

Exploring family-scholar narratives: Explicating self as teacher, teacher educator, and academic researcher

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For the past three years we have been exploring the contribution of family-scholar narratives to understanding ourselves as teachers and researchers. Following Opie (2008), we acknowledge that our experiences and interpretations, separately and together, are open to multiple and shifting interpretations over time and to the intersections and reformulations of personal interest, social dynamics, prevailing (and often disparate) discourses, plus current and historical familial interactions. Informed by Richardson & St. Pierre's (2005) understanding of writing as a way of constructing temporary understandings of experience, we work with a form of collective biography, which takes up the dual strategy of "retrieving memories and using those memories as data that can be analyzed to produce insights into the processes of subjectification" (Davies, Browne, et al., 2004, p. 369). Collective biography can also enable participants to connect themes and experiences across individuals by engaging remembered, felt, and embodied emotions. Family-scholar narratives, continuing dialogues between family members who are in academic careers and are engaged in research on their own practice, trouble individual, interconnected memories and experiences to promote understanding of an ever-evolving self and academic practice.

Objectives

Our work focuses on the emotional and embodied nature of professional learning, an important, but often neglected, aspect of how we understand our professional and personal selves (Forgasz, 2013). By going public with performative experiences and connections, our understanding of our professional selves becomes more integrated with personal selves, which, in turn, informs our readers/listeners. We also explore the ways in which family-scholar narratives provide unique insights into the particular meanings of events at particular points in space and time—insights that are informed by a history not typically available to critical friends (Allison-Roan & Hayes, 2012) or long-term, collaborative, collegial relationships among professional colleagues (East, Fitzgerald, & Manke, 2010).

Methods

We have borrowed selectively from two methodologies: collective biography (Davies & Gannon, 2006) and the self-study of teacher education practice (Loughran, Hamilton, LaBoskey, & Russell, 2004). Informed by Davies and colleagues, we began by individually writing memories of salient events that, in our view, influenced and still influence our interpretations of and responses to professional scenarios. We then shared our memories and responded to one another's memories in writing. Finally, we collaborated on drawing out the corporeal sensations embedded in the memories and representing them in text written from the body.

Because our goal is to do more than explicate and deconstruct experience, our memory work turns to practice—a crucial signpost of self-study (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009). Once memories were written, shared, and rewritten, we identified themes relevant to our current, respective academic environments and the ways in which past influences present, thus paralleling others engaged in collaborative self-study (e.g., East, Fitzgerald & Manke, 2010; Coia & Taylor, 2013; Allison-Roan & Hayes, 2013), albeit as family members. We note, importantly, that although our memories often referred to other family members, as we go public we do not disclose events that would implicate or interpret feelings or constructs beyond our own.

Outcomes

Two, intertwined themes that affect our practice and selves are the concomitant presence of anger in the Bryan's formation of a hyper-masculine (Connell, 2005; Messner, 2002) subjectivity with the Renée's emotions and experiences related to that anger, and the current, in-process, evolution of a mentoring relationship between the second and first author within and beyond academia. The first theme focuses on the relationship between anger and gender, exploring the production of a gendered subject through gendered discourse and practice. The second theme focuses on mentorship into the academy, exploring the presence of emotion within graduate student and faculty relationships. We represent each theme through our separate memories followed by a jointly constructed discussion.

Anger and gender

Bryan: *At first a snuffle. Watery and blurry eyes quickly follow. I try to hide by lowering the bill of my cap. I am on a stage. I am the stage. The umpire calls another ball. And another. Tears pour continuously down my face. The shapes of the batter, catcher, and umpire blur; I lose sight and knowledge of where the hat's bill is; I don't hide the tears any more; I do not care. The crowd fades out. Silence. I am alone. I hear my breath explode in and out of my mouth; I feel my mouth cool and heat; the air rips through the snot clogging my nostrils. I feel and know where the catcher's mitt is supposed to be. Angrily, I throw as hard as I can. Over and over. Strikes. The catcher stands up to pull his left hand out of the catcher's mitt and fervently tries to shake out the pain. The umpire pulls off his mask, and someone comes from our dugout to give the catcher an extra layer to go inside his gloved hand Coaches, parents, players are laughing. I just stand there watching, waiting, breathing heavy, and wiping snot on my sleeve and the back of my hand. Play resumes. I throw as hard as I can. Strikes. Lots of them. Inning ends. I walk to our dugout. I am commended. Everyone is laughing and smiling. Hands pat my back and shoulders. I did well. I am furious. I am confused. No one seems to care. I sit down. Play carries on. I am nine.*

Renée: *It is summer in Central Illinois and we are all sweating—literally and figuratively. Our team is ahead by one in the final inning. My son, the athlete who competes with everyone, is pitching. I do not know who is sitting next to me. I see nothing other than him, the batter, and the umpire. I feel the crowd tense. Strike One. I think, I yell, I pray –You can do it. The runners, on every base, are just waiting to take flight. Ball One. The coach yells. Fans are silent. Ball Two. The coach walks to the mound. The catcher pats Bryan on the back. Bryan looks ahead; he nods his head. I see the intensity in his body. I hold my breath. My fists clench. "Please, don't let him take the fall for losing. Strike Two. Ball Three. You can do it. You can do it." My heart and head hurt. Fingernails dig into flesh. Teeth clench. I see the ball fly from his hand. The umpire stands, "Strike Three!" I jump up yelling "WOO-HOO!" Bryan just stands there. He doesn't react at all. The team rushes out to celebrate and I watch him walk away, alone. He is not smiling; I do not understand why he is not celebrating, but I feel his pain. He shrugs and begins to collect his gear. In my heart and stomach I hurt for him. I hurt for myself—how do we enjoy a happy moment? Why is presumably happy so sad? He is twelve.*

At younger ages we often fail to realize that the things we do, how we do them, and the people we encounter shape our understanding of self and the world around us. As ineffectual as baseball might appear, the numerous front yard contests with predominantly male family and friends, watching games on television, playing video games, and similar

events, together have a way of weaving more than the practice into one's sense of self. They also serve to exclude those who are not direct participants. Sport, particularly competitive sport, is far from harmless, far more than just a game. Indeed, R. W. Connell regarded sport as "the leading definer of masculinity" (1995, p. 54). Bryan's memory illustrates the articulation of anger and performance embodied and expressed through sport, an early practice that shaped his masculinity and sense of self. Whether losing a match, receiving judgment calls against him, or misplaying a scenario, anger developed as a response to various events. Becoming faster, smarter, and more focused and nuanced rather than losing control—although loss of control certainly did occur—anger evolved as a modality of conduct. The suturing together of anger and performance, while possibly advantageous in competitive situations, nurtured an assumption that one necessitated the other. Propelled by this unconscious disposition, Bryan failed to learn that anger precluded him from achieving other forms of success, or even recognizing those forms as successes. Renée's conception of nurture, however, seldom includes anger as a positive influence. Furthermore, interpreting events through a lens of *one caring* (Noddings, 1984) did not automatically lead to an understanding of the one cared for. People, time, and space are necessary for recognizing and understanding both anger and caring.

Mentoring and interpreting anger

Renée: *I am holding my breath; I force myself to exhale and focus as my husband and I file into the high school gym with the other parents present for senior night. We have been here for band concerts and assemblies for others, but this time we are here for our son's tribute to his teacher and soccer coach. My mind wanders to a conversation with the school principal several days ago. I remember my voice shaking as I (and other parents) pleaded with him to move senior night so that it would not conflict with an immovable soccer game. I smile. Even though I am nervous, I feel my chest expand as I listen to the excited buzz as parents greet one another. I become calmer as the program begins. Bryan also appears calm as he takes the stage. He gives examples of the mentoring and support the coach has provided, especially the times when his anger worked against him, the team, and the coach. I begin to cry silently—deeply moved by the words he speaks, words that are coming from the heart. I allow my mind to project (briefly) into the future. Our son will do well in college; I smile as I realize that he has a gift for language. As the speech ends, people applaud; they turn to me and smile; I smile at my husband as he squeezes my hand.*

Bryan: *The parking lot and pavilion between two apartment buildings and the wall lining the area shield me from the rest of Baltimore. I pace 22 steps from one point to another, turn around, and take 22 steps back. I cannot sit. The chair prevents my body from the hasty gesticulations it tries to express as I holler into the ear-bud speaker, thus freeing my arms and hands. I wail, "How can they do this? How can they just change a funding stipulation and not tell anyone?" while my arms and hands fly into the air above my head, snap down, and cram straight into my pockets. I stop and put my feet together, locking in place my legs, hips, stomach, and shoulders while my neck cranes and voice grumbles, "How can they tell me that my follow-up project is important, tell me it's fundable, commend me on following up my previous research award, and then deny me funding for the same things that they funded last summer? This is going to personally cost me \$2,000! We should be seriously worried if accountants govern which research projects do and do not receive funding despite recognition of intellectual contribution!" My mother calmly relays back to me, "I hear you, I hear you."*

Do we work to please others—coaches, professors, or the tenure committee? Do we work to please ourselves? We both face these questions as we interact with graduate and undergraduate students. Sometimes they leave our office or classroom confused and angry. Sometimes we, too, leave our office or classroom confused and angry. Emotions are present, whether or not we choose to acknowledge them. We struggle with our students' struggles, and they with ours. Through our interactions with one another, we have become more sensitized to our students' potential fears and insecurities. What seems to be adequate academic progress for us, does not necessarily feel that way for the students. When we do incorporate emotion into our daily practices, or in other words regarding our students as emotional human beings, what does this mean for our teaching practice?

Learning to teach and learning to conduct research are both enterprises in which an individual learns to practice under the scrutiny of others. We, the parents, teachers, professors, etc. vacillate between encouragement and judgment. *You can do it. But you haven't done it yet.* Renée has a reputation for giving detailed feedback on students' writing, but, also, for giving few specific rules on what they should write about. She tells students that she refuses to tell them what to do, what to write, what to say; she prefers to provide guidance as they are writing and revising. A divide forms: on the one side fears and insecurities manifest

in the absence of certainty, while the academic enterprise of learning to practice (whether as a future teacher, researcher, or colleague) is not governed by set rules and requires both autonomous decision making and learning to learn from failure. Bryan has learned to trust the second author to help explicate situations in which he is the student dealing with his own emotions and sense of uncertainty; Renée has learned to draw from the first author's experiences in order to better understand the emotions and her students' sense of uncertainty.

Conclusion

We acknowledge that any relationship is characterized by an amorphous balance of power (Buber, 1970; Noddings, 1984); in family scholar narratives, this power imbalance is openly acknowledged as our collaborative analyses expose and name these power relations, which include gendered relations. As we write together our influence on one another has begun to shift the power relations within our parent-child and scholar-student relationship. Working with experientially shared histories provides a robust, complex, and potentially insightful (as well as potentially harmful) critique anchored in vulnerability and trust. By acknowledging power and power relations, family scholar narratives can also be mobilized to recognize privilege. Practicing memory writing as part of understanding self as teacher and researcher elucidates the privileges of being able to do so. We suggest memory writing is a powerful, unsettling, and challenging mode of inquiry—as a beginning. Moving to practice is a crucial continuation.

Bryan has reconsidered the polemical approach that he has taken toward qualitative and critical inquiry into his own anger and the complexities of conducting research with others. Renée's reflections on self have become more complex and her analyses of her work have been influenced by the readings Bryan has introduced. We find that new understandings arise when writing with a family member—someone who shares a deeply personal history. Drawing from Whitehead (2004) we are exploring our own "enquiring I" (p. 891), as we consider the impact of familial interactions on reinterpreting past and present. By reviewing and reworking our shared and separate understandings we create a space for continued personal and professional improvement.

We are midpoint in the twin processes of writing for one another and writing for a more general audience, and thus do not have a conclusion to offer. In the coming years we will identify more themes—approximately two per year—and continue to write memories. At this point, however, we can share that our work together has made and is making a discernable difference in our practice. One indicator of influence on our practice, our understandings of our selves, and our presence in the classroom is our inclusion of vulnerability by speaking from our experiences with students. To illustrate this, we share how each of us began our respective courses in Fall 2013.

Bryan: *I am going to tell you two stories because I think it's important you know why your teachers and professors do the work that they do. The first story is about my friend and former soccer teammate, who now works in Silicon Valley making more money than I'll ever see. He is from South Africa, one of the kindest and quietest people I've known. Regularly, however, he was called for an inordinate amount of fouls. As a black kid in America who was larger than many players we played with, now around 6'3", his skin color and size worked against him in a sport dominated by white, middle class families. The second story is about anger. I learned in my youth that when I became angry during sport that I performed better. Not only was I more aggressive and hard working, I actually became sharper, smarter, and more focused. Unfortunately, once I stepped off of the field anger was not as useful—for example, in an academic classroom. I created more problems than solutions for myself. Learning this was a very difficult process for me. To understand how some people are treated differently than others, who benefits and who does not, for what purposes this occurs, what forces are at play, and how to possibly make a difference in conditions of inequality, to understand why popular culture and physical culture are important and relevant sites of analysis are all important to me. This is why I teach.*

Renée: *The last time I taught this class I realized, once it was over, that my students left unhappy. What I had tried to do—build community, introduce the scholarly demands of reviewing relevant literature, emphasize writing as an ongoing process and ever improving dialogue with the reader—was unsuccessful. I was sad because I realized that I had failed my students. I do not want that to happen with you. Your learning to take charge of your own learning is important to me. Building trust and understanding, so that we may all deal with uncertainty and to learn from both success and failure, is important to me. And so I am going to begin class with an exercise. You have in*

front of you three forms of bio poems. Choose one of the forms and take some quiet time to write, to share. And, I will go first:

My name is Renée

The name I should be called is Renée because I chose this name in sixth grade.

What's in my heart is hope because I teach.

The sound I like is waves touching the beach.

The sound I dislike is hearing people in pain.

Something I like to look at is sunrises and sunsets.

I don't like to see tears.

My favorite memory is feeding ducks with my father.

My favorite thing in the whole world is my family.

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