Ozzie sitting unmoved and unchanged in the middle of each draft never getting even close to flying. Though hateful to revisit them, they are part of the story and this is an account of some of them.

## Experts at Evidence-Based Research

The first draft tried to track my own experience of myself as a researcher and research supervisor in the context of changes and developments in the University sector. It cleverly, so I thought, presented a vignette from a Faculty meeting (8 May 2006) where faculty members had a strong reaction to new guidelines around research supervision coming from policy makers (Irish Universities Association, 2005). Some members at the meeting took issue with the insistence on the 'professionalisation of supervision' (NUIM, 2006) and drew the inference that current approaches to research supervision were being regarded as unprofessional.

I tried to plot some of the identity issues I encountered that I felt mirrored Janice's and went on to discuss them in the light of current thinking around Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 2006; West 2006). Feedback was not positive. A colleague in the Department hated it and told me 'I almost completely disagree with your politics.' Feedback from my own supervisor mentioned that the academic discussion was somewhat pedantic. Nobody said anything nice about poor Ozzie.

I default on hard work and so it began. The next draft and the next, all accompanied by a persistent sense of dissatisfaction.

## The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative

Then came summer holidays and I leave the office, feeling unusually well, mind you for the end of the academic year, and we spend, my family and I, a beautiful two weeks by the sea. In the relaxed empty spaces I revisit my literary studies of many years ago and read up on narrative and how it functions (Abbott, 2002). I get excited and take volumes of notes. I begin to understand how *Lazy Ozzie* works as a text and this is the answer to my questions. I write and write and feel I have now gone from 'monological' to 'dialogical' writing (Hunt, 2001). My happy days as an English teacher come alive and I imagine using my wonderful short story as a text with groups.

And so back in the office I write about how Lazy Ozzie works. The framing narrative (the supervisory meeting) and an embedded narrative (the reading of the story of Lazy Ozzie, a father playing with his children while he reflects on the story); narrative point of view, (homodiegetic narrator), themes and motifs, closure. I wrote about all of this and yet again felt that something, literally vital, was missing.

And then I met Davy Mc Bride and I felt that he could help.

## *The Other Side Of You: A Fictional Autoethnography*

Davy is a character in Salley Vickers' novel *The Other Side of You* (2006) and the novel tells the story of his work with a patient Elizabeth Cruikshank who has attempted suicide. I liked him. I liked reading the ruminations about his own life and losses as he listened to hers. But I especially liked it that he makes an auto-ethnographic presentation at a medical conference and his presentation was all about the relational dimension of his work and the role of his own vulnerability in the healing process. I saw myself as Davy to Janice's Elizabeth. And his auto-ethnography said many of the things I wanted to say.

He decides to present a reflexive account of his work at the conference not out of enlightened thinking but as the result of a crisis. The night before the presentation he wakes up and realises he can't do it as planned:

*It was a fastidious compilation of a couple of cases I'd treated over the past year, offering verbatim material of turning points in the treatment and a sound theoretical explanation of the underlying issues. It was well written, well argued and fundamentally false. I'd no appetite for reading the words I'd laboured over, still less for declaiming them in public, and given my present state it seemed likely that I would be in little position to do so.*

(Vickers, 2006, p. 272)

He begins his lecture next day with a visual image, of Caravaggio's *The Supper at Emmaus* and uses it as a way in to the story of his work with Elizabeth Cruikshank which, he says, flowed 'unedited from my disencumbered heart' (2006, p. 274). He addresses his audience:

*The history of my patient finally entrusted to me is not mine to divulge. It is another story. Hers. But I came to this conference with the intention of presenting a case history, or case histories, treated not by drugs but by other, less material, methods, and I mean not to fail in that undertaking. However, the case I wish to invite you to consider is not that of the suicidal patient I have been alluding to but my own, and the part played by Caravaggio's painting, and the story it portrays, in developing my understanding.*

(Vickers, 2006, p. 275)



He writes about Caravaggio, too lengthy to reproduce here, but the conclusions he arrives at in his presentation spoke to me of what I hoped for my supervisee, that my mistakes and doubts and confusion might somehow not stand in her way, or better still, might actually be the source of something good:

*I believe that, in my dealings with this patient, nothing could have been accomplished without three factors: one, my own incompetence and attendant fear...two, my own desire to liberate myself from some long-term inner restriction...three my willingness to express my personal commitment to my patient's continued existence, which I did with uncharacteristic force.*

(Vickers, 2006, p. 275)

I concluded this particular draft by trying to see Davy (and I) as a practitioner/researcher who has had something of a qualitative researcher crisis. I quote from myself:

*In effect then he is concluding that his own countertransference reaction, literally his story activated on listening to her story, was vital to the positive resolution to both stories. In a sense then, this fictional conference presentation performs, as it were, a researcher's crisis of representation (Holman-Jones, 2005), his decision to opt for providing an auto-ethnographic account of his research rather than blandly presenting the research itself, together with his argument that such a medium is the only method he could use in face of the relational dimension of the work.*

And still I hadn't said what I wanted to say. Davy had not spoken for me, blast him, and I was still unable to speak for myself. I cut and paste. I rewrite. I shred copy after copy. I feel very young and confused and cannot understand what is happening me.

Confused or not the time came to send a second draft of my paper. The feedback I got, which I hated and agreed with in equal measure, says that the academic voice in the paper is 'frankly boring' and 'ponderous.' The day the feedback came happened to coincide with a meeting with John.

## A Story of Two Pieces of Feedback

John's thesis had failed and he was hurt and angry. I wasn't his supervisor for the failed thesis, though I am now. How easy it was to have a similar conversation with him as I had with Janice. Structuring arguments, reviewing literature, building conceptual frameworks. I also talked to him about his passion, his strong feelings about rejection and failure, about what he really cares about in his thesis.

And then my own feedback arrived and I felt much of what he must have felt.

*Blood and guts. That's what's missing. I am furious, enraged. Kicking and screaming as a result of my feedback. How dare he tell me it's boring, ponderous. I don't want to hear it. Don't want to feel this way.*

*This is how Janice felt. This is how John felt this morning. Rage. The rage of being told by some supposedly benign and wise, superior being that I'm not good enough. They were raging with me. I'm raging with my feedback.*

*So why do this to myself? Why write an auto-ethnography when I could easily find another university where the academic voice would be the one to hold sway? Why does Janice want to challenge herself? Why would John settle for an appealed pass when he could get so much more?*

*Boredom with the old way of doing things. A feeling of there being something more, another way to think and write. I pontificate so often about the emotional dimension of teaching and learning and strive to include it. To honour the relational dimension of what we do. But here I am in it and I am full of rage.*

As I write in my journal the image of Ozzie's Mom comes to me. I see her as rigid, controlling and fundamentally stifling in her self-righteous position. I remember when writing the story, the experience of feeling similar to her and hating that in myself, hating that feeling. And so I realise that she is something of an objective correlative for me, an external manifestation of this drab and lifeless academic voice that I have built and walled myself in with. Vigilant, correct, compliant, well meaning, but hardly benign for all of that.

## Tired and Terrified

*When you are tired or terrified  
your voice slips back into its old first place  
and makes the sound your shades make there...*

(Heaney, 1984, p. 52)

Regression is the process of returning to an earlier place in oneself, usually as a result of a crisis or a transition (Mander, 2000, p. 17). As Heaney has it we return there when tired or terrified and we encounter old ghostly voices. Object Relations theory (Gomez, 1997) tells us that the voices we encounter are those we have internalised during the process of development, or those we have developed to help us to cope early in life. So Ozzie, for example, may always hear a stern, controlling voice when he is learning something new. He may even develop that voice himself to help him feel in control of a fragile ego. If reflexivity is demanded of him, then these things will out.

The process of reflexivity that this paper has involved has been somewhat convoluted and tortuous. I have been tired and terrified. I have crashed the brand new family car. I have lost my way (literally and metaphorically) on well-known roads. I have been preoccupied, trying to work out what I want to say, how to say it. And I have retreated betimes to the stronghold of a dispassionate, controlled academic voice.

This voice has many antecedents in my own personal story, some of them inchoate, some more accessible. The theme of the story has been one of a conflict between compliance and creativity, between safety and risk. The ghostly personae have included a 13 year old rebellious teenager; a 16 year old who discovered poetry; a young undergraduate who, suspecting he was not as clever as the others, floundered in the morass of a final year dissertation; a 22 year old accident victim who felt punished by the universe for not being 'good enough', who threw himself earnestly into academic work. Each of these positions, I am sure, harbour younger personae too, Martha's or Ozzie's age, all equally struggling to survive and thrive.

## Crossing the Lines of Self-defence

*Your story took so long  
The plot was so intense  
You took so long to cross  
The lines of self-defence*

(Cohen, 2006, p. 209)

Speedy talks about the way post-modernity has eroded authoritative traditions, giving us space to 'speak with less authority about smaller parcels of knowledge-in-context and to tell more local stories' (2005, p. 63). This paper started life as a story together with various commentaries written in a standard academic register: an attempt to eschew traditional research methods while holding on to an authoritative voice. As the paper grew, however, out of the fertile liminal space (Speedy, 2007) between writer and reader it has mutated. What has emerged from this is a local story of how my author/ity has been eroded, making way for new possibilities as a (less authoritative) research supervisor and as an author.

# Making the Familiar Strange

Conclusions are a funny business in writing. The conclusion is the place where very often we are tempted to adopt the 'godlike' academic voice that is 'stripped of all human subjectivity and fallibility' (Richardson, 1997, p. 18) and we propound our final thesis. Alternatively conclusions are the formulaic place where we 'say what we have just said.' Whichever course I take I am at this point supposed to say that reflexivity is indeed a demanding process and that we should recognise this and legislate for it in how we write and think about a radical approach to adult education.

But this paper is just a story and endings are just conventions. In her discussion about reflexivity in research, Ryan talks about the way that poetry, visual arts, novels and so on can 'make the familiar strange' (2006, p. 26). Reflexivity is, above all, a way of making something familiar strange, a way of being in something and outside it at the same time. This story has been a way to be in the struggle with reflexivity and to witness it reflexively at the same time.

Stories, however, need readers:

*[stories] long to be used rather than analysed; to be told and retold rather than theorized and settled; to offer lessons for further conversation rather than undebatable conclusions; and to substitute the companionship of intimate detail for the loneliness of abstracted facts.*

(Ellis and Bochner, 2000, p. 744)

And so, having read this now another story begins.

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