

*Breaking The Ties That Bind:
Beyond imagination and memory in an at-risk youth literacy program-
Some theory and some examples
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Abstract

At what point is imagination and memory a hindrance to education and learning? I explore this question in *Breaking The Ties That Bind* where I argue that it is necessary to overcome the limits of imagination and memory. I begin with an introduction to my classroom, a Youth Literacy Program located in a public alternate secondary school in Surrey, BC, and a summary of my theoretical position. To bring the introduction and theoretical arguments to life I then discuss two pieces of work produced by students as part of their class work. This work shows how "at risk" students active within the classroom change their lives: their acts are found to be liberatory and, in the contexts of student lives, revolutionary. The conclusion returns us to a broader theoretical domain by focusing on the importance of transcending student biography, identity, and imagination in at risk youth pedagogy.

The paper shows that engagement with the literacies of student lives is a viable, necessary, yet insufficient response to the challenges that inner city, at-risk youth face. Stated thus, I also raise questions regarding the dialectics of freedom, agency, and pedagogy within Surrey classroom contexts.

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Breaking The Ties That Bind:

Beyond imagination and memory in an at-risk youth literacy program.

1.0 The Classroom and the Youth Literacy Program.

My classroom and Youth Literacy Program, on which this paper draws, is located in a "Learning Centre". The Centre was established in August 2000 and is one of 125 public schools in the Surrey School District (District #36), the largest in British Columbia with 61,000 students, and one of the fastest growing. Five Learning Centers have been established in the district, each providing focused support to predominantly 'at risk' designated students¹ within the school district, offering students the chance to earn their Grade 12 graduation.

Students (who range in age from 15 to 21 years) face a number of problems. For example, over 7% of Learning Centre students live independently (generally, on the street) at some point in the school year. On average four students each month are entering or being discharged from a local Youth Detention Centre and over half of the students experience violence as part of their daily lives, either at home or on the streets. Over 60% of the students indicated that a Sky train station was a focal point for their social interaction, a station plagued with problems related to youth crime, drugs and violence (Canadian Centre for Education Alternatives (CCEA), 1999, p. 2). In a random survey conducted by a literacy class student, 64% of the Learning Center's morning student group had not eaten breakfast, and had not eaten any food by 11:00 am.

Principals in the school district identify students who, in addition to their at risk designations, have exceedingly low literacy and numeracy scores on provincial standardized assessment tests. These students are referred to my classroom- the District's Youth Literacy Program. For example, on entry, in provincial standardized assessment tests students in the literacy program scored five grades below average in reading comprehension and six grades below average for

numeracy; all assessments in reading comprehension scored at or below the fourth grade level, 30% of Learning Centre students drop out because of literacy-based concerns. On average, my students have not attended school for at least two years prior to entering the program, and the last grade attained for 30% of the students in the 2003-2004 school year was grade three. Sixty percent of the students in the Literacy Program have diagnosed learning disabilities and/or attention deficit disorders.

The Youth Literacy Program accommodates 32 students, mainly boys, who are divided into morning and afternoon class sessions. The blend of students, with a range of literacy and numeracy levels and diverse life experiences, are enrolled and placed in the classroom on a full-time basis. Students are free to leave the program and The Learning Centre at which point new students are accepted. Continuous entry and leaving, and the particularities of each student's life, requires a flexible teaching process that includes individualized, group and peer literacy support and instruction. Frequently teaching is abandoned to provide focused behavior support, counseling, or mediation. In the past (up to September 2004), these different tasks were provided by myself, as class teacher, and the class youth care worker, Ms Adair Bastin, working together as a close-knit team. A certain sense of the research site is captured in some of the student videos (Scott Moloney's "Our class", Jason Sheik's "Black Eyed Peas", and Lance Higgs's "First Love") and writing.

2.0 Description of research methods; summary of theoretical position and argument.

2.1 Research Method

This paper draws on two interrelated research programs. One, an inquiry into the nature of Youth Literacy, was initiated in 2001 and entailed classroom based fieldwork conducted collaboratively, initially with UBC's Dr. Theresa Rogers and later with her research assistant, Ms. K. Winters, a PhD student in the Department of Literacy and Language Education. A second research program, examining the relationships among 'at risk' youth imagination, memory, and autobiography,

1 District counsellors, Learning and Behaviour psychologists and Principals make the 'at risk' designations. Moderate (classified '323') and severe (classified '333') designations are made. '323s' are students with behaviour

commenced in late 2003. In the UBC partnership, my own notes, lesson plans, and observations were supplemented by weekly classroom observation sessions and team teaching conducted by the UBC researchers. Other data sources include samples of student work, teacher and researcher journal and diary entries, teacher and student records, 180 hours of digitally videoed classroom recordings, formal and informal assessment schedules, and annual student interview transcripts. Recently (September 2004), I have been able to commence audio recordings of teaching ‘moments’ and interactions among students using hardware provide by SFU’s Imaginative Education research Group (IERG).

2.2 Theoretical position and Pedagogy

Bearing the context of the school and the student’s lives in mind, I work to find ways of valuing student reading and writing, and extending their narratives to include wider and wider horizons of experience. In this regard, I define youth literacy as one material embodiment of my student’s ‘emergent identities’; youth literacy is the continuous rewriting (and rereading) of the texts of our identities (Brockmeier, 2000, p. 55; Bruner, 1990). While powerful templates (such as racism, homophobia, nationalism, and the edification of violence and warfare) structure an individual’s self and world view, these templates (or discourses, to use the jargon) take effect materially, at particular times and in particular places, among particular individuals (Archer, 2000) through dialectical processes of rereading and reinscription². Or, as Thomas King puts it: “The truth about stories is that that’s all we are” (2003, p. 32).

Because mine is a literacy program focusing on 15-19 year olds, my emphasis is on the rereading of these narratives by my students as they live their lives. Consequently I have the privilege of foregrounding the discursive construction of student identities, a process that is partly autobiographical. Thus student writing starts from their ‘reading’, their understandings, of the templates of their lives; the limitations and biases of these templates structure in fundamental ways

‘difficulties’; ‘333s’ are students with external agency support.

2 Inscription/reinscription: the physical experience (of racism, poverty, violence, homelessness).

the nature of my student's stories. Sally Munt correctly points out that the "self has to manage intelligibility of itself through time, and it achieves this through narrative, through becoming the 'hero' of its own story ... Techniques of the self, such as writing, render the self visible and plausible to itself and to others" (2002, p. 8). Narrative and autobiography, as 'techniques of the self' therefore assumes an important part of the teaching and learning process (Shotter, 2000, p. 10). And as narrative hear writing, reading, photography and the gamut of artistic and scientific expression that the students in the literacy program begin to engage with once they have begun to tell their narratives in the 'heroic' form, as a narrative that affirms their selfhood and that enhances their self esteem. This emergent narrative, a narrative that is so fundamentally imbricated with the spaces of their lives, can be seen in the student's class work- Mel's story; Burgandy's Wahwee and Nerunda; Anton's Whale Rider.

The Youth Literacy Program goes beyond traditional school-based pedagogy by integrating the oral imagination, the material contexts and biographies of student lives, traditional 'text-based' foci of reading and writing literacies, and opportunities for students to express themselves across multiple literacies. The Youth Literacy Program teaches reading and writing by integrating student imaginations, biography, life context and path, with the curriculum content of formal alternative schooling (see Rogers and Schofield, forthcoming).

2.3 Argument

In essence I argue here (and show in the classroom) that when working with at risk designated youth the teaching process should be integrated with the material contexts and biographies of student lives and the student's own readings and re-readings of these biographies. It is these readings, and the student's own tellings of their stories, that become the basis for further curricular exploration. I suggest that deemphasizing reading, writing, and texts, and braiding curriculum texts into narratives- stories written by students that draw on their biographies and their multiple and

hybrid identities- leads to increases in student comprehension and learning and greater commitment to education.

However, as necessary as this pedagogy might be it is insufficient if it is not transformed and transcended. For real education to occur I feel it is essential that we teachers overcome the limits of our dialogically structured imagination (Bakhtin, 1981) and memory precisely because, as Kenneth Gergen points out in a paraphrase of Wittgenstein, “the limits of our narrative traditions serve as the limits of our identity” (1998, p. 10). Biography, the stories we tell that are constitutive of our identities and that profoundly shapes our imaginings (Warnock, 1994; Steen, 1998), must be transcended.

Section three examines how the argument is applied in practice.

3.0 Two samples of student work

3.1 The Metamorphosis

An important component of our work is the use of multimedia technology (in particular Digital Film) in the teaching process. Bradon, for example wrote (all sic.) that:

“I thought that filming was cool and challenging because you have to get the perfect day on which everyone in your film is OK with. And if you try to film on a day when no one is ready then you are screwed. The fun part was the skateboarding. And when I got pissed off I found out that there was no point because I didn’t plan good enough. Another thing I learned was lying with the camera for example I made It look like lance landed a double heelflip”.

Another student, Craig, has been working in the Literacy Program for three years. Although his attendance is occasionally erratic he has made progress, completing the courses required for Grade 10 and starting on Grade 11 courses late in the 2002-03 academic year. At the beginning of the 2003-04 academic year I noticed a sudden improvement in Craig’s class work. I had shifted him off Math 11E, and asked him to write an imaginary/creative piece about a young person who breaks into cars.

Craig wrote carefully for eight days, seldom taking a break, revising, editing and reworking his material and produced a loosely autobiographical short story. I asked Craig for a second story on a related but different theme, and again I got the same result.

To expand Craig's repertoire away from crime writing I introduced him to Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, in an illustrated (cartoon) version that brilliantly retains the novel's bleak existential theme ... or in Craig's words: "the book is based on the metaphor of the struggles of life" (Interview with K. Winters, 19/12/03). After reading the novel I asked Craig to make a short digital video of any part of the novel. This request prompted extensive rereading, discussion, the development of a script, and basic storyboarding ... "a small summary" (Interview with K. Winters, 19/12/03) in Craig's opinion.

Following this planning, Craig began filming whereupon he overcame numerous technical, conceptual and inter-personal difficulties while he worked on the film. For example, one difficulty was to show Gregor Samsa, the novel's protagonist, as a beetle. How could Craig's actor look like a beetle with no make up or special effects budgets? Following an attempt to purchase a "beetle outfit" from the local COSTCO (none were in stock), Craig, a group of students, and I brainstormed possible solutions to his problem: we could film live beetles (a bucketful were collected); we could film worms; we could use plastic worms. The solution that was chosen was to present split second images of a beetle that alternate with shots of Gregor Samsa waking up. The beetle images (in color with a bluish haze) appear to move and flicker, an effect created by filming a downloaded web picture directly off a computer screen.

With perhaps two or three more day's work left before completion, Craig and a friend relapsed into a scripted narrative that I had hoped he had left behind: he attacked, beat-up and robbed a person in a supermarket parking lot. The robbery was captured on security video and Craig returned to prison, his bail chances used up, and with the prospect of trial in an adult court.

Is Craig's biography and identity, the story that he tells himself about his life, a perpetual dance with the justice system? Or is it possible, as Rousseau argued in *Emile*, for Craig to overcome

the constraints of biography and community and to metamorphose into a person who does not have a need to swarm, jump and steal?

3.2 The Whale Rider

The second case study revolves around the work of two students, Anton and Brent. Anton is completing his Grade 10, and Brent, his Grade 12. Brent joined the literacy class in August 2000, and Anton in March 2002. Brent needed to read a novel as part of the course requirements of Communications 12; Anton was struggling to connect to the First Nations studies components of Socials 10. Anton is a strong reader with a clear grasp of symbolism and metaphor; Brent is a committed and dedicated researcher who, after working a night shift cleaning oven extractor vents in hotel kitchens, arrives at school willing to study. In October 2002 I encouraged Brent and Anton to work together on a collaborative piece of work that drew on their imagined and real biographies and on the representations of Maori culture captured in the novel “The Whale Rider” (Ihimaera, 1987).

The novel tells the story of Kahu, an eight year old Maori girl, and her great-grandfather, Koro Apirana. Koro, the elder chief of his community, struggles to reconcile his traditional beliefs regarding paternal hereditary leadership with the fact that his eldest son had left the community leaving Kahu, his great-granddaughter, as potentially the next tribal leader. Koro starts a village school, open only to the boys of the community, to teach them Maori lore and etiquette. Kahu tries to join the school and is rejected and humiliated by Koro. Eventually earning his respect, the novel ends with Koro Apirana recognizing that “she was the one” (ibid. p. 145). I knew that both students would be able to identify with Kahu. In itself this identification with the identity struggles of a girl would be an important learning experience for my students who are socialized for the most part into the gendered mores of mainland British Columbia.

Realizing that Brent was struggling to understand aspects of the novel’s symbolism I brought in the film version of the Whale Rider. I encouraged Brent to watch the film along with Anton. At

this point I was working with two of Egan's (1997) frameworks- for Brent, the Philosophic and for Anton, the Romantic; I also anticipated that as the series of lessons progressed Anton would engage in an increasingly philosophic (and Somatic), and Brent an increasingly Romantic series of activities.

When the film was finished I asked the two boys to write a film and novel appreciation. Both students worked assiduously on this project: Occasionally they discussed parts of the film with each other; at other times we discussed the film together using dyad and triad organograms on the whiteboard. Anton read the novel with an interest that he had never previously shown before. Brent wrote:

“Wow that was a interesting movie. It was a lot to do with spirichal native stuff. I think the end was weard. They lift the boat on logs into the sea ... The grandfather was chef of their trib. Koro Apirana dident like the idea of Kahu being a leader because girls should not be a leader in the native culture” (Class work exercise, 1/12/03. All sic.).

Anton also emphasised spiritual aspects of Maori and Aboriginal cultures when he commented that

“I have always been interested in the native culture and history ... they believe that their great loved ones spirits live within the whales but I am shure that it is also with othwe animals for example the eagle. I don't know much but the eagle is a big part of their religion” (Class work exercise, 1/12/03).

Anton returned to this theme in his review of the novel. He observed that “by reading this book it has helped me relize how their religion works and how different things symbalize important things in their religion. Such as the whale sympolizes their gods and past chiefs” (Class work exercise, 8/12/03).

Concluding his review of the film Anton wrote:

“It showed me that no matter what religion you are if you truly believe in your[self], you will be fine in life because if you fale at everything else in life like education or jobs and anything like that you can still have the pride and faith or spirit that you followed your religion and so when you die you can say you new who you really were and still die with dignity” (Class work exercise, 1/12/03).

A follow up exercise emerged from a question that Brent put to me. At one point in our discussion he asked: “Hey. What was those tattoos on that girl’s face and on some of the men? And why were they sticking out their tongues in the one dance?” (Diary, 3/12/03)

I responded by asking the students to prepare a short PowerPoint presentation, using internet and encyclopedia based research, on Maori Dance and facial tattooing. This exercise lasted five hours, and stretched over three days. The end product I received was a 90 second illustrated presentation on Maori dance, although in the student’s written notes I saw that their research had included reading and note taking on the key features and symbolism of Maori facial tattoos. Reflecting on this aspect of their work Brent commented:

“Anton did most writing coz he’s stronger at that than me. I did most research. I found all the pictures and got info on tattooing. Anton wrote up the stuff and the big words. He’s better with big words- like he came up with “concisely” on the one slide.

I learnt lots of research skills on the Maori people. How they live and stuff. I lost stuff several times, so I learnt about patience, and good writing skills and backing up and saving when I typed it up and wrote it so many times. I revised ‘there’ and ‘their’ quite a bit of times to get them right” (Student reflection journal, 9/12/03).

Although both students were responding to the Philosophic Imaginary contained within the novel I also wanted a deeper emotional understanding; and I wanted the students to turn their reflection from a ‘distant’ Aboriginal culture back to North American First Nation’s communities. To deepen this emotional impact I turned to the Romantic Imagination through empathetic writing: their next exercise was to write two letters each. The first, from Kahu to her great grandfather, Koro where she states her feelings regarding the impact of his constant rejection on her emotions and self esteem. A second letter was to be a response from Koro to Kahu.

At this point Brent missed a week of school on account of his work commitments, but I wanted to continue to link Anton’s interest in Maori culture with aspects of the First Nations experience in British Columbia. I gave him a short Stwomish story that tells how the Creator gave the gift of healing to humanity. Rather than asking Anton to do a traditional reading and reading

comprehension exercise, the kind of exercise that had led to Anton's early rejection of the institution of schooling, I presented him with a 6x10 inch piece of Red Cedar and a set of chisels, and asked Anton to carve me a response.

Anton's response to the exercise was interesting. He questioned how you could turn a story into a woodcarving; or how a carving could be written as a story. He was unsure what to carve, and what of the written version should be left out of his carving. He finally decided, after sketching several possible carvings, to develop his own symbolism and metaphor and not to worry too much if people didn't make a direct translation from his carving to a specific story.

With Anton's carving I ended the unit of work. Throughout the different classroom exercises Brent, Anton and I discussed (often together with other students who joined in the conversation) the central conflicts of the novel and film: tradition and change; patriarchy; youth identity and elder values³.

3.3 Updates: September, 2004

Craig: After serving his time in an adult (er...) corrections facility Craig returned to school. He has not yet finished his film- on returning he did a work experience pre-placement course, before proceeding to Kwantelin college to complete a post secondary equivalent course in Commercial and domestic roofing. With this certification he was quickly employed and spent the summer of 2004 in Whistler installing roofs. He is still working for the same employer, but is thinking of starting his own roofing and contracting company. He attends school on rainy days or when not putting roofs over people's heads.

Anton: Worked for his mom over the summer, and is no longer thinking of dropping out. Rather he is working towards taking over her business. His woodcarving was used by Youswe (a peer) as the basis for short story writing, reading and clay modeling. Building on his renewed interest in school, Youswe then produced a film version of the first two pages of Jose Saramago's (1995)

³ These conflicts climax at several points in the novel and film. One of these, occurring in the film and not the novel, leads Koro Apirana to ask Kahu: "What have you done?", only to be recanted at the film version's end with

novel “Blindness” (see: www.newtonliteracies.ca). Anton participated actively in the life of the class acting in student films, or serving as a camera operator and consultant. He is now producing a film version of Isabel Allende’s short story “Our Secret” (Allende, 1991).

Brent: Two courses shy of his Grade 12 graduation, Brent has had to drop out of school to work full time cleaning hotel and restaurant extractor vents.

Conclusion

I began this presentation by speaking to the important role of biography, identity, and imagination in at risk youth pedagogy. My argument then showed that it is essential to ‘Break the ties that bind’ us into eternally rerunning the scripted narratives of our imagined memories, and projecting the rerun memory of imagination (I draw here on Mary Warnock, 1994, p. 141) into our imagined futures. In short, we must transcend the autobiography of our imaginations. I contend that Teachers can play an important mediating role in student lives by facilitating the transition from rewriting our biographies to reinventing our Autobiographies; to reinventing new stories or having the courage to read alternative narratives and see their tellers as fully human agents with rights equal to my (our) own (Shotter, 2003)⁴.

Finally I have shown that over time, "at risk" students active within the classroom can change their narrativised scripts: These acts are liberatory and, in the contexts of student lives, revolutionary. Maybe no heroic narrative of Metamorphosis towards Enlightenment. But Metamorphosis nevertheless.

Koro’s comment to Kahu: “Wise leader forgive me, I am just a fledgling ...”.

⁴ In my current context, I think here of the grudging tolerance by white Anglo-Saxons of people of other races, and the aversion to any discussion of the rights of gay people.

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