



Commentary

Thinking With Stories: Reconsidering Community Development Work

Corinne Rogers

ABSTRACT

In the retelling of my experiences as a community development worker in Khao Lak, Thailand in 2004, I attend to possible shifts in community development practice through narrative pedagogy. In this moral space, I encounter the dominant community development story alongside the stories of displaced persons. Though this encounter I begin to retell the dominant community development story by thinking *with* stories, rather than *about* stories. It is here in the reconsideration that I wonder about the possibilities when one begins with the sacred stories of a sense of community as lived out in unfamiliar places.

Flip Flops in the Grey

During a six-year teaching experience in Malaysia, which included projects in Indonesia and Thailand, the December 4, 2004 Asian earthquake and tsunami highlighted to the world the importance of community development initiatives. The retelling of these experiences was completed during a Masters of Nursing program at the University of Alberta, Canada and presented during the IIQM Qualitative Methods Conference 2016, in Glasgow, Scotland.

I anticipated the adjustments of living in transition as I was preparing to move from Canada to our new home in Penang, Malaysia, but I never anticipated that my experience would be marked by one of the strongest earthquakes and tsunamis to

hit South-East Asia. I was one of many who watched the tsunami waves from the safety of higher ground. It was as if a giant hand swept through the land, much like a child clearing a path in the sandbox. Currently working in South-East Asia as a school nurse and a volunteer nurse for a safe house for trafficked women, I continue to be involved in community development.

In the months to follow I had the opportunity to travel to other ground zeros to determine potential community development opportunities once the initial states of emergencies were lifted. One of these areas, in Thailand, was Kao Lak, located approximately 700 km west from the capital city of Bangkok and 60 km north of the island of Phuket. It was now three months after the December 26th earthquake and tsunami. As a member of a community development team, I was to assess where our efforts could be best focused. I did not know all the challenges ahead, but in looking backwards, from my air-conditioned office, I encountered disturbances in my way of knowing.

Kao Lak is dotted with a series of traditional villages straddled by exotic resorts, along the coastline of the western side of Thailand. The Lak Mountains, which run parallel to the single coastal highway, were the muster points of many of the survivors running from the beaches to high ground. Approximately 4,000 people perished in this area, but the number of dead could have easily been 10,000 as there was no current census of Burmese refugees escaping the violence in Burma and living illegally in the area.

The enormous debris field invaded my soul as I tried to picture the area right before December 26, 2004. In the tangled mess of twisted metal, I could make out remnants of a previous place now hidden. Fabric twisted in the debris seemed to be stripped of all color as the dried mud infiltrated the threads. Then, something caught my gaze. Through the lens of my video camera I recognized a black, high-heeled flip flop. I try to inhale to reconcile my emotions to what pulled my gaze. Time seemed to stop. I began to once again scan the debris, looking more intentionally for more flip flops. I found a smaller pink one on top of a pile of dead palm branches. Then, I noticed all the flip flops, shoes, and sandals scattered in the debris. I remember wondering: why I had not noticed these before.



Fig. 1: Debris field. This photograph illustrates the power of the tsunami in Banda Aceh Province in Indonesia, as the remnants of a vehicle can be seen under a barge that was 5 km out at sea and brought inland by the waves.

My past memories began to blend with the present; I could not help but notice what was now at my feet. The sea air now seemed acidic; I despised the warm tropical breeze caressing my skin. The clash of all that I did in preparing to come to Malaysia, then to Thailand, against this moment was a deafening sound in my ears that would not go away. The sound nagged at me, diminishing neither in intensity or resonance. I wanted to leave, as I knew that I could. Thinking about leaving amplified the sound of this moment even more as I thought of the countless Burmese refugees who could not leave as they were living in Thailand illegally. I wanted to leave as I felt inadequate. I felt inadequate to listen to the stories that I might hear in the villages and displaced person's camps. Intimate stories of loss and survival that I had no right to hear because I was face to face with my intentions.

What I was searching for to ground me within the greyness of the debris field had disrupted me. I felt myself trying to find something, some object, to ground me within the greyness. In moving back from this time, I came to realize the importance of place in my memories of disasters. As a volunteer during the High River Flood of 2013 in Alberta, Canada, I recall feeling a familiarity with the flooded area. It was as if I had seen this all before; this greyness. Oddly, this familiarity brought me comfort. I wondered why when it represented so much loss. No longer could I deny my real intentions for coming to someone else's ground zero. In the disruption of my intentions and the misreading of the lives of those I wanted to help; I wondered

about my responsibilities, not only as a community development volunteer, but also as a human being. From this point onward, the disruption of my intentions changed my experiences in other disaster areas in South-East Asia I had the privilege to enter. I remember being more awake to what was left behind instead of the greyness of the debris fields. I remember, in Indonesia, brushing away the sand from underneath my feet to reveal the tile floor of homes left behind as the houses were carried away by the waves. I remember wanting to know about the lives that had once been; lives storied by what now is. I remember the awakenings as their stories encountered mine.



Fig. 2: Lost memories. This photograph illustrates the countless documents and pictures left behind as people fled to higher ground in Banda Aceh Province, Indonesia.

Awakenings

While my journey backwards starts long before this, the journey that began with my masters' studies and conversations with colleagues is helping me to explore the boundaries of different ways of knowing. It was at my own boundaries that I came to the awakenings that disrupted me. These awakenings, as I encountered the work of Greene (1984), called from me an enhanced attentiveness to the world around me. Instead of seeing the world strategically, to see it *small* like the greyness of the debris field, enhanced attentiveness allowed me to more likely see it as *big* without clear demarcations to "be privy to the plans people make, the initiatives they take, the uncertainties they face" (Greene, 1995). In seeing the world *big*, what becomes inescapably clear according to Greene, are the details overlooked by the outside observer. This inescapable clarity from the magnification of the experiences around

me disrupted my knowing, which formed my impulse to improve without first understanding (Bateson, 1994). It is in the midst of seeing the flip flops on the sand as *big* that I begin my journey into thinking narratively about the awakenings that disrupted my knowing.



Fig. 3: Flip flops in the grey. This photograph illustrates one of the many flip flops I encountered in the debris field of Khao Lak, Thailand.

Narrative Inquiry

I came to thinking narratively as I began to explore the place where my own experiences engaged with the experiences in Kao Lak. Clandinin and Connelly (2004) situate thinking narratively at the boundaries where narrative thinking (stories lived and told) comes into the intellectual worlds of other ways of thinking. The roots of this research methodology reach into Dewey's (1938) understanding of experience as consisting of personal, social, and continuity. In reading and rereading across my own narratives of experience from this dwelling place, I encounter moments as Huber (2008) and Smit (2007) identify, that are not from a particular space, time, or emotion, but rather moments that compel one to explain, tell, and understand further. In these moments I can move forward, backward, inward, and outward as my narrative is not confined to the words on the page, but can move to explore the pauses between the sentences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004).

In drawing from narrative inquiry as a research methodology, I come to understand that it is more than just the telling of stories; it is a way of composing life from a relational conversation between researcher and participant(s) (Huber, Caine, Huber, & Steeves, 2013). In living out a narrative inquiry, stories are no longer objects, but lived; as human communities and culture seem rather to be the *telling* than the *teller* of these stories (Crites, 1971). With this recognition came a greater awareness of how I had imposed my understanding of community development. The community development story I lived slowly shifted. A shift in which I no longer could ignore narrative pedagogy in this relational space. A space, a practice, in which I encounter thinking *with* stories, rather than *about* stories.¹

Thinking *With* Stories

In thinking *with* stories, rather than *about* stories, a crucial collaboration with feeling is encountered (Morris, 2001). When we think about stories, the stories and experiences are objects. In thinking *with* stories, experiences incur an obligation on the listener, as tensions between ways of knowing awaken us to a moral call of responsible living (Morris, 2001). These disruptions and tensions have called me to attend closely to experience; a more responsible living. It is in negotiating these tensions that I can change the *stories I live by*.

Resistance to shifting the *stories we live by* at times reflect an effort to maintain our composed identity in response to change (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999). In the telling and retelling of my experiences in Kao Lak, I recognize my misreadings of the lives I encountered. Misreadings that extend from the *story I lived by* at the time: misreadings amplified by my misguided intentions.

The Moral Call From Thinking *With* Stories

In thinking *with* stories, I am awakened to a moral call. This moral call, as Morris (2001) describes, is the working of the story on me; a working of a story under my skin which draws attention to the moral fix that brought me back to Kao Lak, and the outcomes from my hearing of stories as a function of me (Coles, 1989). I wondered if I, as Coles (1989) states, the stories that I was *hearing* were shaped by the moral fix of my intentions, in reconstructing the stories of others, so that they could be reconciled with the story I lived by in community development. Thus, the possibility of attending to the thinking *with* stories has begun to widen my *hearing* of experience by paying the closest attention to what I say as it speaks to what is happening to me as I participate in the development of communities (Coles, 1989).

The Dominant Community Development Story

The dominant story of community development begins with the identification of individuals in need, allowing external agents to formulate a response to meet their needs (Swanepoel, 1985), and with recipient-led capacity building to empower individuals to rise above their current circumstances, which is considered best practice (OECD, 2006). It is here that community development is conceptualized as a theory and practice by Gramsci's (1971) ideas of education in understanding the influence of others over others (hegemony) and the role of people as intellectuals that is linked to the realization of progressive community development (Ledwith, 2011). For Gramsci, people are capable of intellectual thought when disciplined by critical education: "something that people do for themselves with the help of others, not something that is done to them by experts" (Purcell, 2012, p. 269) and that the power that comes with knowledge could counter the influence of others. To support such counter hegemony, community development workers can situate themselves in a reciprocal relationship with those they are trying to help rather than do the help onto others (Purcell, 2012). Freire's (1972) work also lies in the development of knowledge or a "critical awareness that enables people to choose a course of action deliberately and with the intention to change some aspect of their reality" (Purcell, 2012, p. 268). Purcell (2012) concluded that Gramsci's and Freire's work on understanding the role of knowledge was incomplete for informing critical community development practice; thus, he supplemented their work with the theory of everyday life: "how ideology, social control and potential resistance may be played out through the lived experience in the everyday life of ordinary people" (p. 272). From here, Purcell (2012) adds that the community development practice is the "walking with a distinct purpose in the community in an attempt to reframe mundane everyday life; to learn to see and experience in a different way" (p. 275).

Retelling the Dominant Community Development Story

In retelling the dominant community development story, I begin with understanding that the communities that community development workers engage with can provide a moral space where counterstories can unfold through narrative practice. Counterstories are narratives of resistance and insubordination that allow communities to challenge and revise the paradigm stories of the communities in which community development workers find themselves working *from* (Nelson, 1995). In retelling the disruption of my intentions, I viewed the practice of community development through the possibilities of seeing the practice of

community development as *big* (Greene, 1984). If the practice of community development was realized out of the attending to stories, boundaries, and tensions in the midst and *with*, this may alter the purpose and outcomes. This bumping up of ways of knowing can also bring awareness to the power of counterstories that hold the possibility to shape who community developers are, what they do, and who they are becoming. The disturbances from a narrative practice (the working of story) can also bring about hesitations, or what Nelson (1995) might have termed “a stopping point” (p. 37); this stopping point is a moment when a counterstory for reconsidering community development, as the thinking *with* stories, takes place.

Reconsiderations in the Conceptualizing the Sense of Community

In reconsidering the dominant story of community development challenges, the dominant story of a sense of belonging to a community is one that is linked with current best practices of recipient-led capacity building (Easterly, 2006; OECD, 2006). If a community is described as a place of becoming, learning, and belonging (Caine, 2010), then the sense of community may inform the intentions of becoming, learning, and belonging. Furthermore, the informing of these intentions is formed from the consciousness that is molded by sacred stories (Crites, 1971). Sacred stories are a celebration of one’s sense of self and the world; Crites (1971) proposes further that they are narrative in form. From Crites’ work I also encounter that these sacred stories are lived out as mundane stories; the stories by which people make sense and clarify their sense of the conscious world. Thus, a sense of community as both composed of sacred and mundane stories, as well as temporality, is important and offers a way to a narrative conceptualization of a sense of community. In recognizing that I cannot halt the continuous movement of experience, I wonder: Can my community development practice be shaped by attending to the sacred and mundane stories called forth by diverse geographic places and social contexts? I wonder how attending to this will shape the becoming, learning, and belonging of not only the recipients of community development, but also the stories community developers live by? Once again I think of the idea *sacred stories*, of a sense of community that is lived out as experience in unfamiliar places. In relation to the narrative conceptualization of a sense of community, I wonder how the *sacred stories* of a community developer encounters the *sacred stories* of the recipients of community

development and if these have the gift to bring about disturbances and awareness, as did the flip flops of Kao Lak for me. In moving outward from such a narrative practice, counterstories could possibly liberate community developers to thinking *with*, rather than *about*, a sense of community.

Note

1. In this work, I do not take up Narrative Inquiry as a methodology, instead I recognize Narrative Inquiry as a site of practice (Huber et al., 2013).

References

- Bateson, M. C. (1994). *Peripheral visions; Learning along the way*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers.
- Caine, V. (2010). Visualizing community: Understanding narrative inquiry as action research. *Educational Action Research*, 18(4), 481–496.
- Clandinin, D., & Connelly, M. (2004). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Coles, R. (1989). *The call of stories: Teaching and the moral imagination*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Connelly, F. M., & Clandinin, D. J. (1999). *Shaping a professional identity: Stories of educational practice*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Crites, S. (1971). The narrative quality of experience. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 39(3), 291–311. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1461066>
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. New York: Dover.
- Easterly, W. (2006). *The white man's burden*. New York: The Penguin Press
- Freire, P. (1972). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. London: Penguin.
- Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the prison notebooks*. New York: International Publishers.
- Greene, M. (1984). "Excellence," meanings, and multiplicity. *Teachers College Record*, 86(2), 283–297.
- Greene, M. (1995). *Releasing the imagination: Essays on education, the arts, and social change*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Huber, M. (2008). *Narrative curriculum making as identity making: intersecting family, cultural and school landscapes*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. Retrieved from <http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/obj/thesescanada/vol2/002/NR46337.PDF>
- Huber, J., Caine, V., Huber, M., & Steeves, P. (2013). Narrative inquiry as pedagogy in education: The extraordinary potential of living, telling, retelling, and reliving stories of experience. *Review of Research In Education*, 37(1), 212–242.
- Ledwith, M. (2011). *Community development: A critical approach*. Bristol, UK: Policy Press.
- Mattingly, C. F. (2008). Reading minds and telling tales in a cultural borderland. *Ethos*, 36(1), 136–154.

- Morris, D. B. (2001). Narrative, ethics, and pain: Thinking with stories. *Narrative*, 9(1), 55–77.
- Nelson, H. L. (1995). Resistance and insubordination. *Hypatia*, 10(2), 23–40. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3810277>
- Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development. (2006). The challenge of capacity development: Working towards good practice. Retrieved from <http://www.oecd.org/dac/governanceanddevelopment/36326495.pdf>
- Purcell, R. (2012). Community development and everyday life. *Community Development Journal*, 47(2), 266–281. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/cdj/bsq058>
- Smit, B. (2007). *Narratives of teachers in a black rural school in South Africa*. Seminar conducted at the Centre for Research for Teacher Education and Development. Edmonton, Alberta.
- Swanepoel, H. (1985). Community development: Alive in our memories or in our development efforts? *Development Southern Africa*, 2(3), 359–367. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03768358508439167>



Corinne Rogers completed her Bachelor of Science in General Studies at Athabasca University, a Bachelor of Science in Nursing with Distinction and a Masters of Nursing in Leadership at the University of Alberta, Canada. She has worked as a Burns ICU nurse, TB nurse, and sessional instructor in Alberta since 2012. Volunteerism plays a key role in her experiences in working with marginalized youth and adults both locally and abroad. She currently lives in South East Asia working in education, part time as a school nurse and volunteers as the primary nurse for a non-government organization that works against human trafficking.