Discourses We Live By
Narratives of Educational and Social Endeavour

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Janet Dyson explores forms of, and the importance of, narrative truth embodied in acts of storytelling. Calling on philosophers, published authors and her own research and teaching experience, she shows how fictional accounts can divulge deeper (if less universal) truths in ways that engage the imagination of the reader, becoming memorable. When training student teachers, Janet encourages them to adopt creative approaches as they reflect on their school experiences and, here, demonstrates how such a story can capture both an event and the emotions it engenders.

‘The truth about stories is that that’s all we are.’ (King, 2003, p. 153)

We are living at a time when the postmodern rise of relativism and the reluctance to challenge the validity of any asserted truth has reached the public consciousness. The discourses around absolute and relative truth(s), heavily contested during the ‘qualitative revolution’ (see Wertz, 2011) have given way to what is perhaps a more sinister state, a growing culture of ‘fake news’, conspiracy and denial (D’Ancona, 2017) in which there is a real danger of the public accepting all truths as equally valid without question.

This chapter makes no attempt to revisit the arguments around the plausibility of an absolute truth. Like Frank (2004, p. 439) I accept that ‘postmodern truth sees too many perspectives to accept the closure of explanation’. Nor does this chapter engage with the distinction between the descriptive chronological account (White, 1984; Mink, 1978) and
the ‘realism’ of texts that are neither representational nor factual, but interpretable, as we move away from what they say to what they talk about (Ricœur, 1976). Instead it enters Bruner’s (1986) ‘possible worlds’, turning to the role that stories and storied accounts can play in capturing and communicating the ‘reality’ as ‘lived’ and ‘experienced’ by the narrator and/or protagonist(s); accepting the impossibility of purely objective truth and the power of stories to illuminate fundamental issues as claimed by Gadamer in *Truth and Method* (2004/1960). It is accepted that narrative can still support ‘understanding’ of ‘specifically human truth’ (White, 1984, pp. 25, 33) and acknowledges it to be ‘an imaginary discourse about real events that may not be less true for being imaginary’ (op.cit. p. 33). To cite Frank again (op.cit., p. 439), through embracing complexity ‘we gain a power to see what is and to say what is’. These multiple notions of truth and narrative are examined, challenged, theorized and exemplified within this chapter, and I draw particularly on ideas expressed by Hans-Georg Gadamer and Wolfgang Iser and the views of more contemporary writers.

**My Research Context**

White (1984) claimed a space for using narrative in history that I acknowledge, but for me there are further questions around the value of ‘stories’, and I am inspired continually to (re)explore Rushdie’s rhetorical question ‘What is the use of stories that aren’t even true?’ (Rushdie, 1990, p. 20). This key question has served me well in a long career as a teacher-trainer in England, where I have been able to encourage my student trainees to reflect on their experiences in school and put them into words — as stories, dialogues, poems, if they were willing to risk the move away from the linear factual account. Over many decades I have collected such ‘fictional’ narratives with a view to later analysis, and as a reflective tool to work alongside these trainees to capture their changes of viewpoint and perspective as incidents arise and their careers unfold.

This chapter draws on my experience of encouraging story-writing with trainee teachers through reflective journals in which they seek to examine the value of stories as a means of conveying ‘truths’. It is part of more extensive studies (Dyson, 2018; Dyson & Smith, 2019) and ongoing
work that use a narrative inquiry approach, the study of experiences as story (after Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Narrative inquiry spaces are places of belonging for both researchers and participants, marked always by ethical responsibility, attitudes of openness, mutual vulnerability, reciprocity, and care. The empowerment that stories bring to tellers and listeners is emphasized, as are the ways in which stories have the power to direct and change our lives, disturbing and puzzling us. Bruner talks about the narrative power and possibilities that reside in texts — which are ‘all we have’ — and which are not reliant on the ‘ontology of verification’ (1994, p. 34). A decade earlier (1986, pp. 12–14) he identified two distinctive ways of thinking: the argument that seeks to convince people through a series of logical steps and evidence, and the story that seeks to be lifelike and draw people into a world that resembles the ‘real’; valuing the story as a form that engages the imagination. Like Bruner (reflecting, in his Millennium lectures, 2002\(^1\)), I believe that stories have a vital role in helping us to make sense of the world.

It is frequently the case that, when I tell or read a story in the context of teaching about reflective story writing, the first question asked is ‘But is it true?’ There is often a sense that, like the reader of Wallace Stevens’ poem, *The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm*, the inquirer wants desperately to hear that the story is true, recognizing instinctively that the imagination is our ‘necessary angel’ (Stevens, 1942–1951); an antidote to the pressures of reality with the capacity to transcend what is and see a different, better version of what could be. Often, I will qualify my answer with ‘It depends what you mean by true’ before drawing on a number of writers who have contributed to my understanding of the nature of truth in fiction and how this relates to reflective storytelling.

Salman Rushdie has consistently demonstrated his understanding of fiction as truth-telling in his own fictional work. Talking about his (then) new novel *Two Years Eight Months*, Rushdie (2015, in interview with Franklin) explains that this is a story about the act of storytelling. ‘It’s a story that’s crowded with stories on purpose […] It has stories nested inside of stories, stories breaking off in order to tell other stories […]’. He believes that fictional writing can ‘intensify our perceptions

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1 Bruner’s Millennium lectures, published as *Making Stories: Law, Literature, Life* (2002), include endnotes that provide a comprehensive overview of how humans use, and have used, stories to better understand the world in which they live.
and perhaps our understanding of the world’ and describes how literary devices can ‘make something happen in the reader’s head’. For Rushdie, fiction is ‘another way of getting at the truth’, through a process that makes beautiful even ‘the darkest truths’ (ibid.). He believes, too, that when factual and fictional discourses ‘collide’ the outcomes are interesting. Both gain from association (ibid.).

Together these sources set the scene for what follows: a text that is fundamentally focused on demonstrating the power of the storied narrative tale. In writing this chapter I am breaking the habit of a lifetime in allowing theory and context to precede the actual stories themselves. Invariably, for me, it has been the story that comes first, as is almost always the case in reflective writing of the kind I encourage in my students and practise for myself. It is the story that wants to be told that we ‘find’, the one that cannot be suppressed but makes its presence felt. It is rare for someone to write a story about what a good day they have had at school. Stories are prompted by trouble of some kind, things that go awry; there’s a dilemma, an unexpected turn of events, a sense of compulsion to tell the story. Just as in literary fiction, for a story to be worth telling, something unexpected has to happen. There is disruption. Questions are raised. ‘Stories are possible because some initial order has been disrupted’ (Eagleton, 2013, p. 104). ‘Something goes awry, otherwise there’s nothing to tell about’ (Bruner, 2002, p. 17). As Aristotle (Poetics, c.335 BCE/2013) recorded there must be peripeteia (reversal); a point where an unexpected event occurs; a twist in the plot becomes apparent.

Framing My Research

My storied work with students sits in the overlapping spaces of reflection and narrative inquiry, adhering broadly to the framework established by Clandinin and Connelly (2006), which, they claim, owes its influence to Dewey’s belief that in order to have meaning, experience must be subjected to reflection. Clandinin and Connelly (in Schön, 1991, pp. 258–9) explain ‘[…] if we take the view that the storied quality of experience is both unconsciously re-storied in life and consciously re-storied and lived through the processes of reflection, then the rudiments of method are born in the phenomenon
of narrative’. Here it can be seen that both narrative inquiry and reflective inquiry have their roots in Dewey’s philosophy of experience. I recognize this as the way the reflective process has worked for those who have been prompted to write the stories and poems that I have collected over my career.

Dewey saw experience as grounded in continuity: ‘[...] every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after’ (1938, p. 35). His understanding of experience also included the notions of situation and interaction: ‘An experience is always what it is because of a transaction taking place between an individual and what at the time constitutes his environment’ (ibid., p. 43). These attributes form the basis for the three commonplaces of temporality, sociality and place developed by Clandinin and Connelly (2006). Thus, the connection between reflective inquiry and narrative inquiry is made more explicit and the overlaps and tensions — indeed, the possibilities — between these two approaches have been explored by Downey and Clandinin (2010).

Schön (1983) built on Dewey’s thinking and developed the practice of deliberate and systematic reflection in a range of professional contexts, identifying and distinguishing between reflection on and reflection in action. Bolton (2010) viewed reflection and reflexivity as cognitive states of mind, which she linked to pedagogical practices in education, health and social care. Furthermore, she asserted that any narrative is inevitably fiction, in that events are reconstructed or recreated from a perspective’ (p. 93), meaning that each individual will tell the story differently. The stories in my inquiry, because of their subject matter, turn out to be not simply reflections on teaching but reflections on the social, and cultural conditions that have an impact on teaching (van Manen, 1991; Zeichner & Liston, 1987). Subjects that have prompted reflective story writing have included issues relating to equality and diversity of race, culture and gender; inclusion and exclusion; child protection; online safety; and social and political issues such as child poverty. Several of these themes intersect in Etta’s story, which I shall share later in this chapter.

First, however, I wish to clarify that the focus of my research is the ways that stories can be written as a means of reflection on practice and are the results of reflection on practice. They represent the action of reflecting and the outcomes of that reflection. They have been explored
through a narrative inquiry with attention to the three commonplaces and using the strategy of thinking with rather than about the stories (Morris, 2002; Estefan, Caine & Clandinin, 2016). The commonplaces of time, place and sociality, and the continuity that is established as we relive and retell stories over time follow the practice explained here by Clandinin and Connelly (2000): ‘Through stories humans create coherence through time, between the personal and the social, and across situations. Stories are not just about experience itself; we live and learn in, and through, the living, telling, retelling and reliving of our stories’ (p. 387).

Blurring the Boundaries of Truth and Fiction

The borders between truth and fiction become increasingly permeable during the twentieth century, attracting the attention of philosophers, theorists and fiction writers alike. In Truth and Method (2004/1960), Hans-Georg Gadamer argued that we can never reach a totally objective perspective because we cannot stand outside history and culture/tradition. He attacked the view that only science held a vision of truth and argued that the truth conveyed by art is necessary for human life — through interpreting texts, we educate the imagination and develop our ability to envisage things differently. Maxine Greene (1995, p. 15) concurs, claiming that ‘it is disruptive to look at things as if they could be otherwise. There is tension in this looking; there is a blank resistance for a while. But then resistance, imagination, open capacities, inventiveness, and surprise are shown to be joined somehow.’

Gadamer further argued that the inability to imagine things differently leads to simplistic entrenchment in received truths and to a fearful defence of what has always been — lack of imagination often leads to fundamentalism. He suggested that to achieve deeper understanding we must integrate something unfamiliar into our familiar way of seeing things and engage our imaginations. Through reading literature and poetry our existing perspectives are altered, both enlarged and deepened; our prejudices and biases are highlighted and begin to shift — in what Gadamer calls ‘the fusion of horizons’. Gadamer stresses that in both the sciences and the humanities only a well-trained imagination can see things otherwise (Lawn, 2006, p. 69), providing
support for my decision to introduce the creative and expressive arts whenever possible within teacher-training programmes, as I do through reflective practices.

Foucault, when questioned about ‘truth and fiction’ with regard to his first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, asserted, ‘I am well aware that I have never written anything but fictions. I do not mean to say, however, that truth is therefore absent. It seems to me that the possibility exists for fiction to function in truth, for a fictional discourse to include effects of truth’ (Gordon, 1980, p. 193). He seeks not ‘proof’ but to offer ideas to see how they attract and withstand criticism; in effect, truth is set aside to establish levels of acceptance and credibility.

At the start of his book *The Fictive and the Imaginary*, Wolfgang Iser (1993) similarly challenges the fact/fiction dichotomy when he poses the question: ‘Are fictional texts truly fictions, and are nonfiction texts truly without fictions?’ (p. 1). He describes literary texts as ‘a mixture of reality and fictions’ that bring about ‘an interaction between the given and the imagined’ (ibid.). He proposes to replace the duality of fiction and reality with a triad: ‘the real, the fictive and what we shall henceforth call the imaginary’ (ibid.). I am, perhaps, over-simplifying Iser’s complex argument here but I believe he is identifying imagination as essential for the act of fictionalizing to take place. This triadic relationship is very clear to me in the kinds of stories that have been generated through the reflections of the participants I have studied, where ‘real’ events and experiences have been fictionalized through the exercise of imagination. And this is a strategy deliberately employed by narrative researchers like Peter Clough, who fictionalizes participant profiles to avoid compromising anonymity.

[...] stories can provide a means by which those truths, which cannot otherwise be told, are uncovered. The fictionalization of educational experience [...] [is] thus providing the protection of anonymity to the research participants without stripping away the rawness of real happenings. (Clough, 2002, p. 8)

This century, philosopher Richard Kearney (2002) tells us that: ‘Telling stories is as basic to human beings as eating. More so, in fact, for while food makes us live, stories are what make our condition human’ (p. 3). He argues that stories give us agency in our own history: ‘[...] [it is] only when haphazard happenings are transformed into story, and thus made
memorable over time, that we become full agents in our history’ (ibid.). Kearney reminds us that when someone asks us who we are, we tell our stories: ‘[…] you recount your present condition in the light of past memories and future anticipations. You interpret where you are now in terms of where you have come from and where you are going to. And so doing you give a sense of yourself as a narrative identity that perdures and coheres over a life time’ (p. 4). He says that every story ‘regardless of differences in style, voice, plot, genre, shares the common function of somebody telling something to somebody about something’ (p. 5).

Within the literary tradition, Barthes (1966) stated that: ‘The narratives of the world are without number […] The narrative is present at all times, in all places, in all societies: the history of the narrative begins with the history of mankind; there does not exist, and never has existed, a people without narratives,’ (p. 14). He also states that: ‘narrative is simply there like life itself, international, trans-historical and trans-cultural’ (Barthes, 1977, p. 79). If you share the view that all life is story, then the perspective of the narrative inquirer that we live storied lives on storied landscapes becomes a way of life, a way of understanding the world and our place in it. Novelist E.L. Doctorow claimed that: ‘There is no longer any such thing as fiction or non-fiction, there is only narrative’ (cited in Denzin, 1997, p. 126), and for Laurel Richardson (2000) the difference between fiction and non-fiction is simply ‘the claim the author makes for the text’ (p. 926). King (2003) asserts more boldly that: ‘The truth about stories is that that’s all we are’ (p. 153). Making a claim that is very relevant to my work and to this book on Discourses We Live By, Robert Eaglestone (2013) writes that: ‘Literature is where ideas are investigated, lived out, explored in all their messy complexity […] Literature is how we make ourselves intelligible to ourselves’ (p. 1), a very strong claim for the role of literature in shaping the biographical narrative.

For Lore Segal, however, philosophers and storytellers should keep fact and truth apart. In the Afterword to her fictionalized account of her escape from Nazi Germany as a child on the Kindertransport (2018/1964, p. 279), she writes:

As a novelist writing autobiographically I get impatient with the reader who wants to know what ‘really’ happened […] It takes a philosopher to define reality, and to differentiate between fact and truth; the novelist
wants to do it with story [...] Why did I choose to fictionalise my personal history? Because I experience and remember and understand like a storyteller rather than a historian. Story chooses me.

How Stories Negotiate Truth(s)

For John Berger, both critic and author, other aspects of stories hold significance. In his essay, Another Way of Telling (1982), he reminds us of the centrality of the story’s main characters between whose ‘actions and attributes and reactions [...] the unstated connections are being made’ (p. 172). He claims that: ‘Stories walk like animals or men. And their steps are not only between narrated events but between each word. Every step is a stride over something not said’ (op.cit., ibid.). For Berger, stories are discontinuous, their authority dependent on a tacit agreement that what is not said is acceptable to the listener, and that its discontinuities make sense. This became really clear to me when I watched three-year-old Eva listening to the story I Want My Hat Back (Klassen, 2017). This picture book has minimal text and little character development but, through simple dialogue and images, poses an ethical question. Eva is sure she knows who stole the hat and is indignant on behalf of the hat’s owner, entering into the tacit agreement that stealing the hat is wrong, understanding implicitly what is not said. Berger argues that what makes a story worthy of being told is the extent to which it ‘invests with authority its characters, its listeners’ past experience and its teller’s words’ (ibid.). He calls this fusing of teller, listener and protagonists ‘the story’s reflecting voice,’ going on to explain that: ‘The story narrates on behalf of the subject, appeals to it and speaks in its voice. This fusing occurs within the discontinuities and the silent (but commonly agreed) connections, which allow the listener to enter the narration and become part of its reflecting subject’ (ibid.). Eva implicitly understood these processes at the age of three, supporting Berger’s further argument that the ‘truth’ of stories is not as relevant as their impact. For her, and those who watched her, the issue of ‘truth’ was not in question. Eva demonstrated the magical experience of being told a story. As she listened, she was able to put herself into the story, to understand what was not said, to respond on behalf of the characters and to engage with its ethical questions.
To respond to a story, as Eva did, arguably requires a blending of cognitive and emotional understandings. Indeed, a good story quickly captures the reader’s attention. The best stories are memorable; they make a powerful impression; they prompt an emotional response; they stay with you and inform your view of the world. As Emihovich (1995) writes: ‘Stories do not pretend to be objective because they deal with emotions, the irrational part of behaviour, they tap into the qualities of imagination and fantasy’ (p. 39/40). For Grumet (1988), in her analysis of stories of women and teaching: ‘Fidelity rather than truth is the meaning of these tales’ (p. 66), a view echoed by qualitative researcher Kim (2015), who sees fidelity as one of the characteristics that distinguishes a story as research from a story that is read for leisure. However, the term fidelity implies ‘something to be trusted’ (ibid., p. 111), and I interpret this to indicate that the reader regards the storyteller as trustworthy. Blumenfeld-Jones (1995, p. 33), also discussing the idea of fidelity, suggests that the ‘believability’ of the story is a key factor, and that the story should resonate with the audience’s experiences, something I have heard described by readers and listeners as ‘ringing true’. Barone (2000) who has elegantly addressed the issue of trust and mistrust in educational storytelling, emphasizes the significance of intention. He considers that it depends on what is being attempted by the writer and what claims are being made about the truth of those attempts. We saw earlier that, for Gadamer, the truthfulness of a text lies in its ‘power to throw light on fundamental matters at issue’ (Lawn, 2006, p. 50), connoting truth-seeking as illumination or examination. All are useful views when considering my main concern.

To return to Rushdie, I ask, is it not a key role of fiction to contribute to answering the questions about the meaning of truth, when addressing the use of ‘stories that aren’t even true’ (1990, p. 20). And, moreover, should we not now consider how storied narratives have the power to influence, even change, the viewpoints of individuals and groups?

The Power of Stories and Fictional Truth

Stories are never neutral. They may be viewed as subversive, as threatening, or as agents of moral teaching, depending on their nature and on how they are perceived and used (Rushdie, 2008; Squire
et al, 2014). King tells us that: ‘Stories are wondrous things. And they are dangerous’ (2003, p. 9); and novelist Amanda Craig asserts that: ‘People are much more frightened of novelists than they are of journalists or researchers’ (Craig, 2013). Here, Craig is echoing Plato’s much earlier belief in the power of stories to influence for good or ill. Plato saw them as soul shapers, to be treated with caution, allowing only certain types of stories and promoting censorship of others; an example of stories as a means of social control.

Then we must first of all, it seems, supervise the storytellers. We’ll select their stories whenever they are fine or beautiful and reject them when they aren’t. And we’ll persuade nurses and mothers to tell their children the ones we have selected, since they will shape their children’s souls with stories much more than they shape their bodies by handling them. Many of the stories they tell, however, must be thrown out. (Republic 3776)

Some writers have used stories to comment on real life. Charles Dickens, for example, used fictional writing as a means of critiquing Victorian values and exposing social injustices. He wrote with a clear social purpose in mind, creating stories to raise awareness of cultural, political and social issues. In his novel *Hard Times* (1854) his character, Mr Thomas Gradgrind, represents Victorian utilitarianism in its most intransigent forms. Gradgrind is deeply threatened by stories and expresses horror at what he terms ‘fancy’, that is the power of imagination. He fears the ability to see one thing in terms of another, the imaginative power to create metaphors, to see a thing ‘beyond us, yet ourselves’ (Stevens, 1965). Gradgrind insists that: ‘In this life, we want nothing but Facts, sir; nothing but Facts’ (Dickens, op.cit., p. 9). He is determined to protect his children from the threat posed by what he calls ‘idle storybooks’ (ibid.) seeing such books as a risk to the political economy, as they could engender different ways of seeing the world. He feels threatened by the possibility that the world could be imagined in a new way, and perhaps changed as a result of fictional engagement. Other classic examples of stories with a social purpose include Harriet Beecher-Stowe’s novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), Mary Gaskell’s *North and South* (1855) and John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). Such writings offer what Barone (1992, p. 172) calls ‘experience-based critiques that challenge conventional, politically comfortable descriptions of social phenomena’.  


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In their different ways and at different points in history, Plato, Dickens and Craig have all shown that fiction poses a threat for some, a view shared by Nussbaum who describes literature and the literary imagination as ‘subversive’ (1995, p. 2). Nussbaum argues that it is novels, rather than histories and biographies, which ‘engender the ability to imagine what it is like to live the life of another person who might, given changes in circumstances, be oneself or one of one’s loved ones’ (p. 5). She suggests that literature has the power to prompt its readers to ‘wonder about themselves’ (p. 5) and that it is disturbing because it ‘summons powerful emotions, it disturbs and puzzles’ (ibid.). Stories raise questions about self and others. They promote identification and sympathy in the reader and they unsettle, prompting questioning of the status quo. Nussbaum suggests that good literature ‘inspires distrust of conventional pieties and exacts a frequently painful confrontation with one’s own thoughts and intentions’ (ibid).

In the case of Plato, Dickens and Craig the social purpose is directed towards others, but this need not be the case. Ralph Ellison, writing his novel *Invisible Man* (first published in America in 1952) was very much an ‘insider’. In November 1981, composing an introduction to a thirtieth-anniversary edition of his book, he looked back on the writing process and highlighted some interesting perceptions of the workings of truth and fiction. Ellison describes his task as a novelist as ‘revealing the human universals hidden within the plight of one who was both black and American […] gambling with the reader’s capacity for fictional truth, to reveal the human complexity which stereotypes are intended to conceal’ (Ellison, 1982, p.xl). Ellison considers that, despite the seriousness of the subject matter, there was enjoyment in writing it: ‘a great deal of fun along the way’, claiming that ‘I knew that I was composing a work of fiction that would allow me to tell the truth while actually telling a “lie” which is the Afro-American term for an improvised story’ (ibid., p.xl).

Further seeking the chance of ‘letting stories breathe’, like Frank (2010, p. 2 of prologue) I have paid attention ‘as carefully as I can to what storytellers say about stories’, those like Ellison who wrote about the process, but also more directly. Grasping the opportunity to talk to a contemporary author, Ali Smith, at a conference in 2017, I questioned the extent to which writers of fiction see their work as a means of
telling truths that are difficult to accept, unpopular, unpalatable. She
responded by writing this aphorism in my copy of her book, Artful:
‘Truth will always out and fiction will always be a way in’, leading me
to further consider how fiction is used as ‘a way in’, or — in Gadamer’s
terms — as a means to actively highlight ‘fundamental matters at issue’
(Lawn, 2006, p. 50). I now examine how a story can offer ‘a way in’
to address ‘fundamental matters’ through a sequence of interim texts
(Clandinin, 2013) that tell and examine a story I collected from Etta, a
trainee teacher.

A Story that Confronts and Conveys Truth(s)

This is an appropriate point to exemplify how reflective story-
writing works. In the following extracts from her Reflective Journal,
Etta creates a story as a means of critical reflection on her experiences
when visiting a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) (a specialist educational unit
for English children excluded from mainstream provision, often for
behavioural reasons).

Etta’s entry for November 9th begins with seven lines from a song
written for Nina Simone that includes the salient line: ‘Oh Lord, please
don’t let me be misunderstood’ and goes on to claim good intentions
even when these fail under duress. These song lyrics are followed by
Etta’s story about ‘Tyrone’.

Sometimes music is the only thing that keeps me sane. I rap lyrics in my
head. Over and over, and over and over again. Justine always shouts at
me for tapping to the beat but I can’t help it. Tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap.
I don’t like it when she tells me off and I rarely listen because she isn’t
my real Mum. My real Mum gave me up when I was born, apparently
she was addicted to drugs... should I say ‘Gave me up’? Perhaps ‘Gave
up on me’ would be better. Justine is alright, to be fair. She bought me an
ipad for Christmas last year so I’m always on youtube listening to music.
People don’t get it. People don’t get me. All the teachers at my old
school had the same reaction — they all ‘gave up on me’. I’m a smart
cookie and they knew that, which is why they were reluctant to hand me
over at first. I could have really boosted their statistics with my cleverness.
But when I punched the Headteacher, they all gave up on me. I was sorry
after, but I found out years ago sorry doesn’t make everything alright.
So, I got sent to this other place instead of school. It’s where the ‘naughty
kids’ go. It’s in the middle of a housing estate about twenty minutes from
my house. I only go in the mornings and just learn about maths and English. The other boys are alright, but I’m much cleverer than them and it’s frustrating learning about things I already know.

That’s when I get angry. It’s boring going over and over and over the same thing. That’s when I start tapping to the rap music in my head. Tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap. Until Miss Smee says: ‘Tyrone will you stop that tapping’ and BHAM! Like a firework, I explode. They know to leave me alone when I’m like this. I sit on the green beanbag in the hallway and dig my nails into the carpet. I continue my tapping and rapping, more aggressively. I say through my teeth, my whole face tense. It releases the tension and eventually I’m feeling more calm. I stand up, hood goes up, I stroll back into class. ‘Tyrone, you’re back just in time for a biscuit.’ I wonder how long it will be ‘til Miss Smee gives up on me too?

Etta followed the story with a more formal reflection drawing on her background in psychology and exploring and theorizing some of the issues raised by her experiences at the Pupil Referral Unit (PRU). Etta explained how she was prompted to write the story and her feelings about writing it:

This story was written from the point of view of a boy I met at the PRU. He was very able, having already passed his 11 plus exam\(^2\) and was working on KS3\(^3\) (Secondary level) work. I worked closely with him and talked to his teachers during my visit. I thought about him a lot afterwards. I actually felt sadder following writing this reflection. Writing from the point of view of this child made me realize how it must be to have an unstable home life, to feel unwanted at home and again at school.

In her story Etta demonstrates her ability to go beyond reflection to the deeper process of reflexivity. This process allows us to distance ourselves from ourselves so that, like Alice passing through the looking glass,\(^4\) we find that the view from the other side is ‘as different as possible’. Taking the reflexive turn allows us to be both inside and outside ourselves and able to look both ways, to move back and forth between two worlds. When Etta stands back and reflects on her story, examining her feelings on writing it, she is demonstrating the ‘doubleness’ that reflexivity involves. Beyond this there is another dimension as Etta theorizes what

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2 Examination traditionally governing admission to grammar schools in England and Northern Ireland.
3 Formal educational stage for 11–14-year-olds in England and Wales.
she has observed and experienced. She is showing how understanding our own personal connection with the writing process can deepen and enrich our writing. The extent to which our ‘characters’ act like real human beings depends on the power of our imagination, the depth of our insight, and also our ability to empathize with them. Etta’s reflective journal entries demonstrate a well-developed capacity to reflect critically on her experiences and to create fiction that reflects truth. Through the writing of Tyrone’s story she is able to stand in his shoes, and in reading this story we are also enabled to try them on to see what they feel like.

**Framing Etta’s Story**

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) identified a three-dimensional inquiry space in which we, as researchers, are situated with our participants. The three dimensions are temporality, place and sociality. *Temporality* refers to the past, present and future of events and people. *Place* refers to the location where the inquiry takes place. *Sociality* refers to the relationship between researcher and participants. These are the relational spaces that provide the setting for the diversity of people and experiences in different contexts and relationships as they travel through the landscape, the scene of the inquiry. Clandinin (2013) shows how the three dimensions are ‘interconnected and interwoven’ (p. 50) explaining that: ‘Temporality is threaded into place and into events and emotions [...] we cannot understand a person’s experience of place without understanding temporality’ (p. 50). The researcher is located within this space, always attending to how the three dimensions have shaped their own experiences. Understanding the three-dimensional inquiry space enables clarification of research puzzles, justifies a study and helps the researcher to understand his/ her place within it. As the inquiry progresses, moving towards a final research text, continuing to draw on the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space enables a deeper understanding of the narratives, stories and poems and of the conversations with participant(s). In Clandinin’s words, such reflection enables the researcher to be ‘in relation’ with the participants (2016, p. 25).

Clandinin refers back to her earlier work with Michael Connelly to re-emphasize this relational nature of narrative inquiry:
Narrative inquiry is the study of experience, and experience, as John Dewey taught, is a matter of people in relation contextually and temporally. Participants are in relation, and we as researchers are in relation to participants. Narrative inquiry is an experience of the experience. It is people in relation studying with people in relation. (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 189)

In terms of the three-dimensional inquiry space, Etta and I are travelling companions on this particular journey. We are in relation as tutor/researcher and trainee/participant, sharing the time and place in which this experience has taken place. We are both inquiring into our experiences and our practice through the use of stories.

In their critique of the design of narrative inquiries that focus on teachers’ and teacher educators’ own practices (Clandinin, Pushor & Murray Orr, 2007), the writers emphasize that narrative inquiry is ‘much more than telling stories’ (p. 21). They suggest that part of the attraction of narrative inquiry may be ‘the comfort that comes from thinking about and telling stories’ (ibid.). They underline the importance of the researcher establishing a relationship to and interest in the inquiry and of justifying the research practically, identifying how it will lead to insights that will prompt changes in the researcher’s practices or those of others. They also point out that the researcher should consider the larger social and educational issues that the study might address, and what the responses might be to the questions: ‘So what?’ and ‘Who cares?’ (p. 25). These questions embrace the personal dimension of the inquiry and the practical implications; in my case prompting me to ask what have the stories revealed and what differences will this make to my own practice and that of my participants? How might this research contribute to theoretical understanding or to making situations more socially just? Considering these questions in relation to Etta’s story, it is clear that through travelling to his world and writing the story of Tyrone, she has highlighted a number of social and political questions relating to the way schools provide for vulnerable pupils, who are able, but whose behaviour challenges their teachers. Writing the story may not have solved this problem for Etta as a teacher at the beginning of her career but it has raised her awareness of the complexity of the situation and allowed her to empathize with Tyrone’s situation. I believe it will make her a better teacher.
Seeing Things Differently

Etta’s story shows the importance of imagination in enabling people to see things differently. She has taken the reflexive turn that enables her to put herself into the shoes of Tyrone and view the world from his perspective, asking ‘What might it be like to be you?’ In doing this she has demonstrated her ability to engage in ‘world-travelling’ (Lugones, 1987, p. 17):

The reason why I think that travelling to someone’s ‘world’ is a way of identifying with them is because travelling to their ‘world’ we can understand what it is to be them and what it is to be ourselves in their eyes. Only when we have travelled to each other’s ‘worlds’ are we fully subjects to each other.

Her imaginative leap is shareable with others through the process of storying. Depending on their standpoint, readers may be troubled, puzzled, challenged, made curious or angry by what they have read. There is disruption. Questions are raised. Mindful of Eagleton (2013: p. 104), we can see how Etta’s story was possible as ‘some initial order has been disrupted’. In Bruner’s terms, there was ‘something to tell about’ (2002, p. 17).

In turn, stories such as Etta’s have the power to disturb the reader into asking important questions about the nature of teaching, the role of the teacher, the meaning and purpose of education. Or, as a specific response to Etta’s story, ask: ‘How can schools provide the support needed for vulnerable pupils like Tyrone?’ Etta’s story is memorable in ways that an objective factual account could never be and it is not just the reader who is affected by its emotions, for she also highlights the power of stories to move the author, when she notes the sadness she felt after writing the story. She is thinking through her story and, like Toni Morrison, finds a means of resolution: ‘Writing is really a way of thinking, not just feeling but thinking about things that are disparate, unresolved, mysterious, problematic or just sweet’ (Morrison, cited in Guardian, 2019). The words of Margot Ely also resonate: ‘We write to know. We write to learn. We write to discover’ (2007, p. 570).
Concluding Thoughts

From undertaking my larger study, I learned that reflexivity is a crucial element of reflection. Meta-reflection requires that we return to our assumptions and expectations and question them in the light of experience, engaging in critical reflection. Our critical reflections may lead us to question previously held beliefs and ideas, not least about ourselves and our identity. Such reflection can lead to discomfort. We are provoking, disturbing ourselves who used to be one way and are now another (Dyson & Genishi, 1994); prompted to see things otherwise (Greene, 1995) and to explore the implications of our new perceptions both professionally and personally, as Etta exemplifies. In acting in these ways, we are using our narrative imagination (Nussbaum, 1995; Greene, 1995) to play a tune beyond us, yet finding for ourselves that ‘things as they are, are changed upon the blue guitar’ (Stevens, 1965). Perhaps something totally unexpected emerges from a story — something we didn’t know before, something we hadn’t thought about, something that gives us a different way of seeing, a new perspective, a different point of view; seeing something in a new light.

In another research conversation, Ben — a trainee teacher and a former journalist used to reporting ‘facts’ — identified the significance of imagination when writing fictionalized accounts from the perspectives of pupils:

It comes back to empathy because if you’re striving to understand someone and then simply reporting — you’re making no attempt, so you write ‘this happened, then this happened’ you’re just simply reporting. Using your imagination means you’re at least making an attempt, not merely to observe, but to understand.

In the literature, Walker (2007, p. 296) considers that: ‘Above all good stories help us to think well about practice [...] Once any story is told, ways of seeing are surely altered?’. Other writers consider the role of the reader more directly. Barone (1995, p. 66) asserts that, ‘the aim of storytellers is not to prompt a single, closed, convergent reading but to persuade readers to provide answers to the dilemmas they pose’. He sees this as a feature of the ‘storysharing contract between reader and writer’ (ibid., p. 250). And Iser (1974, p. 113) writes that: ‘Such story form invites the reader to join in, solve the problem — the reader fills
the gaps, the blanks’. As Okri (1997, p. 34) says, ‘it is readers who make the book. A book unread is a story unlived’. This brief discussion of the role of readers highlights that stories can be used well but also badly. In stories used as a means of control, to promote a particular view of history, for example, or to embed political or religious ideologies, there is no thinking ‘with’, no asking back, no expectation that the reader will have an interpretive role. Okri (1997, p. 49) makes this clear: ‘Writers are dangerous when they tell the truth. Writers are dangerous when they tell lies’. Kearney (2002, p. 148) argues strongly that truth is not the sole prerogative of the so-called exact sciences: ‘There is also a truth, with its corresponding understanding, that we may properly call ‘narrative’. We need both’. For Gadamer (2004/1960) meaning is not subjectively determined. He identifies a process of coming to understanding with the text. I perceive this as thinking with rather than about stories, a hermeneutic practice that makes me ask not only what a story means to me, but how I can understand what it means to the teller and to other readers or listeners.

Furthermore, I consider that reflective story-telling can be seen as a critical pedagogical practice in that it confronts both writers and readers with questions, challenges curriculum, highlights social and cultural issues at individual and institutional levels and may contribute to change, allowing us to see the world in new ways. Nussbaum (1995) does not claim that reading fiction per se will solve all social justice problems but that it ‘can be a bridge both to a vision of justice and to the social enactment of that vision’ (ibid., p. 12). Counter-stories can be created that act subversively against dominant stories (Nelson, 1995) and thus provide access to the benefits of the dominant society to those who are marginalized; such ideas are explored further in the narrative inquiry work of Clandinin, Murphy et al. (2009).

Stories such as the one written by Etta, and many other stories written by trainee teachers that I collected over time, have become an integral part of my pedagogy in teaching about reflective story writing. In Living by Fiction (1982) Annie Dillard explores the question: ‘Can fiction interpret the world?’ (p. 145). She suggests that, by its very nature, fiction lends itself to the interpretive process: ‘Fiction elicits an interpretation of the world by being itself a world-like object for interpretation. It is a subtle pedagogy’ (p. 155). This is an idea that I have carried into my teaching.
The idea of fiction as a means of teaching readers subtly about the world is pertinent to my inquiry question about the ‘use’ of stories that aren’t even true, and particularly the value of the teachers’ stories as learning tools for themselves and for others. The trainee teachers’ responses exposed the feelings and emotions that emerged in the telling of the stories, surprising the writers/tellers and memorable to the listeners/readers. Reflecting on the power of her stories to bring about personal learning, one teacher, Evelyn, commented: ‘On the way I stopped and looked differently’, thus exemplifying the claim of Thomas King, the Canadian First Nations writer and storyteller quoted at the beginning of this chapter who stated that: ‘The truth about stories is that that’s all we are’ (King, 2003, p. 153). He writes that stories have the capacity to be both ‘wondrous’ and ‘dangerous’ and, reminds us that: ‘Once a story is told it cannot be called back. Once told it is loose in the world’ (ibid., p. 10). Etta’s and Tyrone’s stories, and indeed my own viewpoints have been let loose here, lightly tethered within this chapter, but starting a life of their own.

Coda

It seems appropriate to follow Bruner and end this chapter with a coda, ‘a retrospective evaluation of what it all might mean... an invitation to problem solving’; to focus on ‘what comes after the story’ (2002, p 20); to codify my thoughts on the power of narrative truth on tellers and listeners, writers and readers, and where stories stand in relation to the factual account that presents evidence in logical steps to reach an (apparently) irrefutable conclusion. Like Bruner (1986, p. 43), I find that the power of stories lies in their ability to ‘create a reality of their own’ and to draw others into it. Engagement with the story that has to be told requires us to exercise our imagination, allowing us to become world-travellers, to be both inside and outside ourselves and see things differently. Stepping into the shoes of others prompts us to ask the question ‘What might it be like to be you?’ In fiction we have the possibility to create stories that are memorable and compelling, that draw the reader in to share our space. I will never hear Nina Simone singing ‘Please don’t let me be misunderstood’ without remembering Etta’s story about Tyrone. And each time I think of Tyrone, I will be
provoked to re-engage with the social and political questions regarding vulnerable children in schools, demonstrating how the powerful story can lead to action. Etta’s story, my own stories and those of many other writers have the capacity to do what the most powerful stories do: to surprise, perhaps even shock us and disrupt our view of the world; to challenge us to think differently, give us new ways of seeing, and, perhaps, new ways of acting.

When we tell a story, we draw our audience in to share an experience that is profoundly memorable; one that captures our imagination and engages our emotions; one that shows us how others feel and how they perceive the problems they encounter; one that provokes us to search for resolution. We think with rather than about the stories and retell them to others to share their impact and this, I believe, is the power of narrative truth; my understanding of how and why stories matter.

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