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The role of narrative writing in improving professional practice

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The use of narratives in the social sciences has drastically increased throughout recent decades. They are mainly used as a way of collecting data and as a way of promoting professional development. This article sheds light on how a practitioner-researcher engaged in narrative writing and how this helped in what is hereby termed a reflective odyssey. More specifically, the main focus here is how the very act of writing when keeping a personal journal can act as a catalyst for ongoing reflective thought. Therefore, narratives were firstly used by the practitioner-researcher as a form of personal professional development. However, they also acted as data in the longitudinal process of understanding how narrative writing can aid in the continuous striving for improving professional practice. Original narrative extracts are presented throughout the text to back the claims made for narrative writing. This gives a unique opportunity to the reader to get a glimpse of the practitioner-researcher's thought processes and dilemmas. The roles of writing in meaning creation and representation; pushing thinking into unforeseen directions; and the promotion of 'conversing with oneself' and self-understanding are discussed in this article.

Keywords: narrative writing; practitioner-research; reflective practice; self-study; construction of meaning

Introduction

Almost 10 years have now passed since I first embarked on what I have elsewhere called a *reflective odyssey* (Attard and Armour 2005). Little did I know in those initial stages what a powerful tool narrative writing was and what prominence it took in my role of practitioner-researcher. Narrative writing has the potential to aid the writer in analysing lived experiences, as it helps in analysing aspects of those experiences that might have gone unnoticed in that fleeting moment of everyday professional practice. This is because, according to Ghaye and Ghaye (1998), writing gives us the space and time to look back, re-live and re-experience, and ultimately reflect upon our daily lives. Thus, if we want to learn from experience, writing narratives is an effective way of *digesting experience* (Mason 2002). Through narrative writing, the practitioner-researcher also attempts to understand situations from various viewpoints and perspectives. This is possible because narratives can awaken practitioners and researchers to multiple realities and not solely to what in psychotherapy Speedy (2011, 435) calls the *regimes of truth*. As practitioner-researchers writing about and analysing our own experiences, we need to be prepared to under-

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stand different realities, and not be content with our preconceptions. This is not an easy task however, because as I argued elsewhere:

> Negative feelings such as frustration also began to emerge during this stage because I started questioning previously held assumptions and professional practice that seemed to be fine when left unquestioned. (Attard and Armour 2006, 221)

Such an understanding of different perspective also helps with attempting to focus on possible solutions that could improve similar future situations experienced by the individuals involved. Such solutions are narratively *imagined in practice*, and it is through such *imaginary practice* that the practitioner can evaluate the possible effectiveness of such solutions. Only at this stage does the practitioner-researcher opt for the most plausible solution to be transferred into practice.

Yet, it is reflection-on-action that moves professional development and understanding forward in the aforementioned description. So what use is there for writing, and more particularly narrative writing? Johnson simply states that writing 'helps turn reflection into a more coherent and *revisitable* educational experience' (2001, 56). Yet my narrative journal not only helped record my experiences, but was actually the main tool that helped me reflect on my everyday experiences. Writing narratives literally fuelled my thinking, with the main emphasis being on better understanding and learning from experience. I therefore agree with Elliott's (2005) statement that narrative writing should be often supplemented by reflective thinking. It comes as no big surprise therefore that Mason maintains that, 'so many authors who promote reflection also promote writing as a means of personal development' (2002, 19). After all, writing is not simply a way of communicating but a means of creating knowledge through enhanced questioning and more focused thinking (Johnson 2001), since simply telling or writing about an experience often invites you to describe and explain it (Mills 1959). As Parker contends, when writing about the self, 'the purpose . . . is to narrate an edited version of one's life which focuses especially upon articulation and explanation of what it means to each individual to learn' (1998, 118). I experienced narrative writing as a unique way of recording observations, as assistance to reflective thought, and as playing an important role in the construction of meanings and interpretations. As I recently wrote in my journal: 'I am afraid that without the help of my journal, I will fall into a habitual routine, where most of my learning would be tacit and unquestioned'. I therefore agree with teachers in Zembylas' (2004) study who reported that the act of writing itself prompted them towards ongoing reflection.

Writing as a catalyst for reflective thought

> One of the central techniques recommended in the reflective practitioner discourse is the keeping of diaries or journals by teachers . . . in which they reflect systematically on their experiences as they perceive them, keeping a record that can be returned to and re-interrogated in the light of subsequent experiences. (Moore 1999, 135)

In an era where lifelong professional learning is continuously promoted, professionals need to continuously learn and take the role of practitioner-researcher. Here narrative writing can play an important role that aids ongoing professional development. Mills (1959) and Ghaye and Ghaye (1998) maintain that the social

researcher should be reflective; and, moreover, that the reflective process generates *a text – a written journal*. Yet, I came to understand that such a journal was not simply a record of reflections and observations made. It was also a driving force for through writing I enhanced my reflective awareness (Attard 2008; Attard and Armour 2006). In a study by Bain et al.: 'some students considered reflective writing as a *record* of reflective thinking, some as a *motivator* of reflective thinking, and others as an *extension* of reflective thinking' (2002, 189). The following extract from my journal highlights how *I* came to understand the act of writing at a very early stage in my *reflective odyssey*:

> One tool that I found of extreme value in self-study is writing. Writing helps me understand a lot of things about myself. It helps reduce the imbalance I feel between theory and practice since while writing I start thinking critically about my past actions and how these together with educational theory can inform future practice. Sometimes I start writing without knowing exactly what I am going to write about. Eventually, I start tackling various topics and sometimes I even start examining certain issues I never previously thought about.

I thus see writing as a way of thinking that helps me in understanding myself; my own actions; my thoughts; my emotions; my experiences – and I am not alone in reporting this (Elliott 2005; DeMulder and Rigsby 2003; Meriläinen and Syrjälä 2001; Polkinghorne 1995). Apart from self-understanding, self-reflective narrative also assists professional learning because it aids professional thinking (Conle 2003; Glaze 2002; Heikkinen 2001). In short, writing helped me think, reflect, and develop. As I once argued in my journal: 'I write, therefore I think'.

Writing pushes thought into unforeseen directions

Similar to Bain et al.'s study, 'my thoughts seem to develop as I go along' (2002, 190) and it is this that turns the journal into a learning tool rather than merely a record of reflective thinking. It often seems to me as if narrative writing has a life of its own. It is not me who consciously controls what I write about, but it is the act of writing that leads my thoughts: 'Writing is like a chain reaction. Once I start writing, one thing leads to another and, without realising it, I start writing and reflecting on various issues' (Attard and Armour 2005, 198). This is echoed by Bartels (2003) when arguing that thoughts and ideas change during the writing process. It is here that Edwards and Nicoll's question becomes important: '*Can one reflect without language?*' (2006, 122). In this regard, Emihovich (1995) cites Vygotsky as saying that 'thought . . . does not merely find expression in speech; it finds its reality and form' (Emihovich 1995, 37). In fact, the stories I write are not a *reproduction of reality* but are constructed and interpreted by myself as I struggle to reconstruct and give order to the everyday chaotic experiences that are often imbued with initial disorder, difficulty and uncertainty (Conle 2003; Bain et al. 2002; Beach 2001). For example, in the second year of my *reflective odyssey* I wrote:

> After yesterday's lesson, I asked one simple question to myself. The question is simple but its answer is not . . . and probably no answer exists in the first place. What would it have been like had I used this way of teaching with my first group of students? Well, I will probably never get an answer to that one but sometimes I feel guilty

> because I start asking myself 'Why did it take me so long to realise what my students really needed?' I feel guilty because had I changed beforehand, the students in the first group would have benefited too … but then I say to myself that it takes time to learn and more time to unlearn the things you do. At least, students in the 2nd group can benefit from the change in my teaching style. If I never learned from reflecting and writing about what I do, current and future students would never have the chance to learn in the way these students are currently doing.

> Reflection and narrative writing are extremely painful sometimes. It is painful in the sense that I sometimes feel guilty that I didn't learn about something before. It is also hard because what I learn can easily point out some failures of the past … especially about things I used to think that were the right way of doing things. The problem is that in the future, I might learn that my current way of teaching (upon which I'm very enthusiastic and obviously think is the correct way of doing things) might not be so good after all. However, if reflection helps me improve as a teacher, and thus, give a better service to my students, than the little pain that comes with it is more than worthwhile.

The above extract shows how I started with a question; I then tried to answer that question, and later analysed my emotions related to this ongoing experience. The stories I created over the years are a record of my professional learning; initially as a teacher-researcher and later as a university lecturer and researcher. Yet, it is important for me to always keep in mind that no account is objective, neutral, and bias-free (Ghaye and Ghaye 1998), especially when keeping in mind that reality is created by humans through their arguments, texts, and verbal communication – in short, through the use of language (Schwandt 2000). While writing, I am consciously thinking about my personal theories and *tacit* learning, and these become *explicit* through the act of writing in the narratives I create:

> I moved on to realise that taken-for-granted assumptions affect how much I can learn from a given situation. As such, I learnt that in order to learn I must be capable of bringing tacit learning nearer to the surface, while understanding how these shape my professional assumptions. Additionally, such assumptions and their impact upon professional practice must be analysed. Here, the need to unlearn taken-for-granted assumptions might arise, especially if recent observations suggest that such assumptions might be faulty. I now want and need to understand how prior learning and inherited values affect my professional practice and professional development.

As this explanation in one of my narratives suggests, professional assumptions that are formed from prior tacit learning greatly influence my capacity to learn from experience. Hence, the possibility of questioning such assumptions and tacit learning through narrative writing is of value for the practitioner-researcher. Also, narrative helps preserve the complex nature of human behaviour and meaning-making, since through story we connect events together; thus reasoning how one aspect affects another, rather than leaving individual events as disconnected (Elliott 2005; Mason 2002; Meriläinen and Syrjälä 2001; Ghaye and Ghaye 1998; Polkinghorne 1995).

First-order narratives: promoting self-understanding

The narratives in my journal are what Carr (1997) calls *first-order narratives* where the author writes about his/her own experiences, as opposed to *second-order*

narratives where the author writes about the experiences of others. As previously hinted, I perceive writing narratives about myself to have a very close link to reflective practice and self-understanding (Meriläinen and Syrjälä 2001). I believe that while writing about my experiences and reflecting on them, I construct meanings, interpretations, new knowledge and understandings. I also test and modify constructions in light of new experiences and new writings (Schwandt 2000). While writing about my experiences and understandings during a research in progress, I commented that:

> I believe that today's session has showed me that the reality experienced in this group is not too far away from the initial assumptions I held. These assumptions were formed from previous research I conducted together with literature I have read; and although midway through this study these assumptions and professional beliefs had to be critically questioned I quickly realised today that such assumptions are still very strong, even though some minor alterations had to be made along the way. However, I must say that before today I was not fully convinced that members were seeing the benefits of such communities, and in some instances I also thought that members kept contributing simply to honour their initial commitment. Yet, I'm really happy for today I learned that I was wrong and my initial assumptions were reinstated. Of importance is the fact that I critically questioned such previously-held assumptions and did not take them as given.

Thus, *writing about personal experiences* is desirable and also useful 'in enriching and enlightening further personal experience' (Noddings 1994, 358). Like others, I explain this by arguing that through reflection and writing, I could engage in a sort of internal dialogue (Attard and Armour 2006; Glaze 2002; Ellis and Bochner 2000; Ghaye and Ghaye 1998; Schön 1983). Personally, I have experienced this internal dialogue where researcher and professional practitioner were constantly conversing. The following is just one example where internal dialogue is evident, where a part of me is somehow questioning whether reflective practice is really effective in generating new knowledge, new understanding, and improved professional practice. In this extract, the part of me in favour of systematic reflective practice is making the arguments:

> I feel that ideas just strike me when I least expect them to. However, I still believe that systematic reflection is desirable. The more I reflect, the more active I keep my mind, and the greater the chance of getting startling new ideas. Some new ideas are indeed good. Others have to be dropped after carefully analysing them.

> It is 7am and I have just opened my eyes. The things around me are still unfocused as I lay on my bed feeling tired. Suddenly, a great idea strikes my mind. However, I should have been unconsciously questioning myself how I can motivate my students to participate and learn … otherwise, I cannot explain where this new idea came from. Thus, this is why I believe in the power of systematic reflection. Systematic reflection promotes questioning from my part, and questioning encourages me to think of new possibilities. This is where new ideas come from.

Like any other conversation, nobody can exactly predict which issues will be tackled and which arguments will be brought forward in such an internal dialogue; and it is this unpredictability that prompted me to keep my reflective stance. Narrative writing can thus be regarded as a means that helps our thinking progress, if not a means of thinking in and by itself (Meriläinen and Syrjälä 2001).

Conversing with oneself

Conversing with someone else offers the possibility of feedback and exposure to different viewpoints. Unfortunately, as a teacher I felt isolated as none of my colleagues were on a *reflective odyssey* and most of them argued that they had too heavy a workload to engage in narrative writing and reflection. In such a context, collaboration and sharing were limited at best and non-existent at worst. However, through my daily engagement with narrative writing, I felt the need to converse; to make arguments; to obtain multiple viewpoints; to ask questions and give hypothetical answers. In Mills' words:

> I do not know the full social conditions of the best intellectual workmanship, but certainly surrounding oneself by a circle of people who will listen and talk – and at times they have to be imaginary characters – is one of them. (1959, 201)

I thus started conversing with my journal. In reality, I was conversing with myself, but the journal was situated as *the other*; a partner in conversation (Meriläinen and Syrjälä 2001). The unpredictable course of thinking while writing is very similar to when two or more people converse. During informal conversation, one thing leads to another, and nobody can precisely predetermine the outcome of such conversations. Since narrative writing can promote an internal reflective dialogue – a conversation with oneself – the same unpredictability found in informal conversation is present in reflective narrative writing (Glaze 2002; Conle 2001). According to Ghaye and Ghaye, conversing with oneself is 'the centre-piece of the whole reflective process' (1998, 19). Thus, as evidenced by this journal extract:

> I personally think that writing has the power to put the writer in conversation with him/herself … While writing I start asking questions to myself and hence I try to find explanations and answers to my own questions and classroom practices. This is of extreme importance, especially when a teacher feels isolated. I feel that teachers need to speak about their efforts, frustrations, successes, etc., and when isolation is a reality, I think that writing helps us in sharing these things with ourselves. No… this is not madness. On the contrary, I think it is very helpful and healthy for us as education professionals.

While writing, I unconsciously had multiple selves and I constantly made arguments as if I was debating. From the above extract, it is evident that I was defending my argument by saying: '*No … this is not madness*'. It is as if someone was accusing me that what I was arguing about was nonsense. Using the plural also made me recognise, in retrospect, that I was conversing with someone. I could have said '*healthy for me as an education professional*', but instead I said '*healthy for us as education professionals*'. Why? The only plausible explanation I can come up with is that I engaged in conversation with my multiple selves. My journal is replete with such examples, especially when I encounter professional dilemmas. The following is another example from my journal:

> I have already argued about this before … The following are the arguments brought about by the teacher in me who is falling on the defensive with arguments that are convincing the part of me that is putting forward these accusations.

I therefore agree with Ellis and Bochner that the narrative we construct 'displays multiple layers of consciousness' (2000, 739). It is interesting to speculate on the role these multiple selves play. Can these multiple selves play the role of an audience, students, and so forth, as the need arises? I personally did not only incorporate other people's viewpoints into my thoughts that emerged from informal conversation during my observations, but I also imagined myself in various positions, such as a parent, student, school administrator, and teacher amongst others. In this sense, I do agree that 'writing helps us distinguish between our different voices' (Meriläinen and Syrjälä 2001, 4).

But why is conversing with oneself healthy for the reflective practitioner? Bohm (1990) makes the following set of arguments: through dialogue, we disclose assumptions and beliefs held, as well as practical theories; dialogue reveals our understanding and our knowledge; and what we learn through conversation may lead us to action. But do these same arguments hold when conversing with oneself? Through my personal experience with reflection and narrative writing, and as evidenced by previously presented extracts, I have come to learn that through *conversation with oneself*, the aforementioned arguments do hold. As such, 'narrative may also be described as an interactive practice with all the give and take of conversation when it values a multiplicity of voices and perspectives' (Brunner 1994, 17). It comes as no surprise then that Schön (1983) promotes internal dialogue as essential for reflection. Maybe what various fields term as *reflection* is simply the ability of the practitioner to converse with himself/herself as regards aspects of professional practice while being able to study issues from various angles – and the best tool at my disposal to do this is narrative writing. However, the ability of the practitioner to enter into conversation with oneself also depends on the quality of observation, interpretation, evaluation and open-mindedness as well as the ability of the practitioner to tolerate ambiguity, uncertainty and inconclusiveness (Attard 2008). Additionally, my reflective conversation was aided by my continuous questioning because 'the question always invites a response' (Parker 1998, 128). Consequently, the constant questioning that is evident in my narratives is a sign of needing '*the other*' because the teacher's, 'need for an *other* is reflected in her use of questions in [the] journal' (Golombek and Johnson 2004, 313). The following is an early example from my journal:

> This new syllabus is always on my mind. How can I improve current teaching practices? Will I manage to cover the entire syllabus? When and how should certain topics be introduced to students? All these and a million more questions cross my mind constantly. It's like I'm living in a big jigsaw puzzle where nothing has a definite place and nothing has a definite answer. I'm trying to build this jigsaw bit by bit, but I can only know if I'm doing it in the correct way when I get to see the whole picture … i.e. the final result.

Looking deeper into issues

My experience with writing narratives also suggests that, at times, it is easier to write about something than to talk about it. This is especially true as regards experiences that are painful and that arouse emotions such as frustration and anger. This was very evident when analysing my writing. For example, writing offered me the opportunity to air my frustrations freely – something which is not always possible in face-to-face interactions:

> Although this dilemma has been going on for quite a while in my head … it seems that reflection and writing about it never gave me a clear answer. Today I wanted to write what I think … but instead of answers, my reflective thinking offered me more anger, frustration, and lack of change even though I know that change is needed. What shall I do? My thoughts answer: '*I don't know*'.

One of the reasons might be that sitting down and calmly writing about a situation offers more time for reflective thought than does talking. Bain et al.'s experience resonates with mine when they argue that: 'when I talk, I do not really think a lot before I talk. I think it is more in-depth when you are writing journal entries because you tend to think about it a lot more' (2002, 190). Richert's assertion is also very similar to how I experienced writing: 'I've talked about [this] situation before with colleagues, but in writing about [it], I discovered a new dimension in thinking about [it]' (2001, 169). Reflective writing is what Richert (2001) explains to be the capturing of experience with the intention of understanding and learning from it. When I reflect without writing in my journal, my thoughts start wandering off, and I find it hard to *focus* on important aspects, as my thoughts leap from one issue to another. As such, narrative writing afforded me an instance, specifically allocated for *focused* reflective thinking. In short, narrative writing has provided me with a medium for reflection, questioning, critical analysis, thinking, reasoning, and the building of arguments (Kemp 2001; Meriläinen and Syrjälä 2001).

Representing meanings through narrative

'A writer communicates his or her subjective understanding of the world via a text' (Czarniawska 2004, 663). Writing is one way, if not the primary way, of understanding and communicating meanings and interpretations because the language we use helps us think and also share our thoughts with others (Oliver 1998; Emihovich 1995). Narratives are a natural way through which people do not solely report experience, but engage in the pursuit of constructing meanings that are attached to those experiences (Elliott 2005). In Phillips' words:

> One reason human activities are meaningful is that they can be seen in narrative terms – we make our own actions, and the actions of our fellows, meaningful by presenting a descriptive narrative. (1994, 15)

Therefore, the content within narratives can be seen as important data for ongoing change and improvement to professional practice. Such data is increasingly relevant to the teacher-researcher as it is context-specific and is useful in the never-ending action research project that teacher-researchers should embark upon. Elliott argues that:

> There is a long humanist tradition within sociology which stresses the importance of attempting to understand the meaning of behaviour and experiences from the perspective of the individual involved … Narrative … provides a form of communication in which an individual can externalise his or her feelings and indicate which elements of those experiences are most significant. (2005, 4)

Whatever memories I hold are in the form of a story, and whenever I recount something that has happened I do so by engaging myself in a narrative. In short, human beings understand and make sense of their own and other people's lives with the language used in stories and narratives (Czarniawska 2004; Clandinin and Connelly 2000; Conle 2000; Erben 1998; Polkinghorne 1995):

> Because people give meaning to their lives through the stories they tell, it seems appropriate for those who study human experience to use a research methodology that connects with how people construct the meanings of life experiences. (Oliver 1998, 244)

Let us keep in mind that story and narrative are found everywhere, have been used by practically every culture and have been present throughout human history. Story and narrative have been used to help people make sense out of lived experience and to preserve human knowledge, meaning and interpretations for future generations (Richardson 1995; Emihovich 1995). In fact, writing narratives to capture the entirety of my experience was instinctive to me. I find Hardy's words to be very powerful in showing how important narratives are for humans since: 'we dream in narrative, day-dream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticise, construct, gossip, learn and love by narrative' (cited in Erben 1998, 15), and thus, the study of experience, according to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), is best carried out through narrative writing.

Creating causal links

A narrative should have an evaluative function; offering valuable information about how the author interprets and connects meanings to lived situations and experiences:

> The evaluative element is arguably what transforms a simple chronicle of events into a fully formed narrative … The evaluation demonstrates what meaning events have for the narrator and makes the point or purpose of the story clear to the audience. It is because the evaluative dimension of a narrative provides insight into how the narrator has chosen to interpret the events recounted that these evaluative elements can be of particular interest. (Elliott 2005, 43)

Elliott asserts that 'a narrative must add up to something; it is more than the sum of its parts' (2005, 48). As such, a number of historical events do not constitute a story but simply offer particular instances. It is then the author who makes the particular connections between various events. For example, while analysing my emotions and mood way back in 2003, I made the following connections:

> This is not the usual me. In fact, I'm astonished that I can act in such ways. For this reason, I'm actually blaming the work load I've got. However, [colleague] pointed out that I am not the only one who is feeling this tension. The students are tired. Their behaviour is deteriorating. Similarly, teachers are quite tired too and this term was very long. [Colleague] argued that apart from these reasons, there are many external factors affecting our mood. The political situation in Malta at the moment is unique. Tension is high and in a week's time we will know who will govern for the next five years … and if we will ever be a member of the European Union. Everybody is

> talking about political issues and it seems that the country's progress has slowed down dramatically due to uncertainty.

These connections are the analytical aspect present within the narrative, and the causal links are what give significance and meaning to events. A good example here is given by Elliott while referring to Forster's work:

> 'The king died and then the queen died' is merely a 'chronicle', whereas 'The king died and then the queen died of grief' is a plot because it includes an explicit causal link between the two events in the sequence. (Elliott 2005, 7)

However, I feel the obligation to point out that causality in narrative writing does not imply that a particular event is inevitably followed by another specific event in all situations. This goes against the notion that individuals create the meanings and the world they live in according to their past learning and lived experiences. Thus, what I imply here is that present events are dependent on previous events, and should be interpreted accordingly. Similarly, new learning, creation of meanings and interpretations should also be evaluated according to prior learning. Such argumentation also holds for the entire action research process, since our analysis of observations strongly depends on our prior learning, taken-for-granted assumptions, and professional beliefs. In short:

> If we are told that one event followed another this raises an expectation of causality in our minds, namely that the subsequent event was caused by the previous event. This is not to say that those events will invariably be linked in all situations, but rather that in a particular context (specified by the orientation of the narrative) later events can be read as dependent upon earlier ones. (Elliott 2005, 11)

Writing is a method of inquiry

Writing 'is a method of inquiry' (Conle 2001, 22). I have elsewhere argued that writing helps me in continuously questioning myself about various issues (Attard and Armour 2005). In a particular entry I argued that, 'ironically enough, I started writing today to try and find some answers to my problems. Instead, I wrote an incredible number of questions'. Such questions promoted an internal dialogue, made me observe certain aspects of practice more thoroughly and also helped me realise that educational literature could be helpful in my development. As such, I have come to realise that narrative writing, reflection, and observation could not be separated in my action research process; they were inextricably linked. For me, like Meriläinen and Syrjälä (2001, 1), 'narrative research consists of self-study and reflection for which writing is a crucial means of inquiry'. After all, stories are epistemologically a genuine way of understanding professional practice from the practitioner's point of view (Golombek and Johnson 2004; Clandinin and Connelly 2000). This is especially true when considering that 'you cannot divorce how you think from how you write' (Mills 1959, 222). Through personal experience I contend that narrative writing aliments my reflections, while my reflections take the concrete form of written entries. In such a way, writing and reflection have to go hand-in-hand. These inevitably shape my future observations. My unanswered questions prompt me to look at aspects of my practice that are somewhat unclear and/or problematic. Once data is gathered, I engage in further narrative writing. Needless

to say, new knowledge stemming from reflection also shapes my professional practice. By new knowledge, I do not solely intend new insights. Sometimes, realising that there is a blurry patch in my practice is also a kind of new knowledge, because such realisation prompts me to look at that particular aspect in more detail – and such attention usually results in a cycle of observations, recording and analysis of such observations through narrative writing, enhancement of understanding, the encouragement to introduce changes to practice, analysis of such changes, and further observations.

Narrative writing also afforded me the integration of actions, thoughts and emotions; because these can be constructed and expressed through the language I use (Schwandt 2000; Oliver 1998; Emihovich 1995). Let us remember that a person's knowledge base, thoughts, feelings, desires, and sentiments do have an impact upon the meanings she/he creates of experienced situations (Usher 1998). Hence, writing gave me the opportunity to understand myself as a practitioner-researcher in a holistic manner, rather than studying specific, separate and compartmentalised aspects of my professional life (Golombek and Johnson 2004; Oliver 1998). Little (2002) highlights this by referring to the work of Lampert, who decided to videotape her own teaching because she thought that video would capture the complexity of teaching more than writing would. She argued that such a way of capturing experience would be, 'authentic because everything that is going on for the participants seems to be available to the viewer' (Little 2002, 933). However, she soon realised that, 'once viewers started to comment on what they saw me doing on the tape, the video seemed to represent so little of what I knew was going on' (Little 2002, 933). Thus, I feel that writing is a tool that helps in capturing the experience in a more holistic manner, rather than capturing solely what can be seen by the human eye.

The text: a way of capturing the complexity of professional practice and the practitioner's ongoing development

Narrative writing is promoted as an excellent way of being able to observe personal learning from experience as well as tracking one's own professional development (Golombek and Johnson 2004; Usher 1998). The self, especially when engaging in continuous action research, is ever-changing because it is constantly being developed; and narrative, according to Elliott (2005), is a good way of capturing this constant state of change in a written text. In short, through the years, the compilation of narratives in a journal was an effective way of keeping a record of my thoughts, emotions, frames of mind, and experiences that could be returned to for further learning and understanding (Glaze 2002; Moore 1999). However, whereas I agree that narrative writing helped in keeping a record of various stages of my own learning, it would be too simplistic to say that through narrative writing I was able to observe my own learning, due to the fact that a lot of learning is tacit. Narrative writing can indeed help the writer by bringing such tacit learning nearer the surface, but I still believe that not all is visible and observable by the learner himself/herself since: 'at any moment I think I am wide awake to what is happening, but inevitably there are aspects and details which completely escape me' (Mason 2002, 66). Nevertheless, narrative writing offers promise since as a consequence tacit knowledge is no longer entirely tacit. This is because, 'the very act of bringing these happenings

into language imposes a higher level of order on them than they have in the flux of everyday experience' (Polkinghorne 1995, 16).

Although I previously stated that I felt isolated as a teacher-researcher, the reality of my university employment is very different. I engage in discussions regarding research and practice on a daily basis. I am now working in a collaborative community where learning and improvement are at the top of the agenda. Narrative writing has thus taken on a new meaning now. New understandings can now be discussed with other professionals who can highlight any short-sightedness from my part. Such newly created knowledge can be useful to them too, in the sense that they might be awakened to new aspects of their practice and research that until then went unnoticed. This is reciprocal, since on many occasions colleagues who shared their new understandings with me prompted me to look further into particular issues, and at times also made me question my held assumptions:

> As soon as I met [colleague], he talked to me about some problems he was encountering with his research students. He also argued that changes were needed but was uncertain as to which path to take. When he asked for my opinion, I told him that I had never faced that problem before, but in reality, going unnoticed does not mean that the situation is not problematic. I promised [colleague] I would ask my students for their opinion and have a think about it before getting back to him.

This is extremely healthy, and this is why I elsewhere argue that communities of practice are needed to improve professional learning, and ultimately professional practice (Attard 2007; Attard and Armour 2005). Therefore, the main objectives I want to achieve through my writing are the same as those Renner (2001) chose for his study. In his words:

> Three aims drove my investigation. I wanted to enhance my own understanding as part of my personal/professional growth; assist others in understanding the intrapersonal aspects of professional development; and reach out to my readers, inviting them to read their own stories between the lines and begin to interrogate their own practice. (Renner 2001, 1)

Throughout this article, I have mentioned professional development and ongoing learning a number of times. Such mentioning is intentional since narrative writing is a form of conscious personal and professional development in its own right (Meriläinen and Syrjälä 2001; Conle 2000). I hereby agree with Conle's (2000, 2001) statement that narrative writing in practitioner-research serves two functions. The written text serves as data for the action research project, but the writing itself is the medium for the practitioner's own professional development. Therefore, it is not only the *outcome* of the action research project that is important. By using narrative writing as a tool to enhance action research, the *process* through which the practitioner-researcher develops professionally assumes paramount importance, because it is by giving due importance to process that the outcomes can be enhanced in the long-term.

Conclusion: journal keeping is tiring but valuable

When I first decided to compile a journal of narratives, I had no idea how much work it entailed. I experienced periods of tiredness, frustration, and a lessened

motivation due to accumulated tiredness, and this resonates with the argument that practitioners are usually so busy that they have little time for their own writing (Mason 2002; Conle 2000); indeed making endurance an important aspect throughout the entire process. Thus, as already suggested, keeping a journal is time-consuming and not always a pleasant experience (Mason 2002; Glaze 2002; Meriläinen and Syrjälä 2001; Conle 2000; Ghaye and Ghaye 1998). Additionally, for learning to emerge, journal-keeping should be a longitudinal process. In fact, as highlighted by Ghaye and Ghaye (1998), it is naïve to think that innovative, fantastic insights emerge from one or two journal entries as if by magic. Nevertheless, the benefits outweigh the costs. Of most importance is that writing about one's experiences promotes detailed observations of one's practice, analysis of such practice, imagined solutions to one's practice, implementation of such imagined solutions, and re-analysis of alterations to practice. Writing is also an ideal way of showing experiential learning and development of the writer himself/herself (MacLeod and Cowieson 2001; Usher 1998). As one teacher argued: 'As I look back at the hours of writing these reflective pieces, I realise that they were the true beginning of my transformation as a teacher and an individual' (DeMulder and Rigsby 2003, 278).

Throughout this last decade, I wanted to *capture* most of my thoughts, my lived experiences and my reflections within my journal; and thus I was constantly returning to my computer to write first-order narratives. When my computer was not handy, I simply became engulfed by chaotic thoughts that included various interpretations of an event and a number of questions that needed answering. Here, writing served an important function, and as Mills suggested more than half a century ago:

> By keeping an adequate file and thus developing self-reflective habits, you learn how to keep your inner world awake. Whenever you feel strongly about events or ideas you must try not to let them pass from your mind, but instead to formulate them for your files … The file also helps you build up the habit of writing. (1959, 197)

But if narrative writing promotes reflection, and keeping a journal builds up a habit of writing, then keeping such a journal also promotes a habit of being reflective; and this makes keeping a journal of great professional value. Also, human experience and human thought can be so complex, chaotic and disorganised at times that writing narratives as entries into my journal was an effective way of giving some order to my thoughts and reflections, since 'words serve the major vehicle of thought and are our best tools for sorting out and organising our worlds' (Meriläinen and Syrjälä 2001, 2). As such, like Heikkinen (2001, 3), 'from this experience, I came to a conviction it is useful for any teacher to reflect oneself through writing'.

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