



## Foreword

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## Foreword

Narratives are curious constructions. Cutting across memory, body and culture, they are at one and the same time singularly unique and socially resonant. On the one hand, narratives reflect what Mohanty (1989) calls the ‘dense particularities’ of experience: they capture the textures and rhythms of specific lives, including the sensory, affective and physical modes of living and becoming. On the other hand, through their images, metaphors and grammar, narratives are also eminently social: they participate in a communicative gesture in reaching out to others and being received from others; and they circulate within complex webs of both shared and contested meaning. This double characteristic of narratives enables them to occupy a liminal territory, where their appearance both signals a singular becoming and an act of relationality.

Philosophers such as Hannah Arendt and Adriana Cavarero have explored how narratives operate in this doubling fashion. The power of narrative lies precisely in the ways it reveals something about each of us as we speak, write and narrate; it does not reveal, however, ‘what’ is already there, as though our narratives are merely representations or reflections of our social identity, but reveals a ‘who’ that has not been heard, seen or experienced before. As Arendt (1959) claims, we become subjects through our acts of narration, through our words and deeds with others. Thus narrative is relational in the sense it occurs in a space peopled by others with whom and to whom I reveal myself; and it is transformational in the sense it occasions a ‘second birth’ of the self. ‘This disclosure of the “who” in contradistinction to the “what” somebody is – his qualities, gifts, talents, and shortcomings, which he may display or hide – is implicit in everything somebody says and does’ (Arendt 1959, 159).

Cavarero (2000) takes this a step further to suggest that not only do we ‘become’ who we are because we reveal ourselves to others through our stories, but we also ‘become’ selves through the stories that others tell about us. For Cavarero, we are ‘narratable selves’ – selves awaiting our narration. Narratives are not only, then, stories we tell about ourselves, as if we can reveal some truth about who we are as a solo act; rather we are also susceptible to how others narrate our lives and are dependent upon them as listeners and witnesses. Thus narrative always occurs in an in-between space: in-between me and you; she and they. Since, as Arendt claims, we are ‘not the authors of our own stories’ (Arendt 1959, 164), we do not know beforehand who we will become – that ‘who’ only emerges in the relational space we share with others.

It is precisely this open-ended and relational possibility of transformation, in my view, that makes narratives so entwined with education. Narrative inquiry in education, as the essays here show, are about processes of transformation and becoming, and provide the methodological means for exploring how one comes into the world anew. Whether this be because such inquiry can uncover life experiences beyond the

discourses of marginalisation in order to create new possibilities for inhabiting the world differently, or because it can discover new frames of insight and knowledge that go beyond the debilitating ones that can confine and constrict lives in schools, narrative inquiry has the potential to explore how students and teachers resist and change the ways they exist in the world.

But perhaps more than this, narrative, in my view, can *itself* be an educational process insofar as it is not merely about the words that are uttered or written – what is said – but is fundamentally about the act of speaking and writing – the saying. Narrative in this way is a verb, an action: words are spoken and written by someone to/for/with someone else. Narrative is a mode of address that is revelatory of the utterer's presence. In this, narrative is not a thing, but a process of participating in the very conditions of our own becoming. Like education in this regard, narratives enact moments of living in ways that change who – and not only what – we are.

However, from a Buddhist point of view, narratives can also be the very things that limit our transformative capacity. Whilst acts of narration can provide glimpses of alternatives, fuelling our capacity to resist those narratives that demean, harm or constrain us, they can also act to trap us within habitual modes of being with which we so easily identify. What Buddhism suggests through practices of awareness are ways of examining our attachments to certain narratives over others in order to ask ourselves which habits a particular narrative might be serving. Thus, narratives are not simply transformative in and of themselves, but as the articles here suggest, they require attention, analysis and critical awareness. What this special issue does so well is not merely to celebrate stories, but to examine the conditions under which stories shape our lives – for better and worse. That is, critical narrative inquiry allows us to see the connections between a story one tells and the larger educational possibilities it closes down or opens up.

Being in education, I often reflect on my own educational biography and the sheer inadequacy of words to track the pathways through the emotional, intellectual and material landscapes I have wandered through. I am still surprised sometimes by my own stories, and the many variations I have told about my educational life – and how these have changed over time. I can view some of them with much detachment, while others remain sticky, and I am as reluctant to give them up as I would be to relinquish an old pair of slippers. I can speak about my upbringing in a poor urban area, in a less than ideal home which propelled me to seek solace and quietude in books. And I can speak about how school gave my curiosity another kind of home, and yet it too also became risky and dangerous socially. There is no one story, no particular event, no singular epiphany that defines my educational life; it simply does not follow a novel's trajectory. And indeed, some of the detail of these stories has been forgotten, whilst other details surface unexpectedly. Neither, however, do these narratives fit into already existing discourses of race, class and gender as though I am merely the sum of these social identities. Even though I can analyse the poverty I grew up in, and can understand how my behaviour in class was dominated by norms of feminine deportment, I always live in excess of these tropes and categories. The various smells of books that I loved, the softness of my Grade two teacher's stockings as I stroked them while she read to us, the hard knot in my stomach as a classmate threatened me – all of these matter to how and why I tell certain stories about myself to others. As I stated above, stories are not things but verbs and they become unique and varied articulations, not just because of my own memory or stage in my life,

but because of who is there to listen: my mother, a friend, a colleague, a student. The stories I tell are revealing of ‘who’ I am, not in any unified way, but as they are interwoven in conversation with various interlocutors, who also communicate something about me back to myself in ways I cannot predict and sometimes cannot understand. In other words, the ‘me’ that is revealed through a conversation is out my hands and does not fully belong to me.

This dimension of unpredictability in narrative communication is also a dimension of education. We simply do not know which stories will adhere to a person or why, or how new stories can emerge out of the matrix of our relational lives. And isn’t this adventure of education itself? To seek new possibilities for living and becoming that enrich our capacity for leading a life in relation to texts, to the environment, to others and to the materiality we encounter?

Each of the articles in this special issue enacts their own intervention into how and why stories matter to education and how and why they matter to living lives that are meaningful. I can think of no greater testament to the power of narrative than to see it, as the authors here do, both in and as education itself.

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