"I'm hiding": Using the Stories-Around-Poems to Explore the Role of Vulnerability in Today's University Classrooms

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Abstract

This self-study examines the authors' attempts to use narrative to create impactful and transformational learning experiences. The essay describes a process of auto-ethnographic inquiry during which the researchers explored critical incidents related to their use of stories in university classrooms. Further discussion of these experiences led to the creation of two individual poems that deepened our appreciation for the rich connections between narratives and confessional poetry. By using these research tools, the authors explore the role of vulnerability and self-disclosure in the creation of meaningful classroom encounters.

Background

In this essay, we explore how narrative can provide teachers with a tool to facilitate engagement by legitimizing the life experience of adult learners and by affirming the fact that each student has something within them that is valuable and that "counts" within a formal academic environment. For both teacher-educators and students, constructing narratives can create a space that shares aspects of public life and personal life as these intersect the lived space of the course. Using examples from our own teaching experiences, we discuss critical teaching incidents related to narrative within this particular practice setting and explore ways of conceptualizing narrative-based pedagogies within adult learning contexts. Rather than seeing knowing as a mode of contestation, this essay will explore how narrative inquiry operates as a powerful form of disclosure and community-building within the "professional landscapes" (Schaefer & Clandinin, 2011, p. 282) of mid-career teachers who are also beginning researchers.

By attempting to cross boundaries between creative and formal academic writing, our essay relates critical incidents in our teaching practice and "attempts to exist in the rarely seen intergeneric worlds of poetry and inquiry" (Prendergast, 2007, p. 743). In doing so we analyze not only how "poetry may be used as a profound narrative tool" (West & Bloomquist, 2015, p. 3), but also how poetry and narratives can arise—and shed new light upon—the same transformative experiences in the lives of students and teachers (Dobson, 2010; Glesne, 1997; Saunders, 2003; Ward, 2011; Witkin, 2007; Hanley & View, 2014). Following the work of other scholars, we also explore how poetry can be used to understand the implicit and tacit aspects of narratives and to create what one scholar termed a "space for stories" (Gold, 2013).

The Impact of Narrative Inquiry

A growing and impressive body of work has demonstrated how narrative inquiry is a research methodology that has important implications for individual practitioners and the field of educational research itself (Dobson, 2010; Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001; Seiki, 2014). As Connelly and Clandinin (2006) emphasize, "narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story. . .is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience" (p. 82). In this sense, narrative provides a method for noticing our awareness of the world in a way that anticipates surprise and even, being troubled as a prelude to a newfound awareness of different ways of living. In Seiki's (2014) words, "narrative inquiry as a pedagogy requires us to learn awareness that our own stories and experiences will also bump up with, and perhaps stand at odds with, the stories and experiences of our students" (p. 39). Often, the beginning and end of inquiry is the author's own fractured, in-process, multidimensional, and *relational* self.

Even as we use narrative to explore time, society, and place (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), we also learn to recognize that narrative spaces can be a way to use the imagination to understand and to reinvent our relationship with the "real" (Caine et al., 2017). Coming to terms with the power and promise of narrative involves, in part, understanding that, "as teachers—we are also texts our students read" (Ingersoll, 2012, p. 220). Attending to tensions and relationality allows us to become aware of how dominant cultural narratives can undermine our sense of self and our capacity for right action, meaning that narrative inquiry also has an important, and often profound, ethical dimension (Clandinin, Murphy, Huber, & Orr, 2010).

More broadly, self-study has also increasingly exhibited a combination of narrative and poetic forms (Dinkleman, 2003; Dobson, 2010; Hanley & View, 2014; Gold, 2013; Saunders, 2003; Wiebe, 2008). Echoing Gulla (2014) we believe that poetry, like narrative, helps teachers to recognize that, "the ability to consider another point of view is crucial to the development of critical thinking skills" (p. 145). This is not only because of what Hanley and View (2014) call "poetry as counter-narrative" (p. 571), but also because the emotional closeness offered by poems can serve as a means of inviting others into a shared experience. Both forms, then, offer teachers and students the ability to share experiences in a way that is intensely personal and evocative through an aesthetic that more conventional modes of learning and instruction cannot (Prendergast, 2007). Poetry and narrative can complement each other and provide a provocative, intensely *personal*, and often emotionally charged means of opening up new spaces for shared reflection and growth (Simecek, 2015; Ward, 2011).

Methodology and Participants

The authors were the only participants in this narrative inquiry study. John is a 44-year-old Assistant Professor in Postsecondary Education at a Canadian Faculty of Education who has been teaching for approximately 15 years in both university and high school settings. Sarah is a 43-year-old Assistant Professor in Counseling Psychology at the same Faculty. Sarah has been teaching in a university setting for 10 years and had a career as a psychologist before her current academic appointment.

A casual dialogue in a hallway one afternoon between the authors about the role of narrative in teaching led to a discussion about how narrative can trigger emotions in the teacher as well as the students. Over coffee, together we began to discuss ways in which classroom exercises such as object sharing or even role-play might result in unsolicited life histories being shared by students. This process led us to a space where "in our research relationships, we courted and embraced uncertainty, vulnerability and tension in our autobiographical tellings and retellings" (Saleh, Menon, & Clandinin, 2014, pp. 279–280). As a result of these discussions, we identified two critical teaching experiences that had changed our sense of self and the way that we practice. We then decided to do further reflective writing on these experiences and to exchange those narratives. Two galvanizing questions that helped to guide our writing were: i) how have stories shaped my sense of self as a teacher-educator?; and, ii) how have stories about vulnerability shaped my identity and my pedagogical practice?

Through the course of our collaborative reflection, we decided to create poetry as a means of further inquiry. The creation of poetry was aimed at reflection, evocation, and drew its inspiration from our encounters (Prendergast, Leggo, & Samashima, 2009). Creating poems from our stories was challenging since it not only created richer insights that had not occurred to us before, but also forced us into "disrupting the sanding of stories" (Schaefer & Clandinin, 2011, p. 282) whereby researchers attempt to fit narratives into preexisting conceptual boxes. Sarah created a poem from the actual narrative that she had shared with her class about her responses to the Pulse mass shooting, while John wrote an interpretative poem based on his experience as a new teacher at a loss to address two of his students' unexpected and powerful reflections on death. A final phase of discussions related to how these narrative poems might be used in future classrooms and focused on identifying core themes and insights arising from our study (Clandinin, 2010).

Using Poetic Inquiry to Explore Critical Narrative Incidents

Sarah's Story: Sharing a Personal Narrative About the Personal Impact of the Pulse Mass Shootings

After the Pulse Massacre, I was drawn to write about LGBTQ+ affirming practice in K-12 educational communities, pedagogy, and teacher education settings (Pickett, 2017b). Forty-nine people were killed, and 53 were injured in a gay bar in Orlando, Florida on June 12, 2016, by a single gunman who targeted these folks because of their sexuality and gender. When constructing the narratives, I focused on my lived experience within the identities I hold as white, cisgender, lesbian/queer, co-parent, and an educator of educators. I positioned myself within the LGBTQ+ community and used autoethnography as methodology, making meaningful connections between personal and cultural knowledge through provocative and disruptive representations of my experience as an educator (Ellis, 1999, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). In the original work, my aim was to use three narratives, vignettes really, of my experience after the Pulse Massacre with a "goal of contributing new cultural knowledge to the question: *How can allies, K-12 educational environments, and more broadly educational institutions, such as the academy, enact an ethic of care following tragedies such as the Pulse Massacre?"* (Pickett, 2017b).

For the past several years I've taught a course I developed for preservice teachers, *Sexuality and Gender in Education Matters*. The course is delivered in an intensive format over two weeks, and the class discussions allow opportunities for experience near moments which are evocative, viscerally engaging, and contribute to awakenings surrounding constructions, embodiment, and our positionality in relation to sexuality and gender, privilege and marginalization, and power and solidarity.

The term after I wrote the autoethnographic piece in response to the Pulse Massacre, it occurred to me that I might include a reading performance of one of the vignettes in the course. I decided to include the reading performance about half-way through the course. The format is intensive; thus, after week one, the students participate in several collaborative activities which create opportunities for personal sharing, reflection, and engagement with their positions of privilege, awareness, knowledge, and skills in relation to affirmative practice and pedagogy with diverse sexuality and gender. I vividly remember driving in that morning to teach and perform; I was both nervous and excited for what was to come. My background is in counseling psychology, and so, I was quite comfortable with setting the tone of the classroom in preparation for the reading; a performance such as this, from teacher to students, requires preparation. The students needed to be informed that as their teacher I would be sharing personal, vulnerable experience. I told them that while I may shake with nerves initially and perhaps even "tear up" as I speak, I do not need them to rescue me, I am able to care for myself in this situation, and I'm prepared that emotional material may arise throughout the performance. I directly shared my expectations with them as an audience, and my preference that they listen and attend, even when it might be uncomfortable. I requested that they attune, seek to be present with the performance, and notice both the content of their thoughts and their visceral responses. The vulnerability and anticipation was palpable as I started to read.

The following poem reworks the original vignette I constructed and read to the students. I've added the shared experience I had of performing this vignette with the class of preservice teachers. I aim to integrate the students' responses to the performance and my interpretations of how the performance fostered learning. Although I was prepared for the reading performance, I was unprepared for how this moment would catapult the class into deep, reflective meaningful exchanges and relationships with each other in the classroom and beyond.

April 15, 2017, Preservice Teacher Classroom

12 p.m. Twenty eyes await, attentive, assessing, curious
I begin
Today I'm going to deviate from our typical format
With these words I may cry, I may shake, I may stumble
You may want to avert your gaze, distract, console me
Rest assured I'm okay; please continue to listen
It's important.

June 13, 2016: Home

6:00 a.m.
Awake from sleep with rapid, racing, pressing thoughts
What will we tell our children?

How do you explain massacre to a five and six-year-old?
Why don't I feel better prepared for this conversation?
Go back to bed. Covers, where are the covers?
Go back to bed, go back to sleep.

6:15 a.m.
I have to figure out what to say to them.
I have to figure out what to say to them

6:35 a.m.
Making beds, sorting through laundry, and checking the weather
we discuss how to introduce the word gay to our children?

Seems strange, a word with such power surrounding our lives
is not a part of our children's language.
Family conversations about love, romance, marriage, friendship,
gender, sex, and how families may be created
without
the word gay.

6:45 a.m.
Precious alone-time in the shower
Breathe in the steam,
feel the pounding hot water across my back,
push my fingers tightly into my eyes,
hold my hands across my face.

I'm Hiding.

It's not explaining the word that I'm dreading;
it's what the word represents in this conversation.
Five and six, are too young to learn some people hate our family.

How do I explain a massacre?
What is safety?

7:00 a.m.
What are we going to tell them? What are we going to tell them? What are we going to tell them? What are we going to tell them? What are we going to tell them? What are we going to tell them?

April 15, 2017, Preservice Teacher Classroom

12:10 p.m. I look up.
Silence, tears, shifting in seats, eyes avert my, eyes connect with mine
Confusion, validation, visibility, disbelief, awareness, sadness, all co-occurring

I continue.

7:05 a.m.
Deep breath. Good morning my sweets.

7:15 a.m.
Kitchen table, eating waffles and cut strawberries one, by, one
I have something to talk with you both about.
It's important.

Why explain the word gay today? Why explain the word gay today? Why explain the word gay today? Why explain the word gay today?

7:20 a.m.
Phew, we made it through explaining the word gay.
Dig deep, pull on my mother's courage, dig deep.

I begin

The other night a person went into a place where many people who are gay go, this person hurt people very badly.

We don't know why, don't know why, don't know why.

Many people died.
Many were hurt.

5-year old: They died!

Yes, many people died.

Classroom and Home: I'm not prepared, I begin again.

Hurt people, hurt people.

7:25 a.m.
Our family doesn't believe in hurting people.

6-year old: Where were they?

Orlando, Florida.

5-year old: Where Disneyworld is?

Yes.

6-year old: I don't want to go to Florida.

April 15, 2017, Preservice Teacher Classroom

12:25 p.m. I hear a gasp, I witness heads hung, tears flow
Experience far becomes experience near for preservice teachers.

7:27 a.m.

We live far away from Florida.

One person's action.

12:27 p.m. Relief, I'm almost finished,
Hands have stopped shaking; my voice is strong now
20 eyes flickering, changed by these words, this reality,
preservice teacher, queer, trans, and allies
grappling together with this experience, together

7:30 a.m.
Breakfast conversation finally over.
How'd I do?
Too above their heads?
Too dark?
Not explicit enough?

I didn't want to scare them.

Awful

12:30 p.m. Silence

Shana: I didn't do anything, I didn't call my friends or event know, I thought
it was far and didn't matter, I didn't know, I didn't know. I feel awful.
Lexi: You know now, you can choose to do something different in the future.
Paul: I remember that day, walking around like a zombie, so lonely, invisible.
Lexi: What could I have done?
Paul: Reached out, said, I see you, and I'm here.
Mikal: We have an enormous responsibility as teachers, don't we?

I witness and hold the space for the transformation that is rapidly occurring.

Breathtaking. Speechless. Hopeful.

I used the technique of poetic transcription (West & Bloomquist, 2015; Glesne, 1997) to construct my poem, a creative process that is both challenging and fraught in many ways. It combines narrative elements with poetic markers of rhythm, imagery, and heightened emotional response, and, as such, might be considered what Wiebe (2008) calls a "storied poem" (para. 3). I think of my poem as a form of personal testimony as well as an invitation for my students to become part of "the transformation that is rapidly occurring" [referenced in my poem]. Bearing witness can be an effective means of talking about injustice and marginalized perspectives. Whereas dominant subcultures and perspectives may talk about issues related to marginalizing by refusing to talk about their privilege, the simple but often profound tactic of saying, "No. This is my experience. It is real and troubling and unacceptable" is a way in which witnessing can provide a powerful context for teaching through narrative. The act of bearing witness also

calls to others to provide their own accounts and can become a powerful and effective means of creating a shared critical space.

Reflecting now, I also believe that my narrative helped to "unlock" something within me and in my students. It helped me to understand the relational aspects of teaching and the role vulnerability plays in creating a sense of trust and mutual responsibility for what goes on in the classroom (Gold, 2013; Brown, 2015). Poetic creation became a "process of intensifying the implicit" (Gulla, 2014, p. 147) aspects of my experiences and of letting go of the need to have the intellect control the evocative dimensions of my encounters—to leave its meaning open-textured and to put it back into play. Consequently, troubling preconceptions about what it means to be "on the right track" in a course is a vital part of "successfully" employing narrative as a teaching tool. Stories can also help writers become aware of how they might translate their acts of witness into new ways of speaking, feeling, and thinking, in a kind of circular iterative movement (Hanley & View, 2014).

This is why I feel it is so important for students to become used to being pushed to points of uncertainty, even though they may have learned to associate these feelings with being in a state of emotional distress. The story around my poem, like the poem itself, "can be a way of expressing the 'untold stories' that arise from the messy low ground of practice" (Gold, 2013, p. 853). Practitioner stories constitute more of an invitation to collaboratively construct new meanings than a judgment that aims to select out the best or only true account. The process of "poetic re-presentation" can serve as a research tool to allow us to explore themes of empathy and vulnerability (Ward, 2011) at the same time as we continue to create stronger professional communities and connections with students. This, at least, is my goal, as a university classroom teacher sensitive to issues of identity, diversity, and loss.

John's Story: Being Prepared to Share Powerful Emotions in the Classroom

I was relatively new to teaching at the postsecondary level, and I was assigned to teach a blended curriculum course several hours from the main campus. The course required students to reflect on how their life histories informed their teaching and to create a project or an artistic creation that demonstrated critical reflection and engagement. I decided to have a full-day session at the beginning and end of the term to try and bookend the learning experience. I also figured that creating a sense of community by meeting in person would make it easier for students to share their work online. While I do not remember everything that happened that day, I do have a powerful memory of a think-pair-share activity on Yeats' poem, "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death." The line, "a lonely impulse of delight drove me to this tumult in the clouds" (Yeats, 1919/1996, p. 135), led to students sharing two very different, but equally powerful, reflections about love and death.

I remember passing out some poems to the class which all addressed writing and the imagination in some way. Apart from the Yeats' poem, the only other poem I remember from that day was Billy Collin's "Introduction to Poetry." During the activity, one of the students told the class about his mother who was dying from a degenerative disease, and even though he tried to be there with her, he now realized that her experience is always her own and he can never know what it is like to be inside the experience of

facing death. After a very emotional reflection, I remembered that he finished by saying, "In the end, I guess, we all die alone." After he had finished speaking, the room was filled with thick silence, one that was finally broken when another student, Susan, spoke. Susan told the class that she had just learned that her cancer, which had been in remission for several years, had returned. She wondered if the worst were to happen, who would read to her daughter. She also confessed to wondering if she should record bedtime stories for her to hear in case the worse should happen. In the end, she turned to Jamie and said, "so I hope that no one really dies alone" before she broke down sobbing.

Not surprisingly, I struggled for words before suggesting we take a break. During this time, the two students ended up hugging and comforting each other. I spoke to both Susan and Jamie, expressed my concern, and tried to reassure them in a way that I felt to be both clumsy and inadequate. Although I was able to regain my "composure" when James and Susan spoke, I was taken aback by the power of the emotions my students were expressing. I felt like I was playing at being authentic and had hid behind my teacher-mask. My exercise was all about emotion and imagination, but when my students gave me just that—in spades—I did not know how to react. At that moment, I saw the need to move beyond a surface pedagogy towards being open to radical disclosure, or at least, to be willing to live with the discomfort and vulnerability that an ethic of caring often brings.

Even though the moment was raw and powerful and, despite the fact that it left me so uncertain, that experience brought the entire class closer together and, I believe, was the emotional catalyst for one of the best courses I have ever taught in over a decade of university teaching. Students wrote—and shared—pieces in which they took risks and explored their vulnerabilities, and in doing so they taught me how vulnerability could be a powerful teaching tool. Having recently run into Jamie at a play my daughter was taking part in, I learned that Susan was doing very well and still teaching. Although I will admit that I didn't have the courage to ask about his mother, I did learn that he was doing well, had a full-time teaching job in the city, and had a healthy young family. I should have told him how he had taught me about the power of emotion and bearing witness to the pain in our lives and the responsibility of the teacher to care for his or her students, but I didn't.

Consolation

Now listen:
there are many shortcuts
to this town,
back-alleyways and broken chain link fences;
paint-by-numbers, the training wheels
of daydreams and sunsets-at-rest;
those inflatable water wings that kids wear
like the reluctant officers of some
comic constabulary
books, old faithful and dog-eared
feet kicking aimlessly in some dream
like charts or primitive compasses
to guide the faint hearted
though their nocturnal slumbers.

But every now and then
some angry god throws
a shining spear through the moon;
unharnesses the contented planets
to run wild
through churning fields of stars. They tell stories
that cut the meat off bone,
snaps the rope
mid-swing, high over rocks;
cracks the ice
when the shore is long and lean
like the soft silhouette of
some reclining god in exile.

I am asking them for stories:
one guy has a mother
neck deep in
the wasting
her hunched body a mad tenant
that punches holes in the walls
stuffs the pipes with concrete and
stiffs her on a lifetime of unpaid rent. A litany
of prayers and curses lost in the cushions of
a once comfortable couch
rechristened by
the sullen stink
of ash.

Another woman
dreams of the lullabies that
she once-sang for her daughter
and the stories they have caterpillared into;
paper-winged-butterflies that
settle like stars just before the sun comes out; a
hot air balloon hanging serene over mountains
when the storm clouds commune
like clenched-fisted-bullies
circling an autumn playground.

They cry in turn but, I,
I am
an island of composure
cool like evening rain;
the cold bow
that cuts through ocean
water like the clean gleam of
sharpened blade on ice.

Until a lone figure
opens a door and

raps on all my windows. A panic of hail
bounces madly off the street
mute bulbs like frozen sirens flashing;
I am slinking forward
my hands open
wide-eyed
like a wild animal poised on the edge
of full-on-frantic.

Someone has let
a strange bird
        into
the house.

This poem is a reflection upon my narrative experience and my recognition that what scholars call "reader response" is part of the author's performance and by extension, the ongoing negotiation of new narrative selves. The author withdraws from the shared presence but, once heard, he or she is never fully alone. Or is she, since to tell a story is also to risk misinterpretation, rejection, and loss of identity? Both possibilities are immanent in every story we tell, and we can experience both in a single story. Like my story about the teachers reflecting on "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death," my interpretative poem is a reflection on how moments of insight can also be deeply jarring in their sometimes dark intensity. Like the hidden machinery of our imaginations, we don't always know where a poem will go. In this sense, my poem is an attempt to move beyond what Corrine Glesne (1997) has termed the "realist tale" (p. 204) that has been for so long the vaunted model account for academic work and towards something much more open-ended and provocative.

As strange as it may sound, I often feel as though poems "happen" to me. They are experiences that connect thoughts, feelings, experiences, and longings. They sometimes take the form of narratives or they branch out of stories I had heard or events that had occurred in my life, or the lives of those close to me. In the words of Dobson (2010), "[p]oetry seeks to retrieve the intuitive, an all-too-often ignored sensibility that many years of formal schooling and adult living may have dulled, or even dismissed altogether" (p. 132).

Now that I teach mostly in a fully online setting, these authentic moments seem few and far between. Although I use case studies and ask students to share their critical narratives, I feel a degree removed from my students. I cannot gauge the mood of the class by looking at their expressions, the tone of their voices, or even by reading their body language. The messiness of the classroom and its capacity to startle me into new insights—like Jamie and Susan's stories did—seems missing. Even though I receive many personal narratives, some that are quite powerful, there is something about the immediacy of the classroom space and the experience of interacting with a real audience that makes personal storytelling more vital, powerful, and engaging. My poem, I hope, provides a means by which I can "add to the sense of the world's variety rather than negotiate and refine a consensus" (Saunders, 2003, p. 176). In this sense, the narrative aspects of poetry and the poetic aspects of narrative provoke the same imaginative process of taking on the perspectives and opening ourselves to the experiences of others.

Reflections on Sharing

Both of us intend to use our poems in future classes as a means of broaching difficult topics that are evocative and important to teaching in today's classrooms. Sharing our poems and narratives has allowed us to "express interweaving realities" (Witkin, 2007, p. 477) and helped us to come to terms with the isolation and vulnerability that often accompanies professional practice. Our collaboration also has helped us to understand the rich possibilities offered by self-study using a mix of literary forms and life perspectives. Our experience exhibited many parallels with that of Wiebe (2008) who said, "[w]riting storied poems has helped me to see firsthand how some details of autobiographical writing can be truthful, can contain truth, even though these same details may not be historically, or literally, true" (para. 11). Consequently, following Clandinin (2010) we identified three "resonant threads or patterns" (p. 16) arising from our narrative writing and our subsequent "tellings and retellings" (Saleh et al., 2014, p. 271): troubling spaces, caring relationships, and strength through vulnerability.

We recognized that our experiences were deeply unsettling and that they unlocked insights and powerful emotions in our own lives as well as those of our students. Although stories can be a source of knowledge as the trope of bearing witness makes clear, they also can provide a means of "troubling" dominant perspectives and ways of thinking. Whereas troubling can be seen as an impediment to knowledge in empiricist or rationalist knowledge traditions, within critical traditions being troubled or troubling can be a position where powerful insights and forms of transformative agency can occur. Indeed, one of the important functions of our narratives was to show how it is possible to keep tensions and alternatives into play—to resist the tendency towards closure. Narrative's capacity to make us aware of the absence of neat easy solutions leaves open the door for responses to human tragedy and injustice that rely on imagination, empathy, and authentic human response. In this sense, our stories are a call for action, or even simply for teachers to *listen*—to *actually* listen.

Both of our narratives are about the ethics of our responses to others' pain and how empathy and sharing can provide consolation. Similarly, our writing points towards the value of "sustaining stories" (Schaefer & Clandinin, 2011, p. 291) in the lives of beginning researchers who need to find connection and reassurance of their worth as teachers and mentors in an often lonely and alienating institution. Both narrative and poetry offer teachers a tool to express their vulnerability in order to build trust and to encourage empathy and perspective-taking on the part of students (West & Bloomquist, 2015). Poetry as a form is itself inherently complex and contradictory and often, in the words of Christopher Nealon (2007), "returns, again and again to questions of partial or impossible realization" (p. 869)—a quality that also makes it so powerfully imaginative and hopeful in its scope. Narrative and poetry can also become a method of translation: of creating bridges between experiences that create a sense of resonance and connection on the part of storyteller and audience. Rather than a linear movement, translation is often a means of moving laterally, into new shared spaces where growth, perspective taking, and empathy can take hold.

Although our experiences left us feeling "disrupted" and wondering how we could have been stronger, more compassionate or articulate, these encounters also taught us that there is a strength in being

vulnerable (Brown, 2015; Pickett, 2017a). In this sense, what Clandinin (2010) noted about her student participants in her own narrative study could also be said of us namely, that, "within the institutional landscape, composing an identity seemed to be more challenging than passively accepting one" (pp. 18–19). While our stories focused on teaching, the research process itself also helped us to see that, "inquiring into who we are and are becoming as researchers allows us to be present to the ways we frame our experiences within habitual modes of perception" (Saleh et al., 2014, p. 278). This too is an intensely challenging but richly rewarding endeavor that has helped us find our voices as career academics who love working and interacting with students in the classroom.

This process has taught us to try and resist the temptation to treat writing as an act of closure, particularly when writing involves a self that is always unfinished and changing, and how we are sustained by hope, imagination, and even frustration, longing, and loss. Writing can be a way to translate silence and frustration into a creative act that provides hope and meaning within often challenging and restrictive institutional environments (Ingersoll, 2012). We can never know precisely what we are going to take from a story, since the effect of entering into another's story and hearing it depends on our own experiences and our current positioning. Our experimentation with "relational poetry" (Gold, 2012, p. 856) and confessional narratives provided us with rich insights into the complexity and richness of self-disclosure in adult learner classrooms. This is what makes writing as a creative act possess the power to unsettle, to startle and surprise. This experience of astonishment is something worth marveling at. But, as academics can we leave room for work that replaces the easy assurance of conclusions and closure with a simple gesture towards marveling as an end in itself? As simple as it may sound, we all choose, simply by virtue of living writing and teaching. Perhaps that should be enough. Perhaps it is much more than we can ever imagine—so, imagine.

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