

The Role of Counter Narratives in the Renegotiation of Identity: A Curricular Perspective

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Abstract:

Teacher identity resides in the foundational beliefs and assumptions educators have about teaching and learning. These beliefs and assumptions develop both inside and outside of the classroom, blurring the lines between the professional and the personal. Locating identity in autobiographical inquiry, and attentive to the centrality of narrative within this framework, I employ writing as a way of knowing to explore identity as a narrative construct and to examine the role of counter narratives in the re/negotiation of identity.

Keywords: identity; autobiography; reflexive inquiry; counter narrative; currere

Identity Crisis

The first time I recall running full speed into the mirror that shattered my illusions, I was 20 years old. The ink was barely dry on my first parchment, a Bachelor of Arts with tidy teachables. I was half way through a Bachelor of Education program when I confronted a devastating misalignment: I had pursued a career in education expecting to find a space that fostered criticality with heart and conviction—a place where lived experience was integral to learning, where knowledge was negotiated, power was shared, and equity was imperative. I expected to find a place that encouraged students and teachers to be critically conscious, creatively compelled authors of change. I did not find that space back then and, fearing that I had landed in a context that was impervious to change, I fled the system and spent the next 18 months doubting my ability to survive the crushing disillusionment. I eventually returned to education and, 20 years later, I like to think I am not as breakable. It helps, of course, to have found a community that supports me as I foster those spaces I had once hoped to find: critical, creative, equitable, compassionate places where learning has the power to inspire real change.

Part of this change, for me, resides in exploring how personal identity informs our professional selves. The existing literature tends to explore identity as it relates to society. Identity as a personal construct, though, is an integral basis of the Self who engages in teaching and learning, yet it remains in the periphery of discussions (Bochner, 1997; Eisenbach, 2016; and Stets & Burke, 2003). Two seminal scholars defy this trend. For more than two decades Palmer has made Self central in teacher identity. He maintains that reducing teaching to an exclusively intellectual practice relegates it to abstraction, just as making it solely emotional renders it narcissistic, arguing that “intellect, emotion, and spirit depend on each other for wholeness. They are interwoven in the human self and in education at its best, and we need to interweave them in our pedagogical discourse as well” (Palmer, 1997, p. 16). He insists that a composite of the personal and the professional creates a “capacity for connectedness” (p. 16). He also cautions us that including the personal in public contexts creates vulnerability which leads many people to “claim the inalienable right to separate the *personal* and the *professional* into airtight compartments...and keep the workplace conversation objective and external, finding it safer to talk about technique than about selfhood” (p. 21).

In turn, Whyte (2001) echoes Palmer’s assertion that a personal/professional composite is integral to meaningful vocation, stating that “to have a firm persuasion in our work—to feel that what we do is right for ourselves and good for the world at exactly the same time—is one of the great triumphs of human existence” (p. 4). Drawing on ecologies of belonging, he proposes that the human soul finds courage in the difficult intimacies of negotiating identities at the boundaries between Self, subject, and other, and challenges us to “see with the eyes of those who do not quite belong” (p. 172). There, in that space of fear, hope, wholeness, and unbelonging, we will find more liberating approaches to teaching, learning, and being.

Examining personal identity as it affects professional practice is messy and vulnerable work. Compartmentalizing these areas of our lives and forbidding them to intermingle allows us certain flexibility in our values and how we live them in the world. This became apparent to me when I married a soldier. As a social justice scholar, I thought I was living congruently: I care about the students, the subject areas I teach, the process, and their multiple points of intersection; I am attentive to challenging assumptions, uncovering

biases, nurturing multiple perspectives, and interrogating power; I am aware of the privilege accorded by my background, and I work diligently to leverage education as an emancipatory practice. I thought I was living my ideals but irrevocably intertwining my life with someone who also works for social justice, albeit very differently, left me wondering if my contribution mattered at all. Williams (2013) warns me that crossing boundaries into spaces not traditionally mine has deep implications for identity.

When I married into the *armed and ready* micro culture, it was assumed that I, too, was armed and ready. I was not. More than that, I vastly underestimated my ill-preparedness. Only days after we married, my husband was unexpectedly deployed. Facing a year apart, I began to unravel in the wake of discovering that his life, and mine by association, was no longer ours to control. No doubt my husband also struggled—with feelings of helplessness mixed with the sense of responsibility that comes with a call to arms. Although he expressed disappointment that he had to leave and fear about how well we would endure the pressures of what lay ahead of us, he focused on readiness. I dug in my heels and remained hopeful his deployment would be cancelled. The selfishness of my hopes was not lost on me, and I began to fear I was a hypocrite.

In an effort to resolve the tension, I set out to examine Self closely in terms of how I live (or fail to live) my ideals. Hooks (2010) says that thinking critically about personal perceptions, assumptions, beliefs, and practices is central to being a good educator. Walkington (2005) agrees but cautions me that, while this personal interrogation is critical, “outwardly challenging ideas that one holds dear is not always particularly comfortable” (p. 59).

Framework for Inquiry

The starting point for making sense of my identity inquiry is understanding it as autobiographically framed, while remaining conscious of the centrality of narrative within this framework. Drawing support from Richardson (2000) and Kooy and de Freitas (2007), I employ writing as a way of knowing and explore identity as a narrative construct. Through a consideration of these tenets, as well as my vested interest in them, my aim is to untangle the role of counter-narratives in the re/construction of identity.

Autobiography

Teaching is autobiographical work (Bochner, 1997; Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Feldman, 2005). Our thoughts, feelings, assumptions, and aims all inform who we are in our teaching and learning contexts. As a framework, autobiographical inquiry allows scholar-practitioners to interrogate self in concert with professional practice while locating self-study relationally across various contexts within which we live and teach. As such, autobiography allows us to understand professional practice as grounded in personal history and becomes the storied account of identity development (Eakin, 1999, 2008; Feldman, 2005). While a sense of personal identity cannot be regarded apart from a sense of communal identity, too often teaching identity is positioned as “something that hangs, suspended, between teaching and non-teaching experiences” (Sumara & Luce-Kapler, 1996, p.65). When our identities are understood in this way, learning how to teach is reduced to a process of transposing technical skills and management techniques (Bérci, 2007; Sumara & Luce-Kapler, 1996). While advancements have been made investigating the relationship between teacher knowledge and practice, the research often fails to connect this meaning with self-

knowledge and issues of identity. It also fails to interrogate how this self-knowledge is re/constructed (Bérci, 2007).

In failing to foster teaching as identity, teacher education programs focus on content delivery and classroom management. Teachers graduate prepared only to meet the technical requirements of teaching and are then assigned classes where they are “provided with teacher-proof curricular materials as if they are incapable of making educational decisions, and they are asked to provide measurable, quantifiable, certain, scientific results that fit fixed ends” (Latta & Kim, 2010, p.137). This push for evidence-based practice is brokered by predetermined socio-political agendas and allows little time for critical reflection on personal continuity or the development of critical consciousness (Bérci, 2007; Latta & Kim, 2010).

Agreeing that reflexive interrogation of personal congruence is central to the development of critical consciousness, I decided that I must begin my examination of Self by acknowledging the struggle and then work to recover the moral authority to teach, research, and encourage social justice. I thought I was moving closer in some small way to living my values. And then, on a crisp October morning almost four months into his tour, I found the lump. It began to feel impossible to focus on social justice when exploding mortars drowned out our attempts to talk as I awaited pathology reports. The weeks passed and we arranged to meet on his leave.

I arrived in Paris first, picked up the keys to our apartment, and then rode the train back to the airport to meet him. Each eager to get to the other, he dropped his bags and scooped me into his embrace. Almost immediately, though, I felt him tense and, when I withdrew, I noticed the love and longing first evident in his demeanour had transitioned to hardness and irritation. That evening we wandered aimlessly, eventually settling at an outside pub. Sensing he wanted to talk, I sat down to listen. He didn't talk about his experience, though; nor did he ask about my health. Instead, he harshly criticized me for failing to support him. Recalling the weekly care packages and daily letters I sent, I was confused by his assault but I figured it was best to focus on restorative time together.

We spent his leave wandering through Europe, staying in places we visited only a handful of nights. We avoided cities in favour of small communities so he could have the luxury of spending quiet time every day alone with a book or walking outdoors. I ached to be near him but understood that he needed space. Three weeks later we parted company at the airport, each having to go back to our own battles.

Trying to imagine the trauma that would lead someone to be so angry, distant, and uncompassionate, I returned home determined to be above reproach. I tried to balance my requirement for his support during diagnosis with his need for reduced stress. It was about a month before I learned I had invasive ductal carcinoma. Breast cancer. Upon hearing the news, he was granted compassionate leave. I picked him up at the airport two days later expecting that he would fall into the role of fearless supporter. He did not, and the next 10 months of treatment stretched me between fighting cancer, surviving its treatment, and enduring an increasingly tumultuous marriage. My only outlet was the solitary activity of intellectualizing the experience.

Palmer (1997) says that the Self is elastic but not infinite; it has a determinate capacity and we must forgive ourselves those maximums. I would extend his notion to include that we must also forgive others.

The last time I faced an identity crisis as the result of my profession, I understood the source of the problem to be external. In conceptualizing it this way, I had something outside of myself to overcome in the preservation of my ideals. This time, though, the conflict was within me—with a Self I didn't know. In dialogue with the work of several scholars (Bukor, 2011; Hoffman-Kipp, 2008; Gee, 2000-2001; Kraehe, 2015; Palmer, 1998, 2004, 1997; and Sfard & Prusak, 2005), I understand teacher identity holistically as a fluid composite that transcends the barriers of the professional—a composite that is continuously renegotiated based on our experiences. Two particular schools of thought are helpful here: personal identity theory and identity as a narrative construct.

Personal Identity Theory

Personal identity theory is a micro-sociological theory that accounts for individual behaviours by considering the roles that society requires those individuals to play (Hogg, Terry & White, 1995). Because the emphasis in analysis is on the individual as s/he performs various roles, personal identity theory draws on four key aspects: first, it embodies a social psychological model of Self defined by its interaction with society; second, it conceptualizes Self as born of the role positions it plays; third, it understands these role identities to vary; and fourth, it simultaneously recognizes the relationship between Self and society, and the idiosyncratic results of identity-related processes (Hogg et al., 1995). Succinctly summarized by Bukor (2011),

personal identity theory deals with how people categorize themselves as they act out a particular role and how they can incorporate the meaning and the expectations associated with that role into their identity...thus, personal identity may be viewed as *identification* with specific roles that are played out in a social setting by an individual *from the individual's perspective* (pp. 67-68).

Identity as Narrative Construct

The complementary school of thought that is helpful here involves identity as a narrative construct. This theory claims that individuals develop identity through the process of incorporating their reassembled past, seeming present, and anticipated future into an "internalized, evolving story of the self" that allows them to have a sense of purpose and meaning (McAdams, 2001; Kraehe, 2015). Rolling (2010) and Sachs (2005) echo this position in their claims that narrative processes are integral in the construction of identity because they allow us to story who we are, what has informed our development, and what is important to us. This conceptualization is further substantiated by the scholarship of Czarniawska (2004), Philpott (2011), and Said (2014) who present narrative as uniquely designed to help us experientially understand ourselves within society, and Gee (2000-2001), Sfard and Prusak (2005), and Zembylas (2003, 2005) who position narrative as a powerful analytical tool in identity inquiries.

While the construction of identity is certainly a personal endeavour, it is also a situated activity to which others respond (Hofmann-Kipp, 2008). As such, identity construction is an ongoing negotiation of often conflictual conceptualizations of Self (Flores & Day, 2006; Tran & Nyugen, 2013, 2015). These multiple representations of individual identity emerge then not only from Self, but also from counter-narratives of Other.

Counter-Narratives and Identity-in-Crisis

Having thus framed my understanding of identity and its construction, my aim is to consider the role of counter-narratives in affecting identity-in-crisis. Kraehe (2015) reminds me that constructing identity within a narrative framework is sometimes a messy and confusing endeavour. Hicks (2012) echoes this notion in saying the process often requires confronting “narratives we have not authored ourselves” (p. 91). With the help of Denzin (2005), I understand counter-narratives as critical personal narratives that disturb closely held discourse or prevailing text. These may be authored by Self or Other but, interrogated openly, they can form a valuable source of instruction that “contributes to a reflective ethical self consciousness” (p. 948).

The narrated Self can also become ensnared in dialogue with perceptions storied by Other, an occurrence that often begets disequilibrium. Within this state of flux, our closely held stories of Self are disrupted leaving us feeling unravelled. From this place of rupture (Kraehe, 2015), we begin to renegotiate identity. Bukor (2011) refers to this space as the beginning of “perspective transformation” (p.53).

Renegotiating Identity

Thomas and Beauchamp (2007) remind us that we renegotiate our identities in a shifting world based on our interactions in often unexpected contexts. As we endeavour to do this, Palmer (1997) encourages us to pursue integrity. He explains identity as an evolving nexus constituted by the convergence of all aspects of our lives, and describes integrity as the wholeness found within this nexus as we continuously renegotiate Self: “by choosing integrity, [we] become more whole, but wholeness does not mean perfection. It means becoming more real by acknowledging the whole of who [we are]” (p. 17).

Accessing this wholeness as we redefine ourselves is helped by listening to what Palmer (1997) names the teacher within who “is not the voice of conscience but of identity and integrity...[that] speaks not of what ought to be, but of what is real for us” (p. 19). Being true to the authentic wholeness within, he says, makes room for authority and integrity in reclaiming identity. Not to be mistaken with power, which he says is an external force, authority resides in each of us. Listening to the teacher within also helps us determine how we can develop and maintain the authority to stand our ground in the presence of such complex forces found at the intersection of our personal and professional selves (Palmer, 1997, 1998, 2004).

Thoughts as We Part Company

Returning to the context in which I came to question my moral authority as teacher, even my integrity as wife and scholar, I have no tidy resolution to offer. Sometimes we face uncomfortable renderings of self or painful engagements with others that leave us feeling fractured, our identities in crisis. In these times of disequilibrium, whether the battlefields we are called to are literal or metaphorical, we must face the disquieting forces before we can restore peace. Now, 18 months after chemotherapy and radiation, two years since my soldier/husband came home, I have stopped waiting for our lost selves to return and accepted what Aoki (1993) calls *our continual emergence*. Learning to recognize our identities as composites of personal narratives and the counter-narratives of others helps me to embrace the complexity at the intersection of personal and professional selves. It also helps me to understand Pinar’s (2011) conceptualization of curriculum as *currere*—where learning resides not in texts but in our personal construction of meaning. Like the questions I confronted about my willingness to endure personal sacrifice in the pursuit of social

justice, there are no easy answers in currere. Rather, this autobiographical approach encourages us to reflexively and dynamically recall lived experience so that we might understand more fully our future possibilities. Although I still struggle to make sense of the social justice scholar who was distracted by personal circumstances from the pursuit of improved society, it helps me understand the soldier who floundered at home. I am more forgiving of both of us as I work to understand the spirit's limitations.

The curricular possibilities born of making space for exploration of identity are vast. Both humanistic and critical, this approach privileges lived experiences of teachers and learners while teaching them to reflexively examine and critique self to improve education and society. Ticknor (2014) discusses that maintaining a social justice identity can be challenging when we are confronted by evaluators and questioned regarding the lengths to which we are willing to go to advance the cause. She argues, though, that social action includes any critical commitment that advances a more socially just world. This means that teachers can use education as a weapon against social inequity much as soldiers use their guns—the difference is that “the tools of combat are passionate expression of pen, ink, and voice (Bailey, 2010, p. 69).

Author Note

Scholarship that recognizes the blurred boundaries between the personal and the professional can be messy and vulnerable work. While we must be patient with ourselves in the pursuit of deepened consciousness, we also have a responsibility to anyone who might be implicated in our inquiries. My husband was not a participant in this research but I made every effort to present him as a complicated subject, not an object. I discussed with him my aims in inquiry and provided him with a copy of the paper. I also obtained his consent for its publication. In short, and in his words, “Proceed: I was read in.”

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