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# Pragmatic radicalism: An autoethnographic perspective on pre-service teaching

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ABSTRACT

How might a pre-service teacher 'teach against the grain' and challenge their pre-existing assumptions about the profession? By deconstructing and reconstructing my schooling experiences and the social and cultural discourses and practices that have shaped and defined me, I hope to interrupt my conditioning and avoid revisiting my unhappy school experiences upon future students [Miller, A. (2006). The teaching urge: and seeking amnesia. *English in Australia*, *41*(1), 18–24., p. 18]. I am trying to *break* the cycle of social reproduction and domination and become the type of teacher who liberates rather than domesticates. In this article I use 'autoethnography' and 'mystoriography' to analyse my professional development and to imagine and enact a teaching identity based on Garth Boomer's 'pragmatic–radical' educator. *Pragmatic radicalism* provides a strategic means of surviving and undermining hegemonic school systems while revolutionising the politics of the classroom. Pre-service teachers *can* challenge the socialisation process *and* build teaching identities that break the traditional 'authoritarian–transmission' model. Critical reflection on identity construction and past school experiences is essential to this endeavour.



## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Becoming a teacher after hating school

> The outward journey to new places, ideas and perspectives is also the inward journey to self discovery.
>
> (Pike & Selby, 1988, p. 4)

> Individuals are *produced* by the discourses, ideas, practices and languages available to them.
>
> (Meadmore, 1999, p. 5)

> … we need to replace 'the myth that teacher socialisation is largely a passive process of adapting to the expectations and directives of others, routinely accomplished through imitation, reinforcement and assimilation' with a view of socialisation as '*an active construction of meaning that is lived as a process of becoming*.'
>
> (Moore, 2004, p. 25, my emphasis)

I never wanted to be a school teacher. In fact, as a teenager and through my twenties, teaching was high on my list of things *not to do*. I was vehement about this. The mere mention of the words 'school' and 'teachers' tended to enrage and upset me; this, despite the fact that some of the finest people I met as a younger 'me' were school teachers (Miller, 2006, p. 18). After graduating in 1989 I intended *never* to return to school again – *ever*. Ten years later, after completing an Honours Degree in English, friends and colleagues suggested I study a Diploma of Education and become a high school teacher. I found the suggestion insulting and disturbing. The idea of returning to a site of agony, shame, and ridicule was impossible (Miller, 2006, p. 22). I was trying to *forget* school, not remember it.

Five years later again and something shifted. I was pondering my future in the Andes in South America when I stopped and knew I was returning to school: *to become a school teacher*. Yes, after years of resistance, I entered a teacher education program in my mid thirties, terrified, but certain – certain that the teaching profession needed the 'survivors' of school every bit as much as the 'successes' of school. Somehow, by some means, I was going to work against the grain of my school conditioning to bring a different type of teacher to the classroom: one that empowered rather than enslaved.

One way of deconstructing and reconstructing our personal and professional identities and practices is through *autoethnography* (Ellis, 1997; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Jones, 2005; Neumann, 1996) and *mystoriography* (Finley, 2005; Ulmer, 2004). By blending autobiography and social science – creative writing and academic writing – autoethnography allows us (as teachers, researchers, authors, and people) to critically examine the stories, assumptions, values, habits, and emotions we bring to our work. The socialisation process is turned inside out to reveal the subtle and not-so-subtle

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forces that act upon us – and through us – as social beings. This is a form of counter-socialisation and critical awakening (Cochran-Smith, 1991; Freire, 1996; McInerney, 2004). Here, the myths and scripts of teaching are de-naturalised and de-mythologised to enable new identities and new ideas to enter the classroom (Meadmore, 1999; O'Farrell, 1999). We use 'writing', both critically and reflexively, to expose our conditioning and to deepen and extend our learning (Boomer, 1988a; Charmaz, 2005; Chase, 2005; Dart, Boulton-Lewis, Brownless, & McCrindle, 1998; Denzin, 2005; Doyle & Carter, 2003; Ellis, 1997; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Finley, 2005; Foley & Valenzuela, 2005; Jones, 2005; Neumann, 1996; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005; Sebranek, Kemper, & Meyer, 2001; Tedlock, 2005). In other words, we use writing *to write ourselves into being.*

What is Autoethnography?

*Autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural. Back and forth autoethnographers gaze, first through an ethnographic wide-angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable Self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations. As they zoom backward and forward, inward and outward, distinctions between the personal and cultural become blurred, sometimes beyond distinct recognition. Usually written in first-person voice, autoethnographic texts appear in a variety of forms – short stories, poetry, fiction, novels, photographic essays, personal essays, journals, fragmented and layered writing, and social science prose. In these texts, concrete action, dialogue, emotion, embodiment, spirituality, and self-consciousness are featured, appearing as relational and institutional stories affected by history, social structure, and culture, which themselves are dialectically revealed through action, feeling, thought, and language.*

(Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739)

This way, writing, and writing narratives, and creating and 'performing' stories and critiques (Charmaz, 2005; Denzin, 2005; Finley, 2005; Tedlock, 2005), "can evoke deeper parts of the self, heal wounds, enhance the sense of self – or even alter one's sense of identity" (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 965). Writing is, and becomes, a form of knowing and discovery, a method of (auto-)ethnographic inquiry – of *personal–cultural-writing* – that enables the inquirer to learn more about the 'self' and more about the research topic: in our case, the theories and practices that inform and shape our teaching identities (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 959; Sebranek et al., 2001, p. 1, 143). In this way, "writing *is* thinking, writing *is* analysis, [and] writing *is* indeed a seductive and tangled *method* of discovery" (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 967). We use writing to dismantle our conceptual frameworks and to build new knowledge from what we find. We use writing to learn.

This is not change for the sake of change. This is change for the sake of improving practice and improving ourselves as people and educators (Symes & Preston, 1992). It is an ideological orientation that uses both 'pragmatic' and 'radical' means to revitalise and improve the quality and scope of our theory and practice (Boomer, 1988a, 1989; Thomson, 1992). Together, these contrasting dispositions form a strategic approach to institutional life. 'Pragmatic radicalism' provides teachers with a means of revitalising practice and surviving hegemonic systems (Boomer, 1988a, 1989; Thomson, 1992): of "compromising without capitulating" (Boomer, 1988a, p. 149).

What is Mystoriography?

Mystory performances are personal cultural texts (e.g. narratives, paintings, poetry, music) that contextualise important personal experiences and problems within the institutional settings and historical moments where their authors (e.g. painters, collagists, dramatists) find themselves. They attempt to make sense of seemingly senseless moments in life, to capture frustrations and turmoil and open them for critical critique. They open a liminal space, and create an open and dialogic text, where a diverse group of people can be brought to collective understanding of the sites of power, of conflicts between the empowered and the powerless, and from this point of understanding can begin to address the need for social change.

(Finley, 2005, p. 690)

## 2. Surviving socialisation

### 2.1. The making and remaking of the pre-service teacher

Preservice students do not enter teacher education unsocialised; they have experienced a set of formative influences in school and society, which implicitly or explicitly shape their understandings of their future work.

(Hatton, 1994, pp. 6–7)

It has been argued … that teachers' pre-existing beliefs about teaching and learning are so influential that attempts to change teaching styles will be ineffective unless these beliefs are directly questioned.

(Dart et al., 1998, p. 293)

Teachers are constructed from their histories – from the social and cultural discourses and practices that shape and define them (Marsh, 2002). If we remain unconscious of this construction, we are unlikely to question the stories and values we carry into the classroom. In turn, our stories may become the official storylines of society (Grundy, 1994), rather than single stories in a range of stories that make up the classroom. Yet, if we probe deeply into the influences that have gone into constructing our identities, we may just retain our potential to transform and outgrow our indoctrination. We may also come to listen more closely to the stories of others.

To question our conditioning we need to understand *how we are made* and *how we enact this making to influence and make others.* As Monica Miller Marsh (2002, p. 453) suggests, "[l]earning to examine the discourses through which we enact our teaching lives provides us with opportunities to select those discourses that allow for the creation of positive social and academic identities for the children in our care." Our students deserve nothing short of this type of self-examination – after all, they are relying on us get it right. Their futures are at stake.

Similarly, we need to examine how we are constructed and conditioned through university and practicum placements, and to what degree we 'choose' our professional identities. Alarmingly, many pre-service teachers enter university believing they were *born* to teach and have a 'gift' and 'special calling' to the profession – in other words, that they already have the skills and qualities *to* teach (Darling-Hammond, 1999; Whitbeck, 2000). Given this, it is important that reflective practices are developed to challenge and interrogate such perceptions (Cochran-Smith, 1991; Darling-Hammond, 1999; Moore, 2004; Whitbeck, 2000). Pre-service teachers are *not* qualified to teach on the basis of birth or having been to school (Hatton, 1994; Whitbeck, 2000). Without a reflective and theoretical analysis of our school experiences and broader social conditioning, we may *unconsciously* reproduce the normalising discourses and social inequities we observed while growing up (Apple, 1997; Cochran-Smith, 1991; Hatton, 1994; Moore, 2004). Or worse, we may use our classrooms to *re-enact* social and emotional struggles we experienced as children (Moore, 2004, pp. 19–20).

Many commentators note that teacher education programs struggle to 'undo' the deeply held preconceptions of pre-service