

2009

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### Recommended Citation

Edwards, Debra (2010) "Tracing Literacy Journeys: the Use of the Literacy Autobiography in Preservice Teacher Education," *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*: Vol. 34: Iss. 4, Article 6.  
Available at: <http://ro.ecu.edu.au/ajte/vol34/iss4/6>

This Journal Article is posted at Research Online.  
<http://ro.ecu.edu.au/ajte/vol34/iss4/6>

## **Tracing Literacy Journeys: The Use of the Literacy Autobiography In Preservice Teacher Education.**

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***Abstract:** This paper analyses the use of literacy autobiography as a way for preservice teachers to examine their own understandings of literacy, multiliteracies and literacy teaching. We reflect on what we as lecturers have learnt about our students and their literacy experiences, about our own literacy experiences and values, as well as what the students learnt through completing a literacy autobiography. Specifically we look at whether the use of the literacy autobiography has been useful in expanding students' understandings of literacy.*

Stories attach us to others and to our own histories by providing a tapestry rich with threads of time, place, character.... The story fabric ... contribute[s] both to our knowing and our being known. (Witherell and Nodding 1991, p.1).

Stories can help you to recognize the shape of an experience when you come across it...to make sense of and to deal with it.' (Shah, 2003: 7).

This paper is part of a wider review and reconceptualisation of the first year of a preservice teacher education course, in order to enhance student transition and engagement. While the use of autobiography as a mode of exploring and transforming understandings of multicultural education is not new, the use of autobiography for exploring preservice teachers' understandings of literacy is less common. Autobiography has a place within the tradition of narrative that surrounds and defines who and what we are as teachers of literacy. Strong-Wilson (2006, p.103) referred to teachers as being "enmeshed in stories" with much of the teaching day spent working with the narratives of others in the texts shared with and created by students, as well as being the teller of stories who "transmit, interpret and critique culture and society". Story is also important in terms of our literate identities, defining where we come from, who we are in the present and what we hope for the future as well as assisting to sort and understand experience (Bruner, 1990). In this paper we intend to examine the rationale and the outcomes of using autobiography as a tool for preservice teachers to examine their own understandings of literacy. During this examination we also realised the value this assignment had for us as lecturers in reappraising our own understandings of literacy and how we modelled these to the preservice teachers.

A search of the literature indicated use of autobiography in teacher education over the last three decades and a half (Steinman, 2007; Bryan and Tippins, 2005; Sloan, 2004; McVee, 2004; Sharkey, 2004, 2000; Alvine, 2001; Bullough and Pinnegar, 2001; Rousemaniere, 2000; Kramer- Dahl, 2000; Brown, 1999; Spires, Willias, Jackson and Huffman, 1998; Carter and Doyle, 1996; Casey, 1995; Solas, 1992; Ayers, 1989), particularly in curriculum reconceptualizing, literacy education, multicultural education, math and science education. The review of literature indicated that autobiography in teacher education has been used in a variety of ways, originating with Pinar and Grumet's development of *carrer*, where autobiography was used as a method of retrospectively exploring lived experience within discourses of curriculum reform (Pinar, 1975; Pinar 2004, Grumet 1990). Sloan (2004)

described three themes within the literature on autobiography in teacher education or *currents* of discourse identified by Pinar. The first theme was post-structural, analytic self-exploration, through intensive “journaling of memories, present experiences and ... dreams” (Sloan, 2004, p. 118). The second theme was explorations of community, culture and reclamation of marginalized voices, whereby teachers examined how their identities were formed and reformed by their communities and cultures of origin, and how their teaching was shaped by often uncontested or unrecognized cultural practices and values. This included “feminist” examination of how mainstream cultures of teaching may marginalize particular cultural, class and gender perspectives. The third theme was examinations of the narratives teachers’ tell about their own lives and pedagogy, to discover the ways in which teachers construct themselves as teachers, and pass on knowledge about teaching (Sloan, 2004). McVee (2004) similarly identified these themes and added the use of narrative as evidence for beliefs about pedagogy. In literacy education the use of autobiography appears to have been informed by elements of each discourse. Literacy autobiography has been variously defined as: “a reflective, first person account of one’s development as a writing being” (Steinman, 2007, p. 563), “a form of narrative inquiry ... to make connections between personal experience and pedagogical beliefs. ... [exploring] ones own literacy development ... [in order to be] more able to engage in debates and discussions about what counts as literacy and who “defines” literature” (Sharkey, 2004, p. 499), and “stories... that foreground language acquisition and literacy” (Eldred and Mortenson, 1992, p.513 cited in Kramer-Dahl, 2000, p.107). Our purpose in using literacy autobiography was to assist pre service teachers to move from stories about their own language and literacy acquisition, to exploring the connections between these experiences and the pedagogical theory they were encountering in their university study.

The review of literature identified three trends in regard to the use of autobiography, independent of the discourses informing their use. These were: the use of the autobiographies of others as a way of learning about the lived experiences of others, as in the research of Florio-Ruane and de Tar (1995), McVee (2004), Wang & Tianlong (2006), writing and examining one’s own autobiography to examine formative experiences and the contexts shaping them (Byran & Tippen 2005; Sharkey 2004; McGonigal 2000; Nichols & Tippens, 2000; Rousmaniere 2000; Davis 1996; Rosenthal 1991; Koch 1990), or mixed as in the research of Strong-Wilson (2006), Kramer –Dahl (2000), and Spires et.al. (1998). In our teaching we have been interested in the writing and exploration of self autobiography, for “the experiences of childhood carry through to adulthood...there is a connection between our first experiences and our later responses, and ...our early experiences of education shape our adult ways of evaluating school” (Rousmaniere, 2000, p.88).

Greene 1978, (as cited in Strong-Wilson 2006 p. 102) referred to the importance of using reflection on personal history to create thoughtful, reflective teachers. Greene considered that it was through the awareness of our own personal “landscapes” that awareness of the landscapes of others developed, alongside reclamation our own stories (Rousmaniere 2000; Sharkey 2000). In order to step outside the limits of their own experiences, apply new theoretical knowledge and gain an understanding of how the experiences of others are situated within social, political and economic contexts, preservice teachers need first to be aware of, and learn to reflect upon, their own histories and how these were and are shaped by the contexts of time and place. Wang & Yu (2006, p.32) suggest that lecturers also need to constantly revisit their own histories and identities to understand “the fluidity of identity construction. For as Palmer, (1998, p.2) stated,

when I do not know myself, I cannot know who my students are. I will see them through a glass darkly, in the shadows of my unexamined life – and when I cannot see them clearly, I cannot teach them well.

Thus reflective practice for preservice teachers starts with a narrating of their formative experiences and an examination how and why these experiences were formative. The value

of narrating via writing is that the writing may be crafted and revisited so that the learning occurs through the process of writing. The concept of learning through writing may be traced to Gendlin's (1965) discussion of explication – the explaining and analysing of - experience, whereby he proposed that while initial learning may occur with the initial experience, it is in the explication of the experience that further learning occurs. "Explication is a process of steps. As we describe some directly felt experiential aspect, our felt experiencing is thereby released, carried forward... This felt response is a shift in feeling, in experiencing, in how we are in the world" (Gendlin, 1965, p.132). The process of writing an autobiography, the sifting and choosing of the experiences to foreground, creates the possibility of a new experience and awareness of the initial experience. Grumet (2004, p. 324) supports the importance of the reading, or rereading and interpretation of the writing stating that "a failure to engage in some analysis of the autobiographical texts beyond celebration and recapitulation ... consigns the teacher's tale to myth, resonant but marginal because it is not part of the discourse that justifies real action." Griffiths 1995 (as cited in Sharkey 2004) referred to this as "critical autobiography" adding that the analysing and interpreting needs to include consideration of political and cultural contexts. Spires et.al. (1998), Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) and Sharkey (2000) similarly emphasised the interpreting of experience through wider concepts such as culture, class, gender, faith and time, as well as the telling of the story in order to understand how the experience influences pedagogy.

Kramer-Dahl (2000) and Sharkey (2004) noted the feminist critiques of the use of autobiography whereby the teacher educator is positioned as the interpreting authority and the student teacher learns how to "tell the stories that others will listen to" (Sharkey 2004, p.499) but also what is legitimate within those stories. In order to avoid this, critical analysis requires suspension of a belief in a definitive or *true* analysis. Rather an "intention to encourage writers to go deeper with their [own] interpretations" (Sharkey, 2004, p. 499) and to consider how these interpretations influence their own actions as teachers is required. We endeavoured to do this in our literacy autobiography task by not judging the experiences as positive or negative, rather encouraging analysis of how the experience contributed to the formation and understanding of literacy practices. Every experience may be perceived as positive and negative, including those literacy experiences that are generally considered essential to literacy development. The issues of student teachers learning how to tell /write in ways that are perceived to be legitimate within the academic community are also important to examine. As are the links between this and broader considerations of what is allowed as legitimate forms of literacy, though such examination is outside the scope of this paper.

Solas (1992) raised concern about verifying the truth of the autobiography, though none of the other literature reviewed raised this as a concern. We suspect that this is more of a concern when teacher autobiography is being used as data for generalised findings, than when they are being used as a tool for considering how prior experience may inform individual awareness. However, it is important when considering how the teacher educator is grading or assessing autobiography.

### **Context**

The university campus we work on is situated in a regional rural city approximately two hours travel from the capital city. The student population is drawn traditionally from the surrounding rural areas and increasingly from outlying suburbs and particular growth corridors of the capital city, or students (international and domestic) who choose to study in this particular Bachelor of Education degree. The literacy autobiography assignment has been a first year assignment since 1998 (Rowe 2003).

### **Why First Year?**

Bryan and Tippens (2005, p.229) in their report of using impressionist tales as a pedagogical tool for initiating reflection about science beliefs and knowledge with preservice teachers, cited a body of research indicating that “prospective teachers’ beliefs and knowledge about teaching and learning are shaped by their prior experiences”. Thus it appears valuable to examine these experiences early in the process of teacher education in order to expedite reflective practice and the possibility of change. This belief that the “students’ past experiences, prior knowledge and competencies, and cultural and linguistic resources mediate the ways in which they come to understand, interpret and respond to curricula” (Rowe, 2003, p. 5) has informed the approach taken by our teaching team for several years. Rowe (2003, p. 5) noted that the challenge for us was to “find ways to assist students to consider how...[their own] personal histories and prior experiences influence[d] their perspectives on learning and teaching, and help make this knowledge explicit”.

Starting the entry into academic tertiary writing with an assignment that includes autobiography, also signals to the preservice teachers that their “lives, their knowledge and their language are legitimate and valued” (Spires et.al. 1998, p. 297) along with academic research and texts. Part of the first year experience is to “discover and define who they are within an academic context” (Spires et.al. 1998, p. 297). Providing pre service teachers with opportunity to look back at where they have come from, and how prior experience may influence current literacy and language practices, affords a space to consolidate self in the maelstrom of new academic learning and structures (Spires et.al. 1998). Similarly starting with a reflective piece signals that reflection is valued as part of growth as a teacher. As preservice teachers they will constantly be asked to reflect on their practical teaching experiences and their learning from these experiences.

Initially the autobiography had an equal emphasis on considering both the cultural and linguistic experiences of the students (Rowe 2003), with a focus on exploring the cultural diversity of the students and their “experiences with people from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds” (Rowe, 2003: 86-87). To this end the assignment consisted of three parts. First a profile of themselves including: gender, racial/ethnic/cultural identity, language(s) spoken and/or written, religion, socio-economic class, family heritage, community(ies) lived in (or countries), plus experiences with persons with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Second, a written piece about the student’s memories of learning language and literacy, and third a written comparison of their memories with the curriculum document(s) corresponding to their years at school. Each year we have evaluated and refined the assignment with the result that the focus now tends to be on the students exploring their linguistic and literacy experiences prior to entering the Education course. Part of this exploration still involves considering the various contexts of these experiences and the systems associated with them such as; family, cultural, socio-economic, gender, community (including spiritual, sporting, creative, educational, and employment) and geographic locations, however, in less detail than previously. We also scaffold (Wood, Bruner and Ross, 1976) the assignment more tightly than we did initially, in terms of using it both as an introduction to tertiary writing, and as a way of the preservice teachers gaining specific understandings about literacy and language as semiotic systems (Anstey and Bull, 2006) and practices (Luke and Freebody 1999).

The current assignment still consists of three parts. First students are asked to choose five items that represent their language and literacy learning over time, and to share these with peers in a tutorial, explaining why they have chosen each item. They are then to use these items as the basis for a visual representation of their language and literacy learning over time, on one single sided A4 page. Second, a written reflection answering the question: *In what ways am I literate and what has shaped that to date?* Third, a discussion of how their background might impact on their teaching and influence working with students from diverse backgrounds and a discussion of any additional language and literacy learning they might

need. Scaffolding for the assignment is provided through clear and explicit criteria and checklists for the assignment, which are also used as the marking rubric, use of lecturer and student models of all aspects of the assignment, opportunity in and outside of class for students to discuss aspects of the assignment with lecturers and each other, and time in and outside of class to review and edit drafts.

### **Our Aims**

Three of the various theoretical positions underpinning our own language and literacy pedagogy as teacher educators are specifically relevant to the literacy autobiography. First Halliday's (1978: 2) explanation of language as a social semiotic – meaning making system whereby language is not just a neutral conduit of meaning, rather language is part of the conveying and forming of “shared systems of value and knowledge”. In this context oral and written language are one of several meaning making and conveying systems, the others being visual, auditory, gestural and spatial (Anstey and Bull, 2006). Second the work of The New London group (Cope and Kalantzis (2000, p.9) in broadening our “understanding of literacy and literacy teaching and learning...to account for ... culturally and linguistically diverse and increasingly globalised societies... and the variety of text forms [and modes] associated with information and multimedia technologies”. Third, the work of Luke and Freebody (1999) who encouraged us to consider literacy not only as skills and competencies but also as repertoires of flexible practices.

Literacy education is *not* about skill development, not about deep competence. It *is* about the institutional shaping of social practices and cultural resources, about inducting successive generations into particular cultural, normative ways of handling texts, and about access to technologies and artifacts (e.g., writing, the Internet) and to the social institutions where these tools and artifacts are used (e.g., workplaces, civic institutions). (n.p.).

Thus one of the learning objectives we had for the preservice teachers was for them to start their journey as teachers of literacy with broad conceptualisations of language and literacy, even though the focus ultimately would be teaching English language and literacy. We were interested also in discovering how our students defined literacy and whether they had an existing concept of being multiliterate. Because our aim was for the preservice students to broaden their views about literacy and to explore literacy as multiple literacies, (the multiple ways in which they used different language modes) we deliberately invited them to think broadly about all the possible ways they were literate.

Bullough and Pinnegar (2001, p.16) in their guidelines for autobiographical self-study emphasised the importance of the autobiography containing “nodal moments”, moments where there is new growth, new branches of understanding. Thus for the written discussion we asked the preservice teachers to sift through their language and literacy experiences and to choose experiences or artifacts they considered important and demonstrated growth over time. We then asked them to explain why these were important in their literacy journey, and to explain the understandings about literacy or new literacy practices that developed as a result of that experience or artifact.

### **What we learnt**

The autobiography assignment and the student discussion surrounding it, provided insights for us about the students and their lives as well as their understandings about language and literacy. These insights assisted our scaffolding of their learning and transition into both university and the teaching profession.

The majority of the students, regardless of age, initially had a narrow

conceptualisation of literacy as reading and writing. Over the time they worked on the assignment these understandings expanded.

*My understanding of literacy is the ability to read, write understand and communicate at a competent level.*

*We need to look at the bigger picture literacy is not restricted to just written language, it can also be spoken or pictures.*

*When selecting my literacy profile items, it really made me realize that literacy is not as simple as reading a book, but it relates to all sorts of things.*

*The insight that I am gaining is that literacy is a constant journey, something that is not static but is ever changing and evolving with every new situation and experience.*

*Well it has been an interesting assignment this one. The major insight is just the variety of ways that we are literate in our lives*

These initial narrow conceptualisations and the students' growing understanding of literacy as multiliteracies over the time of completing the assignment reinforced the value of the assignment as a learning tool. We had thought that given the inclusion of multiliteracies in most school curriculums over the last decade the students may have entered the course with an existing broad understanding of multiple literacies. This did not appear to be the case for this cohort.

We found that there was diversity of student experiences in terms of home and community, however, less diversity in this cohort than we had expected in their school experiences of language and literacy. Though there was some diversity in terms of what was valued as literacy and explicitly taught. The majority of students did have an understanding of both home and wider community experiences as contributing to their language and literacy development, though school and family experiences were discussed most often. Media, especially television was also often discussed.

*My community, my school and particularly my sport, played a massive part in influencing my literacy.*

*Collecting items for my profile has really made it clear in my mind just how influential t.v. programs ... can be in developing a child's language comprehension and development. I've also realized how much t.v. I must have watched.*

Many of the students had themselves struggled with school literacy tasks and discussed how their involvement in sport, music and community activities (virtual as well as real world) had developed other literate practices, which at times assisted with school literacy requirements.

*I didn't like reading and I guess that's why I wasn't that good at it. I loved computers and sport and that's where I gained a massive amount of my literacy from.*

Student reflection during and after the assignment indicated that the assignment had provided a space to reflect on the experiences that had formed them as literate individuals as well as providing consolidation of self at the beginning of their preservice teaching journey (Spire et al. 1998).

*It has been quite an adventure collecting ...and brainstorming...what things have shaped my literacy journey.*

*Finding things for my literacy profile has brought back so many memories of when I was young...and realising that so many things... contribute to my literacy development.*

*Writing the profile I have become more aware of the experiences that have shaped my literacy journey.*

Most students considered that the task of choosing five key items and the process of discussing those through writing was important in helping them to ground the concept of multiliteracies into their own lived experiences.

Modelling different aspects of the task in order to make our expectations explicit also became an important reflective tool for us. The process of doing the tasks ourselves highlighted the complexity of what we were asking of the students. All too often we reverted to traditional models of print literacy in our examples, illustrating to us how the items we chose indicated the aspects of literacy we valued. As Sharkey (2000) noted the types of stories and the examples chosen to illustrate those indicate what is given value in the classroom. We became increasingly aware that we needed to be clear about the tools we were using to disrupt our own narratives as well as the narratives of the students (Strong–Wilson 2006).

Sharkey (2004) posited that the use of autobiography in teacher education is both valuable and problematic. Analysing the narrative without also considering how the classroom context influences and shapes the stories told and untold, is problematic in that the part the lecturer plays in determining the final form of the narrative is often not recognised. When the narrative forms part of an assessed assignment, then assignment criteria as well as classroom context requires inclusion in any analysis. We were aware that the final product was an assessed item and so the students were obliged to fit within the framework provided.

### **The Untold**

I would be naive if I refused to admit influence in what we notice, what we choose to tell, and in how and why we tell what we do. Nevertheless, autobiographical method invites us to struggle with all those determinations. It is that struggle and its resolve to develop ourselves in ways that transcend the identities that others have constructed for us that bonds the projects of autobiography and education. (Grumet, 1990, p. 324).

Sharkey (2004) uses the quote above as impetus for her own exploration of the untold in autobiography, specifically whether the choices made as lecturer/teachers either restrict or allow aspects of students' lives to be shared. In our literacy autobiography task we specifically asked the students to make choices about the experiences and items they chose to include, in terms of their significance for their literacy journey. Thus we were asking them to make choices about what is told or untold. Sharkey's examination of her own choices in what she chose to share with her students, and her reflections about whether her choices not to foreground aspects of her life then influenced her student teachers' writing, caused us to also consider our own choices. This became increasingly important to us after discussions with students who were struggling with the task due to their concerns about their family literacy experiences not matching those of their classmates. Their concerns were about their own reluctance to revisit emotional situations as well as the judgment that might be made by other students. We had been careful to include aspects of class, language variation, faith, culture, and both negative and positive aspects of school in our own oral models; in an effort to ensure that the narratives were located in specific contexts (Goodson 1997, Sharkey 2004). However, we had not explicitly considered aspects of our own family life that may be considered dysfunctional by others and how these may influence literacy development, in the written models we provided. While we are still undecided as to how to address this – and



probably there is no best way – this served to remind us of the need to tread carefully amongst the lives of the students in our efforts to broaden and challenge established beliefs and thinking about literacy.

It is interesting to note that most of these concerns became apparent in the oral conversations we had in class and individually with students, rather than in the written tasks. Sharkey (2004) also noted that often experiences not included in the written autobiography were shared in conversation, while Gratch (2000) discussed the difficulty of critically examining one's own experience without talking about them with others. This resonated with our growing understanding about the importance of the conversations we had with the student teachers, and the student teachers had with each other, in opening spaces for examination and exploration of their own lived experiences. Conversation allowed for other ways of viewing the experience.

In her own reflections upon the *untold stories* Sharkey (2004) came to recognise that choosing not to tell, or to partly tell, may not always be a weakness. Silence may also be strategic and powerful (Hurtado, 1996; Lewis, 1993; Ropoers-Huilman, 1998; Sharkey 2004). We also needed to be careful not to make judgments about what should or should not be considered by the students in the formation and exploration of their own language and literacy practices. Rather we needed to make spaces for exploration, change and further development available. Like Sharkey we also learnt that it was important for us to revisit how we created space within classes, lectures, online discussion and the assignment itself, and to continually critically evaluate our practice. Also to recognize importance of allowing students the space to be at different stages in their own willingness to share, and ability to critically examine their lived experience.

## Conclusion

The literacy autobiography assignment started as a tool to encourage preservice education students to reflect on their own language and literacy journey in order to broaden their conceptualization of language and literacy. We wanted them to connect the concept of multiliteracies (The New London Group, 2000) with their own literacy development, as well as considering how this might impact on their future teaching of language and literacy. However, the assignment became also a process of reflecting on our own teaching and scaffolding of student learning that we realised was as important as our initial aims. Overall the process of the literacy autobiography assignment did enable students to gain understandings about literacy and language as semiotic systems and practices within a multiliteracies framework, and about the variety of experiences that contributed to their language and literacy learning.

*This task is great, as I can look back and reflect on how I started to understand and interpret things.*

In return we as lecturers gained understandings about our own language and literacy values, plus the value (and pitfalls) of assessment tasks as learning tools. We also gained increased understanding about the value and efficacy of autobiography as a reflective tool for teachers to examine their beliefs and understanding. As such autobiography may be used as a tool in many aspects of teacher education not only for language and literacy.

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Acknowledgements and thanks to the preservice teacher education students quoted for sharing their insights about the literacy autobiography with us.