Abstract: This essay explores the role that storytelling might play in the professional learning of English teachers. It begins by reflecting on the ways that stories shape our everyday lives, and then considers how the meaning-making potential of storytelling might enable us to gain insights into our work as educators. This is in contradistinction to the ‘knowledge’ currently privileged by standards-based reforms, most notably the fetish of measurement reflected in standardised testing. The essay concludes that stories are not simply a form of knowing but a vital means of making the world human to us.

‘So much writing and research about education thrives on its claims to a general usefulness and a dispassionate attention to truth. It is claims like these which can be undermined by the detail and the particularity of what teachers know.’


1. Storying our lives

Is it possible to imagine how we would get by from day to day without telling stories? What would a life without stories be like? You arrive home with the day’s events behind you, and your first impulse is to tell others how your day has been. Perhaps it is to share a moment of insight: the antics of a bunch of teenagers who boarded the train with you, all engaged in excited talk and buoyed up by each other’s company. What must it be like being a teenager these days? Or maybe you want to vent about a wrong that has been done to you. Why would my boss think that it was my responsibility to submit that report? Since when has that been part of my job? I’ve a good mind to tell him where to get off!

We could also consider the way that stories multiply. You are sitting on a train, picking up snippets of conversation, story fragments that strangely conjure up people you do not know and places you’ve never seen. A young woman is speaking into her mobile phone, quarrelling with her mum, giving excuses as to why she hasn’t visited her, saying that whenever she visits she only gets criticised, that dad just blobs out in front of the TV. Such conversations are peppered with ‘she said’ and ‘he said’, typically followed by direct speech, the words of people who are at another remove from you.

Where, indeed, might we locate the flesh and blood people and the physical presence of things in all this talk about what has happened, what might have been, what might happen and what is likely to happen? It seems that rather than securely anchoring us in the present, the stories we tell one another are partly imaginary, driven by other impulses than simply to give an honest account of actual events. And with each retelling of a story, we get better at it. The story becomes more dramatic, the characters more vivid, the speech more pithy, the irony more palpable, as we reshape it in response to our audience’s reactions.

Then there are the big stories that everyone shares. Periodically there is talk in the Australian media about the government needing to tell a narrative that might give the right spin to the decisions it has made. This kind of government rhetoric is obviously not a recent phenomenon – history provides us with many compelling moments when governments have generated
stories in order to vindicate decisions or to seek legitimacy. And this is more than a matter of governments foisting their self-justifying stories on a susceptible public. Such stories are often actively taken up by people, becoming the stuff of their everyday conversations, and eventually – as James Wertsch puts it – the voices of ‘collective remembering’, as people recall major historical events that have shaped their lives (Wertsch, 2002; cf. Parr and Doecke, 2012).

My own childhood memories feature such voices of collective remembering. I still have in my possession, for example, my composition book from primary school, in which I dutifully wrote on topics that were set for us each week by my Grade 4 teacher. The book comprises a variety of stories, some relating personal moments in my life, such as my sister’s wedding, but others retelling the history we learnt, including the adventures of the early pioneers as they cleared the land. I knew the Kings and Queens of England off by heart. My childhood was, in short, shaped by what Andrew Milner has characterised as ‘Empire nationalism’ (Milner, 1985), a metanarrative about the benign role of the Mother Country in governing its Empire. My teachers retold this story without any hint of the stories of collective remembering. I still have in my possession my composition book from primary school, in which I dutifully wrote on topics that were set for us each week by my Grade 4 teacher. The book comprises a variety of stories, some relating personal moments in my life, such as my sister’s wedding, but others retelling the history we learnt, including the adventures of the early pioneers as they cleared the land. I knew the Kings and Queens of England off by heart. My childhood was, in short, shaped by what Andrew Milner has characterised as ‘Empire nationalism’ (Milner, 1985), a metanarrative about the benign role of the Mother Country in governing its Empire. My teachers retold this story without any hint of the stories that teachers tell about their work are typically dismissed as subjective, as ‘anecdotal’ rather than ‘evidence based and data driven’ (DE&T, 2005, p. 15).

Paradoxically, this recognition of how public events have shaped our lives merges with a sense of the way stories touch us at a more intimate level, such as the fairy tales and children’s books that linger in our memories. The vignettes that comprise Walter Benjamin’s *Berlin Childhood around 1900* provide a wonderful example of how to gain a perspective on your life by recalling moments from your childhood (see Doecke and Pereira, 2012). As well as the large public events that figured in his life as a child growing up in Wilhelminian Germany, such as the battles depicted in the panels of the Victory column in Berlin, Benjamin relates other stories, including fairy tales inextricably bound up with his relationships with others: his memory of his mother as she sat at the window, doing her sewing, is linked to his knowledge of Sleeping Beauty’s fate, except that his mother wears a thimble to protect herself from the needle she uses. He recalls the hiding places of his childhood, the cavernous wardrobes into which he would crawl, the world under the table where adults sat eating. He also recalls how words meant far more to him than the things they named – the covered market that he visited with his mother was transformed from the Markt-Halle into the Mark-Thalle, a sign of the way the people and produce at the market were registered on his sensibility, as he wandered though the hall, alive to the world around him. Far from simply being a place for buying and selling, the market hall comprises sights and sounds and smells and colours, as the market women gesticulate and talk with one another (Benjamin, 2002, p. 361).

This world has not yet receded into the dull ordinariness of adult life, as something that exists apart from human emotion and action, which operates according to its own laws. Benjamin’s apprehension of the world is inextricably bound up with the social relationships into which he was born. The world might more properly be understood as a product of those relationships, of Benjamin’s subjectivity and the subjectivities of those who share this world with him.

2. Storytelling and classrooms

By reflecting on the way stories form the fabric of our lives, we can begin to appreciate the insights that stories might yield into our situation as educators. This is not a trivial thing to say, for any attempt to affirm the heuristic value of storytelling inevitably comes into conflict with the ‘scientific’ methods that are now habitually employed to represent what happens in classrooms (cf. Parr, 2010, pp. 43–53). From a ‘scientific’ standpoint, the stories that teachers tell about their work are typically dismissed as subjective, as ‘anecdotal’ rather than ‘evidence based and data driven’ (DE&T, 2005, p. 15). The state of Victoria in Australia, for example, has been a site for what the government called a ‘Performance and Development Culture’, where teachers have been expected to engage in ‘effective’ professional learning that focuses on student ‘outcomes’ as demonstrated by standardised testing (DE&T, 2005; cf. Doecke, Parr, North, et al. 2008).

Phonics instruction, the explicit teaching of grammar, formulaic writing produced according to the ‘rules’ of a circumscribed set of ‘genres’ – such routines are increasingly coming to dominate Australian schools, systematically repressing the value of people sharing their experiences through storytelling. These practices are being adopted in response to pressures by governments to improve the literacy outcomes of students as measured by standardised tests. They generate the ‘data’ that underpin claims about the effectiveness (or otherwise) of particular approaches towards teaching and learning. The fetish of ‘data’ is effectively transforming the way we think about teaching and learning within classroom settings. Everything
is directed towards achieving pre-conceived outcomes, rather than allowing teachers to seize those unanticipated moments with their students when they can throw themselves into imagination and play.

As a counterpoint to the narrow understandings of ‘evidence’ and ‘data’ that presently hold sway (as reflected in the proliferation of so-called standards-based reforms that have been implemented in countries like the US, England and Australia), we might usefully re-conceptualise classrooms in the form of stories, as sites where people come together to share their experiences by telling stories and imagining possibilities that take them beyond the here and now (cf. Rosen, nd; Doecke and Parr, 2008). This standpoint is congruent with all that I have said thus far about the role that stories play in our lives, providing a basis on which to create links between what happens in school and everyday life, and thus potentially overcoming the alienation that young people experience when confronted by the drilling and skilling of more formal schooling.

3. A standpoint within the world
You can perhaps sense that I am not simply advocating the value of story-telling as yet another methodology to add to the range of methodologies on offer when it comes to conducting research in classrooms. Rather than an alternative methodology, story telling implies a certain standpoint vis-à-vis the world that enables us to be more fully responsive to what is happening around us. Indeed, this might more properly be conceived as a standpoint within the world rather than vis-à-vis it, since the latter implies a world that can be posited as an objective realm that remains external to us, as in traditional understandings of so-called ‘scientific’ knowledge. Such a ‘scientific’ stance cannot be a valid starting point for inquiring into the social relationships and activities through which we make our own history by renewing our lives each day.

Here I am again echoing Walter Benjamin, this time drawing on an essay that he wrote after Hitler’s rise to power, in which he tries to capture the way writers might contribute to the struggle against fascism. A socially critical stance, according to Benjamin, cannot be located outside the social conditions that are the focus of critique (Benjamin, 1973). The paradox, as Marx observes in his ‘Theses on Feuerbach’, is that people who take a socially critical stance are the product of the very society they wish to change (Marx, 1969). This is not to say that we are therefore doomed to remain trapped within existing social conditions. It is to recognise that any project for social reform can only arise out of a complex dialectic between our consciousness and our social being, between our vision of what we wish to achieve (what we think ‘ought’ to be) and the social relationships in which we find ourselves, including the values and aspirations of people who may not share our ideals (what ‘is’).

Any genuine program for social reform is an educational program, not just in the populist sense of slogans and propaganda that might prompt people to take political action, but because it means trying to understand the conditions of our lives, and engaging in politics with an enhanced awareness of the possibilities available to us. This is what I understand writers like Karl Marx, Rosa Luxemburg, Georg Lukács, Antonio Gramsci, Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin to mean when they write about people becoming conscious of the social relationships and structures that shape their lives, as they engage in their work and other activities from day to day. This educational program is directed towards enabling people to develop a sustained commitment to reflecting on the conditions that have created them, and which they themselves have created through their everyday activities, in an effort to play their parts as social and historical actors in a fully knowing way.

4. A starting point: ‘Knowing thyself’
We may seem to have travelled a long way from the claims with which I began about the role of storytelling in our lives. How might stories be used to inquire into our professional practice as educators? In the first instance, we might think about the stories that we continually tell ourselves about who we are and the values and beliefs we hold. This is the starting point from which all our inquiries into our work as educators should begin. The kind of inquiry that I am advocating here is perhaps nowhere better captured than by Gramsci’s reflections in The Prison Notebooks on the need to reflexively engage with the conditions of our own making as human beings. He writes:

The starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is ‘knowing thyself’ as a product of the historical process to date which has posited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory. The first thing to do is to make such an inventory. (Gramsci, 1973/1986, p. 324)

This injunction is not only something that those
of us who believe in the heuristic value of autobiographical writing might take to heart. The reflexivity that Gramsci is advocating here is a condition for all inquiry, whether or not it takes the form of an autobiographical narrative. Edward Said quotes this passage from The Prison Notebooks in order to explain his ‘personal investment’ in writing Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient, giving a brief account of his life as a child growing up in Palestine. It would be difficult to imagine a more scholarly tome than Said’s study of Orientalism, in which through a careful analysis of archival texts he is able to show how European writers constructed a version of the Orient that justified colonial oppression. Yet despite the sophisticated scholarly apparatus on display in this book, it is important for Said to foreground a ‘personal dimension’, not in order to expose his ‘bias’ but to make the standpoint from which it is written explicit. This is ultimately more than a ‘personal’ standpoint, as it might be narrowly understood: it is a standpoint arising out of a significant socio-cultural moment – a ‘cultural reality’ relating to ‘the personal involvement in having been constituted as “an Oriental”’ (Said, 1978/1991, p. 26). That standpoint also explains the epistemological position from which the book is written, and underlines the knowledge claims that Said makes.

This is simply one example of a scholar who understands knowledge production as crucially bound up with a sense of who ‘I’ am, conceptualising writing and scholarship as always in some way bound up with questions of identity and belonging. Rather than being incidental or peripheral to inquiry, an autobiographical impulse exists behind all research in the humanities and social sciences (cf. Miller, 1995). Such research is always conducted from an ideological standpoint deriving from an author’s education and upbringing, as they are shaped by larger social and historical relationships. To engage in autobiographical writing at certain stages in your life – to conduct an ‘inventory’, as Gramsci puts it – is a key way of identifying the conditions of his own making, the effect is to convey an impression of his initially wayward spirit directed towards justifying his worldview. To arrive at a ‘consciousness of what one really is’ is a continuing project in which you place your world-view under scrutiny. An ‘inventory’ can never be a definitive statement about what you ‘are’, but a taking-stock, a provisional report of where you are on your journey.

I would now like to point to writing by students who have worked with me, including students from Indonesia (Dewi) and China (Fang) and Chile (Bella), as examples of such inventories (see Example 1). In the excerpts of their writing that I present, they were continually turning words around, alert to what they conceal as much as what they reveal about our lives, including the stories that we habitually tell ourselves about ourselves and anyone else who is there to listen. It’s not enough to simply relate the events of your life as you recall them, or – more problematically – according to how you wish to see yourself at the present moment. Adolf Hitler begins Mein Kampf with an autobiographical account of his boyhood resistance to his father’s wishes, and yet far from critically examining the conditions of his own making, the effect is to convey an impression of his initially wayward spirit prior to responding to the call of destiny. Everything is directed towards justifying his worldview. To arrive at a ‘consciousness of what one really is’ is a continuing project in which you place your world-view under scrutiny. An ‘inventory’ can never be a definitive statement about what you ‘are’, but a taking-stock, a provisional report of where you are on your journey.

It is noteworthy, however, that when quoting Gramsci’s statement about the importance of an ‘inventory’, Said takes exception to the fact that the original English translation omitted the concluding sentence – ‘The first thing to do is to make an inventory’ – an omission that was subsequently corrected in later editions (see Said, ibid.). An ‘inventory’ is not something that is simply available to you. Autobiographical writing that gives rise to a ‘consciousness of what one really is’ (Gramsci, p. 324) is itself a form of knowledge production that attempts to move beyond the immediacy of one’s habitual practices and beliefs, or what Gramsci calls the ‘common sense’ of one’s everyday life (Gramsci, p. 330). This means developing a reflexive awareness of the language that we speak, the clichés and jargon that we use from day-to-day, (cf. Parr and Doecke, 2012, p. 158; Doecke and Parr, 2011). It means continually turning words around, alert to what they conceal as much as what they reveal about our lives, including the stories that we habitually tell ourselves about ourselves and anyone else who is there to listen. It’s not enough to simply relate the events of your life as you recall them, or – more problematically – according to how you wish to see yourself at the present moment. Adolf Hitler begins Mein Kampf with an autobiographical account of his boyhood resistance to his father’s wishes, and yet far from critically examining the conditions of his own making, the effect is to convey an impression of his initially wayward spirit prior to responding to the call of destiny. Everything is directed towards justifying his worldview. To arrive at a ‘consciousness of what one really is’ is a continuing project in which you place your world-view under scrutiny. An ‘inventory’ can never be a definitive statement about what you ‘are’, but a taking-stock, a provisional report of where you are on your journey.

I would now like to point to writing by students who have worked with me, including students from Indonesia (Dewi) and China (Fang) and Chile (Bella), as examples of such inventories (see Example 1). In the excerpts of their writing that I present, they were seeking to reconstruct their histories as learners of English, thereby grappling with the larger social and historical contexts that have shaped their lives.

Example 1. Excerpts from autobiographical narratives

Ilir-ilir tandure wus semilir
Tak ijo royo-royo tak senguh temanten anyar
Cah angon penekno blimbing kuwi
Lunyu-lunyu penekno kanggo nyebu dodot iro
Dodot iro kemiti bedah ing pinggir
Domojo jumatono kanggo sebo mengko sore
Munpunp padang rembulan
Munpunp jembar kalangan
Sung surako surak hore
(‘Ilir-Ilir’, children’s Islamic Javanese song)

O wind, the rice field produces their fruit
The beautiful green of the rice field is like a new
married couple
O shepherd climb the star fruit tree
Climb it though it is slippery
To wash your cloth
Which is wrecked
Fix and sew it
For this evening celebration
When the moon is full and the field is wide
Let’s cheer and hurray
(English version of ‘Ilir-ilir’)

Before I go to bed, Bapak (Javanese name for a father) sings this song as a lullaby for my two brothers and me who sleep in the same bed. I can still feel the warm notes of this song whispering in my ears. This song has had a great impact on my life. It was believed to have been composed by Sunan Giri (Saint Giri) in the 16th century. He was one of the first Islamic preachers in Java known as the Walisongo (Nine Saints). These Walisongo had turned Java towards a form of Islam that was shaped by Javanese culture, which had long ago been influenced by Hinduism and Buddhism. Sunan Giri’s father was a Persian and his mother was a Javanese princess of Blambangan or East Java ...


China is a vast country where a great diversity of dialects coexists alongside the national language, Mandarin ... A dialect might sound like a foreign language to people from another place and they might not understand a word of it. Besides pronunciation, the choice of words in dialects might also be different. For example, when a Wuhanese says ‘haizi’, meaning ‘shoes’, a Beijinger interprets it as ‘children’, because though they are of the same pronunciation, the meanings are different. Because my parents came from different villages of different regions, they spoke different dialects. My grandparents were common villagers, and so they could not speak Mandarin. Therefore as young as I was, as their grandchild I had to speak the dialects of my maternal and paternal grandparents, as well as the dialect of the city in which my mother worked and Beijing dialect, that is, Mandarin. Later our whole family moved to Wuhan City, and I had to pick up the dialect Wuhanese, too. I had to speak different dialects according to whom I met and what situation it was. I felt I was an operator on a switchboard and I was a prolific language learner.


As a child of Chilean migrants, I have always felt a strong affinity with the displaced and vulnerable. It would be as difficult to change this as it would be to change my place of birth for this is my inheritance. By this I mean the physics of who I am – woman, non-white, Chilean born; the social and economic conditions that I was born into – Catholic and working class; and the politics that I have adopted – a commitment to social and political reform. The way that these social forces have intersected over the years has shaped my personal and professional identity. However, none has played as significant a role in determining who I am and my sense of self and community as language.

It is language that has allowed me to be the multiple things that I am, just as much as it has been language that inhibited and constrained my parents from being all that they could be  …


My own work has also involved a series of moments when I have stopped to review my life, to ‘engage with a continuing conversation with voices from my past’ (Doecke, 2004, p. 17; see also Doecke, 2006; Doecke and McClenaghan, 2011).

5. Thinking reflexively

Why is it important for educators to engage in autobiographical reflection? Your answer to this question hinges on your view of the standards-based reforms that are currently transforming our policy landscape. If you accept that so-called ‘effective’ teaching and learning can be demonstrated by the achievement of pre-conceived outcomes, such as the results of standardised literacy testing, you are unlikely to see the writing of an ‘inventory’ as very important. Admittedly, standards-based reforms have been accompanied by a lot of rhetoric about the teacher as the crucial determinant of a student’s learning (cf. Doecke, 2006), but this hardly embraces a teacher’s values and beliefs as they have been shaped by his or her life experiences.

The recently released professional standards developed by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL), for example, constructs an account of teachers’ work around the familiar categories of ‘Professional knowledge’, ‘Professional practice’ and ‘Professional engagement’. But while the last category might conceivably touch on the question of a teacher’s views and values, it is, in fact, narrowly focused on professional learning that will bring about improved practice as measured by preconceived outcomes of a narrowly cognitive kind and which accords with
school and government agendas. The world beyond the school is invoked primarily in the form of mandates with which teachers must comply or external authorities to which they are accountable for achieving those outcomes, not as a place of cultural and social diversity. While the ‘diverse linguistic, cultural, religious and socioeconomic backgrounds’ of students are acknowledged elsewhere in these standards, the emphasis falls overwhelmingly on enabling students to achieve learning outcomes that are non-negotiable. ‘Diversity’ gets a mention, but only as an obstacle or barrier to be surmounted, rather than a condition for the rich cultural exchanges and storytelling that otherwise might occur in schools (see AITSL). ‘Diversity’ is conceived as something external to teachers to which they must attend, not as referring to the culturally specific education and upbringing that they themselves have experienced.

Writing an inventory presupposes a far more complex form of professional engagement than that constructed by such standards, one that raises questions about the way such structures are beginning to mediate teaching and learning. Standards of the kind that I have just mentioned typically reduce educators to mapping their practice against a set of performance indicators, a practice that diminishes any sense of the ideological investment that educators make in their work (indeed, the word ‘ideology’ has no place in the current obsession with specifying learning outcomes that are beyond contention, as with the claims that are made about the PISA results). An inventory in the form of an autobiography is quite a different text. Rather than supposing that teaching and learning lend themselves to being described in universal terms, it posits classrooms as culturally specific sites, where educators need to be constantly mindful of whose culture is being privileged and how it connects with local cultures and the meaning-making practices that characterise them. It supposes that every classroom comprises social relationships to which both teachers and pupils bring their autobiographies, that is, a world of values and beliefs that they may or may not hold in common with others in the room. Given the teacher’s role in facilitating the meaning-making practices that occur in classrooms, it is crucial that teachers exercise this role knowingly, monitoring the way their values and beliefs shape their perceptions of what is happening. Writing an autobiography is one way of achieving the reflexivity necessary to negotiate the transactions that occur in classrooms in a culturally sensitive way.

6. Re-envisioning classrooms

You can probably sense that the way that I amconceptualising the role of storytelling in professional learning rests on an alternative vision of how social relationships are actually enacted in classrooms, and of the kinds of communication that occur within them. For me, Douglas Barnes’s evocation in From Communication to Curriculum of the exchanges that occur in classroom settings provides a powerful counterpoint to the way in which classrooms are currently being constructed by standards-based reforms. Rather than seeing ‘curriculum’ as something that teachers deliver, as with the current obsession with specifying learning outcomes in advance of instruction, Barnes sees curriculum as a form of communication. I shall quote my favourite passage from his work in full:

When people talk about ‘the school curriculum’ they often mean ‘what teachers plan in advance for their pupils to learn’. But a curriculum made only of teachers’ intentions would be an insubstantial thing from which nobody would learn much. To become meaningful a curriculum has to be enacted by pupils as well as teachers, all of whom have their private lives outside school. By ‘enact’ I mean come together in a meaningful communication – talk, write, read books, collaborate, become angry with one another, learn what to say and do, and how to interpret what others say and do. A curriculum as soon as it becomes more than intentions is embodied in the communicative life of an institution, the talk and gestures by which pupils and teachers exchange meanings even when they quarrel or cannot agree. In this sense curriculum is a form of communication. (Barnes, 1975/1992, p. 14.)

I often treat this passage as describing an ideal situation, in contrast to classrooms that are organised around drilling and skilling for standardised testing or other practices that construct pupils as empty vessels to be filled with the knowledge specified in a formal curriculum. But Barnes’ point is that these very practices also constitute a form of communication, except that the interlocutors perform significantly different roles from that which they might perform when a teacher is responsive to the ‘private lives’ (as Barnes expresses it) that their pupils bring into classrooms from ‘outside school’. And even in a classroom that is characterised by very rigid forms of control, such as when a teacher does all the talking, reducing his or her pupils to listening, absorbing and occasionally regurgitating the information transmitted to them,
other patterns of behaviour and communication can be observed, such as the surreptitious talk that occurs amongst pupils while the teacher holds the floor. The teacher’s intentions, in short, are no guarantee that the pupils will actually engage in the lesson in the way that he or she has envisaged.

Yet this difference between intention and enactment need not be seen as a failure on the part of a teacher. Barnes’s distinction suggests that a curriculum is always more complex and multifaceted than any plans that a teacher may have made in advance. While this difference can take the form of a ‘hidden curriculum’, when teachers and their pupils enact certain forms of social regulation, regardless of what a teacher may think he or she is doing, it can also provide a justification for a pedagogy that is directed towards facilitating rich and multifaceted forms of meaning-making – meaning-making that is rich by virtue of the fact that it exceeds what a teacher may have planned beforehand.

The difference between the intended curriculum and the enacted curriculum is also a space where storytelling becomes a vital means by which teachers are able to critically reflect on their practice, exploring the exchanges that occur within classroom settings in an effort to grasp the meaning of what is going on (cf. Doecke and McClenaghan, 2011, p. 26). This is in contrast to the way educators are positioned as technicians or functionaries by standards-based reforms, where people do not feel obliged to probe the meaning of what is happening because it has all been decided in advance. To see yourself as a storyteller is to plump yourself in the midst of the social world of the classroom, alive to everything that is going on there. It is also to be conscious of the fact that you are only one storyteller amongst many, that everyone in the classroom could tell a different story about what is happening, as together you renew your world each day.

7. Teachers’ stories
This section offers a more differentiated sense of the kinds of reflection that teachers’ stories embody. I shall draw on writing that I have done with Douglas McClenaghan, a secondary English teacher in Melbourne with whom I have collaborated over the past few decades in an ongoing inquiry into English curriculum and pedagogy.

To some extent what follows is a précis of arguments that we have developed in Confronting Practice: Classroom Investigations into Language and Learning, a book that we recently coauthored (see Doecke and McClenaghan, 2011, pp. 22–40). During the period of our collaboration, Douglas has written many stories that inquire into dimensions of his professional practice as a teacher of English. These have been published in a variety of places. For the book, we re-published a selection of those narratives, using them as prompts to reflect on the value of storytelling as a means of investigating the complexities of teaching and learning. The excerpts in Example 2 are presented in the same spirit.

Example 2. Excerpts from Classroom Narratives
by Douglas McClenaghan.

Jungle Warfare: The First Strike
I am sitting with my year 9 English class in the Textiles room (great place for teaching English!) period five on a Friday afternoon. We have managed to shoehorn a TV and VCR in between some tables and have re-arranged the room so that everyone can see. Three boys are about to play us a video of their ‘crime story’. The class have been writing crime stories for most of the term and today is the day for submitting them. All of the other students have submitted written pieces but these three boys decided to make a video … The boys had filmed their video on weekends, while their class time was used to ‘plan’ and ‘script’ (their words, not mine) the piece and to reminisce about the previous weekend’s filming adventures …


The Bottle Poem
We know we are teaching well when we are surprised by our students’ insights, when what they accomplish exceeds our expectations or even challenges our preconceptions about how an exercise should be done or a text might be read.

Sue decided to write about alcoholism, producing a text which is instantly recognisable as a poem. She is a Year 9 student, and it is impossible not to be impressed by the way she has constructed a persona through her carefully chosen words, conveying a sense of the menace which alcohol poses to its victim who is implied in the poem by her use of the second person. Because the ‘you’ of the poem confi...
to the individual personalities of the young people with whom they are interacting, gaining an ever more refined sense of their needs and aspirations. This kind of recognition of the other who is standing before me has become increasingly compromised by a relentless emphasis on the importance of measuring young people’s performance against the performance of young people everywhere. Rather than identifying the needs of individual children through dialogue and other interactions that allow insight into what a child might potentially be capable of achieving, standardised tests (like NAPLAN) compel teachers to classify children according to what such tests deem they should know and be able to do at certain stages of their development. Standards-based reforms embody a logic of sameness, at the expense of cultivating a responsiveness to the rich complexities of the situation in which you find yourself. When teachers tell stories about their professional practice, they resist this generalising mentality, and remind us of other vital dimensions of their interactions with students. Concrete detail about the way the desks were organised in the room, the mood of the kids as they walked into class after lunch, the personality of an individual child – such ‘detail’ and ‘particularity’ (to borrow Jane Miller’s words) challenge the capacity of generalisations to capture everything that happens in classrooms.

Storytelling always has a provisional character, reflecting a much more lively spirit of inquiry than that of ‘measurement experts’ when they make definitive judgments about the performance of young people on standardised tests. Such judgments are always about what young people have done, not about their potential (cf. Doecke, 2000). Everything needs to match the types of learning that standards-based reforms map out in advance, as when young people’s intelligence and creativity are interpreted through the lens of pre-existing learning continua. Douglas’s pedagogy stands in stark contrast to this attempt to contain the potential of young people within the world as adults see it. Through his storytelling he nurtures a capacity to be ‘surprised by our students’ insights, when what they accomplish exceeds our expectations or even challenges our preconceptions about how an exercise should be done or a text might be read’ (Doecke and McLennaghan, 2011, p. 27).

This is also a good way of describing the potential of practitioner inquiry to open up dimensions of experience and education beyond the world of standards-based reforms. The story that Douglas then narrates...
concerns a poem created by one of his students, which she presented in the form of a papier mâché display. According to Douglas, this artifact both demonstrated how young people draw on a range of semiotic resources in order to make meaning, rather than simply words, as well as paradoxically raising questions about the claims made by advocates of multiliteracies about the radically innovative nature of such practices (what, after all, could be more traditional than a papier mâché model?). I won’t retell this story here, except to point to the way that it shows how Douglas learnt from what his student had created, critically reviewing his stance as a teacher of English who might have been inclined to value the words of the poem and to treat the visual display as simply decorative. The text his student produced opened up levels of meaning-making that he had not anticipated, but the point is that he needed to be receptive to what she had accomplished, and not allow his judgment of the quality of her work to be overly shaped by his preconceptions about how the task should have been done. And he needed to write his way into this understanding of what she had accomplished. This insight was not simply there for the taking. He had to possess both the capacity to ‘see’ what this student was offering to him (and not allow his judgment to be mediated by his preconceptions about the ‘outcomes’ that might be accomplished through this exercise) and to grapple with words and meaning in order to tease out the significance of what she had done.

Yet that significance cannot be fixed. It is noteworthy that this story has provoked discrepant responses on the part of educators who have engaged with it. Again, these responses are detailed in Confronting Practice, and I won’t go over this ground again here. To engage in storytelling is to treat classrooms as interpretive sites, where the same events might be viewed differently, depending on the interpretive lens that a person brings to it (including the interpretive lens of so-called ‘measurement experts’, whose representation of classroom settings should itself be treated as only one reading amongst many). Telling a story, however, is no guarantee that you can control how readers interpret what you say, and the story itself can prompt a variety of responses, depending on the values and beliefs that readers bring to it. The challenge for readers is to become reflexively aware of the values and beliefs that might be shaping their judgment of the scenes and incidents described – something that Douglas and I have experienced repeatedly when we have workshoped these narratives.

The provisional character of storytelling relates not only to the way a storyteller can make his or her own views and values an object of scrutiny by reflecting on the differences between what he or she intended and what was actually accomplished, but to the activity of readers who engage with the story and who thereby become conscious of their own views and values, especially when they enter into dialogue with readers who might be interpreting the story in significantly different ways. This is not to doubt the trustworthiness of the story: a reader might acknowledge a writer’s preparedness to put his or her own practice on display, whether or not the significance that the author ascribes to the events depicted seems right. Readers involved in workshops that Douglas and I have facilitated typically wish to gain a stronger sense of the specific nature of the school community in which he is working. For them, context is everything when it comes to making a judgment about the teaching and learning represented in a story, and deciding whether that story might provide a meaningful perspective on the school community in which they work and their own professional practice as educators. Needless to say, this acknowledgement of the importance of context again contrasts with the logic of sameness of standards-based reforms. The latter presupposes (to borrow from Bakhtin (1993, p. 37)) that ‘the truth of a situation is … that which is repeatable and constant in it’. The aim of a storyteller, however, is ‘to relate a given lived-experience to me as the one who is actively experiencing it’ (ibid., p. 36) – a ‘truth’ to which readers respond by likewise acknowledging its specific character and attempting to understand it on its own terms.

Storytelling by teachers cannot be dismissed as merely ‘personal’ or ‘anecdotal’, as has occurred with the implementation of standards-based reforms and their circumscribed notion of ‘evidence’. A story typically involves a play between the rich particularity of specific scenes and incidents and a provisional judgment about what it has all meant, as with Douglas’s opening generalisation about how ‘we know we are teaching well when we are surprised by our students’ insights’. It is also significant that Douglas’s narratives are told from the standpoint of someone who is an actor within the situation that is being described, who therefore has an insiders’ view, in contradistinction to the judgments that might be made by an outsider. Teachers’ stories can embody a far more subtle intellectual engagement with the complexities of professional practice than accounts constructed from the
standpoint of an outsider who reads the phenomena of everyday classroom against pre-existing concepts, reducing those phenomena to merely illustrating those preconceptions rather than being sensitive to the way situations of practice can contradict our existing understandings, prompting us to review our values and beliefs and to question what we think we ‘know’ (cf. Smith, 2005). Privileging the standpoint of the outside observer, who can supposedly take a bird’s eye view of all that is going on, as opposed to the thoughts and feelings of those who are actively engaged in the situation that is the focus of the inquiry, is yet another sign of the way so-called ‘scientific’ methods do violence when it comes to representing the way teachers and their pupils actively renew their lives each day.

8. Concluding reflections

Douglas Barnes’ evocation of the classroom as a site where communication occurs reminds us that classrooms are not always what they seem, and that the social relationships enacted within them are mediated by larger contexts that are not immediately accessible to us. Storytelling is a vital means of grappling with that complexity. It is not the only vehicle for this struggle – the enormity of the social and economic changes that are currently occurring around the world (changes that we name with words like ‘globalisation’, ‘corporate culture’ and indeed ‘standards-based reforms’) cannot be captured and rendered human simply through sharing stories, but should prompt intellectual and imaginative work of various kinds (cf. Doecke and McLenaghan, 2011). Nevertheless, the characteristic features of storytelling – its situatedness and specificity, its reflexivity and provisionality, its focus on lived experience – show that it is an indispensable means for remaining fully responsive to what is happening around us.

Such responsiveness reflects not simply an epistemological standpoint but an ethical one. The ‘dispassionate attention to truth’ (Miller, 1995) of so-called evidence-based reforms violates the social world of the school by representing it in the form of a set of performance indicators that lend themselves to ‘objective’ measurement. This is where standards-based reforms such as NAPLAN are driving us, as more and more teachers report the personal struggles they are experiencing when they are forced to treat young people as numbers, rather than responding to them as fellow human beings (see Kostogriz and Doecke, forthcoming; Doecke, Kostogriz and Illesca, 2011). For all the talk about improving students’ literacy, the complex apparatus that has been generated to chart that improvement, such as the annual ritual of standardised testing and the reified educational outcomes itemised in the recently developed Australian curriculum (ACARA), undermines teachers’ capacity to be fully responsive to the needs of the young people in their classrooms. Standards-based reforms posit the school as an object in relation to which we are reduced to merely a contemplative stance, as though our lives are not fully implicated in the lives of those around us.

My basic point, as I reach the conclusion of this essay, is that schools and classrooms are social worlds that should be characterised by the same sharing of experiences (or what Ian Reid calls ‘narrative exchanges’[Reid, 1994]) that enrich our everyday lives as we engage in the relationships and situations that we encounter in the larger society. In countries like Australia, the United States and England, such storytelling has been marginalised, displaced by a reified discourse (‘outcomes’, ‘value add’, ‘effect size’) that alienates us from the life around us. It is time to restore storytelling to its central role in education, and to the way that teachers and researchers account for what happens in classrooms.

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