

“Telling” insights from experience: Establishing resonance with readers, theory, and participants

Kate Chanock

Academic Language and Learning Unit, La Trobe University, Melbourne, Victoria 3086, Australia

Email: c.chanock@latrobe.edu.au

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This special issue of the *JALL* was conceived as a bridge between theory and practice. This is a two-lane bridge: for while theory informs practice, the converse is also true, or ought to be. It can be difficult, however, to engage in dialogue with theory, and not only because our work leaves little time for reflection or writing. It is also, I think, because we lack a genre for this purpose; and my aim in this piece is to encourage more theoretically inflected narratives from the “ground” of practice.

Research is normally planned, “systematic and sustained inquiry,” (Stenhouse, 1981, p. 113), but there are occasionally contributions to the scholarship of learning and teaching that are not the products of designed research, but by-products of teaching. These arise out of moments in practice when something happens that resonates with discussions in our field, and seems to show something about teaching/learning that is worth communicating with colleagues. If we wish to share these “telling” cases with our community of practice, we must consider:

- how can we bring such stories into the scholarly conversation, and
- what problems must be beware of, in attempting this?

This article explores two kinds of resonance that enable “telling” stories (Mitchell, 1984) to be told: resonance with readers, and resonance with theory. At the same time, it acknowledges the range of ways in which such accounts may be felt to lack validity, and argues for collaboration with the students whose stories we may wish to tell, in order to ensure what Maxwell (1992) calls “interpretive validity”.

Key words: cases, learning advisers, narrative.

1. Introduction

In an article titled “What counts as research?” Lawrence Stenhouse offers a succinct definition, with which I think most academics would agree: “Research...is systematic and sustained inquiry, planned and self-critical, which is subjected to public criticism and to empirical tests where these are appropriate” (Stenhouse, 1981, p. 113). Yet, there are occasionally contributions to the scholarship of learning and teaching that are not the products of designed research, but by-products of teaching. Such contributions arise out of moments in practice when something happens that resonates with discussions in our field, and seems to show something about teaching/learning that is worth communicating with colleagues (Chanock & Vardi, 2005). Whether we are language and learning advisers, or academic developers, or discipline teachers, any of us may have those kinds of experiences from time to time that we think have meaning, and perhaps implications, for other people in our community of practice. However, in view of

the criteria that Stenhouse sets out, we may hesitate to write about these insights for publication, in case they are dismissed as "merely anecdotal". The questions arise, therefore:

- how can we bring such stories into the scholarly conversation?
- what problems must we be aware of, in attempting this?

We could begin by looking at what seems to make some stories publishable. Clandinin and Connelly (1991) say that "the study of what an education is or means for individuals is mostly absent in scholarly discourse" (p. 262). I have found this focus more often in autobiographies such as Mike Rose's (1989) *Lives on the Boundary*, or Richard Rodriguez's (1982) *Hunger for Memory*. Nonetheless, we do encounter reflections on the meaning of experience in scholarly publications as well: Fan Shen's (1989) reflections on the painful process of becoming academically literate in English; Iлона Lekić's (2007) case studies of international students' progress through their American degrees; Roz Ivanič's (1998) conversations with British students about their writing for their courses; or Mike Baynham's (2000) quotations from an older woman's reflections on her literate life. In my field of academic language and learning, one of the most valuable sources is Helen Fox's (1994) book *Listening to the World*, which gives us access to what students think, and how they feel, about learning in a foreign culture. The strength of such accounts lies not in their rigour (though they may be rigorous), but in their resonance.

When Maxwell (1992) reflects on "Understanding and validity in qualitative research", he says that "validity is always relative to, and dependent on, some community of inquirers on whose perspective the account is based" (p. 284). In other words, we are not just telling these stories, we are telling them *to* people who inhabit the same world of practice, and grapple with the same problems. In this context, we do not have to offer an account of replicable activity with large numbers of people, but we do have to offer some insight into a kind of experience that our readers share with us. If this insight helps them to make sense of aspects of that experience, and does so by drawing on theory that we also share, it can extend the reach of explanation – and that is scholarship. There are two kinds of resonance, therefore, that we might expect to find: resonance with readers, and resonance with theory.

2. Resonance with readers

I think the literature of narrative enquiry is helpful here, as this is a research method whose purpose is to give us access to learners' own accounts, and to the meanings that they and the researchers construct around their learning (for a concise and helpful account of this approach, see Smith and Sparkes, 2008). Much of this work is more planned, methodical, and sustained than the kind of scholarship I am advocating here, though Georgakopolou (2006) argues for the value of "small stories" as well. But it is in this literature that we find practitioners like ourselves reflecting on what they learn from practice that is meaningful not only for the individual but for their colleagues too. This is because narrative enquiry has often been used as a strategy in getting practitioners to be more reflective about what they do. Researchers elicit practitioners' narratives about their working lives, in order to stimulate them to reflect on their own practice, to understand it better. Then, the purpose of publishing accounts of these narratives, as Clandinin and Connelly (1991, p. 277) put it, is to "have other readers raise questions about their practices, their ways of knowing. Narrative inquiries are shared in ways that help readers question their own stories, raise their own questions about practices, and see in the narrative accounts stories of their own stories".

This process is compellingly described by Mattingly (1991) in a collection edited by David Schön, *The reflective turn: Case studies in and on educational practice*. Mattingly was studying the talk of occupational therapists, and noticed that these practitioners had two different discourses, one of which was "chart talk" (that is, the kind of language used on patients' medical charts) and the other was stories. Chart Talk "made the diagnosis, rather than the individual patient, the centre of description. When a patient case was presented in this way, therapists typically outlined a list of general problems clustered around a particular patient"; and

canvassed various treatment interventions and outcomes (Mattingly, 1991, p. 244). This contrasted with the stories they told informally, where “Both the patient’s illness experiences and therapist’s experience of treating the patient took centre stage” (Mattingly, 1991, p. 245). Mattingly describes one staff meeting where the regular task of formally presenting a case fell to a student intern, whose presentation “divided dramatically. In the first half, the student therapist discussed the general medical characteristics of Parkinson’s, with emphasis on those aspects of the disease relevant to occupational therapy” – these were functional problems, ways to assess impairment, drugs and rehabilitation – but then she shifted into a story about the patient’s wife not understanding his impairment and not being empathetic about what he could and could not do at home (Mattingly, 1991, p. 246). And at this point in the talk, Mattingly (1991) writes:

What was most notable was the response of the audience to this cueing that talk was entering another domain. The affect of the group changed dramatically. Several leaned forward and focused more directly on the speaker’s face...During the first half of her talk the audience was quiet, respectful. Everyone assumed some appearance of listening, if distant listening. The speaker was not interrupted. During the second half, the audience paid increasingly close attention to the speaker, mirroring her facial expressions on their own faces in sympathetic accompaniment to the unfolding story. Talk changed from a strict monologue to an increasingly flowing, overlapping dialogue, with nearly all audience members participating in the end. The audience became a chorus, first in largely nonverbal expressions that marked their strongly felt participation in the story, quickly followed by storytelling of their own at the conclusion of the speaker’s story. (pp. 246-247)

To be able to engage readers as if they were a chorus, in the sense of that group of actors who are on stage in a play, not participating in the action but commenting on the meanings and implications of it: this is how we might hope to engage readers of our professional stories, and is what I mean by “resonance”.

What Mattingly observed has, furthermore, a particular resonance for me as an academic language and learning adviser, for although we are not engaged in medical work, our status in our universities is comparable to the status of occupational therapists in a hospital. Mattingly (1991, p. 255) says, “In the medical culture, occupational therapists are often seen as technicians, or even ‘play ladies’, who occupy patients’ hospital time with checker games and craft groups” – a description that recalls the disparagement of individual teaching that some of us have encountered from managers who see these consultations as tea and sympathy, rather than instruction. “From a biomedical perspective”, Mattingly continues, “chronic illness and disability are physiological problems. But from an occupational therapy perspective, disability is not only an injury to the body, it is an injury to a patient’s life” (1991, p. 255). It is this aspect of their work that recalls our talk, on occasions, with students who consult us individually, a significant component of our work that cannot be reported like the designed interventions, with pre- and post-tests and participants’ Likert-scale agreements with evaluative statements that make up a common genre in our professional literature. Mattingly (1991) notes that, when constrained to “chart talk”, therapists “can say little about how they are intervening to help the patient with a disabled life”, and they told Mattingly that they saw the research she did with them, and “the notions of clinical reasoning that have emerged from it as giving them a new language, a medium for talking about what they do in ways that the traditional, medically derived form of talk does not” (p. 255).

In Mattingly’s (1991) view, however, “the language is not new at all. What we have done is merely take seriously a form of construing clinical problems that was part of their practice all along” (p. 255). When we tell our stories of teaching, similarly, we are taking our own knowledge seriously and thereby taking the knowledge of our readers, who are our colleagues, seriously as well. Mattingly (1991) says that by shifting from analytical to narrative mode, occupational therapists:

placed their technical skills and problem solving within a context of a historically unfolding interaction between themselves and their clients and an evolving sense of the story they were living out in their work with a patient...Therapists are telling something important about their work in their stories, and this is what our study unearthed and helped articulate. The therapists who participated in the research and those who have come to workshops say that our work is "empowering". The sense of power comes, I believe, because their ordinary storytelling had already captured a level of complexity in the clinical problems they were treating that was ignored in the usual biomedically oriented accounts of clinical work. In their stories, therapists reveal the depth of the problems their patients face and, in so doing, the depth of their own interventions. (pp. 253-254)

The work of learning advisers, similarly, requires us to notice and respond to what is happening in each student, in each session, and those are stories that are not often told. However, like Connelly and Clandinin (1990), "[b]y listening to participant stories of their experience of teaching and learning, we hope to write narratives of what it means to educate and be educated" (p. 12).

3. Resonance with theory

We hope, at the same time, to bring out the resonance of our experience with the theories our professional community draws upon in seeking to understand students' learning. Our reflections on our stories are like the process Mitchell (1984) describes for anthropologists drawing inferences from cases they observe: "What the anthropologist...does is to show how general principles deriving from some theoretical orientation manifest themselves in some given set of particular circumstances" (p. 239). A "telling" case "enables the analyst to establish theoretically valid connections between events and phenomena", so our question, as Mitchell (1984, p. 239) says, is always: "What is this a case of?" And in answering that question, we shift the story from being "merely anecdotal" to being meaningful for others in our scholarly community.

I can illustrate this with an extract from an article I published some years ago (Chanock, 2000) in which I sought to show what it was in the process of individual consultations that enabled students who consulted a learning adviser to acquire an academic voice, although they came from very different backgrounds and requested very different kinds of advice. My examples included a Deaf student, a student with a learning disability, a student who had grown up as a Red Guard in China, a student of second-generation Italian migrant background, and a mature-aged Anglo-Australian student. I was coming to see my work with each of these individuals in the light of scholarly conversations I was reading, drawing on Bakhtin (1981, 1984) and Vygotsky (1978), around the idea that all kinds of utterances are dialogic, including silent thought (which Vygotsky shows to be derived from prior conversation), and even writing. This is because, although we are alone when we write, we are responding to an imaginary interlocutor, anticipating the questions they will bring to their reading, and the ways they might respond to what we have written. It is our knowledge of those expectations that shapes our writing. And many of the problems that learning advisers find students struggling with are not simply the result of inadequate English or poor study routines, but arise because they are not in the same conversation as their lecturers, and they cannot imagine the dialogue that they need to imagine as they write their essays. I wished to write an article, therefore, explaining this function of my role, of being that interlocutor, giving students some experience of that academic dialogue around the work they were engaged in. Mary's story, which follows, would not have carried much weight by itself, but as one of five stories about students who had nothing else in common, but each in their own way relied on that interaction with an academic interlocutor, it enabled me to make a case for individual teaching.

4. Modelling academic dialogue

Mary is Anglo-Celtic and Australian born. She enrolled for a degree in her seventies, when ill health forced her to retire from nursing. For more than a year, Mary could not get above a “C” for her essays. She was aware that something hindered her from achieving the results she thought herself capable of, but she could not imagine what it was. She put in long hours, read conscientiously, and reported quantities of information in impeccably expressed, beautifully presented essays. She was irritated to find, in her tutors’ comments at the ends of these, criticisms such as “too much description, not enough analysis”, and queries about her own opinion on the topic. If she had wanted to dabble in opinions, she felt, she needn’t have come to university.

Opinion, I told Mary, meant something different in academic usage. You have opinions because many of the things you are reading are not established facts but arguments. Your opinion is not what you prefer to think but what a consideration of the arguments and examination of the evidence lead you to think. Thus, the focus of university assignments is not only on what we know but how we know it, and why we think what we think about it. What was missing from Mary’s essays was an awareness that the topics on which she was writing were under discussion by a discipline, and that her essays were expected to contribute to those discussions. If writing can be thought of as a “covert dialogue” (Nystrand, Greene, & Wiemelt, 1993, p. 297) in which the writer is listening, and responding to other voices in the discourse community as she engages with the topic under discussion, Mary’s writing was a monologue. This was because she saw the role of a student not as engaging in discussion, but as reporting what one has learned. Her essays were closer, therefore, to the one kind of discourse that Bakhtin (1984) describes as monologic – the “authoritative” utterance of dogma, which takes no account of other speakers but focuses only on “its object, to which it strives to be maximally adequate” (pp. 186-187). Instead of this, Mary needed to imagine herself as a member of the discipline community, and enter into its discussions. This was why “too much description” was “not enough analysis”; information is not an answer to a question that calls for argument. Mary could argue, and she sped through the “B” grade spectrum into the “A”s, where she is still, as she approaches Honours after nearly ten years of part-time study. Her deference to authority remains only in the attentive hearing she gives to other people’s ideas.

That deference made sense, however, in terms of the relationship to knowledge that Mary had had during a long career as a nurse. Medical hierarchies are based on certified differentials of knowledge. Moreover, the responsible use of knowledge lies in following established procedures to a sound result. Although (or because?) medical knowledge is unstable, it is authoritative. This is only one side to Mary’s experience, of course; running a clinic for many years in South East Asia, she often had to be inventive and solve problems she had not been trained for. She brought a rich array of competences to her course of study. But she came from a culture of knowledge that did not quite mesh with the one she was trying to enter, and until the tacit assumptions of each were made visible, she considered dropping out of the degree.

What Mary needed from our dialogue, then, was not feedback on her use of language, which was faultless, but responses to her train of thought. Because she saw herself (realistically) as standing outside the discourse community to which she needed to imagine herself belonging, she was not basing her

writing on the model of discussion. It was discussion, however, that enabled her to do this.

It was the reflection on experience in the light of theory that enabled me to assemble Mary's stories, and the others, into a piece of scholarship. I did not set out to study their experiences of academic writing, and of working with a learning adviser, in the light of theory; but when reflecting on what I had noticed about the work we did together, I found that particular theoretical ideas were helpful in understanding what I had observed.

5. Problems and risks

All this is not to say, however, that theoretically-inflected stories of practice constitute an unproblematic kind of scholarship. It may be felt that they rely too heavily on resonance, for as Peshkin (1985, as cited in Connelly & Clandinin 1990) puts it,

When I disclose what I have seen, my results invite other researchers to look where I did and see what I saw. My ideas are candidates for others to entertain, not necessarily as truth, let alone Truth, but as positions about the nature and meaning of a phenomenon that may fit their sensibility and shape their thinking about their own enquiries. (p. 8)

I think we have to accept the indeterminacy of interpretation, for we are always looking through a researcher's eyes at their selection from a larger (and to us, unknown) body of material gathered from people who have their own understandings and agendas in relating their experiences or representing their ideas in writing. It is, after all, the aim of narrative analysis to study those understandings and identify those agendas. There are, however, well-founded reservations about what can and cannot be learned through narrative analysis. Atkinson and Delamont (2006) give a sense of what is claimed, and contested, in this area. Some scholars see narrative as giving access to a person's authentic experience, while others see it as an exercise in impression management. Some focus on the individual, others on what we learn about the social context around that individual's experience; and some see narrative as a personal construction, while others see it as partaking of stock generic elements in the cultural story bank, as it were. While my own work has not employed the methods of narrative analysis, I think it is well-suited to exploring what we learn from students' own accounts of their learning, and would therefore urge us to be conscious of the risks of re-presenting this material uncritically.

Reflective practitioner, Schön (1991), asks "What constitutes appropriate rigour?", and warns us that if we neglect this question, "'reflection' becomes an *open sesame* to woolly-headedness, a never-never land where anything goes. Appropriate rigor in the reflective study of practice has to do with two closely coupled criteria: validity and utility" (p. 10). In trying to publish stories, we are vulnerable to criticism that they are not valid – which could mean that they are not honest, not substantial, not representative, not truthful to the situation, not truthful to the other participants – and all of these possibilities should be considered.

In the same article in which we learned about the talk of occupational therapists, above, Mattingly (1991) also describes working with a group of Project Officers with the World Bank, for whom the invitation to reflect on their discourses was unwelcome and unproductive. They also had two alternative discourses: one that they used to report on planning and achieving a project, and the other, the backstage talk that revealed that this process was, in fact, rife with politics, negotiation, and chaos. Only the first of these discourses was acceptable in their corporate role, and the second had to be hidden from their employers. In this situation, Mattingly (1991) writes, "I began to confront the tremendous power of stories to obscure the meaning of experience...[and] the power of the institutional context to determine the kind of stories that could be safely told" (p. 250). She found, indeed, that some stories told to her in the front-stage discourse proved, when she visited the site, to be fabrications – that "the housing settlements [supposedly built] were not there, that the cattle [supposedly expelled] were still clogging traffic in the central city, and that there were no new industries. But they existed on paper, in the project appraisal report" (Mattingly, 1991, p. 251).

Connelly and Clandinin (1990, p. 10), too, warn of the risks of deception, narcissism, and what they call in a borrowed phrase “narrative smoothing”, where a story is massaged so that elements that do not fit well do not appear in the story. There is in fact a mode of research narrative that goes much further than this. Peter Clough (2002) advocates, and himself practices, fictionalised forms of communicating what he has learned from research. “The fictionalisation of educational experience”, he writes, “offers researchers the opportunity to import fragments of data from various real events in order to speak to the heart of social consciousness” (Clough, 2002, p. 8). It is enough, in his view, to tell “stories which *could* be true” (Clough, 2002, p. 9, his emphasis). In his accounts of teachers, pupils, and their families in schools catering for troubled children and adolescents, some of the characters are people he knew, and some events happened in the way that he recounts them, while others are combinations or amalgams of people and events he knew, and others are supplied by his imagination, informed by his research experience. With reference to a story in which he has changed the gender of the main character as well as imagining “her” home life, he asserts that “It doesn’t matter whether what I wrote about Nick took place in fact...the event symbolises in a way which data and analysis could never do” (Clough, 2002, p. 77).

My uneasiness about this way of communicating what one learns from ‘educational experience’ does not derive from any doubts about the ability of fiction to communicate a truth about the experience. Clough’s stories are compelling, and for me, the most compelling is about an event that did not happen at all, featuring a person who never existed (as Clough tells us in his chapter of commentary on the stories). This is one in which “Lolly”, a member of a family about whom the researcher has written a story, turns up at his house years later, having read that story, to berate him for his appropriation and patronising portrayal of Lolly’s mother and brother, complete with spoken dialect that makes them appear foolish to the reader as well as to the writer. This has a powerful resonance for me and, I would think, for others who write about students they have known. But I am content to receive this ‘truth’ from fiction for, to borrow Clough’s terms, it *could* have happened. I think that we should acknowledge the tacit contract between writer and reader, the understanding that research attempts to be true to events. In saying this, I fully accept that there is no single or stable truth to events, and that my purpose and perspective in telling about them are also unstable, deriving from a subjectivity which – although, or because, it is mine – I can only incompletely comprehend. Nonetheless, when I publish something I would call scholarship, it should be about something that *I think* happened, at least, and then my readers can subject it to all the kinds of scepticism they bring to reading scholarship. I may get closer to the truth – a truth – in fiction, but I should call it fiction.

While Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2005) allow that “most qualitative approaches...[a]re more interested in verisimilitude, trustworthiness and praxis than validity and generalisability” (pp. 22-23), I think that we should give some attention to a number of kinds of validity set out by Maxwell (1992, pp. 288-289). There is “descriptive validity” – is our story accurate? – and “interpretive validity” – is it true to the participants’ perspective? Then there is “theoretical validity”, which is concerned with whether it is legitimate to apply a particular concept to some particular set of facts – in other words, how telling is any particular “telling case”? On reading a case study, we may sometimes feel that the story is buckling under the weight of theory or the analytical apparatus that has been piled on top of it. Not every story is substantial enough to bear this weight, and we do not want to strain our readers’ patience with one that is just not “telling” enough. Another kind of validity in Maxwell’s list is “generalisability”, the question of whether a case could help us to make sense of other cases.

While each of these deserves attention, interpretive validity is particularly important in view of the unequal power relations between us and our students. While we are bound to understand our students’ experience in ways that diverge from their own understandings, we should not, I think, write something about a student that they would feel is a misrepresentation of their experience. I may have seen something that the student did not see but, if so, I would like them to think “that’s interesting, I wasn’t aware of that”, rather than thinking “wait, it wasn’t like that!” When writing about somebody, we can always ask ourselves whether we would be comfortable about giving them that piece to read. Indeed, it is good practice to give them the piece to read; not

only does it keep us honest, but we also learn of any additions or corrections that can make it better (and can hope to avoid any visits from "Lolly" years from now).

Formally as well as ethically, if we want to use samples of students' writing, as we often do in writing about developing academic literacy, we must ask their permission to do so. Indeed, whenever possible I would advocate inviting the other participants in our stories to be co-authors with us; this does not impose much burden upon them because they have already written the material we wish to incorporate, and can then collaborate to make sure the story remains faithful to their understanding as well as to ours. For postgraduate students, and even undergraduates, who are at an early stage in their development of an academic identity, this can be a very useful experience. It not only gives them skills in preparing work for publication, but gives them a glimpse of the social and professional context surrounding scholarship: a concrete experience of the "conversation" which few see, and some are not even aware of, well into their academic studies.

6. Conclusion

In arguing for "telling" stories as a form of scholarship, I am aware that these do not fit well at all with Stenhouse's (1981) definition of research. However, another quotation, this time from Flyvbjerg (2006), may encourage us to reflect upon our "small stories" for publication:

Hans Eysenck (1976), who originally regarded the case study as nothing more than a method of producing anecdotes, later realized that "sometimes we simply have to keep our eyes open and look carefully at individual cases – not in the hope of proving anything, but rather in the hope of learning something!" (p. 9)

Our research and scholarship are likely to encompass many kinds of accounts, of which small stories are only one. However, if we are wary of the misuses of storying discussed above, we should be able to share more of the insights gained incidentally from practice. We need to think about *what* this is a story of; *whom* it is a story for; and *where* in the conversation it can usefully sit – an interplay of resonances that accounts for stories that are published, and can guide us in publishing more.

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