

A Good Teacher

Patrick J. Lewis

Key words: story,
good teacher,
narrative, film,
performance,
place, space

Abstract: The work is in a documentary film format utilizing digital video through computer software that presents the interviewees' responses to two questions juxtaposed with images and statements of "a good teacher" from popular culture. The two questions are: 1. Can you recall a primary or elementary teacher whom you had that you thought was a good teacher? 2. What was it about her/him that made you think she/he was a good teacher? However, in some of the interviews the interviewer utilizes other questions and/or prompts in order to encourage the participant to expand or elaborate within her/his story. Like TRINH T. Minh-ha (1992) "storytelling is an ongoing field of exploration in all of my works" (p.144).

Through the interviews interpretive themes emerge around the notion of who is/what makes a good teacher. Some of the themes suggest personal characteristics such as "kindness," "patient," "passionate," "calm," "respect," "firm," "understanding" and "encouraging" that entwine with an idea of "personal connection" with the teacher. Other themes suggest shared experience and teaching attributes. These themes are presented with the images of good teachers from popular films. The notion of "good" and "good teacher" are purposefully not demarcated or defined by the interviewer or asked of the participants. This term is implicitly defined in the stories shared by each of the participants and the stories of the teacher films.

Table of Contents

- [1. Prologue](#)
- [2. Trust the Story](#)
- [3. Listening and Telling and Listening and Telling ...](#)
- [4. Performance, Place, Story, Space](#)
- [5. The Story's the Thing](#)
 - [5.1 A Good Teacher](#)

[References](#)

[Author](#)

[Citation](#)

1. Prologue

Narrative research that employs interviews or the recording of stories from participants, often involves audio recording, transcribing the interviews, and, through some theoretical methodology or methodologies, determines the themes and ideas that weave through and emerge from the participants' stories. Narrative researchers then "write up" their interpretive analysis of the other's story. However, once the work is written, we see no one. There is no human face, no expressions, pauses, no coughs, sniffles, no stammers, no hesitations, falters, no certainties, emphasis, no gestures, no ambiguity or ambivalence, no one—there is only the text despite SOCRATES' suggestion to the contrary in Phaedrus. At

best, it is only a partial story often refracted through/by the interpretive prism of the narrative researcher. [1]

Petra Munro HENDRY (2007) reminds us that the narrative researcher's "primary task" (p.494) is to listen yet; we fall far short of that fundamental aspect in our relationships with "others" by over-emphasizing the importance of analysis and interpretation. The result is the re-marginalization of the very voices that we are supposedly giving voice to (p.490). As the 13th century Sufi Mystic poet RUMI (2007) said, "Since in order to speak, one must first listen, learn to speak by listening." [2]

2. Trust the Story

Perhaps, as narrative researchers, we need to (re)establish our trust with(in) the stories of others and resist interpreting their personal narratives. It is through trust that we may recall a faith in story, a faith that sustains; "we come to know another through the world and the world through another" (GRUMET, 1988, p.96) and it is through story that we may come to know, through the story of the other. When we share our stories they come to life through the telling, however, the story has a life of its own and that life is given through the spirit of story and the storyteller. Stories are what make us human and are integral to making meaning. Consequently, storytelling is a *sacred act* shared with others in a plethora of settings from around the water cooler, on the trail, in the schoolyard or at the kitchen table. Place is secondary; the story *act* creates the sacred space for the storyteller to share her story without the interpretation of the narrative researcher. The researcher needs to become an *authentic listener* and be with the storyteller holding the sacred story space in which there is "a dialectic between *teller* and *listener* and at some moment the horizons of telling and listening fuse" (POLAKOW, 1985, p.829). [3]

3. Listening and Telling and Listening and Telling ...

Can film transcend text-based narrative work and (re)form stories? It has been suggested that ours' is "a visual cinematic age; it knows itself in part through the reflections that flow from the camera's eye Adrift in a sea of symbols, we find ourselves ... products of the cinematic gaze" (DENZIN, 1995, p.1). The film shared here attempts to turn that gaze (in)to storytelling so that storytellers and listeners share in the creation of story meaning. However, in such an endeavor it is tantamount to the phenomenologist working toward the essential experience that forever eludes, until only the story is left. But with each telling and retelling it becomes performance, with participants becoming performers, however, the researcher (re)performs their stories. In the film I try not to perform the other's story; I try to listen authentically, inviting participants to tell their stories through the filmed interview. However, doesn't my editing and "framing" influence the other's story? Using the two questions to guide their stories may constrain their responses, but more importantly they guided my editing of each interview; as TRINH T. Minh-ha (1992) reminds us, "the editing plays, therefore with the viewer's expectations" (p.187). And what of the choices and placement of clips

from the teacher films from popular culture, what do they do to/with the story of the other? Have I been faithful to the notion of reflexive integrity in documentary interviewing and trusting the story, the storyteller and you, the listener-viewer? There is no objectivity, no *truth*, there is only story. [4]

4. Performance, Place, Story, Space

Is ours a "performance-based, dramaturgical culture" (DENZIN, 2001, p.26)? If so, is the space between audience and performer now one? The act, the story is the only space. Story, the telling of stories, not only creates a space, but a sacred space. It is a space similar to Michel DE CERTEAU's (1984) notion of "space is a practiced place" (p.117) brought about by the invocation of story; a "bid for power" (TOOLAN, 1988, p.3). It is story that "constantly transforms places into spaces or spaces into places" (DE CERTEAU, 1984, p.118). We are storied beings, living through/in a myriad of narrative experiences. Each of us "without even wanting to know it, is aware of being a *narratable self*—immersed in the spontaneous auto-narration of memory" (CAVARERO, 2000, p.33). One of the most commonly shared narrative experiences is that of our elementary school days and the teachers with whom we lived and worked. [5]

People often have stories about a teacher from their school experience for whom they felt was a good teacher. Are stories of a person's "recollection" of a primary or elementary schoolteacher from childhood able to contribute to our understanding of a "good teacher"? Søren KIERKEGAARD (1983) suggested that "repetition and recollection are the same movement, except in opposite directions, for what is recollected has been, is repeated backward, whereas genuine repetition is recollected forward" (p.131). Through such "genuine repetition" can we discover something about good teachers? [6]

Accompanying and perhaps informing these personal stories are, of course, popular culture stories of good teachers. Do such stories complement each other, contrast, juxtapose and/or disrupt our notion of good teachers? It is through our engagement with stories, our own and those of the other that we may hear stories of good teachers: stories that are so often eclipsed by the dominant story(ies) of the culture of teachers and schools, universities and colleges of education. Michel DE CERTEAU (1984) reminds us that such stories may be spaces of resistance, resistance to the narratives, the stories of instituted power, "these stories offer their audience a repertory of tactics for future use" (p.23). I perform my story and the story of the other, however the story performs you and me. "Authorized voices authorize themselves to be heard" (TRINH, 1991, p.188). "There is no real world. There are no originals. There is no original reality which casts its shadows across the reproduction" (DENZIN, 2001, p.30). There are only our stories and they are constantly reworked, retold, revised, returned, reflexive, recursive, represented, reinterpreted and yes, reperformed. [7]

It is

"our transaction with those different from ourselves [that] transforms our identity. Only the 'Other' has the vocabulary, meanings, plot lines, grammar, truths, possibilities, and the like, we need to retell the story of our life; we need the 'Other' if we are to be born again. ... [F]or only 'Others' different from our selves can provoke the creation of meanings and values beyond our culture's prescriptions" (GARRISON, 2004, p.94). [8]

Story, narrative imagining is one of our paramount ways to engage with meaning making. Story is central to our understanding of self, other, and, quite simply, the lived-world. As Thomas KING (2003), a First Nations storyteller said, "the truth about stories is that, that's all we are" (p.153). There is a symbiotic relationship between humans and story, one in which we shape story just as much as story shapes us. In this narrative symbiosis it is impossible to separate what is a narrative mode of thought from a narrative text or discourse.

"Each gives form to the other, just as thought becomes inextricable from the language that expresses it and eventually shapes it. ... Our experience of human affairs come to take the form of the narrative we use in telling about them" (BRUNER, 1996, p.132). [9]

So entwined with being human, story has significant power in our lives such that when we change our story we may actually change our lives because "we come to know our selves through the world and its stories [and] we come to know the world through our experiences and our stories" (LEWIS, 2007, p.11). The film, the story, shared here aligns itself with what Norman DENZIN (2001) has called a *narrative montage* "a world of jumbled images and memories" (p.42) however, the storyteller creates some narrative thread, a story of sorts, and we, the listener, the other, no matter how foreign or removed to/from the story "we will interpret it as projecting to a much larger abstract narrative, one that applies to our own specific lives, however far our lives are removed from the detail of the story" (TURNER, 1996, p.7). We do so because we strive to make meaning through story, our own and others. [10]

Stories are fluid, dynamic, and alive; they are not static, they are like Salman RUSHDIE's (1990) *Ocean of the Streams of Story*, they are always shifting, changing, reworked by the temporal entanglements of humans. It is in and through stories that meaning is constructed and reconstructed. "We never write on a blank page, but always on one that has already been written on" (DE CERTEAU, 1984, p.43). This story, this film is my attempt to engage with the notion that social science research is performative and by consequence transformative through the everydayness of being in the world and that world is a story-world. The visual is here. When using film in narrative interviews we see the person, we hear, but we also see their conveyance of words; the gestures, the shifts, the movements at different moments in the storytelling, the looks and intonations, pauses, thoughts, shifts with the story; we see their somatic response, the body knowing as they engage in recollecting forward. In this narrative performance, the researcher appears to be absent, nothing more than a

voice off-screen encouraging the storyteller-participants. It is that false sense that lulls the listener-viewer into thinking this is indeed a direct access to reality, but that is not possible. I am very much there in the editing, in the questions, in the storytelling, the story collage. However, I am guided by one criterion more than any other; I am striving to be an authentic listener. [11]

It is neither easy nor possible to include the "whole story" of each storyteller-participant in such a film. Consequently, there are always and everywhere the untold stories. Yet, they are not lost, rather they remain they are our potential or possible future stories. By using film I perform the story of the others' stories of good teachers, where the visual-audio storytelling dramatizes in empathic terms a shared notion of a good teacher. Through the (re)performative act of filming, editing and recollecting all the storyteller-participants' stories and the popular culture teacher stories; I bring them together in a new space "a practiced place" to augment a "repertory of tactics for future use" (DE CERTEAU, 1984, p.23). However, the story space, the space of resistance, transgression, transformation runs the risk of becoming theorized, normalized, assimilated by the hegemonic power structure of the moment—including the academy, including me. The site of resistance experiences its own transformative power to become the opposite of how it began. The performance, the performative must by necessity remain aloof, nebulous, unnamable. Taking a turn from what Jon MCKENZIE (2007) suggested, the question "What is performance?" may be inescapable (p.26), but like the Zen Master, the response should be "which performance?"; which then opens up the possibility, the potential for more and better questions. The film is demonstrative of LAW and URRY's (2004) suggestion that the "social sciences ... are relational and interactive. They *participate in, reflect upon and enact* the social" (p.392) through their research method. They are performative, reminding us that, "while the real is indeed real, it is also made" (p.395). The story told is not the other's perspective, but other realities, both real and possible. The work is an attempt to engender method as a "*system of interference* working towards and making particular forms of the social real while eroding others" (p.397). [12]

Story is the performance. The performance is the story. Story is the everyday act and the event, the quotidian and the spectacle, and everything in between and around. We need only look at Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, Bebo, blogging and reality TV to see some of the forms and functions of the performative turn not only in social sciences, but also in the everyday practice of life. By using film I have ventured into a performative space that has allowed me to explore another means of storytelling. However, it is fraught with challenges that are simultaneously emancipatory and suppressive: the hours upon hours spent in "data collection" of storytelling footage where I attend as audience struggling to "cultivate a patient listening" (DENZIN, 2001); the hours upon hours of (re)listening-(re)viewing with an ear/eye to edit like a sculptor chipping away at the story block using the two questions as chisels and the click of the mouse as mallet; and then the viewing and reviewing of dozens of "teacher movies" to find and dissect minute slices of Hollywood teachers in order to collage them on/with the storytellers reperforming some of their stories of good teachers. How can one "listen" to the storytelling without reinterpreting the story? It is impossible because

the storyteller herself has already done that. And with each telling she will continue to rework, reinterpret and reperform her story. In film I have *captured* one iteration, removed from the natural flow of time, however, not even that keeps the story from being reworked, reinterpreted and reperformed each time the listener-viewer turns her gaze toward it. [13]

I use a narrative montage in an effort to create a visual-auditory tension between the spliced segments of film to project an understanding of a particular narrative. My arranging and editing of the clips is performative, however, by consequence is always and everywhere subject to unexpected responses, even though I arrange them to provoke you, the listener-viewer, toward an idea, a story other than what each person is sharing, but rather the story I perform through that act. I am, as Joe KINCHELOE (2005) would say, a bricoleur trying to "move beyond the blinds of particular disciplines and peer through a conceptual window to a new world of research and knowledge production" (p.323). However, I am endeavoring toward a mindfulness of the "ontological politics" (LAW & URRY, 2004) engendered in the research act—the performance of other possible worlds. [14]

5. The Story's the Thing

As a storyteller-teacher-researcher I attend to the epistemological and ontological nature of narrative and throughout this performative process I keep returning to story because "stories do not simply contain knowledge, they are themselves the knowledge" (JACKSON, 1995, p.5). In my teaching life with the very young and with adults I've come to see that teaching is a performative act and the performative act teaches; it is possessed with a circularity, a recursiveness, but it is not redundant, rather it is similar to Paul RICOEUR's (1984) hermeneutic circle, a "healthy circle" that travels around past the same point several times, not on the same plane but rather more like a spiral (pp.71-76). [15]

After trying to listen authentically to the storyteller-participants and the story I've created, I think if we really want to understand the notion of a good teacher we need to begin with the stories of the other, for we are all the other. It is here in the stories that we may experience the transformative power of performance; the stories "do not simply describe the world as it is, but also enact it" (LAW & URRY, 2004, p.391). The performance provokes us to "think about the worlds [we] want to *help* to make" (p.391). The stories of a good teacher are not found in the technical aspects of the profession: the pre-service and in-service training, the lesson plans, the objectives, the goals, the learning outcomes, the prescribed curriculum, the standards, the benchmarks, best practice or the narrowing notions of assessment and evaluation. The notion of a good teacher emerges from, and in spite of, those thick layers of the technical; they are the stories that show us the humanity of teaching, the care for the other; a child who is vulnerable and desirous of the genuine attention of another. [16]

Listen, to the stories. [17]

5.1 A Good Teacher

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zEF9eDwPEbE>

Video link¹ [18]

References

- Bruner, Jerome (1996). *The culture of education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Cavarero, Adriana (2000). *Relating narratives: Storytelling and selfhood*. NY: Routledge.
- Certeau, Michel de (1984). *The practice of everyday life*. Berkely, CA: University of California Press.
- [Denzin, Norman K.](#) (1995). *The cinematic society: The voyeur's gaze*. London: SAGE Publications Inc.
- Denzin, Norman K. (2001). The reflexive interview and a performance social science. *Qualitative Research*, 1, 23-46.
- Garrison, Jim (2004). Ameliorating violence in dialogues across differences: The role of eros and logos. In Megan Boler (Ed.), *Democratic dialogue in education: Troubling speech, disturbing silence* (pp.89-103). New York: Peter Lang.
- Grumet, Madeleine (1988). *Bittermilk: Women and teaching*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Hendry, Petra Munro (2007). The future of narrative. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 13(4), 487-498.
- Jackson, Philip W. (1995). On the place of narrative in teaching. In Kieran Egan & Hunter McEwan (Eds.), *Narrative in teaching, learning and research* (pp.3-23). New York: Teacher College Press.
- Kierkegaard, Søren (1983). *Fear and trembling; repetition* (Howard V. Hong & Edna H. Hong, Trans.). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Kincheloe, Joe (2005). On the next level: Continuing the conceptualization of the bricolage. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 11(3), 323-350.
- King, Thomas (2003). *The truth about stories: A native narrative*. Toronto, Canada: House of Anansi Press.
- Law, John & Urry, John (2004). Enacting the social. *Economy and Society*, 33(3), 390-410.
- Lewis, Patrick (2007). *How we think, but not in school: A storied approach to teaching*. NL: Sense Publishers.
- McKenzie, Jon (2007). The liminal norm. In Henry Bial (Ed.), *The performance studies reader* (2nd ed., pp.26-31). NY: Routledge.
- Polakow, Valerie (1985). Whose stories should we tell? A call to action. *Language Arts*, 62, 826-835.
- Ricoeur, Paul (1984). *Time and narrative*. Vol. 1. (K. McLaughlin & D. Pellauer, trans.). Chicago: The University of Chicago.
- Rumi, Jalal ad-Din (2007). Rumi on Nafs, selected from the Mathnawi, <http://www.sufism.org/society/articles/Rumi%20on%20the%20Nafs.html> [Accessed: June 1, 2008].
- Rushdie, Salman (1990). *Haroun and the sea of stories*. London: Granta Books.
- Toolan, Michael J. (1988). *Narrative: A critical linguistic introduction*. New York: Routledge.
- Trinh, T. Minh-ha (1991). *When the moon waxes red: Representation, gender and cultural politics*. New York: Routledge.

1 The visual and audio clips used from other films and songs in this work are in accordance with copyright laws under the aegis of *Fair Dealing* in Canada through the six principal criteria established by the Supreme Court of Canada: 1. purpose of the dealing, 2. character of the dealing, 3. amount of the dealing, 4. alternatives to the dealing, 5. nature of the work, and 6. effect of the dealing on the work. In the United States the use is in accordance with *Fair Use* copyright laws through the four factors: 1. purpose and character, 2. nature of the copied work, 3. amount and substantiality and 4. effect upon work's value. This film is a scholarly piece, which further explores the notion of "a good teacher" as a social construction.

Trinh, T. Minh-ha (1992). *Framer framed*. New York: Routledge.

Turner, Mark (1996). *The literary mind: The origins of thought and language*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Author

Patrick J. LEWIS is a storyteller-teacher-researcher. He taught with primary and elementary children for 18 years. Currently, he works with pre-service teachers and graduate students in the Faculty of Education at the University of Regina in Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada. This is his first venture into the story-world of film.

Contact:

Patrick J. Lewis, Assistant Professor
Faculty of Education
University of Regina
3737 Wascana Parkway, Regina SK, Canada
S4S 0A2

Tel.: +1 306 585 4608

Fax: +1 306 585 4880

E-mail: Patrick.lewis@uregina.ca

URL: <http://education.uregina.ca/index.php?id=20&type=faculty&uid=36>

Citation

Lewis, Patrick J. (2008). A Good Teacher [18 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 9(2), Art. 41, <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0802415>.

Revised: 2/2018