



# Narrative inquiry in service learning contexts: Possibilities for learning about diversity in teacher education

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the experiences of pre- and in-service teachers through intentionally created narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006) spaces within three different service-learning engagements in Canada, Kenya, and Turkey. Because the contexts where our studies were situated were culturally different from participants' backgrounds, narrative inquiry spaces shaped windows in which participants could restory their understandings of others different from themselves. We argue thinking narratively suits the purpose of learning within service learning, highlighting the potential this kind of work holds for pre- and in-service teachers' professional identities in school contexts shaped by diversity.

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## 1. Introduction

In this paper we explore the experiences of pre- and in-service teachers through intentionally created narrative inquiry spaces (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000) within three different service-learning engagements in the countries of Canada, Kenya, and Turkey. We argue that thinking narratively suits the purpose of learning within service learning. Thinking narratively, we understand, as entailing “a subtle twist of mind on behalf of the enquirer” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p.4) in which questions shaped by the dimensions of an inquiry space composed of temporality, sociality, and place (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000) are asked, and re-asked, about the actions of participants, with whom we are in relationship, and of ourselves as researchers in the midst of a relational inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Specifically, because the contexts where our studies were situated were culturally different from participants' backgrounds, narrative inquiry spaces shaped windows where participants could restory their understandings of diversity.

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Our three studies inquire into participants' stories of their experiences in service-learning engagements in three different contexts. In so doing, we attend to moments of learning, particularly those moments wherein individuals, participating in activities alongside people whose lives were often quite different from their own, experienced shifts in their understandings of who they were in the world. We emphasize that repositioning the learning in service learning in this way enabled participants to restory their individual understandings of others different from themselves. Thinking in this way drew our attention to the multiple ways our participants' lives intersected with others as they participated in service-learning engagements.

The purpose of our paper is to highlight how narrative inquiry offers a way of meeting service-learning goals of learning about self in a service context. As a way to do so, we draw upon three separate narrative inquiries and focus upon participants' stories of self-learning as they lived in relation with others. Later in the paper we address the significance of narrative inquiry situated in service-learning engagements and the possibilities this holds for teacher education.

## 2. Theoretical perspectives

Our work is positioned within narrative ways of understanding teacher knowledge. The first of these ways is that teachers' and

students' lives are central to the curriculum of teacher education (Connelly & Clandinin, 1994). Following Connelly and Clandinin's (1988) conceptualization of teacher knowledge as embodied, "personal practical knowledge", we understand teachers as teaching who they are. For example, teachers' perceptions of the communities from which children come, shape what happens in classrooms. As pre-service teachers enter teacher education, they do so with embodied personal practical knowledge onto which theoretical notions of difference cannot simply be grafted (Mills & Ballantyne, 2009). The same may be said of experienced teachers, particularly if they have not had ongoing situated experiences in school contexts shaped by diversity. We suggest that learning about diversity is not brought forward by theory, but, rather, is an experiential-relational-reflective process, something that may be achieved by thinking narratively during active engagement in service learning.

Recognizing the importance of situating one's personal and professional identity within the temporal context of a life experience, each of our research projects began by exploring participants' past experiences to understand the composition of their identities, their "stories to live by" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999). Connelly and Clandinin (1999), in research alongside teachers, came to understand teacher knowledge as both shaped and expressed in terms of school context in which "teachers seem to more concerned to ask questions of who they [were] than of what they know" (p. 3). In response Connelly and Clandinin developed the narrative term "stories to live by" as a way to link teacher knowledge with context and identity.

Second, thinking about teacher knowledge across time, relationship and place, we use narrative inquiry methodology to study the experience of pre- and in-service teachers involved in service learning. Narrative inquiry as both methodology and phenomenon (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), allows researchers to attend to the particulars, the contexts, and the participants in relationship. Each of our three studies, undertaken in differing contexts situated in the countries of Canada, Kenya, and Turkey, drew upon narrative inquiry as a methodological framework. Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) conceptualization of a "three-dimensional narrative inquiry space", composed of the personal and social (interaction), the past, present, and future (continuity) coalesced with the notion of place (situation), shaped our understandings of the field texts (data). The "three-dimensional inquiry space" also provided a context within which to view and to locate the field texts within the experiences of the participants and ourselves, as researchers. Directing our attention and informing our understanding of what it means to think narratively in the living of our individual inquiries, and in the after living alongside each other, the "three-dimensional inquiry space" enabled us to analyze our field texts cognizant of temporality, sociality, and place in simultaneous relation (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006; Clandinin, Pushor, & Murray Orr, 2007).

Finally, we attend to the field of service learning as it relates to cross-cultural experiences. Although our focus in this paper and in our narrative inquiry work is on the 'learning' aspect of service learning, we believe careful consideration of the service dimension of service learning is also critical to its success. Boyle-Baise's (2002) conceptual framework of service as either charity, civic education or community-building, provides a useful lens for reconsidering the 'service' dimension of the service learning experience with a view to creating an inquiry-focused experience that, rather than being a 'peek across borders' (Boyle-Baise, 2002) to learn about others, might become a 'borderland' experience (Anzaldúa, 1987/1999) to learn about 'self in relation with others'.

Based on her experiences in a pre-service teacher education context, Vinz (1997) believes learning about diversity can only take place if there is attitudinal involvement. Playing on the

word *disposition*, she calls on teacher education programs to include spaces where pre-service teachers can experience being "dis-positioned" (p. 139) in such a way as to be drawn to re-examine their beliefs and practices. Being dispositioned involves both learning to *unknow* and *not-know* and Vinz promotes these practices as new literacies for teacher education. Echoing Bateson's (1989) idea of 'becoming', Vinz believes that learning to *un-know* and *not-know* are important to the process of creating a life as a teacher. A state of disequilibrium seems to be an important step to engage the kind of reflection that will focus attention on identity and narratives of experience, encouraging learners to inquire into and re-examine beliefs and practices, reformulating themselves as they move forward.

In this way we see the conceptual and methodological understandings of narrative inquiry and narrative notions of teacher knowledge and identity as well suited for learning in service-learning engagements. In part, we are trying to respond to the call of those who have been researching service learning in teacher preparation programs to "expand its scope by addressing new research strands" (Root & Swick, 2001, p. 151). Root and Swick encourage investigators to "consider combining methodologies to more broadly capture potential outcomes of service-learning" (p.151). Our emphasis is upon learning, that is, the benefits of self-learning that thinking narratively potentially brings forward for individuals engaged in service alongside others.

### 3. Situating the inquiries: study Snapshots

Narrative inquiry "as both phenomena under study and a method of study" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 4) is an undertaking infused with complex relational responsibilities that reverberate (Craig & Huber, 2007) across the lives that become connected through inquiry and, as well, as these lives continue to unfold into the future. The ways in which this ethical understanding shaped each of our studies occurred in varying ways, situated within particular relationships and contexts, as teacher researchers in relation with children and teachers. Across each of the studies, as a way to ensure mutual understanding between ourselves and participants, transcript copies of conversations were shared and interim research texts were negotiated over time.

Jennifer's study was a 14 month narrative inquiry into her identity as a teacher situated in a private high school in Ankara, Turkey. Living alongside three students and three colleagues and inquiring into their understandings of their experiences within a school service-learning project that Jennifer coordinated, enabled her to explore and reflect upon her identity within the project and the context of school. The project was composed of two groups of students: Twenty-five grades nine and ten students from the private high school in which she taught and twenty-five grades four and five primary school students from a public elementary school. Private education in Turkey is expensive and the economic distinction between the two groups was pronounced. As a participant observer, Jennifer was situated in two service-learning projects during October 2001–June, 2002 and January–May, 2003. Jennifer's field texts included field notes of her time as a participant observer in the project, audio-taped conversations with three youth and three colleagues, and a research journal. In her work she focused upon the ways her "stories to live by", her identity, shifted as she lived in relation with others within the service-learning project.

Claire's narrative inquiry explored four pre-service teachers' shifting identities through a community-based service-learning engagement. Claire involved participants as volunteers in after-school drop-in youth clubs located in ethno-culturally diverse, low-income communities in a large western Canadian urban centre.

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