

A poem points, a thesis explains: pedagogic epiphany and liminal disposition in adult education

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Abstract

In this paper I reflect on epiphany moments in teaching and learning and the ways in which writing such moments can serve both to refresh and revitalise what Palmer calls the inner landscape of the educator, while also offering opportunities to enliven pedagogy. I use the notion of the liminal disposition to position such writing as an agentic act in the face of bureaucratic and other professional pressures and drifts. I also use the work of Cixous to provide a theoretical framework for writing and for its place in transformative adult learning. I then present the epiphany moment itself in story form together with an account of its impact on groups of learners and discuss its status as good practice in adult education.

Key words: (Epiphany moments; Writing as inquiry; Cixous; Liminal disposition)

Context

I have been teaching in some capacity now for three decades and involved in the field of adult education for the past 28 years. It is a privileged role indeed but it is a challenge to any educator, as Palmer (2007) has shown, to stay alive to its possibilities, to stay fresh and optimistic in the face of changing personal, social and political discourses and landscapes. In particular the encroaching of managerialist, bureaucratic demands I often experience as inimical to the kind of spaces for learning that I seek to create. Transformative learning can sometimes seem pie in the pedagogical and ideological skies, when seen in the light of institutional and bureaucratic demands as well as economic and political constraints.

And so I need to reconnect over and over again what it is I truly believe is possible in adult learning? How can I create spaces for living engagement? What hope can it provide for transformative learning?

Conroy (2004, p. 4) talks of the “technicist onslaught” in educational discourse, characterised by the language of “competence/benchmarks/outputs/targets”, a “performative calculus” inimical to “inventiveness, creativity and excitement”. A liminal disposition on the other hand, Conroy says, helps us to think about “ontological possibilities [which] are created outside the structuring intentionalities of teaching” (2004, p. 234) and creates space characterised by “the willingness to take chances, the capacity to let things take their own course, the patience to hang back” (2004, p. 65). Todd says that this disposition involves a vigilance for “small transformative moments” that can “shift the borders of our self-understanding” (2014, p. 232). Such change “can occur in a mixture of disturbance and delight” (2014, p. 233) in those “small moments of grace, those instants of living transformation” which can offer “texture and depth to our everyday engagement” and “make a difference to who we, as students and teachers, become in the process” (2014, p. 243).

These experiences emerge for me in epiphany moments, moments of significance that serve to refresh and reenliven my practice. Epiphany moments are moments of revelation that emerge often from challenging or troubling experience. I take the term from Denzin who sees epiphanies as “ruptures in the structure of daily life” (2014, p. 53). Epiphanies may be of several types but for my purposes the “minor” or “illuminative” epiphany is of most importance, that is, a moment where “underlying tensions or problems in a situation or relationship are revealed” (2001, p. 37). For Denzin epiphany moments are revelatory for the person in terms of their own meaning making in the world, “something new is always coming into sight, displacing what was previously certain and seen” (2014, p. 1).

Writing as Inquiry

I position this story as an example of auto ethnographic writing as a method of inquiry, an approach associated with Narrative Inquiry as a methodological stance in which personal narratives make possible a witnessing “for readers to observe and, consequently, better testify on behalf of an event, problem, or experience” (Ellis et al 2011, para. 27). A number of theorists have engaged with, and commented on, this method (Ellis et al, 2011; Neilsen et al, 2001; Muncey, 2010; Pelias, 2004, 2011; Richardson and St. Pierre, 2005; Speedy, 2005, 2008; Spry, 2011). However, the work of Cixous (1993, 1997, 1998, 2002; Sellers, 1994) in my view offers an approach to writing as inquiry that is of distinct value and relevance to adult education.

Cixous' work offers a method of inquiry, "of writing one's way through knowledge to a state of unknowing insight. The very purpose of such writing is to depart from the familiar, logocentric understanding of the world and to find new ways of knowing" (Hoult 2012a, p. 17), an epistemology that has particular relevance and resonance in the context of transformative adult education (Hoult 2012a, 2012b).

Writing is a place of "learning and maturing" (Cixous 1993, p. 156) where, by inquiring into and with embodied and felt experience, we can learn from our lives. In this space, as educators and as learners we can engage with our experiences, particularly those experiences that cause us to stop in our tracks and that leave us vulnerable (Cixous, 1997, p. 9), so that we can learn and grow.

For Hoult (2012a; 2012b) the work of Cixous presents a vision for writing that offers us a vibrant, dynamic method of inquiry into adult education practice. Traditional academic genres of writing are bound up with power games and hidden authority. Hoult calls a "sham" the translation of moving and vivid personal accounts of transformative adult learning into the "dry register" of the "one-dimensional, monochromatic text expected by the academy" (2012b, p. 1). This genre of writing "characterized by certainty, logical linearity, and authority moves in a realm characterized by uncertainty and unknowing is... problematic" (2012b, p. 4). Writing about transformative learning requires "a commitment to a different kind of scholarly practice" (2012b, p. 1), one that includes "the symbolic as a way of attempting to express what cannot be contained in rational, logocentric order" (2012b, p. 2).

A Lonely Seal: A Story about teaching and learning

Warren notes that teaching as an activity tends to be kept private, as are our attempts to be critically reflexive about our teaching (2011, p. 139). He calls passionately for a reflexive pedagogy to "complicate the silence of the classroom space" (2011, p. 141) and proposes that autoethnographic writing as a method of inquiry allows us to take "our labor in the classroom as a vital site for investigation" (2011, p. 140).

This story I present here attempts to take up Warren's challenge to "create educational experiences that are rich, textured, and varied" (2011, p. 141) by depicting a moment of epiphany in my teaching life, where my identities as writer, teacher and parent enter into a generative collision. The encounter between my son and I represented here happened to coincide with a particularly frustrating

day in my academic life and uncomfortably prefigured a class on writing skills I had to prepare for the next day.

Wednesday night. A cold snap leaving orange traces in the sky. I am tired out from being back at work after a long Christmas break. I had spent the day resentfully rewriting a badly written report that was past its deadline and should have been finished by someone else. Angry and tired I make in the early evening to the bedroom for some space before the kids' bedtime routine would start.

Dara¹ arrives tearful. "I have to write this poem for school and I can't do it. I'm stuck," he says, "Martha [who is 4 years old] could do better."

"That's not true at all, Dara, but sure I will help," I said, gritting my teeth against the resentment at my space being so easily lost. "What's the poem about?"

"Water," he says. "Mammy says I should write about our walk from St. Helen's to Carne at Christmas, but that's about a walk, not about water." "She's right. They were lovely walks," I said remembering that timeless break so recently lost. "Let's begin by writing down everything you can think of about the walks."

"I can't think of anything." I feel my anger rising – I feel stressed and tired. I've spent the day bloody well writing that report; the only break was over lunch when I was talking about the damn chapter of my thesis I'm so stuck on. Why am I so stuck? I have plenty of desire, any number of ideas but nothing on the page. Just a horrible dry writing retch.

"Course you can. Come on. Let's have a go. Can you remember that your eye balls were cold, your ears were paining you and you were all itch from the layers of clothes we made you wear?"

"That's stupid though, that's not a poem."

I could feel the fetch of anger inside me as I listen to him, the sense of block he is putting in front of himself.

"Yes it is. You are just being negative," I said, silently harbouring my own

1 I am grateful to my son Dara (at this point aged 10) for permission to reproduce this story and poem here.

secret writer self who cannot get going. "Let's just have a go. Close your eyes and see can you remember the walk, the sound of the sea, the feel of the cold, the sound of the gulls, the way Tuskar Lighthouse follows you all the way back to Rosslare." The English teacher, so long dormant, begins to stir in me. So too the poet who walked those stretches for years and longed for the words to catch it exactly, when the sheer ineffability of the day would coalesce into a moment.

Dara, compliant as I was when I was his age, writes the list: cormorants, sea, sea air, fish, rocks

"Great. Now we need a first line." Silence. The English teacher in me quells the impatient parent and waits a moment. "Imagine you are trying to tell someone who has never been on a beach on such a cold day exactly what it was like."

Nothing.

"Ok, so what would you call it, this poem?"

"Walking by water in the winter," he says, "that's too many w's."

"That's a great first line, Dara", I say, relieved to get started. "All those w's in a poem is called alliteration. What else can you think of? Anything else happen?"

"Daisy was chasing seagulls."

"Great, there's your second line!"

"That's stupid, dad. That's only a load of random sentences."

"Great, Dara, there's your third line." I look at him, his red face incredulous, and I know I've made a mistake – he now feels that I haven't a clue what his teacher requires of him.

"That's definitely stupid," he says, the distress rising in him again.

Martha arrives for her bedtime story, so I leave him to stew for a while. "Think of any other lines you can think of," I say uselessly. "It's getting late now and we have wasted the whole night on this." The minute I had said it I knew it was

a bigger mistake. Brushing Martha's teeth and reading her story I was hardly there at all. "What can I do to shift this bloody poem," I thought, "and what about the class I've to prepare for tomorrow."

Back in the room now Dara has made no progress and my impatience is at an intense pitch. Exasperated, torn between tired parent, enthusiastic teacher and blocked writer, I blurt out.

"You've done nothing since, Dara," I say before I see his tears, and then "You're just getting distressed about it now so I'm writing a note to your teacher."

"No. No, dad. I'm going to finish it."

We start again. He closes his eyes, as he had done on the day, but cannot hear the rush of the water, cannot feel the cold of the day.

"What was it like, can you remember?"

"It was relaxing."

Stumped again.

"Right. What else can you tell this person who has never been there?"

"The cold sea breeze was hurting my eyes walking to Carne from Bing Bay."

"Great, you have another two lines." He writes them down. "Now what else?" I begin to remember it now myself, the wonder of the moment, the ineffable joy, the piping of the oyster catchers, the suck and lap of the water.

"A lonely seal was slowly making its way down to the rocks," he writes and I can feel an end in sight. "We could see windmills in the distance." True, true, I think, feeling the relief of the penultimate line. "And we walk back leaving the sparkling sea behind us."

"Well done, Dara, well done. You've done a great job. Go down now and write it out into your English copy."

"Thanks dad," he says. "You're a great dad, dad." We hug and he runs off and I sit in the space left behind. Later, much later and calmer, I begin to see just

how those moments, both of them – the walk and the writing about the walk, speak directly to my own writing project, my thesis, and to the class I’ve to give the next day. Only then do I run downstairs, in child haste, and hope that his precious little page is not in the bin.

Narrative Pedagogy: Learning to write: a dialogical analysis²

I was to conduct a session on “Writing Skills for Qualitative Research” with a group of students on a Masters programme the following day. Indeed I retrieved Dara’s little page³ from the bin and wrote this story for the class. Later, both after the class and again after the group had graduated, theses all written, I used e-mail conversations, positioned here as interactive interviews (David and Ellis, 2008) to engage in a dialogue with the participants in order to make sense of the story, and its relevance to writing qualitative research and good practice in facilitating learning. In what follows I consider the feedback in the light of some of the conceptual material regarding writing offered during these presentations. Interactive interviewing is a process by which we “closely examine interactive events and at the same time deal with the issue of reflexivity, subjectivity, emotional expression, modes of description and narrativity” (Davis and Ellis, 2008, p. 289).

Reader Feedback

Mike saw the writing story as an “exciting and provocative way to go about learning”. He found the story “touching” because of “the paralleling of the struggles between yourself and your son in how to go about fulfilling a task that also meant something to each of you as individuals and as people”. Mike resonated with this because of his own struggle with academic writing.

At the time I was struggling to come to terms with the demands of academic writing while trying to explore a theme that was important to me as a person and as a practitioner of adult and community education. To tell you the truth this remained a struggle for me right up until I handed in my thesis, therefore I did not learn to reconcile the competing demands of creative writing and writing a thesis.

The session brought into relief the binary he experienced between creative

2 I am indebted to the participants, all practicing adult educators working in a variety of settings, who participated in the sessions where this narrative was performed and for their permission to use their feedback in my reflections. Pseudonyms have been used to protect their identities. E mail correspondence was used both after the session and after the course had ended to gather responses and reactions.

3 See Appendix 1 for the page with the original poem and notes

and academic modes of writing and served to alert him to how this binary was uncomfortably operative within his own writing. For Mike the academic mode is “more about argument and knowledge”, while “creative” is shorthand for writing that incorporates “feeling and instinct”. He says

This was a constant struggle for me when I was writing in that I often alluded to themes and ideas rather than discussing them – which in a creative piece might have been more acceptable. For me a poem points, a thesis explains.

For Mike writing that honours both the feeling dimension and theoretical discourse allowed him to see that “there is something powerful in the honesty of the particular experience.” He saw the account of the session as articulating a pattern of experience common to myself in the positions of father and teacher, to Dara as son, student and poetry writer and to himself as participant in the session and later as thesis writer:

The writing seems to relate a story of you making your way out of the mists of uncertainty as the session went on, which might be mirroring the process that your son went through in writing his poem, that you went through in doing your own writing and that I possibly went through in writing my thesis.

Belinda also talks of the struggle of writing, describing herself vividly as “sitting back in the room in Maynooth with that huge pain in my tummy which screams ‘am I able to do this piece of writing that I have to do?’” The story allows Belinda to identify different positions she takes up that are active in her own struggles with writing. The story acts as an objective correlative for these internal states. She identifies with the child in the story who cannot write, but she also sees herself in terms of the confused, demanding and impatient parent. She realises that both of these subject positions are active in her anxiety and this helped her “to look at what the blocks were that I was putting in my path”.

Then the story of Dara, writing his poem for school, in my head I am thinking I am in the exact same place as Dara. The inability to attach the head to the body in order to make logic of what I want to say. It also feels like I am the confused parent to myself as I am the one that feels annoyed and angry with being unable to put the words down the way that seems right to do a thesis.

Mary sees this in terms of “the multiplicity of roles” that as adults we occupy and that we try to separate out and compartmentalise. She comments on, and resonates with, the depiction of the “impatience with yourself and the masked

impatience with your son” as parent in the story. She identifies with the sense in which I “could offer guidance to him to get started but you couldn’t hear it yourself”.

She heard echoes of her own stories and the way they are imbued with introjected voices of powerful others (Cixous, 1997) and that “it captured for me many of my own difficulties of just writing and not over-thinking, pre-empting judgement of what the teacher will want and if it is good enough.”

Catherine enters the struggle of the story from the viewpoint of expectant mother. On hearing about the young boy in the story, she says:

Straight away i [sic] am enthusiastic and emotional all at the same time – the joys of being in the third trimester!! I was suddenly drawn to Dara – the way you pronounced his name and how you’ve spelt it. I had literally spent the evening before with my husband finalising our boy’s names choices and Dara/ Daragh was top of the list for a boy. I listened with intrigue at the little school – going boy’s story of his poem that he had to write, his woes, his fears of being judged, thinking to myself, this could be my little Daragh and then I got so emotional!!

She empathises hugely with Dara, expressing annoyance at times with myself as demanding father (“I was annoyed that you were getting so annoyed with him and then i copped on – he is mirroring you”), experiencing herself as nurturing mother. She notes how as father at times I am striating Dara’s experience: “i see the person who still complies with rules – straight away you’re thinking of the system”. She, as mother sees the need for nurturing and facilitating instead: “I was reaching out hugging Dara at this stage!!! I just wanted to give him reassurance that he was doing great and he didn’t have to follow any particular rules for this to work. The mother to be in me was crying out with wanting to nurture him.”

Catherine describes her embodied response to the story and in so doing she summarises the identity issues at work in the story:

At this stage I’m practically crippled trying to hide my tears. I remember S. [co-participant on the course] giggling at me. I was overcome with emotion. This little lost boy – needing direction which was given to him with such energy (good or bad) by a father/teacher/poet who was so frustrated in his own stuff that nearly lost sight of his focus but then realises his wrongs and comes back to nurture his son – his priority.

Autoethnography as pedagogy

Mike commented on the pedagogical style with which the story was used. He refers to the “light touch” with which a group will “come up with gold”. Belinda talks of how the story positioned myself as a learner alongside the group allowing them “to see you are not perfect, you too have feelings...in relation to a piece of writing, being tired, frustrated, and unable to find a small space for ourselves in the busy life”. Recognising the vulnerability of the educator significantly shifted Belinda’s perspective of herself as a learner:

This helped me as I think prior to this I had considered myself to be a weak student who was striving to achieve. It helped me to grow in confidence and feel it’s normal. As a result of this exercise I wrote and wrote and it was through the many changes and writing that I was eventually set free.

Catherine on hearing the story says “I begin to see you more like a peer now.” Melissa says “to me, when I had experienced difficulties when trying to complete assignments I had put it down to personal inadequacies, however now I was aware that others also experienced these problems. I was not alone in this. It is in fact very much part of the process.” Lara says that the story was “an ideal pedagogical approach in illustrating ‘blocks’ in the writing process, whether these blocks are a lack of time, other demands or even a fear of actually writing. Perhaps sometimes we need a story to tell ourselves that we cannot write just now – maybe the timing is off somewhat.”

Mary felt encouraged after the session that “writing should flow from feeling as much as from head and to quell the voices of teachers past.” Melissa indicates likewise, that she had put her own difficulties with writing down to “personal inadequacies” and that this is so far “embedded” that she didn’t “even realise that they were at work.” She talks of how the process of reading and responding to the story triggered a realisation of “just how much of an impact the class had on me.”

Afterwards I put finger to keyboard and began to write. [This] really freed up, or unblocked a part of me that possibly became too proceduralised or disciplined within an academic form of writing, which I had developed from my experiences as an undergraduate. It helped me to allay my fears and anxieties which were so heavily ingrained in the process of writing.

Catherine was “completely surprised” at my pedagogical doubts and sees the story as revealing of my own vulnerability as a writer allowing her to “begin to

see you as a peer.” She experiences the story with relief and sees its pedagogical purpose as one of encouragement “to see ourselves in our own writing or we won’t be able to write. It was so empowering.”

The catalytic effect of story

Each of the participants talks of how they have incorporated some of the methods and ideas from the session and the account of it into their work. Peter uses the ideas for his own classes. Mike indicates that he didn’t manage fully to take on board the ideas about writing that underpin the session but that “I am trying to encourage my partner who is now doing a Master’s to learn from you through me.” Belinda refers to the writing exercise I used on the day which she says “I use with students all the time because I feel that it helps to release the fear of writing.”

Melissa says that “for me personally this learning has had a major impact on me and now forms a key component in my own practices of teaching.”

Armed with this new knowledge of the value which can be gained from understanding the process of writing, I wanted to share this new insight, and so used your very story of Dara and yourself to speak to my class about essay writing skills. The class received the story well, and felt somewhat relieved that they too were not alone with their fears and insecurities about writing the essay.

Presenting writing, as the narrative does, in a state of undress (Colyar, 2009), where the vulnerability of the writer is, in Cixous’ phrase, written “nude” (1997, p. 3), allows qualitative thesis writers to encounter and process their own vulnerabilities as writers. They begin to understand how they govern their own tongues and recover some of their own capacities to engage with language that is received from culture and begin to make it their own. This insight into our subjectivities as writers seems to be what has worked for people. It demystifies for them the subjective complexities of writing processes, allowing them to relate differently to their own vulnerabilities as researchers.

Pedagogic Epiphany

Cole and Throssel apply the term epiphany to the field of teaching and learning and see that these moments provide an “escape route from any perceived educational drudgery” (2008, p. 181). They suggest that pedagogic epiphanies of this kind are moments in a teacher’s life “when everything seems to come together” when “one’s knowledge area, the purpose of teaching and learning and student responses seem to blend and unify” (2008, p. 175). They propose that integrat-

ing and aligning such moments into curriculum enlivens teaching and learning for all involved. For Goodson (cited in Andrews, 2014, p. 71) these pedagogic moments are those where “the rupture between teachers and taught is healed and a dialectic, an exchange, takes place which affects not just beliefs but the very heart of the matter of living and experience”.

It seems to me that the act of vigilantly watching for epiphany moments in our own lives as adult educators, allied with a capacity to render such moments in writing, creating space for a sensitive, appropriate and deft use of these moments in the adult learning classroom, allows for good pedagogical practice in adult learning to be honoured and exemplified. The purchase such moments and stories offer us as educators and learners, allows for a full emotional and intellectual engagement in a very real and living way that allows for quality of insight to be shared and re-experienced, over and over again.

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